Mainstream media representations of people experiencing poverty
and/or social exclusion in Greece in 2022
Abstract

This thesis aims to analyse how poverty and social exclusion are visually represented through photographic images in the Greek mainstream media, following relevant articles in 2022. It contributes to the discourse on poverty using visual research methodologies, examining media-generated visuals that accompany articles on the same topic, addressing a gap in similar work within Greek media. Additionally, it seeks to offer insights into the professional use of these visuals. The interpretivist visual analysis is conducted under the ontological assumption of a realist and constructivist epistemological assumption. The analysis reveals that the visual lexicon of poverty in Greek mainstream news outlets in 2022 lacks variation and sustains stereotypical representations, with a focus on energy poverty and housing for which visuals are often inanimate. People are present in less than 50% of the visuals, and among them, figures of authority predominate, while in the rest they do not make direct eye contact with the viewer. Visuals involving refugees are staged by the producer, while stereotypical representations of poverty can be found in the one third of the sample and involve refugees in the most part. This research adopts a qualitative and inductive approach to describe, understand, and interpret the phenomenon. By examining the visual strategies employed by mainstream media outlets to represent poverty, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how these topics are constructed and portrayed in the Greek media. The findings hold significance for media practitioners, policymakers, and scholars interested in comprehending the role of media in shaping public perceptions of poverty.

*I am grateful to the members of the faculty at Malmö University and particularly to professor Bo Reimer.*

keywords: poverty, social exclusion, representation, framing, visual lexicon
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1. Introduction

Poverty being a global issue, Greece is very low at policy implementation to address the issue. Media plays a vital role in shaping public perception and understanding of poverty through visual representations. This thesis aims to analyse how poverty is visually represented in Greek mainstream media through photographic images following relevant articles in the past year, 2022, retrieved from the database of the Greek Antipoverty Network, hereafter EAPN Greece.

Poverty is a multidimensional issue facing many countries. It comes in many forms and has a diversity of effects on people’s livelihoods as well as on the sum of their development rendering them unable to plan a quality life. That is why social scientists, economists and political activists have painstakingly been trying to find ways to address and fight it. EAPN Greece is an association which serves as a branch of the European Antipoverty Network whose work is to address matters of poverty in the area, empower people who experience poverty to raise their voice and be heard by decision makers and a research institution into poverty in all its facets in the countries where it operates. As a Greek-based student and employee of EAPN Greece I find doing research pertaining such issues in my country especially exciting interestingly enough through the visuals used in it. The particular selection of topic was made as Rose puts it (2016, p.195) “your key sources may already be to hand; perhaps stumbling across them was what started you off on this research in the first place”.

Poverty, defined as inadequate income to meet basic needs, leads to insufficient access to crucial services like healthcare and education. It also results in energy insecurity, lack of future planning, and social exclusion. This compels people to live and work in unfavorable conditions, harming their well-being and productivity. Those near or below poverty line face higher rates of mortality, health issues, and emotional strain due to financial constraints. This longstanding social issue has been a concern across historical periods, driven by changing societal conditions, declining human rights, and resource scarcity.

The aftermath of COVID-19 has caused unemployment, precarious living situations, and health issues for many people, in the EU context particularly in
Greece. This is worsened by two additional factors: the country's recent experience with pandemic restrictions following four years of intense EU fiscal supervision and recent unprecedented increases in energy bills. Hellenic Statistical Authority published on May 8, 2023 the results of their 2022 survey concerning data collated in 2021 and found 26.3% of surveyed households in Greece at risk of poverty. Governmental attempts to tackle the issue by providing benefits to the public remained unsuccessful with many vulnerable citizens, including those with the lowest incomes, having been left out of the criteria. According to Eurostat the shares of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion varied across EU countries in 2022. The highest values were reported in Romania (34%), Bulgaria (32%), Greece and Spain (both 26%). On the other hand, the lowest shares were recorded in Czechia (12%), Slovenia (13%) and Poland (16%).

The European Antipoverty Network is involved as the largest European network of national, regional and local networks, including anti-poverty NGOs, grassroot groups and European Organisations, fighting poverty. It was established in 1990 and the Greek branch is a founding member.

Working on the premise that poverty is of utmost importance EAPN bases its work on the fact that fighting poverty is a political choice. EAPN works to ensure this participation and campaigns for a social and sustainable development model that puts people at the heart of decision-making. To make real progress effective and integrated rights-based EU and national anti-poverty strategies are needed. These need to ensure access to quality services, adequate social protection and quality employment, and must be supported by sufficient EU and national funding.

In this regard, EAPN Greece is active in the country and one of its basic tools is the dataset of news items on poverty which includes at the time of this thesis 351 articles from mainstream media outlets including online editions. Photographs are a main feature in news items not characterised as op-eds or opinion contributions and articles like that are usually written by social issue or social justice reporters who may or may not be responsible for the images included in the piece. For contained research, I focused on year 2022, when the alarming
rate of COVID-19 has fallen, energy poverty exacerbated and the war in Ukraine broken out, three factors that have worsened the situation for many.

“With few exceptions, researchers have found that photos are one of the first items on a news page to catch the reader’s eye, and may be noticed even when the accompanying story is not read” (Rodgers and Thorson, 2000, p.4). Adding to photographs, other kinds of visuals nowadays used widely such as graphics and photos of graffiti and at the beginning of a news piece, namely under the title followed or not by a caption “help readers judge and make sense of the news stories to which they associate (ibid). In the visual culture enjoyed today, it is safe to say “that the content of news photographs is at least as important as the stories themselves.” (ibid). So much so that the sampled images are perceived as professional news photograph, thus encompassing specific image features. This alongside the assumed wider range of readership of mainstream Greek media renders the research extensive enough to exert safe results.

Through visual analysis, I explore how photographs forge meaning, influenced by factors such as form, genre, production, semiotics, cultural context, history, and emotional resonance. Consequently, my exploration leaves me with more inquiries than I initially aimed to address, a stimulating and enlightening experience, considering the intricate and deliberate nature of photographs in conveying complex social phenomena.

In this research, I analyse media portrayals of poverty during a time when welfare is high on the country and EU's agenda and we investigate whether the media perpetuate inaccurate and stereotypical images in their visual language.

My research questions are:

a. What are the representations of poverty and/or social exclusion in mainstream news articles in Greece in 2022?

b. What are the dominant themes and narratives concerning poverty and/or social exclusion in these representations?

This research identifies images depicting poverty in Greek mainstream media.
The aim is not to analyse their impact on article content or reader perceptions, though inevitably this influence exists. Rather, the focus is on the visual language used in articles about poverty, examining their focal points and transmission to readers. While the dataset comprises 161 articles, this simplification allows for foundational insights, paving the way for future exploration. The endeavour is a meaningful initiative for Greek media, prompting practical inquiries that can lead to more in-depth analysis. Potential questions include examining connections between media intent, photograph selection, and subsequent effects on readers' actions regarding poverty. The conclusion will explore further research directions.

2. Background / Context

Given Greece ranked low on the World Press Freedom Index 2022 -placed 108th out of 180 countries- this research is especially timely. Positioned between Zambia and Burundi, with Bulgaria the second EU country on the Index placed 91 and the three first placements reserved for Sweden (3), Denmark (2) and Norway (1), the condition of the mediascape in Greece seems ridden with problematic elements which span, according to Reporters Without Borders who are in charge of the Index, increased animosity towards journalists, heightened aggression coupled with impunity by the state, to dependence on Artificial Intelligence generated content and fake news.

Additionally, while there has been research focused on poverty representations in other countries (e.g., Rodgers and Thorson, 2000) or similar issues such as the representations of immigrants (e.g., Martinez 2022), there is limited research on Greek media, rendering it important to explore their role in shaping public perceptions on poverty. Despite their limited influence, Greek media outlets should not be ignored, particularly in the EU media landscape, where freedom of speech and information exchange are essential.

The reason why I am researching poverty is twofold. It is a current issue that affects the poorest, most vulnerable people more heavily and it is an issue that news outlets cannot ignore, especially in a pre-election period. Elections in Greece
were held during May-June 2023, therefore year 2022 was dedicated to electoral discourse and debate where the issue (should have) remained central. The political stance on issues related to sensitive social problems and subsequently the ways in which they are presented in the media, visuals included, are promoted in the news agenda. However, researching poverty in the media during times like that risks turning into a journalistic piece of work. Therefore, self-reflection points have been established throughout to make sure this does not happen.

A personal incentive for my focus on poverty's visual portrayal within media articles relates to Crane's reference to Sontag (2008, p.21). Sontag suggests that those capable of alleviating extreme suffering have the right to view such images, while the rest of us are unwitting voyeurs. This parallels the discussion of images from Nazi camps during WWII. If there's a moral obligation to witness, there's an equal moral duty to respond to that knowledge. While we can't change victims' suffering, it doesn't mean we're powerless. Meaning involves making choices, including the choice not to look.

For me, engaging with poverty visuals hinges on who, how, when, and where. "Looking" isn't always opposite to "not looking"; it can oppose "seeing." It implies visioning and understanding what's presented through decision, choice, and the authority of the presenter. However, authority primarily shapes definitions of the issues at hand.

3. Previous research / Literature review

As I navigate existing literature, I aim to shed light on the core understanding of my subject and carefully uncover gaps. The significance of my research emerges from these gaps, as I seek to offer fresh viewpoints, thoughts, and angles. This section starts by exploring the ideas of poverty. Then, it looks at what other researchers have said about these topics. Moving forward, the focus turns on photography and news, where I examine how media portrays 'otherness' and poverty. An important point is the recognition of the lack of visual analysis in Greek media; at looking closely at how Greek media use visuals. This study aims to start
filling that gap by carefully looking at how poverty is represented in Greek media using images.

3.1 Conceptualising Poverty and Social Exclusion

In the exploration of poverty and social exclusion within the context of Greek mainstream media in 2022, a nuanced understanding of these concepts is crucial.

3.1.1. Poverty

Chambers (2013) offers a comprehensive view of poverty as encompassing not only material lack but also conditions and life experiences. This broader perspective posits that poverty is rooted in pronounced deprivation in overall well-being (World Bank, 2000). The notion of "multidimensional poverty" encapsulates a spectrum of deprivations that intertwine to shape individuals' experiences of well-being or ill-being (Chambers, 2013). Ill-being arises from the intersection of material and other deprivations and disadvantages, revealing the intricate nature of poverty.

Narayan et al. (2000) further expands on the dimensions of poverty, involving capabilities, livelihoods, living conditions, social relations, security, and empowerment. These dimensions once again underscore the complex nature of poverty, which can be subjective or objective, experiential or external, and related to interaction, process, or cause. The operational definitions embraced in this thesis reflect this complexity.

These definitions also incorporate varying viewpoints, such as absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty entails the lack of essentials for survival, while relative poverty pertains to the gap between income and local standard. The EU's Social Inclusion Process utilises a relative definition that considers resources needed for an acceptable standard of living. EAPN sees poverty as inability to lead a life with dignity, emphasising multidimensional aspects and barriers to participation and therefore this definition has a strong hold on this research.
3.1.2. Social Exclusion

Social exclusion, a concept intricately linked with poverty, denotes denial of participation and access to societal resources and opportunities (European Commission, 2002). It encompasses diverse facets, including economic, education, healthcare, spatial, social network, political, cultural, and digital exclusion. Like poverty, social exclusion can manifest in various forms and is not solely limited to material deprivation. It involves marginalisation, hindrance of growth, and a sense of being "left behind."

The interplay between poverty and social exclusion is intricate. They often coexist and reinforce each other, resulting in a cycle of disadvantage. Poverty can lead to social exclusion by limiting integration and access, while social exclusion exacerbates poverty by magnifying discrimination's effects. However, it's conceivable to have social exclusion without extreme material poverty, and vice versa. These interrelated concepts underscore the complex dynamics that influence individuals' well-being and access to opportunities.

In this thesis, poverty and social exclusion are used interchangeably, acknowledging their intricate relationship and shared impact on individuals' lives and are hereafter implied when "poverty" is used. This holistic perspective aligns with the understanding that these concepts cannot be compartmentalised; rather, they intersect and influence one another within Greek mainstream media in 2022.

3.2. Poverty and social exclusion

Evidence shows that vulnerable situations were expected to exacerbate as the long-term economic impact of the lockdowns gradually retreated during 2022 and economic activity went back to normal; however, there was no change to the neoliberal economic framework within the limits of which the Greek economy is operating. The energy sector was particularly influenced resulting in a decrease of purchasing power. Greece has been caught within a trap of long-term poverty with 2022 statistics showing that nearly half the population could be considered poor (ELSTAT 2023), if read strictly, that is measuring the poverty rate by taking
price changes into account (Missos et al., 2022) rendering more people at risk of poverty.

Change after a crisis is politically and socially sought after and the Greek crisis is well researched and documented (Kaplanoglou and Rapanos, 2018), attributed to the global financial crisis and the derailment of public deficit and debt having driven the country to economic adjustment programmes of severely restrictive nature and austerity. Results point to a significant rise of inequality of consumption expenditure among Greek households, fueled primarily by a disproportionate drop in consumption levels of what can be considered the “middle class” (ibid p.2) exacerbated today by the energy crisis and clearer neoliberal policies while rising inequality and poverty levels can jeopardise political legitimacy.

Within this realm of inadequacy and ill-being there are neglected dimensions of poverty that are looking for representation. Poverty is multidimensional, conceived as, but not only, material poverty, vulnerability, physical weakness, bad social relations, and powerlessness (Chambers, 2013 p.14). The definitions do not capture the width of the concept—assets, wealth, shelter, clothing, vulnerability, disability, access to education and services, transport and communications, or the environmental effects of where poor people live. Nor do they touch other dimensions of illbeing like violence, insecurity, discrimination, bad gender and other social relations, or powerlessness (Chambers, 2013 p.19). It remains restricted to economics and does not reflect what people living in poverty experience or the expression of their priorities (Chambers, 2013 p.20).

Such discourses are the outcome of the professionals’ understanding of poverty being influenced, even determined, by the methods used to gather and analyse data which is often overlooked. Perceptions of poverty are also shaped by how we represent realities. On one side, we have the complex, diverse, and unpredictable lives and experiences of those in poverty. On the other, professionals have fixed ideas about the people who experience poverty deriving from their own experiences which lead to using certain forms of representation, with both strengths and limitations warranting critical examination. Because of the multitude of elements constituting poverty, we do not research what we cannot see in the visuals but what we do see. (Chambers, 2007).
In the context of visual representation, Chambers (2007) further explores the essence of poverty, emphasising that its definition is contingent on the perspectives of those posing the question, their comprehension, and the respondents' adherence to constructed clusters of meaning. These clusters, constructed primarily by development professionals, draw parallels with individuals possessing specific education, mindsets, and middle-class experiences. Chambers highlights the need for a transformation in the language of poverty, encompassing visual language, to drive meaningful change (Ehrenpreis, 2006).

On a different note, Tschirhart's (2015) extensive study employs Marxist and feminist visual methodologies to critically analyse adolescent girls' development programmes, exposing nuanced empowerment dynamics influenced by these models. Research uncovers strategies like individualised empowerment and embodied entrepreneurship, challenging prevailing gendered development approaches. Simultaneously, the media's influence on public perceptions of poverty is investigated, revealing exaggerated portrayals of black urban poverty in TV news and news magazines, heightening opposition to welfare.

3.3. Photography and the news

Given the nature of the gap which I attempt to fill with this thesis, researching the ways scholars define photos is imperative.

Visuals in news outlets increasingly include graphic designs but I have chosen to focus on the photographic material. I subscribe to the description of a photograph as the product of an encounter of several protagonists, mainly photographer and photographed, camera and spectator (Azoulay, 2008).

In the effort to interpret journalistic products in specific we need to examine our individual situation and how we partake in a discourse of which we are a part. What we are looking at is both more and less than what someone wished to inscribe in it, than what its producer intended or managed to frame at the moment of the production. Therefore photography, which began as a hyperdetailed record of our shared visible world, provides a critical examination of that world in an
attempt to make viewers actually see (Thompson, 2015). Photography matters both because it works as an epistemological medium and because it seeks to provide us with an understanding of the present day through the explorative eyes of the producer (ibid) with whom we share this world therefore.

Whilst the power of news is not necessarily that it tells audiences what to think (Moore, 2020 p.6), it does inform audiences what it may be important to think about (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004).

Lirola (2022) asserts media's pivotal role in shaping public opinion due to the credibility attributed to transmitted news. Building on this premise, this study explores the visual portrayal of sub-Saharan immigrants as noncitizens in the Spanish press, highlighting their contribution to reinforcing a 'we-they' divide an analogy of which can be applied to other vulnerable groups.

Analysing news items from 2016 to 2021 in El País and ABC digital editions, the research employs Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar and van Leeuwen's social actor model to identify diverse methods depicting immigrants as non-citizens, including illustrating arrivals as illegal, framing them as invaders, depicting them as violent, and associating them with animalisation. These visual dysphemisms complicate immigration discourse and accentuate distinctions between Spaniards and immigrants distancing the audience from the root of the problem or potential change.

3.4. Representations of otherness

In general, the media discourse shows stereotypes and clichés that simplify reality and make the message convincing (Yasmeen et al., 2016). This discourse is controlled by elites that narrate and transmit reality in a determined way (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). Here "otherness" is implied, as it highlights the simplified and often biased representation of certain groups or topics in the media.

Analogously with the representations of the immigrants’, visuals are important in representing vulnerable people as the ‘others’, different from the main, dominant
group and in an inferior position because they are not in powerful positions. Particularly in news items visuals are noteworthy, which determines that sometimes readers just concentrate on them and deem the written text secondary. When this happens, visuals create power relationships and reproduce ideology (Fairclough, 2002). Therefore, the meanings transmitted by news photographs that illustrate multimodal news items on issues such as poverty can be influential. Stereotypes are the vehicle.

Rodgers and Thorson (2000) define stereotypes as oversimplified opinions, characterised by the "dispersion" of a subgroup across a category, serving to confirm fixed or generalised patterns. These standardised mental images, held in common by group members, often represent prejudiced attitudes or uncritical judgments. In their work, stereotypes were visually identified, such as portraying African Americans as athletes, and similarly applied to vulnerable groups like refugees and the homeless. Comparable patterns emerge in gender stereotypes, with males evenly dispersed across topics and occupations, while females are more commonly associated with stereotyped roles and subjects (e.g., nurse, secretary, homemaker; human interest, health, social issues). Notably, children tend to dominate in education, human interest, and tragedy-related photographs (Rodgers and Thorson, 2003, p.3).

The stereotypes used for race, culture, criminality and normification in news media are explored by Mortensen et al. (2020). The construct of an analogy with vulnerable groups and counter-cultures may well be the case here because of the emphasis on the power of the images in shaping audience beliefs, linking, for instance, people who experience poverty with concepts such as humanitarianism, conflict, dehumanisation, security, economics, politics, and integration. They also examine mass media's portrayal techniques, enhancing our understanding of conveyed ideas in newspaper articles' headlines and images, revealing the persuasive impact of multimodal representations. Homeless, people who experience poverty and refugees are found to form a big part of the vulnerable “others” used in depictions of poverty and are stereotypically presented as needy and on the move.
“Otherness” in relation to news items, where visuals can overshadow the written text, creates power relationships and reinforces ideological narratives. This also relates to the broader theme of representations of poverty.

More recently, Lundin (2021) published research pertaining extensively to this thesis. She examined how migration spaces, people, and objects were depicted in 2015 Swedish newspapers and has found photographs to offer direct observation of people in spaces and that viewing photos as active products of encounters in photojournalism highlights emerging sociopolitical relations. This approach explores citizenship and visibility within photography which makes for a whole other interesting aspect of research altogether.

3.5. Representations of poverty and social exclusion

Extensive research has addressed issues of stereotyping and framing within media content, revealing patterns of inequality in visual representation. In the context of poverty, discrepancies appear as certain variations receive disproportionate coverage. In their approach, Rodgers and Thorson collaborated with the Los Angeles Times to examine gender, age, and ethnicity stereotypes in newspaper visuals. Their work was welcomed by Times' individuals, prompting actions like a Latino initiative to address underrepresentation and stereotyping concerns, particularly with children, Latinos, and Internationals. Such collaborative news content analysis benefits practitioners, academics, and consumers, shedding light on the particular newspaper’s nuances and refining future analyses. While barriers exist, this approach encourages cooperation for impactful change, more effectively addressing media stereotyping than isolated studies.

Viewing a poverty photo isn't straightforward, as "whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (Barthes, 1999, p.8), especially when it has passed through cultural filters (Barthes, 1999, p.18). We categorise them as poverty visuals through studium, but it's punctum that makes photography "subversive... when it is pensive, when it thinks" (Barthes, 1999, p.39). Photography's value is assigned through the act
of thinking, as we engage in an "intention" of reading a photo and ponder the momentary stillness before our eyes (Barthes, 1999, p.78). This transition from private to public gaze makes the producer's intention part of public interpretation. "The Photograph: it cannot say what it lets us see" (Barthes, 1999, p.100), at least not the same to all viewers. Yet, "we live according to a generalized image-repertoire" (Barthes, 1999, p.118).

This repertoire focuses on portraying the urban poor and contributes to misleading racial stereotypes, stressing the overemphasis on the so-called non-deserving poor (Dreier, 2005). For instance, media consistently portray urban America negatively, focusing on crime or housing, while government efforts are often depicted as well-intentioned but unsuccessful due to mismanagement and corruption. Gilens (1999) highlights disproportionate coverage of welfare recipients, especially African Americans, influencing skewed perceptions and increased welfare opposition. This study probes the impact of visual elements on online political engagement, revealing that perceived "photo news factors" - surprising, emotional, attractive, newsworthy, proximal, controversial, relevant, salient - prompt participation, particularly when combined with sensory perception of newsworthiness or negativity. The evolving media lexicon, including digital products and online techniques, affects news consumption, suggesting a potential for emotional engagement (Geise, 2021) and highlighting the need for research to comprehend its influence on political participation.

The most emotional representation of poverty, therefore largely visible and photographed is homelessness, which is, however, only one form of poverty worldwide. Schmidt (2015) argues that the ways in which people experiencing homelessness are portrayed in the media creates a powerful, fixed lens through which they are seen by the public and such lens captures the producers’ own perspectives and drives them into becoming the perspective of the social majority.

Hence, these photos display similarities like public sleeping, begging, cardboard homes, and living in tents. This shared feature extends homelessness to refugees and migrants, simultaneously generating and perpetuating negative stereotypes that further isolate these vulnerable groups from the housed majority. Tyminski (2022) highlights visual research's power in conveying complex subjects,
enabling marginalised individuals to express their unique stories through qualitative visual data. While visual methodologies have been used for various marginalised groups, a gap exists in their application to homeless populations. This comprehensive review explores the benefits and considerations of employing visual approaches with homeless individuals, offering implementation guidance. Ethical and legal dimensions, including techniques like face blurring, demand careful attention. Despite challenges, utilising visual data holds potential for deeper insights into homelessness phenomena and experiences.

Furthermore, Tyminski argues that even in an increasingly digital age, a significant portion of the population gains their perspective on issues such as homelessness, poverty, or social exclusion from a distant standpoint (ibid, p.4).

How far are photojournalists, however, from the notion of poverty? 41% of the photos I am researching are credited to a professional - adding stock photography would only slightly increase that percentage- which could lead to researching further a potential shared impoverishment of the people on both sides of the camera lens according to Harris (2022) and the relationship between the individual work and the publishing field that it enters. He also suggests that the economic imbalance governing print photo texts was that professional, compensated photographers and their publishers make money by selling representations of poverty to an urban, middle-class audience (ibid, 2022).

Distance may involve vagueness, rough details and imprecision, the presumed absence of people or the people photographed not looking straight to the camera, thus creating a chasm between the viewer and themselves. However, Michaels (2016, p. 37–42) finds that the most compelling and politically resourceful images of the poor are unpeopled, because they portray economic disenfranchisement, and specifically unemployment, as a structural or formal feature of globalization rather than as a personal affliction (Harris, 2022 p.15).

In this context, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent the photographer is part of the photo or is just passing by therefore making it harder to discuss the agency behind the production of the visual. If the photographer did not capture the instant, the instant would have developed regardless in the second case; in the first, the photographer was the one who intervened for the particular instant to exist; the
photographer “orchestrated” it applying their particular lexicon which may not be an element of stock photography and its marketing purposes the use of which questions whom media address nowadays.

3.6. The gap in visual analysis of Greek media

The exploration of visual analysis in news photographs depicting poverty remains notably scarce in academic discourse, especially in the Greek language literature, despite the evident importance of convergence between visual communication and socio-economic topics.

Due to this scarcity, analogies have to be drawn from research on other social phenomena with which poverty share traits and the need for an in-depth investigation into the visual portrayal of poverty in the Greek media landscape cannot be stressed enough. This thesis offers an opportunity to contribute to the understanding of these critical societal matters through a visual analytical lens.

Within this context, we can draw from Konstantinidou (2008) who highlights the strategic fusion of empathetic humanitarian narratives with Greek Christian Orthodox and populist elements in newspaper photo analysis, enabling the Greek press to critically engage with Western discourse on the Second Iraq War while avoiding oversimplification, while the consistent depiction of suffering aligns with Western values.

Similarly, the visual mediascape in Greece is found to be bound to include what is described as the “spectacle of the crisis” (Basea, 2016), an inexhaustible reservoir of images of suffering, which are reproduced, (re)appropriated, debated, and massively disseminated through various photographic […] “mediascapes” (Appadurai, 1990). However, it is argued that […] photographic images can develop a politics of visibility and refusal since they can both be seen as images that articulate the crisis and render it visible and challenge our expectations of what the crisis is and how normalised it is, and become a site where notions of democracy, freedom, and civic responsibility can be articulated (ibid p.2) and goes to show how the visual can move beyond representation and bring forth the urgency for critical engagement with the world (ibid p.10).
Conversely, although not necessarily visually, the mainstream discourse on poverty and inequality can be traced in official reports and white papers ‘to promote and support favoured narratives rather than to open a space for public discussion’ (Esser and Williams, 2017). Mainstream news outlets can fit in well within this context. Photographic images can transcend mere representation and serve as a platform for articulating broader societal issues. This is where my contribution stands.

Lack of visual analysis concerning sensitive social issues like poverty may signal a neglect of the visual dimensions inherent to these critical societal matters. This tendency becomes evident when considering the prevailing emphasis within Greek media on empathetic humanitarian narratives and populist elements, as illuminated by Konstantinidou’s work. This concentration on traditional discourse modes can potentially overshadow the untapped potential of visual analysis, and its capacity to illuminate various dimensions of poverty becomes obscured. Within this media landscape, the concept of "spectacle of crisis," as elucidated by Basea, comes to the fore, highlighting a propensity to replicate images of suffering without a critical examination. While these visuals might indeed articulate the crisis, they often fall short of challenging established norms or providing nuanced insights into poverty.

This situation is further complicated by mainstream media's inclination to shape discourse according to preferred narratives, often neglecting the creation of an open space for public discussion. This phenomenon can dissuade the exploration of visual representations that defy conventional paradigms or introduce alternative perspectives. The multifaceted nature of poverty, encompassing diverse factors such as vulnerability, educational access, housing, and more, poses a substantial challenge for effective visual representation. Unfortunately, the prevalent reliance on stereotypical images risks oversimplifying the intricate reality of poverty, resulting in a narrow and superficial depiction that fails to include the breadth and depth of this complex concept.

Compounding this issue is the absence of critical analysis in visually portraying poverty within Greek media, potentially perpetuating existing stereotypes and clichés. The mediascape’s controlled narrative, as posited by Bednarek and
Caple, could inadvertently contribute to the biased portrayal of specific groups or subjects. Economic factors, governmental influence, and media biases further contribute to the limited range of perspectives reflected in media representations. The precarious state of press freedom in Greece, highlighted by the World Press Freedom Index, could be a contributing factor, influencing reporting boundaries and fostering potential self-censorship.

Moreover, lack of comprehensive visual analysis might arise from an insufficient exploration of the visual language representing poverty. This inadequacy in studying the visual lexicon of poverty contributes to an incomplete understanding of how these pressing issues are visually conveyed. In this context, the role of photographers in shaping the visual discourse surrounding poverty is a complex matter. Photographers may either immerse themselves in the scenes they capture or merely stand as observers on the sidelines. This complexity has profound implications for the agency inherent to creating visual representations.

Yet, amidst these challenges, the potential of visual analysis to transcend superficial representation and serve as a platform for discussing broader societal concerns remains vast. Regrettably, this potential has yet to be fully harnessed within how Greek media portray poverty. Consequently, the interplay of these factors underscores the critical gap in comprehensively addressing and understanding the visual representation of these vital societal issues within the Greek media landscape.

4. Theoretical framework

As discussed in the literature review the nuanced understanding of poverty emphasises their multidimensional nature. This intricate relationship accentuates their coexistence and mutual reinforcement leading to a cycle of disadvantage and complex interaction. I have delved into the importance of visuals in news media and photography's role in capturing encounters between photographers, subjects, and spectators and discussed the dynamic nature of photography as a medium for critical examination and the role of visuals in informing public perceptions. Also, I highlighted "otherness" in media portrayal through
stereotypes and clichés which can simplify reality and create biased representations.

However, I traced lack of comprehensive visual analysis within Greek media regarding sensitive social issues like poverty. This gap may be attributed to prevailing narratives, biases, potential self-censorship, and the limited exploration of visual language. Despite challenges, I emphasise the potential of visual analysis to transcend superficial representation and foster meaningful discussions about such societal concerns. The role of media producers in shaping discourse and the complexity of agency need to be explored for the potential influence of media elites on shaping narratives and the power of visuals to create power relationships and reproduce ideology.

Therefore, the theoretical framework for this thesis relies on an understanding of representations of poverty in mainstream media in Greece through the theories of representation and reception of Stuart Hall, semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure, the framing theory of Erving Goffman and the Agenda Setting theory of McCombs and Shaw, by way of the lens of visual culture.

My assumption focuses on the idea that media representations of poverty in a country that has ranked very low at the World Media Freedom Index are such in order to influence public opinion and shape how people perceive the issue.

Crane (2008) wonders whether we should keep using photographs of the most hideous human behaviour, taking place during the Holocaust, to remember but I believe we need to focus our attention to the ways those who shape mentalities and behaviours depict poverty because these people are closer to policy makers thus, they are more likely to share cultural inferences and interpretations about it; they go to the same schools, they live in the same areas. Since journalism is important ‘for our orientation in the world’ (Silverstone, 2007, p. 6) and shapes what appears to the public and how, when, and where this takes place, we can agree that the photographs of poverty differ from others in the sense that they need to be identified as such and be produced through the agency the visual lexicon of the photojournalist allows. If this lexicon includes misrepresentations or biased depictions and makes choices that do not address the complexity of the issue this may be interpreted as poverty of visual language and culture either
unintended or orchestrated so that visual media can influence public opinion towards particular narratives and action and hinder effective policy-making.

As a researcher I aim to contribute by providing insights into the construction of visual representations, their impact on public perception, and their potential to influence social change.

My theoretical framework combines the work of Stuart Hall, Ferdinand de Saussure, Erving Goffman and Mc Combs and Shaw believing this set of theories offers a suitable framework for analysing poverty media visuals and their implication with the audience.

Stuart Hall's representation theory provides insight into how meaning is constructed and conveyed through cultural context, particularly relevant within news outlets. It serves as a foundational framework for analysing the shaping and perception of visual representations of poverty.

Issues like poverty, rooted in complex structural causes, can be oversimplified by journalists influenced by personal opinions and societal misconceptions, impacting audience perceptions through stereotypes. In Greece, visual media perpetuate stereotypes related to refugees and migrants, contributing to broader discussions on poverty. Photographs are employed to convey these concepts, necessitating audience familiarity with the visual language to decode them accurately. Existing research indicates a tendency to publish simplistic, stereotypical images in reports on humanitarian crises, like those experienced in Greece recently.

The notion that meaning is produced through communication and interpretation, rather than being inherent in objects, prompts a distinction between how producers encode meaning in poverty visuals and how audiences decode and potentially interpret them. I contend that the dominant reading of these visuals occurs when the audience fully comprehends and accepts the intended meaning encoded by the producer. Authority figures in power often depict marginalised groups stereotypically. Hence, when male authority figures take center stage, the audience acknowledges their influence in addressing poverty, especially when these figures directly interact with the camera. Nonetheless, few women are in
control of media production companies. For the audience to bring their perspectives and interpretations, they must accept some aspects of the message while questioning or critiquing others. This concept underscores the audience's active engagement with media content. The meaning of media messages isn't fixed; rather, it's negotiated between producers and consumers. The practice of using stereotypes, like featuring male authority figures in newspapers, can guide perceptions toward a specific viewpoint. Audience members, drawing from their cultural backgrounds, experiences, and ideologies, make sense of media content. For an oppositional reading to arise—where the audience fundamentally disagrees with the intended meaning and challenges the dominant message—one's socioeconomic status and quality of life must allow for it.

The audience's engagement and power dynamics between media producers and consumers also raises concerns about the potential power imbalance when journalists depict people experiencing poverty, or choose to focus on inanimate objects highlighting the ethical considerations and the responsibility of producers in representing these subjects accurately or framed to influence particular readings. Framing involves presenting information in a way that shapes how it is understood. Media can frame poverty in specific ways, influencing public perception and response. This aligns with Hall's focus on how media have the power to frame issues and shape public understanding.

Clawson and Trice (2000) argue that magazine photos, akin to television visuals, captivate audiences. Vivid images leave a lasting impact, contrasting with dry data, and can become pervasive. Yet, news coverage on poverty often stems from individuals distant from the issues or reliant on official reports. Combined with conventions, conservative beliefs, and time constraints in news production, this affects the quality of work on the topic. Poverty, with intricate structural causes, risks oversimplification by journalists influenced by personal opinions and societal misconceptions. These biases can result in "poverty porn," a sensationalized portrayal that lacks depth and fails to address the issue effectively.

Berger's 'ways of seeing' reveal that we never look at one thing in isolation; we consider the relation between things and ourselves (1972, p. 9). This applies to
both the audience and the photo's producer. Photos are intended to represent concepts, and decoding requires a shared visual language between producer and audience. However, aspects of photography elude both parties' control. Azoulay (2008) notes that no photographer fully owns what appears in the photo, as each photo bears traces of the encounter between the photographer and the subject. This results in the viewer decoding two distinct events. They perceive the visual's subject, intended to represent poverty, and if the subject is a person experiencing poverty or social exclusion, their understanding hinges on the producer's stereotypical portrayals. When inanimate objects are photographed, the audience relates them to their life experiences. Focus on authority figures connects to the seriousness of problem-solving or the power to alleviate. An oppositional reading of these visuals could signify mainstream media challenging the status quo.

Visually are part of the language of media people and help form the conceptual map Hall (1997) has discussed of those who look at them and influence how the audience interprets the stories even if they do not understand or are not aware of the codes and conventions used in these visuals. The map of concepts such as poverty is also influenced by the things around us in the physical world, our particular environment and circumstances; our reality and whether we consider ourselves to be included in the category of people experiencing poverty. However, representation is a symbolic practice and process at which stereotyping can intrude in an attempt to make sense of what we see and connect or disconnect the sign, what is being shown, and the meaning or concept behind it putting the researcher in constant doubt as to the natural relationships and how these are understood or not and become able to be put across to the audience reflecting.

Notwithstanding, the media production enterprises with their power related decision-making bodies as to the choice and production of news are far less concerned with solutions. However, in order to be able to move into social change we need to meticulously define poverty and identify the mainstream gaze. Knowledge of the latter, in effect, serves as good basis for identification of perceived solutions and methodologies to guide implementation of the proposed remedial strategies (Njeru, 2004). I maintain that one constituent parameter is the
way we look at poverty and subsequently the way we show it to others.

Certain for the preferred decoding lexicon, the photograph then can instantly be used in related articles and be categorised just by looking at, that is, engaging with the content as it is depicted. Photographs subsequently do not depict poverty to the extent to which they exist; nor can these social issues be actualised in visuals deprived of readers.

This is where the visual lexicon is complemented by the text; this is also the point from which visuals can be used for multiple themes. The meaning of a photograph therefore comes from what can be looked at, which was created by its producer, what the photographed person, object or landscape included in it triggers to the viewer and what the concept is implied to be.

My specific claim as a researcher is that these representations which can be used to raise awareness about poverty, to show the impact of poverty on people's lives, and to advocate for social change are channeled to the audience through a hegemonic lens even more than usual given the bad socioeconomic state of the country and the neoliberal politics at hand.

Analysing photos by examining the relationship between the image (the signifier) and the meaning it conveys (the signified) considering how they work together to create meaning in the photograph and asking how the image is used to represent the meaning, and what assumptions or values are conveyed through the photograph is particularly useful for representations of poverty. I consider how the lack of diversity in such representations of poverty influences the way poverty is perceived by their audience.

Saussure's theory centers around the physical form of the linguistic unit, in our case the image (the signifier) and the conceptual meaning associated with the signifier (the signified). Just as he emphasised that the connection between them is arbitrary, meaning there is no inherent or necessary connection between the two, the meaning of a photograph is constructed by its producer and shared with the audience through their common visual lexicon. Photographs don't inherently depict poverty or social exclusion; their meaning is constructed through the
association between the image and the cultural context. Viewers must share the same visual lexicon as the producer to decode the intended message.

This visual language system at this specific point in time, without considering historical changes, serves to tell us that poverty focus on particular deprivations and are afflicted on particular kinds of people. Also, that they are to be solved in particular ways. Conversely, the historical development and evolution of visual language over time, which would make for a more nuanced diversity of representations of poverty, being neglected, the focus on the constructed meanings of visual representations emphasises the synchronic aspect—the existing relationship between the image and the meaning.

Also, in our context, the underlying system of the visual language about sensitive social issues, its structure and rules, stretches throughout social phenomena that span specific time periods and sociopolitical situations independently of individual instances (langue). The particular expression used for poverty (parole) refers to actual instances of visual speech influenced by factors such as context and individual choice. Their distinction may be aligning with the differentiation between the photographs as a product of mainstream sociopolitical accord and the individual reactions of viewers to them. The audience looks at the people experiencing poverty, the authority figures, the inanimate representations and the landscapes as part of a system of interconnected representations, a structural system of language separate from its individual manifestations and proceeds to particular interpretations in correlation with themselves.

Saussure’s idea of constructing meaning by organising signs into a system is mirrored in the exploration of how photographs construct meaning through the visual lexicon shared between producers and viewers and how visual elements (signs) are organised within an image to convey particular concepts. The boundaries of those concepts are defined by oppositions, such as “good” and “bad” to create meaning. In our context, I introduce the oppositional terms of “interaction” and “withdrawal”.

Depicting poverty matters as it influences public views, which in turn shape public policies. If distorted portrayals shape views on poverty, resulting policies might not effectively tackle its true issues. News photos transcend depicting incidents:
they symbolize broader contexts, adding depth. Interaction in these symbols, like subjects looking straight at the lens, creates a dialogue. In contexts of media restriction, this gaze controls interpretations, aiming to dominate responses to poverty. Alternatively, it asserts presence, highlighting importance. The first gaze belongs to controllers; the second to the controlled. Another approach is indirect: not engaging with the camera creates distance, excluding the audience, who then disassociate from poverty. Thus, a distant subject prompts viewer withdrawal.

The media structure our lives with meaning making and operate in particular political contexts. Coupled with socioeconomic struggles, resistance is rendered mute as we internalise institutional systems that dominate and oppress us (Foucault, 1975). The power relations integral to the media do not imply the kind of power imposed by law or forced or by the brutality of individual people but those forms of coercion which are based on social and cultural conventions prevalent at the time.

My specific claim as a researcher is that people experiencing poverty are usually imagined in the context of a “spectacle of poverty” that enhances particular readings and silences others. What the photos bring to the audience is something they do not see on their own or should be reminded of. These narratives we take into account to include what poverty look like. In our case, the full extent of poverty may be kept hidden when particular depictions are preferred over silenced ones and when the photographed who looks at you straight in the eye is oftentimes the one who sets the agenda.

I use the lens of framing and the agenda-setting theories to explain how the media’s choice of visuals of poverty can influence public perception and understanding of these issues. Portrayals of poverty operate within a mainstream visual lexicon often shaped by middle-class producers, a factor that underscores their significance in shaping public perceptions. Page and Shapiro (1983) emphasise the substantial impact of portrayals of poverty on public opinion, subsequently influencing policy decisions. Therefore, the accuracy and
complexity of these portrayals holds critical implications for addressing the genuine issues surrounding poverty (Clawson and Trice, 2000).

Framing particular sensitive concepts in particularly sensitive periods in specific way demonstrates how the media not only influence what people think about but also how they think about it, thus shaping public perceptions of those issues. In our case, I examine how the use of authority figures in visual representations of poverty and the vagueness or lack of representations impact the narrative and perception of poverty-related issues.

Photography can be used to register and expose poverty. It can do so by including or excluding, by presenting or avoiding and by explaining or stereotyping. When people are involved in the photograph the way they participate is registered in how they stand, act, and look at the camera. Making related production choices evokes ethical concerns and defines professional practices. I see photographs used in articles on poverty as part of the language choices made by their producers who by adding them are adding to the clarification or exemplification of the issue at hand. The professionals who work in mainstream media, that is, high-profile large media corporations, serve as intermediaries between the owners of the business and the audience whose interest in the news they are invested in. Therefore, the language, the visual language here, that these professionals are inclined or forced to use matters. In sociopolitical contexts of questionable media freedom and financial strains these practices can be influenced by the hegemonic group and draw implications.

How information is presented and structured in news stories to shape how audiences perceive and understand issues involves selecting certain aspects of an issue and highlighting them while downplaying others, thereby influencing how the audience interprets the information (Goffman, 1974).

Mainstream media outlets, meaning neither alternative nor consumed by small numbers of users, frame sensitive sociopolitical issues with an intent to affect the reader's perception of the issue, the causes, the consequences, even the possible solutions. The language used, the context provided, the choice of images, and the emphasis on certain aspects all contribute to framing.
The concept of "ways of seeing," as introduced by John Berger (1972), aligns with framing theory. Berger's idea suggests that our perspective on the world is shaped by our experiences and cultural influences. In the context of media outlets, the ways stories are framed contribute to the "ways of seeing" of the readers. The newspaper provides a specific perspective on an issue, influencing how readers perceive and understand that issue. This alignment emphasises the role of media in shaping public perception and understanding of various topics, including poverty.

Although framing is concerned with the ways information is presented in order to become meaningful or understood by readers leading to the use of stereotypical representations, the media hold and exercise the power to frame issues in a certain way, using visuals, in our case, that may situate the audience in a specific way against the issue: distancing them if they view people to whom they bear no obvious relation, withdrawing them if they there is no exchange between them and the subjects of the photograph, or subduing them to the powerful authority gaze.

According to McCombs and Shaw (1972) the media have a significant influence on which issues are considered important by the public, they have the ability to shape the public's perceptions of reality by choosing which issues to cover and how to present them. By emphasising certain topics and downplaying others, the audience have limited or skewed exposure to those issues. Additionally, the framing of poverty as an individual problem rather than a structural issue can reinforce negative stereotypes and shift blame onto individuals. This means that the media have the power to influence also how the public responds to those issues.

To return to ethical concerns, framing, then, is not about the accessibility of a topic (e.g., how many times it comes up in the news feed or in conversation) but its applicability — the way making sense of new information relies upon ways of seeing the world that you already have. Audiences are drawn to stories they can relate to. And they can relate to experiences that they have or can potentially have. People experiencing poverty may be a small part of the audience reached
by the mainstream media, however, they are now more than ever candidates for poverty.

The photojournalistic event that produces visual media content is charged in many ways – by ethical concerns, emotional relations, and levels of engagement between those involved in the process (Bengtsson Lundin, 2021 p.61). Moreover, a vital aspect is their grasp of the situation's complexity.

To address this, an ethical agreement between subjects and producers is essential, even if individuals featured are unaware, as the producer bears responsibility for the visual's creation. Poverty, however, can be shown in the absence of people, in that dwellings, constructions, urban and rural environments or war zones can imply both causes and consequences. Places of poverty can be less dramatic, and realistic, in that poverty resides in workplaces, in the open, in supermarkets, at school.

When individuals engage with the photograph, their involvement becomes evident through their posture, actions, and gaze directed towards the camera. Being described or presented as poor may not be part of the agreement. Similarly, it is impossible to know anything about the situation of a person who has been photographed just by looking at it. And here lies the potential power imbalance that might become a concern when a photojournalist attains power over the photographed people (Bengtsson Lundin, 2021 p.63). Photographs are never innocent; they are always constructed through practices, technologies, and knowledge (Rose, 2016). And they need context and an audience to interpret them in order to justify their existence.

Mainstream media are such a context and provide the audience with the ability to scrutinise or ignore what is being shown to them repeatedly. For visuals to serve the purpose of showing, seeing must take place. Seeing, coupled with understanding, follows looking; repetition, in this case the ability to easily retrieve online media text or go back and forth through the pages of a printed newspaper, especially when social issues are being discussed, nurtures the process. And it is served by the need of the hegemonic group to keep influencing the public with
particular viewpoints. For capturing the audience attention, the power of the image needs to be prevalent; the language used decipherable.

The study of images as representations of poverty is underscored by their political significance and framing capacity. Visual frames influence public attitudes towards issues, underscoring the importance of both mainstream gaze and the photographer's lexicon in conveying messages, make them comprehensible in particular ways therefore playing a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of poverty.

The reason behind the importance of the study of images as representations of poverty (Clawson and Trice, 2000) lies in the fact that this is a political issue and, in its turn, an integral part of the definition of that issue. They are significant in shaping and portraying issue frames. These images, along with metaphors and catchphrases, help define and illustrate specific topics. For instance, research has shown that visual frames significantly influence public attitudes towards certain issues, such as affirmative action (Nelson and Kinder, 1996).

My specific claim as a researcher is to pinpoint the political influence exerted through the choices made by media producers and the ways sensitive sociopolitical issues are framed especially during turmoil.

The multifaceted realities of poverty are depicted through visuals that not only serve to raise awareness but also showcase the impact of poverty and advocate for societal change. However, the process of depicting poverty is not devoid of challenges. The ethical considerations, power dynamics, and contextual interpretation of images demand attention. Poverty can be visually represented through images of places and objects, not merely individuals. The negotiation of consent and agency between photographers and subjects is crucial, as images often reflect power imbalances and ethical concerns.

Gillian Rose's theory of visual methodologies offers an analytical tool for decoding such visual images.

In conclusion, the visual representations of poverty in Greek mainstream media in 2022 encompass a multi-faceted landscape involving complex interactions.
between producers, viewers, and the broader societal context. A theoretical framework from scholars like Hall, Saussure, McCombs and Shaw can guide the exploration of how these representations are constructed, conveyed, and interpreted. Understanding this intricate interplay sheds light on the power of visuals to shape perceptions, frame issues, and contribute to meaningful change.

By applying such a framework on empirical material, I seek to make an original contribution to media studies and scholarship on visual representations of poverty. I designed a framework around two intertwined concepts: interaction and withdrawal, both in the form of lack of interaction with the camera and in the form of absence of interaction.

Visual representations of poverty serve as the point of departure for an investigation of the interplay between visual language and political constraints in the Greek media.

5. Research questions

I set out doing my research realizing the big number of choices that had to be made for such a broad topic. Finally, I opted for an understandable, replicable and scientifically well-established research based on Blaikie and Priest (2019), Collins (2010) and Rose (2016). I decided that the combination of a social issue prevalent in my country -poverty- with the fragile political and mediascape can be served by foundational research; one that relies on a substantive core of data that can be considered representative and that can be furthered in multiple ways. I wanted to detect how poverty is represented in the Greek mainstream media; to understand the visual language of such social issues and how the various factors interplay in their representation to the public. This area of interest is of importance to social policy and political decision making and is all the more significant during periods of crisis. In this sense, I look into what and how is being portrayed by those who wish to be informing others, providing answers, triggering social change.
I am working on two basic research questions, namely:

1. What are the representations of poverty and/or social exclusion in mainstream news articles in Greece in 2022?
2. What are the dominant themes and narratives concerning poverty and/or social exclusion in these representations?

Following Collins at every step I limited my research to a very specific sample delineated in time that I felt would give me a two-fold opportunity to answer my research questions of what exactly is being used as visual material and whether this serves the purpose intended.

The first ‘what’ question requires a descriptive answer (Blaikie, 2000), introduces the research subject and organises its aspects. The second “what” question relates more specific observations and analysis of the concepts behind the representations of poverty in the Greek media, justifies the first research question and investigates whether the media perpetuate inaccurate and stereotypical images of the poor and socially excluded (Clawson and Trice, 2000).

Combining my two research questions I describe and analyse the photographic depictions of poverty appropriately as well as code, explain, and relate them to the selected theoretical and conceptual framework of my research.

My sample comes from the database of the EAPN Greece for the year 2022. The articles archived are sampled for “poverty” and “social exclusion” and form a representative sample size that sufficiently covers the topic area. It is established within the particular time period already mentioned.

My research focuses on the mainstream media in a country with limited English-language publications. It therefore contributes to Media and Communications studies. I analyse online versions of major news outlets, both digital and print editions. However, the research does not cover readership demographics which should be necessary if the research dealt with media effects more specifically.
6. Methodology, method, and scope of empirical data

Research on visual representations of social issues, like poverty pertains to various fields and the pervasive visual nature of our world. Particularly, within the context of a crisis-ridden EU member state, the relevance ties into framing such matters ahead of the 2024 Euro elections. Those shaping decisions and engaging the public employ compelling visuals that align with my research, emphasising representation and reception.

My theoretical framework involves an understanding of the relationship between lack of diversity in the representations of poverty, the use of authority figures in the visuals when discussing poverty, the stereotypes concerning refugees and migrants and the low, skewed media freedom in Greece viewed through the lens of visual culture and analysis.

I draw on literature related to visual culture and apply visual analysis methods, aligning my research design with interpretivism and Rose’s Visual Methodology. I detail my research process, key findings, and ethical considerations. Following Blaikie, my work involves selecting and justifying the research problem, formulating relevant research questions, choosing inquiry logic, clarifying ontological and epistemological assumptions, outlining the research paradigm, and explaining data selection and collection methods.

Conducted under an idealist ontological and constructivist epistemological framework, my research aligns with interpretivist inquiry logic and suitable methodology. While my knowledge emerges from a non exhaustive sample, it offers insights into specific issues. This could be expanded through qualitative and quantitative research on a larger dataset.

6.1. Research paradigm

The research approach I've adopted is interpretivism, making this a qualitative study. This approach involves understanding subjective experiences and the meanings individuals attach, highlighting the role of social and cultural contexts.
in shaping these meanings. As an interpretive media researcher, my focus is on treating data as a social construct, potentially echoing or challenging societal norms. The media I'm examining are cultural artifacts within specific contexts, analysed for interpretations influenced by social and cultural factors from both the publication and the disseminator.

In the context of poverty, interpretive researchers can utilise methods like content analysis, semiotics, or discourse analysis to analyse images. This exploration helps us understand how visual media shapes and mediates perceptions of poverty as a societal issue. It also investigates how individuals in poverty are portrayed, exposing cultural attitudes and stereotypes, and whether they're reinforced or challenged. Similarly, the interpretive paradigm facilitates understanding how audiences interpret these portrayals, influenced by their own cultural backgrounds.

In essence, the interpretive research paradigm in poverty's visual analysis highlights the importance of understanding how visual media shapes and mirrors cultural beliefs about poverty. It also emphasises the role of viewers' own social and cultural contexts in interpreting these depictions.

The philosophical foundation of my research shapes the theories and practices of my project, encompassing ontology, epistemology, and research methodology. My research philosophy is interpretivist, as it believes the reality of poverty and the knowledge about it are socially constructed. Interpretivism asserts that the meaningfulness of research findings depends on the researcher's interpretation. Thus, I focus on revealing the meaning of my findings and demonstrating how this meaning generates observable outcomes.

Interpretivism seeks to understand a phenomenon through interpretation. Like other interpretive researchers, I believe that access to reality is possible through social constructs like language, consciousness, shared meanings, and artifacts. Visual research methods offer a nuanced way to understand complex issues beyond text. While these methods have been used for marginalised groups, their application in Greece—an EU member state facing social cohesion challenges, poverty metrics, and inequality—is underexplored.
This study addresses this gap by employing visual research methodologies, using media-generated visuals to supplement articles on poverty. By doing so, it contributes to the discourse while revealing their applicability in this context. The use of visual research methodologies requires ethical and legal considerations to ensure data integrity. The dataset used here is freely provided by a relevant institution for research purposes, making it suitable for explaining phenomena. Access to the database is open for research and academic purposes.

However, when researching sensitive topics like poverty, considerations arise to ensure material credibility. The organization curating the data plays a crucial role. In this case, EAPN Greece serves as a founding member of a prominent EU social partner combating poverty. The database’s materials undergo careful reading, summarisation, and coding for contextual information. Regular updates maintain the database's currency, offering a reliable reflection of the subject matter's current state.

Images carry significant power, requiring critical consideration. Despite limited research on Greek media, this study meticulously examines visuals from major news publications in Greece during 2022. This research falls under communication and media studies, contributing to a new geographical context. It explores the visual lexicon employed in portraying poverty in the Greek mainstream media during 2022.

In the context of Greece’s low rank in the World Media Freedom Index, this research is essential in understanding how visual narratives interact with socio-political contexts, what dynamics are at play among the different political actors and how extensively we can consider a manipulation of the treatment of these particular issues in the news by the authorities. The study indeed acknowledges the related political implications as visual representations shape agendas and frame discussions surrounding poverty. At the core lies the understanding that representations of poverty in mainstream media are influenced by a visual lexicon aligned with middle-class producers. "Ways of seeing" and journalism's role in shaping public perceptions are also highlighted. Gillian Rose's theory of visual methodologies guides this exploration.
This research strives to uncover the subtle nuances that influence societal perspectives on poverty. By addressing gaps in visual analysis, establishing a strong theoretical framework, recognising the political significance of visual representation, dissecting the process of analyzing visuals, and acknowledging the role of journalism's visual lexicon, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the interplay between media, perception, and reality.

6.2. Research method

My main research goals were to demonstrate how poverty is portrayed in Greek news media and to lay the foundation for exploring poverty coverage comprehensively. I utilised a critical visual methodology (Rose, 2016) that engages deeply with images, considering their social impact, modes of dissemination, and our viewing perspectives. This study combined Rose's method with other theories, categorizing observations through coding to reach cultural interpretations and conclusions (Rose, 2016, p.374).

I employed Rose's visual method. I adopted a more systematic coding process, identifying key themes and recurring visual images. This approach embraced the understanding that visuals are constructed and carry diverse meanings, requiring a critical stance that recognizes their agency, impact, and varied interpretations across audiences.

My research followed Rose's framework, examining production, image, circulation and audience sites, enriched by technological, compositional, and social dimensions. This lens helped uncover social dynamics and power imbalances inherent in visuals, contributing to a comprehensive analysis.

Qualitative content analysis was chosen to uncover latent meanings within image content, aiming for interpretations that inspire purposeful social change. The research focused on "street or documentary photography," aiming to address audience perceptions.
My premise asserts that visual imagery is constructed, necessitating a critical approach that evaluates image agency and socio-practical repercussions, considering diverse audience perceptions. News frames expressed through visual language are crucial, influencing public understanding of poverty's social realities.

Visual analysis systematically examines visual media content to convey specific messages. It's used in fields like marketing and media studies to understand how visual media influence audiences. This study analyses chosen images to offer a genuine interpretation and challenge stereotypes.

My research incorporates Hall's representation and reception theories, Saussure’s semiotics, the Framing Theory of Erwing Goffman and the Agenda-Setting theory of Mc Combs and Shaw and applies Rose's Visual Methodology. I interpret visual data independently, considering their perspective, position, and critical reflection for a fair interpretation.

Overall, my research aims to showcase how poverty is portrayed in Greek news media through a critical visual methodology, combining theories and systematic analysis to uncover diverse meanings.

6.3. Research process

This study employs visual analysis to scrutinise how poverty is visually portrayed in Greek media. Articles from a specific database were selected, encompassing a diverse array of mainstream Greek news sources. Utilising a mix of visual analysis tools, I dissect the chosen photographs, identifying predominant themes, narratives, and visual components. The data is sourced from the EAPN Greece database, focusing on 2022. This period follows the aftermath of COVID-19, the Ukraine conflict, and an energy crisis, all significantly affecting the population. Additionally, I consider the Hellenic Statistical Authority's latest survey results from May 2023.
I decided that in order to answer questions about representations of poverty in the media Rose’s visual methodology is the most inclusive and a particular set of images should be selected. The literary review revealed a gap in researching the media in Greece, a country ridden with poverty issues and one of EU’s most vulnerable member states so I focused on my research questions which bring together these elements.

I then made observations on my data, making a file for each image and following the interpretative process suggested by Rose. The choice made here involved coding the sample according to themes; a theme being a category identified by the researcher that relates to the research focus and questions, and builds on codes that are found in the material (Bryman, 2016, p. 584). The themes provided me with a foundation for a theoretical understanding of the data.

The main themes that emerged from the material are: the focus of the visuals, the stereotypical representations, and the potential multiplicity of their use. In identifying them, I looked for repetition, differences, and patterns in the sample manually and on different periods of time. These observations became my coding system. I analysed the extent to which the news visuals relied on stereotypical traits in their depictions of the people experiencing poverty, what positions and directions of the look the people photographed held; as well as the other subjects/objects photographed and their relation to the poverty.

I examined whether the media perpetuate the notion that a certain gender and/or group is more heavily influenced by poverty and whether children are depicted as much as statistics imply that they are impacted. All coverage explicitly relating to poverty, economic inequality, social policy, or marginalisation in the database of EAPN Greece for the year 2022 is included in the sample analysed. This includes articles focused directly on poverty as a ‘main theme’ and those in which its involvement is implied.

I used Rose’s framework for a critical visual methodology as the underlying structure (2016). To recall, Rose argues that five aspects are crucial for a critical examination of the ‘social effects of images’: visualizing social difference, (2) how
images are looked at, (3) differentiating visual cultures, (4) how images are circulated, and (5) the agency of images. Rose further proposes that there are four different sites at which the meaning of images is made. These are the site of the image (content), the site of production (where the image is made), the site of circulation (where the image travels), and the site of audiencing (where the image encounters its spectators). These sites each have three modalities that contribute to a critical understanding of images: technological (any device made to create or enhance images), compositional (the material qualities of images) and social (practices through which images are seen, interpreted and used) (2016, p. 57). I engaged analytically in all four sites outlined by Rose and, while I was primarily concerned with the social aspects of photojournalism, this study also related to technological and compositional aspects. I also considered the three criteria that Rose identifies as crucial for a critical approach to visual research: (a) taking images seriously as objects of study, (b) thinking about the social conditions and effects of images and their modes of distribution, and (c) considering my own ways of seeing images and the implications they have for the research (2016, p. 53–54).

The compositional analysis was designed to examine what appeared in the 121 photographs of poverty included in articles published in mainstream Greek media outlets in 2022. The primary unit of analysis here was photographs.

In the first part of the analysis, I examine the site of the image itself. Following Rose (2016, pp. 56–57, a compositional analysis allowed me to systematically categorise the photographic content into smaller components according to three modalities (social, technological, and compositional). I focused on the focus of the visuals, the stereotypical representations, and the potential multiplicity of their use.

The starting point for the analysis is simply looking at the focus – what is it that appear within the visual demarcation of the photographs? The purpose is to examine what can be discerned in the photographs through an identifying gaze.
Stereotypical representations concern how particular simplistic traits are assigned in an organised way within the photograph, and may offer a particular viewing position for spectators.

The potential multiplicity of the use, therefore the meaning, of the visuals can be traced to the absence of an identifiable topic exclusively correlated with poverty, which can make it difficult to systematically categorise it.

I address these elements by relating the photographs to my theoretical framework and existing literature. Through this approach, I was able to discern and analyse different elements in the photographs, enabling me to answer Research Question 1, which focused on the content of the photographs. The categories were designed inductively to examine what appeared in the photographs – that is, the aspects that could be seen when I looked at the content of the photographs.

I started by researching whether the visuals are credited and how many were taken from stock photography companies, then excluded the visuals that involved heavy graphic design elements. I then noted which visuals include captions and proceeded to the detailed description of what is in the frame. Next, I coded for environment and atmosphere and, after that, for the punctum of the image. Following I made observation about the producer, their position and disposition and continued with the perception of the audience. Then I investigated for stereotypical representations, the presence of people, and if not of whole figures, which parts of the body appear, the kind of poverty depicted and the implication of obvious social exclusion and gender. Finally, I looked for additional visuals in individual articles and made inferences as to whether these visuals could be used for multiple representational needs.

To answer Research Question 2, I drew conclusions by identifying common elements in a sufficient number and juxtaposing them against the theoretical framework of the thesis.

The full coding scheme for the study is included in the appendices.
Ethical concerns were taken into consideration and are analysed below. Following, I returned to make interpretations and comparisons to the relevant literature according to my theoretical framework. This forms the discussion part of this thesis and proceeded in drawing my conclusions.

7. Ethical issues

Visual research involves ethical concerns over the privacy of the photographed participants and the disclosure of their location, identity, situation and actions. Hence, researchers are held to ethical and legal standards stipulated by relevant bodies.

Matters of informed consent (Pink, 2007); privacy, dignity or potential harm and stigmatization; exploitation or vulnerability of those in poverty through graphic or sensational images for research purposes; cultural sensitivity, bias and stereotyping, and, copyright are the most relevant of these concerns in this thesis.

I selected the visual material for analysis based on the readily available options by the online database of news articles of EAPN Greece, which is open to all for academic and research purposes. I decided which particular dataset would be used based on the fact that I wanted to work on recent, tangible data whose processing could be relevant and timely. The photos were retrieved from mainstream online editions of Greek newspapers or online news sites and have been coded for credit. However, images work by producing effects every time they are looked at (Rose, 2016 p.16) therefore the people photographed and shown in the pages of a publication have become, in a sense, most without realising or having consented to it.

Researchers should comply with copyright laws and seek permission when necessary. However, my data is secondary, in the sense that I am reusing already available material and can be considered online data. Using those same images in my research can be considered a second reproduction. This still raises ethical concerns. However, my images are also available online freely in the public
domain but to be able to look at them and collate them in the Annex related to my analysis I had to manipulate them, change their size again and again, copy and paste them in my analysis grid (the Appendix shows the initial publication in which they were used).

Privacy concerns for the individuals depicted are assumed to be addressed, particularly for the 49 photos credited to photojournalists in the articles. Responsibility for usage of the remaining visuals falls upon the writer and the outlet, who initially published them openly, presumably with people’s consent. Ownership rights are a non-issue, as their inclusion in respective articles deems them public, open for analysis by recipients. If photos feature individuals, I’m assuming the responsible photojournalist or reporter already holds informed consent or copyright (Prosser, 2011), alleviating the need for additional consent.

Under certain circumstances, using copyrighted photographs in a research project may fall under the fair use doctrine of copyright law. Fair use permits limited use of copyrighted works without explicit permission for purposes like criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research. Whether using a photograph in a research project qualifies as fair use depends on various factors, such as the purpose of the use, the nature of the copyrighted work, and the portion of the work used in relation to the whole (Collier & Collier, 1986).

Privacy concerns extend to capturing illegal activities (e.g., paning, begging) and interpreting visuals appropriately. Like media producers, researchers adhere to ethical and legal standards set by relevant institutions. When strong visual data depicting individuals without consent is collected, alteration software is often employed to maintain anonymity, albeit sacrificing some data meaning (Wiles et al., 2008). This approach, however, diminishes empowerment and detracts from the intended focus. Facial expressions, key for conveying attitude and meaning, can carry negative connotations when blurred (Woodgate et al., 2017). Notably, no alterations were applied to this dataset.

Privacy and confidentiality issues are not the case here for the same reasons that apply above while the analysis definitely draws on scientific theories and methods.
but objectivity and bias cannot be out ruled in such work. In addition, the use of visual data has the potential to create, rather than reduce, stigma of certain populations (Copes, 2020). However, personal biases and taking measures to minimize their impact on the research as well as awareness of cultural sensitivity as to the context (Banks, 2001) in which the photographs were taken and are analysed will ensure that I am sensitive to the cultural norms and values of the individuals and communities depicted in the photographs (Harper, 2012).

8. Findings

Following the analysis explained in the methodology, research method, and research process sections, for the visuals accompanying the articles of the sample. The dataset sample is taken from the databank of news articles and publications concerning poverty of the EAPN Greece and concern 2022. 161 entries were found spanning from 5 January 2022 to 24 December 2022. Subsequently, three themes were studied: a. the focus of the visuals, b. the stereotypical representations, and c. the potential multiplicity of their use, and a coding system was defined.

In total 161 articles were retrieved and their visuals studied. From those, 148 visuals were identified. Out of all 161 entries, four were found without content or deleted from their original websites, four photos appeared twice in separate articles, six entries were found with no photograph accompanying visual, two entries had more than one visual accompanying them, 26 visuals with graphic design processing were included and 121 photos. The photos were coded for credit, kind of visual, number of visuals per article, description, environment, punctum, producer, perception to the audience, stereotype, the people photographed (faces, other parts), the kind of poverty talked about, the suggestion of social exclusion, gender, and, exclusive relevance to the issue.

Although design computer graphics and animations have now opened up a burgeoning range of possibilities. (Chambers, 2007 p.36), I chose to work with the photographs putting aside any other visuals due to the differences between
them, primarily the potential to discuss poverty faced by people whose participation is important in the photographic event. News photographs aim to evoke emotions, provide visual witness, and deepen reader connection. Graphic designs, however, convey clear messages in marketing, branding, education, or influencing perception. Photos offer context and engage readers by capturing real-life moments while graphic design encompasses the potentiality of mixing elements so as to enhance meanings in a technical way. While both heighten the reader experience, my research focuses on photos as direct representations of real life, hence perpetuate the power of photo-realism.

Overall, 64 photos involved people (52%), 40 of whom could be recognized (62.5%). Interestingly, 19 portraits were included (30%) - one employee, one child refugee, one woman refugee in a double featured visual, one woman in the second visual used in an article, and one more woman in a setting that represents a violent environment, while all the rest belonged to recognisable politicians, journalists and academics - mostly Greeks - who are also the only ones looking straight at the camera with the exception of Roma children and refugees. So, fifteen are portraits of some authority. For the purposes of this thesis, I define the portrait as the intentional focus on one person even if they are at the company of another, particularly if they have their attention. The portrait is of the protagonist of the image. However, figures of authority are included in four other photos in interaction with others. In none of them do they look at the camera.

As can be seen in photo number 19 people of authority are depicted in the middle of a press conference or announcement directly looking at the camera, hence, interacting with the audience.

The rest of the people who participate in the photos remain hidden either with their backs turned to the camera, bundled up, in interaction with other participants or in a space where they stand separate from one another, most notably in
queues. In three photos the person is blurred -for purposes other than ethical concerns. Six of the photos that involve human figures show parts of their body other than their face, namely hands or parts of the torso combined with the person’s hands. Three of the images are a combination of two different photos at a time; two concern refugees and one homeless people who collect garbage.

As can be seen in photo number 40 people in queues are seen keeping distances, a reminder of the COVID 19 period and the restrictions blamed as a factor contributing to poverty.

Concerning gender, 23 photos (36 %) include men and ten include women (15,6%). Children are involved in five images, four of which are coded for representing child poverty. Six photos depict senior people.

As can be seen in photo number 53 elderly people are connected to poverty in visuals related to every day grocery shopping and, in this case, also turning their back to the camera either in indifference or avoidance of stigmatisation.

From the 121 photos, 40 photos focus on landscapes, views, and urban environments where no people are involved (32,7%), twelve photos involve money in an inanimate setting (10%) and one implicates the EU.
As can be seen in photo number 103 heavily built urban landscapes are used in relation to housing issues inducing at the same time feelings of anxiety and stress.

As can be seen in photo number 54 inanimate images are used to emphasise particular issues such as the fact of disconnections.

Regarding forms of poverty, income poverty (or low ability to consume) is shown in eighteen images (13%), energy poverty in 26 (21.5%), housing issues in 21 and homelessness in two of them (17%); physical and mental health in eleven (9%); (un)employment in thirteen (10%); refugee status and conditions in seventeen (which can involve the homelessness or housing issue) (14%), while 25 images are coded for social exclusion (20.6%).

Photo number 2 is the one of the two visuals to depict homelessness in an array of visuals that hint on housing issues.

Emotions are negligibly detected. People are shown in illegal situations only once (begging) and as potential dangers or related to harmful habits in none of the
Stereotypes according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary are used to confirm [a concept] without variation, to a fixed or general pattern; especially, a standardised mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment and differs from clichés. Stereotypes are most frequently employed to refer to an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic. In this broad sense, 36 photos were coded for stereotyping, namely regarding refugees, homelessness and gender (29%) out of the 64 which featured people (57%).

As can be seen in photo number 41 stereotypical representations regard refugees. Here the producer of the photo shoots from the eye level of the authority figures.

However, twelve of the strongest photos, in the sense that refugees, children or homeless people, who can be recognised, feature in them and stereotypical representations are prevalent, are uncredited.

As can be seen in photo number 45 (Roma) children, one of the most vulnerable groups in Greece, are shown playing with each other and the camera. The photo is uncredited.

Overall, there were few explicit references to experiences of poverty, suggesting
a more abstract or depersonalised form of coverage of the issues. We can say that significantly more emphasis was placed on the coverage of specific forms of poverty, namely energy poverty, prevalent throughout 2022 in Greece, as in the rest of the EU and problems associated with income poverty and the limited ability of people to consume than representations of people as responsible for their own poverty. However, there is stereotypical representation of, mainly, the refugees, as people at risk or experiencing poverty.

Image 140
As can be seen in photo number 140, the cover of a newspaper edition reads “Champions in energy poverty” exemplifying that by using a visual resembling pictures of the past. Oil lamps had been in use in Greece even in the 1980s in rural and island areas.

Similar photographic patterns are detected in the presence of men, who are both more prevalent as authority figures, in the face of politicians, journalists and academics, and as people experiencing poverty although women’s presence in the visuals is connected with employment issues.
Photo number 49 is one of the few images whose focus is a woman, but is also one of the visuals that lack substance in the sense that they can be used in various contexts.

Visual contact with the person photographed is unashamedly established with almost all the figures of authority portrayed usually alone in formal settings or i.d. like photographs and a self-righteous look. However, personal photographs are used to personalise the content but we need to proceed with content analysis to establish the depth of the argument.

Those from the people photographed who are looking at the audience are the ones where the photographer is part of the photo. These are presumed recognized by the mere fact that they are looking at the audience. Other than the figures of authority portrayed, namely politicians, journalists and academics, it is refugees and children, refugee and Roma, who are becoming present to the public in this way. The gaze of the photographed individual says something about their agency either way; the first group is trying to assert presence, the second reminds us of it.

Secondary findings include the fact that out of the 121 photos researched only 59 are credited (48%) of which 10 are taken from stock photography providers which brings down the photojournalistic input to 40% (49 photos) and provides scope for further research as to the practices of media outlets in Greece.

9. Discussion

9.1. Analysis
Having addressed the research questions by presenting and analysing the empirical data, I conclude this study by bringing some of the arguments made earlier to the fore. First, I return to the theoretical framework in order to highlight the most significant findings from the analysis of the photographs of poverty in view of it.

By applying a framework based on Hall's representation and reception theories, de Saussure's semiotics and the framing and agenda-setting theories on empirical material, I sought to make an original contribution to media studies and scholarship on visual representations of poverty. I designed a theoretical framework around two intertwined concepts: interaction and withdrawal, both in the form of lack of interaction with the camera and in the form of absence.

Most importantly, visual representations of poverty serve as the point of departure for an investigation of the interplay between visual language and political constraints in the Greek media since they can be imagined as agentic entities that carry power, even after the photographic moment has passed (Bengtsson Lundin, 2021).

Photographs published in the news can present poverty as lived by those who experience it or as addressed by those who are concerned with its solution and may serve either as emotional drivers and calls for action or can just as easily have the opposite effect by frightening the public.

Photographs have the potential to challenge the ways in which poverty are seen and perceived. By photographing them, spectators are provided with narrative frames through which they can decide to establish solidarity and create proximity or distance themselves from them safely.

The news articles extracted from the EAPN Greece's database, focusing on poverty and/or social exclusion for the year 2022, utilise images that conform to a constrained visual vocabulary. These images avoid capturing the diverse dimensions inherent in the intricate social phenomenon of poverty. Instead, they concentrate predominantly on portraying income poverty, and facets related to energy poverty, housing and urban poverty. This selective visual portrayal predominantly encompasses aspects of material deprivation, while dimensions such as informational and educational deficiencies, poverty of time,
marginalisation and maltreatment, rural poverty, fear, in-work poverty, helplessness, and the absence of agency remain conspicuously underrepresented.

Visual depictions of prevalent dimensions are predominantly presented through inanimate compositions, with simplistic and recycled themes, juxtaposed against a backdrop where individuals, albeit present in nearly half of the sample, exhibit minimal interaction with the camera, and by extension, with the audience. Those individuals who do engage in visual interaction fall within two distinct categories: figures of authority, whose portraits serve as visual representations, and refugees, whose photographic participation is orchestrated by the producers. Notably, stereotypical portrayals and recurrent biases are evident to a certain extent, some of which even stray from the confines of pertinent poverty and/or social exclusion matters.

This analysis highlights a skewed portrayal of traits associated with impoverished individuals in Greece, who predominantly include children, women, the elderly, and the homeless (ELSTAT, 2023), all of whom were inadequately represented. However, the media tended to attribute stereotypical characteristics primarily to refugees. Importantly, these findings should not be interpreted as negating the potential for the audience to infer links between certain groups and potential consequences. Instead, it suggests that the reports did not explicitly incorporate or reference the tangible real-life impacts experienced by those directly facing poverty. For instance, even though articles may have discussed economic hardships, a genuine understanding of the daily realities of individuals grappling with poverty may have been largely absent from the discourse.

Stuart Hall’s Representation and Reception Theories emphasise the idea that meaning is not fixed in media representations but is constructed by the audience. In the context of the findings: The exclusion of certain types of poverty could be linked to the media’s efforts to present a specific narrative that resonates with their target audience. This selective representation might stem from an attempt to elicit particular emotional responses or reinforce certain viewpoints. Depicting authority figures looking into the camera might be a deliberate strategy to establish credibility and control the narrative. This choice could influence how
audiences interpret and receive the information presented. It can also be interpreted as an authoritative attempt to remind the audience they are being controlled. Stereotypical portrayals of refugees could reflect the media’s attempt to simplify complex issues for quick consumption. These portrayals might align with preexisting audience beliefs or biases. The unequal representation of men and women could reflect societal norms and power dynamics, both in media production and in the broader culture. The avoidance of direct eye contact by regular people might be a strategy to create a sense of authenticity or candidness in the visuals. It might encourage audiences to perceive these depictions as genuine and unfiltered.

The lack of diversity in the visual representations of poverty can also be understood through the lens of Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics that highlight how the meaning of images is constructed through a shared visual lexicon. The limited diversity in representations could be a reflection of the shared understanding within a culture’s visual language.

The Framing theory also examines how media selects and emphasises certain aspects of a topic to shape public perception. In my findings the emphasis on income and energy poverty could be a result of framing decisions that prioritize certain dimensions of poverty over others, potentially to align with specific policy agendas or audience interests.

The response to research questions 1 and 2, probing the portrayal of poverty in Greek mainstream news articles of 2022, reveals a constrained visual lexicon by media producers. This constraint veils the issue of poverty, rendering it obscured. Remarkably, the middle-class family, facing significant hardships, according to ELSTAT data, remains notably absent within the analysed content. Instead, inanimate visuals featuring money and energy bills symbolise the broader concern about energy costs. Vulnerable groups are marginalised, pushing the issue of poverty into the hands of authoritative figures who establish a direct visual connection with the audience. Despite a potential attribution of blame to governance and policymaking, compositional analysis of visuals suggests a different narrative. Additionally, the demeanor and orientation of non-engaging subjects distance the audience from poverty, eliciting little identification or
empathy thus moving away from an interactive potentiality into a state of withdrawal.

In these visuals, where participants don't engage with the audience—aligned with the producer's perspective—it creates a distance from both the participant and the issue. This empowers the audience while maintaining detachment from the participants. This notion resonates with van Leeuwen's concept of an "offer image" (2008: 141), where portrayed individuals establish direct eye contact with viewers, deliberately presenting reality for remote observation, sparing readers from active engagement. Conversely, participants whose gaze is directed towards us establish a different dynamic. The distance and angle between the viewer and the participant in the photo yield specific effects, with frontal angles engaging the viewer more compared to oblique angles (Rose 2016, p.70).

The focus is two-fold: individuals whose authority is implicit, their names even absent in the caption, often conveying assumed responsibility and agency; and individuals whose refugee status becomes evident through contextual conditions in the image they're part of. This status is either orchestrated by the producer, who then becomes part of the photo, or exploited by the producer, who remains a mere spectator of the photographic event. Those who willingly appear before the camera essentially "compel" the spectator into a relationship—a "social contract" is formed between the public and the photographed, allowing room for political action (Azoulay, 2008). This choice places them in the spotlight through the camera's directionality, shaping how it's practically used and evoking certain ways of seeing. Cameras can potentially mediate the interaction or detachment of the photographed and the audience, facilitated by the producer's hands typically positioned in front of them when taking a photograph.

The Agenda-Setting Theory explores how media can influence public opinion by highlighting certain issues over others. In my findings, the low ranking in the World Media Freedom Index might be the result of the media's focus on certain issues, potentially leading to limited coverage of poverty within a generalised sociopolitical framework that imparts the particular perspective of the political leadership. Additionally, the way refugees are depicted could be influenced by the
media's perception of what topics are relevant and attention-worthy to their audience, impacting the agenda-setting process.

The prevalence of authority figures in the researched visuals aligns with Erving Goffman's framing theory and McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory that explain how media visuals frame issues by selecting certain aspects to emphasise. The prevalence of authority figures in these visuals frames poverty in a specific way, possibly downplaying other perspectives. Authority figures have the right to appear more than others. McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory applies as the media's choice to highlight authority figures influences the public's perception of the importance of these figures in addressing poverty. Who has the power to decide which events and situations are worth showing and which not – what is made visible and what is left invisible – is also an important question to consider.

Inanimate and landscape settings, namely money with energy bills and Athenian views, permeate the sample and imprint two definitions in the producer’s visual lexicon. Respectively, revealing the implicit aspects of poverty and/or social exclusion encompasses the neoliberal concern with money and material affluence to which modern media subscribe and emphasising the sprawling urban expanse serves multiple representational purposes, from inequality found in impoverished neighbourhoods to marginalization of particular vulnerable groups of residents. The use of such images risks being delineated as stereotypical since the lack of imagination is prevalently served the recycling of particular themes, objects and landscapes that verge on promotional material designed for tourism purposes, allowing the perpetuation of the status quo, assisted by photos of infrastructures and because images work by producing effects every time they are looked at (Alam, 2007 p.19).

The use of stereotypical images and narratives reinforces negative perceptions and stereotypes of the people who experience poverty. In our sample this includes images of refugees barely dressed, children playing next to a garbage pile, empty plates grabbed by many hands, black children with swollen tummies, or narratives insinuating that poverty remains concealed within urban spaces or that people are victims to the powers of the supermarkets. Such representations
can contribute to stigmatisation as to everyone who lives in a big city is a candidate for poverty, or perpetuating the belief that refugees are inevitably subjected to squalor. The first set of images makes it difficult to portray poverty as a condition amenable to transformation through policy or practice. The second reinforces stereotypes that inhibit the good will and effort to develop those policies and practices and suggest distant suffering; these people’s problems are not ours.

The stereotypical representations of male authority figures and refugees/migrants can be interpreted through Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Erving Goffman's framing theory. Hall's theory explains how media representations can simplify reality through stereotypes. The stereotypical representations of male authority figures and refugees/migrants reflect simplified images that align with prevailing societal misconceptions. Goffman's framing theory is applicable as these visuals frame the perception of poverty by emphasizing certain aspects (male authority figures, vulnerable refugees) while potentially downplaying other facets.

Additionally, Saussure's semiotics that focus on signs and their meanings can explain the images in the media as a form of visual signs that communicate meaning. The choice to include specific images like authority figures or refugees communicates particular messages and associations to the audience. The relationship between the visual elements (signifiers) and the concepts they represent (signified) can shape how audiences interpret and understand the content. Stereotypical depictions of refugees, for example, are signifiers of specific cultural constructs and biases.

9.2. Reflexive analysis

The viewer of an image is understood as bringing a certain subjectivity to bear on an image (Rose 2016, p.153). That subjectivity is imbricated in the images they see hoping to bring about an unconscious interpretation which may imply that researchers are more analytically powerful than other sorts of audiences. This reflection agrees with Rose (2016, p.378) in that whatever method one chooses
to use to critically analyse images, they need to make sure that their account acknowledges the differentiated effects of both an image's way of seeing and their own.

However, while a researcher is applying an interpretivist approach the Heisenberg principle is at work. This fundamental concept of quantum mechanics states that in order to measure the position of a particle, we need to interact with it in some way, and this interaction changes the particle's momentum and, similarly, in order to measure the momentum of a particle, we need to interact with it in a way that changes its position.

Relating it to visual analysis, the principle can be seen as a metaphor to highlight the limits of our ability to objectively observe and measure the phenomenon at hand. In visual analysis, the mere act of observing and studying an image can be considered impactful, much like the way the act of measuring a particle's position alters its momentum. This observer effect highlights the importance of reflexivity in research, with the researchers reflecting on how their own presence and biases influence the data studied.

Thus, I came to realise what Rose (2016, p.180) means when she suggests that reflexivity is an attempt to resist the universalising claims of academic knowledge and to insist that, like all other knowledges, it is situated and partial. That is why so much emphasis is placed on understanding and explaining the basis of the researcher's ideology, practice and social position prior to laying out the findings affected by them.

I realize that I have played a part in shaping the very language I aimed to study. My data doesn't present an absolute truth about poverty; it's rather an attempt at interpretation. As I explore the intricate relationship between media and political dynamics in Greece, it's clear that media representation is a complex blend influenced by numerous factors. While the discussed theories provide valuable insights, the larger canvas includes cultural, economic, and political influences that extend beyond their scope. This realization amplifies the importance of my thesis, as it highlights the interplay of media, society, and communication theories. This exploration gains added significance considering Greece's ongoing low rankings in the World Media Freedom Index for both 2022 and 2023,
highlighting potential obstacles to independent journalism and freedom of expression in Greece.

9.3. Suitability of the method used

The choice to employ Gillian Rose's Visual Methodology in my research on visual representations of poverty is rooted in its suitability with the intricacies of my research objectives. This methodology offers a structured framework for analysing visual images, which is essential for exploring beneath surface interpretations and uncovering the nuanced layers of meaning within the visuals.

By focusing on visual analysis, Gillian Rose's methodology resonates with the core of my research, which revolves around understanding how media representations of poverty are constructed, conveyed, and interpreted. The analytical nature of Gillian Rose's Visual Methodology allows me to draw insights from a variety of angles. This aligns with my aim to comprehensively examine the intricate interplay between media, society, and visual representation, especially considering Greece's low ranking in the World Media Freedom Index.

Rose's emphasis on contextual considerations is crucial for my research, given the socio-political climate in Greece. Her methodology encourages a thorough exploration of the broader cultural and historical contexts in which media representations are produced and consumed. This is paramount for understanding the power dynamics, biases, and agendas that shape these visuals.

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of Rose's methodology resonates with my responsibility to handle potentially sensitive images in a thoughtful and ethical manner. Her systematic approach, involving stages like description, interpretation, and explanation, ensures methodological rigor and transparency throughout my analysis.

By integrating Gillian Rose's Visual Methodology with existing theories like Stuart Hall's representation theory and Agenda-setting theory, my research benefits from methodological diversity, enriching the depth and breadth of insights gained. Ultimately, the application of this methodology not only enhances the academic rigor of my research but also contributes valuable insights into the intricate
relationship between media, society, and the visual representation of poverty in a context where media freedom ranks low.

10. Further knowledge

The results of this study contribute to the expanding body of literature concerning media portrayals of poverty and offer insights into future endeavours aimed at more accurate and nuanced representations of poverty in the media. The study presents a substantial sample of images, though not exhaustive, which has enabled specific outcomes. The ensuing discussion remains subjective, a common characteristic of such research. As such, it welcomes diverse interpretations while also paving the way for numerous opportunities for further investigation. Below, I outline a few potential avenues for future exploration.

Conducting interviews with photojournalists and representatives from organisations focused on poverty provides a contextual backdrop and significance to the analysis of poverty representation in Greek media. These interviews can shed light on the importance of understanding prevailing themes and narratives in media portrayals and their influence on public perceptions of poverty in Greece. Exploring photojournalists' viewpoints can uncover visual strategies employed to depict poverty, guided by ethical and aesthetic considerations, thereby facilitating a more discerning interpretation of media content (Barthes, 1999, p.160).

Incorporating insights from organisational representatives can offer a broader perspective, elucidating the social and economic factors contributing to poverty and homelessness. Integrating these interviews enhances the visual analysis of news photographs, resulting in a more enriched, contextualized understanding of poverty representation in Greek media. This approach aligns with Rubin and Rubin's methodology, which prioritizes the quality of interviews over quantity (2005).

By triangulating insights from interviews with the visual analysis of photographs from these sources, a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding can
emerge. This includes how poverty is visually depicted in Greek media, the prevalent themes and narratives in these depictions, and the effects of these representations on public perceptions of poverty in Greece.

Exploring the demographics of the press corps, including photojournalists, could uncover potential factors influencing democracy. Concerns about democracy arise when a single social demographic dominates a specific profession or group, whether in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, or class.

Moreover, investigating individuals' subsequent actions after viewing these images offers insights into potential triggers for political engagement. How do the attributes of visual messages impact this engagement? How are news values determined and field practices applied in the context of photographs? Given the visual nature of today's online deliberative public sphere, exploring the influence of digital media images on online political participation represents a logical progression. The study could also extend to viewing photojournalism as a space for potential political action (Bengtsson Lundin, 2021).

To deepen the analysis, we could consider comparative studies with a focus on multimodality, aiming to identify the visual culture of media outlets, particularly newspapers in Greece. Additionally, we can connect the research to other disciplines such as geography to discuss or analyse spatial poverty traps—locations characterised by specific ecological attributes, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutions, and political isolation.

Transitioning from visual methodologies, conducting discourse analysis of articles (including definitions, diagnoses, moral judgments, and suggested remedies), or focusing solely on article titles or photo captions, could provide insights into media's impact on perceptions of poverty. Content analysis may be particularly effective when examining a larger dataset, facilitating pattern identification, especially concerning communication material effects. This approach also lends itself to generating quantitative data.

On a more political note, the research could explore the significance of poverty-related issues in the context of the Greek National Elections of 2023.
Most importantly, the observed patterns underscore the intricate interplay between media depiction and press freedom, urging a deeper exploration of media policies, societal attitudes, and journalists' perspectives. Greece emerges as a noteworthy case within media landscapes due to its potential for further research, particularly in relation to its ranking in the World Press Freedom Index. This prompts various research paths, such as comparative analyses with countries sharing similar World Media Freedom Index rankings to explore whether media freedom influences the portrayal of sensitive issues like poverty and the investigation of the influence of media ownership and editorial policies on the breadth and accuracy of poverty representations. The potential link between a country’s World Media Freedom Index ranking and the quality of its poverty representations through a longitudinal study linked to such rankings may illuminate potential relationships between media representations and press freedom along with the complicity of state politics and media owners or the oppression of the media producers by that exact state.

11. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to answer the research questions 1) what are the representations of poverty and social exclusion in mainstream news articles in Greece in 2022 and 2) what are the dominant themes and narratives concerning poverty in these representations. I have conducted an interpretivist visual analysis under the ontological assumption of a realist and the constructivist epistemological assumption based on Gillian Rose’s Visual Methodologies but also influenced by Stuart Hall, Ferdinand de Saussure and Michel Foucault. My analysis involved observations, a coding scheme, and interpretations that led to leaving out more than I included. Specifically, I proposed a visual analysis focused on photographic depictions of poverty in Greece’s mainstream media. By scrutinising the visual strategies employed by these outlets to portray poverty, my work contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how these issues are constructed and presented in the media. The findings from this study hold significance for media practitioners, policymakers, and scholars interested in comprehending the media’s role in shaping public perceptions surrounding poverty.
I aimed to shed light on how poverty is visually represented in Greek mainstream media, an area that has received little attention in academia. By addressing this gap, the research brought new perspectives and insights to the understanding of these important societal issues using visual analysis. Using a multidimensional approach that looked at poverty, social exclusion, and media representation, I uncovered their complexities and connections. Ultimately, my study highlighted how visual media could influence perceptions, challenge norms, and engage the audience in discussions about these critical matters.

My examination of visual imagery sourced from the news database of the EAPN Greece for the year 2022 has proven to be of substantial value. This endeavor encompassed an iterative process, involving stages of preparation, research execution, and comprehensive project composition. Throughout this journey, I was acutely aware that a significant portion of my initial efforts, observations, and investigations would ultimately not find their place within the final scholarly work. Additionally, I recognize that my status as a novice in the realm of scientific inquiry has left room for improvement.

The approach I undertook within this study has yielded a sense of enthusiasm, particularly in relation to the theoretical framework that encompasses it and its multifaceted dimensions and gave me the opportunity to engage in the complexities of visual research, working with an extensive yet heterogeneous dataset. It also provided me with the latitude to learn from errors encountered during the application of research methodologies, thereby prompting a renewed and more comprehensive engagement with methodological literature.

The main strength of visual analysis is located in the freedom to assign observations in categories of meaning according to an inclusive code and work your way up to finding meanings in representations. Having the tools to investigate the discourses at play in media images has allowed me to uncover part of the visual lexicon of poverty in the media of country little researched such as Greece. Perhaps the small media market coupled with the seriousness of the
social issues it faces made the work more accessible and potentially foundational.

The visual representations within this study, characterised by their limited diversity when portraying poverty, coupled with an excessive focus on authority figures and stereotypical depictions, hold substantial implications, particularly against the backdrop of Greece's 108th rank on the 2022 World Press Freedom Index. This context calls for a deep examination of media dynamics in the country. The findings potentially signal a confined scope for reporting, influenced by restricted press freedom and potential self-censorship driven by political or economic pressures. Absence of diverse perspectives in these visuals may arise from challenges in sustaining independent journalism, thereby impeding a comprehensive grasp of intricate issues such as poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, this may perpetuate narratives aligned with the neoliberal ideological stances adopted by the government. Absence of voices from marginalised communities could signify barriers to representation, while the prevalence of superficial visuals might stem from difficulties in conducting investigative reporting within an environment of diminished press freedom.

Absence of visual analyses concerning poverty within the Greek media, as identified in existing literature, can be attributed to the dominance of conventional discourses, prevailing media dynamics, the intricate nature of poverty, economic and political influences, unexamined visual language, and the untapped potential of visual analysis as a tool for critical engagement and societal articulation. Addressing these gaps could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of how poverty is visually depicted within the intricate tapestry of the Greek media landscape.

Future investigations into the underrepresentation of individuals grappling with poverty, the perpetuation of stereotypical narratives, and the undue prominence of authority figures before the audience-constituency could unveil a potential synergy between media and politicians in Greece. Such studies could raise concerns regarding the future of press freedom overall and potential social change.
Limitations

The method followed presented two kinds of challenges; the first concerns the process itself and the second the data at hand. Tracing my own train of thought for the particular work, realising that there is a pattern followed and that not only is subjectivity not to be overlooked but is in fact the issue, generalising in retrospect, and validating the research deserving fall into the first category. The second one includes subjecting the selection of articles in the database in scrutiny.

In this context of Greek media coverage, a characteristic emerges: it aptly captures some intricacies of poverty while omitting other dimensions of these phenomena. Notably, media producers' visual lexicon exhibits a thematic concentration on income and material impoverishment. The photographic content analysed constituted three-quarters of the sample, primarily encompassing portrayals of figures of authority and a substantial representation of urban landscapes. Consequently, while the coverage concerning people facing poverty, the pivotal demographic seeking change, provided a foundational groundwork for drawing certain conclusions, it was constrained in its scope.

The selection of the particular database is an element to be considered when discussing such limitations. Objectivity could be established if comparison with other reputable sources were available. Cross-referencing could help identify discrepancies, biases, or inaccuracies.

Conversely, the instances that do delve extensively into poverty may resonate strongly with audiences on a tangible level, yet might not seamlessly connect with the intricate contextual factors or "framing" nuances that contextualise these narratives, encompassing origins, consequences, or accountability linked to poverty.

The visual lexicon of poverty leaves out facets of the multidimensional phenomenon which poverty is to focus on poverty as a financial, male issue about which we need to heed prominent authority figures. It predominantly mirrors
established hierarchies and influence frameworks, subsequently reinforcing and perpetuating these structures. In this process, a self-sustaining loop of coverage and influence is set into motion.

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14. Appendices

14.1. Appendix 1: the matrix of the researched data

14.2. Appendix 2: the coding matrix

14.3. Appendix 3: visual analysis matrix according to Gillian Rose’s Visual Methodologies