

Virtual existence of Refugees: A content analysis of social media during the Rohingya crisis to understand how social media framed and (re)constructed the identity of Refugees

Sherin Farhana Moni
Mamunor Rashid
Rubaiya Zannat
Hasan Mahmud Faisal
Muhammad Asaduzzaman
Salauddin Ahmed

Univ of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, USA

Abstract: Social media platforms like Facebook have become central to modern communication, influencing how global issues and communities are understood. For the Rohingya refugees, Facebook serves as both a tool for self-representation and a battleground for competing narratives. This paper analyses the framing of Rohingya refugees on Facebook, focusing on how these narratives (re)construct their identity. Using a qualitative content analysis method, it analyses the Rohingya Community's Facebook page from January 2018 to December 2022, comprising 156 posts. Three themes emerge as the prominent frame for the Rohingya crisis: humanitarian, cultural identity, and global solidarity. This research contributes to fostering framing research in social media for crisis communication.

Keywords — Crisis and risk, Rohingya refugees, social media, South Asia

SUGGESTED CITATION: Moni, S. F., Rashid, M., Zannat, R., Faisal, H. M., Asaduzzaman, M., & Ahmed, S. (2025). Virtual existence of refugees: A content analysis of social media during Rohingya crisis to understand how social media framed and (re)constructed the identity of refugees. *Proceedings of the 2025 International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference*, 13(1) 43-47. <https://www.doi.org/10.69931/001c.142838>

INTRODUCTION

Rohingya refugees are one of the most stateless communities in the contemporary world [2], which makes them an ideal example of 'homo sacer' [2]. Rohingyas, an ethnic Muslim minority group in Myanmar, are living a 'subhuman' [3] life in Bangladeshi and Indian borderlands after forcibly leaving their homeland due to communal violence in Myanmar. For decades, Rohingya, a predominantly Buddhist country, have faced institutionalized discrimination, such as exclusionary citizenship laws. Most recently, the Myanmar government launched a military campaign in 2017 that forced seven hundred thousand Rohingya to flee. Rights groups suspect the

ISSN: 3068-6539

© 2025 Copyright is held by the
owner/author(s). Publication rights are
licensed to ICRC.
<https://doi.org/10.69931/001c.142838>

government has committed genocide against the Rohingya, but the authority officials deny the accusations. However, from 2017 to today, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have fled persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine State, fueling a historic migration crisis.

As most people do not have direct contact with refugees, the media can significantly shape our ideas about them. Media plays an important role in drawing global attention to the Rohingya crisis [4]. Studies [4, 5, 6] have been conducted regarding the representation of Rohingyas in conventional media (e.g., television, newspapers, radio, and magazines). A few research on the Rohingya crisis [7] have emphasized online media. Digital platforms form practical discourses and relentlessly circulate those to shape public perception of an issue. Social media has become an inseparable part of our modern life. People are now more connected through social media platforms than through face-to-face communication. Social media has become one of the most common platforms for friendship or personal communication and as a source of news and information. Thus, it becomes a significant area of study for communication scholars about how social media frames an issue and the impacts that it may have on people's perceptions based on social media representation. This has practical implications for refugees, offering empowering opportunities for representation but also surveillance concerns. In addition, the shift from traditional media to social media has consequences on how the public understands refugees, with social media platforms now shaping discourses and narratives around refugees. Thus, social media's role in the public's understanding of migrants and refugees deserves critical examination, with more and more people relying on it for news consumption. This research aims to uncover how Rohingya refugees were framed in social media such as Facebook, YouTube, etc.

To the best of my knowledge, no studies have been conducted that examine the depiction of Rohingya refugees on social media platforms. The lack of research in this area and the rapid expansion and effect of new communication technologies provide a rationale for this study. This project aims to understand the dominant frames regarding Rohingya refugees. Finally, the study aims to identify and analyze the discursive patterns reflected in social media when representing and framing Rohingya people and how it constructs their identity. In addition, this research proposes to understand the process of 'othering' and securitization of Rohingya people operated by new communication technologies.

Currently, not much attention is being paid to the role of social media in shaping individuals' attitudes and creating and maintaining negative images of refugees regarding the Rohingya crisis. While critical media scholars have examined print, TV, and radio representations of migrants and refugees, social media platforms remain unexplored. The aim of this research is to analyze the formation of refugees in social media by examining what and how they were framed. For this purpose, the content and the social media actors will be analyzed with a special focus on Rohingya by analyzing the content on the Facebook page 'Rohingya Community', the most prominent social media page with the highest number of followers (78k). Therefore, this study deconstructs the framing of refugees and aims to reveal the role of socio-cultural context. The study will analyze the content and actors of the Facebook pages involved in stigmatizing refugees or even criminality discourse.

This study addressed the following three research questions:

RQ1: How have the images of refugees been formed through social media in the context of the Rohingya crisis?

RQ2: What are social media's dominant frames representing refugees during the Rohingya crisis?

RQ3: What kind of nexus exists, if any, between the framing of refugees in social media and reality?

METHODS OR PROCEDURES

This study uses the qualitative content analysis research method to analyze the content on selected social media platforms. The goal is to examine and then draw results on how the refugees are framed in a Facebook page dedicated to the Rohingya people named "Rohingya Community." It is the Facebook page of a nonprofit organization, Rohingya Community, first formed in 2010. It was formed by a refugee community primarily located in Saudi Arabia. This page was chosen because of its highest number of followers (77k) compared with other Facebook pages for the Rohingya community in South Asia. From January 2018 to December 2023, 156 posts were analyzed for this study. This study investigates the discursive framing associated with the Rohingya refugees and how those frames significantly shape opinion regarding that community. For Littlejohn et al. [8], media frame an event in ways that guide audiences' interpretations. This can happen by various textual features of the "story"—headlines, audio-visual components, metaphors used, and how the story is told, to name only a few of the ways framing functions (p. 161). The texts and visual information are then formed by using theoretical points. This, in return, allows the study to get deeper insights into the information and to make better conclusions about it. Research platform: As of October 2022, over 943,000 stateless Rohingya refugees reside in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas in the Bangladeshi borderland. Kutupalong, located in the coastal district of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, is currently the largest refugee camp in the world. Since the majority of Rohingya refugees took shelter in Bangladesh, that was the reason for considering Facebook as the site of analysis. In

Bangladesh, Facebook is the most popular social media platform.

Thematic analysis methods often take into account the fact that there might be data-driven (inductive) or theory-driven (deductive) approaches to coding, that there might be processes of coding and theme development, and that there might be some wiggle room regarding the theory that underpins the research perspectives [9]. A theme captures an important aspect of the data pertaining to the research topic field and suggests a degree of organized responses or interpretation within the data set [9]. In their foundational study, Braun and Clarke [9] established six processes for executing thematic analysis, wherein data are methodically scrutinized utilising codes, categories, and themes [10]. The six phases/steps serve as flexible and iterative suggestions rather than rigid rules for addressing the research issue.

RESULTS

A qualitative content analysis of 156 posts on the Facebook page Rohingya Community revealed the emergence of the following themes:

HUMANITARIAN FRAMING

One of the dominant frames was the humanitarian frame, which emphasized human rights violations. Posts often share personal narratives, photographs, and reports detailing the violence and discrimination faced by the Rohingya community in Myanmar that forced them to leave their homeland. Such content aims to raise awareness and mobilize support for humanitarian assistance. For instance, a post was shared on the Rohingya Community Facebook page on January 26, 2018, that said, "More than 700,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since August 2017, escaping brutal military crackdowns, with over 400,000 still living in precarious conditions in refugee camps (UNHCR, 2023)." Finally, posts on the Rohingya Community Facebook broadly address the historical discrimination towards the Rohingya community in Myanmar by pointing out systemic discrimination. For example, on May 22, 2022, a post came with a picture inside a commuter train in Myanmar with a text that said, "...While traveling in the same train, Rakhines are allowed to sit on the seats, and Rohingyas are on the floor or just stand. Still, Rohingya is the world's most marginalized and left behind community."

CULTURAL IDENTITY FRAMING

Facebook serves as a platform for Rohingya refugees to share their personal experiences, traditions, and customs. For example, on May 14, 2020, during the Eid Festival, the largest religious program for the Muslim community, they shared a post saying Noticeably, this Facebook page used a number of visual aids such as images and videos. They have a large number of news links from ANA Arakan Today, when most of that news came with a video link. The use of images and videos in posts allowed them to be used as a visual expression of Rohingya culture.

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY FRAMING

Rohingya Community Facebook page was being used for calling for global solidarity for Rohingya refugees and to do that they utilized several strategies to engage audiences and mobilize support effectively. Here are some key approaches employed in these posts.

EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Many posts use emotional storytelling to highlight the suffering and resilience of Rohingya refugees. One news of Reuters was shared on January 25, 2020, titled, "Two Rohingya women killed as Myanmar army shells village". January 14, 2020, a picture showed how people were forced to leave their country. Statistics and Facts: Effective posts often include powerful statistics and facts about the Rohingya crisis. For example, they mentioned the number of displaced individuals or the conditions in refugee camps. Presenting this information underscores the situation's urgency and reinforces the need for a collective response.

CALLS TO ACTION

Posts frequently included explicit calls to action, encouraging individuals and organizations to get involved. For example, they posted on December 14, 2020. Hashtags and Campaigns: Using hashtags (e.g., #StandWithRohingya, #RohingyaSolidarity) can help create a sense of community and a unified message across social media platforms. Campaigns that utilize these hashtags encourage individuals to join a larger movement, amplifying calls for action and solidarity.

HIGHLIGHTING SOLIDARITY EXAMPLES:

Several posts featured examples of solidarity from different parts of the world—such as demonstrations, fundraisers,

or community events supporting Rohingya refugees. For example, February 15, 2023, they shared some picture on how people in Turkiye are supporting Rohingya community by displaying banner and poster of solidarity. February 21, 2022, they shared a post in Bengale to celebrate international mother language day and show solidarity with Bangladeshi people.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH ORGANIZATIONS

Engaging with well-known NGOs and humanitarian organizations in posts was another key framing of addressing the crisis. These organizations lend credibility and reach to solidarity messages. By tagging these organizations, such as the UN, IMF, UNICEF, and so on, and sharing their initiatives, posts mobilized larger audiences to join the cause and provide needed assistance.

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Many posts aimed to educate followers about the root causes of the Rohingya crisis and the importance of solidarity. By sharing articles, documentaries, and informative graphics, these posts enhance understanding and encourage more people to take action.

DISCUSSION

The crisis surrounding the Rohingya refugees has garnered significant attention on social media platforms like Facebook, where stories and updates highlight their plight. The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group from Myanmar, have faced long-standing persecution, leading to a mass exodus to neighboring countries, especially Bangladesh. Based on the analysis of a Facebook page Rohingya Community it can be claimed that Facebook plays a crucial role in constructing and expressing the cultural identity of Rohingya refugees by facilitating storytelling, visual representation, community building, advocacy for rights, and preservation of language and customs. As data analysis showed, the three key themes emerged that framed this community from humanitarian aspect, constructed their identity and call for global solidarity. This finding can answer our two research questions. To answer our first research question: how have the images of refugees been formed through social media in the context of the Rohingya crisis? This research finding revealed that though Facebook posts about Rohingya refugees try to address the crisis that historically affected their live, and how their people are still suffering specially from 2017 for the most significant segregation by Myanmar government. Thus, humanitarian farms were the keyway of framing and characterizing the Rohingya community.

However, existing research and data were not adequate to answer the research question three: What kind of nexus exists, if any, between the framing of refugees in social media and in reality? Along with these three key frames there are a few frames that was used by Rohingya refugees for constructing their image as a community of resistant. For example, on March 3on , 2022, a picture posted on their page called for a global resistance against all types of attacks on the Muslim community, including Syria, Palestine, Ukraine, Myanmar, etc. Another significant framing was resistance against negative framing of the Rohingya crisis. For instance, a post on May 23, 2020, called for action against the hate speech and miss information against the Rohingya community by calling In summary, Facebook posts calling for global solidarity for Rohingya refugees effectively use emotional appeals, facts calls to action, hashtags, examples of solidarity, partnerships, and educational content to mobilize support and foster a sense of communal responsibility for addressing the crisis. This comprehensive approach helps engage a wider audience and encourages meaningful participation in humanitarian efforts.

CONCLUSION

Besides several positive outcomes, Facebook's algorithm prioritizes engagement, which often amplifies sensational and divisive content, including hate speech targeting the Rohingya. Also, users often interact within ideologically homogenous groups, reinforcing either positive or negative frames about the Rohingya. Facebook plays a significant role in shaping global perceptions of the Rohingya. While it has facilitated advocacy and community-building, its misuse has also spread harmful narratives. Ensuring that Facebook serves as a platform for justice rather than harm requires stronger content moderation policies and greater awareness of the impact of framing.

Author Biography

Sherin Farhana Moni, doctoral student at the University of Southern Mississippi, USA. E-mail: sherinfarhana.moni@usm.edu

Mamunor Rashid, master's student at the University of Southern Mississippi, USA. E-mail:

mamunor.rashid@usm.edu

Hasan Mahmud Faisal, doctoral student at the University of Southern Mississippi. E-mail:

hasanmahmud.faisal@usm.edu.

Rubaiya Zannat, doctoral student at the University of Southern Mississippi. E-mail: rubaiya.zannat@usm.edu.

Muhammad ASaduzzaman is a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern Mississippi. E-mail:

mohammad.asaduzzaman@usm.edu

Salaudhin Ahmed, doctoral student at the University of Southern Mississippi. E-mail: salaudhin.ahmed@usm.edu

REFERENCES

- [1] Krisna, S. C. (2018). *A critical analysis of globalization and citizenship status of the Rohingya*.
- [2] Eriksson, E. (2019). Leave no one behind—but what about the ‘scum of the earth’?: A discourse analysis based on theories by Arendt and Agamben on Rohingya and statelessness. *Bachelor's thesis, Uppsala University*.
- [3] Uddin, N. (2020). *The Rohingya: An ethnography of 'subhuman' life*. Oxford University Press.
- [4] Isti'anah, A. (2018). Rohingya in media: Critical discourse analysis of Myanmar and Bangladesh newspaper headlines. *Language in the Online and Offline World*, (6), 18–23.
- [5] Afzal, N. (2016). Elements of pathos and media framing as scientific discourse: A newspaper perspective on Rohingya crisis. *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Science*, 3(6), 89–99.
- [6] Bach, C. (2019). *The construction of refugees in news headlines: A critical discourse analysis on Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and Thailand* [Bachelor's thesis, Linnaeus University, Sweden].
- [7] Roe, J. (2021). Global responsibility: An exploratory corpus assisted discourse analysis of the Rohingya crisis in online media. *Journal of Modern Languages*, 31(1), 1–21.
- [8] Littlejohn, S. W., Foss, K. A., & Oetzel, J. G. (2021). *Theories of human communication* (12th ed.). Waveland Press.
- [9] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- [10] DeJonckheere, M., Vaughn, L. M., James, T. G., & Schondelmeyer, A. C. (2024). Qualitative thematic analysis in a mixed methods study: Guidelines and considerations for integration. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 18(3), 258–269.