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Civilian Suffering: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera's Reporting

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Russia-Ukraine conflict has generated an extensive humanitarian crisis in which media representations play a crucial role in shaping global perceptions of civilian suffering. While previous studies have shown that Western media tend to foreground Ukrainian victimhood and marginalize Russian civilian experiences, the representational practices of non-Western news organizations such as Al Jazeera remain underexplored.

Aims: This study aims to examine how Al Jazeera represents Ukrainian and Russian civilians in its coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war and to identify ideological positioning reflected through linguistic patterns in the reporting.

Method: The study employs a corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADS) approach. A corpus of 20 Al Jazeera news articles published between 2022 and 2025 was analyzed using keyword frequency and collocation analysis, combined with qualitative interpretation based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model and the concepts of civilian victimhood and empathy framing.

Results: The analysis reveals a marked asymmetry in representation. Ukrainian civilians are predominantly associated with harm-related lexis and collocational patterns that emphasize vulnerability, humanitarian response, and demographic specificity. In contrast, Russian civilians appear far less frequently and are mainly linked to administrative or material damage descriptors, resulting in reduced emotional salience and narrative visibility.

Implications: These findings provide empirical evidence that Al Jazeera constructs a hierarchy of civilian suffering that aligns with broader geopolitical narratives. The study contributes to corpus-based media discourse analysis by demonstrating how linguistic patterns reveal ideological positioning in conflict reporting and by highlighting the need for more balanced journalistic portrayals to support critical media literacy.

Keywords: *Al Jazeera news; civilian suffering; collocation; corpus-assisted; discourse analysis; media representation; Russia-Ukraine conflict*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Russia–Ukraine war, which escalated into full scale conflict in 2022, has generated a major humanitarian crisis characterized primarily by large scale civilian displacement and sustained exposure to violence rather than mass fatalities. By 2025, more than six million Ukrainians had fled the country and several million more were internally displaced, making forced mobility and social disruption the dominant forms of civilian suffering in this conflict contemporary warfare, however, such humanitarian realities are not only experienced on the ground but are also mediated through global news narratives that structure visibility and moral interpretation (Cottle, 2009; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010). Visual framing studies further demonstrate that image selection and pictorial narratives play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of victimhood and responsibility in war coverage (Gugushvili, 2025). Contemporary war journalism scholarship argues that media institutions actively construct interpretive frameworks through emotional calibration and narrative alignment rather than merely transmitting events (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021; Stupart, 2021). Rather than being a purely moral matter, such biases emerge from patterned textual routines that privilege certain lexical choices and narrative frames over others. Such patterned routines operate, for example, through euphemism, dysphemism, and selective foregrounding of specific actors and harms, which have been shown to influence audience alignment in conflict reporting (Rohmatullah & Degaf, 2025; Xu & Zhang, 2024).

Recent studies of conflict coverage reveal how euphemistic and dysphemistic language systematically influences audience orientation toward in-group sympathies or out-group exclusion (Stupart, 2021). Consequently, the portrayal of civilian suffering functions not merely as a reflection of events but as a communicative mechanism through which legitimacy, sympathy, and urgency are constructed in the international arena. This dynamic aligns with contemporary scholarship on mediated suffering, which demonstrates how coverage can disproportionally allocate moral visibility to different groups of civilians, thereby constructing *hierarchies of compassion* that influence public empathy and policy attitudes. Research on media framing in conflict contexts, for example, shows how narrative choices and emotional emphasis contribute to differential visibility of suffering across media outlets and geopolitical contexts, reinforcing asymmetries in perceived humanitarian urgency (Iqbal & Farukh, 2025; Rahman & Aoni, 2025). This pattern reflects broader theorization of mediated compassion and moral proximity in international news discourse (Chouliaraki, 2010).

Despite the growing body of research on media coverage of the Russia – Ukraine war, we still lack systematic evidence of how a major non-Western global broadcaster such as Al Jazeera discursively constructs civilian suffering on both sides of the conflict. In particular, little is known about how Ukrainian and Russian civilians are linguistically positioned through patterns of lexical choice and collocation. This study addresses this gap by employing a corpus-assisted discourse analysis to examine how Al Jazeera constructs asymmetries of civilian victimhood in its reporting on the Russia-Ukraine war.

Studies of war reporting increasingly show that “media bias” is not simply a matter of journalists’ oral choices, but a discursive construction produced through patterned textual routines. Across coverage, hierarchies of suffering are built through recurrent

linguistic decisions, such as who is individualized and humanized, who is anonymized, what kinds of harm are foregrounded, and how agency and responsibility are allocated, which systematically shape the visibility and emotional salience of victimhood (Xu & Zhang, 2024). In the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, recent scholarship on Western and European news discourse has documented differential empathy and exceptionalism in the framing of Ukrainian refugees (Ajana et al., 2024). Comparative studies further show that Western and non-Western outlets construct divergent narrative emphases, including a contrast between Chinese and British coverage of the conflict (Chai & Liu, 2025). Research from Global South contexts and from Russian and Ukrainian state media similarly demonstrates that framing strategies reflect distinct political alignments and national interest (Moses et al., 2023; Nath et al., 2024). At the same time, recent framing and computational analyses of Russia – Ukraine war coverage further demonstrate how recurring lexical patterns reinforce geopolitical alignments and moral proximity (Nur'aini et al., 2025; Szostek & Orlova, 2024). A mixed-methods semantic network study shows how opposing media ecosystems construct distinct frame networks that reflect each side's geopolitical positioning (Sulzhytski et al., 2024).

However, what remains missing sharply is systematic evidence from non-Western transnational outlets that may operate with different geopolitical alignments and audience imaginaries. For example, research on BRICS/non-Western media indicates alternative framing strategies in representing civilian suffering. Still, it does not address how a major Global South broadcaster like Al Jazeera discursively distributes victimhood between Ukrainian and Russian civilians (Thussu, 2024). This is consistent with recent discourse analysis indicating how state media in Russia actively frames official narratives to legitimize war policy (Brusylovska & Maksymenko, 2023). This gap motivates a corpus-assisted discourse analysis that examines how Al Jazeera constructs asymmetries in civilian suffering through recurring lexical and collocational patterns.

As a Qatar based International news network with substantial reach across the Middle East, Africa, and the Global South, Al Jazeera occupies a distinctive position in global news circulation, often framed as a prominent Global South, Al Jazeera occupies a distinctive position in global news circulation, often framed as a prominent Global South broadcaster offering perspectives that diverge from Western-dominated narratives (Thussu, 2024; Wasserman, 2018). Comparative research further indicates that Al Jazeera Arabic tends to frame civilian suffering through the discourses of occupation and resistance. In contrast, CNN relies more heavily on institutional and security-oriented frames (Hamzah & Firmonasari, 2025). These findings suggest that Al Jazeera does not merely report conflict differently, but organizes meaning through alternative discursive logics, making it a strategically important site for examining how civilian victimhood is constructed in the Russia – Ukraine war. More broadly, scholarship on victimhood highlights how media discourse constructs hierarchies of suffering, celebrating certain victims while marginalizing others (Lawther, 2022). This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant for examining how transnational broadcasters such as Al Jazeera may discursively position Ukrainian and Russian civilians within asymmetrical frameworks of visibility and moral evaluation.

The Russia–Ukraine war has become a major arena of global narrative struggle, in which news organizations actively compete to define who counts as a victim, an aggressor, and a legitimate target of violence. Studies of European press coverage, for instance, demonstrate how Putin's role is framed through particular moral and political lenses that reinforce specific interpretations of responsibility and legitimacy (Franch et al., 2025). Research on conflict journalism shows that media employ systematic linguistic strategies, such as the intensification of suffering, personalization of civilians, and differential labeling of social actors to produce ideologically structured representations of war (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). In non-Western media, these

strategies are often intertwined with broader political and ethical narratives. For instance, Salsabillah & Paksi (2025) demonstrate that Al Jazeera's coverage of civilian suffering in conflict zones relies heavily on emotional storytelling and solidarity, building a discourse that amplifies particular forms of victimhood while marginalizing others. Likewise, studies of Arab media framing reveal that regional news organizations construct hierarchies of suffering through selective lexicalization and moral positioning (Mardiah et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that civilian suffering is not merely reported but discursively produced, functioning as an ideological resource in global struggles over legitimacy and responsibility in war. Analyses of hybrid media warfare reveal how official narratives from both Moscow and Kyiv use contrasting discursive strategies to shape international opinion (Hu & Wang, 2025).

1.1 Research Gap and Novelty

Although discourse studies on war have advanced significantly, several important gaps remain in the literature that this study seeks to address. First, existing research on the representation of war victims in the Russia–Ukraine context has largely focused on Western media outlets, leaving the discursive practices of non–Western transnational media underexplored. Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) research by Billah & Biswas (2024) highlights divergent ideological stances and linguistic strategies in Western versus Russian reporting. Still, it stops short of examining how outlets positioned outside these geopolitical poles construct civilian suffering. Second, while some studies have analyzed Russia–Ukraine reporting in Western news media at the level of vocabulary and grammatical choice, they typically do not consider how news discourse systematically produces hierarchies of suffering through patterns of lexical, collocational, and semantic prosody.

CDA work on this conflict has shown clear ideological framing in Western contexts. Still, there is little evidence on whether and how alternative news ecosystems might organize similar or different hierarchies (Putra & Gulö, 2025). Third, corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis has increasingly been recognized as a robust methodological synergy that enables researchers to combine quantitative lexical evidence with qualitative critical interpretation. By identifying recurring collocations, frequency patterns, and semantic prosodies, corpus approaches allow scholars to uncover systematic ideological tendencies that may not be intuitively visible through close reading alone (Baker et al., 2008; McEnery & Hardie, 2011). Recent applications of corpus-assisted CDA in media discourse further demonstrate its effectiveness in revealing patterned asymmetries in the representation of social actors and conflict narratives (Akinseye, 2025). Comparable corpus-based studies in other geopolitical contexts similarly illustrate how quantitative lexical analysis can uncover systematic ideological positioning in international news coverage (Tongkai, 2025). Consequently, we lack systematic evidence of how large-scale linguistic patterns in a non-Western global news outlet like Al Jazeera contribute to asymmetries in the representation of Ukrainian and Russian civilians.

This study, therefore, makes three interrelated contributions. Empirically, it extends discourse scholarship on the Russia-Ukraine war by providing evidence from a major non-Western news organization, thereby expanding the geographical and ideological scope of analysis to uncover patterns of empathy, visibility, and moral structuring in news reporting that are not readily apparent through qualitative analysis alone. Finally, methodologically, it offers a replicable model for integrating corpus linguistics and CDA in conflict media studies, showing how lexical and collocational evidence can illuminate ideological positioning in contemporary war narratives.

1.2 Research Question

Based on the outlined background and research gap, this study addresses the following research question: How are Ukrainian and Russian civilians linguistically represented in Al Jazeera's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war? To answer this question, the study examines a corpus of 20 Al Jazeera news articles published between 2022 and 2025, focusing on the frequency and collocational patterns of harm-related and attack-related lexical items, as well as the terms "*Ukrainian civilians*," "*Russian civilians*," and "*victims*". Using a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach, the study aims to identify how asymmetries of vulnerability and emotional salience reveal ideological positioning in Al Jazeera's war reporting.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, drawing on Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis, which combines corpus-based quantitative linguistic analysis with critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach was chosen because it can objectively identify language patterns while providing critical interpretations of ideological constructions that emerge in news texts (Baker et al., 2008; Gillings et al., 2023).

2.2 Research Object

As data sources, this study used 20 news articles from Al Jazeera English that explicitly discussed civilian casualties in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The articles were obtained through manual crawling of the Al Jazeera website using keywords such as "civilian casualties," "Ukraine civilians," "Russian civilians," and "Russia-Ukraine war." All articles were from the news channel <https://www.aljazeera.com/>, published between 2022 and 2025, and used the keywords "Russian-Ukraine victims" and "Russian-Ukraine refugees". Opinion articles, editorials, and in-depth analyses were excluded to focus on news reports. All articles were converted to .txt format and placed into a single corpus folder for analysis using AntConc 3.5.9 and Sketch Engine.

2.3 Research Procedures

The research procedure began with the selection of 20 Al Jazeera English news articles (2022–2025) reporting on civilian casualties, displacement, and humanitarian impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war. These texts were read repeatedly to identify all references to civilian groups and violence-related events, and were then converted to plain text for corpus analysis. The cleaned text was compiled into a single corpus after removing non-linguistic elements such as headlines, hyperlinks, and formatting symbols. Frequency lists of harm-related and attack-related lexical items (e.g., *killed*, *injured*, *wounded*, *dead*, *attack*, *strike*) were generated to examine the prominence of civilian harm and military aggression in the reporting.

Subsequently, a collocation analysis was conducted using the node terms "*Ukrainian civilians*," "*Russian civilians*," and "*victims*," with a five-word window on both sides to identify recurring lexical associations. These patterns were then interpreted through Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis to examine how linguistic choices reflected discursive practices and ideological constructions of civilian suffering and moral legitimacy in Al Jazeera's coverage.

2.3 Research Instruments

The research instruments in this study consist of a set of lexical and analytical tools used to identify and interpret patterns of civilian representation in the Al Jazeera corpus, including (1) harm-related and attack-related lexical items such as *killed*, *injured*, *wounded*, *dead*, *attack*, *strike*, *shelling*, and *bombardment* to measure the prominence of civilian harm and military violence; (2) the node words "*Ukrainian civilians*," "*Russian civilians*," and "*victims*" to anchor the collocation analysis; (3) semantic categories for classifying collocates, namely casualty and harm, human-interest descriptors (e.g., *children*, *families*, *residents*), targeted locations (e.g., *homer*, *schools*, *marketplaces*), and administrative or material-damage descriptors (e.g., *authorities*, *debris*, *buildings*); and (4) Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis as the interpretive framework for linking lexical and collocational patterns to discursive practices and ideological constructions of civilian suffering.

2.4 Data Analysis

The corpus findings were analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013). At the textual level, frequency lists and collocation patterns were examined to identify systematic patterns of lexical prominence and association, which may indicate the salience of particular social actors and forms of harm in news discourse. Corpus-assisted discourse studies argue that recurring lexical patterns and semantic prosodies can reveal ideological positioning that is not immediately visible through close reading alone (Baker et al., 2008; Gillings et al., 2023).

At the level of discursive practice, the corpus findings were interpreted in relation to journalistic framing, focusing on the distribution of visibility, emotional salience, and narrative emphasis across Ukrainian and Russian civilians (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). This step reflects corpus-assisted CDA approaches that integrate quantitative patterns with contextualized critical interpretation (Tongkai, 2025).

At the level of social practice, the identified asymmetries were situated within broader ideological and geopolitical discourse shaping humanitarian narratives of the Russia-Ukraine war. The analysis drew on Chouliaraki (2006) concept of the hierarchy of suffering and Höijer (2004) empathy framing to explain how certain civilian groups were constructed as more morally salient than others. Methodological triangulation between corpus analysis and CDA was employed to enhance analytical rigor, supported by peer debriefing and systematic documentation (Creswell & Plano, 2018).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study, guided by the research question: How are Ukrainian and Russian civilians linguistically represented in Al Jazeera's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war? To address this question, the analysis focuses on the frequency and collocational patterns of harm-related and attack-related lexical items, as well as the terms "*Ukrainian civilians*," "*Russian civilians*," and "*victims*" within a corpus of 20 Al Jazeera news articles published between 2022 and 2025.

Frequency and Collocational Patterns of Harm-Related and Attack-Related Lexical Items

The frequency analysis of harm-and attack-related lexical items provides an initial overview of how civilian suffering and military aggression are represented within the Al Jazeera corpus. By examining the distribution of terms such as *killed*, *injured*, *attack*,
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and *strike*, it becomes possible to identify which types of violence are emphasized and how often these descriptions appear in the dataset. This analysis serves as a baseline for understanding the salience of different forms of harm in the reporting. It offers insights into which civilian populations and conflict events receive greater linguistic attention. Table 1 summarises the frequency of key violence-related lexical items found in the Corpus.

Table 1 Violence-Related Lexis in the Al Jazeera Corpus

Category	Keyword	Frequency
Harm – Related	Killed	75
	Injured	19
	Wounded	12
	Dead	9
Attack - Related	Attack	52
	Strike	13
	Shelling	10
	Bombardment	4

The frequencies presented in Table 1 indicate that references to civilian harm appear prominently in the corpus. The verb *killed* is the most frequent harm-related term, occurring 75 times across the dataset, followed by *injured* (19), *wounded* (12), and *dead* (9). These patterns show that descriptions of fatalities are more common than descriptions of injuries or other forms of harm. In addition, attack – related terms also appear frequently, with *attack* (52) and *strike* (13) being the most common, while *shelling* (10) and *bombardment* (4) occur less frequently.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that the corpus places substantial lexical emphasis on events involving lethal violence and direct military aggression. The prominence of terms such as *killed* and *attack* suggests that the reporting often centres on high-impact incidents involving civilian casualties and large-scale strikes. These frequency patterns provide the basis for further analysis through collocation and contextual examination to determine how different groups of civilians are represented in relation to these acts of violence.

To complement the frequency results, a collocation analysis was conducted to identify the lexical associations surrounding key terms used to refer to Ukrainian and Russian civilians. Collocations help reveal how each group is framed within the corpus by showing the types of words that consistently appear near the target terms. In this analysis, the primary node words examined were “Ukrainian civilians”, “Russian civilians”, and “victims”. The collocates were extracted using a window span of five words to the left and right of each node word. The results highlight notable differences in the descriptive detail, emotional intensity, and narrative prominence assigned to each group. The main collocational patterns are summarised in tables 2–4.

Table 2 Collocates of Ukrainian Civilians

Collocate type	Common collocates	Typical context
Harm–Casualty verbs	Killed, Injured, Wounded, Trapped	Describing casualties following russian attacks
Human–interest descriptors	Children, families, elderly, residents	Emphasising vulnerability & demographic identities
Targeted locations	Apartment block, school, marketplace, residential area	Sites of destruction commonly mentioned
Humanitarian framing	Evacuated, displaced, rescue workers, aid deliveries	References to relief efforts and displacement

Collocates of "*Ukrainian civilians*" show strong association with casualty – related verbs and references to specific demographic groups such as *children* and *families*. These collocates commonly appear in narratives describing airstrikes or missile attacks on populated areas, often accompanied by details about damage to schools, homes, or markets. The frequent use of humanitarian terms such as *evacuated*, *displaced*, and *rescue workers* suggests that Ukrainian civilians are consistently framed in terms of vulnerability, suffering, and emergency response.

Table 3 Collocates of Russian Civilians

Collocate type	Common collocates	Typical context
Neutral administrative terms	Evacuated, local authorities said, regional officials	Reporting minor damage or precautionary actions
Human – interest descriptors	Debris, infrastructure, building hit	Focus on structural impact, not human loss
Passive – event verbs	Stuck, affected	Short, factual mentions without emotional detail

Compared with "*Ukrainian civilians*", "*Russian Civilians*" yields far fewer collocates and appears in neutral, low-detail contexts. The collocates largely relate to administrative reporting, such as statements from local authorities or descriptions of minor damage to buildings near border regions. Notably, harm – related verbs (*killed*, *wounded*, etc.) rarely co – occur with *Russian civilians*, indicating minimal narrative focus on Russian civilian casualties. Overall, the collocation pattern reflects limited emotional intensity and reduced descriptive elaboration.

Table 4 Collocates of Victims

Collocate group	Common collocates	Associated Context
Violence descriptors	Missile strike, Russian attack, air raid	Almost exclusively Ukrainian settings
Recovery/rescue terms	Bodies recovered, rescue	Scenes of mass–casualty

	teams, emergency crews	events in Ukraine
Minor Russian associations	Border blast, explosion reported	Very infrequent, brief references

The collocation patterns for “*victims*” are overwhelmingly tied to Ukrainian contexts, particularly those involving large – scale missile strikes or air raids. These collocates frequently appear in reports documenting mass casualties and subsequent rescue operations, indicating that the term *victims* is predominantly used to describe Ukrainian civilians. Mentions of Russian victims are rare and typically lack narrative extension, reinforcing their lower discursive visibility within the corpus.

3.2 Discussion

Salience of Civilian Harm in Al Jazeera’s reporting

Table 1 shows that Al Jazeera’s reporting in this corpus foregrounds lethal harm and direct military aggression through a strong concentration of violence related lexis. The harm – related verb *killed* is the most frequent item (75 tokens), far exceeding *injured* (19), *wounded* (12), and *dead* (9). This distribution indicates that fatality reporting is linguistically more salient than non-fatal harm, suggesting that civilian suffering is frequently communicated through the “headline” register of death counts rather than through extended descriptions of injury, trauma, or longer-term humanitarian consequences. In parallel, the high frequency of attack-related terms, especially *attack* (52) and *strike* (13), reinforces a reporting emphasis on high-impact violent incidents (e.g., strikes, shelling, bombardment) as the dominant narrative triggers through which civilian harm becomes newsworthy.

These patterns are consistent with recent scholarship in conflict journalism, which notes that war reporting often privileges event-centered, spectacular violence, particularly fatal incidents, because it functions as a powerful marker of urgency, drama, and moral intensity in news narratives. In studies of emotional dynamics in journalism, violence and casualty descriptions are shown to be key resources for producing affective engagement and guiding audience attention toward moments of peak disruption and suffering (Stupart, 2021).

More broadly, research on contemporary war/visual journalism emphasizes that the communicative economy of conflict reporting tends to centre incidents that can be narrated (and visualized) as discrete “strikes” and “attacks”, which then become the main units through which suffering is recognized and circulated. In this sense, the frequency profile in Table 1 can be read as evidence that Al Jazeera’s coverage constructs civilian suffering primarily through a lexicon of immediate, lethal harm tied closely to the narration of military action (Allan, 2025).

Importantly, this lexical salience provides the empirical baseline for the subsequent collocation analysis: once lethal harm (*killed*) and aggression (*attack/strike*) dominate the corpus, the next analytical question becomes which civilian populations are linguistically positioned closest to these high – salience harm terms, and whether this proximity is distributed symmetrically across Ukrainian and Russian civilians. This is where the study moves from overall “violence intensity” to the discursive allocation of victimhood and visibility across groups.

Construction of Ukrainian Civilian Victimhood

Table 2 demonstrates that “*Ukrainian civilians*” consistently co-occur with collocates that position them as highly personalized, vulnerable, and emotionally salient victims in Al Jazeera’s reporting. At the textual level, the phrase is systematically associated

with harm verbs (e.g., *killed, injured, wounded*), human-interest descriptors (e.g., *children, families, elderly*), and specific civilian spaces (e.g., *apartment block, school, marketplace, residential area*). This pattern embeds civilian suffering within recognisable social identities and everyday locations, thereby transforming violence from an abstract event into an experience lived by ordinary people. Such collocational clustering reflects what media scholars describe as personalisation and domestication of suffering, through which distant wars are made emotionally proximate to global audiences.

Recent journalism research demonstrates that conflict reporting increasingly relies on human-interest framing to generate moral engagement, particularly through references to children, families, and destroyed homes. Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) show that the strategic use of emotional language and personalised victims is a core mechanism through which news media produce empathy and moral urgency in war coverage. Similarly, Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) argues that contemporary journalism operates within an “emotional regime” in which suffering is selectively highlighted through affective storytelling rather than neutral description. These insights help explain why “*Ukrainian civilians*” in Table 2 is repeatedly accompanied by emotionally charged and socially specific descriptors rather than abstract casualty figures.

Empirical studies of the Russia–Ukraine war further confirm this pattern. Ajana et al. (2024) demonstrate that European and International media construct Ukrainian civilians through exceptionable empathy, in which their suffering is framed as especially relatable and morally compelling, often via narratives of family life, displacement, and attacks on homes and schools. Likewise, Verbytska (2024) shows that dominant news frames in Russia–Ukraine coverage prioritise civilian vulnerability and humanitarian urgency in Ukrainian contexts, producing a discursive centre of gravity around Ukrainian victimhood. In this light, the collocational profile in Table 2 provides corpus-based evidence that Al Jazeera participates in this broader transnational pattern, consistently positioning Ukrainian civilians as the primary humanitarian subjects of the conflict.

Crucially, this construction is not simply descriptive but discursively allocates moral visibility. By repeatedly linking Ukrainian civilians to lexical fields of harm, family, rescue, and domestic space, Al Jazeera’s reporting establishes them as prototypical victims whose suffering is emotionally and politically legible, setting the benchmark against which other civilian groups are implicitly measured in the corpus.

Marginalization of Russian Civilians

Tables 3 and 4 reveal a sharply contrasting discursive pattern for “*Russian civilians*”. At the textual level, the node phrase is surrounded mainly by administrative and material damage collocates (e.g., *local authorities, regional officials, debris, buildings, infrastructure*) and by low agency passive verbs (*affected, stuck*), while harm-related verbs (*killed, wounded*) are largely absent. This lexical profile produces a markedly depersonalized and low empathy frame: Russian civilians appear peripheral to the drama of war, associated with damage management rather than human loss. In contrast to the dense human-interest clustering around Ukrainian civilians (Table 2), Russian civilians are linguistically positioned at a distance from the core humanitarian narrative.

At the level of discursive practice, such collocational scarcity and administrative framing enact what Chouliaraki (2006) called as “anaesthetic distance,” a mode of representation in which suffering is acknowledged but stripped of emotional and moral immediacy. Recent work in Media, War & Conflict shows that when civilian groups are reported primarily through institutional voices and infrastructural damage, audiences are less likely to perceive them as morally urgent victims, even when harm is present (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). This aligns with Table 4, where the moral label

"victims" is overwhelmingly anchored to Ukrainian contexts (*missile strike, air raid, rescue teams*), while Russian associations are rare, brief, and narratively underdeveloped.

From a social-practice perspective, this asymmetry mirrors broader geopolitical framing in which Russia is predominantly constructed as the aggressor, thereby displacing attention from Russian civilian suffering. Large scale studies of Russia-Ukraine news framing demonstrate that Western aligned and transnational media tend to organize the conflict through moral binaries that prioritize Ukrainian vulnerability while marginalizing Russian civilian experiences ([Makhortykh & Bastian, 2022](#)). Importantly, the present corpus shows that a non-Western global broadcaster reproduces a similar hierarchy: Al Jazeera's linguistic patterns render Ukrainian civilians as morally visible and Russian civilians as discursively peripheral. This finding advances the literature by providing corpus-based evidence that asymmetries of civilian suffering are not limited to Western outlets but circulate across global ecologies.

Asymmetry of Suffering and Ideological Positioning

Taken together, the frequency and collocation patterns in Tables 1–4 reveal a systematic asymmetry in the discursive allocation of civilian suffering in Al Jazeera's reporting. At the textual level, lethal harm (*killed*) and military aggression (*attack, strike*) are highly salient, but their discursive proximity to civilian groups is uneven. Ukrainian civilians are repeatedly positioned next to harm verbs, human-interest descriptors, and humanitarian actions, whereas Russian civilians are aligned mainly with administrative voices and material damage. This uneven co-textual distribution is the linguistic mechanism through which one group becomes morally and emotionally visible, while the other is rendered discursively peripheral.

At the level of discursive practice, these patterns correspond to what journalism scholars describe as the organization of compassion, in which news routines channel audience empathy toward selected victims through personalization, emotionalization, and humanitarian framing. Research on the "emotional turn" in journalism shows that references to children, families, rescue operations, and destroyed homes function as standardized devices for producing moral urgency and affective proximity in war reporting ([Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021](#)). In this corpus, such devices are systematically attached to Ukrainian civilians, while Russian civilians are framed through bureaucratic and infrastructural registers that dampen emotional engagement.

At the level of social practice, this asymmetry reflects the broader geopolitical moral economy of the Russia-Ukraine war. Large-scale analyses of digitally mediated war narratives demonstrate that international media ecosystems stabilize the binary moral economy of the Russia-Ukraine war. Large scale analyses of digitally mediated war narratives demonstrate that international media ecosystems stabilize binary moral schemas, victim versus aggressor, innocence versus guilt, that privilege Ukrainian civilian suffering while marginalizing Russian civilian experiences ([Makhortykh & Bastian, 2022](#)). Recent computational and framing studies further show that news coverage of the conflict consistently centres Ukrainian vulnerability and humanitarian urgency as the dominant narrative axis ([Verbytska, 2024](#)). From a strategic-communication perspective, this pattern also aligns with how global media narratives operate as instruments of image warfare, shaping public sentiment and legitimacy through selective moral storytelling ([Yarchi, 2025](#)).

What is particularly significant in the present study is that a non-Western global broadcaster reproduces this hierarchy of suffering. Al Jazeera's lexical and collocational routines mirror the same transnational humanitarian script found in Western outlets; whereby Ukrainian civilians are rendered hyper visible as "true victims" while Russian civilians are discursively anaesthetized. This finding constitutes the study's core

novelty: by grounding the analysis in corpus-based evidence and interpreting it through an explicit editorial stance. In doing so, it extends research on conflict journalism by showing that asymmetries of civilian suffering circulate across Western and non-Western media alike, revealing a shared global hierarchy of victimhood embedded in contemporary war reporting.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Al Jazeera linguistically represents Ukrainian and Russian civilians in its coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict using a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach. The findings reveal a marked asymmetry: Ukrainian civilians are foregrounded as central victims through frequent harm-related lexis and emotionally salient collocations, whereas Russian civilians are comparatively marginal and more often framed through neutral or administrative language. These results demonstrate how media discourse contributes to the construction of hierarchies of suffering aligned with broader geopolitical narratives.

Methodologically, the study illustrates the value of integrating quantitative lexical analysis with critical discourse theory to uncover patterned ideological tendencies in conflict reporting. The findings also carry implications for media literacy and journalistic practice by encouraging critical awareness of how civilian victimhood is selectively constructed in international news coverage.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the corpus is relatively small, comprising twenty news articles from a single media outlet, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the analysis focuses exclusively on textual data and does not examine visual or multimodal elements that may also contribute to the framing of civilian suffering. Third, the study does not adopt a diachronic perspective that could reveal shifts in representation over time.

Future research could therefore expand the corpus across multiple international broadcasters to enable comparative cross-media analysis, incorporate multimodal approaches to examine the interaction between text and imagery, and conduct longitudinal studies to trace how hierarchies of victimhood evolve throughout different phases of the conflict. Such directions would further deepen our understanding of how media power shapes humanitarian perception and moral evaluation of contemporary warfare.

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Authors' Contributions

Siti Nur Amalia as the principal author of this article, contributing to the research design, data collection, corpus compilation, data analysis, and manuscript drafting. Titik Sudartinah and Pratomo Widodo as the lecturer in Applied linguistics study program contributed through supervision, critical review of the analytical framework, validation of the findings, and revision of the manuscript to ensure its academic rigor and coherence. All of authors approved the final version of the manuscript and take full responsibility for its content.

AI Generative Statement

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely for language refinement and grammatical improvement during manuscript preparation. All research design, data analysis, interpretation, and conclusion are entirely the responsibility of the authors.

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