

Get the picture?

How images can help the labour market integration of refugees

- Discrimination of refugee workers or migrants who try to find work and build new lives in new countries is a big problem.
- Recruitment agencies can help, as they are the link between refugees and the job market.
- In new research, Bernadette Bullinger from Spain's IE University in Madrid and team investigate how recruitment agencies visualise and portray refugees in their promotional media.
- The imagery can go a long way in helping to destigmatise refugees and redefine their value to society.

In 2023, the United Nations estimated that globally 36 million people have fled their native countries as a result of war, oppression, natural disaster, or the effects of climate change. Many are initially welcomed by their host countries with humanitarian aid. But for various reasons, public attitudes change, and discrimination and stigmatisation of refugee workers or migrants can prevent them from building successful new lives.

This is particularly true in the labour market integration of refugees and migrants. Despite evidence of the positive impact that their existing skills and qualifications can bring to local communities, many struggle to find work because they are stigmatised on account of their race, religion, or ethnic origin.

How people come to be stigmatised by society is a complex phenomenon. It is generally accepted that stigmatisation is linked to ideas about who should be regarded as 'worthy' members of society. Research shows that stigmatisation of those outside this group – the 'others' – seriously affects their wellbeing, leading to physical and mental ill-health, as well as poverty, isolation, and lack of access to welfare and other support services. Academics are already looking at what organisations can do to destigmatise the employment of refugees and migrants and help them to gain recognition and worth in society.

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A study conducted by Bernadette Bullinger from Spain's IE University in Madrid and her co-authors, Anna Schneider from the University of Innsbruck in Austria and Jean-Pascal Gond from Bayes Business School in the UK, breaks new ground by investigating the link between destigmatisation and the visual representation of refugee workers. The study particularly focuses on how refugees are depicted in images and photographs used by job placement and recruitment agencies.

Pictures worth a thousand words?

The research involved agencies in Austria and Germany – countries that have seen a rise in racism and Islamophobia in recent years. Of the six organisations that were studied, two advised refugees on job-hunting, three were recruitment matchmakers, and one was a temping agency. All had well-known companies as clients.

The study data comprised 150 photographs used in the agencies' online brochures and websites. Researchers looked for patterns in what the images depicted and how refugees were shown. By also taking



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into account the context in which the images were presented, they reconstructed the meaning and values that the visuals communicated and attributed to refugee workers. Three visualisation practices were identified – ‘professionalising’, ‘domesticising’, and ‘styling’.

‘Professionalising’ images depicted refugee workers diligently employed in a workplace, more often as manual labourers on shop floors or assembly lines, rather than in offices. Workers were shown as actively engaged in tasks, either working alone or with others. The researchers understood that the meaning of such images was that refugees can find work, are keen to learn and develop skills, and that their performance and productivity show their value to society.

‘Domesticising’ images portrayed refugees in work settings as friendly role models of integration. Not directly engaged in work

Images help to reshape the ‘moral worthiness’ of stigmatised refugees by involving the viewer in a direct and emotional relationship with ‘real’ people who are trying to build new lives in the face of adversity.



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‘Professionalising’ images depicted refugee workers diligently employed in a workplace.

tasks, they were alone or with a group, and were identified as refugees by their ethnicity, clothing, and/or the accompanying text. In these images, the subjects often smiled directly at the camera and made eye contact with the viewer. The researchers inferred from this that to integrate successfully with society, refugees need to be friendly, trustworthy, and grateful.

‘Styling’ images showed refugee workers as young, dynamic, and stylish – the kind of images used in social media. The settings were usually outside the workplace, and the subjects were not immediately identifiable as refugees. The images led the researchers to deduce that refugees can be members of a diverse group of individuals who have fun together as part of a friendly and trustworthy team. Refugees’ ‘moral value’ was enhanced by blurring the distinction between them and their local co-workers.

The big picture

More detailed visual analysis suggested that some of the images used by recruitment agencies had problematic implications. The study team found that, although the aim was to destigmatise refugees by using professionalising, domesticising, or styling as visualisation practices to help increase employment opportunities, the images can also communicate negative meanings that risk ‘re-stigmatisation’.

This was especially the case with the visualisation practice of domesticising, but was also true for professionalising. For example, images that invite the viewer to look at refugees and see how well they have integrated into workplace teams suggest that, in order to be considered ‘worthy’, refugees have to accept local traditions and hierarchies. This is patronising and infers that host cultures are superior to refugees’ own. Likewise, ‘professionalising’ images may suggest that refugees can only gain acceptance through work, which denies their value as human beings.

A matter of perspective

The authors acknowledge that the study is limited by being based in Austria and Germany, and that it would be helpful to conduct similar research in countries with different historical and socio-political backgrounds. It would also be worthwhile to capture refugees’ own perspectives, and investigate how visualisation affected their subsequent integration into the labour market.

Despite these concerns, the study concludes that the way images/ pictures of refugee workers are created and used can be a powerful tool for destigmatisation and to help tackle problems such as structural racism and discrimination. Better than text alone, images help to reshape the ‘moral worthiness’ of stigmatised refugees by involving the viewer in a direct and emotional relationship with ‘real’ people who are trying to build new lives in the face of adversity.

Personal response

Please tell us more about how your research advances the academic literature on destigmatisation and organisational studies.

Our novel focus on visualisation practices extends insights on how organisations are contributing to stigmatising and marginalising certain groups in society – or how they attempt to eliminate disparities between different groups and acknowledge their worth. Acknowledging someone’s value isn’t only a concern of social justice and human dignity, it influences individuals’ wellbeing, career prospects, and life chances.

Images – as compared to verbal text – communicate who and what is highly valued differently, yet these specific affordances of images have been seldom studied in the context of employment and work. Through our analysis, we show how visuals, pictures of refugee workers specifically, are able to either highlight or conceal whether the depicted person is a refugee, while involving the audience personally and spatialising complex relationships. We find that even well-intended attempts to destigmatise refugee workers might reproduce social inequalities and re-stigmatise them.

Given that images of refugee workers are so important in conveying meaning, what are your thoughts on images that are posed/staged rather than real-life narratives?

I think that generally media literacy is an increasingly important competence for everyone, and it includes not only cross-checking sources and a healthy scepticism about the presumed ‘truth value’ of pictures, but also questioning why certain companies or organisations

might be using a particular image. In this sense, and social media postings of private people illustrate this, all pictures are staged to a varying degree. Our study shows that even the best intended use of pictures might have negative connotations and implications. Focussing on organisational communication with internal and external stakeholders is challenging. However, in today’s times, it is a crucial task for companies to create images that are aware of their potential readings – and consequently, need to be well-planned – and still authentic at the same time.

Your academic background is in human resource management and organisational studies. What prompted you to research the importance of visual images?

Research in my area of interest is often concerned with meaning communicated through language. However, in society – propelled by social media and technological possibilities – pictures, and nowadays, moving pictures or videos, seem to play a bigger role and impact audiences more profoundly. We see companies focusing on images and videos in their efforts to reach potential and current employees. Marketing as a discipline has understood this societal shift towards visual communication faster than management as an academic discipline has. As I think it’s crucial to understand work – and searching for work – under its current conditions, human resource management and organisational scholars have to turn to visual communication. It is in many ways more subtle and less (legally) regulated as compared to verbal communication and thus, might lead to new ways of discrimination on labour markets.

Details



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Bio

Bernadette Bullinger is an assistant professor of human resource management at IE University in Madrid, Spain. Her research aims to understand work and organisation under current conditions such as migration, mobility, and inequality. She has a strong interest in social and organisation theory, specifically in institutional theory and French convention theory.

Further reading

Bullinger, B, Schneider, A, Gond, JP, (2022) [Destigmatization through visualization: Striving to redefine refugee workers’ worth](#), *Organization Studies*, 44(5), 739–763.

