MAY YOU SMELL THE JASMINE AGAIN

ABSTRACT

This study came amidst one of the largest mass migration and refugee crisis in modern history. Media has a large role in framing the social conversation around refugees. While traditional media plays a part in this, so, too, does the emergence of self-published media like blogs. The purpose of this study was to do a discourse analysis of the comment section of the blog Humans of New York’s coverage of refugees to understand how people talk about refugees, and what the implications of that communication may be when refugees arrive in their host countries. The comments on the blog during its coverage of refugees were abundant and rich with cultural meaning, and, with 17 million followers, these communicative patterns have implications for a large speech community that, once studied, went against the common media discourse of hostility towards refugees and constructed a welcoming, supportive, compassionate dialogue surrounding those fleeing their homes and looking for resettlement. These findings illustrate a large community that is open to refugees and demonstrates the reality of a world that is not as hostile to those in need as it often seems.

INTRO

The global refugee crisis has opened up many channels of dialogue about refugees, the countries taking them in, and perceptions of those refugees by host countries. While media outlets have plenty to say on the matter, so too do citizens of the states discussing taking refugees in. One way to better understand the perceptions of these citizens of the refugees coming to their countries can be found in comment sections on many online platforms. These comments show how people interacting with the blog talk about refugees, talk to refugees, and, over all perceive refugees.
An ethnographic discourse analysis of the comment section of the popular blog *Humans of New York* and its coverage of the refugee crisis featured 47 photos of refugees with direct quotes from the individuals in those photos about their lives as refugees became a valuable way to gauge the general perceptions of attitudes towards refugees of the 17 million followers of the blog who chose to comment on the photos and stories of the refugees. Such a study is very important, especially in times of crisis like the one at present. The context of *Humans of New York* is especially important because the representations of refugees are those of the refugees themselves, not one articulated to them through media coverage.

There is an array of research on the topic of media portrayal of immigrants and refugees and analysis of blogs as forms of news and expressions of public opinion. However, there is not much research on how the public talks to and about refugees through these blogs when the source of the story is not a traditional media story with the interjection of a journalist, but, rather, a story of a refugee told by a refugee and a photo of the individual telling their story. As a primary social crisis of our time, it ought to be known how the people will react, and thus how the welcoming of refugees to a country will likely be managed by the masses.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The media is a complex, powerful entity with a say in what information reaches the public, how it reaches them, and when. The masses look to the news for updates on domestic and international events, especially in times of crisis. Recently, the refugee crisis caused by civil war in Syria and unrest in neighboring countries has been a popular, contested topic. Public perceptions of and discourses on refugees and immigration policies are largely guided by what is being said in the media about refugees (Steimel, 2009, 56) (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2015, 2). While relying on media framing of issues can do important groundwork in informing the public, it is
often the case that the discourse surrounding refugees is one of otherness that has consequences for how refugees are perceived by host countries (Cooper, 1997) (Robins, 2003, 44). The media representation of refugees, then, is not a representation, but rather, a construction of reality (Parker, 2014, 5) (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2015, 2).

Messages that encourage marginalization are not strangers to the media discourse on refugees (Parker, 2014, 4) (Leudar, 2008, 190) which has consequences for how refugees are in turn received by the public and what sort of opportunities are available to those in crisis upon arrival in new countries. The words chosen to refer to refugees in the news such as: “parasites,” “asylum cheats,” and “batch of immigrants” take the humanity out of the refugees (Buchanan, 2002, 12). Often, Refugees are represented as the “unwanted invader (Parker, 2014, 1) (Chovanec, 2013, 194).”

One contributor to the negative framing of refugees could be partially due to the lack of refugee voices in the media. While stories of refugees are often covered extensively, the voices of the refugees are rarely present in these stories (Buchanan, 2002, 8). Immigrants are forced to play a passive role in their coverage, subject to being pegged as “animals,” “weeds blighting American society,” or a “disease infecting body of the USA (Leudar, 2008, 187).” There is a typage reported over and over in the media that does not cover the complex population or refugees fleeing their homes, and, when refugees are interviewed they are often not able to tell their story in the short time allotted and have many barriers to their oral representation of reality (Wright, 2004, 106).

This passive role that is cast upon refugees and other immigrants allows the complex stories of many individuals to be simply framed as: poor, unfortunate, helpless, and unable to contribute to society (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2015, 9). The approach by *Humans of New York* was
unique in its coverage of only refugee voices telling their stories of life during war, and after fleeing war. The stories were no longer told about refugees, but by refugees and the comments and audience interactions to this method of report are telling of what happens when the experiences of refugees are interpreted by reporters.

Relating to the current refugee crisis, Muslim refugees are seen as the “least preferred immigrant” because the public perceives them as at a great distance from the “ideal American immigration myth” and as a burden and problem for society (Steimel, 2009, 56) (Berry, 2015, 5). The enforced otherness of refugees can then become “an instrument for shifting responsibility and as an excuse for one’s own xenophobic attitudes and policies (Mihelj, 2004, 186).” Trends of framing refugees as threats to security, social welfare and health system and linkage to crimes emerged in an analysis of press coverage of the refugee crisis between 2014 and 2015 (Berry, 2015, p.8). These negative attributes perpetuate the otherness that disallows refugees to partake in civil society and integrate in their new countries.

While the environment of information about refugees in the traditional media is important, it is becoming more and more important to look to emerging self-published sources of media like blogs, such as Humans of New York, as they are increasingly becoming sources of news for many. By 2010, 28 percent of Americans were reading blogs (Lacy, 2011, p. 53). Blogs are often perceived as more balanced than traditional news sources because they report an array of opinions (Neil, 2014, p. 660) and their content is immediate, frequent and can report on ongoing political stories with a long lifespan (Neil, 2014) such as the refugee crisis. Topics discussed in popular blogs and social media sites about important issues like refugees become a part of the public perception of the issue as well. Humans of New York is one example of a popular blog, followed by over 17 million people that covered the refugee crisis. The coverage
had thousands of comments left by readers after each post. While a blog is a source of news and media, it has interesting elements that set it apart in how it reaches readers and frames issues.

As opposed to traditional media outlets, blogs have more interactive elements and reader feedback is often abundant. Readers of blogs are twice as likely to interact with blogs than other news media (Neil, 2014, p.663). Unfortunately, blogs and social media have a reputation for being a platform of uncivil communication (Meltzer, 2015). The comments under blog posts are often quite reactionary, heated, and use strong, often offensive language. Comments on blogs can affect readers’ perception of the issues covered in the blog (Meltzer, 88). The internet has increased participation and brought public conversations of race, immigration and other social issues to the hands of the masses. In an analysis of an article from the online version of the Spanish newspaper El País, Alonso Belmonte, Chornet & McCabe (2013, 60) found online discourses to be “steeped in the same ideological positions that render immigrants as racial beings who are a burden for the economy.” In this critical discourse analysis, it was found that commenters merged toward a “xeno-racist reality on [the] online medium.” However, hostility in comment is not always the case, as the vast majority of comments left on the *Humans of New York* coverage were supportive and empathetic. This is important in understanding the public’s views of refugees.

Thus, looking at reader interactions with blogs that cover the refugee crisis is very important. Because of the coverage of refugees in the news and other media sites, many misconceptions of refugees arise and are further discussed on online forums like blog comment sections. Once refugees are given the chance to speak, they most often counter the ongoing discourses about their roles in new host countries and prove the stereotypes to be untrue (Leudar, 2008). The aim of this ethnographic study is to answer the following research questions: How do
members of the *Humans of New York* speech community talk about/to refugees through the comment function on the blog? What are the cultural meanings embedded into these comments? And, ultimately, what are the implications of these beliefs for refugees when they arrive in the United States?

**METHODS**

The *Humans of New York* coverage of Syrian refugees was posted over two weeks, December 2, 2015 until December 16, 2015, with 47 total posts telling the stories of 10 families. The blog posted each entry on Facebook where followers left their comments. The Facebook page of the blog has the exact format and stories as the blog itself, however, the Facebook version allows for comments whereas the blog itself only allows shares and likes. Each post had over one thousand comments left by followers of *Humans of New York* with some reaching up to 21 thousand comments. In order to conduct the discourse analysis I looked at each of the posts’ first 100 comments in order to deduce communicative practices in how commenters talked about refugees and, in many cases, to refugees through commenting on the posts. Because of the large following that the blog has, the discourse created surrounding the refugee stories is telling of a large group of individuals and how they perceive the stories and rights of refugees.

Discourse analysis of comments was an effective method of extracting cultural communicative practices surrounding refugees in the speech community of *Humans of New York* followers. This method allows for the speech community’s meanings and processes of making sense of situations to emerge (Gowan, 2010). The discourse that surrounds a topic allows researchers to look at how matters are being talked about, and what the meaning of those dialogues have as well as potential implications (Wright, 2004) which are important in the case of looking at narratives surrounding refugees. To interview a few followers of the blog on
Facebook to get their perceptions of refugee’s stories after reading the posts would not have produced the same amount of data that could be representative of the speech community, as the comments occurred in the fashion of a naturally occurring conversation with some interactions between commenters, voiced views and perceptions and numerous instances of speaking both to and about the refugees featured in these posts. Discourse analysis allowed for a more holistic approach to gaining an ethnographic understanding (Gowan, 2010) of the page’s follower’s discourse surrounding refugees coming to the United States. Often the data from discourse analysis is triangulated with interviews or focus groups, but in this particular study done in the time it was, its length and its function as a term paper, discourse analysis of comments was enough data to understand the meaning of the means of communication about refugees on the blog, however, the absence of triangulation would be a shortcoming of this study.

As I read through the comments, I began to jot down patterns of communication practices that I was noticing within the comments. I chose to read 100 comments from each post in order to give each story equal and diligent attention. The first 100 comments tended to have enduring patterns of communicative practices throughout the posts, so I understood that 100 comments was enough to gain an understanding of the communicative practices that would likely be present had I read all 241 thousand comments that the coverage of refugees accumulated. It was important to analyze comments from each post because each one featured a photo of the individual or family, and then a story or portion of a story from that individual. Many families/individuals had more than one photo and their stories were told in parts under each photo. Some families had children, some were alone, some were separated from their families, and it was important to cover each story equally in order to gain an understanding of how refugees are talked to/about and not just in stories, for example, with children which tended to
have more supportive comments. Thus, all stories covered needed to be analyzed in order to responsibly draw conclusions about how commenters talk about/to refugees as a whole, not just in instances of individual stories.

As patterns in the communicative practices within the comments began to emerge, I took examples of comments from each ‘genre’ of comments that embodied meanings that were present in other comments of the same pattern. These were the exemplars (Tracy, 2013, 207) that I used in the results that embodied the patterns throughout the comments. I added patterns as I went along, as, in each story, new communicative patterns would emerge in the comments, especially as commenters began to interact with each other and conversations diversified to discuss the many aspects of the refugee crisis and experience. Once 100 comments from each post had been read and categorized 25 enduring patterns of communicative practices had emerged. The 25 communicative patterns then were grouped through a process of axial coding (Tracy, 2013, 195) into themes of similarity. Seven categories of cultural themes emerged from the data, and, those seven cultural themes gave way to two cultural premises of the commenters that are likely to give some insight into how the refugees will be accepted by the communities they are moving to in the United States. An ethnographic study is, thus, the most effective way of approaching the topic of discourses surrounding refugees because it is through these discourses that one can come to understand public opinions on refugees and what implications have for the refugees upon resettling in the United States.

Discourse analysis also has the benefit of being able to analyze communication of what is said and how, that is, what choices in vocabulary and punctuation were made before the content was made public (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). This is unique from verbal communication of interviews and focus groups which are more spontaneous and not always as carefully
constructed. As with every approach, discourse analysis and my method have weaknesses. First of all, not every comment was included in this analysis, however, I believe the 4,700 comments that were included allowed for due-diligence and the responsible conclusions about the meanings of these comments to the members of the *Humans of New York* speech community. Additionally, since I was not in direct communication with the commenters via interviews and focus groups, I was unable to ask for elaboration or further meanings of the comments from the points of view of the commenters. Instead, the interpretation was largely my own understanding of the meanings and some communicative realities could have been incorrectly interpreted on my part since I was not able to ask speech community members for clarifications, rather, I could only see what they said and make sense if it in the context of the comments that surrounded them and communicative patters, themes, and cultural premises that emerged.

**RESULTS**

From the discourse analysis of the comments, as was stated above, 25 patterns of communicative practices emerged from *Humans of New York* followers who comment. These communicative practices were: showing support to the refugees through welcoming statements; speaking to human ability and resilience; establishing personal connections through stories of family members or friends who were also refugees; apologies for what the refugees have endured and for not doing more as an international community to help them; cries for peace for the refugees; defending refugees from stereotypes; calls to action through imploring other readers to vote and make governments accountable; commenting on how refugees are just like us and ought to be viewed as such; commenters reminding others that we will never understand what these people have gone through; asking for ways to get involved; promises to refugees of better things to come in the United States; reassuring the speech community that we have nothing to fear with
the arrival of refugees; general statements declaring that the public cares about them; testaments
to the kindness or Syrians and Muslims often by stories of personal encounters; encouraging
refugees not to turn cold; statements of gratitude to *Humans of New York* for fair coverage of an
often marginalized group that is victim to media framing; statements about how these stories are
opportunities for perspective and the need to stop taking our lives for granted to be able to help
those who really have something to complain about; comments on how these stories and the
comments on them had restored their faith in humanity; “welcome home”, compassion for
children who are suffering; prayers; feeling of collectiveness from commenters also wanting
peace and acceptance of refugees in need; restored faith in American people; pleas to return to
seeing humans as humans; unsupportive comments.

Of these 25 patterns of communicative practices seven dominant categories of cultural
themes emerged in which communicative practices with similarities were grouped together. The
cultural themes were: compassion, belief in the overall good of humanity, apologies; support
through action, togetherness, gratitude for fair coverage, and unsupportive of refugees.

**Compassion:** Compassion was a theme that was embodied by seven distinct cultural practices.
Any pattern that encouraged refugees, welcomed them, and illustrated empathy and caring
demeanors was included in this category. Comments in this category focused on the feelings
towards the refugees offered, in many cases, encouragement to them. ‘Showing support to the
refugees through welcoming statements’ was really prevalent in this category as many of the
refugees in their stories mentioned where they were going in the U.S.A. and there were many
comments from the communities accepting this refugees that told refugees they were happy to
welcome them to their community. General welcoming statements were also common:
“I live in North Carolina. I understand that the town of Carrboro is welcoming Syrian refugees. I hope it's where you are headed. They will welcome you with open arms. There are great universities where you can continue your studies. The weather is lovely here. Your life will definitely change for the better. I'm very excited for you!!!”

In addition to general welcoming statements was another communicative pattern under compassion that welcomed the refugees home. The use of ‘home’ is significant, as it has a very inclusive element that shows the refugees are unconditionally welcome, as this is their home now:

“I'd like to be one of the many readers of HONY welcoming them HOME with LOVE and open arms. Their story is immensely sad, and they have earned happy, healthy, successful lives in their future.”

Also in the category of compassion were promises of better things to come:

“I promise, that is not your share in life. It was certainly the biggest challenge, but there are great things out there for you all and I hope your move here to America, after such a long wait, will prove that more lies within your destiny than you know.”

There were numerous commenters who addressed the refugees and reminded them that people do care about them. Many of these comments also mentioned the history of the United States and immigrants:

“I am glad you and your family got out. Welcome to America. Immigrants have made this country great. And whatever you experience when you get here, come back and read these comments on your story and know that no matter what others may say, there are thousands of us welcoming you and wishing you and your family peace and happiness in your new home.”

Amidst the compassionate comments were comments that ‘cheered on’ the refugees and encouraged them to not turn cold, for there was a community that supported them:

“Don't let the racist xenophobe fear mongers turn your heart cold.”
Although compassion is a cultural theme with a communication practice pattern in itself, there was a specified type of compassion that emerged from the comments. It was compassion for children, for a surge of comments showed increased messages when they covered children who had suffered living in war zones and subsequent lives as refugees:

“OMGOSH....... people... please hear this... this could have been our children...these ARE our children. Children are our future. We must do better to create peace and stability in the world. Let us all please do our parts, starting with the people closest to us...the ripple effect works.”

Finally, the last pattern that had overarching themes of compassion was the offering of prayers to the refugees interviewed. Many people commented with prayers from various religions:

“I hope and pray that the Christians who are yelling out the loudest not to let Syrian refugees in will read some of these scary and sad stories- and God will open their eyes to how a true Christian (or compassionate human for that matter) should be reacting to the horrible experiences these fellow humans are having to go through. I consider myself a Christian and pray for all of you.”

While the communicative theme of showing compassion had a variety of communicative practice patterns included within it, there was a common thread throughout all of them that showed care and concern for the refugees, as opposed to the negative comments that fall under many news stories of crises (Parker, 2014). The themes of compassion show that the followers of Humans of New York are welcoming refugees and not partaking in a negative discourse and framing of them that the mainstream media often imposes. Commenters who showed compassion were hopeful for the refugees and supported them in an often un-supportive environment of online discourse (Alonso Belmonte, Chornet & McCabe, 2013). Commenters on Humans of New York, largely “wished [refugees] the best and that one day things can go back to the way they used to be.” One refugee voiced that he misses the smell of jasmine in his back yard
in Syria and a number of commenters said: “may you smell the jasmine again...” These comments really illustrated the compassion constructed by those who commented on the posts, as many wished him the same compassion of a future of peace and the comforts of home that refugees miss.

**Belief in the good of humanity:** The second communication theme that emerged from the data was expressions of the belief in the good of humanity as a whole. Nine different communicative practice patterns had this overall theme that spoke about/to refugees as a part of a humanity that is good, resilient and intertwined. This category had themes of communication that aimed to empower refugees as well as defend them and include them. Much like the category of compassion, the category of belief in the good of humanity was supportive of refugees.

The first of the communicative practice patterns included in this category is the pattern of comments that addressed the strength of human ability and resilience. Within this communicative pattern there were numerous people who voiced they could never have endured what these people endured, and then followed up with well wishing. The comments often served as testaments to their belief that people are good and want a world of peace and coexistence:

“I can't even begin to imagine the fear and sorrow you have had to live with. You are so strong and brave.”

Since refugees are often victims of framing by the media, and with the rise of Islamaphobia, many commenters took an opportunity to defend refugees and Muslims from common stereotypes:

“These are muslims. Regular people. Doctors. just trying to live. ISIS is NOT run by muslims, and they do not represent islam.”

Another related communicative pattern was commenters giving testaments to the kindness of Syrians and Muslims through personal stories of interactions:
“My cousin married a Syrian whose family came one by one to the US in the last 10 years. They are all wonderful, loving people. I see future doctors, teachers and engineers in these children's faces. Do not despair. Goodness will come to you soon.”

The category of a belief in the good of humanity was also illustrated through comments about how refugees are just like us and they want the same things and no harm to anyone:

“To attack an entire group of people is ignorant and wrong. These are families. People like you and I. Forced to leave everything they know and love just to survive and NOT join this hate group.”

Related to the idea that refugees are ‘just like us’ was the pattern of comments that voiced that we will never understand what these people have gone through and that they did nothing to deserve it, for they are good people. This pattern showed a belief in the good of humanity by reiterating that the followers of Humans of New York see the refugees as good people in need of help and empathy:

“I can't imagine the fear and pain this man has gone through, and the fear of his family. This is just one of a countless number of people facing these horrors. I hope you can find peace in a new home, whether it be permanent or temporary.”

Another pattern that was present in the category of belief in the good of humanity were numerous comments that urged readers to gain perspective from these comments and understand that from gaining perspective we can learn from each other and help each other to live in a world where human good emerges as the dominant force:

“What beautiful souls. Smiling despite the ugliness of the world they have been forced to see. Nobody, let alone children, should have to witness such tragedy and sadness. I am so glad they are getting a new life in the US. We have so much to be grateful for here, things we more times than not take for granted. We should have our arms open, for all who need a new beginning.”
For many who commented, the *Humans of New York* series on refugees was something they claimed restored their faith in humanity that had been lost. Belief in the good of humanity, was, then a belief that was restored by seeing how other *Humans of New York* followers supported refugees in their comments:

“HONY always restores my hope in humanity. When I visit this page I realize that there are good people life even though we hear only the evil. Thank you for making the world a better place for us even if it's on Facebook.”

Those who commented on their belief in the good of humanity also did so through a pattern of comments generally saying that in order to realize the good of humanity we need to return to seeing humans as humans so we can all live peacefully together:

“I'm so excited to hear their stories and hope that people recognize that these people are HUMAN. Not terrorists, but humans.”

The theme of a belief in the good of humanity also produced a pattern of comments that stated we have nothing to fear from others, since most people just want good, peaceful lives:

“Our narrative in the US needs to change. People who run with 3 kids and only take what they can carry ( 3 kids ??? anyone ??? ) from war are not who we should fear. We should fear ourselves for thinking the worst of these humans, who are running from the inhumanity of war.”

**Apologies:** The third communicative theme that emerged from the comment section of the *Humans of New York* refugee stories was also one of the patterns. It was apologies both for what the refugees had been through and also how the international community had treated them and failed them:

“I am sorry that you and your family had to endure the hardships of attacks and war. It is not easy to be an immigrant, but persevere, many ordinary Americans like my family and me, support you and will look out for those who are here and vulnerable.”
There were varying types of apologies, but all were supportive of the refugees and stated many times over that the refugees did not deserve what they went through and that the global community was sorry for what they endured.

**Support through action:** While the vast majority of comments were supportive, most showed support through verbal encouragement, compassion, apologies, belief in the good ect. However, there was one communication theme that emerged of supportive comments that called for action on behalf of the refugees. The first type of support through action comment were calls for peace that demanded action from all in order to create a peaceful global community:

> “When there are no religions, no borders and no hunger in the world then we may have a chance of having PEACE. We are all one. When a part of world is suffering you can't have peace on the other side. It never works like that. And we all know this. Look at the past, all the wars.”

Other called for concrete action from individuals:

> “To all those commenting in support of these innocent refugees and others, remember to channel that support and emotion towards those decision makers in your lives that affect their lives. Write your congress members, email your governors, vote your conscious. Believe that your voice matters - if even 50% who commented on these posts took a few more minutes to email those in office, it would make a difference.”

The third and final pattern of those who were calling for support through action were those commenters who were requesting to get involved in a number of ways like opening their homes, volunteering, signing petitions and other means to help in a concrete way. People were even leaving their email addresses for the refugees to let them know if they needed anything once they arrived in the United States:

> “I wish I could get in contact with this family, or any others coming to Michigan. They need help, and I'd be more than happy to donate some things to them - food,
clothes, stuff for the kids. I hope Detroit treats you well, because it truly is a beautiful city.”

**Togetherness**: Togetherness and solidarity with refugees were cultural communicative themes that were present in bits in compassion, apologies, and support through action however, three communicative practices had distinct, more explicit patterns that called for togetherness and a global community of support for those in need. The first of these dominant communicative practices emerged from commenters who found a connection to the refugees featured on the blog through stories of friends or relatives who had also been refugees:

“My family and I were refugees from Bosnia as well. The heartache of missing what your former country was never goes away but America is safety and peace of mind for you and your children. I wish you peace and the best of luck in America! We are so glad to have you.”

Others who did not offer personal narratives or connections still referenced togetherness and collectiveness that they found in by reading others supportive comments and realizing that many others felt a pull to support the refugees:

“I love the accepting and compassionate people that follow this page. Can we all start our own private community? I would love to live near you all and be surrounded by this type of energy! Amidst all this anger and hatred that the world and social media is living through, I'd come here and find solace and love. HONY (*Humans of New York*) is a breathe of fresh air a lot of people need everyday.”

Many found the page a place to feel a sense of togetherness through restored faith in America and a restored pride in being an American after thinking that everyone was hostile to refugees, Humans of New York was a place they came to realize that there was a community of support and compassion and that there was a sense of a team in that knowledge:

“I come here, to Humans of New York, and read the most beautiful stories about refugees and then read comments that fill my heart with love. This is the kind of
America I want to bring my family back to. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for sharing these stories and being the light in the dark.”

Feelings of togetherness came in various ways, but in all forms the comments emerged and constructed a strongly felt feeling that the other comments gave people a sense of hope that there was good and that through this togetherness they could support the refugees and maintain faith in the good that could come from a community that wants to help others in need. Thus, the comment section of *Humans of New York* is a place where people go to find others with similar beliefs that support refugees and are empathetic to their situation.

**Gratitude for fair coverage:** While people expressing gratitude for fair coverage may not seem directly linked to the research question of how followers of the blog *Humans of New York* talk about refugees in the comment section on Facebook it is pertinent to the second question of the cultural meanings of these discourses and the cultural implications thereof.

“This is a really important thing HONY is doing. Media in America shows us such a narrow view of Syria and Iraq that the only thing we know about the people there is of terrorism and their victims. It’s important to here their stories to remind us that they are like us.”

Many thanked *Humans of New York* for being unbiased and not spinning the stories so the public could better understand the world we live in. In this communicative practice pattern they talked about refugees being just like everyone else, in need of support, and many other of the patterns that have been previously discussed, however, the emphasis of these comments was on how the stories were reported and able to give refugees a voice to remind people of these values and needs of togetherness.

**Unsupportive:** While the vast majority of comments were supportive of refugees and wished them peace, welcomed them and showed great empathy toward them, there were some
unsupportive comments that, for the most part, referenced the uncertainty and potential danger of admitting refugees to the United States. Some were more forward and insinuated that all Muslims are terrorists with more than one using the hash tag #beforeitwashijackersnowtheyarehere and #nooneissafe. Some called the page propaganda and asked if President Obama was funding it. However, others showed more empathetic tendencies of stating they felt bad for the refugees, but that that did not mean they should be allowed to resettle in the United States, for not all of them were likely to have good intentions like the ones featured in the *Humans of New York* coverage and the U.S.A. should not be responsible for providing jobs and services to them. There was also hostility towards men for fleeing a war that the commenters considered them responsible for starting. However, the most common pattern of unsupportive comments stemmed from uncertainty and fear of what would result from admitting refugees:

“Wow...political agenda much? Never getting back on this page. I enjoyed the articles, but this is too much. I understand that most refugees just want to come here to escape their country, and most of their stories are sad, however we need to protect our families and country from the bad apples in the bunch. We don't need pages about Americans to start promoting bringing the people who could be terrorists into the country.”

“It s a mistake , a big mistake to have them settled in US or europe. Ull see in few years how they ll demand to build mosques , asking ppl to wear hijab and asking authorities not to sell pork.”

As was stated before, these unsupportive comments were not frequent, and, often when they were posted other commenters responded with criticism for their views. They asked many unsupportive commenters how it felt to be the only unsupportive people in a sea of support for these refugees.
Of the seven cultural themes, comprised of 25 communication practice patterns discussed above, two very distinct cultural premises emerge: support for refugees and unsupportive stances on refugees coming to the United States. The frequency of support shown for those covered by the *Humans of New York* blog posts on Facebook far outweighed the amount of unsupportive comments. 24 of the patterns of communicative practices that emerged were themes of support and empathy, while only one communicative pattern was unsupportive. Thus, it is evident that for the majority of followers of *Humans of New York*, there is an environment of togetherness constructed through the comments that will likely welcome refugees upon arrival in the United States.

**DISCUSSION**

With over 200 thousand comments, a number of patterns are bound to emerge. The 25 discussed patterns of communicative practices and seven categorized cultural themes were the most prevalent, reoccurring communication practices from the followers of *Humans of New York*. Ultimately, two distinct cultural premises emerged: those who were supportive of refugees in their comments and those who were not. The supportive camp was much more numerous in the speech community of *Humans of New York* followers showing that the community was largely accepting of, and empathetic to refugees and welcoming of them to the United States. These two sides of the discourse show a cultural tension within the speech community and this tension is a social reality that may translate directly and indirectly into the refugees’ experiences integrating into the United States. While the Internet has been seen as a largely uncivil place of communication (Meltzer, 2015), the followers of *Humans of New York* showed that there are online communities in support of refugees and that when refugee voices are the ones being published there are waves of support in a number of fashions. The presence of refugee voices are
scarce in media coverage (Buchanan, 2002), so looking at a popular blog that published refugee voices was a culturally rich set of data that indicated many cultural beliefs about refugees that have long been overlooked.

Those who were supportive of refugees found an evident sense of community through the comments of others with their same ideas and this communicatively constructed community evidenced that refugees are not amidst only hostility in their host countries, but, rather, there are a number of people who support them, however, these people’s voices are not generally on the traditional news (Robinson, 2000). These voices can be found in the comment sections of self-publishing media like *Humans of New York*. The interactions on these sites have great potential to be a welcoming force and the beginning of a dialogue about refugees that is not as hostile as those surrounding traditional media. These results go against much of what is generally concluded about public attitudes towards immigrants and refugees by host countries (Robins, 2003).

**CONCLUSION**

The current refugee crisis is one of the largest in modern history. The circumstances that caused these refugees to flee are ongoing and uncertain. With the global rise of extreme right parties and increases of anti-immigration discourses, looking at public voices on the refugee crisis is important to understand how the masses are reacting in supportive ways, such as the majority of commenters on *Humans of New York*. Looking at a public, online space in which individuals voice concern, empathy and compassion for refugees is an important endeavor for understanding the communities of support emerging and gaining momentum amongst a largely anti-refugee media discourse. This research is limited to one platform and one blog, and more research is needed to understand how these findings translate across different mediums and
speech communities. However, in the case of *Humans of New York*, the communicatively constructed reality of support makes the integration and acceptance of these refugees into a potential reality that may not be evident from other mass media discourses.
REFERENCES


