‘Media witnessing’: people’s engagement with viral news photographs of Syrian children in 2015 and 2016

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Abstract

This qualitative and explanatory study focuses on the concept of ‘media witnessing’, which concerns witnessing media texts performed in, by, and through the media. The aim is to determine how people from different backgrounds engage with news photographs of Syrian children which went viral in 2015 and 2016. Furthermore, this study uses the analytical framework of media witnessing created by Maria Kyriakidou (2015). The framework was made to analyse four different reactions to distant, mediated suffering: affective, ecstatic, politicised and detached. This framework is tested and adapted for this study to identify the engagement experience of individuals with new viral photographs. These photographs were taken by professional photojournalists.

The data was collected via semi-structured, two-person interviews known as dyadic interviews. Participants were recruited by way of purposive and snowball sampling. In the end, four dyadic interviews were conducted which involved eight individuals in total. During each interview, two participants looked together at four viral news photographs and discussed their thoughts and feelings based on an interview guide. All dyadic interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The study material—four transcripts—was finally analysed using a thematic analysis method. Themes were based on modes of media witnessing. The analysis reveals a fifth mode of response—first-hand witnessing—which is linked to an individual’s own experience and past. Finally, this study claims that an adapted framework constitutes a suitable way to analyse people’s engagement but that there is a need for further study of media witnessing.

Keywords
Media witnessing, engagement, news photographs, dyadic interviews, viral images, mediated cosmopolitanism, children, Syrian crisis
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1 Introduction

‘All wars, whether just or unjust, disastrous or victorious, are waged against the child.’ Eglantyne Jebb, the Founder of Save the Children

Children have been represented in some of the most iconic news photographs in history. By now, people around the world have witnessed many photos of children: starving due to famine in Africa, splattered with blood at a checkpoint in Iraq, and hit by napalm in Vietnam. However, ever since the Syrian crisis started in March of 2011 as part of the Arab Spring, images of Syrian children have been part of the everyday news for different people all over the world. Traditional media have published these images, and photos have also circulated in social-media channels. As with any online material, news photographs can nowadays be passed through the digital environment and spread rapidly around the globe by being shared with numbers of individuals on social media. They have become ‘viral’ phenomena, which is to say that they have spread exponentially online (Lindgren 2017 p. 43). On September of 2015, Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy, was found dead on a shore in Turkey. Photographs of this boy made global headlines, and the media described his images as shocking and horrible. Almost one year later the image of a badly injured five-year-old Syrian boy sitting in an ambulance, Omran Daqneesh, gained global media attention. Both news images were widely shared on social media and caused concern over the Syrian conflict. These photographs circulated and quickly gained global attention; they were also said to become transformed into icons of the Syrian crisis, thereby symbolizing these horrific events.

The Syrian conflict has been visually mediated since it started in 2011, and this visualization has transformed a globally known crisis. During this time, people all over the world have been able to witness and engage with the crisis. This study is about this engagement; thus, the key concept is media witnessing as presented by Frosh and Pinchevski (2009) and adapted by Maria

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1 Quote from the website of Save The Children.
Kyriakidou (2015). The concept refers to witnessing performed in, by, and through the media, and can refer to an actor, an act, a text or an inward experience (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009 p. 1). The concept has been used to analyse an audience's engagement with media texts—most often with television news. This concept is discussed in depth in Section 3.3. However, it is important to mention that searches about people's engagement with recent news photographs of children—especially viral ones—are still limited. Different methods, such as narrative, critical discourse and framing analysis have often been used to analyse images of the Syrian conflict.

Pictures compel both public and scholarly attention. Recently, many scholars have become interested in viral news photographs of Syrian children—especially images of Kurdish and Daqneesh children (e.g., Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2017; Vis and Goriunova 2015; Durham 2018; Mortensen et al. 2017). Media scholars have often decided to focus on one or two images of Syrian children in their analyses (e.g., Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2017). Others have investigated how children are represented in non-governmental material (e.g., Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015; Proitz 2018). Many media studies have been interested in determining if media can make us feel connected to people far away and make us feel empathy with distant individuals. Scholars who have explored this issue have made a connection with mediated cosmopolitanism (e.g., Robertson 2010, Chouliaraki 2008, Höijer 2004). Most of the literature concerns the idea of ‘the audience’—often Western—which witnesses, via media, the suffering of distant ‘others’. Ong also highlights this issue with the term Western-centric (Ong 2014 p.180).

Relatively little literature has been written about people’s engagement with images of crisis in general. Moreover, few studies have investigated responses to images—especially images without a ‘Western-centric’ perspective. Thus, this study the author explores how people from different backgrounds engage with images. This study challenges the idea that we all engage with the viral images we see in the same way. Also, how do we feel about pictures in which the child is something other than a suffering, passive victim? Inspired by these questions, this study is eager to find out more about this topic. The selected point of departure is the concept of ‘media witnessing’ by Frosh and Pinchevsky (2009). It refers to the idea that people are engaging with mediated content, such as images and videos. Thus, this study concerns how people are media-witnessing viral photographs of Syrian children.
There are many reasons why it is essential to study media witnessing and engaging experience. Firstly, we are living in the world where the media and especially social media channels have made it possible to see what is happening on the other side of the globe in real time. Once distant corners of the globe together are linked and challenging our ideas of time and space. We can witness many images and situations through the media, but once in a while some of these images or stories managed to engage us ‘all’ in a unique way, although we have different backgrounds and life stories. In order to understand what is happening in these situations, we need to investigate them. What happens when a person sees an image of a child in pain or playing happily with a police officer? What makes us connect and disconnect to mediated person? If we understand how people are experiencing engagement with media images, it is possible to find reasons what touches people all over the world, beyond the borders. At the same time, it is important to find out the reasons why others cannot engage in the same way. It is vital to understand all this, because we are seeing more and more actions which are inspired by extreme nationalism and xenophobia.

Before presenting the study aims and question, it is important to mention my connection to the topic. During the summer of 2017, I worked as a communication and event-production trainee in the children-and-media unit of Save the Children of Finland. The focus of the traineeship was on social media, and I discussed children’s rights with children, adults and even companies. While I talked about issues such as the privacy and protection of the child, I realised that there is a contradiction between actions and guidance: photographs of children in crisis and photographs of children in conflict-free countries. Children are often taught to think twice before they publish photographs of themselves on social media, yet many of us will quickly engage and even share a grim picture of a child on social media. It can be said that these images catches our attention and make us engage with them while exploring the social media feed. This contradiction sparked my interest in this study. Moreover, professionals at Save the Children said this kind of study would be advantageous.

1.2 Research aim and question

People all over the world have seen many viral images of Syrian children. One could state that these images we share became iconic—especially during years 2015 and 2016. It could be assumed that people respond and react in the same way to these images. But is this the case? The aim of this study is to learn more about people’s engagement with such viral images, which
appeal to people’s emotions. The author investigates how people with different backgrounds talk about their responses by using Kyriakidou’s modes. Thus, the main research question is as follows:

**While engaging with viral photographs of Syrian children, taken in 2015 and 2016, which modes of media witnessing can be identified in interviews with people who come from different backgrounds?**

The question is qualitative and explanatory, which means that results are not presented in quantitative ways. This study has an empirical task: to study engagement through interviews with a theoretical discourse regarding media witnessing. In practice, this means that it adapts the framework created by Maria Kyriakidou (2015) about media witnessing. In her study, Kyriakidou asks ‘how viewers position themselves with images of human pain, compelling in their sensational visibility but remote in their mediated representation.’ She argues that there are four modes of media witnessing: affective, political, ecstatic and detached. These modes are described in depth in the methodology chapter, but this study investigates which modes are present through interviews with two people – dyadic interviews – using viral news photographs of Syrian children. It is important to mention at this point that this study does not focus on images of suffering and pain but includes images expressing other emotions.
2 Setting the context: the Syrian crisis

This chapter introduces the context of the study for those who are not familiar with the situation in Syria. The first Section describes the Syrian crisis in general. The second Section discusses Sweden’s relation to migration policies and relation to Syria. The reason these are presented is that the study pinpoints connections between two countries: Syria and Sweden. The participants are from these countries (more about this in Section 4.2), but the interviews were also conducted in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. Moreover, it is important to have knowledge regarding the situation in these countries if we are to understand comments made during the interview.

2.1 From civil war to humanitarian crisis

The Syrian civil war has become the most significant humanitarian crisis in the world during the past seven years. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), of Syria’s population of 22 million, 1.2 million people have been injured and over 13 million need aid due to the conflict (UNHCR 2018). The World Bank (2018) states that 4.9 million Syrians have been registered as refugees and more than 6.3 million are internally displaced. It has been claimed that than 250,000 people have lost their lives. Other sources estimate that the number could be almost 500,000 (World Bank 2018). The conflict in Syria has entered into its eighth year. Syria has become the most dangerous of countries for children (Save the Children 2018).

The Syrian civil war is generally thought to have started during March of 2011 with the wake of revolutions in the Middle East, which are often referred to as the Arab spring (Metro 2018). According to Metro (2018), this movement began as an uprising for democracy. Syrian protesters decided to organise campaigns by using social-networking sites (Independent 2018). However, one specific incident sparked more protests: the jailing of 15 teenagers, who painted anti-regime graffiti on the side of their school in the town of Dara (Al-Jazeera 2018). According to Al Jazeera, these children were not only jailed but detained and tortured. In the end, one of
the children was killed (ibid). Unarmed demonstrators demanded release of the children, but they also called for democracy, political freedom and an end to corruption (ibid).

The Syrian government, led by President Başar al-Assad, reacted violently to the protest, which were often described as ‘peaceful’ demonstrations. Al-Assad argued that protestors are terrorist (Al Jazeera 2018). Soon afterward, hundreds of demonstrators were killed and many more were imprisoned. In July of 2011, the Free Syrian Army, a rebel group, was formed with defectors from the military with the aim of overthrowing the government (Al Jazeera 2018). Public protests against the Syrian government of Bašar al-Assad spread around the whole nation and the protests became a full-scale armed rebellion. One year later, the international Red Cross formally declared the conflict a civil war.

The conflict has escalated between the rebels versus regime—including the forces of President al-Assad with the help of Russia, Iran and various Shia militias. Moreover, moderate and Islamic rebels are fighting in various groups, but they are also fighting against each other. Yet there are even more actors, such as the Kurds: an ethnic group spread across the region without their own state. They are also allies of the United States, and together they have been driving the Islamic State (IS) out of north-eastern Syria. The IS consist of fanatic jihadists who have taken over large parts of Syria and Iraq and are catching attention with their brutality. Likewise, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Israel are taking part in the war in their ways. At the same time, the conflict has caused sectarian divisions to surface, which is making things even more complicated than before. (VOX 2017.)

2.3 the Syrian Crisis and Sweden

Sweden has a long tradition of accepting refugees and asylum-seekers. In 2013, the country had the highest per capita recipient of asylum seekers according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2013). Tens of thousands of refugees have started a new life in the country; the media has often written that Sweden can be considered one of the most welcoming countries for refugees (The Local 2018a; NYT 2018).

In September of 2013, Swedish migration authorities announced that Syrians seeking asylum would be granted permanent residency. Sweden was the first country in the EU to do this (Radio Sverige 2013). This provision also allows that anyone who gains permanent residency may
bring their dependents from Syria to live with them. However, in June of 2016, the Swedish Parliament adopted a law with a restriction on asylum seekers (Migrationsverket 2016). It limited the possibility of being granted residence permits to refugees are able to support themselves. The possibility for the applicant's family to come to Sweden was also limited: They limited the number of refugees who can join their family members in Sweden (The Local 2018a). In other words, it became more difficult for parents to reunite with their children. The legislation in Sweden quickly came under criticism from human-rights groups (The Guardian 2018). In June of 2018, Sweden’s parliament passed two bills related to asylum seekers. The first one gave around 9,000 failed asylum seekers a second chance to stay, thus exposing a split in the opposition over immigration ahead of September’s election (Reuters 2018). The second one gave young asylum seekers a second chance to stay until they complete high school after the overwhelmed migration agency failed to process their applications before they became adults (The Local 2018b).

Despite these changes, according to the Swedish Migration Agency, Sweden is the third largest recipient of quota refugees in 2017 and 2018 (Migrationsverket 2018). This quota has increased to 5,000 places, and the focus of the quota is on Syrian refugees (ibid). Sweden’s refugee quota has not been so high since 1994, during the Bosnian war (ibid). Moreover, Sweden as a country has been active in other ways. For example, Sweden was one of the top-five donors in 2018: It gave 3.2 million to the Syrian Humanitarian Fund (UNOCHA 2018). In March of 2018, Sweden proposed a draft resolution calling for the UN Secretary-General to take immediate action to resolve the issue of chemical weapons use in Syria (The Local 2018a). The draft resolution aimed to solve the problem once and for all.

Because of Sweden’s history and reputation, it is the fruitful country to do this study. While the state is coping with the crisis at the national and international level, citizens are more likely to be aware of the situation Syria, have seen it through the media and social media.
3 Theoretical framework and literature review

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework of the literature review. The first section briefly introduces literature regarding worldly sentiments with respect to viral images. The second Section explores and discusses the role the media play in making cosmopolitan connections. Third Section introduces the concept of media witnessing.

3.2 Viral images and global connectivity

_Viral images_ refers to images which have become ‘viral’ phenomena as they have spread exponentially online (Lindgren 2017 p. 43). Walton (2017) reveals the motive behind viral content sharing: He claims that people often share the content to trigger the emotions of others in addition to processing what they are experiencing in their actual lives (ibid p.7-8). Because emotions, Walton argues, are contagious, the likelihood that other people will also share content reflecting the same sentiments is high; hence, the images influence people to enhance their self-confidence on social-media platforms (ibid). Walton asserts that most individuals share their content on social-media platforms to trigger jealousy, pity or gain praise from others. Consequently, people tend to compare themselves to their friends on social media; thus, if an individual experiences suffering, the viewer is compelled to act to alleviate the suffering. Moreover, Orgad and Seu (2014) find that humanitarian organisations seek attention for particular matters by sharing viral pictures or content via social media (p. 6).

On the other hand, Kyriakidou (2014) argues that viral press can skew one’s perception about issues by modifying the viral content exposed to spectators (p.1474). She claims that the emotions shared through viral content elicit response which can be supportive or aversive. The media tend to compel their spectators to engage in moral judgment regarding the human
suffering witnessed. Furthermore, through viral media, people are compelled to act upon and expand their moral responsibility towards the world out there (Scott 2014 p. 449-466). Höijer (2004) writes that ‘The audience is expected to respond as good citizens with compassion and rational commitment’ (p. 531). Also, Robertson (2010) ascertains that viral content does not represent the viewpoints of the entire globe because there is unequal access to social-media platforms (p. 229-230). Western countries have standard Internet access and advanced technological channels of communication that influence useful interpretation and the expression of opinions. On the contrary, various remote regions in other parts of the world encounter difficulties in accessing the Internet that limits their interaction and communication through social-media channels.

The claims contrast with the role of media as an agent connecting the world as a global village. For example, Chouliaraki (2008) highlights two versions of a worldwide community comprising ‘celebration of communitarianism’ and ‘democratization of responsibility’ (Chouliaraki 2008 p. 80-100) She ascertains that celebration of communitarianism entails global connectivity whereby the media, through viral content sharing, introduces people into a broader community of other spectators by involving the spectator in the viewing of images. Thus, the media creates a common spectatorial atmosphere which is focused on the act of viewing rather than on the content of the demonstration or image itself. The democratisation of responsibility denotes global connectivity, through which media witnessing enhances an audience’s concern with distant suffering (Orgad and Seu 2014: 6). Chouliaraki further claims that the consistent flow of images on social media reinforces the local world of the spectator with respect to distant local realities, thereby facilitating the reflexive process; the audience comes to embrace the distant facts as a significant sphere of action (ibid 31). The viral image on social media aims to provoke a combination of democratisation of responsibility and celebration of communitarianism so as to achieve global connectivity.

3.2 Mediated cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is a combination of two Greek words, kosmos and polites which refers to the idea of being a citizen of the world, cosmopolitan. According to many scholars, cosmopolitanism is the ideology that people belong to a single community based on a shared morality. Hannerz (1990) describes the concept as ‘an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward
divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity’ (p.239) Beck (2006) assigns it refers to ‘the ability and willingness to situate oneself in someone else's life, come to see ‘oneself from the perspective of cultural others’ (p. 89). Guibernau (2007) has summarised that cosmopolitanism encompasses the whole of humanity as citizens of the world. Robertson (2010) states that making connections to with distant places and people requires *cosmopolitan imagination*, perceiving the world as others see it. It promotes imaginative relationships via emotional engagement. Furthermore, Robertson describes that the work of imagination also involves ‘making connections across time as well as space’ (ibid 18).

The media can foster cosmopolitan imagination and make these connections in the way they mediate their message. Thus the concept of *mediated cosmopolitanism* denotes perceiving the world as others see it through the influence of media which have a chance to create cosmopolitan connections. For Chouliaraki (2008) mediated cosmopolitanism is about practices of mediation that represent sufferers to spectators via an array of ‘universal' values (ibid p. 30). She claims that the press is a crucial factor in the development and enhancement of cosmopolitanism. The press reinforces an imagined community which perceives the world as *a global village* (ibid p. 387-391). The author argues that social media has escalated the connection of individuals across the globe, thus creating a public imagination.

Two key concepts which are attached to each other and related to mediated cosmopolitanism: *distance* and *the other*. In his book, *Media and Morality*, Roger Silverstone (2006) describes the distance is that concept what separates us from each other physically and culturally: ‘two cultures across differences of global space and fundamental belief’ (p. 122). Nonetheless, he states that we are prone to believe that this distance can be crossed. In order for this to happen, we need to believe that these made connections are real and genuine; in other words, we need trust. Though trust, according to Silverstone, is ‘always conditional, requiring continuous maintenance and evidence of fulfilment’, it is also ‘a way of managing, that is reducing, distance’ (Silverstone 2006 p. 124-125). To put simply, mediation can transcend distance, if we trust it.

The concept of distance in media studies is often linked to a number of studies about the relationship between people and the faraway others. According to Vandevoordt (2018), media studies have usually investigated the nature and scope of relationship and involve both normative and empirical debates around it (p. 2). At the same time, this relationship has been
defined in various terms. For example, Chouliaraki (2008) uses the *spectatorship of suffering* Boltanski (1999) and the *politics of pity*. Ong uses (2009) *compassion* and Höijer (2004) uses *global compassion*. In normative debates and discussions, this relationship has been conceptualised through a wide range of cosmopolitanism (e.g., Beck 2006; Delanty 2007; Vertovec and Cohen 2002). Instead of talking about acts of compassion, Chouliaraki prefers to use the term *pity* to describe an action that ‘incorporates the dimension of distance’ and produces global intimacy with an interruption of emotion (2008 p. 221-224). She states that the media uses the ideology of potential pity to attract the attention of its audience and to engage in various forms of disposition and emotions, thereby acting upon the viral content (ibid p. 22). The pity is, therefore, used to position distant sufferers strategically (ibid p. 390). The concept of compassion refers to the social construct that is created to enhance the relationship between the spectator and distance suffering.

The conceptualisation of distant suffering is typical in studies which deal with mediated cosmopolitanism. As Robin Vandevoordt (2018) has noticed, media scholars have most often focussed on how news stories of distant suffering – and sufferers – are represented in the media and interpreted by Western audiences (e.g., Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2008; Ong 2012; Silverstone 2006). Distance suffering, as argued by Chouliaraki, entails the power of the media through television – or now through social media – to bring close the disturbing images and experiences that cause suffering among the viewers (2008 p. 88). The media plays the role of presenting the distant suffering to individuals in the comfort of their homes. The mediated presentations are influencing people to take moral action or share what they have seen: a reflexive response for the audience to morally act upon the issue. Chouliaraki claims that the media plays a role in representing distant suffering as it sets the question of what should be done, thereby reinforcing a mediated imaginary community or rather a global community that shares common values, culture, information and feelings (ibid p. 383).

Boltanski argues that media which witness and report viral content encompassing disasters, catastrophes and human suffering have become part of the daily experiences of spectators who are mobilised to participate in the plights of the distant others (Boltanski 2002: 126). Social media offers mediated images of human misery, thereby asserting the need to act and to provide a solution to such events while the media draws upon people to be concerned about the distant other.
The power of media is increasingly being used to reinforce cosmopolitan imagination in the global era—especially with respect to viral images. The role of media platforms in witnessing and representing the spread of viral images has caused mixed reactions and questioning of its moral and social responsibility. In particular, the spread of viral images portrays the role of the media in forging the relationship of cosmopolitanism across borders (Kyriakidou 2014 p. 1475). Social-media networks have made people develop a sense of caring and being concerned about the distant other through the sharing of viral content. In particular, the media has helped spread information regarding distant suffering, thus triggering people around the world to care for the distant other by being compassionate and generous in times of need.

### 3.3 Media witnessing

Frosh and Pinchevski (2009 and 2014) have defined and explored the concept of *media witnessing*. These authors stated that it ‘designates a new configuration of mediation, representation and experience that is involved in the transformation of our sense of historical significance’ (2014 p. 594). As mentioned already in the introduction, the concept refers to witnessing performed in, by and through the media, and it can refer to an actor, an act, a text or an inward experience (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009 p. 1). Furthermore, for Frosh and Pinchevski (2014) the concept means ‘appearance of witnesses in the possibility of media themselves bearing witness and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events.’ (p. 594) The authors claim the concept marks the age of the post-media event: it casts the audience as the ultimate addressee and primary producer, making the collective both the subject and the object of everyday witnessing (ibid).

Kyriakidou (2015) has created the framework to analyse an audience’s engagement with media text. In this case, the texts in question are news photographs. According to her, three practices of media witnessing can be presented with these three questions:

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2 The concept of audience is commonly used by media scholars who have been studying media witnessing, e.g., Höijer 2004, Andén-Papadopoulos 2013, Chouliaraki 2008, Kyriakidou 2015, Ong 2014. However, these scholars have focused on video material, but not photographs. Therefore this study is using the term ‘people’ while referring to individuals who are engaging with photographs.
1) How do viewers perceive themselves as witnessing through media?
2) How do they relate to the witness in the media?
3) What kind of assumptions do they make about witnessing by the media?

Mediated witnessing usually connects to moments of crisis or suffering. Even the concept of ‘mediated suffering’ has been used. Although researchers have created a framework with which to approach this suffering, many have focused only on television news or texts (including Chouliaraki 2008, Sontag 2001, Ellis (2009) and Höijer (2004)). These scholars have also been interested to see if this suffering urges viewers to take a moral stance and act. Kyriakidou (2015) points out that studies of suffering often seem to measure audience engagement in terms of two factors: compassion or action (p. 219) She explains that watching an audio-visual mediation of suffering is emotionally compelling due to the knowledge of that this suffering on screen is actually happening, thereby creating ‘mediated sense of intimacy’ (ibid p. 216).

Based on previous studies, Kyriakidou (2015) has created an analytical framework of media witnessing as ‘a distinct modality of audience experience.’ With a critical standing point, Kyriakidou has put together a typology of witnessing which identifies specific conditions of the experience of media witnessing. She argues that her the concept is not limited to compassion, pity or the assumed oppositional stances of compassion fatigue and denial. Kyriakidou states that exploring the experience of witnessing through the media poses a question: How viewers position themselves with images of human pain which are compelling in their sensational visibility but remote in their mediated representation (ibid p. 217)?

Kyriakidou’s analytical framework consists of four articulations of witnessing experiences. The first is affective witnessing, which is engaging with emotional reactions. This means that the audience is engaging media texts with emotional reactions and affective language. This also means that the focus is on their own affective response and intense emotions. The second mode is ecstatic witnessing, which has to do with the feeling of urgency of the situation. According to Kyriakidou, there are two characteristics of this involvement. The first is that participants place themselves as ‘immediate witnesses’, which means that the audience is present in the scene ‘through the frequent use of temporal deixis’: choice of words underlines the urgency of actual crisis (p. 223). The second characteristic is overwhelmed emotion. She argues that it is based on facing the ‘sublime spectacle of death and fear’ and that it creates a position of witnessing. Based on Chouliaraki’s (2008) description, Kyriakidou’s ecstatic witnessing is
about feeling the urgency of the situation with emotional, intense involvement (Kyriakidou 2015 p. 220-225). When discussions address relations of political and social power and inequality and call for political responsibility, it is about political witnessing. In this mode, the audience is addressing ‘relations of political and social power and inequality’ at the global and local levels. This means that discussions have political discourses. The fourth and final mode of media witnessing is detached witnessing, which concerns an absence of expression of affection through suffering something ‘remote or ultimately irrelevant to the viewers' everyday life’ (p. 220). In other words, emotional involvement is absent: There is no expression of affect, affective language, emotional identification or indignation. The narration of experience with a lack of the emotional response results in a story without any moral imperative, only facts with the external report (ibid 225-228).

In this study, Kyriakidou’s analytical framework is tested and adapted for new research, which do not only deal with ‘suffering’ or ‘distant’ mediated individuals. Though a number of researchers have related media witnessing to the suffering of the distant other, the author of this thesis proposes that Kyriakidou's work can be used for less-disturbing events, which Ellis (2009) defines as ‘mundane witnessing’. Thus, the author will not focus only on the suffering other. One more thing which is different is that the framework is adapted to analyse the engagement of photographs. According to Holtz-Bacha et al. 2006, photographs can inspire the reader, generate emotions, condense information and encourage further reading and knowledge seeking. Höijer (2004) found that compassion is dependent on visuality:

Pictures, or more precisely our interpretations of pictures, can make indelible impressions on our minds, and as a distant audience, we become bearers of inner pictures of human suffering (Höijer 2004: 520).

Höijer (2004) finds that repeatedly shown emotional pictures have a long-term impact on our collective memories and that these images are perceived as accurate eye-witness reports of reality (ibid p. 520-521). On the other hand, the press stands accused of overlooking ethics and morals to ‘get the story' while it tries to survive in a market-led economy (Taylor 1998 p. 20). Specifically, graphic photographs are known to be more powerful because they capture viewers' attention and bring viewers closer to the action, thereby making events seem more real and shocking (Potter and Smith 2000).
4 Methodology

Before explaining the methodology of this study, it is important to share the original method plan discussed in Section 4.1. This chapter presents the methodology of this study step by step. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations of this study.

4.1 Initial method

The initial plan of this study was to use focus groups, interviews with four or more participants. According to Hansen and Machin (2013):

“[F]ocus group interviews allow the researcher to observe how audiences make sense of mediated communication through conversation and interaction with each other in a way that is closer, although clearly not identical, to how we form opinions and understanding in our everyday life.

This comment gave the impression that focus group interviews is an ideal method to use with media witnessing. However, recruiting participants turned out to be challenging than expected. To get in contact with possible participants, 20 posters calling for focus groups were put around Frescati, the campus area of Stockholm's University. The poster was published on different Facebook groups and on the author’s personal Facebook account, from which it was also shared on her friends’ Facebook wall.

Despite this, only two emails were sent from interested individuals, both of whom decided not to join the interview. Some individuals were interested in joining; unfortunately, however, they did not meet the criteria of this study: They were from Palestine and Pakistan and/or lived in other Swedish cities. Moreover, some of the Syrian females did not speak English well enough to participate. At this point, the original idea of having four participants in one focus group changed to three participants. As the author managed to set dates with all participants, some people decided to cancel their participation on short notice or without notice. This happened during the first interview: One of the participants did not show up despite the fact that the author
talked with this person the evening before. Because she still had two respondents ready to be interviewed, she decided to go with Plan B: dyadic interviews.

4.2 Dyadic Interviews as a method

For this study, four semi-structured, dyadic interviews were conducted. According to Morgan (2016), the aim of dyadic interviews is ‘to engage two participants in a conversation that provides the data for a research project’ (p. 15). Dyadic interviews refers to a qualitative research method which uses in-depth interviews with two respondents who are interviewed simultaneously (Morgan 2016; Song 1998). The most obvious difference between dyadic and individual interviews is interaction between the participants, which produces the data (Morgan 2016). Figure 1 shows that dyadic interviews involve two people in direct connections to form a single unit with the complexity of interviews involving three or four participants. This means that what participant one states must also consider what the third or fourth person might think. This aspect of ‘might think’ is not present in the dyadic interview and can lower the threshold required to state personal opinions out loud.

Dyadics also means that more information is obtained with two accounts and can expose the differences in perception which can provide additional insight. Instead of having two individual narratives, dyadic interviews outcome ‘joint’ narratives (Taylor and de Vocht 2011). According to some scholars, the unit of analysis is the relationship between the participants (Morris 2001; Seymour et al. 1995). Thus, it is important in an analysis to make explicit whether respondents

Figure 1: Simmel by George Simmel on Morgan (2016 p. 15-16)
are speaking about joint or individual experiences. Moreover, the researcher has to avoid interpreting one individual's comments as a shared one and vice versa (Morgan et al., 2013). At the same time, the scholar has to be aware of the reactions of participants, as responses can provide opportunities to explore other meanings.

According to Morgan (2016), ‘the goal should be to find the best match to the substantive point being made’ (p.79). Yet he describes one problematic issue: the unit of analysis trap. It is about whether the individual participants or the dyads are the appropriate unit of analysis. In other words, is the focus on the interaction or the substantive content of what is said? For Morgan (2016), this is a false dichotomy: ‘What gets said (the content) depends on how things get said (the interaction), and vice versa.’ Nevertheless, most of the texts have concentrated on ‘the content’ and the subject matter. Keeping this idea of the false dichotomy in mind, this study concentrates on what is being said but includes the interaction as an important but minor factor. Morgan (2016) also mentions that his method is most useful ‘when the researcher wants both social interaction and depth when the narrative is valued, and when interaction in larger groups might be problematic’ (Morgan et al. 2013 p. 128). In other words, the topic of research is the experience. Many studies have been especially interested in shared experiences (e.g., Eisikovits and Koren, 2010). This can explain why, in many studies, dyads have involved intimate partners or families. Also, there is a limited number of studies about dyadic interviewing with a pair of strangers.

Dyadic interviews constitute a suitable way to explore media witnessing and engagement for many reasons. First, dyadic interviews are better than individual interviews because the interaction of two participants can expose both similarities and differences in perception. Thus, the dyadic interview provides new knowledge. This could happen in focus groups as well, but due to the sensitive topic, expressing feelings and thoughts in front of many people can be more difficult for some participants. The dyadic interview situation not only gives time but also demands participants to explain what they mean and feel – both because they have to keep the conversation going and to be sure they are heard and understood. Moreover, in this study, participants are asked to share their experiences when they are actually witnessing four viral photographs; they are engaging with the media content simultaneously at the interview. The interview questions and images require this engagement. Therefore, dyads give information which is generated through personal engagement. Moreover, answers cannot be prepared
beforehand or remembered; instead they emerge at the moment of the interview and from the interactions with another respondent.

There are some disadvantages to the method. First of all, there is always a risk that respondents act differently in a dyadic interview than they would in the focus group or in individual interviews. The answer given by the participant is the public story. In focus groups, the selecting and recruiting of respondents, the interview guide and the role of the moderator can be critical. One person can dominate the discussion or participants may be shy to express their thought and feelings. Nevertheless, focus groups are also more challenging for many respondents. Because the interviews are semi-structured and are used for explanatory reasons, the risk of discussing ‘off-topic’ is higher than it is with a smaller group. Moreover, Svend Brinkmann (2013) says that a semi-structured interview is a good option:

> Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee (Brinkmann 2013 p. 21).

Based on this argument, it could be said that semi-structured interviews are more fruitful and productive in terms of providing valuable data which can arise when departing from the prepared interview guide. Moreover, as the topic is sensitive, dyads were productive, as participants have time enough to express their thoughts.

### 4.2.1 Recruiting participants

As for recruiting participants, the idea was to use purposeful sampling: The researcher purposefully selected participants which will best address the examined topic (Cresswell 2013 p. 39-41). According to Lederman (1990), ‘participants are selected because they are purposive, although not necessarily representative, the sampling of the specific population’ (p.117-127.) In other words, this method does not aim to obtain selected groups as representatives of the general population. Instead, it highlights the significance of specific dimensions of the way in which people interpret the media content.

In this study, age and region are the main criteria of the respondents: they are adults how to live in the Stockholm area. These are based on logistical reasons and on the idea of a ‘normally
occurring’ group, which means that people have a chance to meet and speak with each other in reality (Hansen and Machin 2013 p. 236). Moreover, the reputation of Sweden as a welcoming, war-free country is an essential factor. Consequently, in Sweden, it is possible to get in touch with the Syrian crisis in both everyday life and through the national media, which is at second place in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index (RSF 2018). One could assume that the Swedish people are familiar with the crisis. Syrians, on the other hand, have been asked if they recently lived in Syria before they came to Sweden. The reason for this question is that these people have seen the crisis in real life for themselves – not only through the media. All of them have moved into Stockholm in the past seven years—one of them only nine months ago.

Two Syrian men were successfully recruited on the MeetUp website. However, due to a lack of both contacts and time, changing the recruitment method was mandatory. Thus, it changed from purposefully selected participants to snowball recruiting: ‘[T]he initial participant is asked to identify another potential participant who also meets the criteria of the study’ (Emmel 2013 p. 33-44). The rest of participants were suggested by or recruited by another participant or by my pilot study participants; thus, the rest of the participants were recruited by snowball recruiting. Because of this, the relationship between the respondents varied a lot: Some of them knew each other well, while some had never met. The relationship is a character which should be considered when interviewees are recruited: pre-existing, mutual, social and personal relationships can give more reliable knowledge (Morris 2001; Thompson and Walker 1982). Nevertheless, the idea of a ‘normally occurring’ group is still valid.

4.2.2 Participants

Eight individuals – four women and four men – participated in the study. They all identified themselves as Swedes or Syrians; when the author asked if they were Syrian or Swedish, the answer was yes. They also grew up in Sweden or Syria. All of them were between ages of 25 and 39. Though class was not a variable, it is good to mention that all the participants were educated: They had, for example, studied law, media studies, engineering and marketing. Most of them work in Sweden. Class was not listed as a factor, but the age of the participants was narrowed down for two reasons. First, adults are more likely to follow and use both social and traditional media, such as newspapers. Second, they are aware how to access – and consume – both local and international content online. Due to social media, they also have a chance to
identify themselves as global citizens over borders. Therefore, they are a relevant group of people.

To make more sense about the media-witnessing experience, dyads were assembled based on gender and nationality in the following way:

Interview 1: Syrian men
Interview 2: Swedish men
Interview 3: Syrian women
Interview 4: Swedish women

Choosing gender as a defining character of the dyads was based on the results by Höijer (2004). She found that when women witness mediated suffering, they react with compassion more often than men (Höijer 2004 p. 519). She describes this as follows:

Women react with compassion more often than men, and elderly people much more often than younger people. Feelings of pity, sadness and anger were reported, and women especially also said that they sometimes cried, had to close their eyes or look away, because the pictures touched them emotionally. (Höijer 2004 p. 520)

This result is referred to in a number of studies; therefore, it was decided that women and men would be interviewed in different groups. However, the author is aware of the complex concept of gender. Gender is a socially constructed characteristic (WHO 2018) and performative repetition of acts (Butler 1988) which are often related to two genders, men and women – but can be something else. As in the case of nationality, the interviewees were asked if they were ‘men’ or ‘women’; in other words, did they identify as one or the other. The reason is that, behind the character of nationality is the idea that people who share the same nationality are likely to share a similar cultural and social background. In this case, participants in each dyad also share the same native language (Arabic), which they used during the interviews.

**4.2.3 Practicalities of dyads: preparations**

After finding the participants for the study and talking with them a bit, a date was selected based on their timetables. Four dyadic interviews were conducted at the Media Studies Department in Karlaplan, Stockholm during March and April of 2018 in a meeting room: i.e., a small room with tables, chairs and white boards. The rooms were selected such that participants would not
be interrupted or disturbed by outsiders: They would not be able to be seen by other people and they would not see others walking pass the room. Free snacks were available for participants during the whole time they were in the interview room.

Two days before the first interview, materials for the interview were printed. This included an interview guide, an information sheet and consent form and four selected photographs. Images were printed in colour and numbered with numbers 1 to 4 based on their publication day. These photographs are presented later on in Section 4.3. These images were hidden in a file when interviewees came in so they did not see the images until the moderator gave them to them. All documents and photos were collected by the moderator.

4.2.4 Introduction of the interview

Once respondents came to the building of the Media Studies Department, the moderator guided them to the interview room and to their seats. If the participant came earlier than their partner, he or she had a small talk with the moderator about education, hobbies and the area of Karlaplan. These discussions were not included as part of the transcript. Most of the participants had been in Karlaplan, but not inside the university building. Despite the fact that the interview room was a simple meeting room, the small size of the room made the interview situation comfortable. Both respondents were guided to sit next to each other on one side of a large table in the interview room. The moderator sat on the opposite side of the table with a notebook and a file with photographs facing the participants. This placement made it easier for the dyad to watch the photographs, but it also emphasised that the moderator is not part of the situation nor is watching the photographs in the same way. In the middle of the table were two microphones which were connected to the moderator’s laptop and a smartphone used for recording the discussions.

Before any questions were asked, the information sheet and the consent form were given to participants to read. These documents are available upon request. By signing the consent form, all respondents agreed to participate in the interview and agreed that their answers can be recorded. After this, the moderator started recording the interview. Before asking questions from the interview guide, participants were asked to introduce themselves: That is, they were asked to tell their name, age and profession. Then the interviews followed the interview guide.
They were told that participation is voluntary, that they will not get paid for the interview, and that there are no right or wrong answers.

4.2.5 Conducting the interview

After the introduction and before handing in the photographs, the context of four photographs was explained: Syrian children in news photographs which went viral in 2015 and 2016. They were also told that other information would not be given about the photographs by me with one exception: a photograph of Hudea by Osman Sağırlı. As the respondents were not familiar with the photo and stated that they would like to know what is going on in the photograph, the moderator explained the background story. Moreover, I confirmed whether the respondents were right or wrong with their assumptions.

The photographs were placed as a pile on the table between the respondents and the moderator. Participants were asked to refer to photograph by its number (1-4) in order to make sure for the transcript which photograph they are talking about at that moment. The moderator told them that they could spread the photographs in the way they wanted. For the first time, all respondents organised them as a line and in chronological order. Respondents immediately identified the photographs with which they were familiar, yet I still asked them the same question. In each dyadic interview the following questions were asked:

1) Have you seen these images before?
2) Do you remember where you first saw these images?
3) Can you describe what you see in these images?
4) How do these images make you feel?
5) Can you relate to the child (in the situation) in the photograph?
6) How did the media portray these Syrian children compared to other children?
7) In your opinion, how does your nationality or cultural background impact how you relate to these images?
8) Based on these images, do you feel there is something you can do?
9) Why do you think these images went viral?
10) How important are these images?
11) Final thoughts?
The interview questions were inspired by the three questions of media witnessing by Kyriakidou (2015). She used those to identify the modes of media witnessing. The first two questions are asked in order to find out if participants have engaged with the photographs before. Questions three and four were motivated by Kyriakidou’s first question of media witnessing: “How viewers perceive themselves as witnessing through the media?” The questions three demands that participant takes a look of the photos, while the aim of the question four is to find out what kind of emotional engagement witnessing these viral photographs create. Questions five, seven and eight They are related to the Kyriakidou’s question second question: how viewers relate to the witness in the media? The final question by Kyriakidou was “What kind of assumptions viewers make about witnessing by the media?” The interview questions 6, 9 and ten are connected to this question. While conducting the interview, it was clear that there was not a question which was difficult for all participants. For example, for the two Swedish men in this study argued that the question 6 is almost impossible to answer, for the two Swedish women found it easier to answer.

Some of these questions also functioned as a conversation starter, and they often lead to follow-up questions from the moderator. Moreover, as a semi-structured interview, new questions are expected. Sometimes interviewees themselves asked questions from each other, too. It is important to note that these questions were not always asked in the same order for three reasons: 1) the follow-up questions, which could not be predicted 2) participants answered to another question before it was asked due to flow of discussion; 3) participant said something which was connected to specific question and thus it was natural to ask it.

Each interview lasted about one hour, which means that there were about four hours of interview material to be transcribed. All respondents mentioned that one hour was more than enough for this kind of interview with sensitive topic.

### 4.2.5 The role of moderator

The interviews were conducted and moderated by the author, and the role of moderator was described to the participants during the introduction. The moderator’s role was to ask questions, not answer to them or take part in the discussion in any other way. The moderator’s task was to
observe communication between the participants and to guide the discussion if needed. During the interview, the moderator sat at the other side of the table in the interview room.

Though the moderator’s main task was to observe and guide the discussion, she also gave signs to respondents that she is listening to what they are saying and that she understands what they mean. This encouraged participants to speak up more about the issues. The same happened with follow-up questions: Participants were eager to tell more. The fact that the moderator was neither Syrian nor Swedish did seem to encourage participants their thoughts better as they did not assume that the moderator automatically knew what they meant. In some cases, participants even pointed out this by stating “as I told you” or “don’t get me wrong.”

The moderator involvement changed only slightly in each interview based on the dynamics of each dyad. The more the participants knew each other before, more easily the discussion did flow itself. However, in these cases, respondents sometimes realised that they have been talking for a while and they stopped and asked if the moderator had the next question for them. When the interviewees were not so familiar with the other respondent, the conversation did not flow as long which gave more chances for the moderator to ask questions. Lastly, it is essential to declare that there was not domination by one person in dyads.

**4.3 Four viral photographs presented to dyads**

During the interview, four news photographs were presented to each dyad. The moderator presented images which have gone viral in the years 2015 and 2016, and the timeline is narrowed to those years for two reasons. First, the crisis had been going on for a few years, which means that participants could have seen many other images of the crisis and are aware of the situation. Second, it has been a while since they went viral, so participants might already have acknowledged the importance or unimportance of these images.

Before setting criteria, a Google image search was used to find the right images. The keywords used are viral, Syria, child, 2015 and 2016. Form both searches, I saved the first 20 photographs:
After saving these images, Google was used again to find news stories and academic research and compare them to each other: How did news programs describe these images? Next, these photos were compared to each other and the right images were selected from many other news photographs with three criteria: First, they were acknowledged as viral images in mainstream international media. This means that they have been published on many media outlets. Selected photographs have been described with many emotionally related words, such as heart-breaking, horrible and joyful. Some of these images have also been analysed in academic papers, but this was not a criterion. Second, a Syrian child is in the centre of the photograph. In some other viral photographs, the camera was focused on an adult or adults while the child is the next to or is carried by them. Thus, we were able to see the face of the child or at least his or her profile. Images in which you could only see the back of the child were excluded. The last criterion is that selected images depicted two boys and two girls. This was an intentional decision made to ensure that we have different genders in the images.
4.3.1 ‘Heart-breaking’ surrender

On March 24, 2015, a photojournalist named Nadia Abu Shaban, based in Gaza, shared an image of a four-year-old Syrian girl, Adi Hudea, on Twitter. As the image spread quickly across Twitter, Imgur and Reddit and media companies such as BBC, Telegraph UK and Daily Mail wrote about the image. By 14 March, 2017, the image was retweeted almost 25 thousand times, liked almost 13 thousand times and commented on 1.5 thousand times.

Although Nadia Abu Shaban posted the original photo without credits, one Imgur user managed to trace the original source of the image. It was published in the Türkiye newspaper in January of 2015 with the photographer’s name, Osman Sağırli. He is a Turkish photojournalist who took the picture in December of 2014 at the Atmeh refugee camp in Syria. Hudea, her mother and two siblings travelled to the camp from their home in Hama. When Sağırli pointed his camera with the telephoto lens at her, Hudea, who is wearing dirty clothes, raised her hands up, bit her lips and looked terrified. In the media, Hudea’s surrendering to the camera was described as a ‘heart wrenching’ and ‘heart-breaking’ moment (BBC News 2018).
4.3.2 The Boy on the beach

[Image: Photo number 2. Screenshot of picture by Nilufer Demir]

Alan Kurdi, also known as Alyan Kurdi, was a three-year-old Syrian boy who was found on the shore near the coastal town of Bodrum on 2 September, 2015. He and his family were Syrian refugees trying to reach Kosm, a Greek island to join relatives in the safety of Canada. However, the mother and both sons drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. The bodies of Kurdi and his brother were discovered by two locals in the morning and then moved from the water. At the same time, Nilufer Demir, a Turkish press photographer from the Dogan News Agency, came upon Alan and took photographs of him.

Photographs of Alan were quickly spread around the world and made global headlines, causing international concern over the refugee crisis. Many politicians and presidents acknowledge the tragedy and horror of photographs. Moreover, the images were widely discussed online before and after the mainstream media picked up the story. On social media, illustrations of Kurdi’s body have been turned into poignant memes. Both media outlets started to describe the image as an icon or symbol of all the children who lost their lives while trying to reach safety in Europe and the West. Since then, a number of researchers have studied the case with different methods (Vis and Goriunova 2015).
This selected photograph shows Alan’s face turned to one side. The body looks like it was washed up along the shore, half in the sand and half in the water. His shoes were still on his feet, and he was wearing a red t-shirt and blue trousers. Next to the boy stands a Turkish police officer in uniform, who takes notes of the situation.

4.3.3 The Danish police officer and the refugee girl

In September of 2015, a six-year-old refugee girl and a Danish police officer played together on the E45 freeway north of Padborg, where the police closed the freeway for security reasons (BuzzFeed News 2018). Both the girl and the officer are sitting in the middle of the road. The officer is hiding his face behind his hands while the girl is looking at him with her hands upwards. The girl is wearing a striped shirt and trousers and bright red- and orange-coloured sneakers. Behind them, it is possible to recognise two other police officers and people lying on the side of the road.

This moment was captured by Claus Fisker and freelance photographer Michael Drosten-Hasen for the Scanpix agency. They took several photographs of the situation, and the images were
first published by Danish newspapers *BT* and *Jyllands-Posten* on 9 September, 2015. Soon, a series of photographs went outside of Denmark and was shared thousands of times on Facebook, Twitter and Reddit. Michael Drostin-Hasen’s photograph was awarded the title ‘the year's news picture, Denmark’ in a Danish Press Photo of The Year 2015 contest (Årets Pressefoto 2015).

According to BuzzFeed News (2018), the police officer wished to remain anonymous, hoping that photographs would ‘tell the story on their own.’ As his identity has been hidden, the media has failed to identify the girl. Mortensen (2016) notes in her article that the refugee girl in the photo is Noor El-Saedi, who has been reported widely as Syrian but is actually Iranian (p. 418). This was also stated on the website of the Årets Pressefoto. Due to the volume of international news articles claiming that the girl is Syrian, this photograph is included in this study.

### 4.3.4 The boy in the ambulance

![Image of boy in ambulance](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

*Picture 4: Photo number 4. Screenshot of picture by Mahmoud Raslan*
Omran Daqneesh is a five-year-old Syrian boy who was pulled from a damaged building after an airstrike in the northern city of Aleppo on August 17, 2016. The footage of him injured was taken by photographer Mahmoud Raslan and released by a Syrian opposition activist group at the Aleppo Media Centre. The image appeared on the Internet and gained global media attention. Daqneesh was rescued by his parents and three siblings. His brother Ali, 10, died of his injuries on August 20, 2016. While the material captured the world's attention, Chinese and Russian media—both of which are allies of the Syrian Army—called the images ‘propaganda’ (The Time 2018).

The image of him sitting alone in an ambulance caused international outrage and was widely featured in newspapers and social media. The dust- and blood-covered boy is wearing a T-shirt showing the Nickelodeon cartoon character, CatDog. The left side of his face is covered with blood. His little feet barely extend beyond his seat as he stares shocked around inside the ambulance with the bright orange setting.

4.4 Collection of data

The first step after each interview is to organise and prepare the data for analysis. This includes transcribing interviews and then sorting and arranging the data into different types (Creswell 2014 p. 274). The following sections explain what this involved.

4.4.1 The study material

The study material used in this study is the interviews: namely, four transcripts of interviews. All four dyadic interviews were audio-recorded by two devices: the author’s laptop and her smartphone. For the transcribing, the author went through the interview three times. The first time, she only listened to the interviews and compared the recording to the notes she made during the interview. The second time, the interviews were manually transcribed in detail: If some sentences or words were unclear, the author noted them as ‘unclear’ or marked them with brackets. The third time the audio was slowed down to ensure that everything was written correctly and that all unclear words and sentences were noted. In some cases, it was impossible find out what was being said exactly. During this third time, notes written during the interviews
by the author were written down into the margins of the document. Also, the participant’s real names were changed to numbers (R1) to protect privacy.

4.5 Thematic analysis and analytical framework

Despite the fact that both Kyriakidou (2015) and Höijer (2004) have done meaningful studies about audience reaction and engagement, they do not clearly state or explain how they analysed their data in practice. Kyriakidou applied her analytical framework on an empirical study of Greek audiences with twelve focus group discussion, including 47 participants in total. Höijer (2004) presents in her article two empirical studies of audience reactions: First set of studies combined telephone interviews (500) and in-depth personal interviews, and the other set of studies consisted of 13 focus groups with different groups of citizens. While Kyriakidou presents her framework, Höijer uses terms discourses and codes. Thus one could assume Höijer is used discourse or thematic analysis. Morgan (2016) mentions that the analysis of dyadic interviews is similar to the analysis of individual interviews and focus groups; Morgan thus uses methods such as grounded theory, content analysis and thematic analysis (p.79).

Following the suggestion of Morgan, two analyses are used in this study: the analytical framework by Kyriakidou and qualitative thematic analysis. According to Morgan (2016), thematic analysis is used when a scholar’s aim is to describe ‘a general process of induction whereby the researcher reads and codes the data to understand what the participants have to say about the study topic’ (ibid p. 84). Braun and Clarke (2006) note that thematic analysis gives tools to scholars to ‘identify, analyse and report patterns, called themes, within a particular data set (p. 79). They also propose a six-step process for thematic analysis, which was used to guide the analysis of transcripts:

1) immersion in the data through repeated reading of the transcripts,
2) systematic coding of the data,
3) development of preliminary themes,
4) revision of those themes,
5) selection of a final set of themes, and
6) organization of the final written product around those themes.
Kyriakidou (2015) mentions that the analysis of her focus group material took a point of departure 'three-dimensional nature of media witnessing' and asks following questions:

1) How do viewers perceive themselves as witnessing through the media?
2) How do they relate to the witness in the media?
3) What kind of assumptions do they make about witnessing by the media?

She also explains the function of these questions:

’What these questions enable me to do is construct a ‘typology of witnessing’, which identifies in some detail the specific conditions upon which the experiences of media witnessing may allow for certain forms of moral engagement and not others.’ (p.219)

This typology consists of four different modes of witnessing. In this paper, these four modes are used as (preliminary) themes. This also means that Step 3 was actually a first step in the proposed six-step process. Each comment on a transcript was systematically coded twice with a theme. Three questions by Kyriakidou were used to code the comments.

The author of this paper did systematic coding first on paper: She printed all interviews in paper and marked all comments with colours referring to themes. For example, words, sentences and phrases which express affective language were marked as pink to highlight affective witnessing. This means that the author was aware that one comment can have many codes. Because the study was semi-structured, it was not possible to predict the themes based on questions.

Nevertheless, the author was also looking for new possible themes: If the comment included something which was not mentioned in Kyriakidou's article, it was also marked. After the first coding, the author coded the transcript in same way but by using word-processor pages. These codings were compared to each other and changes were made on the pages document. Finally, the author created a document for each dyad, wrote all themes (modes) found in those transcripts, then collected and organised all comments under five themes. In the next section, these themes and their coding are explained in detail with example comments from Kyriakidou's article. It also explains modes of media witnessing from the analytical perspective.
4.5.1 Themes: modes of media witnessing

The analytical framework of media witnessing by Kyriakidou (2015) has four modes of witnessing, which can be identified with three questions addressed above. The operationalisation of these modes – or themes in analysis – is presented in this section. Kyriakidou mentions is her analysis section terms such as discursive elements and ‘common sense discourses’, which are coming through the interaction of discussion (p. 219).

Engagement in affective witnessing has ‘intense emotional involvement with the human pain’ – or other emotions – ‘witnessed through’ the media (ibid p. 220). Participants have empathetic identification with the child witnessed ‘in’ the media. Nevertheless, there is a condition on the sensationalist nature of the witnessing by the media. Kyriakidou states this mode has two basic discursive elements: singularising particular sufferer – or in this case the child – and affective language (ibid). Thus, comments which show affective language and/or otherwise express feelings were marked as this type of witnessing with the colour pink. Moreover, this affective, emotional response and intense emotions were already observed and noted during the interviews.

Olga: ‘I see the child, and I get goosebumps, and I cry and then what; it does not stop, does it? It’s an embarrassment being a human being.’

Ecstatic witnessing is about engaging and feeling the urgency of a situation with emotional, intense involvement. The audience members place themselves as immediate witnesses, virtually present in the scene and as if the situation is happening in front of their eyes. The viewer expresses this by using temporal deixis. They have intense emotional involvement with the events witnessed and unconditional empathy with the person represented in the media. Moreover, they are accepting the media coverage without questioning it. Thus, comments which emphasized urgency – such as ‘it’s happening now’ – express immediate witnessing. This means that the participant felt like being present in the mediated situation and thus placing themselves in the situation. These comments were marked as yellow. (Kyriakidou 2015 p. 222)

Irini: Because you are actually waiting to see whether that person will manage to jump from the window or not, whether she will be saved from the fire …
Whenever respondents refer to relations of political and social power and inequality, it is considered *politicalised witnessing*. Kyriakidou (ibid) describes this emotional involvement that ‘in the feelings of indignation, addressed either to the perceived reasons that brought the suffering, or most often, to its perceived perpetrators’ (p. 224-225). The viewer is looking for causes of the event they witness and for the attribution of blame and political responsibility. Participant will use word ‘us’ and ‘them.’ All comments about such witnessing were marked in green. This mode demands that we take a closer look at the chosen words. To whom is the respondent referring to: to them or us, I or you.

Pavlos: If the state did not want it to exist, they would have kicked them out of there! … The state itself damns them to go through all this!

The fourth type of witnessing is *detached witnessing*. For the audience, the witness of the media text was irrelevant. Thus, their comments did not express any affect or involve any affective language, emotional identification or indignation. In other words, there was no emotional response, only facts. The viewer uses an external report while describing the events. Comments reflecting detached witnessing were marked as dark blue in colour.

Menelaos: There was an earthquake, and then the tsunami was created, the sea was drawn in, seashells came to the surface…

All comments which could not be identified in accord with these themes were coded with light blue under the theme called *other*. However, in some cases, more than one mode could be marked in one.

### 4.5 The limitations of the methods

Some of the limitations and suitability issues were discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus, this section briefly discusses other the validity and reliability of the study and the suitability of the methods. In qualitative research, *validity* refers to the way the ‘researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures’, while *reliability* indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent (Cresswell 2007).

The main limitation of this study is related to the participants. As a researcher, the author is aware that four dyadic interviews cannot be generalised to represent the general public. Additionally, four transcripts is not a large sample. Generalisation of results was not the goal.
of this study, but to explore the phenomenon of media witnessing and engagement in depth – which is the main point of explanatory research. Moreover, due to time limitations of this paper the author chose to have only three transcript and analyse them thoroughly Yet, it was not the aim of this study to generalize the findings, and the question, ‘how many dyads is enough?’ cannot be answered by this study. Due to space and time limitations, this study does not aim for completeness but merely aims to explain the phenomenon of media witnessing – which is the main point of explanatory research. However, while recognising the validity and reliability related to participants, the change in recruiting method is an issue of reliability. Nevertheless, snowball recruiting proved to be ideal for dyadic interviews. Giving responsibility to the participant is not only convenient and time-saving, but the selected participants make the discussion more flowing, critical and fruitful, as they know each other.

There some limitations in dealing with the analysis. One is the author’s own identity: She is a Finnish woman who understands Swedish but does not understand Arabic. This may affect the way the respondents replied to interview questions and how the author interpreted their comments. Furthermore, English was not participants or her native language. Thus, it would have been better to have had at least two or three scholars analyse the same data – transcripts – and determine how they interpreted all comments. Moreover, as the study follows a concept or framework made by someone else, there is a risk that the researcher is too tightly following categories which are already made and is not noticing other issues. A ready framework can easily steer the analysis too much and does not leave room for new observations. In other words, it is almost effortless to code comments with ready themes. It can also be difficult to point out when data saturation is achieved (Morgan 2016. p. 18). These problems could be solved by having at least two scholars perform their own coding of the material.

However, as this paper is Masters thesis it is done independently, and the author did coded the transcript twice. These two factors together should give more the validity and reliability of this study.
5 Findings and analysis

In this chapter the findings from the interviews are discussed. Section 5.1 comprises a summary of the findings. In Section 5.2 and 5.3 information is provided about each dyadic interview and the interview modes.

5.1 Summary of findings

It was possible to identify modes of witnessing in the dyadic interviews. If we consider all the interviews collectively, it is possible to state that all four modes of Maria Kyriakiakidou’s (2015) media witnessing modes – affective, ecstatic, politicised and detached – were present. However, the findings indicate that one more mode should be added when analysing different audience types, not only the ‘Western audience’. This fifth mode is introduced as the mode of first-hand witnessing: experiencing the media text with personal connection and comparing the mediated situation with the situation one has previously seen with one’s own eyes.

5.1.1 New mode: first-hand witnessing

A new mode emerged during the analysis. During all the interviews, one reason for specific witnessing was pointed out: own experience of the mediated situation. All the Syrians mentioned many times how they could relate to the situation of these children because ‘they have been there’. On the other hand, the Swedes justified their lack of emotions and sameness. Saga said that she would not be able to relate to the events depicted in images because she had not seen them with her own eyes:

Saga: I can imagine, but I’ve never seen that thing with my own eyes. I’ve seen kids playing on the beach. I’ve never seen a kid in a refugee camp with my own eyes, I’ve seen
kids that are … I don’t know … playing in the streets. I think maybe that’s a setting that would be more relatable.

In this first-hand experience, the viewers perceive their experience as being similar to that of the mediated witness experience. No matter the distance, they have a bond due to what they have experienced. They relate to the media image with a strong, emotional connection, because they do not need to imagine the experience of the crisis. The assumptions that the audience makes about the media’s depiction is the certainty of the situation: because they have been through it, they know what it is like.

5.2 Analysis

The author of this thesis used Kyriakidou’s (2015) analytical framework while analysing the transcript. In order to avoid repetition, the publication year of her article 2015 is left out from this part. For the convenience of the reader and in order to protect the respondents’ privacy, their names have been changed to popular Swedish or Syrian names3. Furthermore, in order to make the text more readable, some of the comments have been edited. For example, repetitions have been removed, or words such ‘like’. Moreover, the Syrians were especially concerned that their English was not good enough and they hoped that their grammar would be corrected. This was done most of the time. Even though this has been done for this paper, all the analysed comments were unedited. All the transcripts with unedited comments and without coding are available by request from the author, but excerpts of the interviews are included in appendices.

5.2.1 Dyad 1: Syrian men

Three modes of media witnessing were present in the interview with of two Syrian men, Adnan and Yasser: ecstatic and politicised and the newly-identified mode, first-hand witnessing. The interview situation was relaxed, even though participants did not know each other beforehand. They talked about their personal issues openly and sometimes they described cases which were off topic. Nevertheless, during the interview, they seemed to expect that the moderator is leading the discussion. When Adnan and Yasser had said everything they had in their minds,

3 Names were randomly selected from websites babble.com and nameberry.com
they did not try to continue the discussion by themselves, but they waited for the question to be answered.

The Syrian men perceived themselves to be intensely witnessing through the media, and they also related strongly to the depictions – that is, the Syria children – seen in the images. When asked how the images made them feel, they immediately named the feelings they had at that moment. They did not describe their feelings in detail or with complicated words, but mentioned whether they had positive or negative feelings. They underlined their personal feelings with the pronoun ‘I’: for example, ‘I feel so sad’ and ‘I have a problem when I see this picture’. Yasser and Adna often mentioned that these images generated ‘bad’ feelings in them. Moreover, they said that they thought others would feel the same way about these images:

Yasser: I think all people cry when they see this picture ... I think all people are crying and nervous when they see this for the first time.

Adnan: Bad feelings.

--

Adnan: But sure, when we see this picture [pointing to picture 4] we feel more happy.

Kyriakidou stated that ‘victims become real people to whom the audience can relate’ (p. 221). This can be easily recognised in the Syrian men’s discussion, because they were interested in these children as individuals with names. The assumption of ‘sameness’ with the child occurred many times in many of the men’s comments and it appeared to be a critical factor for them. Their emotional engagement could be explained primarily by their personal history and connection with the crisis: they pointed out many times that they had been ‘there’ and seen what had happened. To the question of whether they felt they could relate to the children in the images, they nodded and replied quickly:

Yasser: Yes. Too much.

Adnan: Yes, because we were there, in the same situation. At the same time.

Yasser: […] All the pictures are talking about what happened.

Adnan made a comment that highlighted this well: ‘We feel this war because we were there’. In other words, they were able to relate to these children because they had had the same experiences as them. These comments reflected that their experiences were linked to witnessing
the situation in real life. By contrast, it appeared that without these experiences they would not have been able to relate to the children as strongly as they did. This means that they were speaking from the perspective of first-hand witnesses, the affective mode.

**Ecstatic witnessing** was a common mode in the Syrian men’s interview. Involving ‘extreme positions of full immersion’ and as ‘immediate witnesses’, they often described the situation of the image as if they were there at that same moment:

Yasser: In Aleppo, the bomber is coming to his house and all the people… This is after the bombing, but they stayed alive.

As they were looking at the images, Yasser and Adna repeatedly highlighted that things were better in Syria before the war. They were concerned about two issues that needed to be changed. Firstly, they mentioned how the only thing that Syrian children see now is war:

Yasser: Maybe children are coming at a bad time and the war... If any children are born now, all they see is the war.

Adnan: Yeah, he [pointing at Omran] spent all his years at war.

Yasser: Yeah. It was seven years.

Secondly, they mentioned the urgency of the situation many times and how the only and ‘last chance’ to live was to leave Syria:

Yasser: If you go there, it will be like this [pointing at Alan and Kurdi]. If you don’t, it will be like this [pointing at Omran]. It is a hard way, not an easy way. It is important to see these people. However, there are too many people who cannot. Men have a house, men have money, children are trying to have a new life. Too many people see this picture and go.

Adna: Yeah, maybe it was their last chance.

Yasser: Last chance.

Adna: To live or not.

There was an intriguing moment with image number 2, Alan’s image. After pointing out that the photographs of Alan are famous, the following discussion took place:
Adnan: I think the photographer who took this photo… I don’t know how, how he… could take this photo.

Yasser: Like this! [Yasser imitates the photographer’s position, going lower.]

Moderator: You couldn’t?

Adnan: I can’t, no.

This dialogue highlights the sense of intense immersion in the tragic scene of the boy. Adnan imagined himself in the scene as a photographer, witnessing the body of a dead child. The sense of immediacy was clear when he spoke in the present: ‘I can’t.’ Adnan was questioning how the photograph could be taken at all. Nevertheless, he did not explain whether it was acceptable to take the photo or if he felt the picture should not have been published.

**Politicised witnessing** was a mode of witnessing for the Syrian men. They pointed out many times that life in Sweden was the ‘high life’ or ‘right life’.

Yasser: I want all to see … my cousins to see this life. This is the right life. The government does not lose anything, only thinking [when they are making decisions]. In Sweden, you don’t have diesel, ‘bensin’, for nothing – made from snow! [laughing]

Adnan: Make everything!

This comment can be analysed as a criticism of the conflict: only by ‘thinking’ – by planning and making decisions – the right life could achieved - that is something that the government has done. Even though the life in Sweden seemed to be better for them, they mentioned that living conditions for children in Syria were better before the war. Kyriakidou attributed the suffering to political issues.

Adnan: I think before the war, they were very good compared to other children. For example, when I was a child. Yeah, I had everything in my life, I think. Yeah, but now, the conditions are bad for them.

They said that the images of the Syrian children gave them a chance to see what was happening in their home country. However, they only once indicated that the US government should stop the war.

Adnan: Maybe they have to stop these things. They have to stop this war. I think they can, the US government.
Kyriakidou observed that in politicised witnessing there is an ‘interpretative frame of conflict’: it illustrates the participants’ understanding of power, underlining ‘them’ as the responsible actor. However, in Adnan’s comment ‘they’ could refer to the US government, but also to all those who were participating in the war. Adnan’s comment highlights the idea that ‘they’ have the power to stop the war and end the suffering of Syrian children like Omran. When the participant mentioned this, he did not show indignation but he said it with a hopeful and peaceful tone.

While detached witnessing was not typical, there were a few moments what could be considered to be in this mode. The men were keen to know these children as individuals with names, but instead of describing what was happening in the image, they focused on explaining the background story of the image, often in an obvious way:

Yasser: His father tried to give him a good life. But they cannot find … cannot go. There was a problem and he didn’t...

Adnan: He was on his way, migrating to Europe

Yasser: To Europe
[other comments]
Adnan: And then he fell into the sea.

5.2.2 Dyad 2: Swedish men

The modes of media witnessing for the Swedish men, Oscar and Adam, were politicised and detached. Affective, ecstatic or first-hand witnessing were not present. The interview situation did not have a similar flow as other three interviews: Oscar and Adam often waited for the moderator’s questions and directly to the questions. However, one in the while they did explain their thought in depth and with long comments. Despite the fact that this dyad had many silent moments, they stayed focused during the interview and gave great answers. Compared to other dyads, Oscar and Adam agreed with each other, too.

Oscar and Adam acknowledged the emotional dimension of the images, they explicitly pointed out that they knew that they were not emotionally engaged. This could be noticed in the way
they removed themselves as they spoke about their emotions. Moreover, they used the word ‘you’ instead of ‘I’:

Oscar: Pictures 1, 2, 3 are quite tragic, especially number 2 and 3. They make you feel quite bad. They makes you feel very uncomfortable and are terrible to look at.

This note can be explained by the fact that in Swedish it is typical to use the term ‘man’, which can be translated as ‘you.’ On the other hand, at the beginning of the interview it was explained that the participants should talk about their own feelings and thoughts. Thus selecting the word ‘you’ can be seen as indicating a lack of emotional connection. Nevertheless, they said that they could relate to ‘the feelings that are evident in the pictures’, such being lost and scared. Moreover, when they discussed positive feelings they were more likely to refer to themselves directly. With negative feelings they did not do that:

Adam: That is an extremely vulnerable thing to see. A very symbolic thing to see as well.
Oscar: I can perhaps relate to picture number 4 because it’s a picture of happiness and joy. So I can relate to it.

Politicised witnessing was present many times during the interview. The Swedish men explained many times how the geographical and cultural distance made them feel less related and connected. Adam and Oscar argued that because they were Swedish taxpayers, they were already helping the situation. This can be seen in the following two comments:

Adam: I thought perhaps I was helping because I am a taxpayer. That is, Sweden as a country has been very generous in helping people come in, providing safety for a while and then also providing the possibility to apply for asylum.

Oscar: Besides the geographical location, the relationship I have, what is my role in this compared … or, like, what are my possibilities for action in relation to my state, which is very much a Swedish thing, because there’s this over-belief in the Swedish way as well and what people are and what the government should be able to do just by tax funding so far?

As if being a Swede gave them a chance to do something, they also said that there were so many conflicts and crises, and seeing graphic photographs and videos were ‘nothing new’. However, when Adam was asked how important these photos were, he brought up actions, consequences and politics:
Adam: But then, number 2… actions have consequences. I mean, the fact that we, for instance, haven’t established a migration policy whereby people, for instance, have applied and been able to migrate through safe routes, for instance, or perhaps there are more asylum [opportunities] somewhere else that doesn’t require them to go to our country. That we have that, we have that to some extent, but we weren’t there, and we weren’t ready and are really seeing what’s happening.

As mentioned earlier, according to Kyriakidou there can be an interpretative frame of conflict. However, Adam’s comment indicates a different frame. By ‘them’ he refers to immigrants and asylum seekers and by ‘we’ to European and other countries that have offered asylum to refugees. In other words, he recognises himself as being on the side of the blamed ones, who were not able to prevent Alan’s death.

Detached witnessing was the most typical type of witnessing of Swedish men. When they were asked to describe how the images made them feel, they did not refer to themselves in the same way as other participants. As mentioned earlier, they did not say that the images made them feel bad, but instead used the word ‘you’. Swedish men justified their lack of emotional engagement by emphasising their own distance from the scene, both emotional and geographical. This is exactly what they pointed out: that they know that they were not emotionally involved with the images or the children they depicted for various reasons. Oscar pointed out that neither of the Swedish men had their own children, which he felt affected the way they engaged and related to these images.

Oscar: I think it’s that we two might not be as emotionally connected since neither of us have children of our own. So I think if you would actually be a parent you could be more emotionally connected to it, but for us it’s quite easy to not have this sort of emotional connection.

The geographical distance was mentioned many times during the Swedish men’s discussion. They explained that they would be emotionally more connected if the country had been closer. Moreover, they said that they did not share or have many things in common with Syria compared to the neighbouring country, Finland. Kyriakidou describes this lack of involvement is justified by the distance.

Oscar: It has to do what Adam said before, geographical distance between these countries, but also cultural differences between countries because it makes us feel more distant in a sense because we, in Sweden, do not have that much in common with Syria as a country. Perhaps I don’t have that much in common with Syrians. […] a country closer to Syria, I
mean, would definitely have things that would be different, and highly and emotionally
connected.

Adam: I don’t think more pictures like this would make you want to go … this country is
quite far away. If these were pictures of children in our neighbouring country, Finland, a
lot of Swedes would start doing things. I absolutely think so. But it’s a country that is quite
far away.

The Swedish men also said that there were many similar situations and seeing these images of
suffering people was nothing new. Adam explained that there were other wars, conflicts and
refugees that they had witnessed, so this was nothing new.

Adam: The thing is if you situate these in the largest or war context, or war media context,
because there’s so much reporting of these sort of conflicts, it tends to have something
like a dulling effect, both in terms of the content and in terms of similar information and
text, but the images that you see, with that said, also make me feel disinclined to help in
some way.

5.2.3 Dyad 3: Syrian women

The Syrian women, Fatima and Amira, demonstrated three of the types of media witnessing
noted by Kyriakidou. The most common was first-hand witnessing, and the other two were
ecstatic and politicised. Detached witnessing was not present during the discussion. Syrian
women also strongly perceived themselves to be witnessing through the media. They also
emotionally related to the Syrian children in the images.

This interview was the most intense one. When Fatima and Amira saw the photographs their
discussion immediately started. For the first seven minutes the moderator decided to stay quiet
and let participants speak. Compared to three other interviews moderator’s questions became a
natural part of the discussion. Sometimes women answered to these questions before they were
asked by the moderator. Furthermore, they often asked follow-up questions themselves. Thus
the role of the moderator was rewarding but challenging. It is important to mention that Fatima
and Amira had a close relationship which developed the discussion to the next level.

It was not easy to discern whether the most common mode during the discussion was affected
or first-hand experience. These women, Fatima and Amira, had strong emotional reactions.
First of all, within five minutes of discussion, Amira got tears in her eye and needed a tissue. Both women used emotional language and, for example, described the children as ‘poor little baby’ or ‘little child’ and noted that the situation was sad and depressing. Usually, they managed to express what they were feeling and thinking, but sometimes it was difficult for them to describe it with words.

Fatima: Number 3, is like a... the look in his eyes is very ... it’s so sad. It’s like it presents the shock that we might all have inside of us. Like we’re shocked about what is going on in there. I’m shocked and confused.

- Amira: Number 1 touches me, very much. This one [showing the photograph]. It’s... I can’t explain what I feel exactly.

The emotional engagement was noticed by Fatima and Amira themselves, mainly when they spoke about photograph number 2.

Fatima: And number 3 – for me it’s like it presents death, even if this kid has survived. He is dead, in my opinion. I can’t see any reason for him to be alive. I’m not saying that he doesn't deserve it, I’m saying that he would continue as a dead person inside. [other comments]

Amira: But I think maybe something dies in you, inside you, when you see these photos. Not him.

Fatima: Maybe. [other comments]

Fatima: I’m reflecting my feelings about this photo.

Amira: Because when you ... when I see these photos, all these and many other photos in the media and TV, I change.

The women engaged with the photographs emotionally, but they reflected on themselves on a personal level. In the same vein as the Syrian men, the Syrian women also demonstrated the validity of Kyriakidou’s assumption of sameness. However, when Fatima and Amira spoke about image four, they connected it with their own experiences:

Fatima: I know that it has been taken spontaneously, but I would say that the road represents that she has a new beginning, a new life to go through.

Amira: This photo [showing number 4]

Fatima: Expresses us.
Amira: It’s like us, we are here, we are safe now, so…

Fatima: So it brings memories and like you feel more appreciative, kind of when you feel like […] I consider myself lucky to have survived hell there.

Amira: Like this girl.

Fatima: And had a chance to leave, to start over.

The Syrian women were intensely and emotionally engaged with the photos. By using the word ‘us’ they made the connection to the sameness of similar experiences in the past. They often ended up talking about other Syrian people they knew and shared their stories, such as how a woman they know cannot eat fish because she keeps thinking about eating Syrians who drowned in the sea. For Fatima, seeing the sea in Alan’s photograph sparked strong emotions: she was also having an ‘unmediated experience’ with Alan’s image:

Fatima: I would never imagine myself going swimming in that sea. Just thinking that the sea had swallowed all these people, and I could have been one of these people. Like I'm just lucky that I got to be here, but I would have been like all these kids. So all these people were drowned in this sea. I wouldn’t. I don’t want to go, like, even for tourism reasons. I don’t feel that I would love to go there and see this sea. I hate this sea.

The Syrian women had only a few moments of ecstatic witnessing. They often talked about the urgency of the situation with intense emotional involvement, but they did not feel overwhelmed, which is characteristic of the Syrians. Instead, they were sad or critical. However, they did have ecstatic moments when they placed themselves in the scene, or experienced immediate witnesses. This occurred especially when they were describing these images:

Fatima: Number 3, I don't know. He’s alone – shocked, I think. No one could answer the questions he has on his face, in his eyes. And this reflects the reality. No one can answer the question of why this is happening, what the problem is, who is to be blamed. How are we going to solve this? No one can answer any question – exclamation marks, question marks, everywhere there are no answers.

They also included their own experiences as part of this mode:

Fatima: I won’t imagine myself going through what number three went through, not even all of them, but surviving this would never … like, it’s worse than dying. If someone would die and in a bomb explosion, there they’re dead, but surviving after that – it’s like
a crucial thing that happens to a human being, like life won’t be the same afterwards. Never. One would be a different person. It won’t be the same.

Along with the affective witnessing, politicised witnessing was often demonstrated during the interview. Fatima and Amira frequently raised questions and issues of political and social power and inequality, especially at the global and local levels. After being asked if they felt they could do something about it, they answered as follows:

Fatima: Well, I probably feel that I’m not strong enough to help now, but maybe in the future I will be able to do something about it. Not just because they are Syrians but because it’s like that in the whole world. It’s not just because they might have been like children to me, but because this is sad on a humanitarian level.

Amira: Also, for me there is a point to these photos. They remind me of other photos in other countries, like Lebanon, the Lebanon war.

Fatima: The Lebanese war…

Amira: The civil war. Also in Uganda. So when I… [Arabic]

The Syrian women did not directly blame anyone for the crisis in Syria, but they did express grievances. For example, according to Fatima, Syrian people feel they are alone, because they are ‘facing this craziness of humanity’. Thus the images reminded them of regrettable happenings, including those that some Syrians did not survive. Fatima and Amira felt terrible about it, but they still felt lucky about their own situation.

Fatima: Even if you’ve survived through this you still have this feeling that you survived but other people didn’t make it. So this feeling is not… it is not really the best feeling.

Amira: Yeah, it’s not enough to survive by yourself.

Fatima: Precisely.

Amira: It’s not enough.

They continued that the Syrian war should stop. Moreover, they claimed that all wars should stop. They did not, as Kyriakidou asserted, ‘search for causes and attribution of blame’ but they were interested in ‘political responsibility for events’ (p, 226). Later on, Fatima began to focus on how the images reminded her of all war situations in this world:

Amira: It’s not enough. It should stop, all this. All war in all countries.
Fatima: Everywhere.


[-] Fatima: It’s all the same. What she wants to say is that these pictures reminded her of pictures of other countries in wartime, so I said the same. Like, it is the same everywhere: it’s ugly, it’s useless, it’s merciless…

5.2.4 Dyad 4: Swedish women

All four of Kyriakidou’s modes of witnessing appeared in the interview with the Swedish women, Ida and Saga, but the most common mode was affective witnessing. The new mode of first-hand witnessing was not present. During this interview, the moderator was passive during the interview. She asked the questions – or replied to questions presented by participants – but otherwise she stayed quiet. Ida and Saga had a close relationship and they were speaking all the time, sometimes arguing and sometimes they agreed with each other. They were not afraid to express their thoughts, especially Saga. Occasionally the discussion was off-topic but participants realised and asked the moderator to ask or repeat the question.

Ida and Saga used affective language while viewing the images. They often told me that they felt sad and hopeless, but also distant from these children. Because of that, they did not show strong emotional reactions. They were also more careful with their choice of phrases. For example, they often used expressions such as ‘I think’, ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I’m not sure’. Ida also thought that because these images depicted children, they were more relatable, especially the first time they saw them:

Ida: I mean, I don’t know. It depends on how you see […] when I saw these images the first time I was really affected by them.

Saga: Yes.

Ida: Maybe I was, maybe it was because it was children and that way I can relate somehow.

Moreover, because they had seen the worst images before, their ‘initial shock’ was not as strong as it had been the first time they saw some of the images. The intense emotional involvement that Kyriakidou mentioned was not present anymore. Nevertheless, they did remember their first reactions to the images of Alan and Omran:
Ida: I didn’t cry. But…

Saga: Yeah, I can just remember having like a…

Ida: Ice in your stomach.

Saga: Yeah, like a lump in my stomach …

Ida: No laughter. Like it was more...

Saga: Like shock.

Ida: Quite serious shock, yeah, I would say so.

Saga: But, as you said, the initial shock of seeing the pictures has gone away. So… but I think sitting and talking about it again kind of gets you to remember more about it, and yeah, how tragic it is. But also, it kind of feels like you asked if we feel as if we can do something. It still feels like there’s not much I that I can do, a little bit like helplessness about what’s going on. You always hear these tragic stories and kind of go numb after a while.

Like the Swedish men, these women felt that in order to feel more about the image they would need to know more about the photograph, especially the one of Hudea by Osman Sağırı. Without the background story, the Swedish women were unsure what to think or feel about it.

Saga: It’s hard to tell because I can see that the kid doesn’t look very happy. Like I said, it’s very sad. But I haven’t seen it before and I don’t really know the context. Without the context it’s hard to say. But I imagine that it can be quite effective with the headline that describes it. Because it shows a lot of emotion.

On the other hand, the women also compared images and recognised that some of them were aroused more emotion at first glance. They described them as ‘tragic, hopeless and devastating’.

Saga described the images of Alan and Omar as ‘instantly tragic’:

Ida: Or when a kid is hurt. I mean, compared to number 1, it doesn’t have the same emotion, like the picture number 2 has a lot of impact.

Saga: For the viewer.

Ida: Yeah, of course. And I think it’s something that people can relate to, like losing a kid, like having a relation and getting really emotional, but the view from a refugee camp is kind of harder to relate to.
Saga: Yeah, maybe. But just, it just looks so sad. I mean devastating, really, when I see this picture, number 2. […] Number two and three instantly evoke a tragic and kind of sad feeling, and a little bit more hopelessness.

The Swedish women also described the children as ‘small’ and ‘cute’. They took a close look at what these children looked like and what they were wearing. This description is typical of affective witnessing. On the other hand, it seemed that for the Swedish women children as actors generated more feelings in them. However, Saga and Ida also assumed that ‘other people’ would also react to children ‘more’ than to others, most likely to adults. They also explained that it was easier for them to imagine children doing something. Saga, for example, mentioned, that ‘it hits closer to heart when it is a child.’

Saga: I haven’t been in any situation like this at all, but I think I can relate to the children, because they are innocent in this whole crisis. They are really victims. It’s obvious that they are victims because they are children. They don’t have anything to do with what started the whole crisis. So, kind of in the sense of their being children, I can relate to it with … I don’t know … other children like, in my family, are like that. But the situation is hard to relate to, I think. This one I can relate to.

Nevertheless, Ida and Saga did not agree on whether the nationality and cultural background affected the way images of children generated emotions in others. For Ida, these emotions would be the same despite the background, while Saga believed that the cultural and national background affected the way individuals felt about them. In the end, they agreed that all individuals would have emotions when they saw these images, but the response might be different.

Ida: Not really. I think everybody would feel affected by these and have similar emotions.

Saga: But, yes, I think it does because if we don’t feel like we can relate so much to some of the pictures then maybe we don’t…

Ida: But, yes, I mean I was thinking of us. Like these people were kinda the same as us – like they had the same living situations as us before. So, in that way…

Saga: but I think, of course, the background will always affect how we view it.

Ida: I think it depends how deep it goes. I think if you really see these they would be, I don’t know, Swedish or Asian, or American, I think you get these instant emotions …

Saga: Yeah, yeah, the emotions. I meant the response and the way we respond to it if we think that we should do something or if we think it’s someone else’s problem or they are the same as us.
The mode of ecstatic witnessing was rare, but there were moments of this mode, especially when Ida and Saga described what they saw in these images. They used present tense and their imagination but were still overwhelmed. This is how they described the images of Omran:

Saga: It’s like, I don’t know. It’s like terror on his face …

Ida: I think he looks numb, like he’s gone.

Saga: Well yeah. […] But its, yeah, not like frightened at the moment... I don’t know. To me, it almost looks like he is giving up hope.

Ida: Yeah, you could say that.

Saga: Like he’s been through so much that he doesn’t even have the energy or can’t even express.
[ --]
Saga: It’s also hard to tell from the picture because he has a lot of blood on him and it looks like it’s both old and new, and I’m kind of thinking ‘is it his or is it someone else’s and/or maybe both. Just very...

Ida: Tragic.

When they were asked how important these images were, many modes of witnessing overlapped, but ecstatic witnessing was more evident in words such as ‘it’s happening now’ and ‘urgency’. Kyriakidou mentioned that in this way viewers position themselves as ‘immediate witnesses’, virtually present (p. 223). This mode of witnessing was related only to the images in which the child was clearly suffering; in other words, injured or dead.

Saga: I think they’re important because they open, as I mentioned, one’s eye[s] to what’s going on, to things that I think a lot of people were not aware of before, especially number two.

Ida: Well, you heard about it, but you...

Saga: You couldn’t really relate, so in that way I think it is more relatable. When you see a picture you can kind of imagine yourself there.

Ida: I think they [are in] need of urgency and emergency...

Saga: Yeah, like it’s actually happening.

Ida: Happening now. It’s actually there. Like…
Saga: Yeah, in that sense it became closer. It’s not something happening something over there, but we don’t need to care. This was more...

Ida: In your face.

The next mode, politicised witnessing, was also rare during the interview. Just like two Swedish men, Ida and Saga often mentioned their nationality and thought that they have grew up in Sweden which is more open and welcoming than many other countries. They were wondering if it has an impact or not.

Saga: Like in Sweden, we are more open, or that’s maybe my view, but we are welcoming more refugees and more and more people to Sweden.

Ida: Not like any other country in the world.

Saga: I’m not sure but maybe that’s – I don’t know if it’s only my view of it – that we relate more to it. Even though it’s people from a different part of the world, we can relate to them as if they were the same as us and I think that might be more difficult for other cultures that are not used to, or don’t have a diverse culture to open up and see.

Ida: Maybe, but there are lots of Swedes who don’t relate to them and don’t have the same opinions about refugees as the European countries.

Saga: Yeah, but that’s also maybe the European sense. Like, we have more mobility. Maybe a person from Asia wouldn’t view these pictures in the same way at all.

They also mentioned that the Swedish media was different: graphic, violent images are not shown in Swedish media. According to Saga, Swedish children are different from Syrian children because Sweden does not have ‘the situation’ of ongoing crisis.

Saga: They are innocent in this whole crisis. They are really victims. It’s very obvious that they are victims because they are children. Children don't have anything to do with what started off the whole crisis.

While the Swedish women stated that Sweden was an excellent example of a ‘good actor’, there was one thing missing from this interview and mode: blaming. Ida and Saga did not blame anyone. This might be connected to their choice of phrases: they were careful about explaining what they thought about the topic. However, Saga did recognise that the children in these images were innocent victims, in other words, facing injustice in this situation.
The final mode, detached witnessing, was not typical of the Swedish women. Similarly to the Swedish men, for Saga the fact of not having experienced or witnessed the situation in real life was the main reason for which she thought it is not possible to relate to the real situation just with one’s imagination.

Saga: In one way, I mean, it’s always in one way, one can always relate to kids that way in general, but I think number one and three are so far away, distant from what I’ve experienced. Of course, number 2 is also different from what I’ve experienced, but as I said earlier it’s on a beach. You can imagine children playing there

[---]

Saga: I can imagine it, but I’ve never seen such a thing with my own eyes. I’ve seen kids playing on the beach. I’ve never seen a kid in a refugee camp with my own eyes. I’ve seen kids that are, I don’t know, playing in the streets. I think maybe it’s the setting that makes it more relatable. Maybe.

Ida: I was thinking more that I would never see this where I am, an actual child on the beach, even though children are playing there.

Saga: No, but I’m...

Ida: Number 4 feels like I could see, this like if I walk up street right now.

Saga: Yes, but I mean like relatable in a sense, not that I’ve experienced it, but if I don’t know something that makes it more easy to imagine how it would be.

5.3 Comparing dyads

Some similarities came up in the analysis that were not tied to the modes of witnessing. The first was the concept of distance between the viewer and the representation of the child. There was no agreement in any of the groups about whether the distance – cultural or geographical – affected the way people felt in relation to the child represented in the news photographs. Others argued that one had to share the same nationality as the child or just be closer to the conflict area. Others asserted that the physical distance or cultural background did not matter, because the person in the image was a child. Fatima presented an argument that echoed a cosmopolitan worldview: ‘Any picture of any tragedy affects me exactly the same, I would say. Exactly the same.’ The Syrian women also stated that they felt sorry for all children, not just Syrian children. The Syrian men did not agree:

Adnan: More people will have bad feelings, as I told you, because they are children.

Yasser: But because of your nationality, you’re feeling the bad thing.
Adnan. No, it is about humanity, not nationality.

Another interesting finding was that all the participants used the discourse of a *new life*. They all used it to highlight how life in Sweden was a new, better life for everyone. While they addressed this, the participants also mentioned that they had seen so many images similar to the photographs used in this study. It was nothing new for them. The Swedes also pointed out that the Syrian conflict had been going on for so long that they felt numb about it – or detached. At the same time, all the participants recognised that other crises were occurring all the time.

According to the study by Höijer (2004), media witnessing is gendered, meaning that women and men react differently to media texts. Based on this study and its results, gender might have a little impact on witnessing. In Höijer’s research, the women were more emotionally affected by suffering images than the men. When it come to the four women in this study, they were visibly sad, especially the Syrian women, who had to use tissues after seeing the images. As opposed to the men, these women verbally described their feelings. For example, while the four men jointly used the word ‘sad’ or ‘sadness’ three times during their interviews, the four women mentioned it 15 times in total. With limited information, four women’s experience of witnessing appeared to be more emotional. However, two Syrian men were also emotionally engaged with the images, while two Swedish men were not. This means that there are characteristics other than gender that have an impact on how we engage with the images. Is it nationality?

Four Syrian participants experience of media witnessing was more personal than that of four Swedes. The Syrians were interested in the children as persons, but they also saw themselves in the photos. While it was affected, it also had a personal dimension that was missing from Kyriakidou’s framework. All four Syrians talked about their own families or other families they knew and shared stories about them, but Swedish participants did not refer to their own real family. All Syrian respondents used the images as their point of departure, explaining how similar they were and are compared to these children. Finally, for the all Syrians the interview was not a comfortable experience: they all described being exhausted, depressed and sad afterwards, because of remembering what was going on. However, Swedish participants it did not make them feel good, but they all stated that they appreciated the experience.
6 Conclusions and discussion

This final chapter comprises conclusions and discussion about this study. The aim of this research was to find out how people from different backgrounds were engaging with viral news photographs of Syrian children. In this thesis Introduction, the author explained that it is essential to study media witnessing and engaging experience, because we witness many images and situations through, but sometimes one news photograph can make us all stop, make a connection and invites us to use our (cosmopolitan) imagination. In other words, the picture can make us imagine through the eyes of the other. It is important to find out what are the reasons we are engaging differently. Once we understand more how people are experiencing engagement with media texts, it is possible to find reasons behind specific reactions and actions – and prevent them.

This study was exploratory and interpretative in nature, and the aim was to address the following research question:

While engaging with viral photographs of Syrian children, taken in 2015 and 2016, which modes of media witnessing can be identified in interviews with people who come from different backgrounds?

The results of this study indicate that it is possible to identify modes of witnessing in dyadic interviews. If we consider interviews together, it is possible to state that all four modes of media witnessing – affective, ecstatic, politicised and detached – suggested by Maria Kyriakiakidou (2015) were present. The findings indicate that one more mode should be added when analysing differing audience types and not only the ‘Western audience’. This fifth mode was introduced as the mode of ‘first-hand witnessing’: experiencing the media text with a sense of personal connection, because participant had previously seen the mediated situation with his or her own eyes. This finding is both interesting and useful for further research. Even though the mode of this study is related to members of the Syrian audience, it would be interesting to debate whether
it is culturally or nationally linked. Instead, it is linked to individual’s experiences and their past. Put differently, if one of the Swedish respondents had been in Syria and witnessed the crisis with his or her own eyes, he or she might have viewed the photographs differently. Nevertheless, there is a need to conduct new research to prove this point.

The methodology of this qualitative study consisted of an analytical framework with four modes, four dyadic interviews and their transcripts, and thematic analysis, which was based on the modes as themes. Even though this was a complex and slightly adjusted set, it was successful. The thematic analysis and analytical framework worked well together, yielding interesting insights into this new and sensitive topic. The framework was a good point of departure for this study, because it provided guidelines in terms of what to look for. However, based on the results, it is clear that the framework works only if the scholar is interested in mediated distance. In other words, if only participants from the conflict-area were interviewed, the framework would not be functional as it is. This is understandable, because Kyriakidou’s focus was on distant suffering, not possibilities of happier situation.

Now the research gap has not been only identified with this study, but identified as the concept of the ‘‘first-hand witnessing’. Moreover, it should be mentioned that there might be more modes. However, this exploration has been left for other scholars.

Based on the results, dyadic interviews as a method was a functional means of investigating media witnessing for two reasons. Firstly, they often asked interesting questions, which could not occur in one-to-one interviews. Secondly, the participants relied on each other when they struggled with anything, especially language. In particular, all four Syrian participant sometimes found it hard to express some things English, and then they told the other participants in Arabic what they were thinking. After that they managed to explain it to me together:

Amira: It was very painful to me but a… [Arabic].
Fatima: We get used to it.
Amira: Yeah.

Another interesting methodological – and theoretical – though was emerged in relation to the dyadic interviews. In chapter 7, figure 1 presented two-, three- and four-person interviews. As simple as the figure is, what it does not take into account is the role of the moderator, whose
questions affect the way participants talk to each other. Thus I would suggest that a better rendition of the dyadic interview would be a triangle: the moderator as the upper dot, and then dotted lines between the participants and moderator to express the various ways of communicating.

![Diagram](image.png)

*Figure 2: Two renditions of dyadic interviews*

### 6.1 Further research

The findings of this study are encouraging, inspiring one to conduct more research in Media and Communication studies about engagement with viral images. More work is required to discover whether there are more modes or if the modes change as participants or dyads change. Moreover, with a larger amount of interview material it would be ideal to use mixed-methods design. In other words, to use two methods in order to have more validity (Cresswell 2014 p. 211). A combination of dyadic interviews and another method, such as surveys to collect quantitative data, would yield fruitful results.

This study is hopefully a stepping stone for such future research. There are many questions in need of further investigation. For example, interviewing only people from Syria or any other conflict area would be an interesting study because it would enable one to step away from the assumptions of the Western-centric audience and cosmopolitan outlook of suffering, ideal victims that many scholars such as Chouliaraki (2008) and Höijer (2004) have focused on for a while. Moreover, one could also compare the audience engagement of neighbouring countries: how does the audience from Libya engage with these images? In this study, the geographical distance influenced the Swedish men’s experience: would it be the same or different for men
of other nationalities? Finally, there is one issue that was raised in relation to the interview picture of a happy child. All the participants said that they would like to see more positive and hopeful images, and not only dirty and bloody victims. Perhaps people would engage with those images more because they are rare? Hopefully further researchers will find answers to these questions.
7 References


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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Welcome and Introduction

1) Greeting
2) Practicalities:
   a) Phones in silent mode.
   b) Information sheet and consent form (recording)
   c) Shocking images of injured and dead children, chances for break if needed
3) Introducing respondents and the moderator
4) Explaining the role of moderator (asking question once in a while, not part of discussion)
5) Mode of discussion: group discussion, free to express feelings and thoughts

Discussion
1) Have you seen these images before?
2) Can you describe what you see in these images?
3) How do these images make you feel?
4) How would you describe the child in these images?
5) Can you relate to the child in the photograph and in what way?
6) Distance: how much distance you have to this child?
7) How media portrays these Syrian children compared to other children?
8) Do you feel like there is something that you can do after seeing these?
9) How important these images are?
10) Do you feel like your cultural background affects the way you see these images?
11) Final thoughts?
APPENDIX  B

Example of the analysed transcript: Syrian women (coding 2)

M: Moderator
A: Syrian woman 1
B Syrian woman 2

(additional information)

[what is happening]

Themes:

Affective:  Ecstatic:  Politicised  Detached  Other

[0:21:57-0:22:54]

M: you are ready I think you said that you can relate to number four and this child and I think at some point you said like you can relate to all of this

A: Yeah, like when she said that she lost trust in the world like I would say that it's number one, and she said that she can't trust societies any more, she can't trust of human rights and all this stuff. Like I think that's relating to number one. I said like I don't like this number 2 is like for me like the sea. I would relate to this, but in a negative way. I won't be able to swim in the sea, like or to visit there in see this sea. Number 3, is like a... the look in his eyes it's very, it's so sad it's like your present to the shock that we might all have inside of us. Like we shocked about it with what is going on in there like a. I'm shocked and confused. number four you I would say I would relate to it as well I would relate to the four of them, I would say. What would you say?

B: Number one it's touching me, very much, this one. It's... I can't explain what I feel exactly

M: Situation is already there quite complicated

B: Yeah it's very complicated, the situation, yes. Number two, maybe it's a weird but I will be think about this but when I see the medel havet.

A: It's not the medel havet, [Arabic] No it's not. It's a…

M: I know I know what do you mean

B: Agean. The sea, I know one women she didn't eat fish ever. She like fish but she didn't eat. Because she thought the fish eating Syrian people. Yeah it's weird, kind of. But she can't anymore eat(ing) fish. Because she have a friend and I know her, her husband and her
daughter, only daughter, they dissapeard this sea, yeah. Nobody knows.

A: Then nobody neighbour, yeah.

M: It also gives me, kind of like new ways to think, because that's something I never even considered.

B: yeah I know her very good and I asked her many times to change her mind.

A: Everyone has their own way to express their anger against what's going on. Probably that was her only way since she's helpless, she can't do anything. So, probably that's her way.

A: How I can related to what's going on, You need some time soon to do something at least like even if it's a bit small thing but just to convince yourself that you're you are not totally because even if you're survived through this you still have this feeling that you survived but other people are, couldn't make it. So this feeling is not, it is not really the best feeling

B: Yeah, it's not enough to survive by yourself.

A: Presicly.

B: it's not enough. It should stop all this. All war in all.

A: Everywhere

B: Everywhere, yeah. No just in Syria.

A: So it sometimes you really need to do like small little stuff and think like some weird ways live like this woman who does't eat fish just like convince yourself...

B: Because when she see fish, she is she thinking about Syria and people try to

A: survive

B: Yeah, died in this scene, all the time. Yeah.

[0:38:44-0:38:48]