

The Influence of Photojournalistic Composition: On Public Support for Social Movements: A Case Study of Media Coverage

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of digital media, photojournalism plays an increasingly critical role in shaping public perception and support for social movements. Through visual composition, photojournalism evokes emotional responses that influence audience attitudes. This study investigates whether compositional choices in news photography significantly affect support rates for social movements. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines qualitative interviews with photojournalists and quantitative surveys of audience reactions to varied photographic compositions. The findings aim to reveal how visual strategies shape emotional engagement and public support, offering theoretical insights and practical recommendations for enhancing media coverage of social movements.

Keywords: Photojournalism, Social movement reporting, Support rate

1. Introduction

With the rapid development and widespread adoption of digital media, the role of photojournalism in reporting on social movements has become increasingly prominent. Digital media has not only transformed the ways in which information is disseminated but also reshaped public perceptions and modes of participation in social activism. In this context, photojournalism functions as a powerful medium of visual communication, where compositional choices significantly influence viewers' emotional responses and their levels of support for social movements. The success of such movements often depends on the extent of public support they receive, which in turn is shaped by the visual narratives constructed in media coverage.

This study aims to investigate how compositional elements in photojournalism—such as camera angles, color usage, subject expressions, and background details—affect audience attitudes and emotional reactions toward social movements. Given the diversity of social movement agendas and visual representation strategies, the study seeks to fill a gap in existing research by examining how visual framing impacts public support. The findings are expected to offer both theoretical contributions and practical implications for journalists, activists, and media professionals aiming to promote social justice and reform.

Specifically, the objectives of this study are to:

1. Explore the relationship between compositional choices in photojournalism and audience support for social movements.
2. Examine how demographic factors (e.g., gender, age, education level) influence audience interpretations and attitudes toward photographic compositions.
3. Understand expert perspectives on how compositional strategies shape public engagement with social movements.

To address these aims, the study adopts a mixed-methods research design. Quantitative surveys will assess how various compositional elements affect audience support, while qualitative interviews with photojournalism professionals will provide insights into the rationale behind visual framing choices and their perceived impact on public opinion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Origins and Early Development of Photojournalism

For thousands of years, written language has profoundly shaped human ideologies. However, with the invention of photography, modes of human communication underwent a significant transformation. In this new era, images convey information with greater persuasive power and emotional impact [1]. One of the earliest instances of photojournalism occurred in May 1842, when a major fire broke out in Hamburg, Germany. A German citizen, Biewer Stalzer, used the daguerreotype process to capture the aftermath of the disaster. This event is widely recognized as the beginning of photojournalism [2].

2.2 Representative of a Social Movement

(1) Social Movements

A social movement is a form of sustained collective action that seeks to challenge dominant interests and beliefs to achieve common goals [3]. Throughout history, social movements have employed a variety of tactics such as press conferences, collective petitions, demonstrations, sit-ins, vigils, and blockades [4]. News media often serve as frontline observers and documentarians during such events.

(2) The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Movement in Hong Kong

In 2019, Hong Kong witnessed a large-scale social movement triggered by opposition to the government's proposed extradition bill. The movement evolved into a months-long anti-authoritarian campaign, with key demands including an independent investigation into police violence and democratic reforms [5].

(3) The Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan

The Sunflower Movement (also known as the March 18 Movement or the Occupation of the Legislative Yuan) took place from March 18 to April 10, 2014. It marked a significant moment in Taiwan's democratic development. The protest began after KMT legislator Chang Ching-chung unilaterally announced the completion of a committee review of the Cross-Strait Service Trade

Agreement within 30 seconds. This sparked student-led protests and the occupation of the Legislative Yuan, lasting 23 days [6].

(4) The Tiananmen Square Incident

In late March 1976, amidst the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, people in mainland China began gathering at Tiananmen Square to mourn Premier Zhou Enlai. In April 1989, students once again assembled at the square, this time in memory of Hu Yaobang, leading to a broader pro-democracy movement. On June 4, the Chinese government ordered military forces to clear the square, resulting in numerous casualties. This tragic event, commonly known as the June Fourth Incident or the Second Tiananmen Incident, remains one of the most significant political events in modern Chinese history [7].

3. Notable Photojournalists

(1) Evan Vucci

Evan Vucci is a prominent American photojournalist currently serving as the chief photographer for the Associated Press. He is widely recognized for his photographic coverage of U.S. political leaders, particularly former President Donald Trump. Vucci's work is known for its authenticity, immediacy, and emotional intensity, often capturing candid moments of Trump in both public and private settings. Through his lens, Vucci has contributed significantly to shaping the public's visual perception of the former president.

(2) Charlie Cole

Charlie Cole was an American photojournalist best known for his iconic photograph of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, famously titled Tank Man. The image depicts an unarmed civilian carrying shopping bags, standing defiantly in front of a line of advancing tanks—an enduring symbol of individual resistance against state violence. As noted by Zelizer [8], Cole's photograph goes beyond mere documentation; it serves as a powerful visual expression of historical memory and the spirit of protest.

(3) Chan Long Hei

Chan Long Hei is a renowned Hong Kong photojournalist who gained widespread attention for his coverage of the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement. During the protests, Chan immersed himself in frontline demonstrations, documenting scenes of mass mobilization and social unrest. His images powerfully convey the emotional and political tensions of the movement, offering an authentic visual record of a defining moment in Hong Kong's recent history.

2.3 Visual Framing Effects in Media Psychology

Recent research in media psychology highlights how visual framing shapes audience cognition and emotion. Visual framing refers to the use of photographic elements—composition, color, angle, and proximity—to guide interpretation and evoke affective responses [9]. These cues not only convey facts but also trigger empathy, anger, or moral judgment.

Studies show that emotionally charged visuals influence issue salience and public support. Violent or chaotic protest images can reduce perceived legitimacy [10], while visuals of unity or

victimization enhance empathy and endorsement. Yet, most research treats framing as textual rather than compositional, overlooking how structural choices, balance versus conflict, close-up versus wide framing, shape emotion and attitude.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on the compositional mechanisms of visual framing. It also considers how demographic and contextual factors, such as gender or political orientation, moderate responses to protest imagery—advancing a more integrative understanding of how photojournalistic design constructs public support for social movements.

3. Research Design

1. Research Framework

Based on the literature review, the following diagram illustrates the conceptual framework of this study:

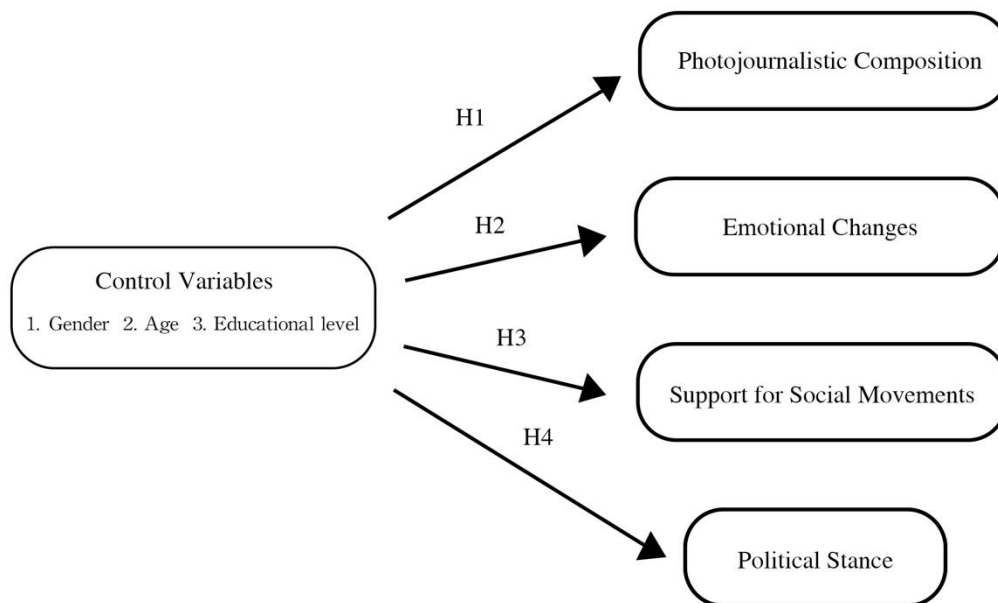


Figure 1. Research Framework

2. Research Variables

H1: Demographic variables (gender, age, education) significantly influence audience interpretations of photojournalistic composition.

H2: Photojournalistic composition has a significant effect on emotional responses to social movement imagery.

H3: Emotional responses mediate the relationship between compositional choices and public support for social movements.

H4: Demographic and contextual variables (e.g., gender, political stance) moderate the impact of photojournalistic composition on public support.

3. Research Participants and Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the impact of compositional choices in photojournalism on public support for social movements. The quantitative component utilizes a structured questionnaire to collect data on participants' emotional responses and support attitudes toward different compositional elements. The qualitative component involves in-depth interviews with selected individuals to further investigate perceptions of photojournalistic composition and the underlying reasons influencing their attitudes toward social movements.

3.1 Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire is structured around four key dimensions: compositional choices in photojournalism, emotional responses, changes in support for social movements, and political stance. Participants are shown three sets of photojournalistic images depicting different social movements and are asked to respond to items assessing their perceptions of composition and their levels of support. The collected data is analyzed statistically to identify patterns and differences in audience attitudes and emotional reactions.

3.2 Target Population

The target population for the survey is residents of Taiwan, as the study aims to explore how demographic factors such as age, gender, and education level influence interpretations of photojournalistic compositions and their effects on support for social movements and political stance.

3.3 Sampling Method

The survey was conducted online and employed a voluntary sampling strategy, inviting individuals interested in or concerned about the topic to participate. A total of 406 valid responses were collected from participants residing in various regions of Taiwan.

3.4 In-depth Interviews

To complement the survey findings, in-depth interviews were conducted with professional photojournalists and experts in the field. These interviews aimed to explore the professional considerations behind compositional choices and their perceived influence on audience emotions and attitudes. The qualitative insights gained from the interviews help provide a more comprehensive understanding of the visual impact of news photography and inform concrete recommendations.

3.4.1 Overview of interview participants

The following table provides the basic information of the interview participants:

Table 1. Brief profiles of in-depth interview participants

Participant Code	Organization	Position	Education	Gender	Interview Date
JOURA	Media	Journalism	Master	M	2024.11.12
UA	University	Professor	Phd	F	2024.11.15

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

Code Explanation: U = University professor; JOUR = Journalist.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Demographic Analysis of Survey Participants. A total of 406 questionnaires were collected in this study, all of which were valid. Among the respondents, 101 identified as male (24.9%) and 305 as female (75.1%), indicating a female-majority sample in terms of biological sex.

4.2 Audience Response Analysis

In the case of the Sunflower Movement, respondents generally agreed that different compositional styles influenced both their political stance ($M = 2.953$) and their willingness to support the movement ($M = 3.687$). These findings indicate that photojournalistic composition plays a role in shaping audience attitudes in distinct ways.

Table 2. Audience response analysis for the sunflower movement: occupation of the legislative yuan



Photo A



Photo B

Table 3. Audience responses to photo A

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
The composition emphasizes the orderliness and demands of the crowd, highlighting the peacefulness and legitimacy of the movement.	3.663	0.995	3
The image conveys a strong sense of the protesters' passion for democracy and political reform.	4.067	0.990	1
The composition may enhance public support for the Sunflower Movement by showcasing the legitimacy and unity of the protesters.	3.727	1.022	2

Table 4. Audience responses to photo B

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
The composition emphasizes confrontation and tension, amplifying the sense of violence within the conflict.	4.214	0.900	1
The image elicits feelings of compassion and emotional concern toward the protesters.	3.611	1.069	4
To what extent does the scene of police action in Photo B make you question the legitimacy of the government's use of public authority?	3.586	1.024	3
The composition may reduce public trust in government actions, as it highlights the conflict within the movement.	3.833	0.962	2

Table 5. Integrated audience responses to Photos A and B

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
To what extent did viewing these two photos affect your political stance or orientation?	2.953	1.165	2
To what extent do you believe the contrasting compositions in these two images may affect public support for the Sunflower Movement?	3.687	1.020	1

Table 6. Audience response analysis for the anti-extradition law amendment movement in Hong Kong



Photo C



Photo D

Table 7. Audience responses to photo C

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
The composition highlights tension and confrontation, emphasizing the conflict in the movement.	4.283	0.853	3
The photo evoked my support and empathy for the protesters.	3.786	1.040	1
The composition highlights justice and conflict, increasing public support.	3.830	1.000	2

Table 8. Audience responses to photo D

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
The composition focuses on a fatigued officer, reducing the protest's tension.	3.382	1.093	1
The photo made me feel more sympathy for the police's role in the movement.	3.512	1.090	2
The composition may reduce public support for the protesters by emphasizing the fatigue and humanity of the police.	3.571	1.090	3
Do you think these photos were designed to trigger emotions?	4.049	0.876	4

Table 9. Integrated audience responses to Photos C and D

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
Did viewing these two photos influence your political stance?	2.786	1.151	1
To what extent do you think the differing compositions in these two images affect public willingness to support the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Movement?	3.451	1.121	2

Table 10. Audience response analysis for the Tiananmen Square Incident

	
Photo E	Photo F

Table 11. Audience responses to Photo E

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
The composition reinforces the violence and tension of the event by emphasizing the chaotic scene and smoke.	4.283	0.847	4
The photo made me feel greater sympathy and support for the protesters involved in the event.	4.096	0.957	1
Do you think Photo A is more likely to evoke public anger or emotional reactions toward the event?	4.158	0.900	2
The photo may increase public support for the protesters by highlighting the government's use of force.	4.239	0.849	3

Table 12. Audience responses to Photo F

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
The composition presents a balanced view of both the military and the protesters, creating a sense of peaceful confrontation.	3.682	1.038	3
The photo made me feel more understanding and agreement toward the military's position.	3.076	1.123	1
The photo may reduce public support for the protesters by portraying the confrontation as peaceful.	3.222	1.090	2

Table 13. Integrated audience responses to Photos E and F

Question	Mean	SD	Rank
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Did viewing these two photos influence your political stance?	2.749	1.183	1
Overall, do you think the different compositions of these two photos could influence public support for the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Movement?	3.232	1.182	2

In the photo compositions of the Tiananmen Square Incident, both images showed relatively limited influence on participants' political stance ($M = 2.749$) and willingness to support the movement ($M = 3.232$), suggesting that compositional choices had a weaker impact in this context.

4.3 Overall Analysis Summary

The study reveals that conflict-oriented compositions are more effective in eliciting emotional resonance and sympathy from audiences, thereby increasing support for social movements. In contrast, peaceful or humanizing compositions may reduce the willingness to support such movements. Emotional responses, political stance, and support attitudes vary across different compositional styles, confirming the significant role of photojournalism in shaping public opinion and influencing levels of support.

4.3.1 Variance analysis

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether there were significant differences between male and female respondents in their reactions to photojournalistic compositions and their perceived changes in support for social movements:

Table 14. Group statistics for gender differences in support for social movements

Gender	N	Mean	SD
Female	305	3.63	1.080
Male	101	3.39	1.104

The results indicated that male participants had a significantly higher mean score ($M = 3.87$) than female participants ($M = 3.62$), with a p-value of 0.034. This suggests a statistically significant gender difference in response. Specifically, male respondents appeared to resonate more with compositions conveying balance and harmony, which may reflect a stronger psychological alignment with imagery involving military presence or symbols of order.

Table 15. Independent samples t-test for gender differences in photojournalistic composition preferences

The composition presents a balanced view of both the military	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	T-test for Equality of Means
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and the protesters, creating a sense of peaceful confrontation.	F	Sig.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	0.179	0.672	-2.121	0.034	-0.252

The statistical results show that the mean score for female participants ($M = 3.43$) was slightly higher than that for male participants ($M = 3.39$), with a p-value of 0.049, indicating a statistically significant gender difference in response to this composition. This difference may reflect that emotionally charged visual elements have a stronger impact on female viewers. When the image emphasizes the fatigue and helplessness of police officers, women may be more likely than men to experience emotional resonance.

Table 16. Group statistics for gender differences in support for social movements

Gender	N	Mean	SD
Female	305	3.62	1.013
Male	101	3.87	1.092

Table 17. Independent samples t-test for gender differences in support for social movements

The composition may reduce public support for the protesters by emphasizing the fatigue and humanity of the police.	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	0.329	0.567	1.978	0.049	0.247

4.4 The Verification of Hypothesis Model

To analyze the structural relationships between latent constructions, this study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling using Smart PLS 3.0. PLS-SEM was chosen due to its suitability for exploratory research, small-to-medium sample sizes, and its ability to handle complex models with multiple indicators per construct [11].

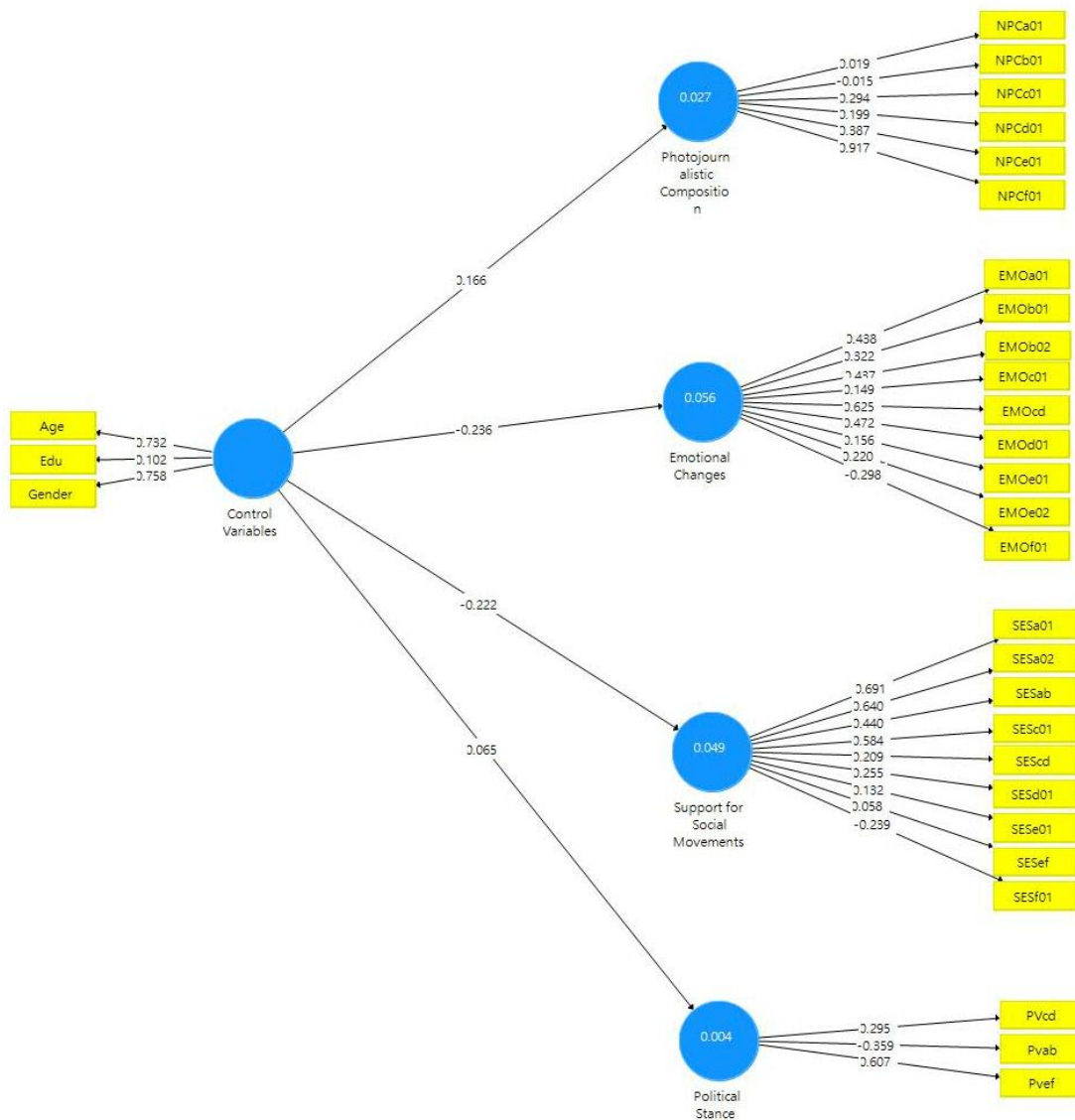


Figure 2. The results of standardized regression model

The measurement model showed that control variables (age, education, and gender) have varying levels of influence on participants' perception of photojournalistic composition ($\beta = 0.166$), emotional reactions ($\beta = -0.236$), and support for social movements ($\beta = -0.222$). Among them, gender and age demonstrated relatively stronger loadings, whereas education was marginal. Notably, control variables had minimal effect on political stance ($\beta = 0.065$), suggesting that demographic factors only moderately shape viewers' emotional or behavioral responses toward sociopolitical media content.

4.5 Inferential Statistics

This study conducted in-depth interviews with two individuals actively engaged in Taiwan's news media landscape, including one photojournalist and one academic expert. The interviews aimed to gather professional insights on the questionnaire design and explore the influence of compositional choices in news photography on public support for social movements. The following six key questions were discussed:

1. Do different types of photographic composition elicit audience emotions that either support or oppose a movement?
2. Have you observed specific compositional techniques that tend to enhance or diminish public support for social movements?
3. How do emotional cues in photographs (e.g., passionate crowds, peaceful gatherings) influence public attitudes?
4. In reporting on social movements, how does image selection affect audience support or opposition?
5. In your opinion, how do different compositional styles (e.g., close-ups vs. wide shots) shape audience perceptions of social movements?
6. Do visual details—such as the expressions of protesters or the actions of police—affect how the public interprets the movement?

The interviews revealed shared perspectives among the two experts regarding the impact of photojournalistic composition on support for social movements. Regarding Hypothesis H1, which posits that background variables (gender, age, educational level) influence audience interpretation of composition, both experts expressed agreement. They noted that audience characteristics such as age and media preference may significantly shape how news images are interpreted.

Similarly, Hypothesis H4, which explores how background variables affect changes in support levels, received support from the interviewees. Expert JOURA emphasized that political stance and demographic background greatly affect interpretation of news images. Expert UA added that the political positioning or editorial strategies of media outlets may influence compositional choices, thereby shaping whether viewers emotionally align with or oppose the event being reported. In summary, the interview analysis indicates that audience background variables are closely associated with changes in support rates, highlighting their critical role in determining the communicative power of photojournalism.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that compositional choices in photojournalism significantly influence audience emotional responses and attitudes toward social movement support. Wide-angle shots tend to emphasize collective power, while close-up compositions highlight individual emotions; each elicits distinct effects on emotional resonance and willingness to support. Additionally, audience interpretations and attitudes are shaped by demographic variables such as gender, age, and educational background. Overall, compositional strategies play a critical role in visual communication within news reporting, shaping both audience perception and attitude formation. Future questionnaire design should focus on increasing sample diversity, incorporating participants from various regions, genders, age groups, educational levels, and political orientations to enhance the representativeness of the data and the generalizability of the conclusions. The questionnaire could also refine the measurement of individual compositional elements—such as camera angle, close-up versus wide shot, and color usage—in relation to emotional response and support attitude, ensuring

that the potential influence of each element is accurately captured and quantified. Moreover, future research could explore how compositional choices vary across different media platforms (e.g., print news, social media, live coverage), thereby deepening the theoretical framework of visual communication in the context of photojournalism and social movements.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest.

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