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# Contextual Analysis of ‘Refugee’ in French Online Press from 2014 to 2024<sup>3</sup>

*The term “refugee” has been at the centre of global and national debates, especially in the context of migration crises, policy changes, and media narratives. Particularly since 2015, news coverage has played a decisive role in shaping public problem definitions and contextualisation. In the French context, online news outlets have developed distinct discursive repertoires that construct refugees through humanitarian, political, security, and economic perspectives, often fluctuating with electoral cycles and crisis events. Examining the representation of refugees in the media provides, therefore, insights into how media shapes public understanding of this term and reflects broader societal attitudes, making it a timely and pressing subject.*

*This study focuses on the contextual analysis of how “refugee” is represented in the French online press, emphasising the evolution of language, framing, and sentiment over a decade. The longitudinal aspect (2014–2024) allows tracking changes in discourse over time and in response to key events. The media framing aspect highlights how different media outlets construct narratives, revealing potential biases or ideological leanings. The linguistic aspect explores how language shapes perceptions, influencing policy and public opinion. By combining these aspects, the study offers a holistic view of the term “refugee” in media discourse.*

*Academically, this research contributes to fields like media studies, migration studies, and discourse analysis. It bridges gaps in understanding how media narratives evolve in response to social and political contexts. Practically, the findings could inform policymakers, journalists, and advocacy groups about how media narratives impact public perception and policy-making around refugees. For the broader public, understanding media framing can promote critical media consumption and greater awareness of societal biases.*

**Keywords:** refugee representation, media framing, sentiment analysis, discourse analysis, French press, migration, narrative, political communication, critical discourse analysis, topic modelling

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## Research scope and methodology

### *Research questions and methodology*

This study investigates how refugees are represented in the French online press between 2014 and 2024 – a period marked by intensified global displacement, evolving EU migration policy, and recurring political crises. Amid these dynamics, the term *réfugié* [refugee] has become central to France’s public discourse, reflecting not only humanitarian concern but also contestation over national identity, integration, and security. By analysing the concept’s framework, emotional charge, and narrative, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the media’s role in shaping public opinion and policy preferences toward refugees.

A brief methodological note on terminology is warranted. This study focuses on the French lexical token *réfugié* because of its discursive salience and legal visibility in French public debates: in French-language reports the term appears frequently and has institutional resonance, making it a useful entry point for tracking representations in the media. At the same time, contemporary news coverage often blurs *réfugié*, *demandeur d’asile*, and broader labels such as *migrant* or *immigrant*. We treat this terminological conflation as an empirical observation rather than an assumed equivalence; the paper therefore analyses how the *réfugié* label is used in practice while acknowledging the broader conceptual field of migration terminology. A similar terminological practice was used by several Anglo-American newsrooms during the 2015 migration crisis. For instance, the BBC and CNN appended a standard editorial disclaimer noting that “migrant” functions as an umbrella category encompassing refugees, asylum seekers, and other mobile populations. This illustrates that the conceptual overlap observed in the French corpus is not nationally specific but part of a broader media tendency toward terminological generalisation.<sup>4</sup>

The research is guided by three central questions:

1. What are the dominant media frames – humanitarian, security, political, or economic – associated with the term *réfugié* in the French online press?
2. How does refugee coverage evolve over time, particularly in response to key events such as the European migration crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and political elections?
3. What is the tone (positive, negative, neutral) of media coverage on refugees, and what recurring narratives structure this coverage?

These questions are designed to bridge empirical analysis and theoretical inquiry, positioning the media not simply as a passive mirror of events but as an active agent in the construction of meaning and power. Framing theory, sentiment analysis, and discourse analysis are integrated to examine how media outlets organise language, attribute agency, and mediate emotions in their representation of refugees. The study

<sup>4</sup> See SEO-KAVAKLI 2022; BOUAGGA-SCALETTERIS-TCHOLAKOVA 2021.



builds on previous literature that highlights the ideological function of framing in migration discourse,<sup>5</sup> while responding to a gap in longitudinal, digital-focused research.

The French context is particularly significant. France ranks second in the EU in absolute terms of asylum applications and has seen sharp increases in refugee arrivals since 2014.<sup>6</sup> The attack in 2015 on the Bataclan concert hall in Paris has additionally negatively shaped public debates across Europe around immigrants and refugees, coinciding with the refugee reception crisis and the large scale of asylum applications.<sup>7</sup> Political and cultural fault lines – around *laïcité*, integration, and national identity – further shape media narratives and public attitudes. French newspapers, which span a broad ideological spectrum, are known to reflect distinct editorial logics that may condition how refugee-related issues are framed.<sup>8</sup> These dynamics provide fertile ground for analysing the strategic and symbolic role of the press in refugee discourse.

A decade-long period of analysis (2014–2024) enables the study to capture both crisis-specific and cyclical trends. Key moments – such as the 2015 refugee crisis, the 2020 pandemic, and the 2024 European and French legislative elections – are treated as pivotal junctures for discourse shifts. These events provide the temporal scaffolding for tracing how representations of refugees adapt in response to geopolitical developments and domestic political agendas.

The study focuses on the digital editions of three major French newspapers: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération*. These media outlets were selected for their ideological diversity and wide reach in the French public sphere. *Le Figaro* is typically associated with centre-right and conservative views; *Le Monde* occupies a centrist or institutional position; and *Libération* is aligned with leftist, progressive politics. By comparing these media outlets, the study interrogates whether and how editorial ideology influences representational strategies.

In summary, the objective of this research is to uncover how refugees are framed, which narratives dominate, and how tone and representation shift across time and media outlets. By triangulating framing, sentiment, and discourse analysis within a longitudinal design, the study offers both empirical insights and theoretical contributions to media and migration scholarship.

### *Corpus and sampling strategy*

To explore how refugees have been represented in the French online press, this study employs a purposefully constructed corpus of 271 articles published between 2014 and 2024. The selection spans three ideologically diverse national newspapers (see Table 1) – *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération* – each of which maintains a prominent digital presence and holds significant influence in French public discourse.

<sup>5</sup> KHOSRAVINIK 2009; VAN DIJK 1993; CHOULIARAKI-ZABOROWSKI 2017.

<sup>6</sup> BOUAGGA-SCALETTRARIS-TCHOLAKOVA 2021.

<sup>7</sup> NUSSIO-BOVE-STEELE 2019.

<sup>8</sup> GOTTLÖB-BOOMGAARDEN 2019.



Table 1: Article distribution by newspaper and year (2014–2024)

Newspaper	Date of publication (year)	Counts	% of total	Cumulative %
Le Figaro	2014	12	4.4	4.4
	2015	22	8.1	12.5
	2020	21	7.7	20.3
	2024	19	7.0	27.3
Le Monde	2014	15	5.5	32.8
	2015	27	10.0	42.8
	2020	23	8.5	51.3
	2024	30	11.1	62.4
Libération	2014	15	5.5	67.9
	2015	36	13.3	81.2
	2020	21	7.7	88.9
	2024	30	11.1	100.0

Source: compiled by the authors

The corpus was compiled using a systematic keyword-based retrieval strategy. Articles were collected using the French-language term *réfugié* as the primary keyword, ensuring thematic relevance and conceptual consistency. To account for the longitudinal dimension of the study, sampling was conducted across four strategically selected years: 2014, 2015, 2020, and 2024. Each of these years is connected to a major political or humanitarian event: 1. the initial increase in asylum applications and early signs of the European migration crisis (2014); 2. the peak of the 2015 refugee crisis; 3. the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on border regimes and public discourse (2020); and 4. the 2024 European and French legislative elections, during which migration was once again a salient campaign issue. To ensure both temporal depth and comparability, articles were collected from three months within each year: January, May, and September. This triadic sampling strategy allowed the study to capture coverage across different seasons and political cycles, thereby minimising bias associated with isolated events and enhancing the robustness of the longitudinal analysis.

To minimise bias and ensure consistency across media outlets and years, the study excluded non-relevant sections (e.g. sports, opinion columns, arts and culture), retaining only hard news and feature stories directly addressing refugee-related topics. Articles were sourced from the online archives of the respective media outlets and exported in full-text format for pre-processing.



To ensure that articles meet the inclusion criteria, each entry was manually reviewed and categorised based on relevance, type, and thematic focus. Duplicate entries, short bulletins, and articles with only tangential references to refugees were excluded. The final corpus was then cleaned and annotated with discursive features using CATMA (Computer Assisted Text Markup and Analysis),<sup>9</sup> and then structured using spreadsheet software to facilitate quantitative analysis. The pre-processing steps included lemmatisation, sentence segmentation, and the addition of metadata such as year, medium, frame, tone, and narrative type.

This dual-stage sampling – temporal and thematic – allows both synchronic and diachronic analysis. It ensures sufficient variation across contexts while enabling targeted comparisons across media outlets and moments of intensified political or humanitarian attention. In addition, this approach addresses limitations in earlier media-migration studies that often focus on isolated events or single-frame typologies without contextualising change over time.

In sum, the corpus construction and sampling strategy employed here ensure methodological rigour, temporal sensitivity, and ideological breadth. These attributes are essential for capturing the complex and evolving nature of refugee discourse in France's digital media landscape.

### *Analytical techniques*

To address the study's core research questions and capture the multi-dimensional nature of refugee representation, this research adopted an integrative analytical strategy that combines lexical analysis, topic modelling, framing theory, sentiment scoring, critical discourse analysis, and statistical modelling. This multi-method design allowed both macro-level pattern detection and micro-level discursive interpretation.

The first layer of analysis involved the examination of sentiment polarity across the corpus. All articles were first manually translated from French to English using validated translation protocols to preserve contextual meaning. Subsequently, sentiment analysis was conducted using a lexicon-based approach in R, calibrated for social science research. Each article was categorised as carrying positive, neutral, or negative sentiment, providing a foundational understanding of the emotional tone underlying refugee coverage.

This process was complemented by lexical frequency analysis, identifying dominant keywords and evaluative expressions associated with different sentiment categories and frames. The results of sentiment scoring were integrated into the master dataset and cross-tabulated with year, media outlet, and frame type (see Figure 1).

<sup>9</sup> HORSTMANN 2020.



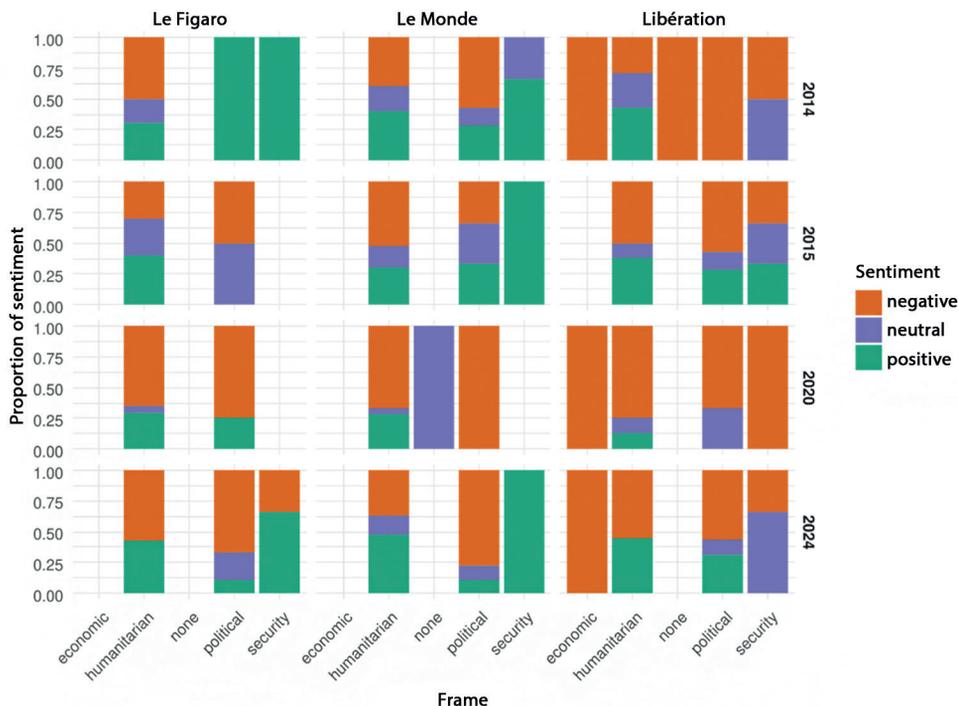


Figure 1: Sentiment distribution across frames by year and newspaper

Source: compiled by the authors

To extract thematic structures from the corpus, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)<sup>10</sup> was used for unsupervised topic modelling. The LDA model was trained on the lemmatised, tokenised corpus using optimal parameter settings (10 topics, alpha = 0.1) to identify recurring clusters of co-occurring terms.

Each topic was qualitatively labelled based on its top keywords and manually validated through contextual reading of exemplar articles. Topic prevalence was analysed across time and media outlet to detect shifts in thematic emphasis (e.g. from humanitarian aid to border policy).

Parallel to topic modelling, a categorical variable labelled frame was assigned to each article based on four predefined frame types: humanitarian, political, security, and economic. Frame coding was guided by criteria from existing migration media studies<sup>11</sup> and cross-validated between human annotators for consistency. Frame frequency was then examined across years and publications using chi-square tests to explore potential ideological or contextual patterns.

<sup>10</sup> GRÜN-HORNİK 2011.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. EBERL et al. 2018.



To capture the discursive construction of refugee subjects, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach was employed. Using the CATMA platform, six key discursive features were manually annotated:

- Agency attribution (expressions assigning responsibility; e.g. *responsable* [responsible], *accuser* [to accuse], *decider* [to decide]): highlights who is portrayed as acting or responsible, revealing power relations and assigning blame in media narratives
- Nominalisation (nouns formed from verbs; e.g. suffixes -tion, -ment): abstracts actions into concepts, often obscuring responsibility or making events seem inevitable
- Modality (modal verbs expressing necessity or possibility; e.g. *pouvoir* [can], *devoir* [must]): conveys certainty, obligation, or possibility, shaping how claims or threats are presented and influencing audience perception
- Charged lexical choice (emotionally loaded words; negative: *crise* [crisis], *menace* [threat]; positive: *espoir* [hope], *paix* [peace]): frames issues with emotional or ideological tones that affect readers' attitudes
- Metaphor use (common metaphors, often war-related; e.g. *combat* [fight], *bataille* [battle]): uses figurative language to simplify complex topics and evoke emotional responses
- Passivation (passive voice, usually *être* [to be] + past participle): downplays or hides agents, minimising accountability in reporting

Each feature was coded as binary (0 = absent, 1 = present), enabling both qualitative interpretation and quantitative analysis. These annotations supported the discussion of symbolic exclusion and affective regimes (RQ3) and allowed comparative analysis across media outlets and years (see Figure 2).

To test associations between variables, a series of statistical analyses were conducted in jamovi (version 2.6), an open-source statistical software.<sup>12</sup> These included:

- chi-square tests for categorical associations (e.g. frame by year, sentiment by media outlet)
- ANOVAs and Welch's tests for differences in sentiment across groups
- ordinal and binary logistic regression to model predictors of sentiment and narrative types
- multinomial regression to assess the relationship between frames and discursive variables

Where assumptions of normality or homoscedasticity were violated, robust alternatives were employed. Regression outputs were interpreted in light of theoretical expectations, with special attention to interactions between sentiment, frame, and narrative variables.

Taken together, this mixed-method design allowed a layered understanding of refugee representation, linking macro-level media trends with micro-level linguistic structures. Each method was carefully selected to answer specific research questions and collectively provide a comprehensive portrait of the dynamics shaping refugee discourse in the French online press.

<sup>12</sup> The jamovi project, 2025: <https://www.jamovi.org>



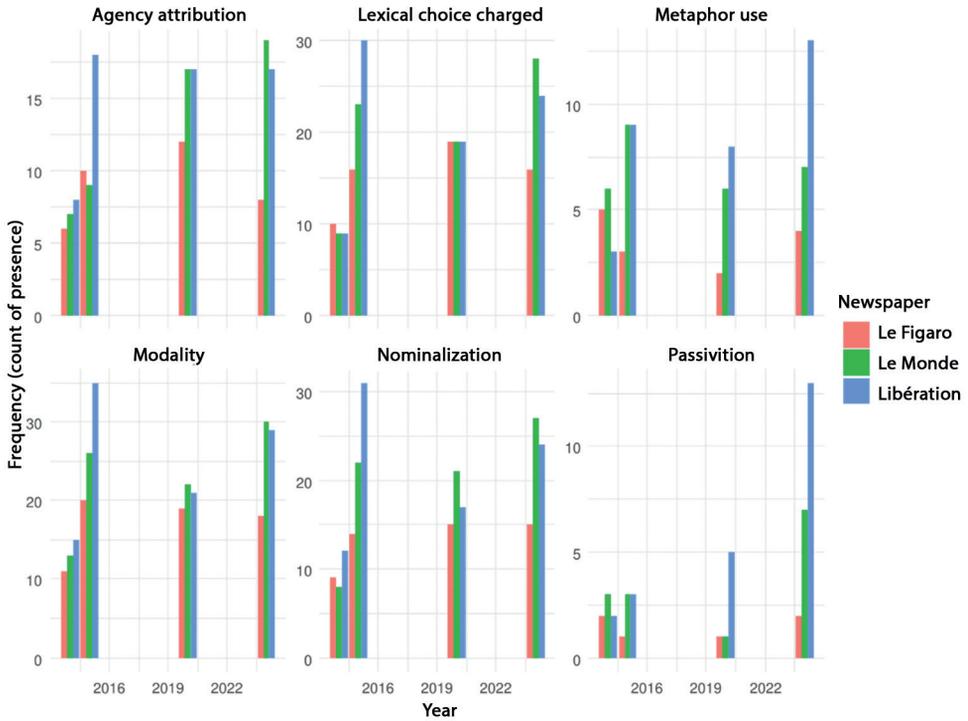


Figure 2: Discursive features frequency by year and newspaper

Source: compiled by the authors

### Research ethics and limitations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of this study, particularly given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the sociopolitical implications of refugee representation. While this research relied exclusively on publicly available online media content, care was taken to ensure responsible and reflexive engagement with the data, especially in the annotation and interpretation of texts concerning vulnerable populations.

No human subjects were directly involved in the study, and as such, formal ethics board approval was not required. Nonetheless, the study adhered to ethical guidelines for digital research, including the anonymisation of data where individual journalists were named, and the exclusion of user-generated content (e.g. comment sections) that could not be verified or contextualised. Moreover, attention was given to avoiding any reproduction of dehumanising or stigmatising language in the presentation of findings, particularly when quoting original article fragments or describing metaphorical framings.



A further ethical concern involved the handling of machine translation in sentiment analysis. Although articles were translated from French to English using validated tools, there is always the risk of semantic loss or distortion. To mitigate this, a manual check of sentiment labelling was conducted on a stratified sample of articles across years and media outlets, ensuring alignment with contextual meanings and linguistic nuances.

Despite the study's rigorous design, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the dataset includes only three national newspapers – *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération*. While ideologically diverse, these media outlets do not fully capture the plurality of the French media landscape. Exclusion of regional, tabloid, or digital-native sources may underrepresent alternative or more extreme discourses, particularly those found on the far-right or within citizen journalism platforms.

Second, the reliance on supervised frame categorisation introduces a degree of subjectivity. While frame definitions were clearly operationalised and cross-validated, some articles contained overlapping or ambiguous framings that could not be easily coded into discrete categories. Similarly, the binary coding of discursive features (e.g. presence/absence of metaphor) cannot fully capture the qualitative richness or rhetorical intent of the original language.

Third, the study focused exclusively on production-level discourse, meaning the content created by journalists and editors. It did not assess reception or audience interpretations of media narratives. As a result, the findings reflect how refugees are represented, but not necessarily how those representations are internalised or acted upon by the public. Future research incorporating audience studies, reader feedback, or digital engagement metrics could help bridge this gap.

Finally, while the study provides a comprehensive longitudinal analysis, it is limited to a ten-year period and to specific events deemed salient by editorial agendas. As migration dynamics and media technologies continue to evolve, it remains crucial to revisit these questions in future cycles to assess how emerging crises, policy shifts, or algorithmic curation practices reshape refugee discourse.

In sum, the research balances methodological rigour with ethical sensitivity, while acknowledging the epistemological and practical boundaries within which it was conducted. These limitations inform the interpretation of results and suggest clear directions for future work in media-migration studies.

## Theoretical framework

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse on migration. Far from being a neutral channel of information, media functions as a discursive apparatus that constructs and reinforces societal perceptions through language, which in itself plays a central role in the creation of meaning and the organisation of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> The communicative function of media is therefore not only descriptive but performative – it contextualises social issues and circulates interpretative frames that mould public understanding.

<sup>13</sup> MONTEIRO–ARAÚJO–AZEVEDO 2024.



Scholars have long emphasised the media's ability to amplify, suppress, or transform particular topics, thereby facilitating what Foucault would call a "regime of truth".<sup>14</sup> As Khosravini (2009) argues, media narratives converge into dominant representations that function as contextual frameworks, both reflecting and shaping societal ideologies and power relations. In this regard, critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a vital methodological lens. Van Dijk highlights that discourse not only mirrors social hierarchies but also sustains them by privileging dominant actors – politicians, journalists, and institutional voices – while marginalising subaltern perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

Dominance, as van Dijk conceptualises it, entails the exercise of social power by elites or institutions, often manifesting in political, cultural, ethnic, and gendered inequalities. This power is reproduced discursively through mechanisms such as representation, legitimation, denial, or the strategic silencing of certain narratives. Media access is thus a key resource in the struggle over meaning. While most individuals have limited capacity to shape public discourse, institutional actors enjoy structural advantages that allow them to define and disseminate hegemonic interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

This structural asymmetry has concrete implications for refugee representation. Chouliaraki and Zaborowski show that news coverage often collectivises refugees while excluding their voices, thereby rendering them passive subjects in their own stories.<sup>17</sup> The result is a form of symbolic misrecognition in which refugees appear in the media not as agents but as abstract problems to be solved. This process reflects what van Dijk terms the "management of social representations", whereby dominant groups maintain control over public discourse and thus over the parameters of political and moral legitimacy.<sup>18</sup>

In this way, media functions not just as a reflection of public opinion, but as a strategic site where power is exercised and contested. Understanding media as a battleground for symbolic power is essential to analysing how specific frames, tones, and narratives emerge and are sustained in refugee coverage.

### *Media framing and the social construction of refugee*

The study of media representation in migration research typically emphasises two key mechanisms of influence: agenda setting and framing. The former concerns how media determines which topics receive attention, thereby guiding public focus. The latter, more conceptually rich, investigates how particular representations shape interpretation by highlighting certain aspects of an issue while omitting others.<sup>19</sup>

To ensure conceptual clarity, this study adopts Entman's definition of framing as the selection and prioritisation of certain aspects of perceived reality in order to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or policy

<sup>14</sup> FOUCAULT 1975.

<sup>15</sup> VAN DIJK 1993.

<sup>16</sup> VAN DIJK 1993.

<sup>17</sup> CHOULIARAKI-ZABOROWSKI 2017.

<sup>18</sup> VAN DIJK 1993.

<sup>19</sup> ENTMAN 1993.



recommendation.<sup>20</sup> Building on this approach, the analysis employs four analytically distinct frame types. *Humanitarian frame* depicts refugees as vulnerable individuals requiring assistance or protection, often foregrounding suffering, victimisation, rescue, or human rights concerns. This frame is typically activated through references to humanitarian obligations, aid provision, reception conditions, and moral responsibilities. *Political frame* resents refugee movements as matters of political contestation, governance, or institutional decision-making. Coverage emphasises policy debates, party competition, EU-level negotiations, and the strategic use of refugee issues as political resources. *Security frame* constructs refugees as potential sources of threat or risk, linking mobility to border control, crime, terrorism, instability, or challenges to public order. It is especially reinforced by problem- and crisis-centred reporting. *Economic frame*, lastly, portrays refugees in terms of economic costs, benefits, or burdens, such as impacts on welfare systems, labour markets, public spending, housing, or local services.<sup>21</sup>

Frames differ from narratives in important ways.<sup>22</sup> They supply the interpretive lens, whereas narratives provide the storyline, the sequential logic through which actors, motives, and consequences are connected. In this study, *narrative construction* refers to how specific articles assemble causal or moral plots, while *narrative trends* denote recurring patterns across the corpus. For analytic transparency, the study explicitly codes eight narrative categories: *victimhood*, *human rights*, *political tool*, *crisis response*, *threat*, *burden*, *institutional failure*, and *collective solidarity*. These categories appear variably across frames, allowing the analysis to distinguish between structural interpretive patterns and the concrete storylines through which refugees are positioned in public discourse.

Television coverage in particular has been shown to reinforce perceptions of threat. Jacobs and van der Linden found that media narratives about North African immigrants in Flanders frequently invoked economic, cultural, and security challenges.<sup>23</sup> Such repetitive framing heightens salience, deepens intergroup divisions, and can harden attitudes, particularly among economically insecure populations.

Importantly, refugee-related discourse often incorporates multiple issue-specific frames simultaneously, reflecting the multidimensionality of forced migration. These overlapping frames influence not only public perception but also policy preferences, contributing to restrictive immigration stances.

Generic frames, by contrast, operate through broad narrative tropes. A common example is negativity framing, which presents immigration as a crisis or invasion. This is often accompanied by metaphorical language – waves, floods, or hordes – that dramatises the perceived threat. A recent qualitative study by McCann et al. revealed that during the 2015 Paris attacks, tabloid media significantly escalated the use of securitised language, suggesting links between refugees and terrorism. Even during the 2022 Ukrainian refugee influx, similar narratives re-emerged, implying infiltration

<sup>20</sup> ENTMAN 1993.

<sup>21</sup> SCHLUETER–DAVIDOV 2013.

<sup>22</sup> EBERL et al. 2018.

<sup>23</sup> VAN DER LINDEN – JACOBS 2016.



risks from Russian agents.<sup>24</sup> These examples highlight how crisis frames are periodically reactivated in response to geopolitical events.

At the same time, humanitarian framing remains a persistent counter-narrative. This frame constructs refugees as vulnerable individuals deserving protection and compassion. Humanitarian appeals tend to dominate coverage during moments of acute crisis, such as shipwrecks or conflicts, yet they can coexist uneasily with security or political frames. The interplay between these divergent narratives contributes to an ambivalent media environment in which refugees are simultaneously pitied and feared.

Understanding framing practices is essential for interpreting the dominant media portrayals identified in our study. It provides the conceptual foundation for analysing how particular frames (humanitarian, security, political, or economic) dominate or recede across time and context. Moreover, it helps explain how the tone of coverage and associated narratives – such as victimhood, burden, or threat – are embedded within larger socio-political discourses.

### *Symbolic boundaries and the logic of othering*

The representation of refugees in the online press is rarely centred on the refugees themselves. Rather, coverage often reflects politically driven approaches that shape how refugees are socially perceived and interpreted. One such approach is extensivisation, which entails the detailed narration of refugees' experiences, often enriched with contextual information. This method evokes empathy by humanising the refugee condition and presenting personal hardships in a vivid, affective manner. Humanisation similarly operates through the depiction of individual refugees – by highlighting attributes such as age, gender, or physical appearance, journalists seek to make distant subjects relatable and morally proximate to the audience.

The use of metaphors is another prominent rhetorical strategy in refugee discourse. In a seminal study of British press narratives, Khosravini demonstrated that metaphors such as “floods of refugees” are not inherently pejorative, but their interpretation depends on broader socio-political contexts. While such language may initially stress the need for humanitarian action, it also risks reinforcing crisis imaginaries and securitised understandings of migration. The meaning of linguistic elements – metaphors, pluralisation, or agenda-setting – is thus contingent on the interpretive frameworks and discursive environments in which they are embedded.<sup>25</sup> For example, proximity to the migration context and the perceived motivations of refugees – such as fleeing war versus seeking economic opportunity – significantly influence how metaphors are received and operationalised in public discourse.

This contextual meaning-making is closely tied to the phenomenon of othering, whereby refugees and migrants are framed as fundamentally different from the presumed audience. Dumlao et al. emphasise that media othering constructs a symbolic boundary between the national “we” and the foreign “them”, thereby reinforcing

<sup>24</sup> MCCANN–SIENKIEWICZ–ZARD 2023.

<sup>25</sup> KHOSRAVINI 2009.



separation, deviance, and latent threat. The process of othering is not simply descriptive; it is productive – it generates distinctions, emotional responses, and political effects by encoding assumptions of alterity into seemingly neutral reporting.<sup>26</sup>

Analysing the mechanisms of refugee representation helps expose deeper patterns of categorisation, emotional resonance, and conceptual ambiguity that shape societal attitudes. These symbolic constructions gain further weight as media attention to migration has increased over the past decade, particularly in response to major geopolitical events.

However, this expanded focus has not necessarily improved the quality of coverage. According to Seo and Kavaklı, refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants (RASIM) are still portrayed through shallow frames that neglect their voices and reduce their complex lived realities to episodic incidents. Media reports often rely on event-based snapshots – border crossings, camp conditions, or policy debates – while omitting broader, structural analyses. This narrow scope leads to fragmented understandings and limits the public's capacity to view refugees as fully human agents embedded in global systems of inequality.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, conceptual confusion is common in media representations. Studies employing correlation analysis have revealed strong discursive linkages between terms such as "asylum" and "refugee", or "wave" and "migration", suggesting that these concepts are often used interchangeably.<sup>28</sup> While such associations can help the audience grasp complex phenomena, they may also obscure crucial legal, political, and experiential distinctions. Representing refugees as abstract masses – "waves", "streams", or "crises" – risks eliding individual narratives and reinforcing perceptions of threat or burden. This logic of de-individualisation feeds into broader securitising discourses and undercuts humanitarian framings.

By interrogating how symbolic boundaries are constructed in media discourse, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how framing, tone, and narrative interact to shape refugee visibility in the French press. It also highlights the need to scrutinise not only what is said about refugees but also how they are positioned within broader social imaginaries.

### *Sentiment, narratives, and affective regimes in migration discourse*

Since 2014, migration discourse in the French press has increasingly been shaped by affective regimes that rely on dramatisation and polarisation. Scholars have observed that crisis narratives – especially in times of heightened political or humanitarian tension – are often sensationalised, contributing to a binary public understanding of migration issues. According to Mistiaen and Calabrese, the French media's coverage of migration since the early 2010s has exhibited a pronounced tendency toward

<sup>26</sup> DUMLAO et al. 2024.

<sup>27</sup> SEO-KAVAKLI 2022.

<sup>28</sup> SEO-KAVAKLI 2022.



emotional dramatisation, frequently portraying migration as an urgent or destabilising phenomenon.<sup>29</sup>

This tendency was further evidenced in the work of Reddy and Thiollet, who analysed how French media have framed migration crises since 2015. They found that these narratives often oscillate between humanitarian concern and political alarmism, depending on the ideological leanings of the media outlet. Conservative-leaning newspapers tend to adopt terminology such as “migration crisis”, emphasising disorder, control, and state sovereignty. This framing tends to marginalise the lived experiences of asylum seekers and foreground themes of security, border management, and institutional strain. In contrast, more progressive media outlets are more likely to use the term “refugee crisis”, foregrounding the vulnerability and human rights dimensions of forced displacement.<sup>30</sup>

Peaks in media attention often coincide with highly visible events, such as the tragic death of Alan Kurdi in 2015, the EU–Turkey migration deal, or the dismantling of the Calais “Jungle”. These flashpoints catalyse narrative shifts but also expose deeper editorial divides. While some media outlets prioritise crisis management narratives – emphasising logistics, state capacity, or institutional responses – others construct emotionally resonant stories that frame refugees as victims in need of protection and empathy. In both cases, sentiment plays a central role in shaping audience perceptions.

By selecting specific narrative frames and emotional tones, the media does more than inform; it actively participates in constructing social meaning around refugees. These narratives shape the symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them”, mobilise compassion or fear, and influence how the public responds to migration policies and humanitarian appeals. As such, the affective regime of refugee representation is a key factor in understanding not only the tone of coverage but also its broader societal and political implications.

The interplay between sentiment, narrative, and media framing thus represents a vital mechanism through which public opinion is polarised. Media outlets contribute to dichotomous understandings of migration – crisis versus compassion, threat versus victimhood, national interest versus humanitarian duty – which, in turn, inform political debates and policy preferences across the ideological spectrum.<sup>31</sup>

### *Media, crisis, and political cycles*

Although the academic literature on media representation of refugees is rich and multifaceted, several overarching trends and notable gaps remain. Seo and Kavaklı, in their meta-analysis of refugee representation in the media, observed that scholarly interest in this field has not evolved in a linear fashion but has rather responded to specific geopolitical developments. They documented a marked rise in publications

<sup>29</sup> MISTIAEN–CALABRESE 2019.

<sup>30</sup> REDDY–THIOLLET 2025.

<sup>31</sup> REDDY–THIOLLET 2025.



following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the subsequent escalation of refugee flows into Europe after 2009.<sup>32</sup> This surge reflects the media's pivotal role in narrating large-scale humanitarian crises and the parallel academic response to understanding the social and political ramifications of such narratives.

However, the researchers also noted a significant decline in scholarly output around 2020. This downturn coincides with a global shift in media and academic focus toward Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and associated public health and political concerns. Such redirection in attention may have temporarily eclipsed interest in migration-related topics, even though refugee issues persisted during this time.

In addition to temporal patterns, the literature is characterised by geographical and methodological biases. Most studies centre on European contexts – particularly the United Kingdom and Spain – leaving other regions underrepresented. Furthermore, qualitative approaches dominate the field, with discourse analysis being the most prevalent methodology. Visual framing, despite its potential for revealing subtle representational strategies, remains significantly less explored.<sup>33</sup>

These findings are especially relevant when considering the relationship between media representation and political cycles. Migration coverage often spikes in response to election periods, political negotiations at the European Union level, or institutional responses to crises. These cycles shape not only the volume but also the framing and tone of refugee narratives. For instance, refugee representation may shift from humanitarian to security-frames depending on whether a political context demands empathy, deterrence, or mobilisation.

In the case of France, as this research explores, it is crucial to understand how such cycles – marked by events like the 2015 migration crisis, the 2020 pandemic, and various national and European elections – have influenced shifts in media discourse. By situating French press coverage within these broader temporal and political dynamics, we gain a deeper understanding of how refugee narratives are constructed, contested, and circulated in times of social and institutional flux.

## Empirical findings

### *Frame distribution across time and media outlets*

The distribution of media frames – humanitarian, political, security, and economic – is a central concern of this study, as framing shapes both public interpretation and political responses to migration. A comprehensive frequency analysis reveals that humanitarian framing is overwhelmingly dominant in the French online press, accounting for 66.4% of the articles in the dataset. In contrast, political frames represent 24.4%, security frames 7.0%, and economic frames appear in only 1.5% of all articles (see Table 2).

<sup>32</sup> SEO-KAVAKLI 2022.

<sup>33</sup> SEO-KAVAKLI 2022.



Table 2: Frequency distribution of frames across the dataset

Frame	Counts	% of total	Cumulative %
economic	4	1.5	1.5
humanitarian	180	66.4	67.9
none	2	0.7	68.6
political	66	24.4	93.0
security	19	7.0	100.0

Source: compiled by the authors

Disaggregated by newspaper, *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* favour humanitarian frames in 71.6% and 73.0% of articles respectively, while *Libération*, though still humanitarian-leaning, presents a more diversified distribution with 56.9% humanitarian and 29.4% political frames (see Table 3).

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of frame type by newspaper

Frame		Newspaper			Total
		Le Figaro	Le Monde	Libération	
economic	Count	0	0	4	4
	% within column	0.0	0.0	3.9	
humanitarian	Count	54	68	58	180
	% within column	73.0	71.6	56.9	
none	Count	0	1	1	2
	% within column	0.0	1.1	1.0	
political	Count	16	20	30	66
	% within column	21.6	21.1	29.4	
security	Count	4	6	9	19
	% within column	5.4	6.3	8.8	
Total	Count	74	95	102	271
	% within column	100.0	100.0	100.0	

Source: compiled by the authors

However, chi-square tests reveal no statistically significant variation across media outlets in the use of frames ( $\chi^2 = 12.18$ ,  $p = 0.143$ ), indicating that observed differences in framing may not be attributable to systematic editorial or ideological factors.

Temporally, the highest concentration of humanitarian framing appears in 2015, during the height of the European migration crisis (81.2% of all 2015 articles), followed by 2020 (83.1%), a year marked by pandemic-related coverage. Political framing rises sharply in 2024, a year aligned with election cycles, suggesting an instrumentalisation of the migration discourse for political purposes (43.0% of 2024 articles were politically framed; see Table 4).



Table 4: Cross-tabulation of frame type by year

		Date of publication (year)				
Frame		2014	2015	2020	2024	Total
economic	Count	1	0	1	2	4
	% within column	2.4	0.0	1.5	2.5	
humanitarian	Count	22	69	54	35	180
	% within column	52.4	81.2	83.1	44.3	
none	Count	1	0	1	0	2
	% within column	2.4	0.0	1.5	0.0	
political	Count	12	12	8	34	66
	% within column	28.6	14.1	12.3	43.0	
security	Count	6	4	1	8	19
	% within column	14.3	4.7	1.5	10.1	
Total	Count	42	85	65	79	271
	% within column	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	

Source: compiled by the authors

The graphical visualisation (Figure 3) illustrates a framing shift from humanitarian to political narratives in 2024. While the humanitarian frame remains consistently dominant, it dips in years associated with heightened political activity. This aligns with the findings of Eberl et al., who noted that frames are often reactive to macro-political contexts.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, this distributional analysis suggests that while French media outlets largely default to humanitarian framings, electoral cycles and geopolitical events influence the rise of alternative frames, especially political and security ones. These patterns support the claim that media coverage is not static but rather evolves in accordance with external triggers and institutional biases. This substantiates the first and second research questions by confirming the dominance of humanitarian frames while exposing how temporal and editorial dynamics modulate the prevalence of other frame types.

<sup>34</sup> EBERL et al. 2018.



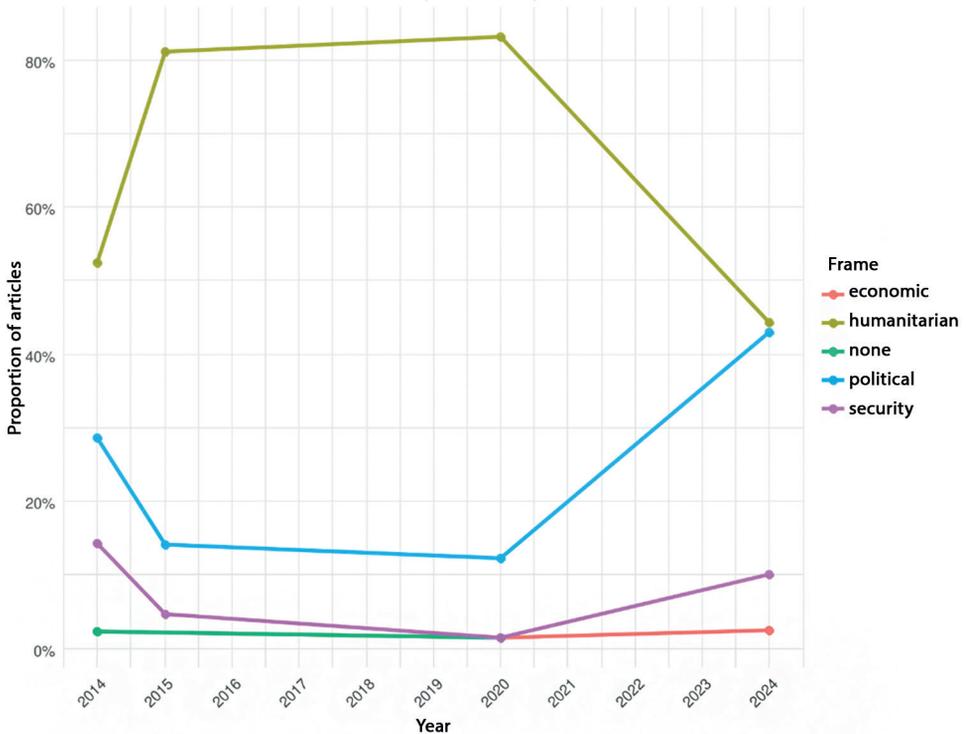


Figure 3: Evolution of media frames over time (2014–2024)

Source: compiled by the authors

### Topic modelling results

To uncover the thematic structure of refugee-related media discourse, we conducted Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling on the corpus of articles. The model revealed a robust set of 10 dominant topics, each corresponding to recurring patterns of language use and content focus in the dataset. These topics, while statistically derived, were interpreted and labelled through qualitative analysis of their top terms and contextual associations.

The longitudinal visualisation (Figure 4) reveals temporal dynamics in topic salience. For instance, Topic 10 (“Syrian Refugees and Sea”) peaked in 2015, aligning with the visual coverage of Mediterranean crossings during the height of the European migration crisis. In contrast, topics related to Law and Policy (Topic 7) and EU Policy (Topic 5) gain prominence in 2020 and 2024, likely in response to institutional responses and electoral debates on immigration reform.



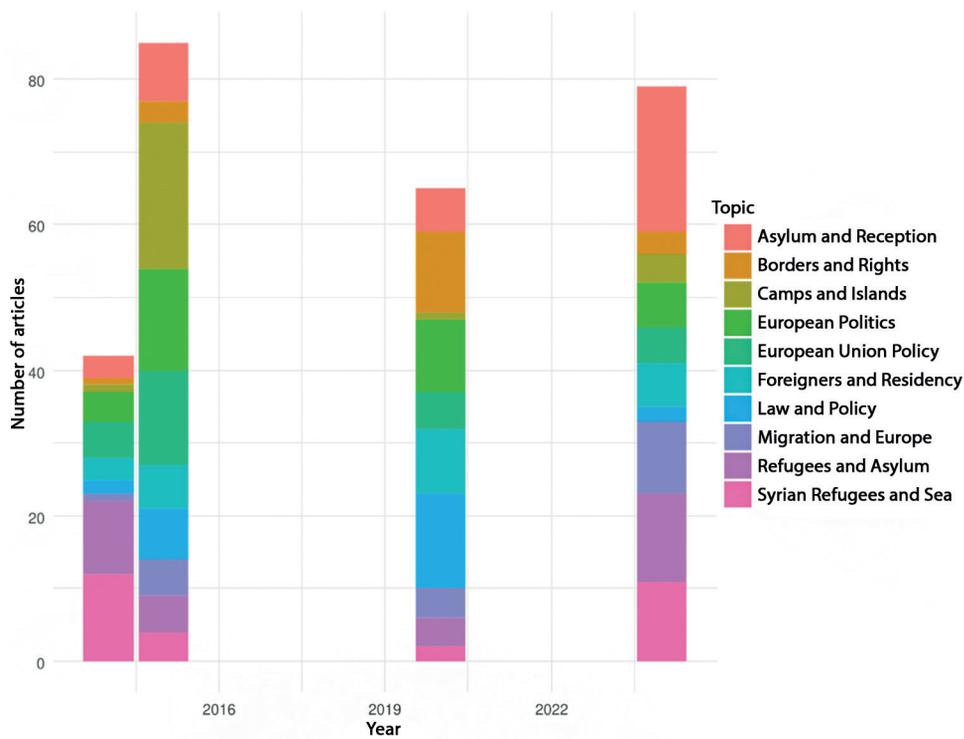


Figure 4: Topic distribution over time (2014–2024)

Source: compiled by the authors

Topic proportions also correlate with specific frames. A dot plot of topic-frame associations (see Figure 5) shows that: Humanitarian frames dominate topics on reception, asylum, and sea crossings (Topics 1, 9, 10). Political frames are tied to EU Policy and European Politics (Topics 4 and 5). Security frames emerge more strongly in topics around Camps and Islands and Borders and Rights (Topics 2 and 3).



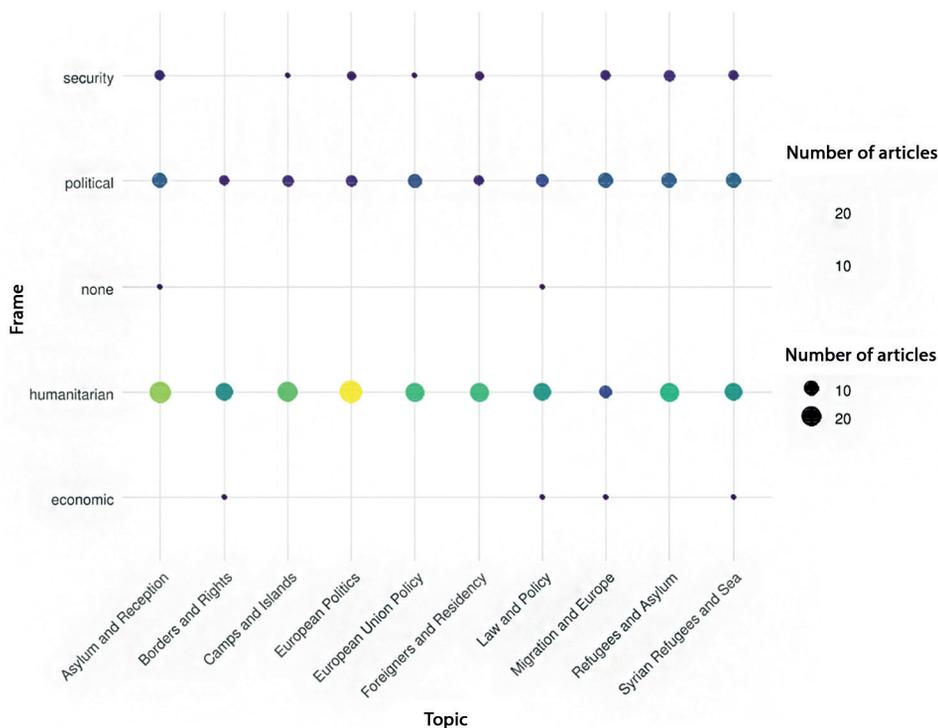


Figure 5: Dot plot of topics and frames

Source: compiled by the authors

These relationships suggest that framing and topical content are not independent. Rather, editorial emphasis on a topic often brings with it a preferred interpretive frame – e.g. Topic 3 (Camps and Islands) is framed through both humanitarian and security lenses, depending on the media outlet and year.

Moreover, a newspaper-specific breakdown (Figure 6) demonstrates divergent topical emphases. *Le Monde* gives more space to EU and French politics, as well as legal and policy debates. *Libération* is more likely to cover refugee reception and humanitarian stories. *Le Figaro* leans more heavily into security-related themes, especially in post-2015 coverage.



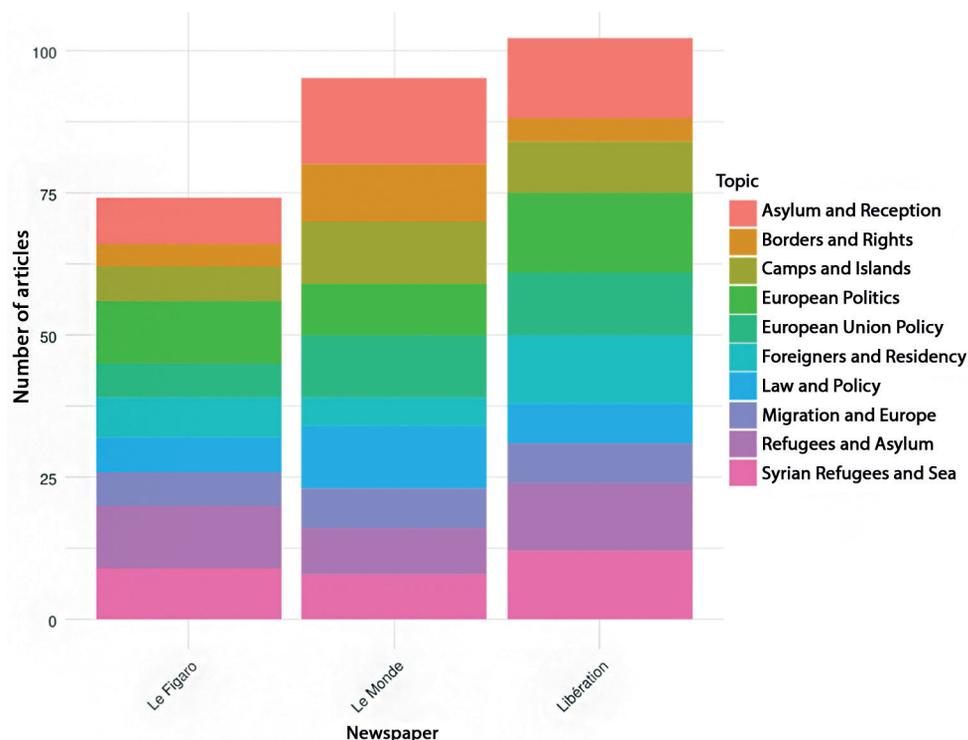


Figure 6: Topic coverage by newspaper

Source: compiled by the authors

Together, the topic modelling findings deepen our understanding of how content priorities evolve over time, align with political events, and shape how different newspapers represent refugee-related issues. These findings support the first and second research questions, revealing both the diversity of topics covered and how they shift in tandem with major political and humanitarian developments.

### *Sentiment analysis and narrative trends*

To assess the evaluative tone of refugee coverage in the French online press, we performed a sentiment analysis on the entire corpus. Each article was classified as having a positive, neutral, or negative tone, based on manually validated machine translation followed by automated sentiment scoring in English.

Negative sentiment dominated overall, but a temporal breakdown (Table 5) reveals meaningful variation. Negative tone was particularly prevalent in 2020 (69.2%) and 2015 (44.7%), reflecting media responses to security incidents and the intensification of political rhetoric. In contrast, positive sentiment peaked in 2024, aligning with a noticeable uptick in humanitarian framing and narrative elements focused on solidarity and rights.



Table 5: Sentiment distribution over time (2014–2024)

Sentiment label		Date of publication year				Total
		2014	2015	2020	2024	
negative	Count	20	38	45	42	145
	% within column	47.6	44.7	69.2	53.2	
neutral	Count	8	17	6	10	41
	% within column	19.0	20.0	9.2	12.7	
positive	Count	14	30	14	27	85
	% within column	33.3	35.3	21.5	34.2	
Total	Count	42	85	65	79	271
	% within column	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	

Source: compiled by the authors

Examining sentiment by media outlet (Table 6), *Le Figaro* consistently exhibited the highest proportion of negative sentiment (50%), while *Libération* was more evenly balanced, with positive sentiment accounting for 26.5% of its coverage. *Le Monde* occupied an intermediate position, leaning toward a more neutral evaluative tone.

Table 6: Sentiment distribution by newspaper

Sentiment label		Newspaper			Total
		Le Figaro	Le Monde	Libération	
negative	Count	37	48	60	145
	% within column	50.0	50.5	58.8	
neutral	Count	12	14	15	41
	% within column	16.2	14.7	14.7	
positive	Count	25	33	27	85
	% within column	33.8	34.7	26.5	
Total	Count	74	95	102	271
	% within column	100.0	100.0	100.0	

Source: compiled by the authors

To uncover the narrative structures underpinning these tones, we analysed eight recurring narrative types: political tool, victimhood, threat, burden, human rights, crisis response, among others. Their frequencies across media outlets and years suggest these narratives serve as discursive building blocks aligned with specific sentiments and frames (Table 7). For example: The “victimhood” narrative was strongly associated with positive sentiment, often appearing in humanitarian-themed stories, particularly in *Libération* and *Le Monde* in 2024. The “threat” and “burden” narratives correlated significantly with negative sentiment, dominating *Le Figaro* reporting in 2015 and 2020. The “crisis response” narrative gained visibility during politically charged moments (e.g. Calais evictions, EU summits), serving to structure both neutral and politicised reporting.



Table 7: Logistic regression: predictors of narrative types (summary)

Narrative	Significant predictor(s)	p-value
political tool	sentiment (positive)	.010
victimhood	frame (political > humanitarian)	.040
burden	sentiment (negative)	.021
human rights	sentiment (positive), frame	.040
threat	(marginal) sentiment (positive)	.067
crisis response	newspaper (Le Monde < Le Figaro, marginal)	.059

Source: compiled by the authors

These regressions confirm that sentiment is a strong predictor of narrative construction, supporting the third research question. For instance, a positive sentiment significantly increases the likelihood of deploying “political tool” and “human rights” narratives, while negative sentiment predicts the use of “burden” and “threat” narratives.

Additionally, the framing-narrative nexus becomes evident: articles with security or political frames disproportionately deploy threat or burden narratives, reinforcing public fears and justifying control-oriented policies. Conversely, humanitarian-framed articles invoke victimhood and human rights narratives, legitimising protective and empathetic responses.

This data triangulation supports the argument that tone and narrative are not incidental but function as key elements of refugee representation. They co-evolve with framing practices and respond to event triggers such as the 2015 migration crisis, the 2020 pandemic, and 2024 elections, amplifying or mitigating societal polarisation.

### *Discourse features and representational practices*

Beyond framing, sentiment, and topic salience, the nuanced discursive construction of refugee representation warrants attention. Through detailed annotation using CATMA, this study examined how French online press constructs refugee subjects via discursive mechanisms such as passivation, nominalisation, metaphor use, modality, agency attribution, and charged lexical choices. These linguistic and rhetorical features not only reflect ideological positions but also serve to subtly encode hierarchies of voice, responsibility, and affect.

Descriptive analysis reveals substantial variance in the frequency of discursive features across the corpus (see Table 7). Modality markers (e.g. “must”, “can”, “should”), which suggest obligation or possibility, are by far the most prevalent, appearing in 95.6% of the articles. This suggests a dominant rhetorical mode that frames refugee-related developments in terms of necessity or contingency – indicating active judgment or policy orientation. Charged lexical choice, including emotionally loaded or evaluative language (e.g. “crisis”, “threat”), also appears frequently (81.9%), highlighting a media tendency to dramatise or moralise refugee discourse.



In contrast, features like passivation (e.g. “refugees were deported”) are relatively rare, occurring in only 15.9% of the texts, but their presence is significant: such constructions can obscure agency and responsibility by omitting actors. Metaphor use is similarly moderate (27.7%), with figurative language (e.g. “waves of refugees”) serving to abstract or exaggerate refugee phenomena. Nominalisation, where processes are turned into abstract nouns (e.g. “migration” instead of “migrants migrate”), appears in 79.3% of the articles, pointing to a formal register that may obscure individual agency. Agency attribution is present in just over half the corpus (54.6%), suggesting frequent, though not universal, efforts to assign responsibility or initiative (see Table 8).

Table 8: Descriptive frequencies of discursive features (summary)

Discursive feature	Presence (%)	Absence (%)
modality	95.6	4.4
lexical choice: charged	81.9	18.1
nominalization	79.3	20.7
agency attribution	54.6	45.4
metaphor use	27.7	72.3
passivation	15.9	84.1

Source: compiled by the authors

When disaggregated by newspaper (see Figure 7), *Libération* shows the most frequent use of nominalisation, modality, and charged language, reinforcing its tendency to engage in interpretative or opinion-driven writing. *Le Monde* exhibits balanced use of agency and modality but is more restrained in metaphor usage. *Le Figaro*, in contrast, shows lower overall levels of discursive complexity, with particularly sparse metaphor usage and agency attribution – potentially aligning with its more conservative and institutional tone.



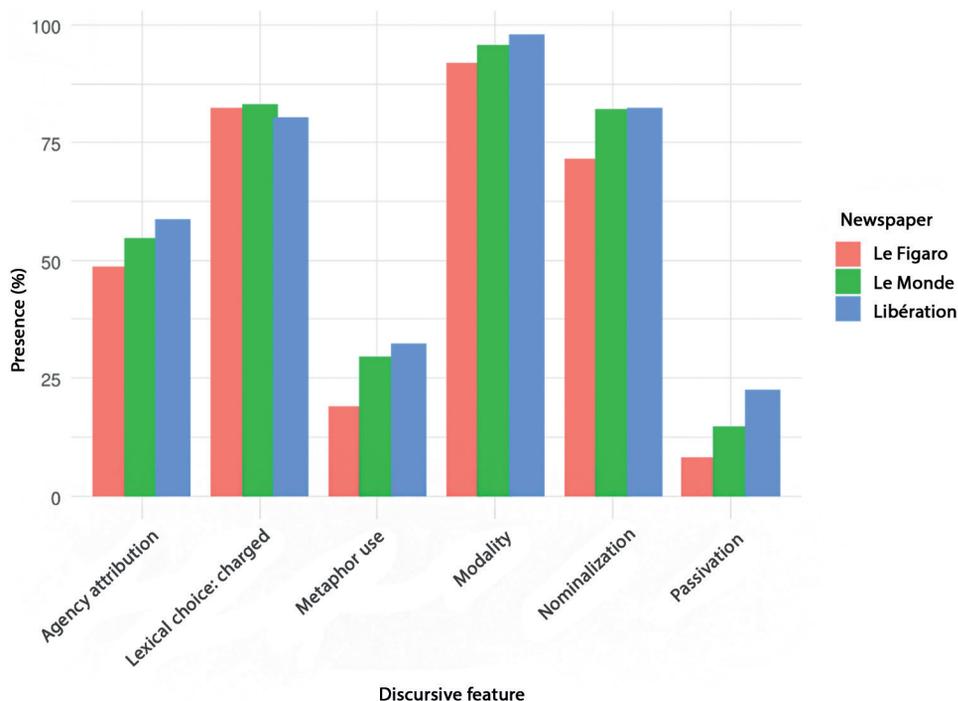


Figure 7: Discursive features by newspaper

Source: compiled by the authors

Temporally (see Figure 8), the use of charged lexical choice and modality remains consistently high across all four years, but metaphor use and nominalisation peak in 2015 and 2024 – coinciding with the European migration crisis and recent political debates around immigration. These spikes may reflect moments of intensified public discourse, where more rhetorical or strategic language is mobilised to influence public sentiment.



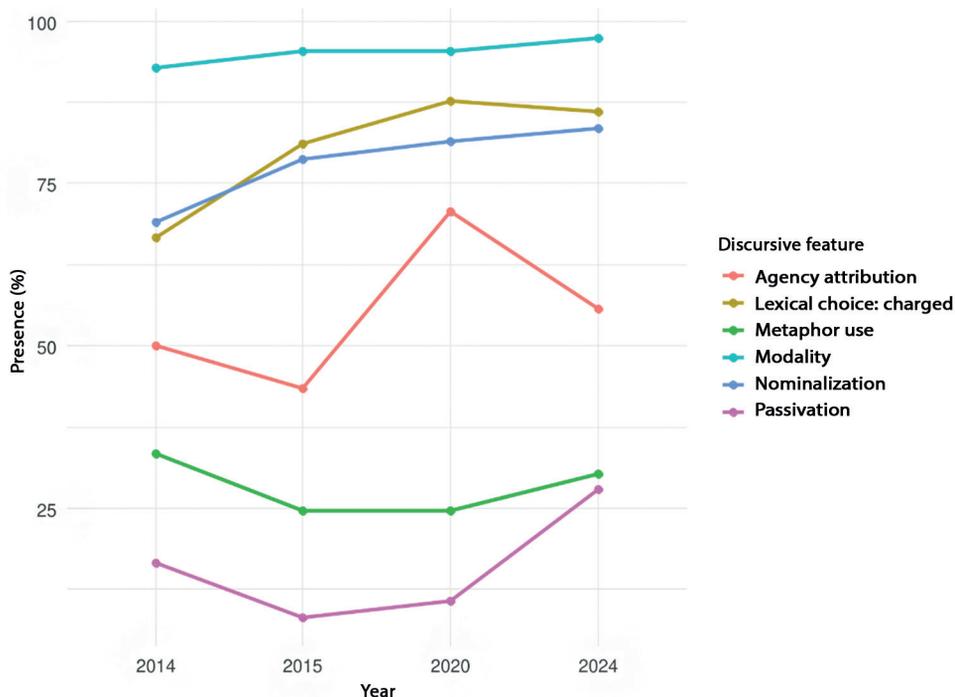


Figure 8: Evolution of discursive features over time (2014–2024)

Source: compiled by the authors

These patterns indicate that French online media do not merely report refugee-related events – they narrativise them through recurrent linguistic strategies. The near-universal presence of modality and nominalisation suggests a preference for institutional and abstracted language, while the frequent use of charged vocabulary underlines the emotive dimension of refugee discourse. Meanwhile, the uneven use of agency attribution and passivation reveals a selective emphasis on responsibility, which may reflect broader editorial orientations.

Such discursive constructions are not neutral. By consistently applying modality, for instance, articles can portray refugee movements as inevitable crises or urgent issues requiring state action. Similarly, metaphor use (e.g. “invasion”) may dehumanise individuals, reducing them to abstract forces. These linguistic features operate as framing devices that subtly reinforce broader ideological positions, thus contributing to the symbolic marginalisation or politicisation of refugee subjects.

In summary, discourse features serve as textual vehicles through which media outlets frame refugees not only in terms of humanitarian or security imperatives but also through latent structures of power, visibility, and emotionality. Their presence or absence shapes how refugees are imagined and how public sentiment is cultivated – thus playing a central role in the representational politics of migration.



## Discussion

### *Synthesis of framing and sentiment patterns*

The findings of this study demonstrate a compelling convergence between media framing and evaluative sentiment in the representation of refugees in the French online press. In addressing the first and third research questions – namely, identifying the dominant frames associated with the term “réfugié” and uncovering the tonal and narrative structures underpinning media coverage – this section synthesises empirical results with theoretical insights to explore how representation is both constructed and strategically modulated.

The data reveal a clear predominance of the humanitarian frame, which accounts for two-thirds of the articles in the dataset (66.4%). This confirms earlier scholarship suggesting that the French media, especially in moments of crisis, tends to construct refugees as vulnerable subjects in need of compassion and institutional protection.<sup>35</sup> This frame is not distributed equally across media outlets, however. While *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* rely heavily on humanitarian framing (73.0% and 71.6% respectively), *Libération* demonstrates a more balanced framing structure, with notable inclusion of political and security frames. Yet, despite these differences, a chi-square test yielded no statistically significant variation by media outlet ( $\chi^2 = 12.18$ ,  $p = 0.143$ ), suggesting that broader contextual factors – such as crisis events or political cycles – may have a more powerful influence on framing choices than editorial line alone.

The second axis of analysis – the sentiment tone – reveals that negative sentiment dominates the corpus, characterising over half the articles (53.5%) with positive and neutral tones accounting for 31.4% and 15.1% respectively. Crucially, sentiment was not evenly distributed over time. Negative sentiment peaked during politically and socially turbulent periods, notably 2015 and 2020, which correspond to the height of the European migration crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Positive sentiment, by contrast, rose most notably in 2024, coinciding with a rise in humanitarian frames and narratives emphasising solidarity and rights.

This temporal fluctuation (see Figure 9) stresses the argument made by Khosravini and van Dijk that discourse is inherently responsive to socio-political events and mediated through ideologically inflected language.<sup>36</sup> The sharp rise in political framing in 2024 (43.0% of the articles) and its correspondence with positive sentiment may reflect an effort by some media outlets to recast refugees within narratives of inclusion or strategic political relevance during electoral campaigns. Alternatively, this juxtaposition may expose contradictions within the framing apparatus: while the political frame often positions refugees within debates on control and state capacity, its alignment with positive sentiment suggests the emergence of more progressive political discourses – possibly around integration or international responsibility.

<sup>35</sup> CHOULIARAKI-ZABOROWSKI 2017; EBERL et al. 2018.

<sup>36</sup> KHOSRAVINIK 2009; VAN DIJK 1993.



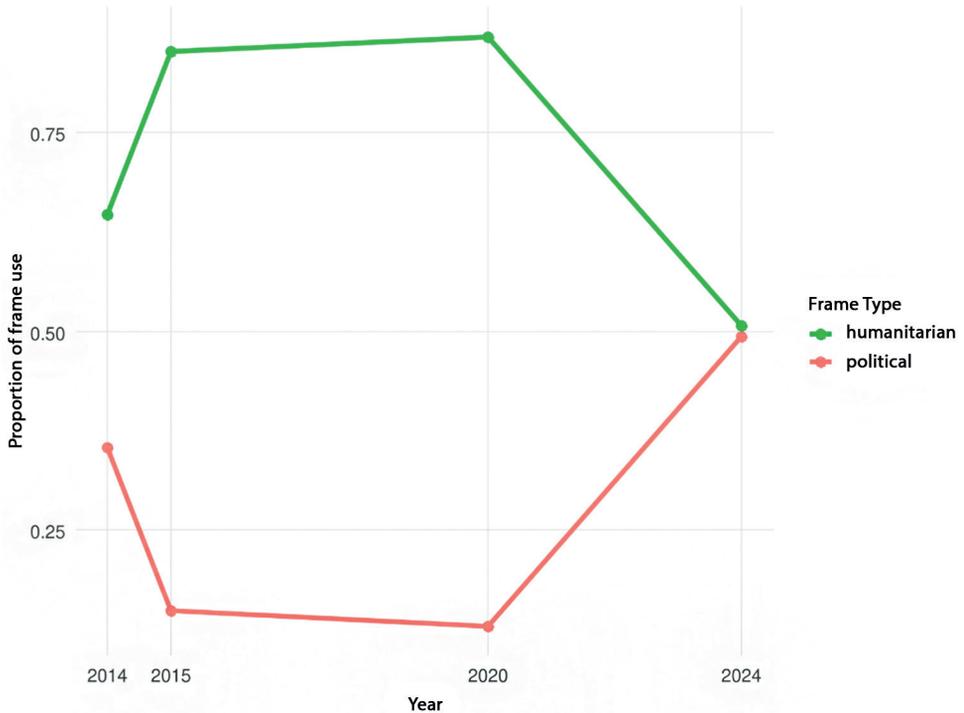


Figure 9: Trends in humanitarian and political framing (2014–2024)

Source: compiled by the authors

The intersection of frame and tone (see Figure 10) is further clarified by the regression analyses. Articles framed in humanitarian terms were significantly more likely to exhibit positive sentiment and invoke victimhood or human rights narratives. Conversely, political and security frames correlated with negative tone and narratives of threat and burden. These associations reinforce the theoretical proposition that framing structures not only shape what is said but also how it is emotionally encoded. Such patterns exemplify what Foucault would characterise as affective regimes – discursive formations that organise sentiment in ways that legitimise particular ideological positions or policy responses.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> FOUCAULT 1975.



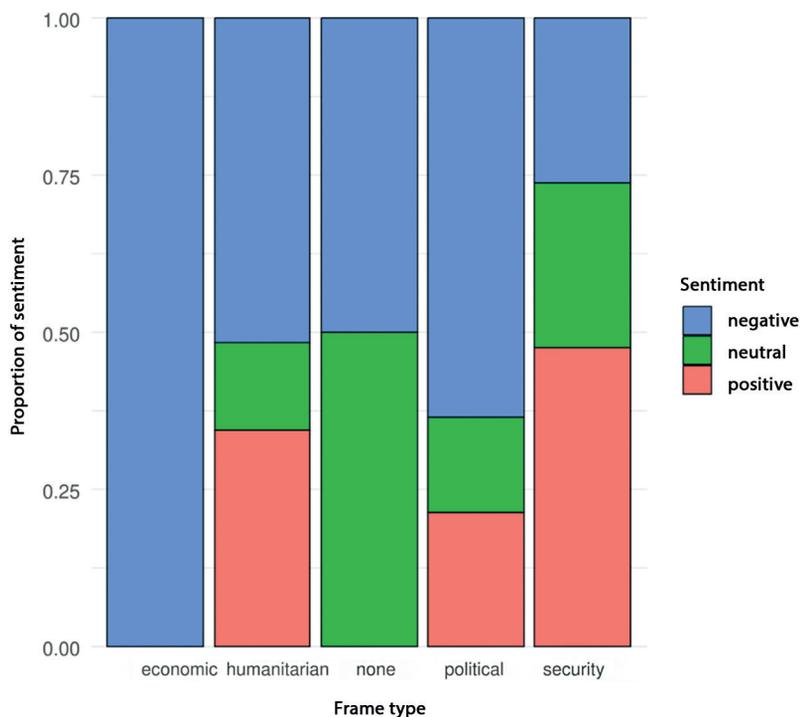


Figure 10: Sentiment distribution by frame type

Source: compiled by the authors

This synthesis affirms the utility of combining sentiment analysis, framing theory, and discourse analysis in migration studies. It also lays the foundation for the focus of the next subsection on temporal dynamics – how coverage shifts in response to crisis events and political cycles – further addressing the second research question and contextualising representation within broader societal transformations.

### *Crisis responsiveness and editorial ideology*

This section addresses the second research question by examining how media coverage of refugees in the French online press evolved in response to major geopolitical and social events – particularly the 2015 migration crisis, the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, and the 2024 European elections. It also considers how editorial orientations interact with these crises, shaping the representational strategies adopted by different media outlets.

The longitudinal analysis confirms that refugee coverage is highly event-responsive, with peaks in specific frames and sentiments coinciding with broader socio-political



developments (see Figure 11). In 2015, at the height of the European migration crisis, the humanitarian frame reached its zenith (81.2% of all articles that year), accompanied by an uptick in emotional narratives of victimhood and a moderate presence of negative sentiment. This is consistent with earlier findings by Reddy and Thiollet, who emphasised that French media during this period engaged in polarised framing, often oscillating between compassion and alarmism depending on the media outlet's political orientation.<sup>38</sup>

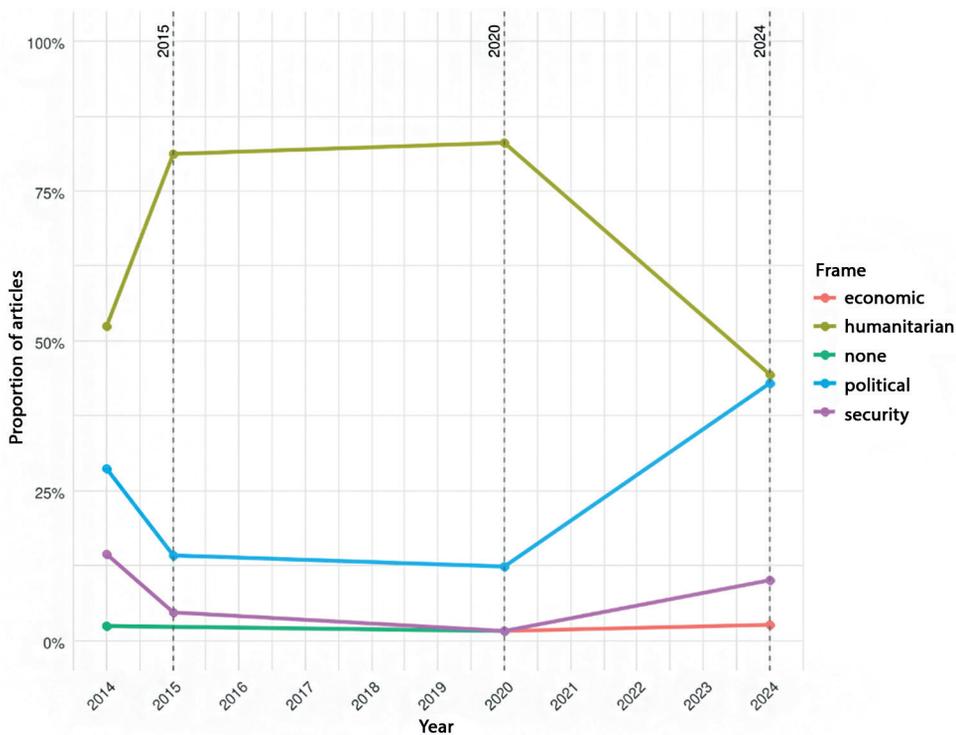


Figure 11: Frame trends with key event years highlighted

Source: compiled by the authors

By 2020, the context shifted markedly. The prevalence of negative sentiment surged to 69.2%, the highest across all years, while humanitarian framing remained strong (83.1%). This suggests that despite the persistence of ostensibly empathetic frames, the tone of coverage turned markedly pessimistic – likely due to the intersection of migration narratives with the public health anxieties and national border closures prompted by Covid-19. The co-occurrence of humanitarian frames and negative tone during this period may signal a discursive tension: while refugees were still portrayed as vulnerable, they were increasingly viewed as sources of risk or logistical burden within the pandemic imaginary.

<sup>38</sup> REDDY-THIOLLET 2025.



In 2024, the political framing of refugees rose dramatically to 43.0%, nearly tripling its 2020 share. This rise occurred in tandem with the European parliamentary elections, confirming prior research<sup>39</sup> that election cycles trigger reframing of refugee issues to align with political agendas. What is notable in the French case is that this increase in political framing also coincided with a relative resurgence of positive sentiment (34.2%). This combination suggests a shift in how political frames were deployed – potentially incorporating themes of integration, responsibility-sharing, or electoral appeals to progressive constituencies, particularly in *Le Monde* and *Libération*.

Indeed, editorial ideology modulates how crises are framed. While the chi-square test indicated no statistically significant difference in overall frame use across newspapers ( $\chi^2 = 12.18, p = 0.143$ ), qualitative differences remain evident. *Le Figaro*, with a conservative editorial line, maintained a stronger presence of security and burden-related narratives during the 2015 and 2020 peaks. *Libération*, known for its left-leaning orientation, emphasised humanitarian and human rights frames, particularly in its 2024 coverage. *Le Monde* occupied a centrist position, balancing institutional narratives with moments of humanisation and victimhood framing (see Figure 12).

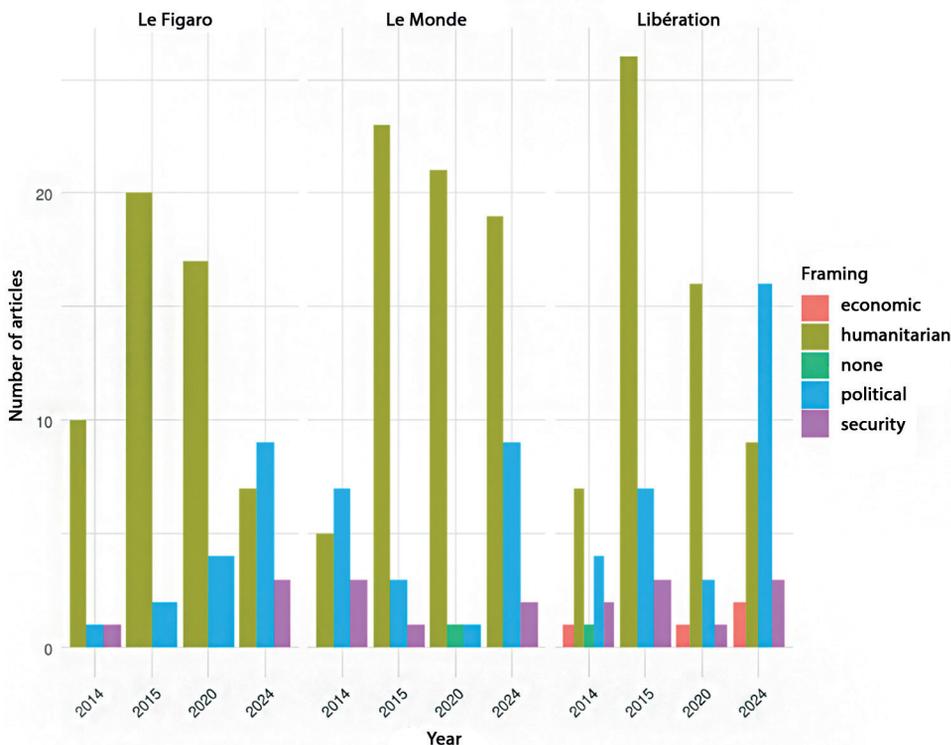


Figure 12: Distribution of framing categories by newspaper and year

Source: compiled by the authors

<sup>39</sup> E.g. EBERL et al. 2018; SEO-KAVAKLI 2022.



In conclusion, this subchapter supports the second research question by demonstrating that refugee coverage in the French online press is neither temporally neutral nor ideologically monolithic. Crises act as catalysts for representational change, but it is the editorial orientation of each media outlet that determines how these events are translated into discursive forms. These findings affirm the media's role as both a mirror and a mediator of public discourse on migration, operating within the structural constraints of political cycles and institutional ideology.

### *Discursive asymmetries and symbolic exclusions*

This section addresses the third research question by examining how tone and narrative structures, in tandem with specific linguistic features, shape symbolic inclusion and exclusion in refugee representation. It synthesises our findings on sentiment, narrative types, and discursive features to demonstrate how refugees are positioned not only as subjects of compassion or fear but as textual figures shaped by asymmetrical power dynamics in media discourse.

Across the dataset, negative sentiment dominates (53.5%), with the sharpest increases observed during 2020 and 2015 – two crisis years marked by the pandemic and the migration influx, respectively. This overall evaluative tilt is significant because it aligns closely with the prevalence of burden, threat, and crisis response narratives, particularly in *Le Figaro* and during politically charged moments. Conversely, positive sentiment, which constitutes only 31.4% of all coverage, correlates with victimhood, human rights, and political tool narratives – most prominent in *Libération* and *Le Monde* in 2024.

Logistic regression confirms that sentiment significantly predicts narrative deployment. Articles scored as positive are significantly more likely to invoke human rights ( $p = .040$ ) and political tool ( $p = .010$ ) narratives, while negative sentiment predicts burden ( $p = .021$ ) and (marginally) threat ( $p = .067$ ) frames. These affectively loaded narratives do more than frame content – they activate symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them”, structuring who is imagined as deserving of empathy, suspicion, or policy attention (see Figure 13).



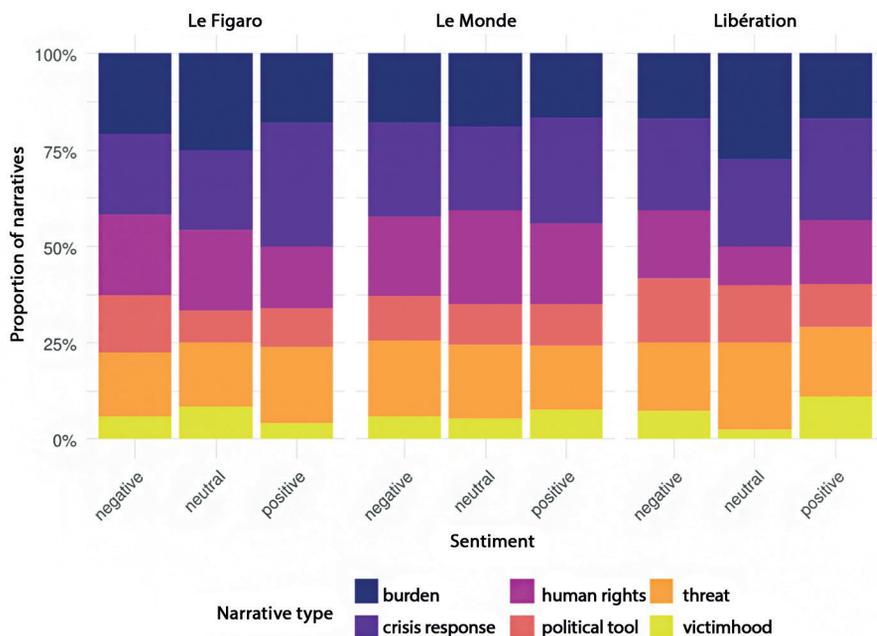


Figure 13: Distribution of narrative types by sentiment and newspaper

Source: compiled by the authors

Discourse-level analysis reveals further asymmetries in representation. Features such as modality (95.6%) and nominalisation (79.3%) are highly pervasive, indicating a formal, institutionalised mode of reporting that abstracts refugee subjects into policy objects or generalised categories. Meanwhile, agency attribution appears in just over half of all articles (54.6%), and passivation – which suppresses agents – is rare but meaningful (15.9%). The selective assignment of agency matters: when refugees are described in passive constructions (e.g. “refugees were relocated”), the actors responsible for these actions – governments, the use of metaphors (27.7%) – such as “waves”, “flows”, or “crisis” – further intensifies discursive marginalisation. While metaphors can serve to dramatise humanitarian need, they often depersonalise migrants, positioning them as uncontrollable phenomena rather than individuals with agency. This aligns with Khosravinić’s argument that metaphorical language, while contextually dependent, frequently sustains securitised or othering narratives, particularly when used in the absence of counterbalancing humanisation strategies<sup>40</sup> (see Figure 14).

<sup>40</sup> KHOSRAVINIĆ 2009.



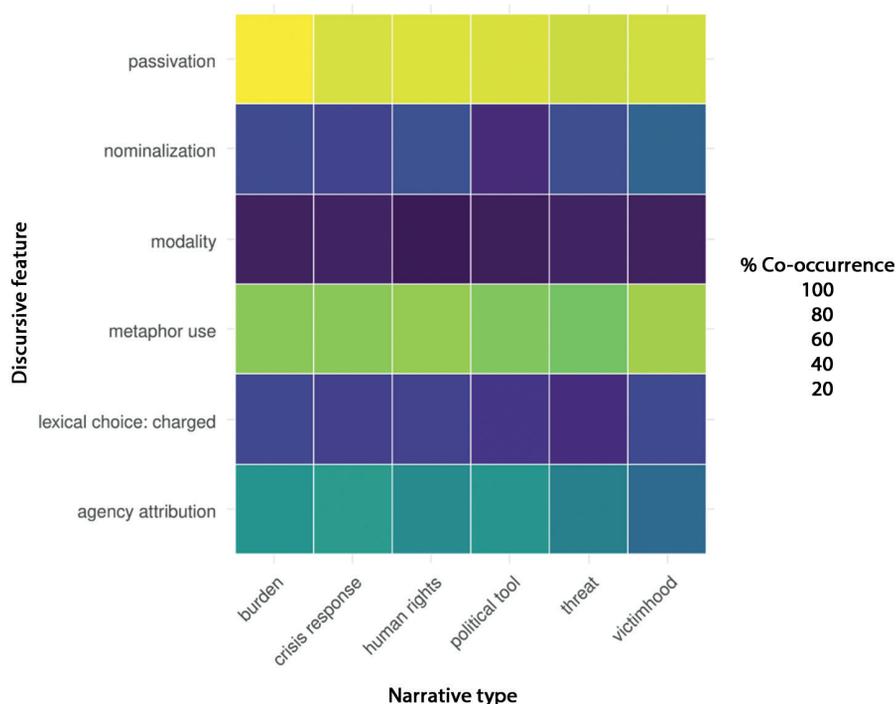


Figure 14: Heatmap of discursive features by narrative type

Source: compiled by the authors

Similarly, the conceptual blending of terms – e.g. treating “refugee”, “asylum seeker”, and “migrant” as interchangeable – erodes important distinctions and obscures legal and experiential realities. Our data supports this trend, particularly in coverage focusing on border control or political debates, where such terminological fluidity facilitates broader security-narratives and policy ambiguity.

Ultimately, these discursive patterns reflect a representational hierarchy. Articles rich in agency attribution and low in nominalisation tend to feature individual refugee stories and align with positive sentiment and humanitarian frames. In contrast, articles that employ modality, nominalisation, and metaphors – but lack agency – tend to align with negative tones and securitised narratives, reinforcing the symbolic exclusion of refugee voices.

In summary, the discursive analysis demonstrates that representational asymmetries in French online media are not merely a matter of framing but are embedded in the very structure of language. The selective use of rhetorical and grammatical strategies produces a hierarchy of visibility and legitimacy whereby certain refugee identities and experiences are foregrounded while others are suppressed. This symbolic exclusion plays a central role in how media narratives structure public sentiment, political discourse, and ultimately, political preferences regarding refugees in France.



## Conclusions

### *The summary of key findings*

This study examined how refugees were represented in the French online press between 2014 and 2024, addressing three central research questions: 1. What are the dominant media frames associated with the term *réfugié*? 2. How does refugee coverage evolve over time, particularly in response to key events such as the European migration crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and political elections? 3. What is the tone of media coverage on refugees, and what recurring narratives structure this coverage?

In response to the first question, the findings clearly demonstrate the dominance of the humanitarian frame, which accounted for 66.4% of all articles in the dataset. This supports prior literature emphasising the centrality of compassion and vulnerability in refugee portrayals, particularly during crisis moments.<sup>41</sup> Political and security frames were also present, albeit to a lesser extent, making up 24.4% and 7.0% of the coverage, respectively. Although descriptive statistics revealed media outlet-specific variations – *Libération*, for instance, demonstrated greater use of political framing – no statistically significant differences were found between newspapers in overall frame usage, indicating that broader contextual factors, such as geopolitical events, likely play a more decisive role than editorial ideology.

Regarding the second research question, the analysis revealed that refugee coverage in the French press is highly responsive to external events. Peaks in humanitarian framing and coverage volume coincided with the 2015 migration crisis and the 2020 pandemic, while political framing surged in 2024, aligning with the European parliamentary elections. These findings confirm that media representation of refugees is not temporally neutral but shaped by the political and social environment. Moreover, sentiment patterns shifted alongside framing: negative sentiment dominated in 2015 and 2020, while 2024 saw an unexpected rise in positive sentiment, especially in articles framed politically – suggesting a possible discursive reframing of migration during electoral cycles toward narratives of integration and rights.

Finally, in addressing the third question, the study found that negative sentiment was the most frequent tone, present in 53.5% of the articles, with positive sentiment appearing in 31.4%. Logistic regression models confirmed that tone significantly predicts narrative construction: negative sentiment was associated with threat and burden narratives, while positive sentiment aligned with victimhood, human rights, and political tool narratives. These narratives did not operate independently of framing. Articles with humanitarian frames were more likely to carry positive tones and feature humanising narratives, while political and security frames tended to correspond with more negative affective orientations.

In addition, the analysis of discursive features – such as modality, passivation, metaphor use, and nominalisation – revealed systemic linguistic asymmetries that subtly reinforce symbolic hierarchies. Features like modality (95.6%) and nominalisation (79.3%) were pervasive, contributing to an abstract and institutional tone that

<sup>41</sup> CHOULIARAKI-ZABOROWSKI 2017.



depersonalises refugee subjects. Conversely, agency attribution appeared inconsistently, suggesting that refugees are often denied discursive agency, particularly in securitised or politically heavy narratives.

In sum, the French online press predominantly represents refugees through humanitarian frames but modulates this framing according to crisis moments and political cycles. Sentiment and narrative structures shift accordingly, producing a representational landscape that vacillates empathy and securitisation, visibility and exclusion. These findings confirm that refugee representation is not merely a matter of journalistic style, but a strategic discursive process embedded in broader ideological, institutional, and temporal contexts.

### *Theoretical and empirical contributions*

This study contributes to both theoretical and empirical research at the intersection of media studies, discourse analysis, and migration studies. Theoretically, it affirms the value of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and framing theory for unpacking how refugees are constructed as social subjects in mediated discourse. Drawing on van Dijk's work on symbolic power<sup>42</sup> and Khosravinik's insights into affective framing,<sup>43</sup> the study highlights how language not only reflects but enacts power – shaping public imagination, moral legitimacy, and political response.

Empirically, the paper advances the field by integrating multi-method analysis – including topic modelling, sentiment analysis, logistic regression, and discursive feature annotation – to provide a longitudinal and comparative view of refugee representation across media outlets and over time. Unlike prior studies limited to episodic snapshots or single-frame typologies, this work demonstrates how frames, tones, narratives, and linguistic strategies co-evolve in response to political events and editorial ideologies.

By triangulating textual data from *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération* between 2014 and 2024, the study adds novel empirical evidence from the French context to a literature often dominated by Anglophone case studies. It shows that refugee discourse in France remains both reactive and strategic, oscillating between compassion and containment, visibility and erasure. In doing so, it underscores the need for future migration research to attend not only to what is represented, but how, when, and by whom those representations are constructed and circulated.

### *Limitations and avenues for future research*

While this study offers a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of refugee representation in the French online press, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, a potential limitation of this study concerns the decision to anchor analysis on the token *réfugié* rather than on the broader categories of *migrant/immigrant*. We acknowledge

<sup>42</sup> VAN DIJK 1993.

<sup>43</sup> KHOSRAVINIK 2009.



that “refugee” is also a legal-humanitarian category and that different tokens carry different normative and policy implications. Two points mitigate this concern. First, the study’s intent was deliberately delimiting: by tracking the use of *réfugié* we target a legally and rhetorically charged signifier that appears frequently in French public debate and therefore offers analytical leverage for detecting shifts in humanitarian, security, and political framings. Second, our corpus analysis documents that journalistic practice frequently conflates *réfugié*, *demandeur d’asile*, and *migrant*, a finding that itself justifies highlighting terminological ambiguity as part of the empirical results. Expanding the project to systematically compare *réfugié* vs. *migrant/immigrant* would require a differently constructed sample and coding scheme (including distinct keyword searches, possibly different stopwords and pre-processing choices) and thus falls beyond the scope of the present paper. We flag this as a clear avenue for follow-up research.<sup>44</sup>

Second, the dataset is limited to three major national newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération*), which, although ideologically diverse, do not encompass the full spectrum of French media. Excluding regional, far-right, or digital-native media outlets may constrain the generalisability of the findings. Including such sources in future research could yield a more granular understanding of fringe discourses or regional framing dynamics.

Third, while the sentiment analysis was carefully validated through translation and modelling, the use of automated tools – especially across languages – inevitably introduces interpretive noise. Future studies could benefit from native-language sentiment scoring and deeper qualitative validation to capture affective nuance more precisely.

Fourth, while this research tracks discursive change over time, it does not directly examine audience reception or policy feedback loops. As such, it remains focused on production-level discourse. Future work could extend the analysis by incorporating audience studies, social media reactions, or interviews with journalists and editors to map how refugee representations are received, contested, or operationalised in practice.

Lastly, the CATMA-based annotation of discursive features, though rigorous, is inherently interpretive. Expanding the coding framework or combining it with computational linguistic methods (e.g. dependency parsing, entity recognition) could enrich the analysis of representational structures at scale.

In sum, while this study provides important insights into how refugees are framed, emotionalised, and positioned within French media discourse, further research is needed to explore media ecosystems beyond the mainstream, audience engagement with refugee narratives, and the policy consequences of these evolving representations.

This study set out to examine how refugees are represented in the French online press across a ten-year span, with particular attention to the interplay between framing, tone, and narrative construction. Drawing on a robust mixed-methods approach – including topic modelling, sentiment analysis, and discourse annotation – it has demonstrated that refugee discourse in France is neither monolithic nor static, but shaped by contextual triggers, editorial priorities, and deeper symbolic logics.

Three central findings emerge. First, humanitarian framing continues to dominate the discourse, especially during crisis periods, though it is often accompanied by negative

<sup>44</sup> See SEO–KAVAKLI 2022; BOUAGGA–SCALETARIS–TCHOLAKOVA 2021.



sentiment and securitised metaphors. Second, coverage evolves in tandem with political and geopolitical events, confirming that representation is responsive to electoral cycles, international agreements, and public health emergencies. Third, the discourse itself is characterised by structural asymmetries: refugees are often spoken about rather than spoken with, framed through abstracted language and emotionalised narratives that reinforce symbolic hierarchies of worth, risk, and inclusion.

Beyond its empirical contributions, this study underscores the need to treat media not only as a mirror of societal concerns, but as an active agent in shaping the boundaries of political and moral imagination. As migration continues to challenge Europe's institutional, ethical, and cultural frameworks, understanding how refugees are narratively constructed in public discourse remains an urgent task – for scholars, policymakers, and media practitioners alike.

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