

**IF I LOOK AT THE MASS I WILL NEVER  
ACT: NEWS MEDIA FORMAT AND  
PUBLIC SENSITIZATION TO THE  
HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN SUDAN**

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"If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at one, I will." – *Mother Theresa*



# QUESTION & HYPOTHESIS

"In what ways does exposure to violence through different news media formats impact public sensitization toward humanitarian crises and human rights abuses in developing countries?"

Participants exposed to a narrative-driven news article about ongoing violence in Sudan will report higher levels of empathy and behavioral intent toward those affected by the humanitarian crisis and human rights abuses than participants exposed to a reportorial video segment covering the same issue.

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# NEWS MEDIA: FRAMING & INFLUENCE

**Framing theory**



How rhetorical devices can be used to convince people of the value of any given position

How rhetorical devices can be used to convince people of the value of any given position



Rhetorical devices = *quantitative* (data-driven techniques appealing to logic, statistics, and hard facts) or *qualitative* (linguistic and stylistic techniques that shape our perceptions of stories to create emotional or persuasive effects)

Ex. Data-driven journalism in contemporary news media most often employs *quantitative* rhetorical devices

# DESENSITIZATION & EMPATHY FATIGUE

**Desensitization:** A reduction in emotional responsiveness following repeated exposure to emotionally intense stimuli



*Studies show that over-exposure to graphic news media is causing increased levels of desensitization—which can lead to a reduction in empathy for victims*

**Empathy fatigue:** The diminishing emotional responsiveness that can occur when individuals are repeatedly confronted with the suffering of others

# COMBATTING DESENSITIZATION: A PERSONAL APPROACH TO REPORTING

*Narrative-driven storytelling* in news media offers a powerful way to foster empathy for and humanize victims.

Key elements to consider:

- *Individual/identifiable victim focus* (one person or a few people instead of mass representations)
  - *Narrative structure* (clear arc with reflection)
  - *Contextualization* (connecting personal stories to broader data)
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# SUDAN

- Most recent war began April, 2023
  - RSF (Rapid Support Forces) and SAF (Sudanese Armed Forces) are the primary warring factions
  - Both parties have violated domestic and international law
  - 2025-->US Secretary of State declared RSF are committing genocide in Darfur
  - Ethnic tensions-->ethnic cleansing
  - Estimated that over 150,000 have been killed, while over 14 million have been displaced
  - Largest and most severe humanitarian crisis today (International Rescue Committee)
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# METHODOLOGY

- Administered Qualtrics survey to 45 COW student participants
  - Pre-exposure questions measured baseline empathy levels, knowledge of current humanitarian crises, news consumption habits, and demographics
  - Students were then randomly assigned one of two *news media conditions*:
    - 1.) *Narrative-driven NYT article* (details an interview of two young girls living in the Darfur region of Sudan as they explain how they have been affected by the war)
    - 2.) *CBS reportorial video segment* (a standard data-driven report that prioritizes objectivity and uses statistics over individualized perspectives)
  - Post-exposure questions measured empathy, content engagement (short response), and behavioral intention (willingness to sign a petition supporting humanitarian relief efforts)
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# RESULTS

**Quantitative findings:** Participants exposed to the video (N=21) demonstrated an increase in empathy from baseline (M=3.56, SD=0.48) to post-exposure (M=4.00, SD=0.42). The mean increase in empathy was 0.44 points (SD=0.46).

Similarly, participants in the article condition (N=24) demonstrated a slightly higher increase in empathy from baseline (M=3.50, SD=0.35) to post exposure (M=3.98, SD=0.37). The mean increase in empathy was 0.48 points (SD=0.27).

However, the magnitude of increase did not statistically differ enough between formats to claim one medium of being more empathy inducing.

**Paired Samples Statistics Video<sup>a</sup>**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	baseline_empathy_mean	3.5595	21	.47700	.10409
	post_empathy_mean	4.0000	21	.41833	.09129

a. Video=1, Article=2 = Video

**Paired Samples Video<sup>a</sup>**

		N	Correlation	Significance	
				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	baseline_empathy_mean & post_empathy_mean	21	.485	.013	.026

a. Video=1, Article=2 = Video

**Paired Samples Test<sup>a</sup>**

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Paired Differences			t	df	Significance	
				Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	baseline_empathy_mean - post_empathy_mean	-.44048	.45692	.09971	-.64847	-.23249	-4.418	20	<.001	<.001

a. Video=1, Article=2 = Video

**Paired Samples Statistics Article<sup>a</sup>**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	baseline_empathy_mean	3.5000	24	.35163	.07178
	post_empathy_mean	3.9799	24	.37016	.07556

a. Video=1, Article=2 = Article

**Paired Samples Correlations Article<sup>a</sup>**

		N	Correlation	Significance	
				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	baseline_empathy_mean & post_empathy_mean	24	.714	<.001	<.001

a. Video=1, Article=2 = Article

**Paired Samples Test<sup>a</sup>**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	baseline_empathy_mean - post_empathy_mean	-.47991	.27368	.05587	-.59548	-.36434	-8.590	23	<.001	<.001

a. Video=1, Article=2 = Article

➔ **Univariate Analysis of Variance**

**Between-Subjects Factors**

		Value Label	N
Video=1, Article=2	1	Video	21
	2	Article	24

**Descriptive Statistics**

Dependent Variable: empathy\_change

Video=1, Article=2	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Video	.4405	.45692	21
Article	.4799	.27368	24
Total	.4615	.36667	45

**Tests of Between-Subjects Effects**

Dependent Variable: empathy\_change

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	.017 <sup>a</sup>	1	.017	.127	.723	.003
Intercept	9.488	1	9.488	69.166	<.001	.617
condition	.017	1	.017	.127	.723	.003
Error	5.898	43	.137			
Total	15.500	45				
Corrected Total	5.916	44				

a. R Squared = .003 (Adjusted R Squared = -.020)

**Qualitative findings:** The *video* format primarily elicited empathy through shock value and visual immediacy. Several participants wrote about experiencing desensitization or feeling numbness as a protective mechanism—often stating it was "too difficult to watch." Out of the 21 participants exposed to the video condition, 18 (85.7%) expressed willingness to sign a petition supporting humanitarian relief efforts.

The *article* format elicited empathy through narrative immersion and character-based identification. Participants consistently identified personal details as the most emotionally impactful elements, expressing that "it is much more powerful to hear about something from someone who lives through it." Out of the 24 participants exposed to the article condition, all (100%) expressed willingness to sign the petition.

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# PARTICIPANT KNOWLEDGE OF HUMANITARIAN CRISES

Figure 1.

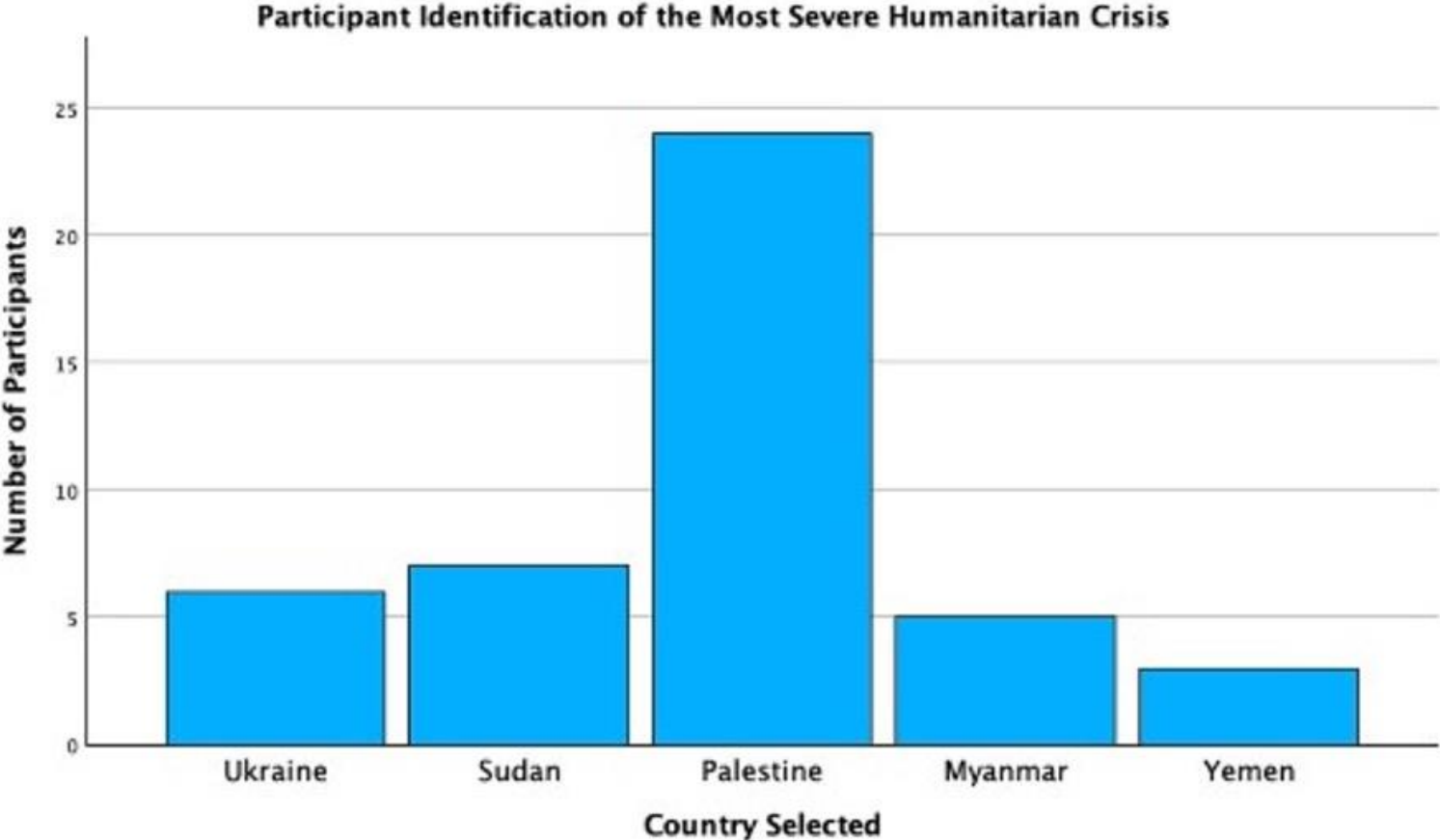


Figure 1 shows participant identification of the current most severe humanitarian crisis

Figure 2.

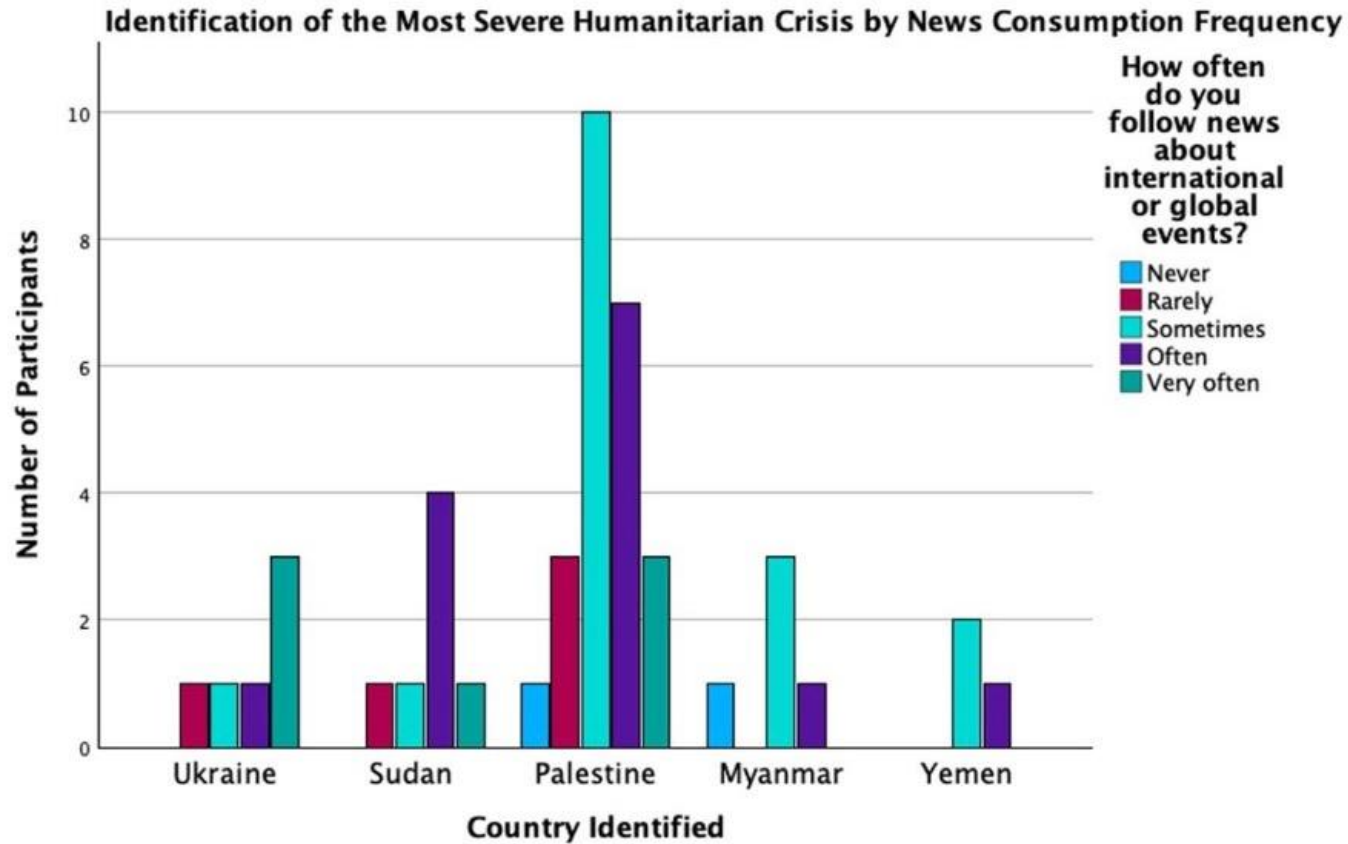


Figure 2 shows participant identification of the current most severe humanitarian crisis by news consumption frequency

# SO WHAT?

- Narrative-driven, personal accounts may be more effective in sustaining emotional engagement and mitigating emotional withdrawal or desensitization
  - Media formats are not neutral conveyors of suffering, but rather "regimes of pity" that shape how audiences engage morally with distant others
  - Future reporting should consider re-engaging audiences by incorporating more individual storytelling and identification rather than just data-driven journalism
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**THANK YOU!**

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