Assessing spectators' humanitarian awareness through visual representations of human suffering: a cross-national experimental research

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Abstract

In dealing with sampling techniques of visual representations of human suffering in the Mediterranean Sea, this experimental research is comprised by a cross-national online survey designed to assess the humanitarian awareness of respondents from Germany and Portugal by identifying their senses of empathetic concerns and levels of political participation. Drawing on quantitative social sciences and social psychology studies, the experimental research raises significant findings aimed at investigating the social phenomena in the politics of international relations. Before presenting the experimental findings of the online survey, the research advances the most recent studies and interests of the academia in testing spectators' reactions to visual representations of human suffering, enabling a more complete picture of how senses of empathetic concerns and levels of political participation of the respondents could be assessed. Thereafter, the second half of the research is concerned with developing a cross-national experimental research that is extremely fruitful because it opens up the possibility to examine whether the participants – most of them students with great potential to become decision-makers, theorists, scientists or influencers in the future – will be educated enough to take action and protect victims of human suffering. Though small in size and number, the findings presented by this cross-national experimental research are useful as a bridge to future discussions concerning the awareness of European citizens upon complex emergencies involving the suffering of distant others.

Keywords: visual representations, human suffering, experimental research, humanitarian awareness, empathetic concerns, political participation.

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Introduction

This research aims to assess spectators' humanitarian awareness through visual representations of human suffering by means of a cross-national experiment. But prior to the application and examination of the experiment, the research takes into account the social and human studies that have for long dedicated resources to investigate visual representations. Roland Bleiker contends that "we live in a visual age indeed. Images surround everything we do. This omnipresence of images is political and has changed fundamentally how we live and interact in today's world" (2018, p. 1). Within this context, images of suffering can also play an important role across the social and political realm. In simple terms, visual representations of human suffering may bring to mind shocking and dramatic images of war and disasters, with corpses or people in vulnerable conditions, like refugees fleeing from violence. The purposes of their usage may vary from terrorist recruitment to humanitarian cyber campaigns. Nonetheless, Roland Bleiker comes into the argument that "(…) we still know far too little about the precise role visuality plays in the realm of politics and international relations" (2018, p. 1).

Aiming to contribute to the current knowledge in the empirical field of international relations, this research gives special attention to individuals' reactions and responses to images of suffering depicting people in distress at the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, in attempting to explore the role that visuality plays in the realm of international relations, the research is inclined to address the public sphere by evaluating spectators' empathetic concerns and their levels of political participation after being confronted with images representing the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes. In doing so, the research attracts more attention to humanitarian debates about civic engagement and social awareness over contexts of human suffering, something that unfortunately remains secondary within the international relations academic community. It is intended, therefore, to open up a public debate within the international relations scholarly community about the potentialities of images of human suffering to empower societies in political participation, where spectators would be more engaged in mobilizing efforts to pressure governments to comply with their obligations over human rights protection and promotion.

In her book *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, Lilie Chouliaraki raises a fundamental question. She asks "how can we differentiate between representations of suffering that may simply bring a tear to a spectator's eye and those that may actually make a difference?" (2006, p. 7). This question forms the basis for much of the debate surrounding the interesting findings of this research. More importantly, aiming to make the unimaginable imaginable to the participants of the experiment, the research evaluates their potential feelings and reactions that might be aroused after encountering emotional contents. Comprised by an online survey, the experiment was designed to place the humanitarian awareness of the participants as the overriding character to be assessed. But for this to happen, it was necessary to dive into other areas of expertise and explore different social disciplines that examine the impact of visual representations of human suffering in spectators' political participation. That is why contributions from social psychology, photojournalism and media studies are explored in more detail throughout the research. These disciplines help to construct the notion that images of suffering might increase the potential for action and involvement of viewers in ways that other types of story-tellings would not. All this considered, in showing to respondents from Germany and Portugal images of human suffering in the Mediterranean Sea, the research examines whether the refugee crisis of the recent years (where many refugees try to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe and receive asylum) appear relevant and urgent to them, and whether this issue leaves any trace in their political participation by engaging them to act and speak out on behalf of the people in distress at high sea. By testing these objectives it will be possible to assess their senses of empathetic concerns and levels of political participation over some of the world's most deplorable complex emergencies.

Empathetic concerns and political participation: from arousal to action

Before exploring the cross-national experiment, the research looks for empirical clarity about how visual representations of human suffering shape spectators' humanitarian awareness, most importantly when it comes to investigate people's reactions and responses to emotional contents depicting others pain. It is worthwhile, thereby, to begin the analysis with perspectives focused on social psychological accounts that define the humanitarian awareness as a combination of empathetic concerns and political participation, which are preceded by what social scientists call 'arousal,' a physiological state of activation when people encounter images of pain and suffering. For this to happen, constitutive notions of 'arousal' (e.g., 'stimulus,' 'empathy,' 'impact,' 'hypermediacy,' and 'emotional commitment'), along with other notions that foster political participation (particularly 'attitude,' 'wellspring of actions,' and 'indignation') will be briefly explored. To understand these constitutive notions of empathetic concerns and political participation it is fundamental to examine how social disciplines explain their importance in the construction of spectators' humanitarian awareness, and how they could possibly inform new and relevant questions to better observe the target publics of the experiment developed in this research.

Most human studies have focused on facilitation of memory for arousing 'representational' stimuli, such as pictures of emotional scenes or words. On the basis of this account, it would be reasonable to predict that increasing levels of arousal would produce corresponding improvements in retention (Croucher et al., 2011). Besides, previous works that assess people's awareness on representations of suffering show that attitude has a positive association with their intention to behave in ways that benefited stigmatized groups. Intentions showed a similarly positive association with actual behavior, i.e., information seeking about the group (Oliver et al., 2012). This is because of the dramatic and connotative mode of communications that images of suffering obtain. Analytically assessing – or furthermore questioning – the motives of the presentation of framing of images depicting the most intimate and tragic moments of distant fellow humans might feel heretical, even heartless. Thus, in everyday settings the emotional and moral education embedded in the dramatic images of others suffering, as well as the politically driven assemblage of these images, often tend to remain beyond critical assessment. These powerful images affect our understanding of the world surrounding us, our position, and the positions of (the suffering) others in it (Kotilainen, 2016).

By creating the perception of sensory closeness to distant victims through direct sensory inputs related to the victims' suffering, emotional contents allow the audience to sense the suffering of the victims as if they were on the spot, no matter where the victims live, which helps to bridge the actual geographic distance between the audience and the victims (Cao, 2010). In the international law, for example, such painful aesthetics encounters can be thought of as the pre-legal or perhaps the pre-political affective climate that galvanizes human rights discourse (Sliwinski, 2009). However, although emotional contents can be subjectively vivid and cause emotions (or sometimes social commotion at high levels), they might be considered as 'merely arousal' if the viewers (spectators) do not activate their ethical imperative of 'doing something,' beginning with developing deeper perceptions of sensory closeness to distant others that will allow them to act or speak on behalf of the victims and against the perpetrators of violence and suffering.

Transcending 'merely arousal' is a necessary step for achieving empathetic concerns. For this, spectators must activate their effective responses; a positive recognition response accompanied by recollection of the encoding context, such as thoughts, feelings, and sensory details that were experienced when the stimulus was first presented. Looking through these lenses, recent empirical investigations focus on the 'immediate impact' of the emotional contents on spectators emotions (Croucher et al., 2011). For example, in an experimental research drafted by professors of the Penn State University and Indiana University-Purdue Fort Wayne (USA), undergraduate students were randomly assigned to read and rate one of six different versions of a newspaper story about elderly persons, immigrants, and prisoners. The purpose of this social experiment was to investigate whether those stories arouse a host of positive and negative emotions in the participants. The research revealed a main effect of a target group, with the stories of immigrants receiving higher scores compared to the ones about the elderly or prisoners (Oliver et al., 2012).

Investigations like this are focused on 'impact,' and they observe how emotional contents increase what Lilie Chouliaraki comes to describe as "(…) spectators' awareness of the distant other, and whether they also increase spectators' concern for the misfortune of these sufferers" (2006, p. 26). Bringing this issue to the realms of international relations and international law, more precisely, one should note that it is not the legal discourse of human rights (which constructs human dignity and freedom as being inalienable), but the visual discourse (which mediates suffering and asks individual to exercise their faculty of judgment) that has power to make audiences respond to distant suffering as deserving moral action (Sliwinski, 2009; Seu, 2010). In this sense, the calls to empirically engage more with the audience and open up the existing research on mediated suffering and the audience might also be considered as part of a wider effort to broaden the field in terms of disciplinary boundaries (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). In the critical analysis of international relations, for example, broadening the field of mediated suffering by focusing on 'impact' also means to empirically investigate the social phenomena and the immanent possibilities for reducing cases of suffering through the development of empathy and political participation within societies.

Following this line of thought, the social discipline of psychology, together with notions of photojournalism, are fundamental to understand how images of suffering shape spectators imagination, impacting their attitudes, actions, and interpretations over humanitarian issues. For instance, the term 'impact' derives from photojournalism, where it is used to describe powerful and striking images. In behavioral and neuroimaging studies, this term has been shown to influence the allocation of visual attention and also the amygdala response to negative emotional images, to high versus low impact image sets that have been matched on a number of stimulus attributes, including arousal (Croucher et al., 2011). By using 'impact' to arouse empathy for the victims of suffering, the media also play an important role. Lilie Chouliaraki is convinced that "choices made regarding the mode of news presentation have a considerable impact on the ways in which spectators get in touch with and come to evaluate the news on suffering" (2006, p. 74). Susan Sontag says that "the first idea is that public attention is steered by the attentions of the media, which means, most decisively, images" (2003, p. 81). She adds that "when there are photographs, a war becomes 'real'" (2003, p. 81). For Chouliaraki, "live reportage creates a greatest sense of proximity and urgency vis-à-vis the reported suffering for spectators than does a studio anchor presentation" (2006, p. 74).

Luc Boltanski argues that "the spectator occupies the position of someone to whom a proposal of commitment is made" (2004, p. 149). The story-tellers, e.g., the eye-witness recounting the human suffering through statements and images, propose to the spectator what Boltanski calls "(…) the definite mode of 'linguistic' and 'conative emotional commitment.' The spectator can accept the proposal made to him, be indignant, be moved, or feel the black beauty of despair" (2004, p. 149). Additionally, technological advances, namely the internet but also the use of mobile phones, have brought societies closer to the sufferer (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). In this reading, it is important to observe that the ultimate goals of inducing empathy for the victims are to elicit personal helping behavior (making donations to charitable organizations), and push governments to take actions on behalf of the victims by mobilizing public support for such actions. Organizations and governments worldwide are committed to eliminating chronic threats to the survival and welfare of people, but they are not able to do so partly due to the lack of public support. These organizations and governments attempt to solicit support and help through the media (Cao, 2010).

Nonetheless, a spectator may have the intention to donate money to a charity organization after seeing images of distant suffering, but whether such intentions will eventually be carried out or not remains unsure and questionable unless he (or she) carries out their intentions as soon as he (or she) has watched the images (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). For this reason that the media should use 'impact' not only to arouse empathy for the victims of suffering, but also to activate the tendency of those spectators who can immediately share their emotional state by developing an effective response to others pain, then moving from arousal to action, i.e., from empathy to participation. Susan Sontag takes as examples the wars in Vietnam and Bosnia. As she reminds, "the protest against the Vietnam War was mobilized by images, and the feeling that something had to be done regarding the war in Bosnia was built from the attentions of journalists (i.e., 'the CNN effect')," which, in her argument, "(...) brought images of Sarajevo under siege into hundreds of millions of livings rooms night after night for more than three years" (2003, p. 81). These examples illustrate for Sontag "(…) the determining influence of photographs on shaping what crises we pay attention to, what we care about, and what evaluations are attached to these conflicts" (2003, p. 81). What is relevant to understand by now is that a photograph cannot create a moral position. Instead, it may – and often does – work to reinforce an existing one (Kotilainen, 2016).

In this sense, it is important to understand that visual representations can shape our evaluations attached to conflicts by transforming spectators' empathetic concerns into political participation. Within this process, the media bear the function of what Lilie Chouliaraki describes as "(…) hypermediacy, which foregrounds the spectacle on the screen and focuses on suffering as the staging of a performance" (2006, p. 45). For Chouliaraki, "visual representations invite the dispassionate observers to join the deliberative processes of the agora, and, thereafter, to engage in rational argumentation on the universal values of the spectacle that they are watching" (2006, p. 45). Chouliaraki also indicates that "(…) part of this hypermediated engagement is the spectators' awareness that their acts of connecting with the content connects them with distant others, where they happen to be always part of an ongoing conversation" (2006, p. 45). In this process of hypermediacy, news images serve a powerful expository role, hence offering 'suggestive unfolds beyond the camera's frame' (Zelizer, 2010; Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2017).

Furthermore, by indicating a nuanced role of visuals, social researchers found out that images of suffering can deliver stronger framing then text (Powell et al., 2015; Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2017). Susan Sontag is convinced that "awareness of the suffering that accumulates in a select number of wars happening elsewhere is something constructed" (2003, p. 18). Pursuant to Sontag's point of view, this occurs mostly because of "(…) the form that is registered by cameras, it flares up, is shared by many people, and fades from view" (2003, p. 18). She believes that "in contrast to a written account – which, depending on its complexity of thought, reference, and vocabulary, is pitched at a larger or smaller readership – the photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all" (2003, p. 18). The construction of the awareness of the suffering occurs due to the powerful function of images in reaching wide audiences, which can also make the spectators in the audience carry out empathetic concerns further into political participation.

An online social survey conducted by professors of the University of Oregon (USA) who developed a questionnaire to gauge reader reaction to four different stories of journalistic elements showed that, when provided a photographic image of the afflicted refugees, the panel of readers reported feeling significantly more motivated and inspired than panelists reading the same story without a photo. Considering this, seeing is indeed believing – the story with photo was rated highest in credibility (Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2017). Another research administered via a survey company called Knowledge Networks (USA) has examined the effect of the overt emotional expressions of a victim (crying in the case of the study) on subjects' brow activity. The result showed the exposure to the victim's crying increased the levels of brow activity among subjects. The finding was consistent with the prediction that, compared to not seeing the victim's overt emotional expressions, seeing them might induce higher levels of brow activity (Cao, 2010). Therefore, images of crisis and human suffering tell of the shared fate of all living creatures as vulnerable and precarious. Images also communicate humanity, the peril it is in, and the need to protect it and alleviate the suffering (Kotilainen, 2016). As firmly concluded by Lilie Chouliaraki, "the impact of any news text is almost always a function of its visual referent" (2006, p. 76).

John Corner also adds the fact that "(…) the offer of 'seeing' is absolutely central to the project of television journalism" (in Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 76). The point is, thereby, to know whether such an 'offer of seeing' is capable of making spectators convert their emotional state into reactive and effective responses. The study drafted by the Knowledge Networks indicated, for example, that the emotional expressions of the subjects had a marginally significant positive effect on empathetic concern. The finding, combined with the observed positive effect of the victim, may induce greater empathetic concern for the victims by compelling the audience to imitate the emotional expressions of the victim (Cao, 2010). However, scholars warn that disturbing shock images might also mute effective responses by turning the suffering into a dehumanizing spectacle that could contribute to compassion fatigue (Borer, 2012; Pruce, 2012; Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2017). Fatigue is further explained in the next section, but to avoid it, images must somehow have a balance capable of developing a sense of presence, allowing viewers to witness events unfolding no matter when or where the events take place. This also supports the tendency of the spectators to be empathetic, meaning that viewers share emotional state of the victim but also develop reactive responses to the victim's emotions and situations, feeling sorry and concern for the victim (Cao, 2010).

After briefly exploring notions that constitute arousal, it is imperative to grasp that, by creating a balance that depicts suffering without appealing to disturbing shock images, visual representations can still make the audience sense the pain of others, as if the spectators were on the spot of the victims. Besides, in knowing that these notions (particularly impact and hypermediacy) precede potential attitudes for political action, we should understand how the movement from arousal to action takes place after spectators are confronted with visual representations of suffering. Susan Sontag indicates that "compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to e translated into action, or it withers" (2003, p. 79). In her view, "the question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated" (2003, p. 79). The survey drafted by the Knowledge Networks, for example, did not find evidence to support the expected effects of the victim's overt emotional expression on attitudes toward interventions or helping intentions. What the study did find was that direct sensory inputs of a victim's suffering (e.g., seeing an image of the suffering) enable people to have concrete sense of the plight of the victims, which, in turn, elicits empathetic concerns (Cao, 2010). For this reason that the we need to investigate more evidences to ensure that it is possible for the spectators to put their concerns into action.

In this connection, researches found that visual representations can cause negative emotions in the audience (e.g. anger and anxiety), framing effects on opinions about humanitarian issues, such as forced migration. Social psychologists also refer to these emotions as effective responses that might stir up 'wellspring of action,' whereby 'bad' feelings trigger action intended to avoid potential harm, whereas 'good' feelings can encourage action to maintain favorable circumstances (Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2017). Back to the study developed by the professors of the Penn State University and Indiana University-Purdue Fort Wayne with undergraduate students, for instance, it was possible to reveal a model that retained the role of involvement in the casual chain leading to heightened empathetic attitudes. This model suggested that involvement played an indirect role in attitude change by serving as a precursor to compassion. Attitude was associated with stronger intentions to engage in actions with helping the target group. Stronger intentions were associated with greater likelihoods of engaging in information seeking (Oliver et al., 2012). Speaking of information, what is also noteworthy to bear in mind is that, even though phrases such as 'an image tells more than thousand words' are commonly reiterated, images are ambivalent and silent. Though images of suffering, war and bodily human distress and destruction are often referred to as powerful, influential and even politically potent, they are in themselves mute (Kotilainen, 2016).

To change this scenario, a narrative must be introduced, either through discourse or reflexive questions (as the experiment of this research is arranged to determine). With the purpose of 'unmuting' its message, the insertion of narratives into images of pain and suffering might lead the viewers to convert their feelings into action, making them wonder whether certain political attitudes should be put into practice. However, we should take into account the problem of distance. In accordance with Luc Boltanski's argument, "when the spectacle of the unfortunate and his (her) suffering is conveyed to a distant and sheltered spectator, there is a likelihood of this spectacle being apprehended in a fictional mode the horizon of action recedes into the distance" (2004, p. 23). Boltanski asserts that "the distinction between reality and fiction loses its relevance for the utterly powerless spectator for ever separated from what he views" (2004, p. 23).

Psychological distance – spatial, social and temporal – can have a profound effect on how people perceive actions and events in distant places and how they react to them. Social psychology demonstrates that distant events and actions are less likely to induce emotional response which may have implication for people's capacity to be emotionally, compassionate and empathetic towards distant suffering (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). The theory about the evolutionary origins of empathy also suggests that human beings may have been genetically programmed to empathize with and help others close to home in order to promote the survival of their own genes (Cao, 2010). In addition to this, it is questionable whether people's moral intentions will be carried out unless words are immediately accompanied with deeds (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). What makes this process of moral intentions being followed by actions is the necessary development of a tendency defined as sympathetic indignation as attitude, not simply as compassion.

Luc Boltanski firmly points out that "(…) when the person who acts is treacherous or perverse, the spectator's sentiments will equally be composite. They will be in part composed of indirect antipathy toward the person who acts, the persecutor" (2004, p. 46). Boltanski also indicates that, "in developing this idea, Adam Smith speaks of the just resentment of innocent sufferers and makes his style seethe with the sympathetic indignation, which naturally boils up in the breast of the spectator of injustice" (2004, p. 46). According to Susan Sontag, "images of suffering cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers" (2003, p. 91). Bearing this in mind that Sontag suggests us to ask ourselves a couple of questions: "who caused what the picture shows? Who is the responsible? Is it excusable? Was is inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?" (2003, p. 91). As a matter of fact, all of these reflexive questions come together in a way of understanding that, as Sontag points out, "(...) moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action" (2003, p. 91).

To turn out our compassion into sympathetic indignation as attitude, Lilie Chouliaraki suggests us to "(…) identify ourselves with some form of public cause – such as philanthropic care in the case of tenderheartedness or denunciation on the case of indignation" (2006, p. 90). For this, Boltanski contends that "the demand for public speech and anticipation of an active attitude therefore constitute the minimal conditions of an appropriate relationship to reality" (2004, p. 23). These attitudes of denunciation and public speech are essential actions driven by moral intentions that define the tendency of sympathetic indignation as attitude. By evoking these attitudes we move our empathetic concerns to the next level, that of political participation through action. This is what Chouliaraki describes as "(…) the indignant impulse to denounce or even attack the evil-doer, which articulates the moral demand to civil justice" (2006, p. 91). However, people's worldview is what determines whether they saw themselves as people who could help or as people who were helpless observers of political events, under threat and fighting for their very existence. There is a sense of moral salience that moves us beyond more sympathy for the suffering of others to create a moral imperative to act (Monroe, 2014). People's (re)actions towards the suffering of distant others also depend on the way they identify with and relate to distant events and distant groups of people. It shows us the diverse and contrasting thoughts, feelings and behavior that people can hold about themselves and towards others (Huiberts & Joye, 2014).

An extensive empirical research that interviewed over 100 people who lived through World War II emphasized the importance of identity. Among the participants, the rescuers explained their behavior through reference to identity, revealing a strikingly similar sense of how they saw themselves in relation to others. For a Dutch rescuer called Tony, all human beings – even the "evil Nazis" – are classed in the same category. All rescuers expressed this sense of being people strongly connected to others via bonds of a common humanity, bonds which then led to a sense of moral salience, the feeling that another's suffering was relevant for them, that it demanded action to help, not just generalized feelings of sympathy or concern (Monroe, 2014). This sense of being strongly connected to others via bonds of humanity made the rescuers important actors who moved their concerns to participation, transforming their character of spectatorship. More importantly, the character of spectatorship holds attention to two important aspects called by Luc Boltanski as "(…) viewing and action" (2004, p. 25). For Boltanski, "action, as commitment in a situation, necessarily has a local character. On the other hand, someone who can be seen looking on can always be appealed to and involved in the scene he or she views" (2004, p. 25).

Bearing this in mind, it must be argued that there is a need for the acknowledgment of an intricate, multifaceted and sometimes contradictory spectator given the different issues and factors, both contextual and personal, at play in observing the attitudes, actions, and interpretations of the audience when confronted with misfortune (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). For instance, the bystanders interviewed in the empirical research expressed little solidarity with Jewish victims of the Nazis. Beatrix, cousin of Tony, presented a low sense of agency in which she described herself as helpless, low in efficacy, and fatalistic. The bystander refrain was: "But what else could I do? I was alone against the Nazis." The link between lack of agency and choice was clear in the bystanders' protestations that they did not know anything about what was going on during the war (Monroe, 2014). We must identify, therefore, the existential gap between viewing and action. While the first can even arouse empathy, this does not mean that the latter will be taken for granted. When confronted with visual representations of human suffering, high levels of empathy can be found in the audience, but some spectators will tend to be more like the bystanders (helpless viewers and less involved in political participation) than rescuers (viewers who partake in helpful actions).

For a more complete understanding of the audience, this insight into the existential gap between the two aspects must be taken into account. To investigate whether people's emotions, thoughts, compassion and all the aforesaid notions that constitute arousal of empathetic concern (such as 'stimulus,' 'empathy,', 'impact,' 'hypermediacy,' and 'emotional commitment') will be converted into attitudes, indignation and actions that define political participation, this social research must look through the lenses of social psychology and cultural anthropology, whereby cultural and identity issues would be placed more centrally in the analysis of the audience. Empathy is something easily expected and assumed when it comes to assess spectators' reactions to images of pain and human suffering, but it is also important to examine what factors potentially lead some spectators in the audience to become less emotionally involved, not willing to take action on behalf of the victims, or sometimes frustrated of not being able to do anything. Whereas some spectators might cross the bridge between arouse and actions, others can be less motivated to do it, and this depends on the following stances that will concisely be explored below.

Lack of empathy, state of denial and compassion fatigue

Once there are individuals with greater tendency of empathy, there are also those who turn away from suffering victims, which are considered by scholars as individuals who lack capacity to develop perspective taking, not understanding the victim's feelings and situation through imagining his or her perspective. This is a process that does not involve the suppression of one's own perspective and the adoption of the victim's perspective (Cao, 2010). We need to bear in mind, then, the possibility of an increasingly passive audience, staying in the online confines of a Western dominated hegemonic, commercialized atmosphere, potentially leading to spectators who care less and less about distant events, and eventually accumulating in a digital form of compassion fatigue (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). This leads us to reflect on Susan Sontag's assumption, when she highlights the idea that, "(…) in a world saturated, no, hyper-saturated with images, those that should matter have a diminishing effect: we become 'callous.' Images just make us a little less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked" (2003, p. 81). For Sontag, "that news about war is disseminated worldwide does not mean mat the capacity to mink about the suffering of people away is significantly larger" (2003, p. 90).

Beyond the hyper-saturated world with images, another crucial factor that contributes to the lack of empathy is the geographic distance between the audience and victims. That is to say, a suffering victim in a nearby place should induce greater empathetic concerns than a victim in a far-away place because people tend to represent a nearby victims in more concrete and detailed terms in their minds; so a concrete and vivid representation should be more emotionally arousing than an abstract one. This is because human beings may have been genetically programmed to empathize with and help others close to home (Cao, 2010). In an experimental research developed by professors of the Lancaster University (UK), one-hundred undergraduate students at an English university rated their likelihood of offering both financial and political help after natural disasters in Europe and South America. When European (but not British) identity was salient, participants were less likely to offer help for disasters in South America than Europe. They were also more likely to offer financial help after disasters in Europe when European non-British identity was salient. It is in this condition that place and identity salience would be consonant, and consequently feelings of responsibility among participants would be by all means highest (Levine & Thompson, 2004).

The third factor is precisely the construction and consolidation of identities (both collective and individual), which is central to social psychology. Starting from the notion of people's tendency to define themselves by comparing themselves to others, this theory stresses how groups are formed and maintained not only by inclusion of some, but by exclusion of others who are considered not to meet up to the in-group standards (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). About this matter, Luc Boltanski offers an interesting reflection. He is convinced that "the unfortunate who suffers and the person who views are, on this account, nothing to each other. Neither family nor community ties nor even interest bring them together" (2004, p. 37). Boltanski says that "the person looking on is thus characterized by the absence of already existing commitments, which is one of the spectator's principal characteristic" (2004, p. 37). For him, "the attention he or she gives to the person suffering is disinterested. So the misfortunes in which affect the suffering person have no effect on the spectator's condition (on his or her mode of life, for example), and he or she could safely ignore them" (2004, p. 37).

These three factors (hyper-saturation, geographic distance, and identity) may reflect the scenario which adopting the perspective of the victim become less imperative. In a world saturated with images, seeing a visual representation of one specific victim can make it difficult for audience members to project themselves into the shoes of the victim because they can easily notice the differences between themselves and the victims – in terms of age, gender, appearance and culture – and, therefore, distance themselves from the victim (Cao, 2010). Besides, in contributing to the saturation of images, the mass media do not promote reflexivity on our societies. Theoretically speaking, Lilie Chouliaraki points out that "instead of making the disturbing spectacle of distant sufferers the object of critical reflection, much theory on the media places the content – ethical and political – of mediation outside the agenda of research and debate" (2006, p. 5). In Chouliaraki's argument, "mediation deals with theories on the media that understand media discourse in a simplified manner, as image only" (2006, p. 5). Thereby, Chouliaraki comes into the conclusion that "despite their critical spirit towards the society of the spectacle, these aesthetic narratives of mediation have more to say about the life of spectators than the ethical dilemmas that the life of the distant sufferers may press on our societies" (2006, p. 5).

In this sense, in not making distant suffering an object of critical reflection on societies, the mass media intensify the tensions between geographic distance, identify and public action. The main problem is that, in establishing a discourse in a simplified manner – by depicting human suffering occurring far away from our reality, and highlighting the sufferers just as 'different others' – the conventional media provide us only few options and limited alternatives to act against the perpetrators of human suffering. Most of the visual representations are reduced to appeals for charitable causes, contributions and donations, and they can lead some spectators to believe that charity is enough to make a difference in relieving pain and distant suffering. Pursuant to Luc Boltanski, "the person who practices charity does not accomplish the impossible. He (or she) sacrifices time, goods and money, however it is a limited sacrifice" (2004, p. 8). In his opinion, "the task that presents itself is not insuperable; he (or she) arrives on the scene after the struggle has taken place, and he (or she) is not required to put his or her own life at risk" (2004, p. 8).

What is also relevant to highlight is that, in work on the psychology of genocide and group violence, Ervin Staub has argued that bystanders play a central part in the establishment and maintenance of human rights abuses. Staub believed that the concept of the bystander should not be limited to the individual who ignores a cry for help, but should also encompass groups and institutions that ignore the plight of others in their own country or other countries (Levine & Thompson, 2004). Hyper-saturation, geographic distance and identity are factors intensified by the mass media and its theoretical accounts of mediation, and they have a direct influence on bystanders' (in)actions over cases of suffering. Instead of offering forms of civic engagement, by showing political protests or acts of solidarity developed by civil society groups, the media tend to reduce our actions into charitable causes. Highlighting the importance of charity is necessary, but the media should not reduce the options to limited actions. This shrinks bystanders' responses in some actions and not in others more suited to political participation. For Sontag, "a more reflective engagement with content requires an intensity of awareness – what is weakened by the expectations brought to images released by the media, whose leaching out of content contributes to the deadening of feeling" (2003, p. 82).

In empirical researches, such as the one developed here, the lack of empathy is a fundamental element that should be a matter of consideration. Any social experiment aimed at assessing spectators' humanitarian awareness on images of suffering must shed light on the possibility of people's behavior being something belonging to the three constitutive factors of what is considered lack of empathy. Take as an example the identity issue, which has become a starting point, reaching far beyond the discipline of social psychology and is used throughout social sciences (including the field of sociology, anthropology, history, gender studies and communication sciences) whereby compassion may less likely to be felt towards socially different people, including those who are portrayed as such in mediated messages of suffering (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). So, in this way of thinking, the effective response to images of suffering should be investigated with caution, given the fact that respondents may consider it socially appropriate to report some negative feelings and emotions regardless of their mood state (Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2017).

After briefly examining the causes of the lack of empathy, it is useful to think of three fundamental gaps. One gap that looks at what happens between the suffering and its representations, and it has been the focus of study for sociology, media and communications and of humanitarian debate. Another gap that looks at what happens between audiences' reception and action, and it has greatly preoccupied social psychologists interested in helping and pro-social behavior. However, very little empirical research has been carried out into a middle gap, on how audiences respond to communication about distant suffering, although many assumptions have been made about what happens in this space (Seu, 2010). It is on this middle gap that the second stance is focused. In any empirical research on images of suffering, the state of denial is a stance to be considered. For Stan Cohen, "statements of denial are assertions that something did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about" (2001, p. 5). Cohen argues that "assertion of denial can be made either by governments (for example, 'there was no massacre') and individuals (for example, 'I did not se anything')" (2001, p. 5). The point here is to focus on individuals, where denial could be associated with diminished empathetic responses. This perspective grows out of recognition that stigmatized groups are collections of people who are negatively evaluated (by some) in the grounds that they share common and undesirable characteristic. As a consequence, negative affect may signify lower levels of empathy and greater attribution of blame (Oliver et al., 2012).

Yet in this reading, it is worthwhile to highlight the fact that psychological studies often tend to assume a realist stance, whereby what spectators say is taken at face value to represent what they would actually do, hence neglecting the contradictory, complex and ambivalent nature of their attitudes. Sociology and media studies have, on the other hand, engaged with the political, ideological and cultural meanings underpinning the processes through which distance suffering is mediated. However, very little is know about what happens in the unexplored space between reception and (re)action (Seu, 2010). When the reaction is none (that is, inaction), the spectator develops a space called by Cohen as "(…) the 'black hole of the mind' – a blind zone of blocked attention and self-deception" (2001, p. 6). Those who slip the information into the 'black hole' of their minds develop what Cohen calls "(…) neurological phenomenon of 'blindsight' as a model" (2001, p. 6). Within this 'blindsight' model, Cohen comes to explain that "(…) one part of the mind can know just what it is doing, while the part that supposedly knows, remains oblivious of this" (2001, p. 6).

For Cohen, “information is selected to fit existing perceptual frames, and information which is too threatening is shut out altogether. The mind somehow grasps what is going on – but rushes a protective filter into place” (2001, p. 6). In other words, denial makes part of a strategy of defence, a mode of avoidance we all use to protect ourselves from unpalatable realities and our responsibility towards the suffering of others (Seu, 2010). Denial can be manifested in three forms: literal, interpretative, and implicatory. Literal is as blunt as it is blatant, serving as a blanket defence against acknowledging facts. In the interpretative, the facts are not denied but are given a different spin, hence altering the meaning. Last but not least, in the third form of content, the implicatory denial does not dispute either the facts or their conventional meaning; rather, either the psychological, political, or moral consequences are denied, minimized, or muted (Welch, 2007). In relation to the interpretative form, Stan Cohen points out that “by changing words, by euphemism, by technical jargon, the observer disputes the cognitive meaning given to an event and re-allocates it to another class of event” (2001, p. 8). Concerning the form of implicatory denial, Stan Cohen also argues that “(…) the fact of children starving to death in Somalia, mass rape of women in Bosnia, a massacre in East Timor, homeless people in our streets are recognized, but are not seen as psychologically disturbing or as carrying a moral imperative to act” (2001, p. 8).

In an experimental research conducted by a professor of the Birkbeck University of London (UK), participants were given three visual prompts: the first was an appeal from an Amnesty International campaign for Afghanistan, the second was also an appeal made by Amnesty International, but for a campaign against torture, and the third was an article from the liberal British newspaper called The Guardian on human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. Then, they were asked to describe their emotional and cognitive reactions to those three appeals by a charity against human right abuses (Seu, 2010). Although charity is a limited action of political participation, as already explained, it can be a useful tool for understanding how interested is a target group in helping people in suffering. Charity is not the best productive way of making a big difference in pressuring perpetrators of suffering to stop violating fundamental rights. Partaking in political protests and in some acts of solidarity for the victims of suffering are physical acts of intervention that, if taken at a macro level by civil society groups, represent a broader model of civic engagement able to force authorities to rethink their (in)actions and behavior in their dealings with stigmatized groups. However, when it comes to evaluate emotional responses to images of human suffering, questions about charitable causes can help us to observe the existence of denial in spectators’ answers.

Lilie Chouliaraki argues that “(…) denial – far from being an intentional indifference to the other – reflects a banal kind of complicity between television and the spectator” (2006, p. 112). For Stan Cohen, “denial may be neither a matter of telling the truth nor intentionally telling a lie” (2001, p. 4). Cohen seems convinced that “the statement is not wholly deliberate, and the status of ‘knowledge’ about the truth is not wholly clear” (2001, p. 9). In the experiment with the three appeals, it was demonstrated, therefore, that some of the emotional responses to the communication was more directed at how the message was put together or at Amnesty, rather than the horrendous details of the appeal. Some participants fluctuated between openly doubting the truthfulness of the events (literal denial), and a more subtle intimation of distortion of the truth (interpretative denial). Both have the effect of undermining the force of the appeal (Seu, 2010).

Either on good or bad faith, the force of the appeal was undermined by forms of denial. Thus, the outcome was the rejection to acknowledge the facts. This is a matter of concern in the following experiment, once participants can develop forms of denial due to many factors, including their genuine ignorance, defence mechanisms or distrust in the hyper-saturated world of images. In Luc Boltanski's argument, for instance, "media charity is post-moralist in the sense that it reconciles pleasures and good intentions; no more must anything spoil the consumer happiness of citizen-television viewer, distress itself has become an opportunity for entertainment" (2004, pp. 179-180). Making a connection between this assumption with the experimental research of Amnesty appeals, some participants even saw the appeal as a cleverly devised marketing campaign which is manipulative. They positioned themselves as being resentful of manipulation and cleverly seeing through such attempts. They also positioned themselves as discerning consumers, and yet, express resentment at being addressed as consumers. Their negative reactions conveyed considerable anger and justified the self-righteous response of self-defensive shutdown (Seu, 2010).

Furthermore, Lilie Chouliaraki also comes to suggest the fact that "it is this mundane but pressing routine that, ultimately, manages to push the distant other aside as suffering occurs everywhere all the time and there is nothing we can do about it" (2006, p. 112). In Chouliaraki's point of view, "this attitude of denial and indifference to the distant other on the part of the spectator is known as compassion fatigue and is often held responsible for corroding the potential for civil action in public life" (2006, p. 112). In this line of thought, Stan Cohen contends that "one result is the refusal to spell out one's engagement in the world" (2001, p. 18). Cohen takes as an example "(…) the ability of Germans to overlook the extermination programme", which in his conception, "(…) they must have known that something terrible was happening, but as long as they remained ignorant of the details, they could say later, 'we did not know'" (2001, p. 18). This reminds us, indeed, the Beatrix's statement, one of the bystanders interviewed who presented a low sense of agency, and that described herself as helpless. This behavior defines compassion fatigue, and it occurs due to three forms of refusal: retreat, exception and abdication.

The first form involves a complete lack of engagement with the fact of social suffering and a retreat from recognizing what is going on in the social world. Hannah Arendt observed that some German citizens during the Third Reich tended to ignore that world in favor of an imaginary world 'as it ought to be' or as it once upon a time had been. The second form involves making an exception to one's normal relation of moral obligation to the Other on the grounds of necessity (e.g. soldiers 'obeying orders,' bureaucratized systems, training and the inculcation of military cultures designed to negate empathy). The third form involves the abdication of the obligation to a dehumanized Other. The suffering of the Other is not recognized as human suffering and, therefore, no obligation is seen to arise from it (Jamieson & McEvoy, 2007). This considered, the state of denial and the three forms of refusal (more importantly retreat) can work as what Stan Cohen called "analgesic for anxiety". For Cohen, "in response to a devastating event such as the death of a loved one, we oscillate between intrusion (i.e., invasion) and varieties of denial (e.g., avoidance, disavowal of obvious meaning, numbness, etc.). These are the two sides of attention; neither is healthy" (2001, p. 19). He adds, thereby, that "denial is only a palliative: anxiety is reduced, but the threat remains. This palliative distorts our ability to pay full attention, to see things as they are" (2001, p. 19).

The form that is a matter of concern in this research is retreat, once it best represents the potential compassion fatigue over the images depicted in the online survey. Lilie Chouliaraki says that "the spectators' feelings of powerlessness to act on the distance suffering become more acute when we consider the radical distance between safety and danger that the map of adventure news construes on the television screen" (2006, p. 112). Chouliaraki appoints that "the cause of compassion fatigue does not only lie in the omnipresence of suffering on our television screen, but in the significant absence of the distant sufferer from the community of Western spectators" (2006, p. 112). Perhaps the main reason for this is the concentration of power over the visual politics of suffering. In other words, the ones possessing the power over information and communication might determine the influence of photographs in the shaping of our political imagination.

Looking at this scenario through the lenses of political sciences and international relations, one may observe that the ones possessing power over representational practices have also the power to determine whose suffering is visualized and significant, and hence they have power over who's suffering matters. In fact, it seems that what determines the iconization, representability and the extend of circulation and processes of atrocity images, besides the atrocities themselves, is the political context and cultural appropriateness (Kotilainen, 2016). In the case of this research, for example, the visual representations of people in distress at the Mediterranean Sea have been circulating in the activist media, however, they have neither been remembered as a 'visible brutality,' nor have the European authorities been framed by most of the spectators as perpetrators of such suffering. Death in the Mediterranean seems not to be our domestic concern, even when the event occurs at the borders of Europe. But why is the suffering of others in the European sea areas not our domestic concern? Why do not we see the same global commotion as happened when images of people in panic and running away from the falling towers of the World Trade Center in New York circulated worldwide? One thing is sure, lack of empathy, denial and compassion fatigue are stances that should not be neglected in this analysis. For this, it is important to bind the studies of international relations (more precisely the field of forced migration) and the social sciences (mainly the fields of mediated suffering and social psychology) together.

By a more detailed examination of several theories within the field of social psychology, it became therefore obvious how we could examine an audience in the context of their surroundings, and in recognition of the many different personal traits and contextual factors that can lead to different reactions of spectators (Huiberts & Joye, 2014). Media and psychological studies are helpful to observe the different reactions to mediated suffering. For Susan Sontag, "an image is drained of its force be the way it is used, where and how often it is seen" (2003, p. 82). In a critical view of international relations, the process of making the suffering of some visible, and thus significant, is also a process of making suffering of some other invisible, less significant and less reacted to. Whose suffering we see it, and whose suffering remains unseen to us, are subject to political governance and power. Indeed, this is a matter of politics of (the institutionalization of protection) humanity (Kotilainen, 2016). The fact that images are presented with intentions and made to tell us particular stories must be a matter of concern before exploring the cross-national experiment. This explains how stances such as lack of empathy, denial and fatigue can be flourished in spectators political imagination, then reducing the chances of achieving a desirable humanitarian awareness.

Hypotheses of the research

Considering the theoretical framework presented above – where social disciplines and previous empirical studies were presented and discussed – some predictions concerning the cross-national experiment conducted in this research can be provided in the form of a directional hypotheses. Therefore, based on the literature explored in the first part of the research, and acknowledging that empirical studies in the social sciences attempt to decipher how the world around us works, thus explaining how it is structured according to the analysis of the behavior of individuals and groups (Stockemer, 2019), the following hypotheses are posed:

Visual representations of human suffering in the Mediterranean Sea, compared to the visual representations depicting no human suffering, will increase …

H1: the senses of empathetic concerns by demonstrating higher 'levels of relevance' given by participants over the issue of refugees coming to Europe via MS routes;

H2: the senses of empathetic concerns by demonstrating higher 'levels of urgency' given by participants over the issue of refugees coming to Europe via MS routes;

H3: the senses of empathetic concerns by demonstrating higher 'levels of indignation' given by participants over the issue of refugees coming to Europe via MS routes;

H4: the political participation by demonstrating participants' willingness to discuss about the issue with friends and family;

H5: the political participation by demonstrating participants willingness to post humanitarian appeals about the issue on their social media;

H6: the political participation by demonstrating participants' willingness to sign a petition to demand European institutions to comply with their obligations to provide protection to people in distress at the Mediterranean Sea;

H7: the political participation by demonstrating participants' willingness to seek further information to become a member of non-profit organizations that either provide emergency relief capacities and demand for rescue operations at high sea by the European institutions;

H8: the political participation by demonstrating participants' willingness to partake in demonstrations calling for the protection of refugee rights;

The cross-national experiment

This cross-national experimental research is conducted by a guest doctoral researcher under the supervision of two assistant professors. The experiment is limited in size and number. The results found in this experiment are not necessarily representatives of the feelings, emotions, reactions, beliefs and concerns that would be found in the European society as a whole. Nonetheless, assessing the humanitarian awareness of two target publics from two different countries (Germany and Portugal) seems to be an interesting exercise, which opens up the possibility for the experimenter to make logical inferences by developing interpretations and concluding remarks. These interpretations and remarks are able to determine whether the target publics are engaged in activating empathetic concerns and political participation on behalf of the people in distress at the Mediterranean Sea. Although its size limitations, the experiment provides us a field of social observation on substantial issues within the analysis of international relations, such as forced migration, where empirical considerations about the relationship among variables could also be made.

For this, the experiment dives into quantitative methods of analysis. Properly speaking, the research methods are the "bread and butter" of empirical political and social sciences. They are the tools that allow researchers to conduct research and to detect the empirical regularities, casual chains, and explanations of political and social phenomena (Stockemer, 2019). Quantitative social science is an interdisciplinary field encompassing a large number of disciplines, including economics, education, political science, public policy, psychology, to understand and solve problems about society and human behavior (Imai, 2017). All this considered, the experiment is underpinned by quantitative methods in the attempt to predict the potential effects and all other factors that may affect the political spectrum through civil society and human behavior.

Quantitative research works with statistics or numbers that allow researches to quantify the world. Quantitative methods not only allow us to numerically describe phenomena, they also help us determine relationships between two or more variables (Stockemer, 2019). In addition to this, quantitative methods vary on whether respondents are to respond on solely the most pertinent emotion scale, or to respond on two or more scales to indicate possible blends, or to respond to all scales in a list. While there are some standardized instruments of this kind, most investigators prefer to create ad hoc lists of emotion categories that appear to be relevant in a specific research context (Scherer, 2005). As one might observe in the next sub-fields that describe this experiment, the emotions categories that are managed here are easily interpretable given the plausible language provided by closed-ended questions aimed at requiring the participants to select answers from predetermined five-point scale choices. The applied quantitative methodology leads the participants to provide responses that could help the experimenter measure their emotional feelings and willingness to stand up and take actions on behalf of refugees. As it is further explained in the next sections, the cross-national experiment is accompanied either by visual representations of human suffering depicting people in distress at the Mediterranean Sea retrieved from many online newspapers and newsletters, and non-suffering images of seascape and other visual representations retrieved from sources found on the search engine of Google.

Variables

In social sciences, quantitative analysis is used to determine, in a given population, the relationship between an independent variable (a type of quantities that capture observed values of things that could be manipulated) and a dependent variable (the observed results of the manipulation of the independent variable) (Niño-Zarazúa, 2012). Thus, the dependent variable is the variable the researcher is trying to explain. It is the primary variable of interest, and it depends on other variables (the so-called independent variables). The effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is not coincidental or spurious (which means explained by other factors) but direct. In analyzing data from a cross-national survey, for example, variables provides us the opportunity to compare attitudes and social behaviors across countries (Stockemer, 2019). That is why experiments are important to the development of social fields, once they offer a rigorous way to establish causal relationships between variables, which is critical for both building and evaluating theory (Thorson, Wicks & Leshner, 2012). In this connection, it is not wrong to conclude that any theory built on the basis of limited observations can only be accepted tentatively, and its validity has to be assessed by further experimentation (Crama, Hammer & Ibaraki, 1988).

Quantitative analysis does not imply causality per se; but rather, it helps us to test the underlying theory empirically, a process that the methodologists called deductive analysis. This is because in social and behavioral experiments (like the one developed here), it is much harder to establish clear parameters for the size effect of correlations between variables. It is often more of a matter of judgment by experienced social and political researchers to establish parameters for either weak or strong correlations (Niño-Zarazúa, 2012). In the case of this experiment, more precisely, its results might be useful for establishing some parameters for weak or strong possibilities of civil societies to increase humanitarian awareness. Bearing this in mind, this experimental research aims to attract attention of spectators from two different countries by presenting them either frightening images of people in distress at sea or seascape images depicting no human suffering. In this sense, while the images of the Mediterranean Sea consist the independent variables (whereby some depict human suffering and others do not), the defining aspects of spectators' senses of empathetic concerns and political participation consist the dependent variables.

The defining aspects of the senses of empathetic concerns are the levels of relevance, urgency, indignation given by the participants over the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes. The defining aspects of political participation are the participants' willingness to discuss about the issue with friends and family, post humanitarian appeals on social media, sign a petition to demand European institutions to comply with their obligations to provide protection to people in distress at the MS, seek information to become a member of non-profit organizations that either provide emergency relief capacities and demand for rescue operations at high sea by the European institutions, and partake in demonstrations calling for the protection of refugee rights. To measure all these aspects that comprise the dependent variables, a survey was developed in order to ask participants to rate their levels of relevance, urgency and indignation over the issue, as well as their willingness to discuss about the issue, post appeals online, sign a petition, seek information and partake in popular demonstrations.

The bottom line of experiments is that it is important to select the physical stimulus features, treat them as the independent variables, and then measure psychological responses (Thorson, Wicks & Leshner, 2012). Aiming to explore this cause-and-effect relationship among the variables, the experiment captures participants responses to images of suffering, hence analyzing the senses of empathetic concerns and political participation. With the help of a questionnaire, the visual representations enable the experimenter to constitute the dependent variables and subsequent logical inferences that interpret the psychological responses of the participants. Representing the stimuli, the independent variables are selected on the basis of suffering and non-suffering-typed images. The stimulus set is, thereby, comprised by ten visual representations of each type of image, and followed by ten questions. Ultimately, the independent variables are presented in the questionnaire according to a random generator in a counterbalanced order.

Participants

Survey sampling is one of the main data collection methods in quantitative social science research. Sampling techniques are often used to study public opinion and behavior. This is a process that researchers select a subset of the population, called a sample, to understand the features of a target population. What makes survey sampling remarkable is that one can learn about a fairly large population by interviewing a small fraction of it (Imai, 2017). In this experiment, more precisely, the participants were people living in Germany and Portugal. From the total sample of 122 respondents that participated in the survey, 40 come from Germany (who comprised the panel Germany), and 82 from Portugal (who comprised the panel Portugal). From these 122 respondents of both panels, 75 were women (approximately 61,5%), 46 men (approx. 37,7%), and 1 diverse (approx. 0,8%). The general average of the participants is 24,5 years old, with 25,65 years among the German respondents, and 23,35 years among the Portuguese. Other socio-demographic information are provided in detail when the results of the experiment are presented.

With the help of the random generator, the participants were separated into two groups: the experimental group (confronted with images of suffering) and the control group (confronted with something different, such as images of the Mediterranean Sea depicting no suffering). Both groups were equal, except the stimulus (independent variable) that was presented to them. Then, immediately after encountering the stimulus, the participants were assigned to answer a series of questions intended to assess their empathetic concerns and political participation (dependent variables). By choosing predetermined choices in five-point scales, the respondents captured their humanitarian awareness to what extent the visual representations made them feel empathetic and whether they would eventually move their concerns to actions, such as discussing about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes with friends and family, posting humanitarian appeals about this issue on their social media, signing a petition demanding protection to people in distress at sea, becoming a member of non-profit organizations that either provide emergency relief capacities and demand for rescue operations by the European institutions, and partaking in demonstrations calling for the protection of refugees rights.

Criteria and software

The survey was based on a commonly accepted criteria called simplicity, which is limited in the number of questions. The survey was also reduced to a manageable size of closed-ended questions that required the participants to select answers from predetermined five-point scale choices. The software for the questionnaire applied in the experiment was developed in the SoSci Survey, a web-application designed for online questionnaires. Offered as a cloud service free of charge for scientific surveys and scholarly survey projects, this software helped to programme a fully controlled randomization of the independent variables, which led the experimenter to analyze the dependent variables in an easy and reliable way. When it came to the analysis of the data, it was used the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to make sure whether the differences of the results between the two panels and four groups were significant or not.

The questionnaire

By having the option to choose one out of three languages (English, German and Portuguese), the participants from Germany and Portugal were asked a total of eleven questions. It is important to observe that the first five questions, along with the treatment check question (number eleven), were designed to assess the empathetic concerns, whereas the questions six, seven, eight, nine and ten were designed to assess the political participation of the participants. Besides, a brief socio-demographic query was made to extract relevant information about the age of the participants, as well as gender, country, and level of education. Between the socio-demographic query and the eleven questions, an introduction story presenting the main issue of the questionnaire was showed to the participants of both the experimental group and control group.

Introduction story: In the so-called refugee crises of the recent years, thousands of people have tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea to get to Europe and receive asylum. In this context, I would like to ask you for your opinion about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via Mediterranean Sea routes. In the following questions, the answer choices are comprised within a five-point scale. Please pick any spot in that best represents your answer. The spots vary from “not relevant” to “highly relevant,” definitely no” to “definitely yes” and other options alike.

Question one: In your opinion, how relevant is the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from ‘not relevant’ to ‘highly relevant’).

Question two: How does the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes appear urgent to you?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from ‘not urgent’ to ‘very urgent’).

Question three: How indignant are you when you think of the refugees in distress at the Mediterranean Sea?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from ‘very slightly’ to ‘extremely indignant’).

Question four: When you think of the refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes, how threatening do you find these people?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from 'not threatening' to 'very threatening').

Question five: Do you think that our society should do more to reduce human suffering in the Mediterranean Sea?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from from 'definetely no' to 'definetely yes').

Question six: Would you discuss about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes with friends and family?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from 'definetely no' to 'definetely yes').

Question seven: Would you post humanitarian appeals about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes on your social media?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from 'definetely no' to 'definetely yes').

Question eight: Would you sign a petition to demand European institutions to comply with their obligations to provide protection to people in distress at the Mediterranean Sea?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from 'definetely no' to 'definetely yes').

Question nine: Would you seek further information to become a member of non-profit organizations that either provide emergency relief capacities and demand for rescue operations at high sea by the European institutions?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from 'definetely no' to 'definetely yes').

Question ten: Knowing that European states are legally obliged under international and European law to provide rescue operations to people in distress at sea, would you partake in demonstrations calling for the protection of refugee rights?

(Answer choices: five-point scale from 'definetely no' to 'definetely yes').

Question eleven: In your opinion, to which extent did the visual representations you have seen during this survey depict human suffering?

(This is the treatment check question and it is the only one without visual representation. Answer choices: five-point scale from 'no human suffering' to 'very acute human suffering').

Results: the German panel

Socio-demographic

From the total of 40 respondents living in Germany, 22 were women (55%), 17 men (about 42%) and 1 diverse (about 3%). From these 40 respondents, 19 composed the control group (about 47%) and 21 the experimental group (about 53%). In the control group, from the 19 respondents, the great majority was composed by the female gender, 14 in total (around 74%), while the male gender was represented by 5 participants (around 26%). On the other hand, the experimental group was comprised by 12 male participants (around 57%), 8 female participants (around 38%), and 1 diverse participant (around 5%). Therefore, it is worthwhile to note that although the respondents from Germany are predominantly female, the majority of respondents that were confronted with visual representations of human suffering were male.

The participant average age was 25,65 years, with 76% of them between 19 and 25 years old. In the control group, the average age was 25,6, and 85% of them were between 19 and 25 years old. In the experimental group, the average age was 25,7, and 67% were between 19 and 25 years old. Conclusively, the respondents from Germany represented a youthful panel. When it comes to the level of education, the panel was comprised by 80% of people without a university degree. In the control group, for example, 85% of the respondents did not hold a university degree. In the experimental group, the percentage of respondents without a university degree decreased to 76%. This means that the experimental group, besides being older, presented a higher level of education among participants compared to the control group. Given these socio-demographic information regarding the German panel, it is worthwhile to begin with examining the results of the first five questions designed to asses their senses of empathetic concerns.

The senses of empathetic concerns

When asked about the relevance of the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes, the participants of the German panel had to rate their answers in a five-point scale from ‘not relevant’ to ‘highly relevant.’ The calculated mean values from each group can range from 1 to 5, whereby 1 represent ‘not relevant’ and 5 ‘highly relevant.’ Thus, the calculated mean value of both groups concerning this question was 4.38. The control group presented the mean value of 4.61, while the experimental group presented the mean value of 4.14. When it comes to testing whether the differences between the control group and the experimental group are significant, it is important to highlight that the significance level must be less than 0.05. To be considered ‘significant by trend,’ the significance level must be less than 0.10. In the case of this question, for example, the calculated significance level was 0.025, which suggests a ‘significant difference’ in the results concerning the ‘level of relevance’ about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes between the German groups. It was possible to observe a higher amount of participants in the control group rating the issue as ‘highly relevant’ compared to the participants in the experimental group. This means that the visual representation of suffering did not play a crucial role in determining the ‘level of relevance’ about the issue among the German respondents.

Following this, in relation to the second question, when asked about how the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes appear urgent to them, the participants of the German panel had to rate their answers in a five-point scale from 'not urgent' to 'very urgent.' The calculated mean value of both groups concerning this question was 4.49. The mean value of the control group was 4.55, whereas the experimental group presented the mean value of 4.43. When it comes to testing whether the differences between the groups were significant, the significance level was even greater than 0.10. To be more precise, the calculated significance level between the groups regarding this question was 0.609. This comes to suggest neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' in the results concerning the 'level of urgency' about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes between the groups. It was possible to note, for example, that the same amount of participants in both groups rated the issue as 'very urgent.' This means that the visual representation of human suffering did not play a substantial role in determining the 'level of urgency' about the issue among the respondents of the German panel.

Concerning the 'level of indignation,' the calculated mean value of both groups was 4.30. The mean value of the control group was 4.41, while the experimental group presented the value 4.19. The significance level was greater than 0.10, more precisely, 0.475. This suggests neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' in the results regarding the 'level of indignation' about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the MS routes between the groups. To get a better view of this, the same amount of participants from both groups rated their level of indignation as 'extremely indignant.' In the question four, when all the participants of the German panel were asked how threatening they would find the people depicted in the image, they had to rate their answers in a scale from 'not threatening' to 'very threatening.' The calculated mean value of both groups was 1.95. The control group presented the value 2.19, while the experimental group presented the mean value 1.71. The significance level 0.182 suggests neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' in the results between the groups of this panel.

In the last question designed to assess the participants' senses of empathetic concerns in the German panel, it was asked whether they believe that our society should do more to reduce human suffering in the Mediterranean Sea. In a scale from 'definitely no' to 'definitely yes,' the mean value of both groups was 4.62, with the control group presenting the value 4.57, and the experimental group 4.67. The significance level was 0.678, which suggests neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' between the groups. In this manner, the only question designed to assess the empathetic concerns that presented a 'significant difference' between the groups was the question number one, which asked about the relevance of the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes. As it was possible to observe, the control group presented a higher mean value in the 'level of relevance' compared to the mean value of the experimental group. When confronted with an image depicting no human suffering, the participants tended to give a higher 'level of relevance' about the issue in comparison to those who were confronted with an image of people in distress at the MS. This explains the significance level lower than 0.05. What is particularly important to conclude, thereby, is that the visual representations of human suffering did not play a substantial role in determining the senses of empathetic concerns among the participants of the German panel.

The levels of political participation

In relation to the questions aimed at assessing the levels of political participation, the question number six, which asked whether the participants would discuss about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the MS routes with friends and family, presented 4.05 as the mean value of both groups. As in all other questions designed to assess the levels of political participation, the answer choices were presented in a five-point scale from 'definitely no' (mean value 1) to ' definitely yes' (mean value 5). Such a calculated mean value 4.05 presented in the question number six is the average of the mean value 4.10 found in the control group, and the mean value 4.00 found in the experimental group. The significance level between groups was 0.802, suggesting neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend.' In the question seven, which asked participants whether they would post humanitarian appeals about the issue on social media, the calculated mean value of both groups was 2.93, whereby the control group had the value 2.70, and the experimental group 3.14. The significance level was greater than 0.10, precisely 0.374. Indeed, this comes to suggest neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend.'

When it comes to signing a petition (in this specific case, the question eight) the mean value of both groups was 4.17. The mean value of the control group was 3.85, while the mean value of the experimental group was 4.48. In this case, it was possible to observe that the differences between the results of groups in this question were significant, once the significance level was less than 0.10. By presenting the significance level of 0.078, the difference between the results of the German control group and the experimental group in the question asking about signing a petition can be framed as 'significant by trend.' In the question nine, which asked whether the participants would seek more information to become a member of non-profit organizations that provide emergency relief capacities and demand for rescue operations by the European institutions, the calculated mean value of both groups was 3.02, with the control group presenting the value 2.90, and the experimental group 3.14. Moreover, the significance level was 0.591, which suggests neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' between the results of the groups. In the last question designed to assess the levels of political participation, which asked if they would partake in demonstrations calling for the protection of refugee rights, the mean value of both groups was 3.25. The control group presented the mean value 3.00, while the experimental group the value 3.48. Consequently, the significance level 0.372 suggests neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' between the results of the groups comprising the German panel.

About the treatment check question, none of the participants in the control group answered that the images presented to them in the questionnaire depicted 'very acute human suffering.' In the experimental group, none of the participants answered that the images presented to them in the questionnaire depicted 'no human suffering.' Therefore, considering these information, the only question aimed at assessing the participants' political participation that presented a significant difference (in this case, a 'significant difference by trend') was the question eight. When confronted with an image depicting human suffering, the respondents seemed more interested in signing a petition compared to those who were confronted with an image depicting no human suffering. The image of suffering might have played a key role in determining the significance level of this question.

Results: the Portuguese panel

Socio-demographic

From the total of 82 respondents living in Portugal, 53 were women (about 65%), and 29 were men (about 35%). From these 82 respondents, 39 composed the control group (about 48%) and 43 the experimental group (about 52%). In the control group, from the 39 respondents, the great majority was composed by the female gender, 26 in total (around 67%), while the male gender was represented by 13 participants (around 33%). On the other hand, the experimental group was comprised by 27 female participants (around 63%), 16 male participants (around 37%). The average age was 23,35 years, with 83,5% of them between 18 and 25 years old. In the control group, the average age was 23,7, and 87% of them were between 18 and 25 years old. In the experimental group, the average age was 23 years, and 80% were between 18 and 25 years old. Eventually, the respondents from Portugal also represented a youthful panel. When it comes to the level of education, the Portuguese panel presented 90% of the participants without a university degree. Apparently only 10% of them held a university degree. For instance, 87% of the respondents in the control group held no university degree. On the other hand, the percentage of respondents in the experimental without a university degree increased to 93%. From these socio-demographic information, it is possible to assert that the Portuguese experimental group, besides being younger than the control group, presented a lower level of education. After describing these socio-demographic information about the participants of the Portuguese panel, the results of the both groups are a matter of discussion in the following sections.

The senses of empathetic concerns

When asked about the relevance of the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes, the participants of the Portuguese panel rated their answers in a five-point scale from 'not relevant' to 'highly relevant.' The calculated mean value of both groups in this question was 4.70, whereby the control group presented the mean value of 4.71, and the experimental group 4.69. The differences between these results are neither significant nor significant by trend, insofar as the significance level was greater than 0.10, in this case, 0.860. Following this, in relation to the second question, when asked about how the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea routes appear urgent to them, the participants of the Portuguese panel had to rate their answers in a five-point scale from 'not urgent' to 'very urgent.' The calculated mean value of both groups about this question was 4.66. The mean value of the control group was 4.61, whereas the experimental group presented the mean value of 4.70. When it comes to testing whether the differences between the groups were significant, the significance level was 0.503, which comes to suggest neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend.' Concerning the 'level of indignation,' the calculated mean value of both groups was 4.48. The mean value of the control group was 4.51, while the experimental group presented the value 4.45. The significance level was greater than 0.10, more precisely, 0.739. This means that the visual representations of human suffering did not play a fundamental role in determining the levels of relevance, urgency, and indignation about the issue among the 82 respondents of the Portuguese panel.

In the question four, when the participants of the Portuguese panel were asked how threatening they would find the people depicted in the image, they had to rate their answers in a scale from 'not threatening' to 'very threatening.' The calculated mean value of both groups was 1.99. The control group presented the value 1.93, while the experimental group presented the mean value 2.04. The significance level 0.635 suggests that neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' could be found in the results between the groups. In the last question designed to assess the participants' senses of empathetic concerns in the Portuguese panel, it was asked whether they believe that our society should do more to reduce human suffering in the Mediterranean Sea. In a scale from 'definitely no' to 'definitely yes,' the mean value of both groups was 4.72, with the control group presenting the value 4.68, and the experimental group 4.76. The significance level was 0.594, which suggests neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' between the results in the groups. In this manner, none of the five questions designed to assess the senses of empathetic concerns presented a 'significant difference' or a 'significant difference by trend' between the groups. When confronted with images depicting no human suffering, the participants presented almost the same senses of empathetic concerns in comparison to those participants who were confronted with images depicting people in distress at the Mediterranean Sea.

The levels of political participation

In relation to the questions aimed at assessing the levels of political participation, the question number six, which asked whether the participants would discuss about the issue of refugees coming to Europe via the MS routes with friends and family, presented 4.51 as the mean value of both groups. As in all other questions designed to assess the levels of political participation, the answer choices were presented in a five-point scale from 'definitely no' (mean value 1) to ' definitely yes' (mean value 5). Such a calculated mean value 4.51 presented in the question number six is the average of the mean value 4.59 found in the control group, and the mean value 4.44 found in the experimental group. The significance level between groups was 0.439, hence suggesting neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend.' In the question seven, which asked participants whether they would post humanitarian appeals about the issue on social media, the calculated mean value of both groups was 4.00, whereby the control group had the value 3.76, and the experimental group 4.22. The significance level was less than 0.10, more precisely, 0.093. This suggests 'significant difference by trend.' In this case, it is possible to argue that, when confronted with an image of suffering, the participants of the experimental group exhibited a higher willingness to post humanitarian appeals concerning the issue on their social media platforms in comparison to those participants of the experimental group who were confronted with a non-suffering-typed image.

When it comes to signing a petition, the mean value of both groups was 4.41, with control group presenting the value 4.46, and the experimental group 4.36. The significance level was 0.661, which suggests neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend' between the results of the groups. In the question asking if they would seek more information to become a member of non-profit organizations that provide emergency relief capacities and demand for rescue operations by the European institutions, the calculated mean value of both groups was 3.95, with the control group presenting the value 3.90, and the experimental group 4.00. The significance level was 0.692, which suggests neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend.'

Just to get a better notion of how similar were the results of both groups in this question, almost the same amount of participants from each group picked the spot 'definitely yes' when they were asked whether they would seek more information to become a member of non-profit organizations that provide emergency relief capacities and demand for rescue operations by the European institutions. Ultimately, in the last question designed to assess the levels of political participation, which asked whether they would partake in demonstrations calling for the protection of refugee rights, the mean value of both groups was 3.86. The control group presented the mean value 3.80, while the experimental group the value 3.91. The significance level 0.672 comes to suggest neither a 'significant difference' nor a 'significant difference by trend.'

Concerning the treatment check question, which asked the participants to which extent did the visual representations presented to them during this questionnaire depicted suffering, only 11,5% of the participants in the control group rated as 'very acute human suffering.' In the experimental group, however, around 30% of the participants rated the images presented to them as 'very acute human suffering.' In general terms, the results of the treatment check question attested the usage of different images between the two groups in both panels of the experiment. In addition to this, it is possible to indicate that the only question aimed at assessing the participants' political participation which presented a significant difference (in this particular case, a 'significant difference by trend') was the question number seven. When confronted with an image of human suffering, the respondents of the Portuguese panel seemed more engaged in posting humanitarian appeals about the issue on social media in comparison to those respondents who confronted an image depicting no human suffering. Apparently, the image of human suffering might have played a crucial role in determining a higher willingness of the participants from in the experimental group in sharing, pushing and spreading humanitarian appeals about the issue out to the digital world.

Summary

Bearing in mind the respective proportions, this experimental research, along with its findings, can theoretically and empirically be considered significant for future developments of broader studies aiming to evaluate the senses of empathetic concerns and levels of political participation of society's members over issues involving pain and suffering of distant others. Though small in size and number, the cross-national experiment developed in the course of this research was able to estimate the relationship between the visual representations of human suffering and the defining aspects of spectators' senses of empathetic concerns and political participation. As the results of the cross-national experiment demonstrated, the visual representations of human suffering did not play an important role when it came to arousing participants' senses of empathetic concerns. As a matter of fact, high senses of empathetic concerns could be found in all the groups from both panels of the experiment, with or without visual representations of human suffering. However, the visual representations of human suffering were able to move spectators' concerns to more active participation in two aspects, each one in a different panel. In the German panel, for example, the visual representation of human suffering might have influenced in a higher level of participants' willingness to sign a petition, while in the Portuguese panel they might have influenced in a higher level of participants' willingness to post appeals on social media.

In both panels of the experiment, participants seemed committed to move their concerns to action. Nonetheless, the impact of the visual representations of human suffering on the formation of a commitment to take action to relief the pain of others could solely be seen in these two aforesaid defining aspects. The main possible assertion of the analysis could be that visual representations of human suffering might induce spectators in developing high levels of political online participation, either by signing petitions or sharing content in the digital platforms. Though this assertion must be proved by further experiments, it points the way for those researchers interested in conducting studies about online public awareness on complex emergencies involving suffering of others. Obviously, this experiment leaves some gaps to be filled up, particularly the actual exercise of the political participation of the spectators over the issue addressed. However, its findings might be consistent with the idea that some defining aspects of humanitarian awareness can be fostered through visual representations of human suffering, mainly those aspects capable of measuring the political participation (e.g. signing a petition and sharing appeals online).

When it comes to testing the hypotheses, the findings determine that images of human suffering in the MS, compared to those depicting no human suffering, did not increase spectators' empathetic concerns in the levels of relevance (H1), urgency (H2) and indignation (H3) concerning the issue of refugees coming to Europe through MS routes. Also, the images of suffering did not increase participants' willingness to discuss about the issue with friends and family (H4), to seek further information to become a member of non-profit organizations that either provide emergency relief capacities and demand for rescue operations at high sea by the European institutions (H7), and to partake in demonstrations calling for the protection of refugee rights (H8). But although the findings did not support most of the hypotheses, not all of them could be fully rejected. Eventually, two hypotheses were partially confirmed, such as the H5 and H6. As previously observed, in the Portuguese panel, the visual representations of human suffering, compared to the visual representations depicting no suffering, increased the political participation by demonstrating spectators' willingness to post humanitarian appeals on social media (H5). In the German panel, on the other hand, the visual representations of human suffering, compared to the visual representations depicting no human suffering, increased the political participation by demonstrating spectators' willingness to sign a petition to demand European institutions to comply with their obligations to provide protection to people in distress at the Mediterranean Sea (H6).

Considering that the potential limitation of the research was about not being able to determine whether the participants would actually move their concerns to actions by pushing institutions to adopt policies that yield positive outcomes for people in distress at the MS, the findings of this research lead to a more complete understanding that the participants from two youthful European panels seem at least interested in fostering their humanitarian awareness over the complex emergency in the MS. In closing the argument, and notwithstanding its difficulty in determining if participants would definitely turn their senses of empathetic concerns into meaningful action after encountering images of suffering, this research was able to demonstrate that spectators with great potential to become decision-makers, theorists, scientists or influencers in the future are engaged in playing the role of rescuers, i.e. viewers who partake in helpful actions.

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