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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Malta's migration governance and the task of managing external borders in the European Union context

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Abstract. In the last two decades, Malta has often maintained its humanitarian commitment to managing border and asylum procedures in the context of international conventions. This is particularly emphasized in relation to rescuing migrants and generally enhancing safety and security of border crossings. Though the smallest EU member state has initiated policies aimed at reducing illegal and unsafe crossings to its shores, the country still hosts the highest number of refugees per capita in the EU with 25.3 per cent of its population being foreign nationals. This paper examines the measures put in place by the Maltese authorities to manage the enormous inflow of migrants on its shores in tandem with the four pillars of European Agenda on Migration. It also interrogates the institutional means and structural capacity of Malta to ensure the efficient implementation of the European Border Surveillance system (EUROSUR) on the one hand or provide rights-based approach to migration and asylum on the other hand. Lastly, it identifies Malta's collaborative efforts with other countries in the last twenty years and peculiar challenges faced by the more exposed countries (i.e. Malta, Spain, Italy and Greece) in the course of countering irregular border crossings.

Introduction

Thousands of migrants have died or disappeared in the last twenty years while making attempts to reach European borders, seeking better opportunities and international protection (Laino, 2015). For instance, while crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach European shores in 2016 alone, over five thousand refugees were reported to have died while 2,406 migrants lost their lives in 2022 according to estimations (Statista Research Department, 2023). In all, over 26,000 deaths have been recorded since 2014 (Sunderland, 2022; IOM, 2023) with 2023 recording the deadliest first quarter (between January and March) for migrant deaths in six years when over 400 migrants died while attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean, considered the most dangerous maritime crossing in the world (Statista Research Department, 2023) having several cases of missing boats with "no records of survivors or search and rescue (SAR) operations" (IOM, 2023). With unfavourable economic conditions, persecution, extreme poverty, perennial conflicts, ethnic cleansing, and rights violations in many African countries, as well as absence of meaningful safe and legal channels, many people are continually propelled to embark on irregular journeys despite the risks involved. Thus, uncontrolled arrivals of "irregular migrants" continue to trouble the EU particularly the more exposed countries like Malta, Spain, Italy and Greece.

In response, member states increased their efforts to address the issues surrounding migration. Also, the EU's efforts to control migratory flows through a variety of principles and

measures rooted in regional cooperation, include the creation of common border force and coastguard. Malta subscribes to the EU's shared immigration and asylum policy, but it lacks the institutional instruments and structural capacity to effectively manage the massive inflow of migrants and asylum seekers who arrive at its ports. Although the smallest EU member-state has, over the years, implemented policies intended to reduce unauthorized and dangerous border crossings to its shores in order to avoid being "submerged by migrants," the country still hosts the highest proportion of refugees per capita in the EU, with 25.3 per cent (137,376 people) of its population being foreigners.

This paper examines the measures put in place by the Maltese authorities to manage the enormous inflow of migrants on its shores in tandem with the four pillars of European Agenda on Migration. It also interrogates the institutional means and structural capacity of Malta to ensure the efficient implementation of the European Border Surveillance system (EUROSUR) on the one hand or provide rights-based approach to migration and asylum on the other hand. Lastly, the paper identifies Malta's collaborative efforts with other countries in the last twenty years and peculiar challenges faced by the more exposed countries (i.e. Malta, Spain, Italy and Greece) in the course of countering irregular border crossings from Sub-Saharan Africa.

The article proceeds from this introduction to the second section, focusing on the European agenda on migration and border control. It explores the steps taken by the EU to ensure a sustainable border management system through different legal instruments for the protection of external borders against trafficking in goods and people, illegal immigration, transnational crime, and terrorist-related threats as well as non-legitimate asylum seekers. The third section discusses the burden of mixed migration flows and border control in Malta and its limited capacity to provide reception and protection for disembarked migrants like other coastal states.

The fourth section enumerates varied measures, policies, and practices, under five thematic areas, that can facilitate a well-functioning migration and asylum system in Malta in collaboration with regional bodies and international organisations, prioritizing the human rights, safety, and lives of migrants across countries of origin, transit, and destination. Lastly, the concluding section establishes how Malta's burden of massive inflow of migrants can be significantly addressed through international cooperation and regional approaches. It emphasizes the strengthening of the SAR operation in the central Mediterranean with adequate support for humanitarian NGOs to ensure safe and timely disembarkation of every person rescued at sea in the context of a common and human rights-based arrangement.

The European Agenda on Migration and Border Control

In the European territorial space, issues around external borders became a priority with the removal of internal borders when free movement of people (citizens' work mobility) was highlighted as one of the 1957 Treaty of Rome's goals and amplified in the Schengen Agreement reached in 1985. In the last decade, particularly after the so-called 2015-2016 refugee crisis, the EU has taken steps to ensure a sustainable border management system through varied legal instruments for the protection of external borders against trafficking in goods and people, illegal immigration, transnational crime and terrorist-related threats as well as non-legitimate asylum seekers (Marenin, 2010). Such measures also aim at ensuring humanitarian and safe European migration policy or reforming the common European asylum system (Dumbrava, 2023) as well as how to effectively manage migration flows in a comprehensive manner.

The Partnership Framework and the Valletta Action Plan constitute an essential part of this comprehensive approach to migration. Through such a complex and multifaceted response to control the flows of irregular migration, the EU developed a diverse set of technical, securitized, and traditional development measures and projects (Molenaar and El Kamouni-Janssen, 2017). These initiatives specifically aim to (a) enhance return policies and shelter in the region of origin; (b) combat human trafficking and smuggling networks operating out of Libya; and (c) address the fundamental causes of irregular migration.

In addition to supporting host countries that receive large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 2019), another comprehensive approach to migration management also targets the African region. This encompasses different measures such as creating the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, opening up legal immigration routes, boosting the protection of migrants and asylum seekers through maritime operations, and enhancing return and readmission cooperation, among other things.

Arising from these responses about border control by EU institutions and governments are serious human rights concerns regarding violent pushbacks or summary deportations in spite of the EU pledge of full respect of fundamental rights while protecting its borders. For instance, it is argued that people's rights are often violated through the EU externalization policy by frustrating "the right of any person to leave a country" (Human Rights Watch, 2018), thereby undermining "the right to seek asylum" or by providing "support for abusive security or border forces" (Human Rights Watch, 2018) in the cause of collaborating with third countries. Also, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has on different occasions, observed "Malta's failure to provide prompt assistance to migrants in distress in the central Mediterranean" (OHCHR, 2021) and multiple circumstances of pushbacks organised by the Armed Forces of Malta.

The "external dimension" of migration in relation to European external borders was a major focus of the Malta Declaration of February 2017 in dealing with the massive inflows of third-country nationals and "the humanitarian issues that frequently arise as a consequence" (Borsacchi, 2017) particularly among Mediterranean EU Member States in the last decade. The European Immigration and Asylum Policy has evolved over the course of more than 20 years from many outstanding roadmaps, including the Conclusions of Tampere (1999), the Work Programme of The Hague (2004) and Stockholm (2009), and the European Agenda on Migration (2015). Overall, controlling the common EU external physical boundaries, which addresses all border-related issues through an integrated strategy, and a global policy addressing migration are the two independent but complimentary approaches that best define the EU policy.

While managing the inflow of migrants and asylum seekers, however, EU member-states have raised concerns about lack of respect for national sovereignty, lack of responsibility towards EU obligations or lack of solidarity among governments (Buscaini, 2018). Though member-states at the EU's external borders such as Malta and Italy depend on the collaboration with the Libyan Coast Guard, different NGOs and members of the European Parliament have equally advocated that the EU halts its cooperation with and funding of the Libyan Coast Guard which "result in the detention of migrants by Libyan authorities" (Laux, 2021) apart from violating EU law by financing the Libyan Coast Guard.

The effective management of the EU's 32,719 km long sea border, 12,033 km long land border, and 1,863 authorized Border Crossing Points (BCPs) (Frontex, 2019) is a challenging task, but it largely depends on coordinated action by Member States with strong support from the

European Commission. In addressing the challenges inherent in the implementation of migration and asylum policies, the Council of Europe Action Plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum in Europe (2021-2025), with its four pillars- cooperation (transversal support), democracy, human rights and the rule of law- "proposes targeted measures and activities to enhance the capacity of member states to identify and address vulnerabilities throughout asylum and migration procedures" (Council of Europe, 2021). This is to ensure access to law and justice in practice, promotion of human rights, dignity, participation and diversity, the protection from exploitation, violence, abuse, and neglect as well as co-operation between migration and asylum authorities in Council of Europe member states.

The Burden of Mixed Migration Flows and Border Control in Malta

With the EU membership in 2004, the national borders of Malta were simultaneously redefined as external borders on the periphery of the Union (Mainwaring, 2014). The reality today is that Malta has, after its membership of the European Union, become a country of immigration as against being a country of emigration for several decades. This reality manifests in the presence of many EU and third country nationals in the country and given its proximity to North Africa, Malta experiences the inflow of refugees and asylum seekers, using irregular migration routes from the northern coasts of Africa and Turkey to reach Europe.

This has significant repercussions for the country with reference to international protection, migrant integration or return of failed asylum seekers as well as resources and accommodation logistics. Over the past years (since 2002), Malta has received an upward trend in the number of unaccompanied and separated children arriving by sea, as indicated by analysis of demographics of arrivals (IOM-UNHCR, 2014), causing tremendous pressure on the country's reception infrastructure and capacity for children. The EU member-states, particularly those receiving maritime migrants, have continued to face a significant difficulty in managing the arrivals of refugees and migrants at sea. Despite its modest size (landmass) and population, Malta has one of the highest rates of unauthorized immigration and the highest rates of refugees per capita in the EU, placing strain on the country's underfunded asylum system.

Consequently, the increase in migratory pressure has continued to generate public attitudes toward migrants in Maltese society. Apart from apprehension towards foreign people and cultures occasioned by homogenous identity, there exists social tension between the migrant communities and the Maltese largely driven by the "fear of invasion that plagues the Maltese historical memory" (Holicza and Stone, 2016). For many migrants (regular) however, Malta is a preferred "destination for employment, retirement, or studies, coupled with the Mediterranean climate and lifestyle" (IOM, 2016). This also explains the unusual increase in the foreign workforce on the islands in recent years.

Similar to other coastal States that bear an excessive amount of the pressure resulting from such maritime SAR operations, Malta's capacity to provide reception and protection for disembarked migrants has been a herculean task due to its limited material power, resources, and personnel, thereby "undermining their effectiveness both in qualitative and quantitative terms" (Eleonora and Luigi Gatta, 2020). As a result, migrants, especially those in vulnerable situations such as victims of trafficking, LGBTI migrants, children and survivors of sexual violence or torture face human rights challenges given the inability of the relevant authorities to accurately establish and evaluate their human rights protection needs. With regular financial and human resources support from European states, Malta can explore more rights-based methods for effectively

managing mixed migration flows into the country by strengthening its border protection capacities through appropriate equipment infrastructure and surveillance means.

Policy measures towards a well-functioning migration and asylum system in Malta

The EU has strengthened external border control operations since 2016 as apparent in the activities of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency and Frontex. While this has limited migration to the EU significantly (Breines et al 2015) it has not stopped migrants from embarking on long and perilous journeys to reach Europe. Studies (Breines et al. 2015; Omilusi, 2023) have shown that Malta is rarely the intended final destination for irregular migrants given that many of them, who are frequently intercepted at sea by the Armed Forces of Malta, initially anticipated to land in Italy while the majority of them were unaware that Malta even existed before arrival.

Similarly, migrants on the move have little or no information about the nuances of asylum policy and practice in Europe before and during arrival given that "decisions about where to go are made *ad hoc* along the way" (Crawley and Sigona, 2016) based on information supplied by agents and smugglers. This section elaborates on some measures, policies, and practices under five thematic areas that can ensure a well-functioning migration and asylum system in Malta, prioritizing the human rights, safety, and lives of migrants across countries of origin, transit, and destination.

A more coordinated EU approach on disembarkation and solidarity mechanisms

In order to respect the fundamental rights of everyone involved and create a secure environment for asylum seekers and migrants, the EU's approach to disembarkation and solidarity mechanisms has to be more methodical and coordinated. For instance, reception centres in the front-line Member States have in reality turned into detention centres (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2021), thereby violating EU and international law regarding migrants and people seeking international protection. This is applicable to Greece, Italy, and Malta. It is frequently reported that the Maltese detention centres offer substandard living conditions and human rights abuse where migrants are "held in severely overcrowded conditions with little access to daylight, clean water, and sanitation" (Times of Malta, 2020) in some cases, for 18 to 25 months (Aditus foundation, 2022).

The systematic detention of asylum-seekers and migrants who arrive irregularly in Malta by boat has also been put under the spotlight with regards to solitary confinement, electrocution, denial or delay of medical care and physical torture as confirmed by European Union Agency for Asylum (The Times of Malta, 2021) against the Maltese authority's commitment to improve the quality of living conditions in the detention centres in the 2015 Strategy Document and the Detention Regulations. The practice of mandatory detention portrays all irregularly arriving migrants and asylum seekers as dangerous criminals and creates a feeling of fear and distrust against them from the Maltese general population.

Based on the recommendations made by a number of non-governmental organizations and international (European) agencies, the Maltese government should take drastic measures to guarantee humane living conditions for all migrants and asylum seekers in detention facilities and to provide adequate support for those with unique needs and vulnerabilities. More importantly, given that there may be no legal basis for the detention of many asylum seekers and migrants and the detrimental effects of prolonged detention on their mental and physical wellbeing, "the establishment of predictable and effective mechanisms for disembarkation and relocation of

asylum-seekers" (UNHCR, 2020) should be a priority for the government with the support of other EU countries.

In this context, "the Malta agreement," which was signed in 2019 by Malta, Italy, France, and Germany during an informal summit in Valletta, aims to create a predictable temporary solidarity mechanism. Reception and accommodation for asylum-seekers and refugees require proper management while international obligations regarding the rescue of persons in distress at sea and disembarkation points should be continually respected in terms of humane treatment and provision of humanitarian assistance by concerned coastal states, ship owners, governments, flag states, as well as other qualified authorities.

Mandatory detention of irregularly arriving migrants and asylum seekers in Malta, without genuine recourse to a court of law, contradicts international human rights law and should not be an "automatic legal consequence of a decision to refuse admission of entry or a removal order" (UNHCR, 2018). Also, the non-legally binding 'solidarity declaration' signed by 18 member-states of the Union in 2022 with regards to the relocation of asylum seekers arriving in Mediterranean countries, should be strengthened with more financial commitment and operational support for frontline states.

Considering its high population density and limited size, Malta should be a greater beneficiary of this 'solidarity declaration' having, at different times, prevailed upon other member-states to acknowledge the serious irregular immigration burden and other migration-related challenges it grapples with. This is where the twin resolutions of the Internal Security Fund and the updated Integrated Border Management Fund (IBMF) passed by the Parliament in 2021 to combat organized crime and improve member-states' border management capabilities would be of great help.

Assisted voluntary return activities.

For unsuccessful asylum seekers or other migrants who wish or need to return and reintegrate in their community of origin, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes are designed to facilitate such intention of a safe and dignified return. An effective EU system for returns, it is argued, can help promote safe legal pathways, especially for third-country nationals, by having a deterrent effect on unsafe and irregular migration. While the EU member-states are encouraged to set up return and reintegration counselling structures to promote voluntary return, awareness-raising information through standard means of communication should be designed and disseminated by countries of destination and concerned international organizations/agencies.

However, such counseling or awareness raising can only assist migrants in making an educated decision about their future when they understand their legal condition and alternatives. More importantly, the reintegration component of the AVRR programmes, which is a multidimensional and complicated process, requires the commitment and collaboration of civil society, governments, and other relevant partners/actors in countries of origin in order to deliver quality reintegration supports/investments in terms of access to vocational training, psychosocial counseling, start-up grants, and other livelihoods projects. It is contended that Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) cannot be termed "voluntary" when offered to migrants in detention.

Malta has, for over two decades, closely partnered with the international lead agency for migration, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in the return and relocation of failed asylum seekers. Of recent for instance, as part of a project financed by the EU Commission and

Malta, International Organisation for Migration (IOM 2023) facilitated the relocation of 14 asylum-seekers in 2022. Though aimed at incentivizing return and considered more humane, cheaper, and simpler than deportation or less politically costly, AVRR programme outcomes should be constantly evaluated by operating intergovernmental bodies and other stakeholders to establish their desirability or possible sustainability gaps and areas for improvement in implementation.

Coordinated awareness-raising campaigns in countries of origin, transit and destination.

Awareness raising campaign by civil society organizations, international organizations, and governments constitutes part of the many responses aimed at exposing the dangers of human smuggling and trafficking in persons and reducing irregular migration to Europe. It usually targets potential or actual migrants on the move with a view to promoting the use of regular migration pathways and local livelihood opportunities. Using various innovative communication approaches such as community conversation, mass media, infotainment programmes, peer-to-peer messaging and training, awareness raising initiatives can bring about change in behaviours, attitudes, and perception "so that potential migrants do not consider migration as the only option for decent livelihood" (Okutho, 2018). Rather than a one-off campaign, different awareness raising interventions though community engagement and advocacy should be a continuous event in both countries of origin and destination, and this is capable of countering misinformation by smugglers and facilitating safe migration decisions.

Institutional strategies to dismantle smuggling networks.

For several years, smuggling networks, often carried out by flexible criminal groups or individuals, have mostly used the three Eastern, Central and Western Mediterranean Sea routes in addition to the Atlantic route (Western African route) to bring migrants into the EU irregularly, challenging the integrity of international borders and posing a major security and humanitarian threat for the EU in recent times. In tackling areas of impunity for smugglers along smuggling routes, the EU has strengthened international cooperation with many countries of transit and origin, particularly in Africa. Some policy instruments adopted between 2015 and 2016 include the Migration Partnership Framework, the Valletta Action Plan and the European Agenda on Migration targeting cooperation with migrants' countries.

Within Malta's expansive SAR zone, the Armed Forces of Malta and the Malta Police Force are in charge of the practical and operational elements of border control, while the Ministry of Home Affairs and National Security is in charge of internal border control and irregular migration regulations. In recent years, Malta has in this regard cooperated with Italy and received assistance from other EU countries in carrying out its maritime patrols concerning search and rescue operations, training of Maltese personnel and intelligence sharing. Combating irregular migration, smuggling, and trafficking requires the cooperation of third countries and building their operational capacities in terms of anti-smuggling risk analysis, border control, return and readmission.

It is argued, especially by EU politicians and supported by a few studies (Deiana, Dehesri and Mastrobuoni, 2019), that existing major search and rescue (SAR) operations unintendedly boost migrant smuggling or "serve as pull factors for migrants" (Breines, M. et al 2015). Most studies (Arsenijevic, Marcel and Rony, 2017; Steinhilper and Gruijters, 2018; Cusumano and Villa, 2019; Rodríguez Sánchez, Rischke, Wucherpfennig and Iacus, 2022) however, found that "non-governmental SAR operations do not correlate with the number of migrants leaving Libya by sea"

(Cusumano and Villa, 2019) and do not incentivize more crossings, affirming that the presence of NGO ships has little effect on migratory flows from Libya to Europe in the last decade.

Enhancing legal migration pathways (cooperation with third countries)

It is established that many asylum-seekers traveling to Europe from the Middle East and Africa rely on human smugglers who often provide migrants with false travel documents or arrange for transportation to assist them move across international borders illegally and many of them, in overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels. Promoting more legal and safe pathways for refugees to reach Europe and improving domestic asylum systems are central to effective management of irregular migration or the prevention migrant smuggling at sea rather than focusing on border control and deterrence.

Over time, restrictive visa policies make moving to Europe very challenging, especially for Africans. For instance, the legal pathway to Malta and its concomitant challenge can be explained in the number of foreign missions/embassies it has globally. The Island has a total of 35 diplomatic missions and 7 consulates abroad with only 4 Embassies, 1 High Commission and 2 consulates in Africa (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade, personal communication, July 4, 2023). Opening up more possibilities of legal entry into the EU is, therefore, one of the approaches of discouraging asylum seekers and migrants from resorting to smuggling that is often aided by state officials, border guards and law enforcement officers. Exchange of data and best practices as well as factual and objective reports on migration-related issues should be embedded in partnership agenda with all actors and stakeholders with a view to engendering safe, orderly, and regular migration. The EU and its Member-States should also ensure that migration policies are country specific so that actual and real needs of migrants can be identified and addressed in each country, rather than dealing with Africa (with 54 countries) like one sovereign state.

In addition to creating seamless legal pathways through the embassies in countries of origin for potential migrants-which are presently in form of family reunification, high-skilled labour schemes or university students and staff exchange- migration to the EU can also be facilitated through other legal pathways such as humanitarian admission, resettlement mechanisms and other credible alternatives. These mechanisms are essential for migrants (refugees) who are not returnable due to conflict or whose life, health, safety, and liberty are at risk in the country where they have sought refuge. For Malta, family reunification is being encouraged as a legal pathway in recent years for beneficiaries of international protection "with reasonable prospects of permanent residence and stable resources which would enable him/her to maintain himself and his family members" (Identity Malta Agency, 2021).

Tackling the drivers (root causes) of irregular migration from Africa

Strategies designed to tackle migration 'root causes' should include adequate consultation with third countries and "the use of aid as an incentive for cooperation on migration management" (Schöfberger and Keijzer, 2018) considering that challenges such as irregular migration are transnational that require development cooperation. Such long-term, broad-based partnerships, in the context of the Joint EU-Africa Strategy, the Rabat Process, Khartoum Process (European Council, 2015) the EU Action Plan on the Central Mediterranean and Team Europe Initiatives, subject to unflinching commitment of all parties, can effectively tackle the complexities and challenges of irregular migration and contribute to better migration management. Suffice it to

emphasize that these collaborative measures must take into consideration respect for human rights in accordance with national legislation, international laws, and the sovereignty of states.

Combating the root causes of northwards African migration or causing a reduction of migration flows to the EU can be facilitated by development assistance, economic cooperation, conflict prevention and trade expansion which are fundamental bases for economic prosperity or improvement in living standards. The massive outflow of migrants through irregular routes can be substantially reduced if African countries address the issues of corruption, poverty, youth unemployment, income inequality, environmental hazards, and avoidable conflicts. These measures will, as a matter of fact, encourage young people and potential migrants to explore economic opportunities and work in Africa in an enabling environment provided by national governments, rather than risking their lives through dangerous journeys in the Mediterranean Sea and desert.

Conclusion

While it is the obligation of the states to exercise their sovereign control through migration and border management policies for the purpose of regulating movements of people into their territories, it should be emphasized that such entitlement is not absolute because "it is restricted by a number of specific provisions of international law and human-rights obligations" (Grech and Wohlfeld, 2016). The slogan of "Malta is full" is common among Maltese which also reflects government's policy on migration and asylum in recent years. While this is understandable in view of its small size (both in landmass and population), a more humane, rights-based approach should be embedded in such policies with respect for humanitarian standards.

As a border state with strategic alliance with frontline member states in the Mediterranean Sea and other European countries, Malta has a key responsibility to maximally explore the Union's "internal solidarity" not only in border protection but in respect of transfer of migrants irregularly arriving the country (intra-EU relocation), and generally, as concerns the overall governance and management of migration and asylum. Migrants are human beings with inalienable rights, regardless of their immigration status- either documented or lawful- and the specific needs of those vulnerable situations should be addressed.

Being one of the primary disembarkation points for sea boat migrants - many of them after several attempts at crossing the central Mediterranean route- Malta's burden of massive inflow of migrants can be significantly addressed through international cooperation and regional approaches. The capacity of the SAR operation in the central Mediterranean should be strengthened with adequate support for humanitarian NGOs to ensure safe and timely disembarkation of every person rescued at sea in the context of a common and human rights-based arrangement.

The reality, however, is that as long as those socio-cultural and economic factors driving migration such as climate change, conflicts or demographic decline and labour force shortages are present, migration to Europe, either regular or irregular, is not likely to decrease in the near future. Similarly, much as those pull factors including job opportunities, political stability, quality education, individual freedoms, and better health care, are not replicated in countries of origin, young Africans for instance, will continually find Europe attractive. Finally, migration has the potential of benefiting both countries of origin and destination, if well managed, and shall continue to be an inevitable reality of the contemporary world.

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Migration and Economic Growth in Nigeria: Do Migrants Remittances Matter?

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Abstract. Nigerians have moved over the years in pursuit of more economic opportunity, security, and improved living conditions. Remittances from migrants are indisputably significant in developing nations; yet, the degree to which they facilitate or impede overall economic growth in Nigeria remains unknown. While most empirical studies concentrated on the individual impact of migration or remittances on economic growth, their combined impact on economic growth in Nigeria remains largely unexplored. This study examines the impact of migration and remittances on economic growth in Nigeria, employing data from 1992 to 2022. This study employed the auto-regressive distributed lag (ARDL) model to analyze the short-run and long-run relationships among the variables under investigation. The results indicated that migration and remittances exerted a significant and positive effect on Nigeria's economic growth during the study period, both in the short and long run. This suggests that migrants allocate their remittances to productive investments that foster economic growth. Based on the findings, the study therefore recommends that policy makers should improve the financial sector and make the process of remittance transfer much easier and less expensive to attract more remittances, as this will promote investments in various economic sectors and enhance the growth of Nigerian economy.

Keywords: Migration, remittances, economic growth, ARDL, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Migration has emerged as a significant force shaping the global economy, with profound effects on both the countries migrants leave behind and those they move to. In Nigeria, migration is a long-standing phenomenon, influenced by a variety of socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. Over the years, a considerable number of Nigerians have migrated, both within the country and abroad, in search of better economic opportunities, safety, and improved living conditions. This movement of people has given rise to a crucial financial lifeline for many Nigerian households.

Remittances, the funds transmitted by migrants to their home country, have emerged as a vital element of Nigeria's economy. The World Bank reports that remittance inflows to Nigeria have regularly ranked among the largest in Sub-Saharan Africa, constituting a substantial portion of the nation's GDP. These funds often exceed official development assistance and foreign direct investment, underscoring their importance as a source of foreign exchange and household income (World Bank, 2021). Remittances play a vital role in supporting household consumption, funding education and healthcare, and alleviating poverty, thus playing a vital role in improving the welfare of many Nigerians.

Remittances constitute one of the most evident links between migration and development, exceeding both foreign direct investment and official development assistance in low- and middle-income nations. In 2023, these nations received approximately $656 billion in remittances via official channels, an increase from $422 billion a decade prior, according to World Bank estimates.

Remittances can enhance economic growth by augmenting investment in human capital and small enterprises, thereby fostering entrepreneurship and local economic development (Giuliano & Ruiz-Arranz, 2009). However, there is a concern that remittances might lead to economic dependency, reduce labor force participation, and exacerbate income inequality, thereby stifling long-term growth (Chami, Fullenkamp, & Jahjah, 2003). Furthermore, the utilization of remittances predominantly for consumption rather than productive investment could limit their potential to drive sustained growth. The relationship between remittances and economic growth is numerous and diverse, influenced by factors such as the use of remittances for consumption versus investment, the development of financial institutions, and the overall economic environment.

The migration of Nigerians, both within the country and internationally, has generated substantial remittance flows that are crucial for household welfare and poverty alleviation. Report indicates that Nigeria received $17.2 billion in remittances from its diasporas in the year 2020, reflecting a 2.9% increase from the previous year, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this figure is the largest in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is significantly lower compared to countries with larger diaspora populations, such as India, which received about $119 billion during the same period. The remittances to Nigeria predominantly came particularly from the United States, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Additionally, Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest average remittance costs at 7.9%, which is higher than other regions. However, in 2022, remittances to Nigeria totalled approximately $29billion in 2022 according to the World Bank estimates. These funds encompass various fees, including bank charges, money transfer operator percentages, and stamp duties which are vital for supporting household consumption, education, healthcare, and other basic needs, contributing significantly to the socio-economic stability of many Nigerian families.

However, despite the substantial inflows of remittances, Nigeria continues to grapple with persistent economic challenges including, high unemployment, insecurity, widespread poverty as well as slow economic growth. While remittances undeniably play a crucial role in supporting households and reducing poverty, the extent to which they contribute to or hinder broader economic growth in Nigeria remains an open question and somewhat contentious. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the interactive role of remittances on the effect of migration-economic growth nexus in Nigeria between 1990 and 2022. By analysing these dynamics, the paper seeks to clarify and provide a better understanding of the role remittances play on Nigeria's economy, offering insights that can inform policies aimed at maximizing the benefits of migration and remittances in enhancing economic growth.

2. Literature Review

The literature found three pathways by which remittances influence growth. First, remittances reduce the cost of capital in the recipient nation by expediting capital accumulation, hence enhancing both physical and human capital rates. This has the potential to stabilize the

economy and mitigate volatility. The second effect pertains to the eventual shift in labor force participation, which happens when remittance income replaces labor income. Furthermore, remittances influence the efficiency of investment by increasing total factor productivity (Oladipo, 2020; Gapenet al.2009). Remittances do, however, depend on supportive governmental policies and an environment that is conducive to investment activity to determine how much they directly or indirectly affect economic growth.

The neoclassical migration theory, proposed by Lewis (1954), highlights that individual's make migration decisions based on the expected costs and benefits of migrating. The neoclassical migration hypothesis posits that people relocate in search of improved living conditions, higher earnings, and better employment opportunities. Furthermore, it emphasizes the impact of push and pull factors such as; regional economic inequalities, employment opportunities, and standards of living on migration choices. According to neoclassical migration theory, the primary factor driving migration is the significant disparities in wages, leading to a net movement of individuals from areas with lower wages to those with higher wages. This theory posits that individuals travel in order to pursue possibilities that will maximize their present or expected income. In summary, the neoclassical migration theory predominantly emphasizes wage disparities as the main driving force for migration and regards remittances as a significant contributor to sustained economic development.

The literature on the independent impact of migration or remittances on economic growth in Nigeria indicates that both migration and remittances exhibit either a positive or a significantly negative effect on economic growth. Akinpelu et al. (2013) utilized the Johansen cointegration method and the Granger causality test to analyze the effect of remittance inflows on Nigeria's economic growth and found a long-term correlation among the variables. The Granger causality test indicated a unilateral causality between gross domestic product and remittance inflows; gross capital formation and remittances; remittance inflows and economic openness. Job and Eugene (2019) examined savings, remittances, and economic growth in Nigeria with the VAR methodology in a comparable study. The research demonstrated that savings and remittances exert a favorable and considerable influence on growth; the impact of savings is enduring and durable throughout the study duration. Conversely, Igbinedion (2020) determined that remittance-driven growth was not inclusive in Nigeria from 2000 to 2018, employing the Fully Modified OLS method.

Adeseye (2021) utilized multiple regression analysis to investigate the correlation between emigrants' remittances and economic growth in Nigeria from 1990 to 2018. The research indicated that remittance inflows exerted a favorable and considerable influence on economic growth over the examined period. Adjei et al. (2020) employed the Vector Error Correction Model to examine the impact of remittances on economic growth, utilizing panel data from seven West African nations spanning from 2003 to 2018. The results indicated that remittances had a substantial beneficial impact on economic growth in Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali.

Ebunoluwa and Ebele (2022) investigated the impact of labor emigration and remittances on Nigeria's economic development, demonstrating that labor migration serves as a supplementary revenue source that positively contributes to economic advancement in Nigeria. Eberechi et al. (2024) and Ikwuakwu et al. (2024) employed the ARDL limits test method and discovered that remittances exert a negative and significant impact on economic growth in Nigeria.

Amadi and Abe (2024) employed the ARDL estimating method to analyze the effect of migrants' remittances on Nigeria's economic growth from 1986 to 2022. The research demonstrated a substantial and positive correlation between remittances and economic growth, applicable in both the short term and the long term. Foreign direct investment and private investment significantly contribute to growth, suggesting that remittances, FDI, and private investment bolster economic development in Nigeria.

Mbadiwe and Egesimba (2024) utilized the Error Correction Mechanism to analyze the influence of remittances on Nigeria's economic growth from 1986 to 2021. The results indicate that remittances substantially bolstered economic growth in Nigeria during the study period. Omoniyi and Owoeye (2024) employed the error correction process to analyze the impact of remittance inflow on Nigeria's economic growth, utilizing time series data from 1981 to 2021. The study revealed that remittance inflow has a minor negative impact on Nigeria's GDP growth in the near term, while demonstrating a strong positive correlation with GDP in the long term.

3. Methodology
3.1 Theoretical Framework

The neoclassical growth theory proposed by Lewis (1954) posits that labor emigration results from imbalances in the labor market and discrepancies between labor supply and demand. The theory posits that individuals migrate from low-wage areas to regions offering higher income, improved infrastructure, and enhanced socioeconomic advantages, primarily driven by incentives such as remittances and foreign income. This incentivizes labor, as remittances serve as valuable alternative income sources for participating households; the inflow enhances productivity and stimulates economic growth in the emigrants' country of origin. The emigrants' immediate household directly benefits from remittances at the micro-level, while the broader economy also gains from investments made by remittance-receiving households (Afen-Okhai, 2023). The neoclassical theory is utilized in this context due to its emphasis on the significance of remittances within the migration-economic growth relationship.

3.2 Model Specification

The empirical model is based on the work of Oladipo (2020), Gapen et al. (2009), and other contributors to the extended neoclassical economic growth model. The model is adjusted to include relevant variables in order to assess the impact of migration and remittances on output growth.

$$GDP_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 MIG_t + \beta_2 REMI_t + \sum_{j=2}^{n} \beta_1 X_{it} + \mu_t \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots. (1)$$

Where; X is a vector of other control variables (GCF, FDI & EXCH) that affects economic growth (GDP), see Table 1.

The estimation model is defined in linear form as follows:

$$RGDP_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 MIG_t + \beta_2 REMI_t + \beta_3 MIG * REMI_t + \beta_4 GCF_t + \beta_5 FDI_t + \beta_6 EXCH_t + U_t \ldots\ldots\ldots. (2)$$

Where; $RGDP_t$ represents the real gross domestic product per capita at year t, MIG_t is the net migration rate, $REMI_t$ is the personal remittances received, $MIG * REMI_t$ is the interaction term between migration and remittances, GCF_t shows the stock of capital formation

as a proxy for investment, FDI_t is the foreign direct investment, EXC_t is the real exchange rate and U_t is the error term. See Table 1.

Table 1.Definition, measurement and sources of variables

Variables	Definition and Measurement	A priori Sign	Source
RGDP	Annual Real Gross Domestic Product pet capita measured at constant prices		WDI
MIG	Net Migration rate	Negative	WDI
REMI	Personal remittances received % of GDP	Positive	WDI
MIG*REMI	The interaction term between migration and remittances	Positive	Constructed
GCF	Gross Fixed Capital Formation (% of GDP) as a proxy for investment in physical capital	Positive	WDI
FDI	Foreign direct investment % of GDP	Positive	WDI
EXCH	Real exchange rate LCU per US $	Positive	WDI

Source: Authors' Compilation, 2024

4. Results and discussion
4.1 Test for Stationarity

An augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test and Phillips-Perron (PP) test were performed on all relevant variables to assess the stationarity of the dataset utilized in this study. The unit root test is built on the standard regression model.

$$\triangle X_t = \ \alpha + \beta X_{t-1} \sum_{j=1}^{p} \gamma_j \triangle X_{t-j} \ + \ \mu_t \dots\dots\dots\dots(3)$$

Where;$\triangle$ is the difference operator,X consists of each of the five variables in the model, $t = 1, \dots\dots$, represents the time index; $\triangle X_{t-j}$ the lagged first differences are included to address serial correlation in errors; and μ_t denotes the error term.

Table 2 presents the findings of the Augmented Dickey Fuller (ADF) and Phillips Perron (PP) unit root tests for each time series at both the level and first difference. The null hypothesis $Ho: \sigma = 0$ posits that the variable is non-stationary, whereas the alternate hypothesis $H1: \sigma = 0$ asserts that the variable is stationary.

Table 2. Unit root test

	ADF			PP		
Variable	T-Statistics	Critical Value	Order	T-Statistics	Critical Value	Order
RGDP	-3.2370	-4.3098	I(1)	-3.0679	-3.6793	I(1)
MIG	-3.9896	-4.2967	I(0)	-3.8615	-4.2967	I(0)
REMI	-7.4003	-3.6793	I(1)	-7.1462	-3.6793	I(1)
GCF	-3.8458	-3.6793	I(1)	-3.8699	-3.6793	I(1)
FDI	-6.6772	-4.3098	I(1)	-6.8447	-3.6793	I(1)
EXCH	-5.3119	-3.6793	I(1)	-5.2478	-4.3098	I(1)

Source: Authors' Compilation, 2024

From Table 2, the result of the stationarity test indicated that RGDP, REMI, GCF, FDI and EXCH are stationary at first difference for both ADF and PP with inferences drawn at 5% significance level. However, MIG is significant at levels for both ADF and PP test at 5% level of significance. Consequently, the variables in our study are classified as I(0) and I(1). Given that all series are linked in different orders, there exists a potential for a cointegrating relationship among the variables. The ARDL bound testing approach was employed to ascertain this.

Peseran, *et al.,* (2001) highlighted that ARDL allows the estimation of the cointegration, as well as the short-run and long-run relationship for variables of different orders simultaneously. It also tests for the non-existence of all regressors of order 2 or above to avoid an invalid F-statistics computation and the possibility of spurious regression. The The ARDL model is characterized by its autoregressive nature, incorporating *p* lags of the dependent variable, and its classification as a distributed lag model, which includes *q* lags of independent variables.

It is typically presented as follows:

$$y_{it} = \sum_{j=1}^{m} \alpha_{ij} y_{it-j} + \sum_{j=0}^{n} \beta_{ij} x_{it-j} + u_i + \varepsilon_{it} \dots \dots \dots \dots \dots \dots \quad (4)$$

i= 1,2,……..n, t denotes time, *t* = 1,2,3,……T, *j* denotes number of lags

Thus, Eq. (4) becomes

$$GDP_{it} = \beta_0 + \varphi GDP_{it-1} + \beta_1 MIG_{it-1} + \beta_2 REMI_{it-1} + \beta_3 MIG * REMI_{it-1}$$

$$+ \beta_4 GCF_{it-1} + \beta_5 FDI_{it-1} + \beta_6 EXCH_{it-1} + \sum_{j=1}^{m-1} \alpha_{ij} \triangle GDP_{it-j}$$

$$+ \sum_{j=0}^{n-1} {\beta^1}_{ij} \triangle MIG_{it-j} + \sum_{j=0}^{n-1} {\beta^2}_{ij} \triangle REMI_{it-j}$$

$$+ \sum_{j=0}^{n-1} {\beta^3}_{ij} \triangle MIG * REMI_{it-j} + \sum_{j=0}^{n-1} {\beta^4}_{ij} \triangle GCF_{it-j}$$

$$+ \sum_{j=0}^{n-1} {\beta^5}_{ij} \triangle FDI_{it-j} + \sum_{j=0}^{n-1} {\beta^6}_{ij} \triangle EXCH_{it-j} + \varepsilon_{it} \dots \dots \dots \dots \dots .. (5)$$

The variables with the differences are the short-run variables while those without the difference are the long-run while the summation signs in the model represent the error correction dynamics.

4.2 ARDL Bound Test for Cointegration

The Bound test for co-integration is conducted to assess the joint significance of the coefficients in the specified conditional ARDL model. The Wald test is performed for this equation by applying restrictions to the estimated long-run coefficients of all lagged level variables. The F-statistic of 9.71575 exceeds the upper bound critical value of 2.88 at the 1 percent significance level, indicating that the null hypothesis of no co-integration can be rejected at this level of significance. Consequently, evidence supports a long-run relationship between RGDP and the independent variables in the model, as shown in Table 3. Therefore, we will estimate the long-run coefficients of our model.

Table 3. Bound Test

F- Bounds Test		Null Hypothesis: No levels relationship		
Test Statistic	**Value**	**Significance**	**I(0)**	**I(1)**
F-Statistics	9.71575	10%	1.99	2.94
K	6	5%	2.27	3.28
		2.5%	2.55	3.61
		1%	2.88	3.99

Source: Authors' Compilation, 2025

4.3 Long-Run Model Estimation

Following the confirmation of a long-run relationship among the study variables, the subsequent step in the ARDL approach is to estimate the long-run coefficients. The Schwarz-Bayesian criteria was employed, selecting a maximum lag order of two, resulting in the ARDL (2, 1, 2, 2, 1, 2, 2) equation. The long-run relationship illustrated in Table 4 indicates that 99 percent of the variation in RGDP is significantly accounted for by the independent variables in the model. The F-statistic suggests that the model is statistically significant overall.

Table 4. Long Run Regression Result

Dependent Variable: RGDP			
Variable	**Coefficient**	**t-statistic**	**Prob**
MIG	-0.0136	-2.6001	0.0265**
REMI	0.0054	3.8179	0.0034***
MIG*REMI	0.0136	4.2290	0.0017***
GCF	-0.1973	-5.0674	0.0005***
FDI	0.0045	1.7182	0.1165
EXCH	0.0004	0.0001	0.6770
C	3.3273	5.7524	0.0002
Adjusted R-Squared	0.99		
S.E. of Regression	0.0051		
Prob(F - statistic)	0.0000		

, * indicate that the series are significant at 5 and 1 percent respectively
Source: Authors' Compilation, 2025.

Remittances exert a positive and significant effect on economic growth in Nigeria, with conclusions drawn at the 1 percent level of significance, aligning with the a priori expectation. An increase of 1 percent in remittances is linked with a 0.5 percent increase in long-term economic growth. Migration exerts a significant adverse impact on economic growth, indicated by an expected sign of (-0.0136), with inferences established at a 5 percent significance level in the long run. This indicates that, ceteris paribus, a one percent rise in net migration corresponds to a one percent decline in economic growth during the study period.

Although migration adversely affects economic growth, its relationship with remittances mitigates this effect. Therefore, a positive and significant long-run relationship with remittances is observed, with inferences made at the 1 percent significance level. Remittances have significantly contributed to household income, investments, and human capital development, including

education funding and healthcare improvements, positively impacting Nigeria's economic growth. The long-run relationship between gross capital formation and economic growth is negative and statistically significant at the 1 percent significance level during the study period. An increase of 1 percent in gross capital formation is associated with a 19 percent reduction in economic growth. The outcome is inconsistent with the anticipated positive correlation between capital and economic growth. This may result from widespread corruption in the public sector or misallocation of resources, which subsequently diminishes productivity and overall economic growth. Conversely, foreign direct investment and exchange rates do not have a significant effect on economic growth in the long run during the study period. This contradicts the a priori expectation, which may arise from investments that are not economically efficient or from corrupt practices in the public sector.

4.4 Short-run Error Correction Estimates

Following the results presented in Table 4, which estimate the long-run coefficient and confirm the existence of a long-run relationship among the study variables in the ARDL equation, the short-run ECM is subsequently estimated. The Adjusted R-squared indicates that approximately 96.15% of the variation in RGDP is explained by variations in the explanatory variables within the short-run model.

Table 5 ARDL ECM Result

Dependent Variable: DRGDP			
Variable	Coefficient	t-statistic	Prob
DMIG	-0.0136	-4.9963	0.0005
DREMI	0.0054	8.8134	0.0000
DMIG*REMI	0.0134	8.4852	0.0000
DGCF	-0.1973	-9.5706	0.0000
DFDI	0.0045	3.4569	0.0062
DEXCH	0.0004	0.9985	0.3416
ECM (-1)	-0.8695	-11.4949	0.0000
Adj R-Squared	0.92		
S.E. of Regression	0.0039		

Source: Authors' Compilation, 2025

The lagged error correction term coefficient is negative (-0.8695) and significant at the 1 percent level, aligning with the results of the bound test for co-integration. In particular, 86.9 percent of the disequilibria resulting from the previous year's shock return to long-run equilibrium in the current year, indicating a high speed of adjustment. A highly significant error correction term suggests a stable long-run relationship among the study variables (Tolcha & Rao, 2016). The findings are consistent in both the short term and the long term. Migration exerts a notable negative influence on economic growth at the 1 percent significance level; however, when interacting with remittances, it positively and significantly contributes to economic growth in the short run during the study period. A 1 percent increase results in a 1.3 percent rise in economic growth. Gross capital formation exhibits a significant negative impact on economic growth in the short run during the study period, at a 1 percent level of significance. A 1 percent change in gross

capital formation is associated with a reduction in economic growth of approximately 19.7 percent. Conversely, both foreign direct investment and exchange rate demonstrate a positive correlation with economic growth. However, the exchange rate shows an insignificant relationship, whereas foreign direct investment is significant, with inferences drawn at the 1 percent significance level. A 1 percent increase in foreign direct investment is associated with a 4.5 percent improvement in economic performance, aligning with prior expectations.

4.5 Diagnostic Tests

To assess the validity of the estimated model in the long run, several diagnostic tests were performed. The findings presented in Table 6 demonstrate that the residuals exhibit a normal distribution, as evidenced by the p-value of the Jarque-Bera statistic. The Breusch-Godfrey LM test similarly indicates the absence of serial correlation in the model, and the coefficients are estimated efficiently. The Breusch-Pagan-Godfrey test results indicate homoscedasticity, suggesting that the standard errors and coefficient estimations are robust and efficient. The Ramsey reset test confirms that the model is correctly specified. The inferences were derived from the decision rule, as the corresponding p-values are significant at the 1%, 5%, and 10% significance levels.

Table 6. Diagnostic tests

Test	Null Hypothesis	Value	*P*-Value
Jaque-Bera	Residuals are normally distributed	0.9178	0.6319
Breusch-Godfrey LM	Absence of serial correlation	1.2886	0.3698
Breusch–Pagan-Godfrey	Homoscedasticity	0.8626	0.6355
Ramsey RESET	Model is correctly specified	1.0175	0.3556

Source: Authors' Compilation, 2025

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study analyzes the effects of migration and remittances on Nigeria's economic growth during the period from 1990 to 2000, employing the autoregressive distributed lag (ARDL) methodology. The validity of the estimation technique was established through credible indices, including adjusted R², t-tests, and F tests, alongside diagnostic tests to assess the model's validity. The study concludes that migration significantly negatively impacts economic growth; however, the interaction with remittances mitigates this effect. The interaction between migration and remittances significantly contributes to economic growth in Nigeria during the study period. The study recommends that policymakers enhance the financial sector and simplify the remittance transfer process to reduce costs and attract more remittances, thereby promoting both short-term and long-term investments across various economic sectors and fostering the growth of the Nigerian economy.

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Policies in practice: The relationship between Street-Level Bureaucrats and Displaced Colombian and Venezuelan migrant adolescent mothers in Bogotá, Colombia

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Abstract. Colombia hosts the world's largest population of internally displaced people (IDPs) and has received over two million Venezuelan refugees and migrants since 2015. Refugees, migrants, and IDPs who become mothers during adolescence are subject to innumerable challenges. The Colombian government has developed policies to aid internally displaced people and refugees from Venezuela and we aim to get insight into the execution of these policies specifically in regard with internally displaced and Venezuelan adolescent mothers. We will draw from scholarly discussions about street-level bureaucracy theory which aims to understand the relationship between policy goals and execution. We performed ethnographic fieldwork among professionals and displaced adolescent mothers - participatory observations, interviews, and a focus group discussion - in Bogotá. The analysis reveals challenges faced by street-level bureaucrats related to public policies and tensions in their relationships with clients. The patterned decision-making that results from the relationships between street-level bureaucrats, the women and public policies is central to the findings. The study's inclusion of both displaced Colombian and Venezuelan migrant adolescent mothers advances the understanding of the dynamics between street-level bureaucrats, their clients, and public policies in a community that includes both internally displaced and migrant populations.

Keywords: Internal displacement, migration, adolescent mothers, street-level bureaucracy, ethnographic fieldwork, co-responsibility

Introduction

Worldwide, 114 million people were forcibly displaced by the end of September 2023 (UNHCR). Women and children constitute the majority of displaced people and are at greater risk of vulnerabilities during and after displacement, such as adolescent pregnancy, than their non-displaced counterparts (Fielden, 2008; Parker et al., 2018). The additional responsibilities that displaced adolescent mothers bear only magnify their position of vulnerability (Fielden, 2008). This phenomenon is particularly visible in Colombia.

Bogotá, Colombia's capital city and most common reception center, hosts a high volume of internally displaced Colombians and Venezuelan migrants fleeing years of internal conflict and devastating socioeconomic crisis, respectively. In Colombia, adolescent IDPs become pregnant at disproportionate rates (Cadena-Camargo et al., 2020). Between ages 17 and 19, 36.4% of adolescent IDPs experience pregnancy compared to 19.5% of their non-displaced peers (Cadena-Camargo et al., 2020). An increased rate of adolescent pregnancy among Venezuelan refugees

and migrants has also been reported (Bahamondes et al, 2020). Considering the unique challenges they face, the current study focused on adolescent mothers who were displaced within Colombia or who were Venezuelan migrants.

The Colombian government has developed different policies to aid internally displaced and Venezuelan migrant populations. The policies that apply to internally displaced people include Law 387 of 1997 and Law 1448 of 2011 which provide humanitarian assistance, "psychosocial care and comprehensive health care," and comprehensive reparations to IDPs (Gov.co, n.d.). CONPES 3950 addresses rights of Venezuelan refugees and migrants by establishing a 10-year temporary protection status (TPS) and guaranteeing rights to healthcare, education, and inclusion within the labor force. The policies for both types of refugees offer the same level of national subsidies under the same conditions. However, as of March 2021, Venezuelans are only able to access such benefits after successfully obtaining their TPS.

While the content of Colombia's public policies guarantees comprehensive social services and reparations to displaced adolescent mothers, reports from displaced and migrant adolescent mothers reveal that they struggle to rebuild their lives in Bogotá after resettlement (Cadena-Camargo et al., 2020). An important question, therefore, is how these public policies are implemented in practice. According to Lipsky's theory on street-level bureaucracy (2010), street level bureaucrats, the professionals who provide the services laid out in policies, play an important role in answering this question as they often face challenges that prevent clients from receiving the benefits promised to them (Lipsky, 2010). Street-level bureaucrats are "public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs" providing services and enacting policies (Lipsky, 2010, p. 3). Lipsky (2010) argues that while policies are written far from the local reality, street-level bureaucrats continue to create the policies through their interactions with citizens and by exercising discretion to guide the allocation of services to the public. According to the theory, public policy cannot be understood only by reading policy documents but through the interactions and tensions between street-level bureaucrats and policies, their agencies and allocated resources, and their clients in practice.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ground-level execution of Colombian policies that aim to help adolescent mothers who are internally displaced or migrants from Venezuela using the street-level bureaucracy theory as the theoretical framework (Lipsky, 1980).

Methodology
Study Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative method and an ethnographic fieldwork approach and was conducted in Ciudad Bolivar, a southern neighborhood of Bogotá and a common reception location for IDPs and Venezuelan migrants. An interview guide was developed using core themes from Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory including the dilemmas in the relationships between IDPs and migrants and street-level bureaucrats. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. Ethical clearance was granted by the Maastricht University Programme Ethical Review Committee and was cleared under the formal approval granted by the Ethic Committee of the School of Medicine of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá (Act 21/2015.FM-CIE-8744-15).

Data Collection

Inclusion criteria for this study were adolescent mothers 18 years or older who were internally displaced in Colombia or migrated from Venezuela, and street-level bureaucrats who were 18 years or older and who work with adolescent mothers who were internally displaced or displaced from Venezuela. Between June and August 2023, 15 semi-structured were conducted. Participants included seven adolescent mothers (five IDPs and two migrants from Venezuela) who were living in Ciudad Bolívar during the study and who became mothers as adolescents. They were between 24 and 60 years old at the time of the study and had arrived in Ciudad Bolívar between five years and two months before the interviews took place. The participants also included 8 street-level bureaucrats who were working with internally displaced and displaced Venezuelan adolescent mothers in Ciudad Bolivar at the time of the study. The professionals had been working with the community for between one year and twenty years. The group of street-level bureaucrats included psychiatrists, public health nurses, a dentist, a social worker, and an administrator. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Interviews were recorded with consent from participants.

Data Analysis

Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-step thematic analysis model was used to analyze the interviews and focus group observations. Guided by the research questions and the theoretical background, we reviewed interview and focus group transcripts, and identified key themes, placed the themes in a data analysis chart that consisted of topics derived from the street-level bureaucracy theory (i.e. dilemmas faced by street-level bureaucrats and policy implementation). Relevant quotes and observational notes were then organized into the different themes in the chart (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To analyze and draw conclusions, the chart was reviewed, themes were identified, and the themes were analyzed in conjunction with the concepts put forth by Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory. All participants signed written informed consent forms before participating in the study. Furthermore, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and no identifying information was transcribed to protect anonymity.

Results

In this section, we will analyze the implementation of policies to support internally displaced people and Venezuelan migrants and the relationship between policies, street-level bureaucrats, and clients.

Experiences of accessing help after displacement

Both internally displaced and displaced Venezuelan adolescent mothers identified key experiences that prevented and facilitated their access to assistance in Ciudad Bolivar after displacement. Francesca described the difficult process of registering as a displaced person with the government upon her arrival.

'When we arrived here… we did not feel the support from anyone. After we arrived, we made the declaration that we were displaced. But it's not that there is someone to accompany the community when you arrive in Bogotá. No, there is a lot lacking.' (Francesca)

Julian explained that she lacked the government support she expected while searching for food and shelter, although such assistance is guaranteed by Law 387. Furthermore, Hester

identified a need for support *after* resettlement in Bogotá. Even after completing her technical training certification, Hester struggled to find a job and could not find a daycare to take care of her children.

'We need a lot of help and not just support with things like food and shelter. Lots of people don't know how to read, right? How can people help us use a computer or help us with things related to education, those are the things we really need.' (Hester)

The need for support during different stages of displacement and resettlement shows that, not only did participants want to settle comfortably, but they also expected to develop skills to continue moving forward and build a dignified life for themselves and their children. In this process, however, they need support from the professionals and the government.

Although Gabriela has felt left behind by the government and street-level bureaucrats in Ciudad Bolivar, she trusted her friend, who was also displaced as an adolescent mother, to support and guide her. Community engagement was identified by some of the participants as an important source of support. When they lacked relationships professionals, other women who had similar displacement and migration experiences were able to provide guidance and emotional support.

Experiencing obstacles providing help

*T*he street-level bureaucrats recognized the needs of their clients but described the obstacles they faced that prevented them from assisting internally displaced adolescent mothers and Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Tension and limitations in the professionals' relationships with public policies, logistic and systemic barriers, and tension between street-level bureaucrats and their clients were identified as barriers to providing help by the professionals.

Professionals have come to understand public policies as 'nice on paper,' but complained that they do not translate into real benefits when applied on the ground. Emilio, a psychologist who also works closely with displaced women, expressed his frustration that the policies he reads are not translated into tangible benefits for the women with whom he works.

'The public policy appears very nice. You can go look for it on the internet and you say, wow how wonderful! And then you think, why are the women referenced in the policies not living decent lives? Because when they go and try to access the services, there are barriers that stop them.' (Emilio)

Laura agreed that the public policies do not translate into 'concrete responses' in the community.

Logistic and systemic barriers such as distance, the cost of public transportation, long wait times, and inefficiency of service delivery were also identified as significant barriers to providing help to clients.

'When people arrive here, they have to report themselves to the displacement office…But from here the closest office is in Olaya … They spend two hours doing this trip… And the transport is … expensive for them if they are displaced… If they are going to go to the office or stay to sell food, they prefer to stay and continue working so they can feed their children and forget about going on the trip to the office.' (Andrea)

The street-level bureaucrats explained that many internally displaced and migrant women work informal jobs and live in precarious financial situations. Paying for transportation and missing an entire day's worth of earnings to attend only one appointment is often unfeasible. These barriers in the lives of the women shape the local meaning of the public policies to both the professionals and the clients as ineffective and unreliable.

Street-level bureaucrats identified the tension they experienced between their perspective of their roles as professionals and the expectations of them held by their clients as the final barrier to providing help. First, they passionately explained that they do not treat adolescent mothers from Colombia differently from adolescent mothers who migrated from Venezuela. Bella answered insisted that she and her coworkers 'receive all of [the women] with the same love and the same affection' (Bella).

'We know that they are Venezuelan because it is formal … We guide them and orient them, but we do not discriminate. Not at all. All are equal, we receive everyone equally.' (Bella).

The street-level bureaucrats emphasized the value of their personal connection to the women, but they also described the tension that exists between the way they defined their role as a professional and the expectations of aid held by the IDPs and Venezuelan migrants. Most of the professionals felt that many internally displaced or migrant women arrived in Bogotá assuming that they were entitled to receive resources.

'The vast majority of the people do not have the autonomy, or they don't have the desire to solve their situation… Instead, they function off of what others give them. They always come asking for things.' (Laura)

While they consider providing guidance, accompaniment, and empathy to be central to their responsibilities, they also recognize the tendency for their clients to expect too much from street-level professionals.

Co-responsibility of professionals and women from the perspective of street-level bureaucrats

The street-level bureaucrats consistently mentioned the importance of establishing co-responsibility, a reciprocal relationship in which both parties remain accountable to appointments or tasks, with the community. The objective of the co-responsibility approach is to prioritize relationships with women who are dedicated to receiving services. In this narrative, co-responsibility played a role in the street-level bureaucrats' decision-making. The limited services available at Matthew's foundation, for example, forced him to choose which clients will receive benefits. Those who demonstrate a consistent co-responsibility are more likely to receive said resources. Co-responsibility also plays a role in Laura's decision-making as a psychologist in Ciudad Bolivar. However, Laura invests more of her time in clients who demonstrate a lack of co-responsibility.

'The families that have less co-responsibility are the ones that we want to impact the most. Because it is with those families that children have many problems.' (Laura)

Both Matthew and Laura use the presence or absence of co-responsibility to address a dilemma in their jobs as street-level bureaucrats. They chose where to distribute their limited time and funding based on the populations' co-responsibility and their level of need.

The street-level bureaucrats also connected the concept of co-responsibility to their understanding of public policy. Emilio expects the women he works with to demonstrate co-responsibility because he does not trust the government to provide the services and resources that it promises. By teaching the women how to find assistance or by empowering them with the knowledge and information to become self-sufficient, he is protecting them against the uncertainty of the government's provisions.

Throughout their professional experience, the street-level bureaucrats have formed expectations of the public policies targeting internally displaced and Venezuelan migrant adolescent mothers. They have grown to distrust and expect failures from government initiatives - especially domestic policies and funding. Professionals placed more trust in international interventions and funding directed at Venezuelan migrants but felt that organizational failures in domestic plans to support IDPs were 'the norm' (Kathleen).

As explained by Emilio, the expectation of co-responsibility is connected to the mistrust street-level bureaucrats have developed over time based on their experiences working in Ciudad Bolívar. The theme of co-responsibility connects the professionals, the women, and the public policies, and it shapes the ways in which the professionals understand and perform their role as a street-level bureaucrat. The professionals made decisions about resource distribution based on the responsibility of the women, and the professionals' distrust in the public policies motivate them to demand a co-responsibility from the women to encourage them to establish independence.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to analyze relationships between street-level bureaucrats, displaced and migrant adolescent mothers, and public policies that guide the treatment of and services allocated to IDPs and migrants in Colombia. We aimed to identify the meanings of public policy "on the ground" and how the discretion used by street-level bureaucrats has created that policy.

On the relationships between professionals, clients, and policies, Lipsky (2010) argues that street-level bureaucrats reconcile conflicts between written policy and the needs of their clients by exercising discretion. He asserts that street-level bureaucrats' decision-making directly impacts the lives of citizens and shapes the way citizens see the government and themselves (Lipsky, 2010). This study confirms Lipsky's arguments and contributes to the discussion surrounding the street-level bureaucracy theory.

First, on the experiences of IDPs and Venezuelan migrants and their experience accessing help after displacement, adolescent mothers described the lack of support they felt from street-level bureaucrats and from the government after coming to Bogotá. Notably, they use cognitive and social power to improve their lives despite barriers and limitations they face. This study's findings concur with Zamora-Moncayo et al.'s (2021) description of the role of cognitive power and social power in the lives of internally displaced women. By strengthening social networks and empowering other women within their community, IDPs use social power to continue moving forward (Zamora-Moncayo et al., 2021). Participants also used community support to navigate limitations in relationships between the women and street-level bureaucrats (Zamora-

Moncayo et al., 2021). Both IDPs and Venezuelan migrants noted that they found emotional and practical support through community ties.

On the relationship between professionals and public policy, the street-level bureaucrats in this study expressed their frustration with the policies applied to displaced and migrant populations. Deeming the policies ineffective and only 'nice on paper', they devote their attention and act on the needs of the clients. The professionals identified with the role of a citizen-agent as opposed to a state-agent, consistent with an argument presented by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) in which professionals "make judgements first about the citizen-client and then turn to rules and procedures to" provide a solution to the *person* in front of them (p. 347). This impacts the local meaning and implementation of public policies. Instead of advocating for the implementation of policies themselves, the professionals identified the needs of the adolescent mothers and used the policy as a tool to provide a solution.

Furthermore, this study adds to the discussion of the dilemmas of street-level bureaucrats who work with migrant populations. Tension between local and immigrant populations is well established in the literature, but the relationships between internally displaced and refugee and migrant populations are not often studied (Ullah et al., 2020; Ulutas, 2021). This study adds that the internally displaced and migrant adolescent mothers residing in Ciudad Bolivar did not report the same tension often found between local and migrant populations. Their shared experiences of displacement were more significant than differences in nationality. Street-level bureaucrats echoed this sentiment by declaring that they welcome every client equally and feel the same responsibility towards Colombian and Venezuelan women. However, the tension between the local community and refugees and migrants was reflected in the relationship between the street-level bureaucrats and the Colombian government. The professionals reported that the services supported by international aid were more effective than services sponsored exclusively by the Colombian government. The street-level bureaucrats expressed their frustration that the internally displaced women they were trying to assist were less likely to receive benefits promise by public policies than the Venezuelan migrant and refugee population. This could have resulted in a difference between the assistance offered to Colombian and Venezuelan mothers by the professionals due to their perception of the domestic and international aid being offered.

Finally, street-level bureaucrats explained that the co-responsibility between themselves and their clients was influenced by their perception of public policy and was used to guide policy implementation. In his theory, Lipsky (2010) argued that *routinized d*iscretion exercised by street-level bureaucrats be used to reconcile dilemmas and cope with limitations. In this study, all participants explained that they use an expectation of co-responsibility, a form of patterned discretion, as a part of their decision-making process. Effectively, the expectation of co-responsibility has become a pattern in the work of street-level professionals and a part of the policy as it is understood locally in Ciudad Bolivar (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 1980). While their aim is to empower and support the population, the street-level bureaucrats' collective responses to their professional limitations have the potential to systematically discriminate against certain groups of clients. Biases held by individual professionals or collective moral assumptions influenced by sociocultural or political factors could disadvantage particular groups within the community. For example, women who are, culturally, more reserved or women living in extreme poverty who must work every day to feed their children might be less likely to interact with and form relationships with the street-level bureaucrats. Identifying these "informal patterns of practice" is key to

preventing discrimination and understanding the local implementation of public policy in addition to the dilemmas and limitations that plague the work of street-level professionals.

Strengths and Limitations

To our knowledge, no previous studies have examined the relationships between internally displaced women, refugee and migrant women, and street-level bureaucrats in the same context. While the results cannot be generalized to other localities, the results presented may be relevant to understanding dynamics related to street-level professionals, displacement, and migration in other contexts. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, which is not the primary investigator's first language. To mitigate this limitation, an audio recording was taken of each interview which allowed for detailed transcriptions. Furthermore, the second author, a native Spanish speaker, was available for consult.

Conclusion

To conclude, street-level bureaucrats experience tension and dilemmas in their jobs and in their relationships with clients and public policies, and the nature of these relationships should be considered and reflected in policies going forward. As demonstrated by this study, the relationships between professionals and the community impact the formation and implementation of policies, and these factors must be considered during the initial creation of policy. Moreover, street-level bureaucrats should be aware of the impact that their systematic decision-making has on their clients. Responses to limitations and barriers, over time, may lead to unintentional discrimination towards a certain sector of the community. By consulting street-level bureaucrats and displaced women in the creation of policies that apply to their daily lives, policies could better reflect the lived reality of the women and the limitations and barriers faced by the professionals in their jobs. This would provide more relevant support to the bureaucrats while they attempt to support their clients and more relevant services and benefits to the displaced women as they work to rebuild their lives after displacement.

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Migration and Acculturation: a Qualitative Exploration of Foreign Students' Resettlement in Istanbul

Muniza Javed

Abstract. This qualitative study explores the acculturation challenges foreign students face in Istanbul, Turkey, along with their coping strategies. The research aims to identify key challenges in acculturating to Turkish society, examine students' adaptive strategies, and evaluate the roles of universities, local communities, and support services in facilitating their acculturation process. 25 international students from diverse backgrounds were interviewed using a purposive sampling method, ensuring representation across nationality, gender, academic discipline, and duration of stay in Istanbul. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis using NVIVO software, the study uncovered prominent challenges such as language barriers, cultural adjustment issues, and social integration difficulties. Coping strategies identified included seeking social support, learning the language, and engaging in artistic activities. Findings highlight the importance of tailored support systems and policies to enhance the acculturation experience of international students in Istanbul, offering practical recommendations for improving their integration into Turkish academic and social environments.

Keywords: Acculturation, Coping strategies, foreign students, Higher education, Istanbul

The world is in a constant state of transformation and globalization. People from around the globe are crossing national boundaries for some purpose, like a job, resettlement, or studies. These purposes can be the results of "push factors" in their country, like political instability, limited job opportunities, family problems, or lack of educational facilities. In this increasingly globalized world, education turns out to be a critical channel for cultural exchange and international cooperation. Higher education institutions play a significant role in bringing diverse cultures together by providing a rich intellectual environment and opportunities for students to study abroad through various scholarship mediums or cultural exchange openings.

Turkiye is not much behind, it is also a part of this race welcoming a huge number of international students from all around the world. In Europe, Turkiye stands among the top 5 countries and top 10 worldwide for hosting international students (Aldirasa Platform, 2022). Turkey's Council of Higher Education (YÖK) stated that over the past decade, the number of international students in Turkey increased significantly. In 2023, approximately 260,000 foreign students from 182 countries enrolled in Turkish universities, a huge rise from just 48,000 foreign students in 2012 (YÖK, 2023). Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara seemed to be the major hubs for international students. The universities that host a large number of international students include Istanbul University, Anadolu University, Karabuk University, Bursa Uludag University, and Ondokuz Mayis University (Can, 2021).

Istanbul is considered to be a dream city for many people around the globe. A fortunate city due to its strategic location linking Europe and Asia. This city was privileged to emerge as the biggest hub for higher education for many international students by hosting approximately 50,000 international students alone in the 2020-2021 academic year. The following year, Istanbul

University solely hosted almost 8722 international students (Aldirasa Platform, 2022). Istanbul attracts students from diverse regions, including the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and Europe. The city was marked as the home of more than 70,000 international students, nearly 27% of the total foreign student population in Turkiye (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2023).

Studying abroad brings various opportunities for students, which in another manner are termed as "pull factors". These factors include a chance to learn a global perspective and exposure, gaining new skills, expanding their intellectual horizons, and helping them in seeking personal, professional, and academic growth. However, this increasing level of foreign educational migration brings various kinds of challenges, particularly in terms of acculturation challenges in the host country that impact their academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being (Yılmaz et al., 2020). Acculturation is a process by which an individual belonging to one culture adopts the values, beliefs, and behaviors of another cultural group (Ramírez-Ramírez et al., 2018).

This process of adapting to a new culture can be a critical aspect of the experiences of foreign students in Istanbul. There is a dire need for the understanding of these acculturation challenges by the universities in Istanbul to provide adequate support and resources to facilitate the successful integration of these foreign students. This study aims to explore the acculturation challenges faced by foreign students in Istanbul, focusing on their lived experiences, observations, and perceptions of the acculturation process mainly related to language barriers, social integration, cultural adjustment, academic adaptation, navigating daily life, identity negotiation, discrimination and prejudice, homesickness and loneliness, financial challenges.

Various existing studies highlighted that acculturation is a tough and multidimensional process that includes various factors like proficiency in language, cultural differences, and social interactions. Frequent studies have shown that local languages turned out to be the biggest hurdle for international students, specifically during the early stages of their arrival in the host country (Morey et al., 2022; Tutar, 2023). Although conversation is a hurdle for these foreign students but in addition, non-native speakers face huge difficulties in performing their academic writings and research tasks due to these language barriers (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020). Moreover, studies also revealed that culturally and linguistically diverse students with zero or less competency in the English language experienced more isolation and inadequate support that affects their learning experience(Jeong et al., 2011). All in all, language barriers can lead to detachment, stress, and anxiety, which affect their overall well-being and performance.

Furthermore, cultural difference is another challenging barrier in a foreign country. The world is made up of diverse cultures with similar to opposite norms and values followed by every country. Every new person experiences cultural shocks and ethnocentric behaviors in a host country so as foreign students do, which leads to misunderstanding and creates difficulties in adjusting and adapting new environment (Saputra, 2019). This socialization process of foreign students often involves sociocultural barriers, for example, the lack of support and cooperation, inadequate academic preparation, and difficulty in becoming a part of a new cultural environment (Bakhou & Bouhania, 2020).

Cultural adaptation is quite broad. Usually, it relates to learning the local language, but it is more than just a language issue. Cultural adaptation includes mingling with local customs, traditions, and social norms. A study by Güven & Halat (2015) revealed that ample efforts have been made by Turkish institutes to teach Turkish culture to foreigners, highlighting the significance of cultural competence in the acculturation process.

Social Integration and interactions are another critical challenge in the acculturation process. International students mostly face the difficulty of getting involved and making new friendships with the locals due to a communication barrier, which in turn gives them a sense of isolation and loneliness. Study revealed that these foreign students can only feel a sense of belonging by being able to interact with local peers and making themselves mixed with them (Yılmaz et al., 2020). Existing literature also revealed that foreign students prefer to make friendships and find co-national communities to cope with these feelings of isolation. This, in turn, creates more distance and isolation between foreign and domestic students (Can, 2021).

Apart from all these challenges, a prominent challenge one foreigner as a student faces is the adaptation to a new academic culture and expectations. A study revealed that graduate students face extreme anxiety in their transition phase while dealing with new academic curriculum, different medium of instruction and teaching, publishing pressures, and professionalization in the process of adapting to the norms of the host institution (Stouck & Walter, 2020). Like any other country, Turkiye also has a unique academic environment, having both similarities and differences from other countries, like variation in teaching styles, assessment methods, and academic expectations, which brings adjustment challenges for foreign students (Yılmaz et al., 2020). International students may also face additional pressure to perform well academically while managing acculturation stress (Lin & Scherz, 2014).

Moreover, the acculturation process is also influenced by the student's characteristics, such as the willingness to study abroad, selection of any particular country, their expectations from that country as well as from their degree. Also, it depends on the coping mechanism they choose to deal with these challenges. Various studies have raised the importance of understanding these personal factors to deal with these acculturation challenges and to provide proper support to these international students (Tutar, 2023).

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to explore challenges specifically the acculturation challenges faced by foreign students in Istanbul. Primarily, focusing on their lived experiences and perceptions of the acculturation process. The aim of the present study is to get a vivid understanding of the specific challenges these foreign students face and the coping strategies they employ to these challenges through a phenomenological approach.

The incursion of international students in Istanbul from all around the world in past few years made this a dire need to understand the difficulties they face during their acculturation mainly related to adapting to the new culture and environment. This study intends to shed light on the critical and multidimensional aspects of acculturation, including language barriers, social integration, cultural adjustment, academic adaptation, navigating daily life, identity negotiation, discrimination and prejudice, homesickness and loneliness, and financial challenges.

By employing qualitative methods, the study aims to grasp the rich in-depth insights of the lived experiences of foreign students in Istanbul. Through findings, this study intends to share the valuable perspectives on the unique challenges faced by this population and the coping strategies they develop. Findings will further help in developing more effective support systems and interventions to help international students successfully in the acculturation process, not only in Istanbul but in the whole of Turkiye.

In addition, this qualitative inquiry not only intends to document the challenges but also to give voice to the experiences of foreign students in Istanbul. Through analyzing their unique perspectives and stories, this research will contribute to a better understanding of the acculturation phenomenon and its impact on the lives of international students. Finally, the goal is to provide recommendations for universities, policymakers, and support services for the betterment of foreign students in Istanbul.

Scope of the study:

The scope of the present study encompasses various key dimensions to deeply understand the acculturation process of international students in Istanbul. The study targeted a diverse sample of foreign students enrolled in different universities across the city, belonging to different countries, levels of study, and disciplines. By specifically focusing on Istanbul, a significant cultural and educational center in Turkey, this research highlights the distinctive cultural, social, and academic environment that shapes students' acculturation experiences.

Key areas of investigation include language barriers, social integration, cultural adaptation, educational challenges, financial challenges and psychological well-being. The study used qualitative methods mainly in-depth interviews and participant observations to collect detailed data on students' lived experiences and narrations. Study employed thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns, providing a comprehensive understanding of acculturation challenges.

The research covers an extensive period, monitoring the changes and developments in students' acculturation experiences over time, and takes into account both short-term and long-term adjustment processes. Moreover, this study also explores the availability and effectiveness of institutional support systems like language learning programs, counselling services, support networks, or identifying any other areas or support centers, activities, and communities that provide prompt support to international students.

Finally, this study will be helpful in providing actionable recommendations for university administrators, policy makers, and government officials to better support the acculturation and integration of international students in Istanbul, as well as provide a path for other cities in Turkiye. By addressing these dimensions, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges encountered by international students and propose practical solutions to enhance their overall experience and success in Istanbul.

Conceptual and theoretical framework:

This study on acculturation challenges faced by foreign students in Istanbul intends to employ a multidimensional acculturation model and theories related to migration and resettlement. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the process and strategies involved in adapting to a new cultural environment. Parks and Miller's unidirectional model of acculturation focuses on leaving your home country culture and accepting the foreign land culture (Park & Miller, 1921). John Berry's Social Identity theory and bidirectional acculturation model, including strategies of acculturation including assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalisation between the new culture and the old culture, served as theoretical resources for the study. Collectively, they offer an insight into how international students went through these complexities of cultural adaptation, identity formation, and social integration.

Park and Miller's unidirectional model is one of the earliest model used for acculturation. The model depicts that acculturation is a linear process in which an individual slowly and gradually abandons their own country's cultural norms and values and completely adopt the host country's cultural norms and traits. This model provides grounds for investigating the degree to which foreign students abandon their cultural identity in favor of adopting Turkish culture. It also helps in understanding the instances where students do not preserve their original cultural ties and instead they shift towards a homogeneous cultural identity that allows them to get align with their new environment.

This model suggests the importance of assimilation, where the targeted goal is to make these immigrant students indistinguishable from the native population regarding language, behavior, and cultural practices (Park & Miller, 1921). According to this model, the international students in Istanbul went through a process of adapting Turkish cultural norms progressively while leaving their own original cultural identities. Moreover, this model identifies the challenges linked with such transformation, including identity conflicts, loss of cultural heritage, and the psychological stress of trying to become a part of a new culture and environment. Overall, this unidirectional model provides the grounds for understanding the acculturation process.

In contrast to Park and Miller's unidirectional model, there is another model helpful for this study, i.e., John Berry's bidirectional model. This model emphasizes that acculturation is a two-way process where individuals keep their original cultural identity as well as manage to adapt to the host culture (Berry, 1997). Berry's framework proposed four acculturation strategies individuals may adopt. Assimilation is the first strategy where an individual wants to quit their own cultural identity to become a part of a new cultural environment. For international students in Istanbul, assimilation means getting themselves completely involved in Turkish society, becoming part of local customs, adopting social norms, trying to speak Turkish, and minimizing their connection to their home culture.

Individuals who opt separation strategy keep their bond with the original culture and avoid connecting to the host culture. In the context of Istanbul, international students who adopt this strategy would mainly interact with their compatriots and maintain their native cultural practices, resulting in minimal engagement with Turkish society. Then there is an integration strategy which suggests maintaining a balance between an individual's own cultural identity and, at the same time, engaging with adopting aspects of the host culture. In the case of international students in Istanbul, integration means learning Turkish, participating in local culture and traditions, and trying to engage with Turkish people and communities while preserving their local ties. Then there is a marginalization strategy which occurs when an individual gets disassociated from both original culture and host culture resulting in feelings of alienation and loss of identity. International students experiencing marginalization may face significant challenges with acculturation, feeling disconnected from both their home and host cultures.

Berry's bidirectional model is particularly relevant for this study as it recognizes that acculturation is not a uniform process but is influenced by personal choices, societal acceptance, and institutional support. This model is instrumental in understanding the diverse experiences of international students in Istanbul and how they negotiate their cultural identities. By employing Berry's acculturation strategies, this study aims to explore how these students adapt to a new culture and the challenges they face, such as stress and social identification. Berry's theory incorporates the concept of acculturation stress, which may arise during the adjustment process,

providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing the adaptation experiences of foreign students.

Overall this theoretical framework combining both unidimensional and bidimensional models to explore the acculturation experiences of foreign students in Istanbul helped in delving into the complex and dynamic nature of these experiences, affected by various factors like socio-culture distance, personality traits, and the nature of acculturation setting in the host country (Saylag, 2014).

Research Question:

What are the major acculturation challenges experienced by foreign students in Istanbul, and how do they cope with these challenges?

Research Objectives:

To identify the key acculturation challenges faced by foreign students in Istanbul.

To explore the coping strategies used by these foreign students to deal with these acculturation challenges.

Examine the role of universities, local communities, and support services in facilitating the acculturation process of these foreign students

Offer suggestions for enhancing support systems and policies to improve the acculturation experience of international students in Istanbul.

Methods:
Research Design:

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to identify the acculturation challenges faced by foreign students. An interpretive approach was utilized to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research topic under consideration (Silverman, 2013). The study intends to understand and interpret the lived experiences of international students undergoing acculturation in Istanbul. Phenomenology is well-suited for exploring experiences from the perspective of those who live them, providing a deeper understanding of the acculturation process and the strategies they used to get mingled in Turkish culture.

Participant selection:
Sampling:

The purposive sampling method was used deliberately to select international students who have direct experiences central to the phenomenon of acculturation. Also, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of nationality, gender, religion, academic discipline, and duration of stay in Istanbul. 25 in-depth interviews including 12 male and 13 female international students were conducted by the researcher belonging to different countries including Venezuela, Bosnia, Pakistan, Tunisia, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Colombia, Palestine, Nigeria, Lebanon, and India, religion majority were Muslims and few were Christian (Catholic), studying in various disciplines and universities in Istanbul. Participants were selected based on their consent to participate and their experience related to residing and studying in the city for at least six months.

Recruitment:

For recruiting participants, researcher used social media groups as well as through using snow ball technique where one friend referred another friend for in-depth interview. This technique helped the researcher to approach specific individual who meet the criteria of the study while leveraging existing networks to reach potential participants. Interested participants were first went through a pre-screening by asking few questions to check whether they meet the study criteria.

Informed Consent:

Before starting all the in-depth interviews researcher ensured that all participants provided informed consent, fully understood the study's nature, their rights, and how their data would be utilized.

Data Collection:
Semi-Structured Interviews:

Data was gathered through an in-depth and semi-structured interview guide with a set of open-ended questions through the literature review and theoretical framework pertaining to acculturation theories. All the interviews were conducted one-on-one to ensure flexibility and depth. The medium of communication during interviews was English, as per the preference of participants.

Procedure:

The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable environment, lasting around 60-90 minutes. With the participant's consent, each interview was recorded for accuracy. A digital voice recorder was employed to capture uninterrupted and comprehensive details of the conversations during interviews.

Fieldnotes:

During and after each interview, thorough notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and initial impressions of the participant.

Data Analysis:
Transcription:

The researcher transcribed the audio recordings verbatim. The transcripts were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.

Coding and theme development:

A thematic analysis approach was used for the analysis of data. The researcher keenly identified the patterns and coded the themes and sub-themes derived from the data. The coding process entailed a systematic and iterative approach of reading, coding, and categorizing the data. First, initial codes will be generated, followed by identifying and reviewing themes, and finally defining and naming the final themes.

Data Management:

Although the data was already in English, transcription of the data was not that difficult or time-consuming. The researcher utilized NVIVO data analysis software to assist in organizing raw data and generating codes and themes during the analysis process.

The table below depicts the generation of codes, sub-themes, and themes:

Table 1: List of themes, sub-themes, and codes

Themes	Sub-themes	Major codes
Anticipating Istanbul: Preconceptions vs. Early Encounters	Background Pre-arrival expectations Personal growth Support system	Country of origin, previous education, family background Expectations vs. actual experiences Changes and growth since coming to Istanbul Family, friends, university services
Cultural Convergence in Istanbul: From Language to Lifestyle	Language barriers Social Integration Cultural adjustment Navigating daily life	Experiences, learning Turkish, communication strategies Making friends, interactions with Turkish peers, social activities Challenges, cultural shock, adopted practices Daily challenges, managing tasks, accessing services
Learning in a new city: Academic challenges	Academic Adaptation	Academic expectations, challenges, support systems
Identity struggles and survival	Identity negotiation Discrimination and Prejudice Homesickness and Loneliness Financial challenges Reflection on experiences	Changes in identity, adopted cultural practices Experience, coping strategies Frequency Financial issues, management strategies Additional challenges

Findings:

The respondents narrated their transformational stories, lived experiences, some deep fears, and also some exciting incidences that they went through in this acculturation process. The majority of them were eager to explain their journey's moments. They highlighted various factors that played a significant role in determining the acculturation challenges they faced in Istanbul as an international student. Also, they shared some unique coping strategies to deal with this challenging process. Factors include language hurdles, cultural shock, academic challenges, loneliness, and isolation. Keeping into consideration the goals of this research, 100 codes were developed from 15 themes. To streamline the data analysis, the study's findings were categorized into the following key areas anticipating Istanbul, cultural coverage in Istanbul, learning in a new city, and identity struggles and survival.

Anticipating Istanbul: Preconceptions vs. Early Encounters

It's human nature that whenever we plan to move to another area, city, or country, or even if there is a new beginning in life, we often pre-assume the situation of how this new journey will going to be. The same was with these international students who were planning to move to Istanbul, they set some preconceived notions about what life in the city would be like. These preconceptions might be influenced by various sources like social media, personal research, stories from friends and families, and also due to the "pull factors" like better educational facilities, personal and professional growth, and international exposure. However, the reality of their early experiences upon arrival often differs significantly from these initial expectations. This theme delves into the journey from anticipation to the reality of life in Istanbul, highlighting the surprises, adjustments, and adaptations students go through as they acclimate to their new surroundings.

Background:

The majority of the participants belonged to small towns or cities. Few of them were from middle-class families. All were from diverse cultural backgrounds with more or less financial struggles. All of them belonged to educated families from villages, small towns, or cities, and also got their family support to pursue their education and good academic careers. The majority of them chose Istanbul for better opportunities, diverse culture, and high-quality education. Few of them came to Istanbul by choice, few came because of their country's unstable situation, and they wanted to escape, whereas few came to Istanbul because they missed another opportunity to study in Europe or other developed countries. Almost all the participants belonged to economically struggling countries lesser than Turkiye. One of the participants said:

" I opted Istanbul deliberately because Istanbul has a rich history of diverse culture, famous for the Ottoman Empire's history, and being a student of social sciences I always wanted to explore life in Istanbul" (P2)

Few students came here on scholarships, so they shared that it was a privilege for them to study in a country that chose them based on their academic merit. One participant shared with joy:

" I didn't choose Istanbul, Istanbul chose me, and it is an honor for me to be there, explore their rich culture, and to pursue my studies funded by the Turkish government. I was always waiting for an opportunity in my life back in my country, so when I got this scholarship, I was so happy and I thought, let's try something new and explore a new world". (P5)

Another participant with a similar view shared:

"Honestly speaking, there wasn't any serious plan to come to Istanbul; it was all a matter of faith. I got admission in New Zealand in 2019, but due to COVID, borders got closed and it opened quite late in 2022. Meanwhile, as a matter of luck, I applied for a Turkish scholarship and I got that, so I came here. I came here because of Istanbul, not because of Turkiye. If I had been admitted to any other city, maybe I wouldn't have availed of this opportunity. Istanbul was always my dream city because of it's historical and cultural richness and the sacred value of this land since the time of the Ottomans" (P8)

Pre-arrival expectations:

Istanbul is undoubtedly one of the most famous cities all across the globe due to its nature of welcoming diversity and liberalism, a blend of different cultures, modernism, and rich spiritual history, so everyone has the option to choose whatever lifestyle they want. Almost all the participants shared that they had heard a lot about Istanbul and always got mesmerized by the lifestyle in Istanbul, so the pre-arrival expectations were high and positive. One participant shared his feelings:

"I watched a lot of videos about Istanbul, and it seemed like such an interesting city with lots of beautiful places. Also, Istanbul is an open-minded city compared to the rest of Turkiye because coming from Latin America, I didn't want to end up in such a strict society in terms of religion". (P20)

Few participants shared that their pre-arrival expectations were extremely different, especially in terms of language. One female student responded:

" My actual expectations were 100 percent different than what I thought, especially in terms of language. For instance, before coming here, I thought Istanbul was a tourist city, so a lot of people must speak English like my country but people here are barely known to English language and even if they know, they are not comfortable talking in English." (P18)

Personal Growth:

Leaving your personal space and comfort zone is always challenging, but worth it in terms of personal growth. The majority of the respondents shared that coming to Istanbul is a life-changing experience for them. In the beginning, it was extremely hard to get adjusted to a new environment, place, and culture, but it turned out as a positive personal growth for all of them. Regardless of gender difference, all participants felt that it was really hard for them to survive in this new environment, but it made them more strong, independent, and motivated. One female respondent answered:

" Coming from a patriarchal society where girls are dependent on male counterparts, I believe living on my own is a major personal growth for myself." (P16)

Another participant with similar views shared:

" After moving to Istanbul, I found that my social nature has flourished even more. Now, I'm more open to making friends from different countries, broadening my cultural horizons, and enriching my social experiences, so yes, this city has changed me positively". (P21)

One more participant shared:

" Leaving your country and your comfort zone at the age of 19 with no prior knowledge about life challenges, yes I can say Istanbul has shaken my whole personality and now I become more responsible, aware, and self-dependent in terms of taking life decisions". (P12)

Support System:

Friendship is something that doesn't come like blood relations. It is a bond you didn't deliberately choose, it is unexpected, yet the most important and reliable relation. Almost all the participants are of the view that peer groups are their biggest support system here in Istanbul. Living a life far from your family when you can't share your ups and downs with family because

they will get stressed out, so the only support system you have is your peer groups, who went or are going through the same situation as you. A few participants highlighted that there are some communities in Istanbul for foreigners to make friends and become aware of the local culture. The majority of them shared that they joined social media communities and groups to find friends belonging to their own country, other countries, as well as Turkish. Some respondents shared that they are fortunate enough to get good Turkish friends, whereas, few shared that the majority of their peer group is based on friends belonging to their own country or other foreigners like them, but no Turkish friends.

One of the Pakistani respondents shared her experience:
"One of my language instructors, who was almost my age fellow and very much fond of Pakistan, we turned out as good friends and now she is like a family to me here in Istanbul. She is my biggest support system here as through her I got the chance to learn a lot about Turkish people and society". (P11)

One Kazakhstani respondent shared his experience:
"My support system here is my Kazakh community, it's like we have a mini Kazakhstan here in Istanbul. We all are going through similar situations so we have each other's back here but unfortunately, I don't have any Turkish friends, I have friendly classmates but they don't want to be my friends so with them I feel isolated if I don't have my people's community here it would be really difficult for me to survive here". (P13)

Cultural Convergence in Istanbul: From Language to Lifestyle:
Istanbul is a unique city where East meets West, which offers vibrant and unique experiences for International students. While there are many positive aspects of living in Istanbul, it also brings a lot of challenges and new experiences for the foreign students in the journey of acculturation. This theme highlighted their acculturation challenges and lived experiences while navigating through the complexities of learning a new language, striving to integrate socially, adjusting to cultural norms, and managing everyday tasks that shaped their daily and academic life in Istanbul. Almost all the participants shared that living in Istanbul encountered both obstacles and opportunities for growth.

Language barriers:
The majority of the participants were of the view that the biggest challenge they faced here in Istanbul was the language barrier. Few participants were of the view that it was difficult in the beginning, but later on, as they learned the language it became easy for them to communicate with Turkish people. Whereas, a few shared that learning a different language was extremely stressful for them. One participant shared her experience:
" The language barrier squeezed my whole energy and enthusiasm to live and study in Istanbul in the beginning, it also suffocates me sometimes especially in academic setup but it was really helpful to learn the language as I feel confident now when I have to move around in city but before I felt like an Alien". (P15)
Almost all the participants are of the view that language plays a crucial role in this transformational journey, acting as both a bridge and a barrier. The struggle to master the Turkish

language and the need to understand and be understood in academic and social settings form a central aspect of their experience. Most of them shared that it's crucial to learn the Turkish language not only in terms of successful communication but also to feel a sense of belonging in their new environment.

Social Integration:

Participants shared that social integration added another level of complexity and enrichment to their living experiences in Istanbul. Creating social ties, making Turkish friends, and participating in Turkish community activities require good Turkish linguistic skills, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability. Some participants shared that the more time they spent with Turkish people, the easier it became for them to create strong social ties here. One respondent highlighted:

"After living in Istanbul for more than 2 years, I have started spending more time with Turkish people and less with my nationals, so I can say I got well integrated into Turkish society because I don't have many friends belonging to my country I have more Turkish friends and few are from other nations. I speak Turkish like a native because I have completely devoted myself to this culture, language, and people". (P14)

Another participant shared a different opinion:

" For me, it's very difficult to get mixed up in Turkish society. It's not like I didn't try, I did I have learned the language, and I do participate in their cultural activities, but it's like they just don't like me as part of them. I think it's reciprocal, they don't feel comfortable with me, I prefer to be more active and comfortable when I am with my Nigerian friends". (P16)

Cultural Adjustment:

The majority of the participants stated that cultural adjustment was never easy for them in terms of getting mixed up with Turkish people. It's a continuous fluctuation between your own cultural identity with the host country's cultural demands. Participants shared that getting deeply involved in the customs, traditions, and everyday practices of Turkish society was quite a difficult yet interesting process. One respondent shared sarcastically:

"It's funny that after coming to Istanbul, I am always confused between "Merhaba", "Selam", and "Hello". Even now, sometimes I have started saying "Merhaba" to my parents and friends back in Argentina". (P24)

Navigating daily life:

Almost all the participants shared that surviving in Istanbul while dealing with daily life struggles is itself the biggest challenge because all of them came here after leaving their comfort zone. A few participants shared that in the beginning, it was extremely difficult for them to use public transport or do groceries because of cultural differences and a language barrier. Whereas, a few shared that it is still difficult for them because they came here to study in an English-medium university, so they didn't get a chance to learn the language, and dealing with daily activities in Istanbul is difficult for them.

One participant shared her weird experience:

" It's a weird as well as interesting incident for me, before coming to Istanbul I heard that it's a liberal city so I went to a grocery shop to buy frozen nuggets and as I am Muslim I wanted to be sure that it was Halal so it was quite difficult for me to ask so I use translator but when I asked the shop keeper he became angry and start saying something in Turkish loudly I got afraid then one foreigner in shop told me that he is saying that they are all Muslim here so everything is Halal here. I felt ashamed and afraid that I asked that question, but now I laugh a lot while memorizing that incident". (P12)

Another participant shared her unique experience:

" I went to a cafe to drink coffee, unfortunately, I sat at a dirty table where there was one empty cup already. So when I went to pay my coffee bill, they asked me to pay for two cups when I drank only one. They didn't know English, and I didn't know the Turkish language at that time, so it was difficult to make them understand. I had to pay for two cups, but now that I have learned the language so it is quite easy for me to deal with the daily life issues". (P22)

Learning in a new city: Academic challenges
Academic Adaptation:

Adapting to academic life in Istanbul presents a unique set of challenges for foreign students. The process of academic adaptation involves not only understanding and meeting the expectations of a different educational system but also integrating into a new cultural and social academic environment. This theme explores the multifaceted experiences of foreign students as they strive to succeed academically in a foreign city. Students shared their unique challenges while dealing with academic adjustment, as it is their main purpose of coming to Istanbul. Almost all the participants shared that there are variety of academic challenges they faced in their acculturation process that including class participation, teaching styles, assessments, and learning about the new curriculum. Few participants shared that they are more than satisfied with the academia here because they are studying in English-medium universities. While few shared that although they are studying in English-medium universities but their lectures are in Turkish, and also their teachers don't understand much English, so they face discrimination and difficulty and which indirectly affect their performance and results. Some participants face extreme difficulty in studying here because of turkish medium universities. One participant shared:

" I am under extreme stress because I am barely passing my exams because of not having a good command of academic Turkish, also all my classmates are Turkish, I felt so isolated and inferior among them because I couldn't perform well like them. I feel everyone is making fun of me whenever I present in Turkish in class. Also, no teacher wants to supervise my thesis as they want me to go back to the language learning center and learn Turkish for a few more years. This gives me extreme anxiety that sometimes I want to go back to my country". (P17)

Another participant shared her story:

" Although I am studying at a Turkish medium university, my teachers know English very well, they allowed me to perform in English till I became better in advanced Turkish, also they tried to make me comfortable whenever I speak Turkish so that I feel more involved and positive. This helped me a lot in mixing with them". (P13)

Identity Struggles and Survival:

The experience of foreign students in Istanbul is not only an academic journey but also a profound personal transformation. This theme dug into the experiences of foreign students in terms of navigating through complex identity negotiations, dealing with discrimination, coping with homesickness and loneliness, and managing their financial challenges, all while trying to get adjusted to a foreign land.

Identity Negotiation:

Almost all the students shared that it is a continuous struggle for them to keep their individuality as well as get involved in Turkish society. Participants shared that to be a part of Turkish society, they are mostly involved in adapting Turkish habits and attitudes while striving to maintain a sense of their original identity. One participant explained:

"Living in Istanbul made me feel like a global citizen. Now I don't just have my own national identity but also a mixture of many other nations' cultures, including Turkiye. It is an opportunity for me to share my culture as well as discover others". (P19)

Discrimination and Prejudice

Talking about discrimination and prejudice, every participant had different opinions. Few shared that they faced discrimination in terms of their nationality and ethnicity, and a few shared that they faced discrimination in terms of having different religions. Some feel they found Turkish people a little conservative, so they faced discrimination in terms of gender. Whereas few participants shared positive opinions and experiences, they felt Turkish society was more accepting, and they didn't face any discrimination.

One student has a view:

" I have heard about cases of assaults and racism in the country especially to the Arab community but luckily I have never been a victim of such assaults or discrimination". (P10)

Homesickness and loneliness:

The emotional toll of homesickness and loneliness is another significant aspect of identity struggles for foreign students. Being away from family and familiar surroundings can lead to nostalgia and longing. Students shared mixed experiences in terms of this matter. Almost all participants shared that they went through extreme anxiety and isolation in the beginning, but as soon as they developed some connections here, it became easy for them to survive. Few participants shared that homesickness and loneliness are continuous feelings for them. One participant shared:

"It's my third year in Istanbul and I am thankful to Allah that my country is nearer to Turkiye, so whenever I feel homesickness, I visit my parents, it's like fresh air for me" (P13)

Another shared:

" I have a family like friends here, so whenever I feel lonely, I spend quality time with them, they are like medicine for me to survive here". (P20)

Financial challenges:

Financial challenges added another layer of complexity to the identity struggle of foreign students. Many foreign students shared that they face significant financial burdens, including tuition fees, living expenses, and adapting to a new city. Some share that they have health issues due to financial stress, and it also affects their academic performance and overall well-being. A few students shared that it was not very difficult for them in terms of financial challenges due to family support or because of scholarships. Few shared that they have to do odd jobs, but for survival, they have to do.

One participant shared:

" Inflation is one of the biggest challenges living in Istanbul these days. Prices are always going up, and sometimes, it's almost impossible to survive as a student here." (P22)

Overall, findings indicate that foreign students' lived experiences are a blend of both opportunities and challenges.

Discussion:

The findings of this study reveal a rich tapestry of experiences among foreign students in Istanbul, characterized by both opportunities and challenges. These narratives reflect the dynamic process of acculturation and adaptation, encompassing many factors including language barriers, cultural adjustments, social integration, academic challenges, identity negotiation, discrimination, homesickness, and financial struggles.

Theme one indicated that pre-arrival expectations of international students were shaped by various sources such as social media, personal research, and stories from friends and family. Many students had high and positive expectations about living in Istanbul, primarily due to its reputation for diversity, liberalism, and rich cultural history. However, the reality often differed, particularly regarding language barriers and cultural adjustments. This finding is in line with previous studies by Titrek et al. (2016) & Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu (2020) who highlighted that communicatıon is the central challenge faced by international students in Turkiye. These early encounters were crucial in shaping their initial experiences and subsequent adaptation strategies.

Theme two highlighted that the language barrier emerged as a significant challenge, impacting daily interactions and academic performance. A study by Özoğlu et al. (2015) Similarly endorsed these findings by stating that language difficulties may significantly impact social interactions and academic success. While some students managed to learn Turkish and found it eased their communication and integration, others continued to struggle, feeling alienated and stressed (Gökalp et al., 2021). Social integration also posed difficulties, with students needing to navigate cultural sensitivities and adapt to new social norms. Many students found solace in forming peer groups with other international students or engaging with local communities, which facilitated a sense of belonging and support. Cultural adjustment required continuous negotiation between maintaining their own cultural identity and adapting to Turkish customs and traditions. Zhou et al. (2008) also identified that cultural adaptation involves navigating through various dimensions, including social and behavioral adjustments, which resonate with the experiences reported by students in Istanbul. Despite the challenges, students found the process enriching, offering opportunities for personal growth and broader cultural understanding. These findings go in line with the findings of previous studies by Can, 2021 & Bashir et al., 2021.

Theme three indicated that academic adaptation was another significant area of challenge. The need to understand and meet the expectations of a different educational system, coupled with language barriers, often creates stress and anxiety among students. This finding relates to Acar's (2016) and Anderson & Guan's (2017) studies that emphasized adjustment issues related to the educational system and time management. Alpaydin (2018) echoed similar findings of this study, which stated that some students reported positive experiences with supportive faculty and flexible academic environments, while others faced discrimination and felt isolated. The varying teaching styles, class participation norms, and assessment methods required substantial effort to adjust, impacting their academic performance and overall experience.

Theme four explored the journey of identity negotiation, marked by a continuous struggle to balance their original cultural identity with the demands of the host society. This negotiation process was often complicated by experiences of discrimination and prejudice based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, or gender. While some students felt welcomed and accepted, others encountered significant barriers. A recent study by Bianet (2024) endorsed the same issues where students described instances of exclusion and mistreatment in various social contexts. The study indicated that homesickness and loneliness were common emotional challenges, with many students experiencing anxiety and isolation initially, which is consistent with findings from previous research indicating that culture shock can severely impact psychological well-being (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024). Developing social connections and finding support systems were crucial in mitigating these feelings. Financial challenges further compounded their struggles, with some students resorting to part-time jobs to manage their expenses, which was often against local regulations.

Conclusion:

Overall, the study highlights that the lived experiences of foreign students in Istanbul are a complex interplay of opportunities and struggles. Multiple factors, including language proficiency, cultural adaptation, social integration, academic challenges, and personal identity negotiations, influence the acculturation process. Despite the difficulties, many students demonstrated resilience and adaptability, employing various coping strategies to navigate their new environment. This study is in line with Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, which posits that the acculturation process involves both psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. The narratives of foreign students in Istanbul reflect the interplay between maintaining their original cultural identity and integrating into the host society. The challenges related to language barriers, cultural adjustments, and social integration underscore the importance of both individual and contextual factors in the acculturation process.

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The Digital Fortress. Navigating Tech-Control, Hate Speech and Discrimination in Spain and France

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Abstract. In the context of increasing government technologization, this article examines the role of artificial intelligence and big data in establishing surveillance mechanisms targeting migrants and diasporic populations in Europe. Through a comparative study of Spain and France, we analyze how these technologies may exacerbate existing social inequities. We investigate digital control mechanisms at Spain's southern border, focusing on the Integrated System of External Surveillance (SIVE), and explore how algorithmic video surveillance (AVS) deployed during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games may impact migrants' lives in France. This study contributes to our understanding of how surveillance technologies transform migration management and their implications for human rights and social equity.

Keywords: Surveillance, Migration, AI, Bias

Contextual Background

To begin addressing the issues and actors involved in this study, it is essential to emphasize the phenomenon of migration itself as a fundamental aspect of human beings in constant evolution and movement. The political, media, and regulatory approach to human mobility, which often stems from the rhetoric of an "original sin" (Arce, 2023), fails to recognize migration as a phenomenon inherent to humanity. This deviation leads to a "constructed reality" (Cózar & Rodríguez, 2019) of human mobility, often portraying migration flows as threatening, uncontrolled avalanches, demanding exceptional political and legal measures that do not prioritize the human rights of migrants.

Moreover, due to transnational bonding, the definition of group identities is no longer determined by the geographical and physical space that groups inhabit. In this breeding ground, to understand the basis of transnational networks (Vertovec, 2004), it is worth referring to what Appadurai called "the work of imagination" (1996), highlighting the influence of knowledge technologies[1] such as AI and big data, which are critical elements in weaving transnational communities around the globe. In this sense, the fundamental role of knowledge technologies is not necessarily seen negatively, as they enable the elaboration of a multilocated geography, allowing for dense social life, fostering new landscapes and possibilities for creating and recreating culture and social capital.

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[1] Knowledge Technologies are new computer-based techniques and tools that enable a more sophisticated and intelligent use of Information Technology. These technologies encompass a wide range of tools and systems, including artificial intelligence and big data analytics, which are designed to process and interpret vast amounts of complex information quickly and efficiently (Milton 2008).

Beyond these positive potentials, this article aims to raise awareness of some harmful possibilities related to these technologies. It addresses threats posed by algorithmic surveillance systems to individual rights and the proliferation of biases influencing population decision-making procedures. The broader adverse collective social impacts of knowledge technologies could systematically undermine socio-technical systems[2], highlighting the complex interplay between technological advancements and their societal implications (Yeung, 2019), with direct consequences for racialized communities.

In this context, we analyze the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools by official state bodies, as well as the European Union's recent reinforcement of its borders and legislative frameworks within its territory. Despite international and European legal frameworks requiring states to uphold human dignity and fundamental freedoms for all individuals under their jurisdiction (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024), significant gaps remain in safeguarding fundamental rights. These gaps give rise to scenarios that seriously endanger the fundamental rights of migrants at risk, whose rights are often severely violated. The EU's emphasis on border control and dissuasion frequently neglects the protection of these rights, perpetuating a humanitarian and human rights crisis both within and beyond its borders (Doctors of the World, 2024).

Building on this foundation, we will examine the influence of AI-related rhetoric, which often permeates our understanding as "objective information" flowing through media channels that establish hegemonic narratives. It is essential to question these narratives to prevent deviations that may introduce bias and disinformation, particularly in the forms of racism and hatred, as evidenced in the cases we are studying.

With this purpose in mind, the study employs a primarily theoretical methodology, focusing on the analysis and synthesis of existing literature to critically engage with these issues. This approach involves a comprehensive examination of current documentation regarding AI and big data legislation in the EU, specifically exemplifying its use by state forces in France and Spain. The research methodology is grounded in a thorough review and analysis of legal frameworks, policy documents, and academic literature pertaining to the EU AI Act and its implications for state-sanctioned AI applications. By adopting this approach, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between AI technologies, migration policies, and human rights in the European context.

AI: A Double-Edged Sword

The development and use of big data and artificial intelligence tools by official European state forces raise critical questions about their conception, purpose, and implementation. This investigation focuses on several fundamental aspects: How were these tools conceived? What specific purposes were they designed to serve? How were officials trained to use these applications, and how were the applications themselves programmed to achieve their objectives? These inquiries serve as a foundation for our subsequent analysis of the theoretical and ethical implications that underpin the deployment of such advanced tools in state-sanctioned contexts.

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[2] Socio-technical systems refer to the complex interplay between people and technology in society. This concept emphasizes that individuals are not merely passive users of technology, but active participants who shape society through their interactions with both technological tools and other people. As Sang Baek et al. (2015) note, these systems highlight how social interaction dynamics contribute to the overall formation and evolution of society in conjunction with technological advancements.

AI has indeed become a revolutionary force, offering the ability to automate tasks, enhance efficiency, and provide deep insights through data analysis. However, alongside its benefits, AI has come under scrutiny for its capacity to perpetuate and even amplify existing societal biases (Ma et al., 2024). Since AI is based on algorithms created by humans, there is a risk that developers, even unintentionally, may transfer their own biases and prejudices into these technologies. In line with this, one of the consequences of the structural powers embedded in socio-technical systems is the so-called algorithmic bias (Scott, 1992), as AI technologies are predominantly developed from and centered around the perspectives of more advantaged groups (Carsteens & Friess, 2024).

As a result, numerous studies have examined AI's capacity to reinforce social inequalities and discrimination. For instance, Eubanks (2018) discusses how AI, when applied to automated decision-making, can lead to "digital discrimination" and explores the challenges and consequences of giving machines the power to make decisions about human needs, public benefits, and state interventions. Buolamwini and Gebru (2018) conducted groundbreaking research showing that facial recognition systems (widely used by law enforcement) perform poorly when identifying racialized individuals. Their findings reveal that AI models often misclassify individuals from minority communities at alarmingly high rates, possibly leading to wrongful arrests or increased surveillance of already discriminated groups, in particular racialized individuals.

Within the scope of our research (border scenarios in Spain and large public events in France), AI-driven surveillance is increasingly used, and the inaccuracies involved can lead to severe consequences. Additionally, following Pasquale (2015), the opaque nature of many AI systems, working as "black boxes", significantly exacerbates discriminatory outcomes, as their inner workings are not transparent to users, regulators, or the public. This opacity not only conceals how AI systems make decisions but also obscures the biases embedded in them, making it difficult to scrutinize or contest their outputs. Without transparency, it becomes nearly impossible to determine whether an algorithm's decisions are fair or biased, complicating efforts to hold institutions accountable when discriminatory outcomes arise.

O'Neil (2016) reinforces the idea that bias in AI-driven decision-making often reflects race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Thus, when AI systems are trained on biased datasets, they may disproportionately harm marginalized groups, leading to unfair outcomes in critical areas such as policing, criminal justice, and public safety. Racialized individuals frequently encounter systemic barriers that AI may not only fail to address but may also aggravate, particularly when algorithms are used in contexts where they are already under heightened scrutiny, such as border control, immigration processes, or public safety measures at large-scale events.

In these cases, we will study how AI can be a double-edged sword and, when in the hands of official state forces, must be regulated, presenting a significant issue for the European community. This challenge must be addressed not only through the detailed revision of applications that deal with citizens' rights but also through proper training of state force officers who work directly with the population in their jurisdiction. The task at hand requires a comprehensive approach, balancing the potential benefits of AI with the need to protect individual rights and prevent discriminatory practices.

AI Surveillance at the Southern Border of Spain

The European Union has been working for years on the development of "smart borders"[3] along the limits of the Schengen Area. This concept encompasses the use of artificial intelligence technologies for controlling the entry and exit of citizens from "third countries"[4] (Fernández, 2023). Within this framework, we will assess the increasing technification of control processes at the southern border of Spain[5], which has seen continuous growth in recent years.

Within this framework, the rise and capabilities of tools that combine AI and big data in border contexts present several conflicts, based on two fundamental issues. On one hand, controversy surrounds the use of these tools by state forces towards individuals, as they may violate the fundamental rights and freedoms of migrants in transit and at their destinations (FRA, 2024). On the other hand, this fact brings about the collection, interpretation, and use of personal data, which can potentially infringe upon basic privacy rights (Eticas AI, n.d.).

Specifically, at the southern border of Spain, a variety of tools work together to create a far-reaching and branched control network. Among these, we focus on one of the most significant, known as SIVE (Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior, or Integrated System of External Surveillance), a system designed to enhance border control, purportedly with the aim of combating illegal immigration and drug trafficking (Jiménez Arandía, 2022).

SIVE is a comprehensive surveillance system that employs a network of fixed and mobile radars, along with high-resolution cameras and infrared sensors, to detect and identify vessels approaching the Spanish coasts (Fisher, 2018). This system provides real-time information to a control center, allowing for the coordination of interception efforts by land, sea, and air resources of the Spanish civil guard, called Guardia Civil.

The implementation of SIVE began in 2004 in the Canary Islands, and nowadays, its application varies across the Iberian Peninsula, Ceuta, and Melilla as well. Despite geographical and political differences, efforts have been made to standardize surveillance, detection, and migration management, such as through the SIVE system, which includes drones, thermal cameras, and facial recognition systems in Ceuta and Melilla (CEAR, 2017).

Since its initial development, various companies have been responsible for updating the system. In 2024, GMV enhanced the software underlying SIVE with a new product called PERSEO, using its OTEOS system (Observation and Tracking Electro-Optical System)[6]. This system employs AI-based algorithms to automatically classify vessels as "suspicious". PERSEO uses image recognition technology to analyze the silhouette and size of vessels detected by SIVE, identifying whether they are sailboats, merchant ships, passenger vessels, small boats, or potential drug trafficking vessels. When the radar detects a new object at sea categorized as

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[3] Smart borders refers to the use of advanced technologies to enhance border management, including automated border control systems, biometric identification, and large-scale information systems for border control purposes (European Parliament 2016).

[4] Third countries are defined as countries that are not members of the European Union and whose citizens do not enjoy the European Union right to free movement (European Migration Network n.d.).

[5] Southern border of Spain mainly includes the ports of Andalusia and the Canary Islands, as well as the maritime and land entry points to Ceuta and Melilla. For years, this border has established itself as one of the three most important routes for migrant arrivals by sea to Europe, alongside Italy and Greece.

[6] Presentación Escribano M&E. December 2023. https://anyflip.com/ezgnc/xbsb/basic

"suspicious", the agents operating SIVE can manually adjust the cameras to focus on the area indicated by the radar and decide on the appropriate action (Bellio et al., 2024).

This objective, according to which SIVE aims to encircle boats suspected of criminal activities, does not align with other definitions of the system that highlight border control actions based on the installation of radars and facial recognition systems at border posts, with the aim of enhancing the smart borders system (Público, 2015). The installation and refinement of anti-climbing systems on the walls of Ceuta and Melilla, and the improvement of thermal cameras, AI-equipped drones, laser illuminators, and biometric tools for facial and fingerprint recognition puts the focus on border surveillance, detection, prevention, and containment of mobility, rather than its use for facilitating rescue and protection.

This finding confirms trends observed in the Mediterranean region where technology is primarily used to implement a repressive migration policy regime, relegating the protection of migrants to a secondary role compared to the militarization of borders (Bautista et al., 2022). This directly relates to border security policies that are serving to increase the risk and danger of the journeys and routes that migrants are forced to take (Almoguera, 2024).

The widespread application of AI technologies further endangers migrant groups already at significant risk while fleeing their countries of origin, particularly during sea migrations. These journeys are fraught with dangers such as drowning and harsh weather conditions, especially for inexperienced travelers in unseaworthy vessels often lacking basic safety equipment like lifejackets. Additionally, climate patterns significantly influence migration flows across the Mediterranean, with an increase typically observed in the second quarter of each year. As spring brings calmer seas, more migrants attempt the perilous journey, further complicating the risks they face (Frenzen, 2014).

Among the threats they face, which stem from EU-funded projects, are remote biometric identification systems, profiling within EU databases, and predictive analytics systems, with the inherent risks of algorithmic biases. As currently drafted, the AI Act[7] either does not sufficiently address these threats or fails to consider them altogether (Bollero, 2022), raising alarms among civil liberties advocates. Consequently, the issue goes beyond harmful elements like fences topped with razor wire and trenches, or security forces using excessive force beyond the scope of international human rights standards.

As noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights (Association for Progressive Communications, 2019), there is first concern about the growing role of private technology companies in managing digital social resource systems as we have seen in the SIVE case. Second, there is concern that applying technological advances to access social rights may deepen the criminalization of poverty, as it prioritizes fraud detection and economic efficiency over the effective enjoyment of welfare resources by vulnerable groups, including migrants (Soriano, 2021).

In this context, migrants and people in the process of diaspora already affected by exclusion are exposed to an increase in negative stereotypes, barriers to reducing social disparities, and new difficulties related to the impact of digitalization on legal and social aspects of their lives. At this juncture, we examine the interplay between daily life and legal structures,

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[7] Further Information: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20230601STO93804/eu-ai-act-first-regulation-on-artificial-intelligence

focusing on the role of media in Spain and its potential influence on the technification of the southern border. This analysis aims to assess the media's rhetoric and its possible contributions to shaping public perception of migration issues.

Mass Media Narratives on Migration

Content analysis, a widely used technique in communication studies (Igartua et al., 2007), allows us to explore the primary frames of migration in the Spanish press, examining both themes and key signifiers. This section offers a focused analysis of how Spanish media addresses migration issues, providing an overview of its portrayal.

The construction of political discourses in the media, on social networks, and daily interactions are forms of communitarian engagement that aim to make sense of social phenomena. It shapes "coherent" narratives that serve as justifications intertwined with power structures (Hall, 1997). From this perspective, prejudices against migrant populations are not merely individual attitudes; rather, they are public arguments that emerge from a broader social process of constructing and defining situations.

In this context, we analyze a news article[8] from a prominent Spanish newspaper that employs blatantly biased and sensationalist language. The headline reads: *"Ceutians[9] outraged with Sánchez over the migrant invasion: "You have to be humanitarian, but not a fool"".* Beyond the crudeness of the statement, it is worth questioning the foundations on which this postulate is built. Who are the ceutians represented by that statement? On what grounds is the term "invasion" being used?

The use of terms like "invasion" exaggerates the scale of migration, potentially fostering negative public perceptions that are not supported by factual data. According to the IOM World Migration (2022) international migration movements account for around 3.6% of the global population. This data shows that the use of alarmist terminology like "invasion", "tension" or "migrant crisis", repeatedly used in articles and news reports (Málaga Acoge, 2020), exaggerates the issue but plants the seed of distrust and fear through repetition.

Is it a crisis concerning European borders and vast amounts of migrants looking to enter? Or is it a crisis of European immigration and asylum policies, forcing migrants in search of a better life to travel this deadly and dangerous route? (Jumbert 2018, p. 691). Such reporting often scapegoats migrant movements as the cause of long-standing national problems that governments have struggled to resolve for decades.

As we observe in this same article, the combination of "unemployed" and "migrant" constructs a leading question, "Why do they want immigrants when there are four million unemployed?". Following Lakoff's works and specifically the "don't think of an elephant" technique, which demonstrates how language and framing shape our perceptions (Lakoff, 2004), we analyze this query that strategically connects "immigrants" and "unemployed," establishing a mental structure that implicitly suggests a conflict between these groups. In this case, the question depict

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8   https://okdiario.com/espana/ceuties-indignados-sanchez-invasion-migratoria-hay-que-ser-humanitario-pero-no-gilip-13390792

9 Demonym for the population of Ceuta, a Spanish autonomous city, located on the Tingitan Peninsula, on the African shore of the Strait of Gibraltar, on its eastern side. It is washed by the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, while to the west and southwest it borders Morocco.

migration as a threat to employment, potentially reinforcing negative associations with migrant and diaspora communities.

This narrative suggests that migration are the source of national problems, fueling notions of crisis and public frustration, and it reflects Van Dijk's (2016) concept of the "ideological square", which emphasizes the positive traits of the in-group ("us") while downplaying its flaws and highlights the negative traits of the out-group ("them"). Such framing not only oversimplifies complex economic issues but also contributes to the marginalization of migrant communities, potentially justifying discriminatory policies and social exclusion.

The rhetoric of racism (Faso, 2010) underlying news stories like the one analyzed here, seeks to normalize and legitimize the exclusion and stigmatization of migrant groups, closely tied to concepts of democratic racism. Such exclusion removes migrants from democratic frameworks in the EU context, legitimizing human rights violations by portraying migrants as threats and framing migration within a security-oriented discourse (Buraschi & Aguilar, 2023).

At this point, it is essential to highlight that both human and AI model biases are largely a product of the information they consume. Research has shown that people often internalize and reproduce stereotypes after exposure to biased media (Muchnik et al., 2013). Similarly, AI systems trained on such biased data can learn and perpetuate these stereotypes, reinforcing harmful biases in their outputs, which, as we will see, can lead to hate speech and other race-based discriminatory outcomes.

AI Surveillance at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games

France, under President Emmanuel Macron's leadership, has strategically positioned itself as a global leader in AI technology. This ambition has been solidified through policies encouraging technological innovation across various sectors. A key example of this is the proposed law on the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games which includes Article 7[10], a controversial provision that authorizes the use of experimental AI-driven surveillance systems during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games which includes polemical algorithmic video surveillance (AVS). This legislation permits the deployment of AI technologies to monitor public spaces and detect potential security threats, marking one of the first large-scale implementations of AI surveillance at a major global event.

Proponents of this initiative argued that these advanced technologies would significantly enhance public security, streamline crowd management, and enable real-time detection of "suspicious" activities[11], which could help prevent incidents such as terrorist attacks. However, the adoption of Article 7 has raised significant concerns among both human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International, 2023; Privacy International, 2023) and researchers (e.g., Duflot 2024; Azran et al., 2024), who argue that this measure violates international human rights law, contravenes the principles of necessity and proportionality, and poses unacceptable risks to fundamental rights such as privacy, freedom of assembly and association, and the right to non-discrimination.

Given the international visibility of the Paris Olympic Games, many saw this as an opportunity for France to demonstrate the power and efficiency of implementing AI in public safety.

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[10] Law no. 2023-380 including Article 7: https://www.senat.fr/leg/pjl22-220.html

[11] AI Olympics Security. Built In. Accessed February 7, 2025, https://builtin.com/articles/ai-olympics-security.

Precisely, Article 7 allows law enforcement agencies to analyze video feeds from drones, closed-circuit television cameras, and other surveillance systems using AI algorithms designed to detect "unusual" behavior, such as crowd surges or "suspicious" movement (Statewatch, 2023). However, the legislation explicitly stated that these operations would not involve biometric identification or facial recognition technologies, in compliance with the European Union's stringent data protection laws, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (Red en Defensa de los Derechos Digitales, 2024). This appeared to be a measure to safeguard privacy by ensuring personal biometric data will not be processed.

Despite these assurances, critics like Chiappini (2023) highlight concerns about the broader ethical and legal implications of using AI for mass surveillance, even without biometric data. One significant aspect is the absence of rigorous regulations to evaluate the risks and biases associated with these AI systems before their deployment. The lack of transparency in how these AI algorithms are designed and trained, raises doubts about their accuracy and potential for misuse. For instance, without proper safeguards and oversight, there is the risk that AI-driven surveillance systems could unfairly target or misclassify individuals, leading to immediate and profound consequences.

AI-powered surveillance technologies remain largely unexamined, raising serious questions about their decision-making processes and the potential for discriminatory outcomes, particularly in high-risk public spaces. The risks associated with these AI systems are especially concerning when processing the facial features of non-white individuals, resulting in higher error rates in identifying people from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds. Migrants, especially those from regions underrepresented in the datasets used to train these algorithms, are disproportionately affected by these inaccuracies (Jain et al., 2004).

The French government's decision to employ smart video technologies designed to detect "suspicious" behavior has raised ethical questions about the definition of such behavior and the potential for disproportionate targeting of minority groups. One of the primary concerns surrounding this, has been the potential for racial profiling. Lodie and Juarez (2023) discuss how AI-assisted security measures, though not using facial recognition specifically for the Olympics, could still exacerbate France's history of biased law enforcement practices.

Moreover, the risks of deploying AI surveillance systems in public spaces are further compounded by the possibility of false positives, where normal behavior is incorrectly flagged as "suspicious". For instance, Amoore (2020) highlights that predictive algorithms used in mass-surveillance can misinterpret crowd behavior, such as peaceful protests, as potential security threats. Applying Amoore's insights to cultural or festive events typically held by minority or migrant groups, this misidentification could lead to disproportionate police intervention, thereby infringing on individuals' rights to free speech, assembly, and civil liberties.

France's history of discrimination against migrant populations, particularly African, Middle Eastern, and North African communities, has raised concerns about the potential over-surveillance of these groups during the Paris Olympics Games. Research from the National Institute of Standards and Technology (Grother, Ngan, & Hanaoka, 2019) has demonstrated that facial recognition systems misidentify black and asian individuals at rates significantly higher than white individuals. These findings support the idea that the deployment of AI-powered camera surveillance was particularly troubling in the context of the Olympics, where large, diverse crowds were gathered.

In response to the French National Assembly's decision to allow the use of algorithmic video surveillance technology powered by AI during the 2024 Paris Olympics Games, Mher Hakobyan, Amnesty International's Advocacy Advisor on AI Regulation, has stated that, "while France promotes itself as a champion of human rights globally, its decision to legalize AI-powered mass surveillance during the Olympics will lead to an all-out assault on the rights to privacy, protest, and freedom of assembly and expression" (Amnesty International, 2023). This criticism highlights a key concern that AI systems will monitor individuals continuously, often without their consent, collecting and analyzing vast amounts of personal data.

Additionally, in 2023, a group of civil society organizations released an open letter[12] calling for the rejection of the aforementioned Article 7, arguing that the measures "pose unacceptable risks to fundamental rights". Allowing the experimental use of "augmented cameras" during the event set a precedent that may prompt other EU States to adopt similar measures. According to Coaffee's research (2024), the Olympic Games have often served as a pretext for introducing heightened surveillance technologies, which tend to persist long after the events have ended.

Long-term social sorting and discrimination are consequences of surveillance systems, according to David Lyon (2003), who argues that these systems gather data to classify people based on various criteria, determining who is subjected to intensified scrutiny. Adding to this concern, Karolina Iwańska (2024), Digital Civic Space Advisor at the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law, explains that "once an 'exceptional' surveillance measure is allowed, it's very easy to normalize it and make it permanent". This statement underscores the risk that algorithmic video surveillance conducted during the Olympics in France could continue beyond the agreed date of March 31, 2025 (Library of Congress, 2023).

In this line, Paris police prefect, Laurent Nuñez, has already expressed his support for extending the use of algorithmic video surveillance, initially experimented with during the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Daffunchio Picazo, 2024). Although he emphasized that this technology has only been limited to detecting behaviors or events deemed "abnormal" (such as abandoned objects, falls, or crowd movements) and officially excluding facial recognition, the desire to extend its use raises important questions:

Could the continued use of such knowledge technologies lead to widespread privacy violations, as individuals are monitored simply for attending public events?

Does this create a slippery slope where the initial purpose of surveillance might expand, potentially infringing on fundamental civil liberties and human rights in France?

Social Media Narratives on Migration

Social networks have become a space where anger and hate can be expressed with impunity. Homophobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Roma sentiment, and other forms of intolerance exploit the internet and social media to insult, humiliate, engage in social lynching,

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[12] A coalition of 38 civil society organizations, including EDRi, ECNL, La Quadrature du Net, and Amnesty International France, published an open letter urging the French Parliament to reject Article 7 of the proposed law on the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The letter argued that the article's provisions for AI-driven video surveillance posed "unacceptable risks to fundamental rights" and could set a dangerous precedent for expanded surveillance practices across the EU (European Digital Rights, 2023).

harass, or threaten (Cabo A, García Juanatey, 2017). The spread of racist narratives online has led to alarming trends, such as the propagation of the "great replacement"[13] conspiracy theory, which has been associated with multiple hate-motivated attacks globally (Laub, 20199). These developments highlight the complex challenges faced by social media platforms, governments, and society in addressing online hate speech while balancing free speech concerns.

Hate speech on the internet, particularly on social media, has reached such a scale that it is presumably now on the agenda of numerous European and international organizations. However, despite the growing recognition of this issue as a significant problem on social media platforms, political measures taken so far have proven insufficient to effectively combat it. The scale and complexity of hate-fueled content have outpaced current regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms.

The harmful consequences of media rhetoric that negatively portrays migration and emphasizes the need for stricter border controls and anti-migrant regulations are evident in the proliferation of different forms of online harassment continually appearing on social media. A striking example is the emergence of a song on TikTok titled "je partirai pas" (I won't leave). This anthem, generated through artificial intelligence tools, mockingly spreads openly racist lyrics advocating for the forced return of immigrants to their countries of origin (Tual & Reynaud, 2024).

This viral phenomenon in the form of a xenophobic anthem also includes lyrics such as "good riddance and don't come back" or "as you come, you will leave!". It gained particular traction during the French legislative elections held between late June and early July 2024. The song's lyrics directly reference Jordan Bardella, who became one of the most relevant faces of France's far-right movement party's National Rally (Maldita, 2024). This case illustrates how social media platforms can amplify extremist rhetoric, especially during politically charged periods.

Right-wing supporters in France have stimulated the song's popularity, which specifically targets people of Arab or Muslim origin, exemplified by terms as "djellaba" (a traditional North Africa robe) and names as "Fatma" (a popular Arabic name). After gaining significant traction, TikTok's bans have not deterred users from re-uploading the track manually (Dufeal, 2024). Consequently, it has spread to other social media platforms such as YouTube and X, which only declared it would "limit the visibility" of posts by applying the message "limited visibility: this post may violate X's rules on hateful conduct" under tweets sharing the song.

The anti-racism organization SOS Racisme filed a legal complaint against social media X for "incitement to hatred and discrimination against a community based on their religious affiliation or nationality" in response to the xenophobic song and their lack of action towards the racist content circulating on social media. The organization called for the immediate removal of the offensive content from platforms and urged authorities to take action against those that failed to comply (Le Grand Continent, 2024).

The connection between the rhetoric constructed in the media regarding migration and the racist discourse spread by the public on social media is direct. As the saying goes, "you reap

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[13] The "great replacement" is a far-right conspiracy theory that claims white European populations are being systematically replaced through mass migration, demographic growth, and a decrease in the birth rate of white Europeans. This theory, popularized by French author Renaud Camus in 2011, asserts that Muslim and non-European populations are replacing the native white population, allegedly endangering European culture and civilization. Despite lacking credible evidence, the theory has gained traction among far-right groups and has been linked to several violent attacks worldwide (Laub, 2019).

what you sow," and, in Goffman's sense, frames constitute "schemes of interpretation" (Goffman, 1994). Each situation or experience can be "framed" in different ways, but the interpretative schemes applied define the meaning of the situation, how it is interpreted, and how it is understood. In this sense, the link between media narratives "framing" the discourse generated by the public in the form of hate speech, as we could see above, is noticeable, highlighting the need for stricter regulation of digital interaction spaces.

With this in mind, the feedback loop between individuals and communities that incorporate knowledge technologies into daily life and vice versa resembles a two-way road with a blurred dividing line, depicting a scenario where risks and vulnerabilities are ever-present. The urgent need for effective governance and regulatory frameworks in the digital realm is well portrayed by Davidow (2024) when he warns that "like the overgrazing of public lands or overfishing of the seas, the digital space will continue to be exploited" referring to an imperative need for regulation of digital spaces to preserve civil rights against power interests seeking to control and exploit discourse in digital media.

Conclusions

While knowledge technologies such as AI and big data tools have the potential to revolutionize various sectors by increasing productivity, and presumably expanding efficiency and accuracy, their deployment, particularly in sensitive areas like law enforcement and surveillance presents significant ethical challenges. The cases we have examined exemplify how these tools, despite their benefits, can exacerbate societal inequalities and perpetuate biases, particularly against migrant individuals. The use of AI-driven surveillance by states raises critical concerns about privacy violations, racial profiling, and the disproportionate targeting of migrants and minority groups. As we have analyzed, this creates a chain of events that, from a structural level, permeates the community networks woven through social interaction.

As we have been able to analyze, both in relation to the SIVE software in the southern border of Spain, as well as in relation to algorithmic video surveillance at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, there is a common denominator that refers to the "suspicious" target that these tools focus on. Whether in reference to "suspicious" vessels, movements, activities or behaviors, what we find is a categorization that supports surveillance systems trained by artificial intelligence systems to decide what constitutes "normal" or "abnormal" at every moment they are put into operation. However, every artificial intelligence tool is nurtured by people who shape it and enable it to work, and the logic that underpins these social conventions with which these tools are instructed is contextual.

In this way, the social context of those who develop and work with these tools is transmitted, and knowledge technologies, even though they are capable of restructuring and generating information, operate within the contextual margins that have given rise to them. The perception and categorization of each citizen becomes an increasing value to sustain logics that can continue feeding the structural logics that reproduce inequity and racism in all its forms. It is at this point where the media, as de facto powers, raise their role as shapers of public opinion that will be poured into the aforementioned artificial intelligence tools.

As we have observed based on the case studies examined in this research, it is highly relevant to stress the role of media in framing, selecting stories, shaping language and formatting discourse. Mass media manage what is known as the Overton Window (Overton, 2006), also

known as the window of acceptable discourse. This concept represents the range of ideas considered acceptable in public discourse, and from this position, they have the capacity to widen or narrow the margins of this window, thus influencing what passes through it and is therefore considered "normal" or "acceptable".

This framing process involves not only highlighting certain issues but also how they are presented and explained, selecting specific aspects, emphasizing certain elements, and often excluding others. We observed this in the portrayal of supposed unanimous Ceutian opinion about migration on the southern border of Spain, leading to the distortion of realities through discourse. The risk of exposure to this type of news is the reproduction of hate speech and patterns, as evidenced by the case in France and the viralization of a racist anthem created with artificial intelligence.

Thus, political decisions, media representations, and public opinion form three interconnected axes of a spiral that continuously evolve, feeding back into each other while shaping social conventions. The role of knowledge technologies, gaining prominence at various stages of this spiral evolution, is central to this research. The findings of this article aim to raise awareness about the potential tendency of structural powers to monopolize digital advances implemented by state institutions, potentially exacerbating social inequities.

The central question of this article has pointed towards the aggravation of this problem at a critical point, as when these artificial intelligence tools are used by official state bodies that hold and exercise uncontestable power over the population, the implications can incur in pressing human rights violations, increasing and supporting abuses of power such as racial profiling stops on the street or hot returns at the border. The basic error is the same: the perpetuation of biases that normalize discriminatory actions. However, the consequences, when perpetrated by official authority, can be exponential if the European Union and its Member States do not regulate and detail the use of these tools in each of the cases in which they come into play.

It is crucial to recognize that AI systems, when trained on data generated by members of societies with historically racist structures, can perpetuate and amplify these biases. Intercultural education at all levels is fundamental to ensure that future AI training does not harbor racist biases. This approach aims to foster critical thinking that can lead to the development of AI systems that are more equitable and less prone to perpetuating harmful biases.

In this context, it is essential to emphasize educational approaches that place critical digital literacies at the center (Pangrazio, 2016). These literacies refer to the ability to question power and authority, playing a crucial role in socio-digital contexts. They encourage citizens to critically reflect on mainstream media representations and produce alternative content that challenges dominant ideologies. This relationship between critical literacies and political engagement is further supported by critical pedagogy, which advocates for educational methods fostering reflection and political action (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Given the pervasive nature of racism in our society, it is imperative that we take an anti-racist stance across all levels - institutional, personal, and communal. This approach requires concerted efforts to identify, challenge, and dismantle racist structures and behaviors. In this regard, grassroots organizations play an essential role in creating socio-educational environments in both formal and non-formal educational settings. These initiatives focus on training and prevention concerning violence and stigma against marginalized groups, with a special emphasis on digital environments.

However, the work done by social organizations is not sufficient to resolve structural issues. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into public life, establishing ethical frameworks and regulatory safeguards is essential to ensure that its benefits are equitably distributed. Policymakers must prioritize transparency, accountability, and fairness in AI systems to prevent them from reinforcing social inequities. As social cohesion among communities is at stake, these technologies should be designed to serve society as a whole, requiring approaches grounded in anti-racist perspectives to help shape intercultural socio-digital environments.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. This includes but is not limited to financial relationships, personal relationships, or professional connections that might raise questions about the objectivity or integrity of the research presented herein. All authors have reviewed and approved this statement.

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Thematic analysis of United Kingdom newspapers' coverage of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Benjamin Taylor

Abstract. In United Kingdom policy, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are people assessed as under 18, and have applied for asylum, having arrived in the UK without parents or other responsible adults. As of 31st March 2024, there were 7380 of these young people in the UK. As with other immigration related topics, the care for, and conduct of UASC continues to be a subject for debate among policy makers, campaign groups, the general public, and in the media. This paper analyses the coverage of UASC in the UK's eight most read newspapers from 2020-2024. UASC are presented as vulnerable to different challenging circumstances, while also being at times, a threat to UK citizens, and lacking genuineness. It also concludes that there is variation in how different newspapers present UASC, which themes they focus on, and how they use language to imply characteristics and behaviours.

Introduction

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), according to England's Department for Education (2024) are people, assessed as being under 18 years old, who have applied for asylum in their own right, having arrived in England without a parent or any other responsible adult. Local authorities have a legal duty to accommodate these children, as part of that local authority's wider in care (or looked after) cohort. In many cases these young people arrive in England having had little or no formal education, and may have experienced exploitation, abuse or trauma in their home country. Of course, the journey to England, and the act of leaving friends and family may also have been distressing. Some children are not unaccompanied when they leave their home country but become separated from parents during the journey (Lenette and Cleland, 2016) which can cause further distress. Therefore, local authorities face significant challenges in supporting UASC because of a mixture of some, or all of these factors (Rivers, 2018). This task is increased by the number of young people arriving in England. In 2014, there were 2050 UASC in England. This has increased overall, though not always steadily, to 7380 as of 31st March 2024. Accommodation is therefore more complex for local authorities who may struggle to find foster carers or other appropriate placements for these children, and it is important to note that the number of children in care overall, has itself increased from 68790 to 83630 in the same ten-year period. Of course, this number needs to be seen in a global context, with 122.6 million people across the world forcibly displaced by mid-2024, having increased from 59 million at the end of 2014, and approximately 40% of these being children (UNCHR, 2024). These displacements are due to war, persecution, climate change, human rights violations and reductions in resources. Indeed, the United Kingdom (UK) government's (2017) Safeguarding Strategy for UASC acknowledges that these young people are vulnerable, citing exploitation, trafficking and the perilous journey to the UK. It also states that we must remember that they are children and should not be defined solely by their status as asylum-seekers or refugees, continuing by noting the UK's 'proud history of offering support to people fleeing persecution and war' (p. 4) and the generosity of the British people to help the most vulnerable. The strategy goes on to

outline how the care for UASC should be improved (e.g., increased fostering capacity, training for foster carers, additional funding). Rigby *et al.* (2021) in their analysis of the strategy, found the implication that UASC may *choose* whether to enter the country legally or illegally to be problematic and found there to be notions of validity implied, as if some children are more deserving of help than others. The references to the safeguarding and welfare of *all* the children in the UK, and sections on risk, suggested that some UASC may pose risks to themselves and others (Rigby *et al.*, 2021).

Whether these specific policy elements impact on how UASC are perceived is unclear, but as this paper will identify, some of these perspectives are also found in the newspaper coverage in the UK. Indeed, Rosen and Crafter (2018) argue firstly that the media not only describes, but also shapes events, and second, that the UK has an exclusionary immigration regime. Similarly, Wilmot (2017) suggests that newspapers have significant impact on their readers' perceptions of reality, and it is clear that immigration generally, and UASC specifically have featured regularly in UK newspapers in recent years. This research analyses the UASC focused articles in the eight most widely read UK newspapers, between January 1st, 2020, and December 31st, 2024, their principal themes, and how these themes, and the children themselves, are presented and described.

Newspaper depictions of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Previous research into this area has focused on different elements of print media, including the words and their surface and implied meanings, the use of photographs, readers' letters, and quotations.

UASC and vulnerability

A recurring theme in the way that UASC are presented in the media, in terms of the language and images used, is vulnerability. Frequently the narrative around these young people focuses on their pain and suffering, and shows them as victims of great tragedy (Tuck and Yang, 2014). Of course, many UASC will have experienced hardship both before and during their journey to the UK, but their presentation in newspapers, often with photographs of many young people, not making eye contact with the camera implies that this victimhood is their only real characteristic (Wilmot, 2017). Elements that make up one's person, e.g., occupations, skills, traits are rarely featured. Indeed, imagery that focuses only on distress and vulnerability, such as those of the migrant camps in Calais, leads the reader to link UASC to primitiveness, disease and poverty. By extension, these concepts begin to be seen as things that mainly happen offshore and are then imported (Lenette and Cleland, 2016). Of course, there is significant poverty in the different parts of the UK, as there is in many other countries, which is not linked to immigration.

Frequently these children are shown in photographs without their parents. Rather than providing a range of explanations for this, the UK media has tended to present these children as being global orphans, abandoned (McLaughlin, 2017). This presents the British people as being kind, generous and caring, by stepping in to help these children, while simultaneously implying that the parents of these young people are neglectful (McLaughlin, 2017) and irresponsible (Anthony and Thomas, 2017), having made choices that resulted in these challenging outcomes. These depictions create sympathy amongst the public, within the concept of universal childhood that does not account for individual circumstances (Rigby *et al*., 2021) and with an expectation

that UASC should show gratitude for the help they receive (McLaughlin, 2017). Furthermore, this coverage does not acknowledge the children's individuality, rather presenting them as either being vulnerable or a threat (Rosen and Crafter, 2018) with little nuance. Indeed, Wilmot's (2017, p. 67) perspective is that the coverage shows these young people as either 'bare life...stripped of any rights or legal status...[or] a threat to security and identity'. Newspaper readers may then feel torn between sympathy for the UASC and an underlying anti-immigration sentiment (Pantti and Ojala, 2018).

UASC and threat

Anti-immigration by extension may become anti-immigrant; the UK media's presentation of this issue as a crisis of borders, threatening security, and people's identities, tends to reduce the understanding of, and consideration for the dangers that UASC face (Pruitt, 2019). Rather, they are perceived to be perpetrators of threat, and not those in danger, and the closer these young people get to the UK, the more concern about the threat they pose increases, while the focus shifts away from their protection (Rosen and Crafter, 2018). This impacts on readers' perceptions and priorities, as is demonstrated by Lynn and Lea's (2003) analysis of readers' letters, published in newspapers, in which the denial of UASC's freedoms was a recurring theme.

It is also evident that media coverage of these children is influenced by suspicion of their motives. Their genuineness as asylum seekers will be discussed shortly, but Rosen and Crafter (2018) note that the media seems to emphasise the importance of protecting the UK's innocent children, and in doing so, it is necessary to be suspicious of all asylum seekers who claim to be children. Freier (2017) recognises this also, noting that UASC are often portrayed as 'threatening male invaders' (p. 80), while their depiction in imagery, as males interacting with the police on arrival, or sometimes symbolically blocked from our view by the police, implies to readers that they need to be protected from them (Wilmot, 2017). Indeed, when stories about UASC are accompanied by images of adults or older young people, this reduces the sympathy for them amongst the public, instead linking UASC with issues like border policing, detention and deportation (McLaughlin, 2017). This approach presents, again without nuance, UASC as being either deserving or underserving of sympathy and support, but the use of stereotypes (e.g., criminals, abusers of the system) is persuasive (Rigby, *et al*., 2021).

UASC and genuineness

A factor in whether UASC are described as being deserving of the sympathy and hospitality that is offered to them by the UK public, is whether or not they are genuine migrants (Rosen and Crafter, 2018). Those that are genuine are expected to look vulnerable but there is a narrative when UASC do not look young and in need, that they may be perceived to be greedy, duplicitous, and lacking in integrity (Lynn and Lea, 2003). Indeed, the implication in some of the reporting around UASC is that genuine asylum seekers are actually rare, and to some extent irrelevant, when considered alongside those who are untrustworthy, criminal, and abusing the good will of indigenous people (Lynn and Lea, 2023; Rigby *et al*., 2021).

Part of this debate within the media is linked to what these young people look like, when compared with what might have been expected. David Davies, the Conservative MP tweeted in 2016 that 'These don't look like "children" to me. I hope British hospitality is not being abused' and this was the subsequently featured in articles in The Express and The Sun (e.g., Gutteridge and

Sheldrick, 2016; Tolhurst, 2016). This is likely to influence the readers of those newspapers, and give the idea that UASC should look and behave in a certain way (Freier, 2017). Young people arriving into the UK with facial hair and wearing hoodies may not be considered to be the sort of child migrants that people want or expect (Rigby *et al*., 2021) while images showing them arriving with adult men, implies to the reader that these UASC, even though are in their mid-teens are really coded as men, or nearly men. These reports frequently use terms like fake and bogus, while real may be used but in inverted commas, to demonstrate that their genuineness and integrity is debatable. Furthermore, even the language of childhood is presented similarly. Newspapers, rather than referring to them as children use terms like youths, lads and minors, again often in inverted commas, and alongside descriptions of their physicality (e.g., 'burly') (McLaughlin, 2017).

These approaches reduce the understanding that the UK public have for these children and reduces sympathy for their situation, while stereotyping and exaggeration positions them as being somewhere on a spectrum including characteristics such as unchildlike ungrateful, inauthentic, duplicitous, delinquent and criminal. This makes the consumers of these media feel like the UK public are the victims.

Methods and analysis

This research is a qualitative case study, analysing the coverage of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children travelling to, and living in, the United Kingdom, in UK newspapers. The aim was to present a comprehensive, balanced analysis, to capture the themes that are most evident in newspaper stories, and how these themes are presented. The case study can be described as intrinsic (Stake, 2005) because the case itself is of primary interest and because the study's main aim is to provide greater insight into a debated issue.

The sample for this study was articles published in the eight most widely read newspapers in the UK (The Telegraph, The Mail, The Times, The Guardian, The Express, The Independent, The Sun, and The Mirror), that included coverage of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Sunday editions of the newspapers were also included. Articles had to be available in full on the newspaper's website with a publication date between January 1st, 2020, and December 31st, 2024. For each newspaper, the website was searched via its own search facility and the following search terms were used: unaccompanied, asylum seeker, asylum-seeking, child, refugee, lone, minor. Different combinations of the words, and plurals, were also used. To be included in the research the article had to be news reports which included some coverage of UASC. Articles did not have to be solely about children; if the report was about asylum seekers or refugees in general, and included information about adults and children, then it met the criteria for inclusion. If the report did not mention children at all (or any term indicating childhood) then it was excluded. Articles also had to be specifically about the UK or about UASC who were travelling to the UK, or who may soon be travelling to the UK. For example, newspaper reports about children living in the migrant camps in Calais were included, but those about children claiming asylum in the USA from Central America were excluded. The following article types were excluded from this research: readers' letters, editorials, policy reports or policy briefs, opinion pieces, features in magazine supplements. In total, 110 articles met the inclusion criteria with the breakdown by newspaper as follows: The Mail – 23, The Times – 21, The Independent – 14, The Guardian – 11, The Sun – 11, The Telegraph – 12, The Express – 10, The Mirror – 8.

The articles they were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified inductively, i.e., during the analysis as there was no intention to test an existing hypothesis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). Working inductively was also appropriate as it was important to not assume which topics the articles would include, nor what their perspectives on them would be. During the initial analysis the following themes were identified:

The number of UASC crossing the English Channel;
UASC and misrepresentation of age;
UASC and terrorism;
UASC and the responses of Kent County Council;
The negatives of UASC for UK citizens;
UASC and the costs to the UK taxpayer;
The dangers of crossing the English Channel;
Risks to UASC;
UASC going missing;
Failing of the UK government, the Home Office and other services.

Following a second review of the data, the themes were adapted and rationalised as follows:

The 'Kent Council' theme was removed and the data was recoded with other themes.
The 'dangers of crossing the channel' theme was removed and the data was moved to the 'risks to UASC' theme.
The 'misrepresentation of age' theme was changed to a broader theme to do with the age of UASC more generally; this includes the misrepresentation of age, but also age assessments.
The 'UASC going missing' and the 'risks to UASC' theme were combined because going missing is a risk in itself, and it is also linked to other risks, such as modern slavery and inadequate accommodation.
The 'failings of the UK government' theme was removed and the data was moved to other themes, principally, the 'risks to UASC', 'UASC and age', and 'UASC going missing' themes.

Inductive thematic analysis recognises that themes are linked to and entwined with others (Gallagher, 2024). These changes acknowledge that trying to analyse some of these themes in isolation would have been difficult or would have resulted in numerous repetitions and caveats. The final themes were therefore as follows:

The number of UASC
The age of UASC
UASC and terrorism
UASC and costs to the taxpayer
Risks to UASC

Ethics

In that this research draws solely on documentary data, there are no risks to participants. Furthermore, the articles are all in the public domain, so there are no ethical considerations related to accessing the data. However, documentary research relies on accurate representation from the researcher (Denscombe, 2021). Therefore, every effort has been made to precisely capture the content of the articles. Of course, newspapers do not just present facts, and in analysing

documents there is usually an element of inference, but there has been no intention to misrepresent what the articles have said. Where the meaning of an article is perhaps unclear, or where there may be an implication, this is indicated.

Limitations

The principal limitation of thematic analysis of documents is that the documents are context-related (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The articles were not created for this research, but to present information to a specific audience. The context in which they were created influences the information that is included, the information that is omitted (whether intentionally or accidentally), and the specific vocabulary that is used to present the information. Newspapers may also have a political bias which influences how they communicate the story, which is why different newspapers may present the same story in different ways. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to expect newspapers to present just the bare facts; while this is part of their role, they also try to appeal to their readership in the way that these facts are presented, and the opinions that accompany them (Denscombe, 2021).

Thematic analysis is by definition, inferential (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012) and in the case of newspaper articles both the meanings of the authors, and the themes used to code the data, are inferred. Indeed, what the writers of these articles really mean is open to interpretation (Robinson, 2010), especially when using italics, inverted commas, quotes or specific language (e.g., the word 'youths' instead of 'children'). Therefore, a potential criticism is that researchers might favour articles that take up a particular position, or support a hypothesis. In this research the potential for this has been minimised by the adoption of an intrinsic case study that focuses on developing greater insight into the themes, and by including broadsheets and tabloids from a broad political spectrum.

Findings and discussion

Here the data from the 110 articles that met the inclusion criteria is presented and analysed. Each theme is addressed separately, though there are some links between themes and where one impacts on another it is acknowledged. The analysis focuses on how UASC are presented and described in relation to these themes, and extends beyond the semantic to include latent analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is important because word and phrase choices often imply a meaning, without stating it explicitly.

The number of UASC

The most commonly occurring theme is the high number of UASC either crossing the English Channel, or already living in the United Kingdom. This features in 55 articles, and in all of the newspapers. In 18 of these, the high numbers of UASC is the main story, often stating how many children have claimed asylum within a specific period, or making comparisons with previous years, where there has been an increase. These articles frequently include comments made by politicians or other interpretations. For example, one article in the Sun (Gaspar, 2020) about the rise in the number of UASC also includes a quote from Priti Patel, then the UK's Foreign Secretary, stating that European countries needed to do more to stop asylum seekers reaching Britain, that they are in safe countries already, who needed to ensure their asylum processes were effective. These comments are not buttressed with counterpoints, or specific details about asylum law, such

as the 1951 Refugee Convention which states that people do not have to claim asylum in the first safe country they arrive at. Instead, the article claims that Britain is now the number one destination for asylum seekers in Europe, referring to a report from the European Asylum Support Office, which states that in the previous year, the UK accommodated one fifth of the unaccompanied young people who claimed asylum in Europe. No other data is provided regarding other countries, nor any information about previous years, or trends. The implication here is that too many asylum seekers are coming to the UK, when they should claiming asylum in other countries, and that those countries should be supporting them to do so.

Another example of an article principally about the high numbers of UASC but supplemented by a particular narrative, is a piece in the Mail (Wright, 2021) which refers to asylum seekers 'making a dash' from France, which may be interpreted by readers as something that people do if they are trying to evade the authorities. This article also mentions an 'extraordinary surge' in migrant numbers, while others quote stakeholders with strong views, such as Nigel Farage, then leader of the Brexit Party who used the term 'invasion' (Cole, 2020), or Bella Sankey, director of Detention Action, who claimed the UK government's strategy was cruel and divisive (Carr, 2020). At times, even when more balance is provided, there remains an implied slant. For example, an article in the Daily Mail (Boyle, 2020), does include information about what happens when migrants arrive in the UK, and some quotes from Clare Moseley from Care4Calais, a refugee charity. However, this information is either found in a sidebar or at the bottom of the article. In contrast the information about the numbers of asylum seekers, images of them arriving and quotes from Nigel Farage feature in the headline, subtitle and the beginning of the article. Some articles present less emotive coverage, focus more on the numerical data, the situations of the young people, and the related challenges for the Home Office and Kent County Council (e.g., Savage (2024) in the Observer).

The remaining 37 articles that featured the high numbers of UASC contextualised this with other issues. Over 20 of these discussed issues that cause a concern for, or a risk to the young people, such as the dangers of crossing the English Channel, accommodation in hotels, and overcrowding in reception centres. All the newspapers published articles which mentioned the lack of capacity in Kent County Council, with some raising concerns about the lack of care and education placements. Again, there is sometimes selective use of quotes to emphasise particular elements of the story. For example, an article in the Mail on Sunday (Wilcock, Wright and Owen, 2021) includes a quote from Matt Dunkley, then Kent County Council's corporate director of children's services, which mentions KCC being at 'breaking point' because of the high numbers of UASC, and also describing it as 'a humanitarian crisis involving traumatised young people who deserve the best support'. From the quote, only the term 'breaking point' is included in the headline, and the subtitle, which also says that Kent 'bears the brunt' of what it refers to later as a 'spiralling crisis'. Other articles also mirror this presentation of UASC, because of their numbers, being a burden, such as Hymas (2021) in the Daily Telegraph, outlining how other local authorities are being forced to look after UASC because of the impact on Kent. A different approach is found in some articles, where a specific danger to asylum seekers is noted, and then linked to high numbers of UASC and those who might claim asylum in the future, e.g., potential deportation to Rwanda (Calvert, 2022, in The Independent on Sunday).

Eleven articles, rather than focusing on elements that might cause risk or concern for the young people, instead discuss how the influx of UASC might negatively impact British citizens.

This theme will be revisited later, but it is worth mentioning here because the stories discuss actual risks posed by a very small number of UASC, which may then be extrapolated more widely. For example, articles mainly about adult males posing as children (e.g., Godfrey (2024a) in the the Sun), or UASC potentially arriving with high rates of Covid-19 (e.g., Wilcock (2021) in the Mail), but also mentioning the high number of asylum seekers overall, imply that these risks might be prevalent in the wider UASC cohort.

The age of UASC

Eighteen articles included discussion of the age of UASC, and in twelve of these the stories mentioned adult male asylum seekers, claiming to be children. Nine of these twelve were published in either the Mail or the Sun. A common narrative presented in these articles is that asylum seekers lie about their age (or are told to lie by people smugglers) in order to access better financial support and housing. Some articles include language intended to present UASC as purposefully deceitful, such as 'adults brazenly plotting', 'ruse', 'rumbled by officials' (Godfrey, 2024b), 'kids' in quote marks to emphasise that they are not children, 'tricksters' and 'fraudulent claims', (Godfrey, 2024a). Other than the possibility of receiving better support from social services, none of these articles suggested reasons why UASC may be reticent to be truthful, such as previous negative experiences with the authorities, being used to not being believed, and concerns about what might happen to them if they provide correct personal details (Ni Raghallaigh, 2014). Instead a number of the articles share concerns about the potential risks to UK citizens. Four articles suggest that this deceit on the part of the UASC might result in the safeguarding issue of adult males being in classrooms with children. Links are also made in some articles to outlier cases, such as a former Islamic State fighter, aged 42, who claimed to be a child (Sethi, 2023), and an asylum seeker aged 18, who claimed to be 14, and went on to commit murder (Tingle, 2024). These are important cases to report of course, but may give unfair impressions about other UASC, when they are presented in the context of a more general story about age assessments and young people not providing correct or complete information.

Age assessments also feature within a number of articles, with some giving statistics about the number of asylum seekers who had claimed to be children but were assessed to be adults. Sometimes this focuses on a specific case, while other articles may give a total number (e.g., 1317 (Godrey, 2024b), or present it as a fraction. Indeed, a story in the Express (Austen, 2022) had to publish a correction, having originally stated that two thirds of those who had claimed to be unaccompanied children were actually adults, when actually the two thirds related only to claimants that the Home Office believed to be over 18, not all UASC. It is important to note that while asylum seekers may sometimes claim to be younger than they are, the age assessment process can also make errors. Only five of the articles acknowledge this (three in the Guardian, one in the Mirror, and one in the Independent). Where the aforementioned articles raise concerns about the safety of UK children, these outline the potential risks to UASC of being incorrectly assessed as adults. This includes at least 1300 14-17 year olds housed unsupervised in adult accommodation (Burke, 2024a), and the risk of lone children being sent to Rwanda, having been deemed to be adults (Savage, 2024).

UASC and terrorism

Nine of the articles mentioned terrorism, usually referencing the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Taliban. Three of the articles, all in the Mail, focus specifically on the aforementioned asylum-seeker who murdered a man in England having claimed to be 14 when he was actually 18. Four more of the articles are not specifically about terrorism, but mention specific cases where people claiming to be children have gone on to commit crimes. For example, an article in the Express (Austin, 2022) about the age of UASC, includes a quote from Alp Mehmet (anti-immigration campaign group Migration Watch):

'Adults claiming to be children have long been given the benefit of the doubt... It is a costly and dangerous gap in our defences. Ahmed Hassan, the Parson's Green bomber, lied to stay here. And adults being placed among children doesn't bear thinking about.'

It has been reported that Ahmed Hassan lied about his early experiences in Iraq, and about his engagement with the Prevent programme (e.g., Harrison and Portal, 2018; White, 2018) but neither these reports, nor a published letter from Sir Philip Rutnam, then permanent secretary of the Home Office, to Yvette Cooper, then chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, stated that Ahmed Hassan had lied about his age, just that he claimed to be 16 when he arrived in the UK. Therefore, this was an odd example to highlight. No counterpoint is given to Alp's quote and so readers could infer that other UASC may do the same as Ahmed Hassan, even though in this one example, the person may not have lied about their age, which is the main theme of the article. Similarly, an article in the Sun (Godfrey, 2024b) also about asylum seekers lying about their age, includes a quote from Robert Jenrick, then a Conservative Party leadership contender, stating that people claiming asylum are known to UK security services, are threats to communities and have links to ISIS and al-Qaeda. The quote does not mention children, age assessments, or lying about age, even though that is the article's main theme. Therefore, again, there is an implied link, between UASC and terrorism which may not be warranted.

One article in the Mirror (McKelvie, 2021) presents a different aspect, focusing on young people who come to the UK as UASC but are then returned to their home country when they turn 18. It focuses on one main example, where an asylum seeker was forced to join the Taliban for his own protection on being returned to Afghanistan. There is also some wider context provided about other potential challenges that people may encounter when they are returned home (e.g., finding work or education, mental health support), and about the asylum rules that may lead to these returns.

UASC and costs to the taxpayer

Nine articles included specific coverage of how much UASC cost, either in terms of the amounts paid to local authorities to look after the young people, or costs of accommodation. Many other articles referred to this indirectly via coverage of challenges faced by Kent County Council in accommodating UASC and associated topics, such as the National Transfer Scheme (a protocol for reallocation of UASC to different local authorities) and the reluctance of some authorities to receive these young people. Three of the stories highlighted the significant costs the UK government was paying to house asylum seekers in hotels. Of course, unaccompanied children would normally be looked after in foster care, but some lone children were accommodated in hotels, which will be discussed later. Indeed, one of these articles (Crew, 2022) explains that additional funding is paid to local authorities (£6000 per child over three months) to encourage

them to move children from hotels into their care. Another article (Duell and Barrett, 2021) outlines that £28million was paid to France by the Home Office to double their patrols and make the crossing unviable, adding that Home Office sources, that are unnamed, blame the French for not doing enough to stop these crossings. The implication there is that the UK taxpayer is not getting a satisfactory return on the payment, though the article does go on to explain that some crossings were prevented and returned to France.

Three of the articles, one in the Sun (Elsom, 2023), one in the Express (Lister, 2024) and one in the Mail (James, 2023), cover the provision of universal basic income (UBI) to UASC, as part of a pilot in Wales. A UBI of £1600 (before tax) is paid to care leavers in Wales to support them in transitioning to adult life. Because UASC are also looked after children, on turning 18 they become care leavers and so are eligible for UBI. The articles do explain this, in varying degrees of detail, within the body of the article, but the headlines highlight just the provision of the money and their asylum-seeking status, rather than their care leaver status, which is why they qualify for UBI. Indeed, the headline in the Express (Lister, 2024), 'Wales pays huge sum to 'illegal migrants' in 'nonsensical' Labour scheme' incorrectly refers to the young people as 'illegal' while subjectively describing the payment as 'huge'. The use of quote marks is important as they refer to quotes used later in the article from then Welsh Conservative leader Andrew RT Davies (who incorrectly described the young people as 'illegal migrants' and said that the policy was 'nonsensical'). It should be noted that a quote at the end of the article from a Welsh government spokesperson states that the young people are not illegal immigrants. The articles in the Daily Mail (James, 2023) and the Sun (Elsom, 2023) cover this story alongside the provision of free legal aid for UASC in relation to immigration, or 'taxpayer cash to fight deportation' (Elsom, 2023). Both articles quote James Roberts from the Tax Payer's Alliance, a low tax pressure group, who argues that 'illegal immigrants' should not receive this support, as legal aid is means tested. The conflation of these two issues (the legal aid and the UBI) is unhelpful as they are separate policies, and separate methods of supporting UASC.

Risks to UASC

73 articles, across all of the newspapers sampled, include coverage of the risks associated with being an unaccompanied asylum-seeker. Eleven of these discuss in detail the dangers of travelling to the UK, across the English Channel, or at least acknowledge the significant risks that migrants take. There is less coverage of the potential risks to UASC on leaving the UK, though McKelvie (2021) in the Mirror, explains that over 100 children who were taken in by the UK as children, were deported to Iraq and Afghanistan having turned 18. Three others (e.g., Calvert, 2022) explain that children could be deported to Rwanda, either before their age was assessed, or having been incorrectly assessed to be adults.

The most commonly reported risk to UASC is related to unsafe or inappropriate accommodation, or UASC being detained. 33 of the stories featured this. Some of these include details of specific situations, such as child victims of rape or torture being housed in hotels (Stevens, 2023) or children with diphtheria having to live in shipping containers (Burke, 2024b). Many of the articles provide data regarding how many children are living in unsuitable accommodation and for how long, and some also state that the Home Office and Kent County Council are acting unlawfully by using these settings for unaccompanied children. The principal

reason given for this is a lack of capacity in reception centres and foster care, though some of the stories suggest that incorrect age assessments result in children being treated as if they are adults.

22 of the articles discussed the risks posed to UASC by criminal gangs, acknowledging that in some cases the young people are trafficked to the UK so that they can be kidnapped and exploited in, for example, modern slavery, the drug trade or sex work All the newspapers, except the Sun, outlined in detail the risks associated with gangs, and three stories in the Mail (e.g., Wilcock, 2021) explained that some councils are fearful of the impact on the wider local authorities of an increase in gang activity.

Many of the articles include more than one risk, in that one risk may lead to another. This is most evident in the link between inadequate accommodation and vulnerabilities to criminal gangs, which is highlighted in at least ten stories. Because there is a lack of supervision, inadequate safeguarding procedures, or because UASC may not feel safe alone in hotels, they may be more easily targeted by gangs, and then kidnapped, or they may leave willingly. This then links to another risk, described in 22 of the articles, that UASC are frequently going missing, usually from hotels (or similar) rather than foster care. This features in all of the newspapers, except the Sun and the Mail, usually with data to show how many UASC have gone missing, where from and how many have then been found, or have returned.

Other risks included in the articles, though less frequently include the overcrowded and unsanitary migrant camps in Calais that UASC may experience prior to coming to the UK, racism and violence directed towards them in the UK, and self-harm, suicide and depression linked to their prior experiences and unsuitable accommodation in the UK.

Conclusion

Returning to the initial themes identified in previous research, of vulnerability, threat and genuineness, they remain prevalent in newspapers' coverage of UASC, in the 2020-2024 period. They are positioned by many of the articles as vulnerable. They are at risk of harm during the journey to the UK, they suffer from trauma, depression and may even attempt suicide while they are in the UK, and they are vulnerable to further negative experiences if they are deported to their home, or another country. However, even more evident is their positioning is vulnerable to failings of services that should be there to support them (e.g., local authorities, the Home Office) and criminal gangs that intend to exploit and / or abuse them. In these situations they appear to lack the power to affect what happens to them. This vulnerability and lack of influence is then presented as affecting UK citizens, via increased gang presence, and the criminality of the UASC, even though this may be unwilling, forced upon them by others.

Threat is most clearly linked to UASC via stories about their engagement in terrorism, even though relatively few examples are reported. These are used, and associated with other more common characteristics, such as crossing the channel, or lying about age, to imply that the threat of UASC is significant. They are also presented as threats to the safety of UK children in schools, again drawing on few examples to raise questions about the wider cohort. Rhetorical, emotive language, often in headlines, may be inferred by readers as an indication that the threat is more acute than it actually is. A different sort of threat, that to taxpayers and the return they see, is also evident.

Genuineness features in many articles, in particular in stories about the age of UASC. Many more of these discuss UASC lying about their age, than being incorrectly assessed as

adults. None of the articles engaged in meaningful discussions about why UASC may decide to not provide full and accurate personal information, instead there is again significant rhetoric, positioning the UASC as deceitful abusers of the immigration system, with possibly sinister intentions.

It is important to note that the newspapers are not all the same in their approach to their coverage of UASC. For example, The Sun published four articles in the sample that included coverage of UASC lying about their age, while the Mirror (often perceived as an alternative to The Sun) did not publish any, while The Times published far more articles than any of the other newspapers regarding UASC and trafficking or exploitation by gangs. Similarly, the Mail and the Express more frequently appear to use quotes and emotive language in their headlines, which may influence readers' perceptions of UASC, especially if they do not read the full article. Colleagues working with and for UASC cannot change how the media presents events, nor how this shapes wider inference. However, if stakeholders understand what these perspectives are and where they come from, they can challenge incomplete information, overly emotive perspectives, and outlier examples, to present a more balanced narrative.

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Pro and Con Theories on Nationalist Language as a Modern Means of Social Cohesion and National Unity

Simona Camelia FER

Abstract. *Many scholars have approached nationalism as a particular political ideology most of them recognizing it as a product of modernity and as inseparable from it. This study begins by accepting this view, considering the spread of nationalism as part of a more extensive process of modern age. Nationalist language became, therefore, not only a means of communication but also a symbol of national identity, unity, modernity and political legitimacy. Most theories of nationalism are centred on the assumption that nationalism is a product of, and inseparable from modernity. Political language is considered by researchers an essential element of nation-building and a powerful force in shaping modern political ideologies. Language, in this respect, becomes a symbol of cultural continuity and the historical depth of the nation, which is essential for the construction of a cohesive national identity, the preservation and promotion of a national language being seen as necessary for maintaining the integrity and continuity of the nation.*

Keywords: political language, nationalist language, national identity, social cohesion, social exclusion

Introduction

Preserving and expressing a nation's culture, language serves as a primary means by which people convey meaning. Through its vocabulary, grammar and idiomatic expressions, a language encapsulates the unique values, customs and beliefs of a particular community. Human language is characterized by its cultural and historical diversity, with significant variations observed between cultures and across time[1]. Ideology and nationalism are coeval terms since their origins equally lie in the French Revolution. The term 'ideology' is usually located in Destutt de Tracy's (1754–1836) definition of it as the 'science of ideas' and Napoleon's disparaging use of it to describe his adversaries ('the ideologues'). It was the Napoleonic usage that really defined the term. While the meaning of nationalism remained broadly unchanged, the concept of ideology shifted meanings several times after its inception[2].

Nationalist language is a type of discourse that promotes the idea of the superiority of a certain nation, culture or ethnicity, emphasizing its unity and interests in comparison to other groups or nations and this type of language can include elements of national pride, but also

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[1] Evans, Nicholas & Stephen Levinson (2009), "The Myth of Language Universals: Language Diversity and Its Importance for Cognitive Science", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, 429–492.

[2] Kennedy, Emmet, A Philosophe in the Age of Revolution: Destutt de Tracy and the Origins of 'Ideology' (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1978); B. Head, Ideology and Social Science: Destutt de Tracy and French Liberalism (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1985). As Freeden notes, his work has not been translated into English: M. Freeden*, Ideology*: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 129.

rhetoric that marginalizes or demonizes external groups, often using negative stereotypes. Nationalism, as a movement or ideology, can range from moderate forms that emphasize the importance of protecting and promoting the cultural and political values of a nation, to more extreme forms that promote the exclusion or even contempt for other nations or minorities.

In nationalist language, national pride can be encountered as a feature expressing a sense of belonging and appreciation for the culture, history and achievements of a people. Sometimes nationalism can lead to the marginalization or demonization of other groups, nations or cultures, which obviously leads to exclusion of others. Emphasizing the importance of the political and economic independence of a nation, this linguistic phenomenon leads to national sovereignty and it often calls for social cohesion and national unity strengthening internal unity which is vital for its creed.

In many historical and political contexts, nationalist language has been used to mobilize the masses, but also to justify conflicts and policies of discrimination or territorial expansion.

Nationalism defined a major change in thinking from ideas that dominated prior to the nineteenth century. Throughout a large part of the eighteenth century, people of a particular land saw themselves as subjects with loyalty towards some type of ruler, whether it be a king or an emperor[3]. The nineteenth century marked the beginning of a time when new nations were forming all over Europe because of nationalism and linguistic similarities.

Nationalist language theorists are those thinkers who analyze and develop ideas about how language is used to construct and sustain national identities, to mobilize populations for political purposes and to encourage feelings of inclusion or exclusion, by examining how nationalist discourse can influence collective perceptions of nation, culture, ethnic belonging and political authority.

Pros and cons in nationalist language theories

Benedict Anderson (1936–2015) was a British academician and theorist of Irish descent, best known for his influential work in the field of nationalism and identity studies. He is most famous for his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), in which he explores the concept of the nation as an "imagined community". Anderson supported the idea that nations are "imagined" in the sense that, although the members of a nation do not know each other personally and do not have direct contact, they share a sense of belonging and a common identity, constructed through language, symbols and institutions, such as schools and the media: "The language of nationalism... is a language of belonging, a language of the nation and a language of solidarity, which helps to make the nation imagined. It transforms the idea of a group of people into a community with a collective identity"[4]. According to Anderson, the spread of a common language, facilitated through print media or books is crucial to the creation of a sense of shared identity among members of a nation, language allowing individuals to conceptualize their place within a larger community, despite the fact that they may never meet most of the others in that community[5]. A solid concept in Anderson's work is "print capitalism", the idea that the rise of printing technologies, especially the printing of books and newspapers and the spread of literacy

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[3] Gipson, Haley (2023), "A Language of Nationalism", in *Michigan Journal af German Studies*, March 26

[4] Andreson, Benedict (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso: London/New York, p.17

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 18

played a significant role in the development of nationalism. In the 17th and 18th centuries, print media began to standardize and spread languages across large geographical areas, which in turn helped to forge national identities: "These print-languages laid the bases for national consciousnesses in three distinct ways . First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication..."[6]. Before the spread of mass printing, local dialects and languages were fragmented and limited to specific regions. Through the circulation of newspapers and books in specific national languages, people were able to consume a shared narrative, which helped create a collective consciousness and a sense of belonging to the nation, and thus nationalist discourse mediated through print contributed to the sense that people were part of a larger, unified political and cultural entity. Anderson discusses how the rise of nationalism led to the imposition of "official" languages, often at the expense of regional dialects or minority languages. Nationalist discourse, driven by political and cultural elites, sought to create linguistic unity within the nation. This linguistic homogenization was an important part of nation-building efforts, as it facilitated communication and the spread of nationalist ideas across diverse populations. However, Anderson acknowledges that this process can be exclusionary, as it marginalizes those who speak minority languages, and nationalist language, in this sense, not only promotes unity but can also create divisions by prioritizing one language over others.

Anderson notes that nationalists often use language to invoke a sense of common history and destiny, drawing on myths of ancient origins, heroic struggles and shared cultural achievements this symbolic use of language helping to reinforce the idea of a nation as a unified and enduring entity, even in the face of modern political or social challenges.

In his views, nations are not natural or fixed realities, but historical constructions that have been formed in the context of modernity. Anderson was also a professor at Cornell University in the United States and had a particular interest in the history and politics of Southeast Asia, his book on nationalism having a significant impact on social science studies, especially in understanding the process of the formation of modern states and national identities. In addition to his academic work, Anderson was also a political activist, involved in movements for human rights and democracy, especially in the context of politics in Asia. As he traces the rise of the nation-state throughout history, Anderson continually returns to language, literacy and publishing technology as main factors that allowed people to imagine themselves as members of communities and then claim political identities and rights based on those communities.

He shows how the spread of common languages allowed people to see their shared interests and, eventually, organize revolutions. And he concludes that, because dialect can stand in for identity and publishing can connect people who will never meet face-to-face, language is a crucial but by no means the only medium for people to imagine and create national communities[7]. Anderson discusses the concept of the "imagined nation" and how language, particularly through mass media, constructs collective images of nations that are not always tangible but are still perceived as shared realities.

Ernest Gellner (1925–1995) was a British philosopher and anthropologist, widely known for his work on nationalism and its relationship to modernity, being often associated with the idea that nationalism is a product of industrial society and the modern world, rather than a natural or

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[6] *Ibidem*, p. 44

[7] *Ibidem,* p. 70.

timeless phenomenon. His ideas about nationalism were influential in the field of social sciences, particularly in understanding how nations are formed and maintained in the context of political, cultural, and economic changes. One of Gellner's most significant contributions was his theory of the relationship between nationalism and language, particularly in his book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). Gellner argued that nationalism is fundamentally a product of the modern age, emerging with the advent of industrialization. Thus, Ernest Gellner famously argued that nationalism is the direct, or indirect, consequence of industrialization with its new division of labour[8].

In traditional societies, kinship groups and local communities were the primary sources of social cohesion. However, in industrial societies, the need for a unified system of communication and education became central to sustaining modern economies and bureaucracies, thus the idea of nationalism integrated in modernity being generated[9].

According to Gellner, language plays a central role in the formation of national identity. In pre-modern societies, different groups spoke various dialects and languages, but the rise of modern industrial society demanded a standardized form of communication. Nationalist movements, therefore, sought to promote a single, standardized language that could be used for education, administration, and social integration. This language, often referred to as a "national language", became a symbol of national unity and language became a unifying force. Gellner also emphasized in his pretious work the importance of education in the process of national integration, arguing that the rise of mass education systems in the 19th and 20th centuries was essential to spreading a common language and creating a shared sense of national identity. The educational system, controlled by the state, taught citizens the standardized language and conveyed the values of the nation, promoting loyalty and cohesion.

Nationalism, in Gellner's view, required a degree of cultural homogenization and considered that the spread of a single national language often involved the suppression or marginalization of regional languages and dialects. This process, while promoting national unity, also led to the erasure of linguistic diversity in some cases. Gellner argued that this standardization was necessary for the functioning of modern states but could also lead to tension and conflict when multiple ethnic or linguistic groups felt that their identities were being suppressed, fostering the idea that cultural homogenization was essential in unifyng a nation.

For Gellner, nationalism was not just an expression of cultural identity but also a political tool or instrument used to gain power and influence. The promotion of a unified language helped create a sense of shared history and destiny among people, making it easier for political elites to mobilize support for the nation-state. Therefore, Gellner's theories suggest that nationalism and language are deeply interconnected in the modern world and the rise of standardized languages, fostered by state-controlled education systems, was a fundamental element in the creation of modern nations. Language, therefore, became not only a means of communication but also a symbol of national identity, unity, and political legitimacy. To conclude we may review that Gellner considers nationalism as a product of modernity, and language plays an essential role in standardizing education and creating a common culture that supports the nation.

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[8] Jonathan M. Acuff (2010), "Modernity and nationalism", in R. A. Denemark (Ed.) *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, Oxford/Boston-Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

[9] Gellner, Ernest (2006*), Nations and Nationalism,*(2nd ed.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 22.

Another theorist noted for his ideas and debates on the nationalist language is *Anthony D. Smith* (1939–2016), a British sociologist and historian renowned for his work on nationalism, particularly his focus on ethnic nationalism and the role of culture, symbols, and language in the formation of national identities. One of his most influential books on the subject is *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (1998), where Smith critiques and compares different theoretical perspectives on nationalism, especially those of modernists (such as Ernest Gellner) and ethnonationalists. He argues that nationalism is not simply a product of modernity, as some theories suggest, but also has deep historical roots in pre-modern ethnic communities, which he refers to as *ethnies*[10]. Another main book by Smith is *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986), in which he elaborates on the idea that modern nations have evolved from earlier ethnic groups and that cultural continuity, including shared language and traditions, plays a crucial role in the formation of national identities. Both of these works are central to understanding Smith's contribution to the study of nationalism and the role of language, culture and ethnicity in the formation of national identities[11]. While Smith does not offer uncritical praise of nationalist language, he does suggest that nationalist language plays a significant and often positive role in the development of modern nations.

Smith's theories on nationalism and language are deeply tied to his broader conception of nations as "ethnic communities" or "ethnies" which are rooted in shared historical experiences, myths and symbols, believing that language is a fundamental tool in defining and perpetuating national ethnic identity.
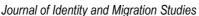
Smith's work on nationalist language and discourse is primarily based on his understanding of nationalism as a cultural phenomenon that is rooted in the preservation and promotion of ethnic identities and his views on language are particularly relevant to his concept of "ethnic nationalism", which stresses the role of cultural markers such as language, religion, and traditions in the formation and maintenance of national communities. Smith argued that nations are essentially extended ethnic communities or *ethnies*, which are formed around common cultural traits, including language. For Smith, language is not just a tool for communication but an essential marker of ethnic identity. The shared use of language helps to create a sense of belonging and continuity within a group, as it links individuals to a shared history, mythology and collective memory. In this sense, language is central to the construction of national identity and ethnic communities should enjoy shared languages as well.

Smith emphasized that language plays a crucial role in connecting modern national identities to their historical roots and ationalist movements invoke a "common" language to link contemporary populations to ancient or mythic ancestors. Language, in this respect, becomes a symbol of cultural continuity and the historical depth of the nation, which is essential for the construction of a cohesive national identity, the preservation and promotion of a national language being seen as necessary for maintaining the integrity and continuity of the nation. The theorist viewed nationalism as being deeply intertwined with myths and symbols that help to unify people, stating that nationalist language often invokes these myths, whether historical narratives about the nation's origin, struggles or triumphs, or cultural symbols like folklore, national anthems and rituals. These symbols, conveyed through language, reinforce the emotional and cultural ties that

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[10] Smith, D. Anthony (1998), *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism, Routledge, p. 78.*

[11] Idem (1986), *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, p. 124.

bind the members of a nation together. By using language to evoke these myths, nationalist discourse serves to reaffirm the group's identity and foster loyalty. Maybe because languages are now so deeply intertwined with nationalist projects, we have become much more emotional about language and languages than people may have been in the past. This is true even of academic research, where there can be significant pressure to bring our emotions into our research, too[12]

While Smith emphasized the cultural and ethnic dimensions of nationalism, he also recognized the political role of nationalist language, nationalist leaders and movements using language to articulate a vision of the nation-state and defining who belongs to the nation and justifying, at the same time, political actions such as independence movements or territorial claims. Political discourse within nationalist movements is often framed in terms of the defense of the nation's language, culture and heritage, positioning these as under threat from external or internal forces (e.g. colonization, globalization or minority groups). Smith's theory of nationalism includes a recognition that language can also serve as a tool of exclusion and by defining the national language as central to the identity of the nation, nationalist movements can marginalize those who do not speak it or who speak a different dialect. As the previous theorists did, he agrees that this process can lead to the exclusion of minority groups or the imposition of cultural conformity, language becoming a boundary marker that determines who is part of the nation and who is not, sometimes leading to tensions and conflicts over identity and belonging. Smith also explored how nationalist movements often seek to revive or preserve a national language, especially when it has been ignored or suppressed by colonial powers, imperialism or globalizing forces. The revival of a language is seen as a form of resistance to cultural domination and a means of reclaiming the nation's cultural and political autonomy and this is mainy evident in post-colonial contexts, where former colonies seek to revive indigenous languages as a part of their national identity and decolonization process.

As we may notice, Anthony D. Smith's theories highlight the profound connection between language and nationalism and for Smith, language is not just a medium of communication but a powerful symbol of ethnic identity, continuity and cultural belonging. Therefore, nationalist discourse uses language to construct and reinforce national myths to promote unity and to delineate the boundaries of the nation. His work suggests that nationalism is as much about the preservation and promotion of culture and language as it is about political sovereignty, with language serving as a central tool in both the construction and defense of national identity.

Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012) was a British historian, widely regarded as one of the most influential Marxist historians of the 20th century, his work spanning a wide range of topics and including the history of labor movements, nationalism, the rise of capitalism and the development of modern political ideologies. Hobsbawm's scholarship was characterized by a focus on the social, economic and political forces that shaped the modern world, generally framed through a Marxist lens. In his works on nationalism, Hobsbawm states that nationalism is often a modern construction, and language is a central element in creating national myths that are transmitted across generations. Hobsbawm, in his work on nationalism, mainly in *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990), explored the role of language in nationalist discourse, arguing that while language is often a significant marker of national identity, it is not necessarily the primary driver of nationalism. He pointed out that many nationalist movements

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[12] Piller, Ingrid, (2021), "Can we ever unthink linguistic nationalism?", *language on the move*, 4 october

emerged in multilingual societies, and linguistic uniformity was often an outcome rather than a prerequisite of nationalism.

So, he considers nationalist language as a marker, not a cause. In his book he highlighted how national languages are often modern inventions or standardizations rather than organic, ancient entities, considering that the process of codifying and imposing a national language was frequently tied to state-building efforts, such as the creation of official dictionaries and grammars[13]. Therefore, nationalist languages are modern constructions. Another idea we remark in his work is that nationalist movements have frequently used language to consolidate identity, sometimes even artificially promoting or reviving languages to serve political ends (e.g., Hebrew in Israel, Irish in Ireland).

Hobsbawm also noted that nationalism did not always demand linguistic homogeneity explaining that many national leaders and intellectuals in the 19th century spoke multiple languages, and some nationalist movements functioned effectively in polyglot societies. He criticized the idea that nations are naturally formed around linguistic communities, showing instead how political and historical factors played a decisive role in shaping national identities.

Hobsbawm made significant contributions to understanding the role of political language, especially in the context of nationalism and explored how this type of language is used to construct identities, forge national unity and justify political power. He argued that language is not just a passive reflection of national identity, but an active tool in the creation of national myths, symbols and narratives. Political language, as he saw it, plays a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions of their collective identity and in defining the boundaries of the nation-state. Hobsbawm also pointed out that the emergence of national languages and standardized forms of communication were fundamental to the spread of nationalist ideas. As these languages were promoted in schools, media and state institutions, they helped solidify national cohesion and the sense of belonging to a unified political community. In this sense, political language is an essential element of nation-building and a powerful force in shaping modern political ideologies. So, while Hobsbawm is more widely recognized for his analysis of nationalism, his work also sheds light on the profound impact of political language on society and the ways it intertwines with the development of modern states.

Joseph Roth, an Austrian-Jewish writer, in one of his stories, *The Bust of the Emperor (1935),* expresses reflections on the roots and expansion of nationalism, in which he states that the nation is an 'invented or created' structure. His works often reflect his critical stance on nationalism and the use of language in fostering national identities. Roth was deeply concerned with the rise of nationalism in Europe, especially during the interwar period, which led to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One of Roth's most well-known novels, *The Radetzky March* (1932), touches on themes related to nationalism, the decline of empires and the role of language in shaping national identity. In his works, Roth often expressed skepticism about the idea of a singular, exclusive national language that could unite people, his writing reflecting a nostalgic longing for the multilingual, multicultural world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where various languages coexisted and people were less bound by rigid national boundaries[14].

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[13] Hobsbawm, Eric (1990), *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality, (second edition), Cambridge University Press, p.9.*

[14] Roth, Joseph (2002), *The Radetzky March*, 3rd Print edition, The Overlook Press, p. 10.

Roth believed that the fragmentation of empires into nation-states and the rise of nationalist language was a force that contributed to division and violence, rather than unity. He criticized the reduction of cultural and linguistic diversity into monolithic national identities, seeing it as a source of exclusion and conflict. For Roth, language, in its nationalistic form, became a tool of exclusion that could define people in a restrictive and divisive way, instead of celebrating the rich diversity of human experience.

In his essays and journalistic writings, Roth also explored the rise of anti-Semitism and nationalism, seeing the former as often intertwined with the latter. He believed that nationalist rhetoric and language were used to create an "us versus them" mentality, where minorities, particularly Jews, were excluded or vilified. In essence, Roth's view on nationalist language was one of caution and critique, because he saw it as a tool for creating divisions rather than fostering the kind of cosmopolitanism he cherished in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Literature based on Monarchy, is written in, during or about the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and provides a great opportunity to analyze the becoming of nations. Royalty and monarchy, representing the political community opposing the nation, were held together by acknowledging the status of its subordinates and by being capable of taking in anyone because they were only concerned with having their dominance accepted. This antithesis shows 'the dark face of the nation as well for a nation cannot remain an open community and it is not capable of accepting others without trying to assimilate them, because it came into being when fighting wars against other nations and therefore cannot imagine itself without borders'. The myths of the nation and the symbols which keep them alive are also on today's agenda: nationalism resurrects from time to time, new nations are born, or old ones restate their identities[15]. The dark side of nationalist language as well is that it lends itself to xenophobia or to the exclusion of minority groups. Nationalism and its specific language are closely conected, because language acts as a powerful tool for expressing cultural values, preserving heritage and fostering a collective sense of belonging, and the use of a common language can foster a sense of shared identity and cultural heritage among people within a nation. Nationalist actions often express the promotion and preservation of a national language as a symbol of sovereignty and unity. This connection can sometimes lead to linguistic policies aimed at elevating the status of a particular language over others, reinforcing national identity and pride. Although most scholars argue that nationalism is indissociable from modernity, others argue that modernity provided only a catalyst for pre-existing groups to seize power or negotiate power-sharing arrangements through representative leaders. For some authors, nationalism was no mere chaperon of modernity, but a tool used by elites to consolidate their power, while imposing their modernizing views and spreading the ideology of progress among the masses[16].

Conclusions

Theories surrounding nationalist language are complex and multifaceted, with both proponents and critics offering various perspectives on its role and impact. Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith agree that nationalist language plays a central role in unifying diverse groups within a nation, creating a sense of shared identity and fostering social cohesion.

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[15] Roth, Joseph (1986), *The Bust of the Emperor,* Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 183 pag.
[16] Conversi, Daniele (2014), "Modernism and Nationalism", in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 17(1):13-34, Routledge, DOI:10.1080/13569317.2012.644982.

Nationalist language, through the standardization of speech and written forms (especially through print), helps to create a common cultural framework and identity, even among geographically dispersed populations who may never meet. This shared language enables individuals to imagine themselves as part of a broader, unified community, leading to stronger social solidarity and national cohesion. Eric Hobsbawm, to some extent, says that nationalist language plays an essential role in the construction of modern nation-states arguing that nationalism, expressed through language, is an instrumental force in the creation and solidification of nation-states. The establishment of a unified national language helps define the political, cultural and social boundaries of a nation, creating a sense of common belonging. It can also serve as a tool for building national institutions and fostering civic participation, but on the other side he states that nationalist language is used to manipulate public opinion and construct myths that distort history for political purposes.

The theorists whose works have been mentioned and analyzed in this study contributed to the understanding of how nationalism is tied to language, both in everyday discourse and in national and international politics. Language not only reflects national identity but also actively shapes it through symbols, myths and narratives that are essential for the cohesion of a nation. Nationalist language can indeed be considered a modern means of social cohesion and national unity, particularly in the context of modern nation-states. The role of language in nationalism has become more prominent in the modern era, especially since the 18th and 19th centuries, as political systems evolved and the idea of the nation-state gained atraction. Nationalist language serves as a powerful tool to shape and promote a shared identity by creating a common frame of reference and allowing individuals to feel part of a larger, unified community.

Nationalist language in many circumstances operates by defining who belongs to the nation (in-group) and who is considered "other" (out-group). And while this can foster internal unity, it can also be exclusionary, emphasizing linguistic, cultural or ethnic differences that create divisions with external groups or minorities within the nation, the use of this language evolving over time, influenced by political, social, and historical shifts. This topic will certainly be a crucial one for a future study, especially as it plays a significant role in shaping social dynamics, political discourse and identity. Nationalism relies on this division to create a sense of unity and belonging within the nation, while simultaneously constructing the "other" as different, foreign or even threatening, this aspect of nationalism having far-reaching implications, both historically and in contemporary settings.

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Vietnamese Catholic Migrants and Their Missionary Identity: Historical and Contemporary Contributions

Anthony Le Duc

Abstract. *The Catholic Church's history is deeply intertwined with migration, as Catholic migrants have carried their faith and religious practices to new homes. This has significantly contributed to the Church's development and growth over the last two millennia. Vietnamese Catholic migration, which dates back centuries, has been shaped by religious persecution, political upheavals, and economic opportunities. This paper situates Vietnamese Catholic migration within the broader narrative of global Catholic migration, examining its historical trajectories and contemporary realities. It highlights the contributions of Vietnamese Catholic migrants to the Church's growth in diverse contexts and their ongoing role in its evangelization mission. Furthermore, this paper argues that migrant missionary discipleship represents a distinct and vital expression of the universal call to missionary discipleship shared by all Christians.*

Keywords: *Catholic Church, migration, Vietnamese migrants, Christian discipleship, missionary discipleship*

The Catholic Church teaches that every Christian is a missionary disciple.[1] Missionary discipleship constitutes an intrinsic aspect of the Christian identity, where being a "missionary" and being a "disciple" of Christ are inseparable. According to Pope Francis, missionary discipleship defines the Christian life as a dynamic interplay of faith, witness, and mission, each inextricably woven into the other. Through the sacrament of baptism, the Christian is fully incorporated into the Body of Christ. This reality bestows upon the Christian the identity of disciple of Christ with the mandate to proclaim the Good News in the world. The Christian life is nourished and transformed by personal encounters with the love of God in Christ, and this transformation naturally overflows into mission.[2]

Because missionary discipleship is rooted in the sacrament of baptism, it does not exclude any Christian, no matter their life circumstances. Thus, Catholic migrants who move out of their homeland for any reason—economic, political, religious, environmental—are still called to live out this Christian vocation. Christian migrants, in fact, have been shown to be pivotal in the missionary efforts of the Church. Jehu Hanciles in his book *Christianities in Migration: A Global*

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[1] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium,* 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[2] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium,* no. 120.

Perspective, asserts, "Every Christian migrant is a potential missionary."[3] According to Hanciles, "Christianity is a migratory religion, and migration movements have been a functional element in its expansion."[4] Based on his research exploring crucial relationship between migration and mission in the historical development of Christianity, Hanciles argues that there is an "inextricable connection between migration and mission in the Christian experience."[5]

This paper explores the Catholic identity of missionary discipleship in the context of Vietnamese Catholic migrants. Analysis of historical and contemporary realities of Vietnamese Catholics in diaspora reveals that the story of Vietnamese Catholic migration over the past several centuries have indeed contributed to the development and expansion of the Church in numerous places. This paper especially examines not only Vietnamese Catholics who migrated in the aftermath of the fall of South Vietnam to communism in 1975 but also waves of migration that began as early as the beginning of the 18th century as well as recent migrants. Thus, it attempts to provide a more comprehensive narrative of Vietnamese Catholic migration and its contribution to the mission of the Catholic Church around the world.

Early Development and Persecution of the Vietnamese Church

When examining the topic of Vietnamese in diaspora in general—and Vietnamese Catholic migrants in particular—many naturally take the year 1975 as their starting point. This is understandable, as the events of that year—the fall of Saigon and the rise of communism throughout Vietnam—triggered the largest exodus in the nation's history. In 2025, the Vietnamese community in diaspora are commemorating the 50th anniversary of this dramatic event. However, this episode takes place within a much broader historical narrative in the history of Vietnamese Catholicism.

The phenomenon of Vietnamese Catholic migration abroad has taken place for hundreds of years. In the early stages, the migration of Vietnamese Catholics was primarily due to religious persecution. According to the historical record titled "*Khâm Định Việt Sử*" (33.6b), the anti-Christian edict of King Le Trang Ton mentioned a Western missionary named I-nê-khu, who secretly entered the country by sea and evangelized in the villages of Ninh Cuong and Tra Lu around the year 1533. After the initial period of establishment and growth, by 1802, during the reign of Emperor Gia Long, who unified Vietnam, the Catholic Church had established a significant presence across the country. In the Diocese of Dang Trong, which encompassed Southern Vietnam, the Church was led by one bishop and supported by five missionaries and fifteen priests, serving a community of approximately 60,000 Catholics. In the north, the Diocese of Western Dang Ngoai had a similar structure, with one bishop, four missionaries, and forty-one priests ministering to 120,000 Catholics. The Diocese of Eastern Dang Ngoai, also in Northern Vietnam, had the same clerical composition—one bishop, four missionaries, and forty-one priests—but served a larger Catholic population of 140,000.[6] These figures reflect the remarkable expansion

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[3] Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 6, 296.

[4] Jehu J. Hanciles, "Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-Century Church," *Missiology* 27, no. 4 (Oct 2003): 149.

[5] Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 1.

[6] Vietnam Bishops Conference, "Sử Lược Giáo Hội Công Giáo Việt Nam," October 15, 2017, https://hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/su-luoc-giao-hoi-cong-giao-viet-nam-25947.

of Catholicism in Vietnam despite numerous challenges in the initial stages of proclaiming and planting the Church in the country.

However, the history of Christianity in Vietnam is closely linked with periods of persecution marked by waves of intense repression spanning centuries, as various ruling powers sought to suppress the faith.[7] The earliest recorded persecution occurred under the Nguyen Lords in the South (1615–1778), who issued eight edicts banning Christianity. The most severe crackdown took place in 1665 when Christian imagery, particularly the Cross, was misinterpreted as an emblem of the Portuguese king, leading to the expulsion of missionaries and the execution of many Catholics under Lord Hien Vuong. In the North, the Trinh Lords (1627–1786) similarly sought to eradicate Christianity, issuing seventeen edicts against the faith. Jesuit missionaries, including Fathers Messari and Bucharelli, were among the many martyrs of this period.

The Tay Son Dynasty (1775–1800) continued this brutal legacy, enforcing six anti-Christian edicts and orchestrating one of the most infamous massacres in 1798, in which Catholics faced extreme torture and widespread destruction of their places of worship, forcing many to flee. Under Emperor Minh Mang (1820–1840), persecution intensified, with seven edicts issued against Christianity. This era is particularly remembered for the martyrdom of numerous clergy and lay believers. His successor, Emperor Thieu Tri (1840–1847), continued the repression with two additional edicts, followed by Emperor Tu Duc (1847–1883), who escalated the persecution with thirteen edicts, leading to some of the bloodiest episodes of violence, including the martyrdom of figures like Phan Thanh Nhan.

Following the death of Tu Đuc, the Van Than Persecution (1885–1886) emerged as a nationalist movement resisting French colonial influence, with Catholicism targeted as a foreign-aligned faith. This period saw widespread massacres of Vietnamese Catholics, marking one of the final large-scale efforts to eradicate Christianity in the country. Despite these relentless waves of persecution, the Catholic faith in Vietnam endured, sustained by the resilience and sacrifices of the faithful, many of whom are now recognized as martyrs by the Church.

The history of Christian persecution in Vietnam is a tragic chapter that reflects the resilience and steadfast faith of Catholic believers. Vietnamese Catholic narratives of this experience always highlight that even in the most challenging times, facing brutal oppression and cruel punishments, Vietnamese Christians were unwavering in their faith in God and were willing to sacrifice their lives to defend their beliefs. They endured suffering, imprisonment, and even painful deaths, yet never renounced their convictions and love for God. Of the estimated 300,000 who lost their lives over several centuries of persecution, 117 have been canonized by the Catholic Church. For Vietnamese Catholics around the world, these martyrs are powerful symbols of faith and spiritual strength. They serve as a source of inspiration and pride for the community, and as shining examples for future generations of believers.

Early Waves of Catholic Migration Abroad

The history of religious persecution in Vietnam related above provides the backdrop for the waves of migration that followed. During periods of intense persecution, many Vietnamese Catholics were compelled to flee their homeland in search of refuge and the freedom to practice

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[7] Vietnamese Missionaries in Asia, "Giáo Hội Công Giáo Việt Nam,"
    https://vntaiwan.catholic.org.tw/ghvienam/ghvienam.htm

their faith. One such case involved a group of Vietnamese migrants who settled in Chanthaburi province in Siam (now Thailand), near the Cambodian border.[8] In 1707, during the reign of King Sanphet VIII (1703-1709), a group of 130 Vietnamese Catholics arrived in this area to escape religious persecution in southern Vietnam. This event coincided with the issuance of one of the eight royal edicts banning and attempting to eradicate Christianity, issued by the Nguyen Lords in the South (1615-1778).[9]

In Chanthaburi, the Vietnamese Catholics continued practicing their faith. They cleared a forested area and built their first small church in 1712 during the reign of King Sanphet IX (1709-1733).[10] After four reconstructions to accommodate the growing Catholic community, in 1909, the Catholic community of the Diocese of Chanthaburi inaugurated the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. This Gothic-style Catholic architectural masterpiece is one of the largest and most beautiful churches in Thailand. In 2010, after the cathedral's restoration was completed, the Diocese of Chanthaburi organized a week-long grand celebration to mark the cathedral's centenary and the 300th anniversary of the Catholic community. On this occasion, the diocese invited a delegation from the Vietnamese Church, including Cardinal Pham Minh Man, then bishop of the Archdiocese of Saigon, several bishops, priests, and nuns. During the final day of the celebration, in the Marian procession around the church, many faithful wore Vietnamese *áo dài* to express their Vietnamese heritage.

Although the first group of Vietnamese Catholics arrived in Chanthaburi nearly 320 years ago, subsequent waves of migration continued due to ongoing Christian persecution in Vietnam. Notably, in 1833, during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang, Bishop Jean-Louis Taberd (1794–1840), a French missionary, had to flee Vietnam to Siam due to severe repression. However, he did not leave alone—Bishop Taberd brought many seminarians with him, intending to send them for training in Singapore or Penang (Malaysia). Shortly after, other French missionaries also fled to Siam along with a number of Vietnamese Catholics seeking refuge in Chanthaburi.[11]

In the following years, some Catholic faithful from Chanthaburi were relocated to the former capital, Ayutthaya, where their descendants still reside today. Historical records mention a Vietnamese community within Ayutthaya's foreign quarter. In the ancient capital, Vietnamese Catholics worshiped at St. Joseph's Church, originally built of wood in 1666 by Bishop Pierre Lambert de la Motte (1624-1679, founder of the Lovers of the Holy Cross congregation in Vietnam and Thailand) during the reign of King Narai (1656-1688). However, this church, later rebuilt in European-style brick, was completely destroyed in 1767 when Burmese forces captured the city. In the 1830s, Vietnamese Catholics in Ayutthaya assisted a French priest in rebuilding the church, which still stands today.[12]
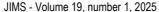
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[8] "The Ancient Riverside Community of Chanthaboon,"
https://thailandfoundation.mfa.go.th/en/content/56362-the-ancient-riverside-community-of-chanthaboon?cate=5d83123615e39c1d34003a37

[9] Tha Mai Tales, "The Catholic Church of Chanthaburi," https://www.thamai.net/2011/08/the-catholic-church-of-chanthaburi/

[10] Tha Mai Tales, "The Catholic Church of Chanthaburi."

[11] Historical Archives of Archdiocese of Bangkok, "วัดนักบุญฟรังซิสเซเวียร์ (วัดสามเสน),"
dhttp://catholichaab.com/main/index.php/1/church7/2/1256-2016-07-15-03-39-09

[12] Travel Fish, "St Joseph's Church,"
https://www.travelfish.org/sight_profile/thailand/bangkok_and_surrounds/ayutthaya/ayutthaya/178

While the first migration of Vietnamese Christians occurred in the early 18th century, in the 19th century, the Kingdom of Siam received additional waves of Vietnamese Catholics fleeing persecution.[13] According to Thai Catholic sources, during the reign of King Rama III (King Nangklao), Siam engaged in conflicts with Vietnam from 1832 to 1846 over control of present-day Laos and Cambodia. In 1834, while Siamese troops were engaged in war on Vietnamese soil, they discovered 1,500 Vietnamese Catholics hiding in the forest near one of their military camps. These people were fleeing from the soldiers of Emperor Minh Mang (1820-1841). Upon seeing the Siamese troops, some leaders from the group approached them to seek help. The Siamese soldiers were willing to assist and invited the Vietnamese to leave the forest and stay with them. However, the Vietnamese Catholics hesitated, unsure whether to trust these foreigners. To assure them of their goodwill, the Siamese general asked a French priest named Clement, who had been assigned as an interpreter, to speak with the Catholic leaders and reassure them.

The reason a priest accompanied the Siamese military was that two high-ranking officers in their army were Catholic. Before their deployment, these officers had approached Bishop Taberd, requesting a priest to serve as an interpreter. However, Bishop Taberd feared that if this was discovered by the Vietnamese authorities, Catholics in Vietnam would face even harsher persecution. They then sought help from Bishop Florens, who assigned Father Clement to accompany the army. After meeting the priest and hearing him speak about Siam, most Vietnamese Catholics agreed to follow the troops. Once the Siamese military mission in Vietnam ended, they brought the group back to Krungthep (present day Bangkok) for resettlement.

According to Thai sources, King Rama III welcomed 1,350 Vietnamese Catholics who returned with the Siamese army from Vietnam. The king provided them with land, housing, and essential supplies.[14] Additionally, he financed the construction of a temporary church, named St. Francis Xavier Church. When this church was destroyed by a storm three years later, another church was built to replace it. A school was also established to educate children in catechism and Vietnamese literacy. The community also included 15 nuns from the Lovers of the Holy Cross, who were granted a residence to live their religious life. These women religious played a crucial role in teaching catechism and caring for orphans.

Catholic Migration in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

The 19th and 20th centuries marked a turning point in Vietnamese Catholic migration. During the French colonial period (1887-1954), Christianity gained a stronger foothold, particularly in southern Vietnam. French missionaries actively spread the faith through schools and hospitals, attracting more Vietnamese to Catholicism. Although large-scale migration was not a defining feature of this era, some Vietnamese, including Catholics, left their homeland as a result of being recruited by the French colonial government to work in France as well as other French colonies.[15]

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[13] Historical Archives of Archdiocese of Bangkok, "วัดนักบุญฟรังซิสเซเวียร์ (วัดสามเสน)."

[14] In addition to these people, there were an additional 1,500 Vietnamese who were captured by Siamese soldiers during their time in Vietnam.

[15] See Nguyen Thi Trang, "Vietnamese Indentured Labourers: The Intervention of the French Colonial Government in Regulating the Flow of Vietnamese Labourers to the Pacific Islands in the Early Twentieth Century," *Labor History* 63, no. 5 (2022): 584–603, https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2022.2142541; Nguyen Thi Hanh and Nguyen Thi Trang, "Colonial

For example, as early as 1891, Vietnamese Catholics had arrived in New Caledonia, a French territory in the South Pacific, east of Australia and north of New Zealand. This territory comprises the main island of Grande Terre, the Loyalty Islands, the Isle of Pines, and several smaller islands. The Vietnamese presence there resulted from French government encouragement for labor migration to Noumea, New Caledonia's capital, with promises of higher wages. Additionally, some Vietnamese prisoners were exiled to this island. Today, the Vietnamese Catholic community in Noumea numbers about 500 people and has preserved its faith across five generations. While younger generations primarily speak French, the elderly still use Vietnamese in daily communication.[16] Notably, during major religious celebrations such as Holy Week, the Vietnamese Catholic community in Noumea invites Vietnamese priests from Australia to conduct Triduum services in Vietnamese.

In the 20th century, seeking to escape poverty and find better opportunities, many Vietnamese—both Catholic and non-Catholic—migrated to Laos and Thailand. This new wave of migration took place post-World War II due to France's efforts to reoccupy Indochina in 1945. Many crossed the Mekong River into Thailand, hoping for a more favorable environment and political sympathy from the Thai government, which had also fought against the French in the early 1940s.[17] Most migrants came from central provinces (Quang Binh, Ha Tinh, Nghe An) and northern provinces (Nam Dinh, Thanh Hoa, Thai Binh). Although many initially planned to return home, they gradually adapted to their new lives and chose to stay, with only a small number returning as intended.[18]

Vietnamese Catholics in Laos and northeastern Thailand became integral to the local Church. In many parishes, Vietnamese Catholic families played a crucial role in parish life through active participation and support. A significant portion of Laos' 45,000 Catholics are of Vietnamese descent, as are many of Thailand's nearly 400,000 Catholics.[19] Additionally, many priests and religious in these two countries are descendants of Vietnamese migrants from various historical periods. It is thus unsurprising that the Archbishop of Tharae-Nongsaeng in northeastern Thailand today is of Vietnamese descent. Archbishop Anthony Weradet Chaiseri traces his roots to Can Loc district, Ha Tinh province in central Vietnam. His predecessor, Archbishop Louis Chamniern Santisukniram, also had Vietnamese ancestry. Furthermore, the current archbishop of Bangkok, Bishop Francis Xavier Vira Arpondratana, was born in Samsaen, the area where Vietnamese Catholics fleeing Emperor Minh Mang's persecution first settled in Siam. In Laos, Bishop Anthony

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Labour in French Policy: A Case Study of the *Lính Tho* Sent from Vietnam to France, 1939–1950s," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463424000286

[16] Society of the Divine Word, Australia Province, "SVD Reaches Out to Support Vietnamese Catholics in New Caledonia," April 27, 2023,
https://www.divineword.com.au/itemlist/tag/vietnamese#:~:text=SVD%20reaches%20out%20to%20support,by%20Fr%20Viet%20Nguyen%20SVD.

[17] John Walsh, "The Vietnamese in Thailand: A History of Work, Struggle and Acceptance," *Acta Universitatis Danubius Oeconomica* 1 (2011): 160-172.

[18] The ones who returned mostly did so as a result of the propaganda by the northern Vietnamese government's propaganda urging them to return for a better life in their homeland due to restrictions imposed on the Vietnamese community by the Thai government wary of Vietnamese communist infiltration in Thailand.

[19] Wikipedia, "Catholic Church in Laos," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_in_Laos#cite_note-fr-1

Adoun Hongsaphong who became bishop of Vientiane in March 2025 is also of Vietnamese ancestry.

In Cambodia, Vietnamese Catholics make up a significant portion of the Catholic population. According to Vatican statistics, in 1953, there were about 120,000 Catholics in Cambodia, of whom 50,000 were Vietnamese.[20] In the following years, many Vietnamese returned to their homeland, particularly after Lon Nol's military government took power in 1970. The Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979) nearly eradicated Catholicism in Cambodia, with most local Catholics perishing in forced labor camps or being executed.[21] The Catholic Church in Cambodia began to recover in the 1990s, and by 2015, the total Catholic population in the country was approximately 20,000. It is important to note that about two-thirds of Cambodia's Catholic population is of Vietnamese descent.[22] This is the same with many priests and religious working in the country. Some Vietnamese have settled in Cambodia for a long time, while others migrated from southern Vietnam in recent decades.

Vietnamese Catholic Migration from 1954 to Present

The Vietnam War brought significant changes to the lives of Vietnamese Catholics. Between 1954 and 1975, following the Geneva Accords that divided Vietnam into two regions, approximately 800,000 to one million Catholics migrated from the North to the South. This was one of the largest migrations in Vietnamese history, as a significant portion of the Northern Catholic community left their homeland to escape the new communist-led government in the North.[23]

The fall of South Vietnam in 1975 marked a decisive moment. The new communist government's policies and statements on religion created widespread concern among Catholics. Fearing persecution, imprisonment, and forced re-education, a large wave of refugees—many of them Catholic—fled the country. This is reflected in demographic data indicating that of the 2.1 million Vietnamese in diaspora in the United States, 700,000 are Catholic.[24] This represents a significantly higher proportion than in Vietnam, where Catholics constitute about 8 percent of the total population. A similar pattern is observed in Australia, where Catholics make up roughly 20 percent of the nearly 300,000-strong Vietnamese community.[25]

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[20] Wikipedia, "Catholic Church in Cambodia," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_in_Cambodia#:~:text=Throughout%20the%20Church's%20history%20in,Catholics%20in%20Cambodia%20were%20Vietnamese.

[21] Wikipedia, "Catholic Church in Cambodia."

[22] UCANews, "In Cambodia, Khmer and Vietnamese Catholics Remain Disunited," https://www.ucanews.com/news/in-cambodia-khmer-and-vietnamese-catholics-remain-disunited/68382#

[23] Pham Duc Thuan and Pham Thi Phuong Linh, "Migration of Citizens of North Vietnam to South Vietnam After the Geneva Agreement on Indochina (1954–1955)," *Migration Letters* 20, no. 7 (2023): 395–401, https://doi.org/10.59670/ml.v20i7.4314.

[24] Susan Klemond, "From Surviving to Thriving: Once Refugees, Vietnamese Catholics Make Up Vibrant Part of US Church Today," NCR, August 25, 2022, https://www.ncregister.com/news/from-surviving-to-thriving-once-refugees-vietnamese-catholics-make-up-vibrant-part-of-us-church-today.

[25] This number only counts Vietnamese-born individuals. Department of Home Affairs, "Country Profile – Vietnam," https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/country-profiles/profiles/vietnam#

After 1975, Vietnamese refugees sought shelter in various countries. Most fled to neighboring Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia before resettling in Western countries like the United States, France, and Australia. In these new environments, Vietnamese Catholic communities were established to preserve their faith and cultural traditions. Today they and their descendants continue to practice their faith and, in many cases, contribute significantly to the local Church.

Vietnamese migration has not ceased with the refugee waves following 1975. In the new millennium, a different migration trend has emerged, including Vietnamese women marrying foreign husbands (especially in Taiwan and South Korea), international students, and migrant workers—both documented and undocumented. Vietnamese nationals constitute the largest group of foreign workers in Japan, with approximately 520,000 workers as of October 2023. This number has grown significantly in recent years, driven by Japan's need for labor in various sectors. Along with students, the Vietnamese numbers nearly 600,000.[26] Meanwhile, the Taiwan government reports that in 2023, there were 110,000 Vietnamese spouses of Taiwan natives, 100,000 children of such spouses, 250,000 Vietnamese on foreign worker visas, and more than 20,000 Vietnamese students.[27] Beside Japan and Taiwan, South Korea has also become a popular destination for Vietnamese nationals, resulting in a substantial community comprising migrant workers, students, and spouses. Presently Korea hosts nearly 300,000 Vietnamese,[28] making this community the largest expatriate population after the Chinese.[29]

In Southeast Asia, Thailand is a popular destination for Vietnamese migrant workers because of favorable conditions such as convenience of travel back and forth between the two countries, and easy accessibility as citizens of ASEAN.[30] Almost all Vietnamese migrant workers enter Thailand as tourists, after which they proceed to find employment. While there are no official estimates due to the undocumented nature of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, it is surmised that the number fluctuates between 30,000 and 50,000 depending on the time of year and the economic situation in kingdom. Beside the four Asian countries mentioned above, Vietnamese migrants are also present in other countries including China, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Macao, and Singapore, albeit in much lower numbers. Unfortunately, there are no credible or updated statistics that could be found for these countries.

In addition to Asian countries, Vietnamese are migrating in large numbers to Western countries such as Germany, France, United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Some of the migrants even do so through treacherous means and with large sums paid to smuggling

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[26] Islamuddin Sajid, "Foreign Workers in Japan Hit Record High," January 31, 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/foreign-workers-in-japan-hit-record-high/3467838.

[27] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Growing Ties of Friendship—Taiwanese–Vietnamese Relations over the Years," November 30, 2023, https://nspp.mofa.gov.tw/nsppe/news.php?post=244875&unit=410&unitname=&postname=Growing-Ties-of-Friendship%E2%80%94Taiwanese%E2%80%93Vietnamese-Relations-over-the-Years.

[28] Korea Info, "Số Người Việt Nam Cư Trú Tại Hàn Quốc Khoảng 271.712 Người," October 21, 2024. https://www.korea.info.vn/2024/10/so-nguoi-viet-nam-cu-tru-tai-han-quoc.html.

[29] Ivan V. Small, "Assimilating Southeast Asian Migrants into South Korea: Expanding the Meaning of Being 'Korean'," *Fulcrum*, February 5, 2021, https://fulcrum.sg/assimilating-southeast-asian-migrants-into-south-korea-expanding-the-meaning-of-being-korean/.

[30] Anthony Le Duc, "The Role of Social Media in Community Building for Illegal Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand," *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016): 4–21.

agents.[31] In Germany alone, as of 2020, there were over 100,000 Vietnamese nationals residing in the country.[32] The migration patterns of Vietnamese Catholics have changed significantly since the large-scale post-war exodus. Today, economic factors are dominant, as many Vietnamese seek better job opportunities and higher living standards abroad. Religion plays a less prominent role in migration decisions today. However, faith remains relevant. While religion is not the primary reason for migration, a significant proportion of migrants are Catholic. According to Vietnamese government statistics, there are currently about 6 million Vietnamese (including overseas Vietnamese) living and working in more than 130 countries and territories.[33] If we estimate that the U.S. has 700,000 Catholics and an additional 400,000 Catholics from the remaining 4 million overseas Vietnamese (10%), the total number of Vietnamese Catholics living in diaspora today is over one million.

Migrants as Missionary Disciples

From a religious perspective, Catholic migration is not only about survival or improvement in life situations but also a powerful means of evangelization. When Christians migrate to a new land, whether domestically or internationally, they do not only carry with them the aspiration for a better life, but also their culture and religion. The movement of people has played a crucial role in the growth of the Church since its earliest days. From the missionary journeys of the Apostles to mass migrations driven by political and social change, the spread of Christianity has been deeply tied to the movement of believers across nations, continents, and cultures. Throughout history, Catholic migrants have not only preserved their faith but have also actively contributed to the development and expansion of the Church in new lands. By bringing their traditions, beliefs, and communities with them, they have helped establish and strengthen Christian life wherever they have settled.[34]

This reality calls attention to a fundamental claim: every migrant Christian is a potential missionary.[35] Migration offers immense opportunities for spreading the Gospel, as those who carry the faith into new environments become witnesses to Christ's presence. Christian migrants do not merely adapt to their host communities; they also enrich them spiritually, creating vibrant spaces for faith to take root and flourish. According to Pope Francis, "history teaches us that the contribution of migrants and refugees has been fundamental to the social and economic growth
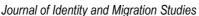
[31] Amelia Gentleman, "Essex Lorry Deaths: 39 Vietnamese Migrants Suffocated in Container, Court Hears," *Guardian*, October 7, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/07/essex-lorry-deaths-39-vietnamese-migrants-suffocated-in-container-court-hears.

[32] Anh Tuan Ho, "Hành Trình Đức Tin Của Cộng Đồng Công Giáo Việt Nam Tại Đức: Những Làn Sóng Di Cư Và Vai Trò Truyền Giáo," in *Di Dân Việt Nam Với Sứ Mạng Loan Báo Tin Mừng* (Bangkok: ARC, 2025), 203.

[33] Duy Linh, "Việt Nam đang có khoảng 600.000 nhân lực chất lượng cao ở nước ngoài," *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, December 14, 2023, https://tuoitre.vn/viet-nam-dang-co-khoang-600-000-nhan-luc-chat-luong-cao-o-nuoc-ngoai-20231214182037416.htm

[34] Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 16-25.

[35] Godwin Aturuchi Eche and Innocent Karibo, "Christianity and the Challenge of Migration in Time Perspective," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 2, no. (2019): 112.

of our societies. This continues to be true in our own day. Their work, their youth, their enthusiasm and their willingness to sacrifice enrich the communities that receive them."[36]

In the case of Vietnamese Catholics in diaspora, this missionary dimension is evident in their active participation in the Church in numerous ways. In various contexts, Vietnamese immigrants have contributed to developing and sustaining the local church. For example, countries like the United States and Australia have greatly benefited from vocations within the Vietnamese migrant community. Vietnamese currently make up 12 percent of seminarians in the United States.[37] This is remarkable considering Vietnamese American Catholics constitute less than one percent to the American Church. Moreover, individuals of Vietnamese background made up 4 percent of the 2024 ordinands to the priesthood in this country.[38] The Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement (VEYM), which has a membership of 25,000 youth and 2,500 youth leaders, is a source of tremendous spiritual and vocational formation for Vietnamese American youth. In Australia, the presence of Vietnamese Catholic migrants has contributed to the diversity within the Australian Church, numerous priests and religious, and even several bishops. Bishop Thinh Xuan Nguyen, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Melbourne was consecrated at St Patrick's Cathedral on February 1, 2025.[39]

Recent Vietnamese Catholic migrants who go abroad as workers and students also have the potential to contribute to the evangelization mission of the Church, especially in countries where the Church is being negatively affected by the aging of the population and secularization. In Japan, Catholics comprise a small minority, estimated at approximately 431,100 individuals, representing roughly 0.34 percent of the population.[40] Taiwan's Catholic population, as of 2022, is 226,589, representing 0.7 percent of the total population.[41] In Thailand, Catholics represent a small minority, with an estimated 388,000 members, constituting approximately 0.58 percent of the population.[42] Compared to the other three countries, South Korea boasts a much larger Catholic community, estimated at around 5.9 million adherents, or approximately 11.3 percent of the total population.[43] However, by all standards, it is still a relatively small church.

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[36] Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20220509-world-migrants-day-2022.html

[37] USCCB, "Vietnamese Vocations," https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/vocation-directors/vietnamese-vocations#:~:text=Vietnamese%20men%20currently%20make%20up, Vietnamese%20priests%20in%20the%20US.

[38] USCCB, "The Class of 2024: Survey of Ordinands to the Priesthood," https://www.usccb.org/resources/Ordination%20Class%20of%202024%20-%20report_0.pdf.

[39] Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, "Joy Overflows at Consecration of Melbourne's Newest Bishops," February 1, 2025, https://melbournecatholic.org/news/joy-overflows-at-consecration-of-melbournes-newest-bishops.

[40] CBCJ, "Catholics in Japan," https://www.cbcj.catholic.jp/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/statistics2021.pdf.

[41] Pham Trong Quang, "Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyến Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan," in *Di Dân Việt Nam Với Sứ Mạng Loan Báo Tin Mừng*, ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: ARC, 2025), 230.

[42] Asaree Thaitrakulpanich, "Here's Pope Francis' Schedule for His Thailand Visit," *Khaosod English*, October 2, 2019, https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2019/10/02/heres-pope-francis-schedule-for-his-thailand-visit/.

[43] ZENIT, "South Korea: Statistics Show Vitality of Catholicism, 11.3% of the Population," May 7, 2024. https://zenit.org/2024/05/07/south-korea-statistics-show-vitality-of-catholicism-11-3-of-the-population/.

In addition to the small size, the churches in these countries are also dealing with an aging membership. The Catholic Church in Japan is experiencing a noticeable aging of its congregations, mirroring the country's overall demographic trends. This aging is coupled with a declining birthrate, which further exacerbates the issue. As older members pass away and fewer young people join the Church, the sustainability of local parishes and communities becomes a concern.[44]

The Church in Taiwan faces a similar problem as Japan. Fr Pham Trong Quang, SVD reported that at Cathedral Parish of the Diocese of Chiayi (嘉義教區), where he used to serve, of the over 2,000 registered parishioners, only around 200 attend Sunday Mass. Pham commented, "A very common issue in Catholic churches in Taiwan today is that the majority of attendees are elderly, while there is a significant absence of young people."[45] This situation partially reflects the low birthrate in Taiwan. Data from the Department of Household Registration of Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior shows a consistent decline in Taiwan's total fertility rate for women aged 15-49, falling from 1.06 percent in 2018 to 0.865 percent in 2023.[46]

While the Catholic Church in South Korea has seen growth in recent decades, it is not immune to the aging trend. As the population ages, the Church must find ways to engage younger generations and ensure their continued participation. This is crucial for maintaining the Church's vitality and its role in Korean society. Similar issues concerning aging within the church can be seen in South Korea, which reflects the overall trend in society. A CNA article in 2020 reported that about one in five South Korean Catholics are over the age of 65, and only 8.5 percent of Catholics are age 19 or under.[47] South Korea's 2023 fertility rate of 0.72 births per person is the lowest on record, well below Japan's 1.2 and the 2.1 replacement rate.[48] The situation in Thailand is equally worrisome. According to data from Chulalongkorn University's Sasin School of Management, Thailand's birth rate has experienced a significant decline of 81 percent over the past 74 years, placing it third globally in this metric. Only South Korea and China have witnessed steeper declines, at 88 percent and 83 percent, respectively, during the same period.[49]

In addition to the problem of aging, the Church in the host countries is experiencing various degrees of secularization.[50,51] In their book *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*,

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[44] Andrés Henríquez, "Archbishop of Tokyo: An Aging Society like Japan's Will Not Survive," *Catholic News Agency*, November 22, 2024, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/260647/archbishop-of-tokyo-an-aging-society-like-japans-will-not-be-able-to-survive.

[45] Pham, "Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan," 241.

[46] Pan Tzu-yu and Wu Kuan-hsien, "Taiwan's Declining Birth Rate Difficult to Reverse: Official," *Focus Taiwan*, October 24, 2024, https://focustaiwan.tw/society/202410240013.

[47] Catholic News Agency, "Church in South Korea Growing, Slowly," April 27, 2020. https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/44334/church-in-south-korea-growing-slowly.

[48] Christopher Hamill-Stewart, "South Korea's Fertility Rate Should Be a Warning to the World," *Salzburg Global*, September 30, 2024, https://www.salzburgglobal.org/news/latest-news/article/south-koreas-fertility-rate-should-be-a-warning-to-the-world#:~:text=South%20Korea's%20fertility%20rate%20hit,fertility%20replacement%20rate%20of%202.

[49] Bangkok Post, "Don't Ignore Birth Rate Dip," editorial, December 23, 2024, https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2925101/dont-ignore-birth-rate-dip.

[50] UCA News, "Dealing with Secularization and Its Consequences in Japan," May 29, 2023, https://www.ucanews.com/news/dealing-with-secularization-and-its-consequences-in-japan/101455.

[51] Pham, "Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan," 240-241.

Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun argue that while South Korea experienced a period of Christian growth intertwined with its rapid modernization and Westernization from the 1980s to the early 2000s, the country is now demonstrably experiencing secularization. Initially, this growth, particularly from 1982 to 2005, where religiously unaffiliated numbers decreased while Catholic and Protestant shares increased, was interpreted by some as contradicting secularization theory. The adoption of Christianity was, for some, linked to aspirations for Western prosperity. However, recent trends indicate a sharp decline in religiosity, especially among younger generations who find religious institutions ill-equipped to address contemporary issues. Among those born after 1990, only 17.6 percent attend religious services at least once a month. This decline is further evidenced by the stagnation of megachurches and diminishing trust in religious organizations following scandals. South Korea stands out globally with a high percentage of convinced atheists (54.9 percent in 2018) and those who do not believe in God (59.4 percent in 2018).[52] Religious affiliation is not a central aspect of identity for many South Koreans, and belief in traditional religious concepts, such as life after death, has significantly decreased (from 52.2 percent in 1982 to 33.7 percent in 2018). The initial rise of Christianity appears linked to the desire for a Westernized identity during modernization, and with widespread modernization achieved, Christianity is now in decline.[53] The assertions made by the authors have also been corroborated by the research of Sam Hyun Yoo and Victor Agadjanian, noting that "since the 2000s, those with no religious affiliation tend to be younger, male, and urban residents typically embracing individualistic lifestyles."[54] This reality of secularization has been cited as a reason for observed declines in religious vocation in South Korea in recent years.[55]

While Kasselstrand et al. do not discuss the case of Japan extensively, they assert that "secularization occurs when people simply stop being religious of their own volition. And that is exactly the kind of secularization we now see taking place the world over, from Canada and Uruguay to Germany and Japan."[56] It must be noted that the phenomenon of secularisation in the case of Japan is a highly contested issue with scholars such as José Casanova arguing against the standard secularization theory, which predicts a decline in religion in modern societies. While acknowledging that Japan is secular in terms of the separation of church and state, and its education system, Casanova contends that Japanese society remains receptive to various religions. This challenges the Enlightenment-era assumption that modernization inevitably leads to the demise of religion.[57] Rodney Stark is also another scholar who has denied that Japan is undergoing secularization, citing the popularity of Shinto rituals in the modern day.[58] Going deep

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[52] It must be noted that in the Asian spiritual milieu, atheism, or not believing in a monotheistic God does not necessary mean that there is lack of spirituality and religiosity. Asians who practice Daoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and Buddhism often declare that they do not follow a religion or believe in God.

[53] Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun, *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

[54] Sam Hyun Yoo and Victor Agadjanian, "The paradox of change: Religion and fertility decline in South Korea," Demographic Research 44, Article 23 (2021): 541.

[55] UCA News, "Korean Religious Blame Secularization for Vocation Decline," January 26, 2024, https://www.ucanews.com/news/korean-religious-blame-secularization-for-vocation-decline/103953.

[56] Kasselstrand et al., *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society,* 113.

[57] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11-12.

[58] Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 8.

into secularization theories is beyond the scope of this paper. What cannot be denied is that in Japan, church attendance is observably seen to be among the older people, and many are dying. Without young people entering the Church, the number of native Japanese in the Church is steadily decreasing. In reality, the majority of Catholics in Japan today come from the immigrant community.[59]

The case of Thailand is slightly different from the East Asian countries. Thailand is still overwhelmingly religious with 90 percent of the population adhering to Buddhism,[60] oftentimes intermixed with local animistic beliefs in gods, spirits, and ghosts. Muslims and Christians make up the majority of the rest. While it is possible to argue for the greater prominence of secular values in Thai society, it would be incorrect to claim that it is a secular culture. Therefore, the Church in Thailand is not so much affected by secularism as by the non-Catholic religious milieu, which presents a challenge for Catholics, especially the youth, to remain faithful to their religious tradition. While no official statistics exist, empirical observations indicate that nowadays a majority of Thai Catholics marry outside of their faith, which makes it difficult to maintain traditional Catholic households. And many of them already come from mixed-faith families themselves. Many young people, once they move away from the home to study or work also tend to drift away from the Church. This is the primary reason why all the dioceses in Thailand as well as many religious congregations insist on maintaining minor seminaries accepting students who have completed primary school to ensure that there is a cohort of young people being trained in the Catholic environment on an ongoing basis. Despite the extremely low success rate of minor seminarians eventually becoming priests and religious, many Church leaders remark that at least the ones who benefit from seminary life will have a better chance of holding on to their faith than their peers.[61]

As we can see, the already small churches in Asia are experiencing multiple challenges in maintaining the number both in terms of adherents and vocation. Facing this reality, the presence of Vietnamese Catholic immigrants can help to sustain the Church in numerous ways. The new wave of Vietnamese Catholic migrants possesses several characteristics that enhance their missionary potential. Primarily, they are young, mostly in their 20s and 30s. This youthful demographic is more adaptable to new languages and cultures. This can be seen with Vietnamese migrants in Thailand, where many are able to speak Thai fluently due to daily interactions with local people, even without formal language training. Many Vietnamese migrants come from rural areas, especially in the northern provinces, where strong religious practices are maintained, particularly in Catholic villages. While Mass attendance statistics in Vietnam are not available, empirical observations reveal that rural areas still show high participation, even on the weekdays. Furthermore, the Catholic faith remains central to many Vietnamese migrants' lives abroad, with numerous Vietnamese Catholic groups meeting for monthly or weekly Mass in the churches of their host countries. Thus, with their youthfulness and relatively high level of religiosity,

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[59] UCA News, "The Fading Japanese Church, the Growing Church in Japan," May 2, 2023, https://www.ucanews.com/news/the-fading-japanese-church-the-growing-church-in-japan/101175.

[60] US Department of State, "2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Thailand," https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/547499-THAILAND-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf.

[61] Information presented here comes from the author's experience working in the Thai Church and conversations with various individuals in the Church.

Vietnamese Catholic migrants can help to renew the local churches facing decline if provided adequate support, guidance, and formation by church leaders and pastoral agents.

Conclusion

Missionary discipleship is a vocation that belongs to all Christians and Catholic migrants are not excluded from this calling. In fact, history demonstrates that the Church has largely developed and expanded as a result of various waves of migration in history. In this vein, Vietnamese Catholic migrants since the 18th century has also contributed to the development of the Church in many contexts. Moreover, they have the potential to continue to help develop and sustain the Church today, especially in places where the local church is experiencing a decline in membership due to aging and secularization. This essay demonstrates that despite their relatively small numbers in global migration, Vietnamese Catholic migrants have significantly contributed and will continue to contribute to the Church's mission as missionary disciples, fulfilling Pope Francis's call for a Church that goes forth and actively engages with the world.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Mihnea Maruta, Virtual Identity: How and Why Social Media Transforms Us (Identitate virtuala: Cum si de ce ne transforma retelele de socializare), Bucharest: Humanitas, 2023, ISBN 978-973-50-7978-9, 291 pages

Carmen Ungur-Brehoi

Virtual Identity: How and Why Social Media Transforms Us is a very popular work, written by Mihnea Maruta, a Romanian journalist and philosopher. The book represents Maruta's doctoral thesis and was praised for its original approach and depth of analisys. Published in May 2023 by Humanitas Publishing House, the book explores how social media platforms influence users' identity and behaviour. Virtual identity is seen as something that appears and lives in the others' minds: is the sum of the others' perceptions, intuitions, judgements regarding an individual who created them for the social media.

The book contains ten poetical chapters (*Self Production, Self Metalepsis, Self Simulation, Self Illusion, Self Seduction, Self Mirroring, Self Time, Self Filiation, Self Shade, Self Dissolution*) that are structured along almost 300 pages. The innovation that the work brings, together with a fascinating interpretation of the virtual identity concept, is the interactivity that it involves, with incorporated multimedia aspects. Maruta made podcasts on the same topic and QR codes embedded in the text serve as a connection between the written material and real-time discussions. This interactive format allows readers to engage more deeply with the content, providing different perspectives and expert opinions (such as Dragos Stanca's, an entrepreneur and media expert) on the issues raised in the chapters, understanding better the definition of the notions and even visualising some paintings, movie fragments in relation to those key ideas.

The author's approach in researching and explaining the concept of virtual identity is an interdisciplinary one, blending philosophical, sociological, and psychological and communication perspectives. The book has the power to allow readers, both to those that use the philosophical notions and to those that are not initiated in this field, to explore both the personal and societal implications of living in a digital era, making it an insightful reflection on contemporary programmed culture.

The central focus of *Virtual Identity* is the way in which social media platforms transform the identity of individuals, responding to the open questions of why and how the process takes place. In today's computerized world, social media is a powerful tool but not only for communication, self-expression, and connection, but for an incredible way of influencing individuals' perception about themselves and the others through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others that shape virtual identity compared to real-world selves. The construction of the virtual identity is crafted, if our "real" identities are impacted by face-to-face interactions, the digital selves are edited through the lens of social media. People carefully select how to present themselves, what to share, and how to reply to others. The virtual self can lead to

a distortion of reality, as people often present idealized versions of themselves, which may not reflect their true selves or the complexities of their lives, but be a completely new identity.

In *Introduction*, Maruta explains the terms he is about to work with during the chapters, in an expressive emanation, with vivid examples, defining what "virtual", "virtual thing", "virtual concept" and then "virtual identity" stand for. The intertextuality is present in all the chapters, producing into the reader an enlightening joy to discover through bright comparisons from literature (such as the Italian modernist novel of Luigi Pirandello-*One, None And A Hundred Thousand,* the Argentinian marvelous realism of Adolfo Bioy Casares-*The Invention Of Morel,* Arthur Conan Doyle's novels) and Philosophy field (from the Greek wits Plato, Aristotle to Martin Heidegger, Philippe Queau), to the Arts field (the painting *Las meninas* by the artist Diego Velazquez, *Narcis* by Caravaggio, *Pygmalion and Galateea* by Jean-Leon Gerome, *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck), cinematography (the movies of the director Alfred Hitchcock, the films *The Purple Rose Of Cairo, Starwars, Guardians Of The Galaxy, Birdman, the series Game Of Cards*) and television's daily Politics (the situation of Ukraine in 2019).

The book touches so many concepts, as for example the digital selves, that are constantly being shaped by feedback from others, as a response to likes, comments, and shares. The feedback loop influences how we see ourselves and how we present ourselves to the world, with psychological effects of this constant validation-seeking behaviour, suggesting that many people derive much of their self-worth from their online persona. The effect is a tension between the real self (who we are offline) and the virtual self (who we are online). The concepts of self metalepsis and antimetalepsis are explained concisely, with relatable examples from Arts and movies, which transform the abstract ideas into revelations for the readers. Maruta makes projections regarding the near future and what our children's avatars will look like, focusing on other key terms, such as the metaverse and many others.

On a deeper philosophical extent, Mihnea Maruta examines the meaning of having an identity in the age of digital technology, questioning the very nature of selfhood and whether the distinction between the real self and the virtual self, where the boundaries between the physical and digital worlds are increasingly blurred. Once the digital era appeared, the person built an alternative to the reality, an ontological level where it is possible to manifest exclusively on screens and in a continuous fission, which is seductive, contracting the dimensions of the image by diminishing it, and which offers a new chance to the supressed eros, inducing an illusion of rebirth through the others.

The impact on mental health is another important aspect explored in the writing as a consequence of social media use. Research has linked heavy social media use to increased anxiety (such as FOMO-the fear of missing out), depression, and issues with body image. Maruta shows how the constant need to perform and curate an idealized image online can create stress and lead to mental health challenges, especially for younger generations. In the same time, the cold and impersonal network gets to suggest to us to dream about dreams and wishes that are not actually our own (such as the paradisiac islands that can be visited, the clothes, the food to try, the books or movies that we think we would like to see, all suggested by the platforms and algorithms).

Social media promises greater links, a living style for the network, with the intentional wish to converge to immortality and a living style in the network. Maruta highlights a paradox where individuals lose the present moment, sacrified in order to live a higher satisfaction, an

online pleasure, but the same individuals may feel more isolated, alienated, lonely, despite being constantly connected and living in a superficial way. Living actively in the network is compared to using a mask over the human fear of death, that could protect us somehow from rediscovering that within us is not the same us that exist and that we created online. Users compare constantly their lives with others, leading in the end to a cycle of self-comparison and diminished self-esteem.

The *Postward - Metaverse And The Issue Of Freedom* of the book is a pragmatic glance forward the future of the social media and the virtual identities of our descendants, that might have to live in a very complicated world, not of real human beings, but through visible fictions. If nowadays the virtual universe started with attractive games, such as *Fortnite, Roblox,* the very near future will be of a troubling society, with physical and moral torments, many temptations and few bench-marks, an unreal infinite that we will dive in. For the next decades, the battle will be held for controlling the human minds, through all the possible means: propaganda, new media, social media and metaverse. Of course, the free will might save the future generations, if they will choose to limit themselves to their real bodies and a reality without technologies and without the fascinating experiences that surpass the real for the virtual environment.

Maruta's *Virtual Identity* is an essential contribution to the conversation about technology and society and further, the human being, with its conscious and subconscious. It offers a detailed exploration of how our digital interactions are transforming personal identity and reshaping social structures. The book reveals human's biggest fear-of remaining present and not absent, even after physical death, possible thanks to the digital media instruments. The readers are invited to reflect critically on their own virtual identities and the broader implications of living in a world where online and offline realities are increasingly intertwined, to understand the concepts that participate in the very delicate relation of real-digital-virtual and to see which are the risks that might occur to us and to the future generations.

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