VISUAL FRAMES OF WAR PHOTOJOURNALISM, EMPATHY, COMPASSION, AND INFORMATION SEEKING

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ABSTRACT

Although it has long been assumed that pictures depicting the human suffering of war evoke empathy and compassion, which leads to social action, there is little empirical evidence of that claim. This study aimed to fill the gap in visual communication theory about the effects of war photojournalism on media consumers' emotional and behavioral responses. This mixed methods design included a between-subjects experimental design tested whether photos (from conflicts in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo) with a human-cost-of-war visual frame had significantly different effects on participants' levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, other-oriented distress, and information seeking than pictures with a militarism visual frame. A second study used series of focus group discussions, to investigate how media consumers make meaning out of images of conflict. The findings expand our understanding about the way audiences react to conflict photos, and they have implications for how photo editors might present audiences with images of war that will engage audiences.
Dedicated to Wren and Micah:

May you grow up in a world filled with empathy and compassion.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Photojournalism of conflict has been considered an essential component of keeping the public informed and of holding the U.S. government accountable during times of war (Prochnau, 2005). The images of conflict that have been most celebrated, won prestigious awards, and become icons have been the ones depicting human suffering (Greenwood & Smith, 2007; Kim & Smith, 2005; Moeller, 1999; Perlmutter, 1998; Ritchin, 2013). These are also the photographs considered to be the most effective at generating concern in audiences for those caught in the chaos of war (Kennedy, 2012).

Yet, analyses of recent Iraq and Afghanistan war coverage indicate that, most of the time, U.S. publications opt for running pictures that emphasize militarism as opposed to the human cost of war (DeGhett, 2014; Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Griffin, 2004; Keith & Schwalbe, 2010; Kennedy, 2008; King & Lester, 2005). This is due, in part, to the caution of photo editors who continually debate whether the news value of publishing disturbing images outweighs the potential to traumatize audiences (Emmett, 2010; O’Brien, 1993; Perlmutter & Major, 2004) and to journalistic norms and logistical restrictions that limit the type of images photographers can make in the field (DeGhett, 2014; Hall, 1973; Ritchin, 2013). Another issue complicating decisions about displaying pictures of people in the midst of war is whether it is ethical to publicize their pain (Sischy, 1991; Sontag, 1973, 2003; Szorenyi, 2006).

One of the reasons deliberation over running photographs of human suffering is so difficult is that there is little conclusive evidence about the effect such visuals have on viewers. In newsrooms, editors rely on anecdotes, letters to the editor, online comments, social media posts, and personal experience to anticipate audience reactions (Emmett,
Empirical audience research on the potential of images of conflict to influence peoples’ emotions, attitudes and behavior has been sparse and contradictory (Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzsein, 2011; Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002; Pfau et al., 2006, Zillmann, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999). Employing the combination of an experiment and focus group interviews, this study fills that gap by examining people’s emotions, empathy, and information seeking behavior in response to images that depict the human cost of war compared to those of militarism.

Questions about the ethics related to images of war are not just applicable to photographers and photo editors. Audience members in an age of globalization regularly encounter mediated depictions of war. Sontag (2003) observed, “being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience” (p. 18). This sentiment was echoed by Ashuri and Pinchevski (2008), who claimed that “the situation in which the whole world watches the plights and misfortunes of distant others is certainly a novelty of the twentieth century” (p. 140). As various media have sped the rapid pace of globalization and enabled audiences to easily keep up with events around the world (Pieterse, 2009) they have also brought visuals of war into view. Whether one seeks out coverage of conflict directly in news coverage of international affairs or stumbles upon stories of war through a social media post, images of war and the suffering of others have become ubiquitous. And, as Sontag (2003) observed, “the understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images” (p. 21).

When confronted with such pictures, viewers must decide how to make sense of them. Kennedy (2012) contended, “As this image-world becomes more and more
saturated by images of corporeal violence and vulnerability, it becomes imperative to consider the aesthetics, ethics, and the politics of the claims the suffering bodies make upon us” (p. 314). Certainly there is a range of responses that individuals may have when looking at photos of others in pain and at war. Some may be so desensitized that they barely register a picture of conflict. Some might be so overwhelmed or disgusted that they turn away from the image and the issue it represents. Yet some people may experience empathy for those depicted in the photo and become more motivated to learn more about the war or to seek out ways to become politically involved. This last type of reaction is what Rentschler (2004) referenced when she claimed that “to watch, see or hear another’s victimization from afar can nonetheless constitute affective and political forms of participation in others’ suffering” (p. 298). How a person reacts to pictures of war is dependent on his or her individual worldview and interpretation of the visuals. Yet, as Kaplan (2008) noted, “Nevertheless citizens’ emotions regarding catastrophes will partly depend on the form of images they are given” (p. 4).

So while audiences are responsible for their own responses to photos of conflict, it is photographers and editors who decide what to present to audiences. Of course, photographers are limited to what is possible to shoot in the field, and editors are constrained by the images available to them. Still, “given that the Western world comes to know about distant suffering through the spectacles of television or the Internet, the question of distant suffering is essentially a question about the ethical role of the media in pubic life today” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 153). Choosing how to illustrate war in the news is no easy task for photojournalists or photo editors. Publishing shots that are perceived as too disturbing or graphic might result in angry and traumatized audiences. On the other
hand, failing to visually depict the human cost of war can be construed as withholding important information from the public. Photographers and editors face the ethical dilemma of whether to prioritize viewers’ comfort or the news value of keeping audiences informed (Emmett, 2010; O’Brien, 1993; Perlmutter & Major, 2004).

In addition to considering the effect on audience members, there are ethical questions of whether images of wartime strife are respectful of the subjects and make them vulnerable to repercussions after publication. The most poignant pictures of war capture people in moments of profound devastation, and in these circumstances most people are not in the position to give consent (Ritchin, 2013). For this reason, some have decried these types of photos generally (Sontag, 1979, 2003), and others have proposed that pictures of suffering are ethically contingent on the context and results of their display (Ritchin, 2013; Sischy, 1991; Szorenyi, 2006). If viewing images of the human cost of war really does influence audiences to be more empathic toward the subjects and become more engaged with the conflict, that may justify publishing such images.

Although “it is widely held that images in the news can stir emotions and foster public outcry like no other means of expression” (Zillmann et al., 1999, p. 208) the evidence for such a claim is primarily anecdotal, and empirical research on the capacity of news photos to move people to action is sparse (Brantner et al., 2011; Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002; Pfau et al., 2006, Zillmann et al., 1999). Some experts have asserted that pictures of war have not been effective at evoking emotion and social action, because they have not stopped war throughout history (Perlmutter, 1998; Sontag, 2003), whereas others have contended that photos have successfully generated anti-war sentiment (Ritchin, 2013). The empirical research on the influence of war images has also
yielded differing conclusions. Some experimental studies have concluded that the influence of conflict photographs on people’s attitudes is limited by individuals’ pre-existing attitudes and worldviews (Domke et al., 2002). Yet more recent studies have argued that there is a significant connection between visuals of war and viewers’ emotional and attitudinal reactions (Brantner et al., 2011; Gartner, 2011; Iyer, Webster, Hornsey, & Vanman, 2014; Pfau et al., 2006), and recent research has examined the potential link between empathy and news photos of conflict depicting the human cost of war (Brantner et al., 2011).

This dissertation looks specifically at empathic responses to images. Empathy is “the capacity to understand and respond to the unique affective experiences of another person” (Decety & Jackson, 2006, p. 54). Empathic processing involves both an affective component, whereby one person automatically taps into the emotional state of another, and a cognitive component, as one person consciously considers the perspective of another (Hein & Singer, 2008). This research also explores the way various visual frames of war may induce compassion, which is a discrete emotion closely tied to empathic processing. Compassion is “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas, 2010, p. 351). Research has repeatedly shown that when empathy arouses compassion in people, they are significantly more likely to experience changed attitudes and engage in prosocial behavior toward the subject of the empathy or the subject’s group (Batson, 2011; Batson et al. 1983; Batson et al. 1997; Dovidio et al., 2006). Incorporating these theories, this dissertation investigates the ways visual frames in war photojournalism affect media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses, and, more broadly, how media
consumers make meaning out of visuals of conflict. More precisely, it asks whether images, when presented in a way that emphasizes the human cost of war instead of military action, have the ability to evoke empathy and compassion in audiences, and if those affective responses lead to greater information seeking behavior.

**Study Design**

This dissertation fills a gap in journalism and visual communication theory about the effects of war photojournalism on media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses. Employing a combination of an experiment and focus group interviews, this work examined how people respond to images with a human-cost-of-war visual frame compared to those with a militarism visual frame. The between-subjects experimental portion measured participants’ levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, other-oriented distress, and information seeking behavior after viewing news photographs of war, and the focus groups investigated how participants make meaning out of images of conflict.

This dissertation used a triangulation design, where the quantitative and qualitative components were given equal weight, and both methods were used to explore the same phenomenon of audience responses to war images (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989). The goal of this approach was to compare complimentary data from the experiment and the focus groups, yielding a deeper understanding of the way that media consumers react to war visuals. The triangulation design bolstered the validity of the dissertation because the findings from the experiment and focus groups corroborated each other, and because using quantitative and qualitative approaches together addressed the methodological limitations inherent in both (Myers, 2014). In line with the parameters of
a triangulation design, the data from both studies were collected concurrently and independently, then analyzed separately, and interpreted simultaneously (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989).

This mixed methods design allowed for investigating a wider range of hypotheses and research questions and provided greater explanatory power to the results of the project (Benoit & Holbert, 2008). Scholars continue to advocate for methodological pluralism in audience research (Benoit & Holbert, 2008; Brannen, 2007; Darling-Wolf, 2014; Robinson & Mendelson, 2012; Schroder et al., 2003; Splichal & Dahlgren, 2014; Ruddock, 2001). Darling-Wolf (2014) made the necessity of this approach explicit: “It is becoming increasingly clear that the media-rich environment in which we live today is just too complex for one paradigm or one method to completely and definitively explore ‘all of it’” (p. 24). Another reason for using a multi-method design is that previous research on the processing of war images revealed that audiences have ambivalent responses to depictions of others’ suffering, where reactions of compassion are mixed with feelings of anger, shame, and powerlessness (Höijer, 2004). Brannen (2005) found that mixed methods was “a methodology that allowed for the expression of contradictory views and feelings” (p. 179).

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The findings of this dissertation have theoretical value for media studies about the potential of war imagery on emotions and behavior. This work also provides useful information to photographers and photo editors for making difficult ethical decisions in the presentation of images of war. If conflict is comprehended for most people primarily
through news images (Sontag, 2003), a deeper knowledge of how people respond emotionally and behaviorally to such pictures is crucial to reporting conflict responsibly.

By investigating how visual frames in photojournalism of war affect media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses and by examining the various processes participants use to make sense of conflict photos, this dissertation will answer several calls for action in communication research. First, this project contributes methodologically to audience studies by advancing mixed methods designs that capitalize on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Second, this dissertation will gauge the influence of particular visual frames of contemporary conflicts in the news. Bird (2014) argued, “when we seek to explore how audiences interact in their daily lives with news, an important dimension must be to investigate direct response to specific texts” (p. 502). Third, this project focuses specifically on the affective responses of participants to news visuals, which addresses Morley’s (2006) concern that “we make a mistake if we continue to prioritize the cognitive and rational dimension of media consumption over the emotional and affective” (p.109). Fourth, this study addresses “the need for scholars in psychology and the media to learn more about the interactions among a traumatic image, its source, genre and placement, and psychological response in an era of global proliferation of images and related cultural emotions” (Kaplan, 2008, p. 3). In other words, this work draws on media theory and psychology to explore the relationship between photos of conflict and affective and behavioral responses. Finally, this dissertation sheds light on the question of whether visual frames of conflict photojournalism influences media consumers’ responses to provide useful information to photographers and photo editors for making difficult ethical decisions in the presentation of such images.
of images of war. For, as Aday (2010) has argued, “what we still do not know, at least in a way we can be sure of causality, is how exposure to war coverage that includes casualty and soldier/battle images shapes audience attitudes” (p. 442).

**Overview of Chapters**

Following this introduction, chapter two provides a detailed look at relevant scholarship from journalism, visual communication, and psychology. The first part of the literature review discusses why news organizations, photographers, and photo editors value and publish war photography and it examines some of the debates in journalism theory and practice about how to balance news values and image ethics. Next, the literature review presents visual communication theories about how photographic meaning is constructed and explains the processes relevant to the creation and publication of war photos. Then, the review looks at visual framing theory and summarizes studies about the visual framing employed in U.S. media’s photographic coverage of the recent U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Then various visual communication, art, journalism, and political science theories are reviewed that address the impact of photographs of war. Next, the literature review summarizes related empirical studies on emotional and attitudinal responses to war photos and my preliminary research on the topic. Finally, the review highlights relevant psychological theories about empathy, compassion, distress, and prosocial behavior.

Next, chapter three presents the experimental method and results of the dissertation. It lays out the hypotheses specific to the experiment, details the methods used in the study, presents the results, offers an analysis of those results, and points to the theoretical and practical implications of the experimental study. Chapter four addresses
the method and results from the focus groups by listing the research questions applicable to the focus groups, reviewing the methods employed, describing the findings, and providing an analysis of those findings, and outlining the theoretical and practical implications of the study. Chapter five concludes the dissertation by synthesizing the results of both the quantitative and qualitative findings. This chapter discusses the theoretical and practical implications of this research and provides directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Why Produce and Publish War Photographs?

News images depicting the atrocities of war pose a particular and touchy problem for photo editors. If a news organization publishes disturbing pictures it risks traumatizing audience members and inviting complaints. If the pictures involve collateral damage from U.S. military operations, a news outlet could also be labeled as anti-American. However, if that organization does not publish war photos, it may be criticized by journalists, cultural critics, and academics for failing to fully inform its audience (Emmett, 2010; DeGhett, 2014; O’Brien, 1993; Perlmutter & Major, 2004). Even though images of war are newsworthy, running them is so controversial that the decision is often fiercely debated and escalated to numerous levels of editors, or even to the publisher (DeGhett, 2014; Emmett, 2010; O’Brien, 1993). Miami Herald Deputy Photo Video Editor David Walters explained the dilemma photo editors find themselves in: “We try to strike a balance, delivering not only what readers want to see but also what they need to see” (Emmett, 2010, p. 30). In other words, when deciding whether to run images of human suffering, editors must weigh concern for the comfort of the audience against the news organization’s duty to inform the public.

Part of guarding the wellbeing of a publication’s audience stems from an ethical obligation to prevent people, particularly children, from becoming unnecessarily distressed by news content (O’Brien, 1993). For example, Bill Keller, former executive editor of The New York Times, explained that, while editors have a responsibility to publish newsworthy images, they “have to be mindful of the pain these pictures would cause to families and the potential revulsion of readers, and children” (Perlmutter &
Major, 2004, p. 72). Despite the careful deliberation of photo editors, some audiences inevitably react to disturbing photos with comments like this one sent to *U.S. News & World Report* after it ran graphic pictures of U.S. soldiers who were burned and hung from a bridge in Iraq: “Please consider carefully how much gore and carnage your readers need to see to get the full scope of war and human suffering” (Perlmutter & Major, 2004, p. 71). Negative feedback like this also raises pragmatic concerns about losing audience members and advertisers (Emmett, 2010; DeGhett, 2014; O’Brien, 1993).

Scholars and journalists alike have critiqued U.S. news publications for accommodating audiences and advertisers at the expense of upholding their journalistic duty to inform the public about war. Communication research has shown a clear trend in U.S. news coverage of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan of publishing more photos of soldiers and benign military action than pictures of casualties and destruction (Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Griffin, 2004; Keith & Schwalbe, 2010; Kennedy, 2008; King & Lester, 2005). *Washington Post* photo editor, Bonnie Jo Mount, lamented, “We’re in a culture that censors visuals very heavily. I think that sometimes works to our detriment because we don’t run visuals people need to see” (Emmett, 2010, p. 31). Taking that logic a step further, DeGhett (2014) argued, “Sometimes though, omitting an image means shielding the public from the messy, imprecise consequences of a war—making the coverage incomplete, and even deceptive” (para. 5). When editors fight to publish photos of conflict, their stance is usually framed in terms of the journalistic responsibility to show the public what war looks like. For example, analyzing conflict photos from Soweto, O’Brien (1993) wrote, “their importance lies not so much in the dramatic episode they
captured as in their insistence that we confront an ugly reality we might otherwise never see” (p. 69).

When editors declare that an image of conflict is something that people need to see, the implication is that what is depicted is a violation of socially accepted norms of warfare that demands recognition and potentially action. Such a suggestion teeters on the edge of objectivity and advocacy, which is also why pictures that humanize war are so controversial. “Notions of objectivity and balance,” Griffin (2010) contended, “are tested by the results of wartime reporting and image-making” (p. 7). One of the most fundamental professional norms of contemporary U.S. journalism is objectivity (Bennett, 1983). Yet, in times of war, exactly how to be objective is challenging both to conceptualize and to enact. First, journalists must decide whether their coverage should aim to unify the nation and support the government during wartime, or if it should scrutinize the government and the military to ensure accountability (Prochnau, 2005). On the one hand, the media have taken on the role of reassuring the public in times of crisis (Gans, 1979) and relaying official information from the government to the public (Bennett, 1983). The press is expected to act as a watchdog, whereby journalists monitor the government to ensure that officials are carrying out their duties correctly and report any transgressions to the public (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). In times of war, it is difficult to fulfill both roles at the same time, and neither role falls neatly in line with being objective (Prochnau, 2005).

Some photojournalists have dealt with this tension by eschewing the notion of objectivity in favor of advocacy, and have come to define their work as a mission to raise awareness about injustices caused by conflict. For example, two of the most celebrated
photojournalists in the profession have rejected the idea of objectivity, and they have explicitly stated their work is about social justice and ending war. James Nachtwey (2001) made it clear in his credo, published in conjunction with the film *War Photographer*, that the motivation for his work is to try to stop the wars he covers:

> But everyone cannot be there, and that is why photographers go there—to show them, to reach out and grab them and make them stop what they are doing and pay attention to what is going on—to create pictures powerful enough to overcome the diluting effects of the mass media and shake people out of their indifference—to protest and by the strength of that protest to make others protest.

Similarly, W. Eugene Smith declared, in the opening of his book *Minamata*, “The first word I would remove from the folklore of journalism is the word ‘objective’” (Smith & Smith, 1975, p. 7). These two photojournalists made it public that they allowed their personal beliefs about war and social issues to drive their coverage instead of attempting to remain objective. Nachtwey and Smith are like many other contemporary photographers who define their work as social documentary photography that aims to illuminate social injustices with the eventual goal of inspiring audiences to take action. Or, as Ritchin (2013) put it, “Many working in what is now called visual journalism have long had as their mandate the rousing to consciousness of a distracted people and a sometimes oblivious government” (p. 29). Whether photographers and photo editors embrace objectivity or advocacy, the question of how effective images of war are at piquing concern and action is crucial to answer.

**The Process and Meaning of War Photography**

To understand how media consumers react to photojournalism of conflict, it is necessary to first recognize how photographic meaning is constructed in general. The message that a viewer takes away from a particular photograph is the result of a number
of interacting factors, including the photographer’s perspective, the context of the photo’s creation, the interaction between the photographer and the subject, and the individuality of the viewer (Mendelson, 2008). As mentioned above, one key distinction that can affect a war photograph is the photographer’s philosophical outlook on conflict photojournalism. If he or she, like Nachtwey and Smith, approaches his or her work as a way to generate anti-war sentiment, it is likely that the resulting images will highlight the ravages of armed conflict. On the other hand, if a photographer esteems the news value of objectivity, she or he may be more prone to produce frames that focus on military and political action.

The context of how the photographer operates in the field also interacts with his or her personal views, particularly when in a war zone. In the recent U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, photojournalists have gained access to military action primarily through the process of embedding with U.S. military units, as opposed to moving around independently (Prochnau, 2005). This approach has provided a relatively safe way to generate visual news coverage, unlike covering the conflicts in Libya and Syria, but it has also constrained the types of images that are produced. The content of the pictures has been limited by what photographers encounter as part of the military operations of their assigned units, which has reduced opportunities to photograph Afghans and Iraqis. Although there has been some overt military censorship of pictures, the embedding process has led to self-censorship by photographers and editors who have sought to ensure continued access to the embedding program (DeGhett, 2014; Griffin, 2010; Ritchin, 2013). The process of embedding, where journalists live closely with soldiers and depend on the unit for their safety, has also left photojournalists vulnerable to
identifying too closely with the military unit, making impartiality toward the war a challenge (DeGhett, 2014).

Apart from the specific context of the battlefield, news photographers and photo editors are influenced by the journalistic norms, news values, and routines that have come to shape the profession. Journalists draw on news values and norms to determine the content of news coverage and to structure the presentation of stories. Each day, editors and journalists are confronted with numerous options of events to report on, and they “cannot decide anew every day or week how to select the fraction that will appear on the news; instead they must routinize their task in order to make it manageable” (Gans, 1999, p. 235). Therefore, journalists have developed norms and news values that enable them to prioritize an otherwise overwhelming volume of potential stories and to guide difficult editing decisions. These norms of the profession are rarely articulated explicitly; instead, they are passed on to journalists through a process where certain practices are reinforced by each other and by editors. In this manner, news professionalism socializes journalists to internalize certain values associated with these norms (Soloski, 1999). Using news norms and practices to direct their story selections leads journalists and editors to promote stories that privilege certain values over others (Bird & Dardenne, 1988; Gans, 1999). This same professionalization process leads photojournalists to adopt news norms and values that shape visual content (Hagaman, 1996; Rosenblum, 1978). Therefore, the ongoing trend of news publications privileging images of military action over those of human loss creates a norm where photographers know these are the images that will be published, and where editors realize these pictures do not typically generate controversy.
Another factor that contributes to the visual meaning of a photograph is the interaction between the photographer and the subject (Mendelson, 2008). As mentioned, photographers who are embedded may come to develop personal relationships with the members of their military unit, and these relationships are likely to result in more humanized depictions of the soldiers compared to less personal photos of Afghans or Iraqis. On the other hand, photographers who take an advocacy or anti-war approach that focuses on civilians caught up in war face another challenge. The intentions of such photographers may be noble, but there can be unforeseen consequences for the subjects of such pictures in an age of digital publishing (Ritchin, 2013). Although some scholars have argued that the subjects of photos are not simply passive, and they can present themselves in a manner that asserts the way they want to be represented (Azoulay, 2008; Hagaman, 1996), generally, people caught up in conflict are often not in a position to articulate their preferences or anticipate the repercussions of being photographed (Bleiker, 2007; Moeller 1999; Sischy, 1991; Sontag 2003; Szorenzy, 2006).

Therefore an ethical consideration photographers and photo editors must wrestle with is the imbalance of power between the photographer and the subject who is in the midst of war. Hall (1997) called attention to the importance of examining the power relations involved in the taking of any photograph, asserting that power “always operates in conditions of unequal relations” (p. 261). This imbalance of power, that is usually in the photographer’s favor, led Sontag (1973) to declare “There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera” (p. 7). Sontag’s criticism of image making is broad, while other scholars have voiced more specific concerns about the manner in which the photographer
and subject interact. Pryluck (1988) argued that even when photographers attempt to respect privacy by obtaining informed consent, the process is laden with coercive power.

Whereas the photographer deals directly with the subject, once the picture is taken and published, the process of photographic meaning shifts to the interaction of the viewer with the picture (Mendelson, 2008). Every media consumer brings her or his own life experiences and worldviews to the process of interpreting a photograph. These individual differences, created by personality and culture, shape the way an image is understood from one person to another. Also, although there may be a dominant message in a photograph, “words and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control” (Hall, 1997, p. 270) and people do not uncritically accept embedded ideologies. People have the ability to see different types of meaning in photographs. As Barthes (1980) asserted, “All images are polysemous: they imply, underlying their signifiers, a floating chain of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others.” (p. 274) Yet, polysemy is not without its limits. Condit (1989) cautioned against an overemphasis on the flexibility of messages, arguing “the claim perhaps needs to be scaled back to indicate that responses and interpretations are generally polyvalent, and texts themselves are occasionally or partially polysemic” (p. 107). So while viewers have the ability to interpret images according to their worldviews, there are certain meanings embedded in those pictures as a result of photographers’ and editors’ choices.

The messages in a photograph can be challenging for viewers to consciously perceive without making a concerted effort to decode them, because people often assume pictures are merely a straightforward depiction of a subject or an event. As Sekula (1984) observed, “the photograph is seen as a re-presentation of nature itself, as an unmediated
copy of the real world” (p. 5). Perhaps more famously, Barthes (1981) posited, “It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself” (p. 5). The tendency for people to take an image at face value as being a truthful reproduction of something is not surprising. After all, photographs have been used in various contexts to “furnish evidence” that something existed or provide “incontrovertible proof” that something occurred (Sontag, 1973, p. 5). Or as Barthes (1981) suggested, “The Photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents” (p. 85). The widespread belief of this sentiment is captured in the existence of the popular saying “a picture never lies.” This emphasis on the denotative function of images has been reinforced by journalism practice, which has capitalized on photography’s assumed transparency and has historically suppressed the connotative role of photojournalism (Ritchin, 2013; Zelizer, 1995).

Scholars of visual communication, however, have demonstrated that photographs are not a neutral form of documentation but are laden with socially constructed meaning. For example, Hall (1973) asserted that news photos carry ideological messages but that the messages are difficult to detect. Specifically addressing photojournalism, he wrote, “By appearing literally to reproduce the event as it really happened, news photos suppress their selective/interpretive/ideological function” (p. 188, italics in original). Echoing this sentiment, Worth (1981) claimed, “Pictures are a way we structure the world around us. They are not a picture of it” (p. 182). In other words, the camera does not record a disinterested rendering of the objects before it, rather it captures the objects before it that the photographer has decided to document in a particular way for a specific purpose. As Mendelson (2008) noted, “photographs are complex and highly constructed
products, influenced in their conception and perception by a host of interacting variables” (p. 34).

One powerful way that meaning is constructed in photographs is through the process of visual framing, which occurs through the photographer’s choices about content and composition, and through the editor’s selection of images and layout. Referring to news texts in general, Entman (1993) argued that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52). This definition stresses that framing the news occurs when journalists emphasize certain elements of story over others. Although many people have learned to be critical readers of written texts, understanding that an author writes an account that reflects his or her perspective, that same approach is often neglected when viewing images. Messaris and Abraham (2001) argued that, just as written narratives employ framing devices that privilege certain information, photos use visual frames to do the same. They contended that visual frames are subtler than written frames, and they often operate undetected by viewers because of the assumed transparency of images. That makes visual framing a powerful tool for conveying messages about social issues, or myths. Therefore, the ways images of war are framed imbue them with particular ideological meanings.

**Visual Frames of War Photography**

The way photos of war are framed visually suggests how viewers might interpret the conflict being depicted. Many U.S. news outlets have shied away from publishing images with a visual frame that shows the human cost of war in their coverage of recent U.S. conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Griffin and Lee (1995) conducted a content analysis of photographic coverage of the Gulf War in Iraq for which they developed a
coding strategy using 36 categories that recorded the content, style, genre and context of the sample photographs. Their research showed that largest category of images published in U.S. newsmagazines was, what they labeled, *cataloguing the arsenal*. These photos highlighted the strength of the U.S. military by showcasing the quantity and technology of the armaments. The second largest category comprised pictures that focused on U.S. troops preparing for war but engaged in non-combat activities. Importantly, they also found that there were “very few images of casualties or human suffering due to the war” (p. 821). Therefore, the majority of the published photos glamorized conflict, and Griffin and Lee (1995) concluded, “the photographic portrayal of the war seems to promote American military and technological superiority as a central theme” (p. 821).

In a follow-up study, Griffin (2004) conducted a content analysis comparing photos in U.S. newsmagazines from the Gulf War and the current U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he found the same pattern. The top two categories were again cataloguing the arsenal and U.S. troops preparing for war, and pictures of destroyed infrastructure and casualties (both U.S. and Iraqi) were largely absent. Griffin (2004) found that there was an increase in images that showed U.S. soldiers engaged in combat. However, those pictures tended to glamorize war, rather than humanize it. He summarized that, compared to the Gulf War coverage, “the dominant visual discourse remained the same: we saw an overwhelming and unstoppable American military machine relentlessly roll across Iraq to Baghdad” (p. 397). King and Lester (2005) used a content analysis to compare the coverage of the Gulf War to the 2003 Iraq War in *The New York Times, Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times*, which produced similar
results. Their analysis revealed that there was only a marginal increase in the proportion of photographs of combat published during the Gulf War compared to the 2003 Iraq War.

Schwalbe (2006) and Schwalbe, Silcock, and Keith (2008) found that the same trend in visual coverage of the recent Iraq War extends to U.S. news websites and television broadcasts. Both of these studies found that, although the themes of photographic coverage of the war shifted from week to week and occasionally focused on elements that humanized the conflict, the overall narrative was one that glorified the U.S. military. Schwalbe (2006) concluded that “The images reinforced the patriotic, government-friendly master war narrative—U.S. military might, efficient troops with technologically superior weapons, heroic rescue, victory and control” (p. 283). Again, pictures of the trauma of war and human loss were conspicuously absent. In another content analysis, Fahmy and Kim (2008) found that, compared to the trend uncovered in other studies, The New York Times published a greater number of images of the collateral damage of the Iraq War, However, they observed that the majority of those pictures focused on destroyed property as opposed to death or injury. Additionally, when the newspaper did run photos of Iraqis it was in the context of positive interactions with U.S. troops.

All these scholars argued that the main themes in U.S. photojournalistic coverage reinforced the U.S. government’s agenda in the wars depicted and served to promote the U.S. military’s positions to the public. For example, commenting on the 2003 Iraq War, Lester and King (2005) observed, “Looking at the content of the images reveals the unmistakable fact that the military received the type of coverage it hoped for when it installed the embedding program” (p. 634). Griffin (2004) asserted that this type of
coverage goes against the expectation that the contemporary press would publish visual content that would convey the full scope of war. He declared that “the myth of the photograph revealing human suffering, opening the viewer’s eyes to the conditions of the downtrodden, and provoking movements for social reform” was nowhere to be found in the images of recent wars in U.S. media (p. 400).

Lester and King (2005) and Griffin (2004, 2010) all connected the lack of published pictures of the human cost of war and the dominance of pictures celebrating the military to the tensions in journalistic norms and values. Analyzing U.S. war photography, Griffin (2010) contended that “professionalized practices and competing news values inevitably shape and limit the perspectives and images that make it into news publications and programs, regardless of the intentions and personal experiences of individual image makers” (p. 35). Griffin (2010) pointed out that the process of embedding also limited the type of access photojournalists had to document the human cost of war and subjected coverage to potential military censorship. Yet Griffin (2010) and Lester and King (2005) were quick to point out that although there were fewer official restrictions on photojournalists in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than during the Gulf War, the pattern of visual coverage remained the same. Therefore, it seems that self-censorship on the part of photographers and photo editors, as the result of embedding culture, is the primary factor in determining whether or not human cost of war photos are published.

Photographers and photo editors appear to share the concern that U.S. visual depictions of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have served to bolster the U.S. government’s agenda. Vincent Laforet, a contract photographer for The New York Times,
reflected on his wartime coverage: “My main concern was that I was producing images that were glorifying the war too much…I was afraid I was being drawn into a public relations essay” (Kennedy, 2008, p. 284). Similarly, Stella Kramer commented on special editions of the Gulf War she edited for *Life*: “We were very sanitized…So, that’s why these issues are all basically just propaganda” (DeGhett, 2014, para. 42). Inherent in the logic of the criticisms from both scholars and journalists is the notion that photographs that glorify the military versus pictures of the human cost of war will produce different responses in audience members. Journalists regularly make this assertion, often pointing to photos from the Vietnam War as having a pivotal effect on the end of the conflict (Emmett, 2010; O’Brien, 1993). Research has demonstrated that these claims about Vietnam are anecdotal (Perlmutter, 1998), and scholars are divided on the potential of images of the human cost of war to influence attitudes, emotions, and behavioral responses (Aday, 2010; Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002; Gartner, 2011).

**Impact of War Photojournalism**

The polysemic nature of images makes interpreting audience responses to photojournalism challenging in general. When an emotionally, morally, and politically charged topic like war is added to the mix, it becomes even more complex. Anecdotally, photojournalism has long been valued for having the power to move people emotionally on behalf of those in dire circumstances. It can be argued that documentary photography itself “operates on the presumption that images not only can elicit a response in an audience, but ideally, might induce viewers to take some action to remedy any suffering or hardship they depict” (Johnson, 2011, p. 635). Kennedy (2012) was more specific about the emotional response when he argued, “Western photojournalism has been
significantly shaped by the idealisation of a culture of humanity, and in particular, the promotion of compassion as a commensurate response to the suffering of distant others” (p. 306). Yet scholars from various disciplines have theorized that the relationship between images of war, empathetic responses, and action is complicated by a number of factors.

The theories above summarize why people may not be moved after looking at an image of the suffering of others in wartime. At the same time, scholars have observed that some people do respond empathetically, but their emotional responses fail to lead to any sort of political, charitable, or information seeking action. The phenomenon of why people do not react to news reports of disturbing events, such as international conflict, has come to be known as compassion fatigue (Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001). Scholars who study compassion fatigue have lamented that high levels of audience engagement with news of war seems to be an exception, most audiences tune out after only limited exposure (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Höijer, 2004; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001).

Common to most analyses of compassion fatigue is the assertion that, in instances when concern for others is evoked in audiences, it is due in large part to the photographic elements of the news. For example, Chouliaraki (1999) contended, “The impact of any news text is almost always a function of its visual referent” (p. 161). Moeller (1999) connected the imagery even more directly with emotion when she posited, “What reverberates in our memory is our empathetic response to the visual stimulus” (p. 39). Other scholars have theorized that there is a direct link between the visuals in a news story and the affective reactions of the audience (Slovic, 2007). Additionally, research
has demonstrated that when people recall news coverage of international conflict their memories revolve around specific images and they directly relate their expressions of compassion to those visuals (Höijer, 2004). Hence, the meaning, and thus impact of war photos is shaped by the interplay of aspects of images, such as content and composition, and individual factors that have influenced the perspective of the viewer.

While photos that put a human face to conflict are thought to be particularly suited to stirring compassionate responses, the context in which they are presented may dampen this effect. When the flow of images of grief becomes too constant and too overwhelming people’s emotional responses seem to shut down (Moeller, 1999). The format of most media coverage has been criticized as too superficial, formulaic and American-centric to foster enough concern from audiences (Moeller, 1999; Zelizer, 2010). Such reporting may lead people to feel as though there are too many crises at once to comprehend, that problems abroad are too entrenched to be fixed and that international issues are too removed from their lives (Moeller, 1999). Graphic photos of conflict may be particularly culpable: “Threatening and painful images cause people to turn away, and since the media prioritize bad-news images, this tendency may partially account for America’s compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999, p. 35). U.S. media outlets have also been criticized for presenting visuals of war without enough contextual details or information about what audience members might be able to do in response (Sontag, 2003; Zelizer, 2010). The result is that “without a politically mobilizing news media, witnesses are left to ‘feel’ with little to no direction for how to act” (Rentschler, 2004, p. 300).

Without a sense of being able to effect meaningful change after looking at images of human suffering, viewers may be left with a sense of paralyzing helplessness (Sontag,
2003; Berger, 1980). This may be linked to the fact that the viewer of a picture observes a moment in the past, and while that moment is accessible as an image, in reality it no longer exists (Barthes, 1981). Therefore, people are unable to respond directly to the specific horrific act they see in a photo, instead they can only respond to the depicted war as an abstraction, and once conflict is abstracted in this manner it is essentially removed from the realm of political action (Sontag, 2003). Berger (1980) described this process, arguing, “the issue of war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticised. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody” (p. 40). When people are confronted with pictures of human agony and are moved emotionally, they have no recourse to action, which leaves viewers with the option of taking some minimal charitable action, but not effective political action, or being overcome by feelings of helplessness (Berger, 1980). This state was more recently described as empty empathy, where audience members are moved to feel concern for those depicted in images of catastrophe, but their perceived lack of solutions drives them to hopelessness and, ultimately, disengagement with the issue (Kaplan, 2008).

Again, while the content, visual framing, and context of presentation shape the impact of an image of war, individuals react differently based on their own interpretations and worldviews. Therefore, some people do react to photographs of people in pain by engaging in what some scholars have identified as witnessing. The process of witnessing has been conceptualized as key to addressing dire social issues, whereby “witnessing at the highest level involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common” (Kaplan, 2008, p. 20). The concept, in this sense, involves both attitudinal shifts and action in response to viewing mediated human suffering, and it
works by “prompting an ethical response that will perhaps radically change the way someone views the world, or thinks about justice” (Kaplan, 2008, p. 21). Witnessing has also been described as an active affective response, or a “form of participation, through mass mediation, in others’ suffering” (Rentschler, 2004, p. 297). Affective reactions to visuals of suffering are key to this response, as it is thought that when viewers engage with visual depictions of the pain of others “that might lead to the development of empathy, and that might open the door to more radical democratic engagements and movements in the future” (Landsberg, 2009, p. 228). For some scholars, witnessing is not a voluntary reaction to photographs of atrocity; it is an imperative, where everyone is bound by a civil contract to react on behalf of others whose pain has been photographed (Azoulay, 2008) and photos of war and torture “are ethical commands; they call us to an ethical response to human suffering” (Green, Mann & Story, 2006, p. 178).

**Empirical Studies on Emotional and Attitudinal Responses to War Photos**

With these theories about the impact of war photojournalism in mind, this review now examines the empirical work that has investigated how visuals of war influence people’s attitudes and emotions. Domke et al. (2002) looked at whether people’s political attitudes and information processing differed in response to news content about the Vietnam War when an iconic image accompanied the text. They discovered that when 155 undergraduates in the U.S. read a news story about the Vietnam War, the inclusion of John Filo’s famous photo of a student mourning over the body of a protestors shot by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University did not elicit attitudes in support of the protestors. On the contrary, the image produced more support from participants for the government perspective than did the condition where participants read the article alone.
Domke et al. (2002) claimed this lack of support was evidence that dramatic images do not have universal persuasive power over audiences, that people process visual imagery in complex ways that interact with deeply held values, and that the influence of photographs is limited. One major limitation of the study is that researchers showed an iconic image from a protest of the Vietnam War to students who, in the year 2000, had no direct connection to the conflict. Participants’ responses may have been different if they had been shown images of a more recent conflict that would register as news instead of as history. This study focused on participants’ cognitive judgments about an issue in response to an image, but did not address the affective responses that might interact or function as pathways to image evaluations.

Similar to the Domke et al. (2002) study, two experiments by Pfau et al. (2006, 2008) tested how the presence or absence of photographs influenced U.S. participants’ attitudes about conflict. However, these two studies also examined emotional responses in conjunction with attitudinal responses to photographs of war. Taken together, the studies demonstrated that photographs are more effective at eliciting emotion than text alone and that certain visual frames elicit specific emotions more reliably than others (Pfau et al., 2006, 2008). Pfau et al. (2006) showed 181 U.S. undergraduates either a story from the Iraq War with a photo, just a story, or just a photo. There were two variations of the stories and photos, with one version focusing on U.S. military casualties (a photo of a soldier saluting rows of flag-covered coffins) or on Iraqi casualties (a photo of four, bloody Iraqi insurgents). They found that participants who viewed only captioned photos of war experienced greater levels of the negative emotions of puzzlement, anger, and sadness than participants that viewed the photos and text or that
read text alone. The increase in negative emotions correlated with a tendency for participants who viewed the images and captions to express decreased support for war. Building on that study, Pfau et al. (2008) presented 200 undergraduate participants with a television news report about combat operations in Iraq. Some participants viewed only an anchor reading the report, while other participants saw visual footage of the war in addition to the anchor. Pfau et al. (2008) discovered that participants who saw the images of war expressed less support for the war and greater issue involvement. In terms of emotions, participants who viewed the images experienced reduced levels of pride but no significant changes in anger, fear, or sadness.

Iyer and Oldmeadow (2006) investigated whether participants had different attitudinal and emotional responses when news content was presented with or without photography. Their study did not focus precisely on coverage of war but on terrorism, which have arguably become synonymous in a post-9/11 world (Lockman, 2005). Iyer and Oldmeadow (2006) presented 60 British students with a story about a British kidnapping victim, and they also showed half the participants five photographs of the victim. The study found that the photograph condition evoked greater fear responses in participants, compared to the text only condition. The increase in fear response correlated with participants’ likelihood to express support for negotiations to release the victim despite political consequences. Building on this work, Iyer, Webster, Hornsey, and Vanman (2014) tested whether showing different types of photographs of the 2005 London bombings to 235 British adults would lead to variations in participants’ emotions and attitudes toward terrorism. They found that participants who were shown photographs of the victims of terrorist attacks experienced greater levels of sympathy.
than participants who were shown pictures of the accused terrorists. Conversely, participants in the terrorist photo condition experienced higher levels of anger and fear than those in the victim photo condition. Iyer et al. (2014) found that participants who experienced high levels of sympathy were more likely to endorse government policies aimed at helping victims of terrorism, those that felt more anger supported aggressive counterterrorism measures, and those who were more fearful favored terrorist negotiation policies.

Fahmy, Wanta, and Song (2006) looked at the way visual coverage of terrorism influenced the attitudes and emotions of 345 U.S. adults who took part in a phone survey. They discovered that U.S. participants’ emotional reactions to the visual images from the 9/11 attacks influenced how well they were able to recall photos of the event. More specifically, if people experienced sorrow, shock, or worry in relation to 9/11, they were more likely to remember larger numbers of specific visual images from media coverage of the terrorist attacks. The emotions of sorrow, shock, and anger also affected whether people were able to recall the specific emotional images of corpses, people jumping from buildings, and the plane crashing into the World Trade Center. A path analysis revealed that people who recalled more images and reacted with high levels of emotion expressed greater concern about terrorism than people who had low image recall and experienced lower levels of emotional responses. Therefore, Fahmy et al. (2006) concluded that, when people have strong emotional responses to traumatic visuals, it influences their ability to recall photographs and their attitudes about terrorism.

Aday (2010) looked at how U.S. adults’ foreign policy attitudes toward the Iraq War and their emotional responses differed based on their political ideology and whether
they viewed casualty photos of dead U.S. soldiers, battle photos of U.S. soldiers in action, or no images. In terms of foreign policy attitudes, Aday discovered that, across conditions, there was no main effect of the visual condition on foreign policy attitudes; neither viewing casualty photos nor battle photos made a statistically significant difference on U.S. participants’ support of the Iraq War or acceptance of internationalist foreign policy approaches. Within conditions, Aday found significant differences in the attitudes of liberals and conservatives; liberals were more opposed to the war and more in favor of internationalist approaches than were conservatives. Yet comparing ideological groups between conditions, Aday found that conservatives who viewed the casualty photos were significantly less likely to support the war and were more favorable of internationalist approaches than conservatives who viewed the battle photos. Therefore, the effects of the casualty photos on foreign policy attitudes were limited to conservatives.

Examining emotional responses to the visual conditions, Aday (2010) found that participants who viewed the casualty photos experienced significantly higher levels of feeling angry, disgusted, upset, and distressed than participants who viewed the battle photos. The emotional states of pride and enthusiasm were also tested; however, photographic condition did not lead to any significant differences in participants’ levels of these emotions across conditions. Yet, across conditions, overall scores of feeling angry, disgusted, upset, and distressed were higher for participants who identified as political liberals than for those who identified as conservatives. This observation, combined with the findings on visual conditions’ limited effect on foreign policy attitudes, led Aday to argue that “political ideology matters more than media coverage in
explaining foreign policy beliefs, but media portrayals might have an indirect effect when they evoke certain affective responses” (p. 455).

In contrast, Gartner (2011) contended that certain types of casualty images do have a direct effect on people’s attitudes about supporting war, and partisanship moderates that influence. Gartner (2011) theorized that one reason for Aday’s (2010) results, and inconsistent findings in other experiments about the potential of war photographs to influence attitudes about foreign policy, was that the studies did not account for differences in the level of what he called conventionalization in the stimulus photos. In a series of seven experiments, with a combined total of 1,769 participants, he examined how both the content and level of conventionalization of war photos influenced participants’ attitudinal responses about the wars depicted. Like Aday (2010), Gartner (2011) created visual conditions where participants were shown either a casualty photo (labeled as a loss image), a battle photo (labeled as a militarism image), or no photo. However, Gartner (2011) created two categories of loss images: conventionalized or unconventionalized. He defined conventionalized loss images as ones “that employ readily available narrative components, gestures, compositional devices, and symbols” (p. 548). He pointed to pictures from military funerals, such as flag-draped coffins or mourning relatives being presented with a U.S. flag, as examples of conventionalized loss images. Unconventionalized loss images were defined as ones that are more polysemic and lack clear visual cues about the story of loss being depicted, such as dead soldiers on the battlefield.

Incorporating Aday’s (2010) findings, Gartner (2011) identified political leaning as another potentially significant factor in how visual images are processed by
individuals. However, in Gartner’s (2011) study, partisanship (Republican vs. Democrat) was used as opposed to political ideology (conservative vs. liberal). Examining the effects of visual condition and format and partisanship on support for the Iraq War, the Afghanistan War, and a hypothetical war in Tonga, Gartner (2011) found that conventionalized loss photos and partisanship independently influenced participants’ level of support for war. Specifically, only the conventionalized images of loss produced statistically significant levels of opposition to the Iraq war and reduced support for both the Afghanistan War and the hypothetical war in Tonga. Similar to Aday’s (2010) study, Gartner’s (2011) experiment revealed a significant interaction between the visual frame and partisanship, where participants who identified as Republican were more likely to support war (regardless of the specific conflict) than Democrats. The more participants held Republican beliefs, the less effect the conventionalized loss images had on their support of war. Therefore, although Gartner (2011) concluded, “conventionalized images of death have consistent and substantial effects on individual’s likelihood of opposing military action” (p. 557), he qualified the effect, observing that “partisanship consistently limits the influence of viewing conventionalized loss images” (p. 557).

The studies by Aday (2010) and Gartner (2011) are particularly relevant to this dissertation, because they both test the effects of a human-cost-of-war visual frame against variations of militarism frames. However, they did not look specifically at how such visuals influenced empathetic responses in participants. Studies by Brantner et al. (2011) and Höijer (2004) did specifically examine the relationship between images of war and empathy.
Brantner et al. (2011) investigated how variations in visual framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict influenced 248 Austrian undergraduates’ emotions and their evaluations of journalistic credibility and objectivity of the stimulus stories. In one visual condition, participants saw a political frame, comprised of photos of Israeli leaders, and in another visual condition, participants saw a human-interest frame made up of two photos of Palestinian victims. Brantner et al. (2011) discovered that participants who looked at news content with photos that employed the human-interest frame experienced a significantly higher level of feeling disturbed, but no greater amount of empathy than participants who viewed photos with a political frame. One potential reason that the human-interest frame did not produce significant differences in terms of empathy is that the visual frames were conflated with the political sides of the conflict. Only Palestinians were shown in the human-interest frame pictures, while Israelis were depicted in the political frame. Therefore, it is not possible to parse whether participants’ empathetic responses were in response to the visual frame, political leaning, or both. Additionally, responses may have been different if the participants were Israeli or Palestinian.

Höijer (2004) examined Swedish participants’ memories and responses to the news coverage of the Kosovo war to see how they connected to visual images. As mentioned above, Höijer (2004) discovered “the compassion that the audience expresses is often directly related to the documentary pictures they have seen” (p. 520). Höijer concluded from interviews and focus groups that people experienced varying types of compassionate responses. Interestingly, she observed that, while some people felt emotions that solely focused on sympathizing with the victims of war, many people experienced more ambiguous types of compassion that were mixed with feelings of
shame, guilt, or powerlessness. In Höijer’s (2004) discussion of her study, she advocated for additional audience research on the effects of war photos, asserting, “we need to ask about and study how people as audience react to and interpret documentary media reporting on violence and human suffering” (p. 528).

The Current Study

Building on the above scholarship, a pilot study to this dissertation was performed to investigate whether a human-cost-of-war frame versus a militarism frame of images from the conflict in Syria would evoke greater amounts of empathy and prosocial behavior (in terms of seeking further information about the topic). In the experimental study, 132 student participants read a story about the conflict in Syria and viewed a series of five related images. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: one militarism visual frame and three variations of a human-cost-of-war visual frame. The militarism frame included images that highlighted weapons and artillery and photos of soldiers in battle, while the human-cost-of-war frame included pictures of dead and injured soldiers and civilians, refugees, destroyed property and people mourning (Gartner, 2011; Griffin, 2004). Participants then filled out an empathy scale and demographic information. The analysis revealed that the visual frame had significant effects on the level of empathy participants experienced and whether participants chose to view additional information. Participants who viewed images with the various human-cost-of-war visual frames reported higher levels of empathy and were more likely to seek out additional information about the conflict than participants who viewed images with a militarism frame.
Continuing with that work, the overarching research question to be investigated in this project is the following: How do visual frames in photojournalism of war affect media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses? Both the experimental and focus group portions of the dissertation will address specific hypotheses and questions that stem from this main inquiry. Considered together, the literature reviewed above leads to the following research questions about how media consumers respond to and seek out visuals of war:

RQ1: How do participants make sense of war in general and the emotions it provokes?

RQ2: Do images of conflict evoke concern for the people depicted, or do they overwhelm participants, or both? How do participants resolve ambivalent reactions?

RQ3: Is the emotional experience of viewing images with a human-cost-of-war frame different than viewing images with a militarism frame? If so, how and why?

RQ4: What thoughts and feelings cause participants to engage with or turn away from war photos? How do those cognitions and emotions connect with intentions to seek out additional information about the conflict?

**Psychological Theories: Empathy, Compassion, Distress, and Prosocial Behavior**

There are numerous theories about the ability of images of the human cost of war to evoke empathy and inspire action. Questions about the way that audiences respond to images of conflict remain largely hypothetical. As mentioned above, only a limited number of studies have examined people’s attitudinal and emotional responses to pictures
of war, and even fewer have looked specifically at empathy (Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzsein, 2011; Domke et al., 2002; Pfau et al., 2006, Zillmann et al., 1999). To understand why people withdraw from disturbing news it is necessary to draw on work that incorporates psychological theory (Slovic, 2007). Therefore, it is useful to define and explicate some key psychological concepts about empathy.

Empathy is a complex psychosocial process, and as such, numerous definitions of the term have been employed in psychological theory and research. The discrepancies in various conceptualizations of empathy in the past have centered around disagreement on whether empathy is primarily an affective versus cognitive process (Decety & Jackson, 2006; Knafo, Zahn-Waxler, Hulle, Robinson, & Rhee, 2008; Preston & de Waal, 2002). The affective aspect of empathy is thought to occur automatically and elicits a shared emotional response to someone else’s feelings, whereas the cognitive aspect is considered to be a conscious ability to understand someone else’s situation and imagine their feelings (Chiao & Mathur, 2010). Current definitions of empathy have not converged; however, most acknowledge the interplay of the affective and cognitive components of empathy. One commonly used definition is Hoffman’s (1981), which proposes that empathy is a “vicarious affective response” (p. 128) that functions in concert with the cognitive appraisal of another’s circumstances. Recent work in neurobiology has demonstrated that separate neural networks modulating emotions and perspective taking are both activated during the process of empathizing (Decety & Jackson, 2006; Hein & Singer; 2008). This dissertation adopts Decety and Jackson’s (2006) definition of empathy: “the capacity to understand and respond to the unique affective experiences of another person” (p. 54). This capacity is the result of both affective and cognitive
processing. Empathy also can be considered a dispositional trait, which means that some people consistently experience higher levels of empathy than others (Knafo et al., 2008). This is where individual differences in terms of personality, culture, and worldviews come into play. At the same time, people also experience varying levels of situational empathy when they encounter people or representations of people in distress (Levy & Freitas, 2002). Therefore, although some people are predisposed to feel more empathy than others, most people generally experience empathy in relation to specific situations.

Agreement over the definition of empathy has also been complicated by the variety of ways empathy has been tied to the concepts of compassion, sympathy, and pity (Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas, 2010; Oveis, Horberg & Keltner, 2010; Wispé, 1986). These terms are closely related and have been used interchangeably in literature across various disciplines (Wispé, 1986). However, although empathy is typically tied to compassion, it is possible for one person to empathize with another’s happiness, relief, hope, or any other type of emotion. Hein and Singer (2008) asserted that empathy is distinct because “an affective state elicited by empathy is isomorphic with the other’s state, which is not the case for sympathy or compassion” (p. 154) Therefore, this dissertation considers empathy to be an affective and cognitive process that can lead the subject to take on a variety of emotional states in response to another’s circumstances, and considers compassion (similar to sympathy and pity) to be a discrete emotion. Oveis, Horberg, and Keltner (2010) defined compassion as “the concern for those who suffer or are vulnerable and the motivation to enhance the welfare of others” (p. 618). Similarly, Goetz et al. (2010) proposed that compassion is “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (p. 351). This
dissertation accepts these two comparable definitions to operationalize compassion as the feeling of concern and the related desire to help in response to another person’s suffering.

Drawing on these definitions of empathy and compassion and on theories mentioned above about the potential influence of different visual frames, this dissertation tests the following hypotheses:

H1: Images with a human-cost-of-war frame will evoke higher levels of empathic processing in participants than images with a militarism frame.

H2: Images with a human-cost-of-war frame will evoke higher levels of compassion in participants than images with a militarism frame.

The close relationship between the process of empathy and the activation of the emotion of compassion is key to theories about why people are motivated to engage in prosocial behavior in response to the suffering of others. It is theorized that when empathy causes feelings of compassion, people become predisposed to altruistic acts (Hoffman, 1981; Oveis, Horberg & Keltner, 2010). In the same way that empathetic disposition varies from person to person, motivation to engage in helping, or prosocial behavior, also differs between individuals. Psychologists have found that a variety of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional factors influence people’s likelihood to engage in prosocial behavior (Dovidio et al., 2006; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). However, research has repeatedly shown that when empathy arouses compassion in people they are significantly more likely to experience changed attitudes and engage in prosocial behavior (Batson, 2011; Batson et al., 1983; Batson et al., 1997; Dovidio et al., 2006).

Prosocial behavior in psychological studies has included stated intentions to help theoretical subjects, willingness to help experimenters in tasks following experiments,
and commitments to donating hypothetical and real money and volunteer time to assist theoretical subjects (Batson, 2011; Batson et al., 1983; Batson et al., 1997). In communication research, one way prosocial behavior has been operationalized is whether participants engaged in information seeking behavior after being exposed to reading material aimed at eliciting empathy and compassion (Oliver, Dillard, Bae, and Tamul, 2012). This dissertation adopts that operationalization of prosocial behavior as information seeking behavior.

Although witnessing the suffering of another can lead people to engage in empathic processing, feel compassion, and seek to help those in need, it can also provoke distress in people (Batson, 2011; Batson et al. 1983; Batson et al. 1997; Dovidio et al., 2006). As Batson (2011) explained, “This state does not involve feeling distressed for the other (a form of empathetic concern) or distressed as the other…It involves feeling distressed by the state of the other” (p. 19, italics in original). Here, the emotion is one that is not other-oriented but instead is focused inward in response to what has been seen. When the dominant emotional response to witnessing others’ suffering is personal distress, people are most likely to react in whatever way most easily minimizes their distress (Batson et al., 1983). If that easier path is to engage in prosocial behavior, distress may in fact lead to some sort of helping action. Yet most of the time, the easiest way to alleviate distress is to distance oneself from the disturbing stimulus. In terms of measurement, personal distress has been difficult to distinguish from other-oriented distress that is actually similar to compassion (Batson et al., 1997; Carrera et al., 2013; Lin & McFatter, 2012). Therefore, this dissertation follows studies that have employed measures to differentiate between whether participants feel personally distressed by
stimulus material versus distressed on behalf of someone else (Batson et al., 1997; Decety, 2011). Hence, in the context of this dissertation, personal distress is theorized to lead to the avoidance of information about conflict, whereas other-oriented distress (similar to compassion) is likely to lead to information seeking.

Accounting for the possibility that people may respond to images of war with different types of distress, this dissertation proposes the following hypotheses:

H3a: Images with a human-cost-of-war frame will evoke higher levels of personal distress (sadness, anger, fear, shame, and disgust) in participants than images with a militarism frame.

H3b: Images with a human-cost-of-war frame will evoke higher levels of other-oriented distress (sadness, anger, fear, shame, and disgust) in participants than images with a militarism frame.

Considering the above theories about the relationship of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress, this dissertation also examines the following hypotheses about the influence of visual frames and emotional responses on information seeking behavior:

H4: Participants who view images with a human-cost-of-war frame will be more likely to seek out additional information about the conflict depicted than participants who view images with a militarism frame.

H5: Higher levels of empathy will be associated with more information seeking.

H6: Higher levels of compassion will be associated with more information seeking.
H7a: Higher levels of other-oriented distress will be associated with more information seeking.

H7b: Higher levels of personal distress will be associated with less information seeking.

Allowing for the possibility that empathy, compassion, and other-oriented distress may mediate the influence of visual frames on information seeking behavior, this dissertation also investigates the following hypotheses:

H8: Empathic processing will serve as a mediator, such that the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking will increase as levels of empathic processing increase.

H9: As compassion increases, the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking will increase.

H10: As other-oriented distress increases, the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking will increase.

Two other theoretical aspects of empathy that are relevant to this dissertation are effects of gender and of ingroup membership on empathic processing. First, gender has been found to influence empathic responses to the suffering of others, with females experiencing higher levels of empathy than males in self-report scales across several studies (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Christov-Moore et al., 2014; Hoffman, 1977). There has been speculation that higher self-reported empathy in females is the result of socialization in cultures that stereotype women as being more empathic (Derntl et al., 2010). However, behavioral research with non-human mammals and infant and child populations has produced similar gender differences, indicating at least some of the
variation has a biological basis (Christov-Moore et al., 2014; Hoffman, 1977). After reviewing behavioral and self-report studies on empathy, Hoffman (1977) theorized that females and males engaged in slightly different forms of empathic processing. Recent neuro-imaging research has supported this concept, revealing that, in response to viewing others’ pain, females primarily engage regions of the brain associated with affective processing, whereas males mainly activate areas related to cognitive processing (Christov-Moore et al., 2014; Derntl et al., 2010; Schulte-Rüther, Markowitsch, Shah, Fink & Piefke, 2008). Therefore, although both females and males engage in empathic processing, females are more likely to experience the affective component and males the cognitive. Although this dissertation is not primarily aimed at investigating gender differences, it will take gender into account in evaluating the results of the studies to isolate the effects of the visual frames.

Group membership is another factor that influences levels of empathy in response to the pain of others. People tend to display more empathy when they are confronted with the suffering of someone perceived to be a member of the same ingroup as opposed to a member of an outgroup. This result has been found to apply to racial groups (Chiao & Mathur, 2010), social groups (Cheon et al., 2011), and hypothetical groups (Ruckman et al., 2015). Neuroimaging and biological response studies clarify that people experience heightened levels of empathic processing and affective responses when viewing images of ingroup members as opposed to a lack of empathic processing when looking at pictures of outgroup members (Brown, Bradley & Lang, 2006; Cheon et al., 2011). In other words, people do not necessarily fail to empathize with outgroup members, rather they more easily empathize with ingroup members. This finding extends to people’s
willingness to engage in empathy and compassion driven helping behavior. Altruistic acts toward ingroup members appear to be activated more often, regardless of evaluations of the subjects’ personal characteristics, whereas helping behavior directed toward outgroup members seems to be more dependent on positive evaluations of the subject (Hein, Silani, Preuschoff, Batson & Singer, 2010; Stürmer, Snyder & Omoto, 2005). Therefore, this dissertation examines whether ingroup membership along lines of nationality may influence empathic reactions and prosocial behavior. In this study, photos from Afghanistan were expected to arouse affective responses in American participants to a greater extent than photos from the Democratic Republic of Congo because of the United State’s involvement in the Afghanistan war. It was theorized that, as U.S. citizens, participants’ connection to the war paired with seeing photos that included U.S. soldiers may lead to ingroup identification.

Taking these theories about the influence of ingroup identification on empathic responses, this dissertation addresses the following hypotheses and research question:

H11a: Americans will be more likely to experience empathic processing when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

H11b: Americans will be more likely to experience compassion when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

H11c: Americans will be more likely to experience personal distress when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
H11d: Americans will be more likely to experience other-oriented distress when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

H12: Americans will seek a greater amount of additional information after viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan, compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

RQ5: Do participants’ levels of empathy and information seeking vary according to whether the conflict depicted is one where the U.S. military is directly involved?

The hypotheses and research questions proposed in this dissertation seek to address unanswered questions about the influence of war photographs on emotions and behavior. These questions relate directly to the journalism, visual communication, and psychology theories reviewed above. Recall that news organizations and visual journalists esteem images of the human cost of war, speaking of them with reverence and deeming many award-worthy. Yet, publishing such pictures raises a host of ethical issues related to audience reception. The visual communication scholarship summarized in this chapter about the construction of photographic meaning and the processes involved in war photography set the stage for this dissertation’s examination of the hypotheses and research questions. The concept of visual framing is of particular importance to this investigation. It must be reiterated that U.S. media publishes more images that depict the military action of war instead of the damage of war. Theories about how various types of war frames affect people have been proposed in the visual communication, art, journalism, and political science literature reviewed above. This dissertation aims to
engage with those theories while taking into account the results of a small body of related empirical studies on emotional and attitudinal responses to war photos. The psychological theories about empathy, compassion, distress, and prosocial behavior summarized above are also key to exploring the proposed hypotheses and research questions. The following chapter presents the experimental study and begins to answer some of these questions.
CHAPTER 3: EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

The first study in this dissertation employed a $2 \times 2$ between-subjects experimental design: ingroup identification (Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo) $\times$ visual frame (human cost of war and militarism) to tackle the overall question of how visual frames in war photojournalism affect media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses. The aim of this portion of the dissertation was to quantitatively test whether photos with a human-cost-of-war visual frame had significantly different effects on participants’ levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, other-oriented distress, and information seeking than pictures with a militarism visual frame. In order to make that assessment, this study investigated the specific hypotheses listed below.

Hypotheses

H1: Images with a human-cost-of-war frame will evoke higher levels of empathic processing in participants than images with a militarism frame.

H2: Images with a human-cost-of-war frame will evoke higher levels of compassion in participants than images with a militarism frame.

H3a: Images with a human-cost-of-war frame will evoke higher levels of personal distress (sadness, anger, fear, shame, and disgust) in participants than images with a militarism frame.

H3b: Images with a human-cost-of-war frame will evoke higher levels of other-oriented distress (sadness, anger, fear, shame, and disgust) in participants than images with a militarism frame.
H4: Participants who view images with a human-cost-of-war frame will be more likely to seek out additional information about the conflict depicted than participants who view images with a militarism frame.

H5: Higher levels of empathy will be associated with more information seeking.

H6: Higher levels of compassion will be associated with more information seeking.

H7a: Higher levels of other-oriented distress will be associated with more information seeking.

H7b: Higher levels of personal distress will be associated with less information seeking.

H8: Empathic processing will serve as a mediator, such that the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking will increase as levels of empathic processing increase.

H9: As compassion increases, the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking will increase.

H10: As other-oriented distress increases, the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking will increase.

H11a: Americans will be more likely to experience empathic processing when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

H11b: Americans will be more likely to experience compassion when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
H11c: Americans will be more likely to experience personal distress when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

H11d: Americans will be more likely to experience other-oriented distress when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

H12: Americans will seek a greater amount of additional information after viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan, compared to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Figure 1: Hypothesized Model
Method

Participants

The initial sample was comprised of 339 undergraduate students (115 males, 222 females, 2 unknown) from a large, urban university on the East Coast of the United States. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for the study, participants were recruited from strategic communication, journalism, media studies and production, advertising, psychology, and political science classes. They were offered extra credit in their classes in exchange for participation in the study and were treated in accordance with IRB procedures. Three participants started the study, but they did not reach the questions pertaining to the key measures in the experiment. Therefore, they were removed from the sample. The final sample consisted of 336 participants (222 females, 114 males). The participants ranged in age from 18 years to 54 years ($M = 21.3$, $Mdn = 20$). The majority of participants (89.9%) were American, whereas the remaining 10.1% of the sample listed other nationalities (Antiguan, British, Burkinabe, Chinese, Colombian, Georgian, German, Haitian, Iranian, Italian, Jamaican, Japanese, South Korean, Malaysian, Malian, Mexican, Nigerian, Polish, Russian, Saudi Arabian, Turkish, and Vietnamese). Participants identified as 65.2% White, 15.2% Black, 8.6% Asian, 5.6% mixed, 4.2% Hispanic, and 1.2% other.

Procedure

This study used a $2 \times 2$ between-subjects experimental design: ingroup identification (Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo) $\times$ visual frame (human cost of war and militarism). Participants were randomly assigned to read a news
story and view photos from one of the two conflicts, and they were shown photos with either a human-cost-of-war visual frame or a militarism visual frame.

Participants were told they were taking part in a study investigating audience engagement with online U.S. news about international events. Participants were provided with a link to an online survey (powered by Qualtrics), which they were able to take at their convenience, over the course of three weeks, from any computer. The survey was disabled on mobile devices to reduce the influence that screen size variation might have on the viewing experience. After reviewing an IRB-approved informational and consent form, participants recorded demographic information, including age, gender, and year in school. They also filled out measures of political ideology and news use. Participants then read, at their own pace, an article about the conflict being depicted and viewed a gallery of six related images, shown in random order, with captions. Next, participants answered questionnaires measuring their levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress. Participants then viewed a message informing them that they had finished the experiment, but they were given the option to view links to six different articles with additional information about the conflict depicted. The number of articles viewed by each participant was recorded as a measure of information seeking. Finally, a message was displayed thanking participants for their help and informing them of on-campus counseling resources available to anyone who felt disturbed by the content of the survey.

Stimulus Materials

**Stimulus news articles.** The stimulus articles that participants read were composites of news stories from *The New York Times, Stars and Stripes*, Associated
Press, and Reuters. The stimulus articles were modified from actual news stories in order to replicate as closely as possible the actual experience of reading U.S. online news. The articles were approximately 300 words in length, with seven paragraphs in each news story. Both stories were presented as coming from *The New York Times* on February 5, 2015. The text in each of the articles was exactly the same, except that the names of people, places, and groups were specific to each of the conflicts. The stories followed a typical inverted pyramid style, where details of a specific incident in the conflicts were given, followed by more general background information about the conflicts. The last paragraph in each article made note of the large numbers of human casualties in each of the conflicts. The stimulus articles are presented in Appendix 1.

**Stimulus news photos.** Photos of the conflicts in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo were selected from Associated Press Images. Thirteen photos for the human-cost-of-war visual frame and ten photos for the militarism visual frame were selected, with a total of 23 pictures for each conflict. Images were chosen for each conflict that paralleled the other in terms of the type of action depicted, level of graphicness, and amount of emotion depicted. Care was taken to ensure that variety in compositional elements, such as subject distance and camera angles, were consistent across conditions, as these elements have been found to affect the extent to which viewers identify with subjects (Messaris, 1997). Between the sets of photos for each conflict, the number of images of children depicted in the human-cost-of-war visual frames was kept to a minimum (1 photo for each conflict) because this has also been shown to influence empathic responses (Höijer, 2004; Slovic, 2007). Recognizing that textual information plays a role in anchoring the meaning of an image (Hall, 1973),
captions were edited to include only the location of the event depicted, names of the subjects (if provided in the original Associated Press captions), and a short, neutral description of the activity in the photo. Each photograph was also labeled with the Associated Press photo credit to establish the credibility of the images (Salgado, 1991).

These images were pilot-tested with 32 undergraduate student participants, who were given extra credit in communication classes in exchange for their participation. Participants used a link to an online Qualtrics survey and conducted the pilot study from a computer of their choice. After reviewing an IRB-approved informational and consent form, participants viewed all 46 photographs (23 per conflict) and rated each one according to the levels of arousal and positive or negative valence they experienced after looking at the image. The pictures from each conflict were grouped together, and the order that the conflicts were presented in was randomly determined by the Qualtrics software. Within each group, the human-cost-of-war and militarism images were mixed together and displayed in random order as well. Participants rated arousal and valence using Bradley and Lang’s (1994) Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM), which is a picture-oriented measurement tool similar to the Semantic Differential Scale (see Appendix 3). The SAM measure for valence displays nine different graphic depictions of the affective state of pleasure (or displeasure), whereby the scale “ranges from a smiling, happy figure to a frowning, unhappy figure” (Bradley & Lang, 1994, p. 50). Similarly, the SAM measure for arousal shows nine graphics that range “from an excited, wide-eyed figure to a relaxed, sleepy figure” (Bradley & Lang, 1994, p. 50). Mean valence and arousal scores were calculated for each image, and pictures with mean scores that differed from the others significantly were discarded. From the remaining pool of images with similar
means of valence and arousal, six human-cost-of-war and six militarism photos were chosen for each conflict. The final selection of stimulus photos is provided in Appendix 2.

**Measures**

Before participants read the stimulus article and viewed the stimulus photographs, they were asked to fill out demographic questionnaires that included the political ideology, previous knowledge, and news use measures. After the stimulus material was presented, participants answered additional questionnaires that contained the empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress measures. Finally, participants’ choice to view more articles was recorded as a measure of information seeking.

**Empathy.** The extent to which participants experienced the process of empathy while engaging with the articles and images was assessed using three questions, modified from Levy and Freitas (2002), ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*):

1) While reviewing the news content, to what extent did you think about how the people in this conflict felt?

2) While reviewing the news content, to what extent did you think about how you would feel if you were one of the people in the conflict?

3) While reviewing the news content, to what extent did you feel like you experienced emotions similar to what the people in the conflict experienced?

To assess the validity of using these three items in an empathy index, a principal components analysis was performed on these three items. The analysis produced one clear factor, which explained 69.14% of the variance and had an eigenvalue of 2.07. The
three items had a Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$. The factor scores were retained and used for the analysis.

**Compassion.** Participants’ levels of compassion were measured with two items, similar to a study by Oliver, Dillard, Bae, and Tamul (2012). The questions asked, “While reviewing the news content, to what extent did you experience the following emotions?” One item specified the emotion of compassion and the other sympathy. Responses ranged from 1 (*did not experience the emotion at all*) to 7 (*experienced the emotion a great deal*). To ensure the compassion index of these two items was valid, a principal components analysis was conducted. It revealed one distinct factor, explaining 85.06% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 1.70. The two items had a Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$. The factor scores were saved and used for the analysis.

**Personal distress and other-oriented distress.** To assess the extent to which participants experienced personal distress and other-oriented distress while engaging with the news content, a modified version of Batson, Early, and Salvarani’s (1997) nature of distress measure was used.

First, to measure the extent to which participants experienced distress in general, they were asked about five distress emotion items: “While reviewing the news content, to what extent did you experience the following emotions?” The specific emotions were anger, sadness, fear, guilt, and shame. Responses ranged from 1 (*did not experience the emotion at all*) to 7 (*experienced the emotion a great deal*).

Second, to differentiate between personal and other-oriented distress when experiencing these emotions, participants were asked a set of personal versus other-oriented distress items. If participants answered from 2 to 7 for any of the distress
emotion items (indicating some level of experiencing that distress emotion), they were then asked a pair of follow-up questions specifying the type of distress they experienced. Participants first read the following explanatory note:

Some of the distress emotions you just rated can be experienced in different ways. You can feel directly distressed, as you might when you personally have a bad experience. You can also feel distressed for someone else who has a bad experience. These feelings may both be described as distress, but they are different types of distress (Batson et al., 1997, p. 753).

Then they were asked these two questions for each distress emotion they reported feeling, “While reviewing the news content, to what extent did you feel directly angry/sad/afraid/guilty/ashamed, as you might when you have a bad experience?” and “While reviewing the news content, to what extent did you feel angry/sad/afraid/guilty/ashamed for the people in the midst of the conflict?” Responses ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal).

Using the scores from the distress emotion items and the personal versus other-oriented distress items, two indices for personal and other-oriented distress were created. First, the answers to the personal versus other-oriented distress items were recoded so that in instances where participants reported not experiencing a particular distress emotion the scores for the personal and other-oriented distress questions were entered as zeros.

For each of the five distress emotions, the scores from the distress emotion items were multiplied by the scores from the corresponding personal distress item and again by the scores from the corresponding other-oriented distress item, resulting in scales that
ranged from 0 (no amount of personal or other-oriented anger/sadness/fear/guilt/shame) to 49 (highest amount of personal or other-oriented anger/sadness/fear/guilt/shame). This produced five scales for personal distress in terms of anger, sadness, fear, guilt, and shame and five scales for other-oriented distress in terms of the same emotions.

Next, the five scales for personal distress were averaged to form one personal distress index. This index was checked for validity with a principal component analysis, which produced one distinct factor that explained 63.75% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 3.19. The five personal distress items had a Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$. The five scales for other-oriented distress were also averaged to create a single other-oriented distress index. A principal component analysis indicated one clear factor, explaining 60.96% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 3.05. The five other-oriented distress items had a Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$. The factor scores were retained and then used for the analysis.

**Information seeking.** A modification of a behavioral measure, drawn from Oliver et al. (2012), was used to determine whether participants were moved enough by the stimulus material to read additional information about the conflict depicted. For each conflict, participants were presented with the option to view articles from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the United Nations, the U.S. Department of State, *The Guardian*, and *The Washington Post* (listed in that order). The number of articles (ranging from zero to six) people viewed was recorded and interpreted as the information-seeking score.

**Political ideology.** Aday (2010) and Gartner (2011) both discovered that participants’ political attitudes influenced their responses to visuals of war. Therefore, political ideology was measured as a potential covariate. Participants were asked in the
demographic survey to identify their political ideology on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative).

**Previous knowledge.** To assess whether previous knowledge of the conflicts depicted was a covariate, participants were asked to rate this question on a seven-point scale: “Previous to viewing this news content, how familiar were you with the conflict in Afghanistan/Democratic Republic of Congo?” The answers ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely).

**News use.** To measure how often participants consumed news they were asked to indicate (on a seven-point scale) how often they watch, read, or listen to the news during a typical week (1 = not at all, 2 = once a week, 3 = 2-3 times a week, 4 = 5 times a week, 5 = once every day, 6 = 2-3 times every day 7 = many times every day).

**Results**

**Influence of Visual Frames on Empathy and Emotions**

According to the model, Hypothesis 1 suggested that participants in the human-cost-of-war visual frame condition would experience higher levels of empathy than participants in the militarism visual frame condition. Similarly, Hypothesis 2 proposed that the human-cost-of-war visual frame would evoke higher levels of compassion in participants than the militarism visual frame. Hypothesis 3a predicted that the human-cost-of-war frame would evoke more personal distress in participants than the militarism frame. Relatedly, Hypothesis 3b posited that participants in the human-cost-of-war visual frame condition would experience more other-oriented distress than participants in the militarism visual frame condition.
Before running MANOVA’s with the independent variables of primary interest, political ideology, news use, and previous knowledge were tested as potential covariates by running separate linear regressions on empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress. None of the regression equations were significant, so political ideology ($M = 3.18, SD = 1.176$), news use ($M = 3.52, SD = 1.568$), and previous knowledge ($M = 3.12, SD = 1.778$) were not included in the MANOVA’s.

To test these hypotheses, a two-way between-subjects MANOVA (depicted country x visual frame) was performed. The MANOVA yielded main effects for the visual frame condition, $F(4, 329) = 20.230, p < .001, \eta^2 = .197$, indicating that there was a statistically significant difference in levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress based on the visual frame condition. However there was no significant main effect for the depicted country condition, $F(4, 329) = 2.290, p = .060, \eta^2 = .027$. The interaction between visual frame and country depicted was not significant, $F(4, 329) = 0.494, p = .740, \eta^2 = .006$.

A one-way between subjects MANOVA was conducted to more precisely assess the effects of the visual frame condition on levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress. The MANOVA demonstrated main effects for the visual frame condition, $F(4, 331) = 19.952, p < .001, \eta^2 = .194$, indicating that there was a statistically significant difference in levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress based on the visual frame condition.

Tests of between-subjects effects revealed that there was an effect for the visual frame condition on the levels of empathy, $F(1, 334) = 7.072, p = .008, \eta^2 = .021$, where participants in the human-cost-of-war visual frame condition experienced greater
empathy ($M = 4.72, SD = 1.32$) than participants in the militarism visual frame condition ($M = 4.31, SD = 1.51$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. There was also a significant effect for visual frame condition on the levels of compassion, $F(1, 334) = 75.061, p < .001, \eta^2 = .183$, with participants in the human-cost-of-war visual frame condition feeling more compassion ($M = 5.36, SD = 1.27$) than participants in the militarism visual frame condition ($M = 4.07, SD = 1.45$). These results support Hypothesis 2. Additionally, the visual frame condition produced significant differences in the levels of personal distress, $F(1, 334) = 7.602, p = .006, \eta^2 = .022$, where participants in the human-cost-of-war visual frame condition reported higher personal distress ($M = 16.01, SD = 9.17$) than participants in the militarism visual frame condition ($M = 13.22, SD = 9.22$). Hence, Hypothesis 3a was supported. Finally, the visual frame condition led to significant effects on other-oriented distress, $F(1, 334) = 18.655, p < .001, \eta^2 = .053$, whereby participants in the human-cost-of-war visual frame condition experienced more other-oriented distress ($M = 22.37, SD = 10.02$) than those in the militarism visual frame condition ($M = 17.75, SD = 9.62$). Thus, Hypothesis 3b was supported as well, as predicted by the model.

**Influence of Gender on Empathy and Emotions**

Although the focus of this study is not on gender differences in empathic and emotional responses, it was expected that females might respond with higher levels of empathy, compassion, distress, and information seeking, based on research about gender and empathy and emotional responsiveness (see Chapter 2 for a review). Therefore, a post hoc analysis tested for differences attributable to gender in order to contextualize
and isolate the effects caused by the visual frames, which is the factor of interest in this study.

A two-way between subjects MANOVA (visual frame x gender) was conducted to assess the effects of both visual frame and gender on levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress. The MANOVA demonstrated main effects for the visual frame condition, $F(4, 329) = 16.488, p < .001, \eta^2 = .167$, and for gender, $F(4, 329) = 8.189, p < .001, \eta^2 = .091$, indicating that there was a statistically significant difference in levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress based on the visual frame condition and participant gender. The interaction between visual frame and gender was not significant, $F(4, 329) = 0.884, p = .473, \eta^2 = .011$.

Tests of between-subjects effects demonstrated that there were significant effects for gender on the levels of empathy, $F(1, 332) = 5.565, p = .019, \eta^2 = .016$, with females reporting more empathy ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.45$) than males ($M = 4.26, SD = 1.35$). Gender also produced significant effects for the levels of compassion, $F(1, 332) = 6.720, p = .004, \eta^2 = .025$, where females felt more compassion ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.46$) than males ($M = 4.41, SD = 1.57$). Additionally, significant effects were observed for gender on the levels of personal distress, $F(1, 332) = 4.443, p = .036, \eta^2 = .013$, with females experiencing more personal distress ($M = 15.41, SD = 9.42$) than males ($M = 13.06, SD = 8.86$). Finally, there were significant effects for gender on the levels of other-oriented distress, $F(1, 332) = 20.423, p < .000, \eta^2 = .064$, where females felt greater other-oriented distress ($M = 21.91, SD = 9.94$) than males ($M = 16.46, SD = 9.38$).

**Predictors of Information Seeking**
Moving to the next step in the model, Hypothesis 4 proposed that participants in the human-cost-of-war visual frame condition would be more likely to seek out additional information about the conflict depicted than participants in the militarism visual frame condition. It was also predicted that higher levels of empathy (Hypothesis 5), compassion (Hypothesis 6), and other-oriented distress (Hypothesis 7a) would be positively associated with more information seeking, while higher levels of personal distress (Hypothesis 7b) would be positively associated with less information seeking.

Multiple regression was used to test these hypotheses by evaluating how well the framing conditions, the levels of empathy and emotions, and other potential covariates predicted information seeking behavior. The predictor variables were visual frame, country depicted, empathy, compassion, personal distress, other-oriented distress, gender, political ideology, news use, and previous knowledge, and the outcome variable was information seeking ($M = 0.208, SD = 0.540$). The initial outcome variable of information seeking was non-normally distributed, with skewness of 3.908 ($SE = 0.133$) and kurtosis of 22.846 ($SE = 0.265$). As this violated statistical assumptions necessary for regression analysis, the variable was transformed using a power transformation following the procedures outlined in Fink (2009). The transformed outcome variable remained non-normally distributed but was improved with skewness of 1.768 ($SE = 0.133$) and kurtosis of 1.134 ($SE = 0.265$).

This study focuses on the potential influence of visual frames, empathy, and emotional responses on information seeking. Therefore, these predictor variables were tested after the potential covariates. The first regression assessed the predictive power of the potential covariates of gender, political ideology, news use, and previous knowledge.
This regression produced an insignificant regression equation, $F(4, 331) = 1.656, p = .160, R^2 = .020, R^2_{Adjusted} = .008$. Post hoc analysis revealed that political ideology correlated significantly and negatively with information seeking ($r = -.130, p = .009$). This negative correlation indicated that information seeking behavior decreased as reported participant ideology was more conservative. It should be noted that this correlation was weak but significant. Gender ($r = -.045, p = .208$), news use ($r = .047, p = .194$), and previous knowledge ($r = .037, p = .251$) did not correlate significantly with information seeking.

The next regression tested how well empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress predicted information seeking when added to the model along with gender, political ideology, news use, and previous knowledge. Once again, the resulting regression equation was insignificant, $F(8, 327) = 0.967, p = .462, R^2 = .023, R^2_{Adjusted} = -.001$. This negative adjusted $R^2$ value indicated that the predictor variables of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress were a poor fit for the model. Inspection of the correlation table revealed that none of these additional predictor variables were significantly correlated with information seeking: empathy ($r = .017, p = .375$), compassion ($r = .036, p = .256$), personal distress ($r = .048, p = .189$), or other-oriented distress ($r = .030, p = .295$). Thus, these predictor variables were excluded from the next regression.

The third regression evaluated the potential of visual frame and country depicted to predict information seeking along with gender, political ideology, news use, and previous knowledge. A not significant regression equation of $F(6, 329) = 1.318, p = .248, R^2 = .023, R^2_{Adjusted} = .006$ was produced. Neither of the added predictor variables
correlated significantly with the outcome variable: visual frame ($r = .024, p = .332$) and country depicted ($r = -.053, p = .167$).

Table 1: Multiple Regression Equations for Information Seeking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Equations</th>
<th>Regression 1</th>
<th>Regression 2</th>
<th>Regression 3</th>
<th>Regression 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-6946.067</td>
<td>-6883.802</td>
<td>-6208.875</td>
<td>-6987.998*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1222.670)</td>
<td>(1256.898)</td>
<td>(1753.933)</td>
<td>(587.587)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-256.059</td>
<td>-265.286</td>
<td>-287.319</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(447.843)</td>
<td>(473.469)</td>
<td>(450.364)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Ideology</td>
<td>-401.419</td>
<td>-406.132</td>
<td>-409.129</td>
<td>-413.935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(174.692)</td>
<td>(176.937)</td>
<td>(175.232)</td>
<td>(173.405)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Use</td>
<td>59.801</td>
<td>67.276</td>
<td>89.409</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(136.219)</td>
<td>(138.192)</td>
<td>(139.021)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Information</td>
<td>42.634</td>
<td>23.950</td>
<td>-42.752</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(118.236)</td>
<td>(120.963)</td>
<td>(144.078)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td></td>
<td>-83.946</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(282.874)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td></td>
<td>70.494</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(269.047)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Distress</td>
<td></td>
<td>333.280</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(376.096)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other-Oriented Distress</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(419.351)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Frame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>188.230</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(412.476)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country Depicted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-521.725</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>(498.384)</td>
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<td>$R^2$</td>
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<td>.023</td>
<td>.017*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$Adjusted</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.014*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

N = 336
*p < .02

In the first three regressions the only predictor variable that correlated significantly was political ideology. Therefore, a fourth and final regression calculated how well political ideology alone predicted information seeking. This time the regression was significant, $F(1, 334) = 5.698, p = .018, R^2 = .017, R^2_{Adjusted} = .014$. Participants’ predicted level of information seeking is equal to $-6987.998 - 413.935$ (political
ideology), where political ideology is measured on a scale of 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative). Participants with more liberal political beliefs were more likely to seek out additional information than more conservative participants. It should be noted that political ideology, however, only explained 1.4% of the variance in information seeking. Hence, the majority of the variance was left unexplained by this multiple regression analysis. Hypotheses 4 through 7b were not supported.

Hypothesis 8 predicted that empathic processing would serve as a mediator, such that the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking would be increased as levels of empathic processing increased. Hypothesis 9 suggested that, as compassion increased, the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking would increase. Hypothesis 10 anticipated that as other-oriented distress increased, the effect of the visual frame condition on information seeking would increase. As mentioned above, the regression analyses revealed that neither visual frame condition, empathy, compassion other-oriented distress were predictors of information seeking. Therefore, Hypotheses 8 through 10 were not supported.

**Influence of Ingroup Identification on Empathy, Emotions, & Information Seeking**

Hypotheses 11a through 11d proposed that Americans would be more likely to experience empathic processing (H11a), compassion (H11b), personal distress (H11c), and other-oriented distress (H11d) when viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan compared to those from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. To assess these hypotheses, a two-way between-subjects MANOVA (depicted country x visual frame) was run on a subset of the data that included only participants who identified as Americans. Thirty-four non-American participants were removed from the sample,
leaving a subset of 302 participants (199 females, 103 males), with 150 participants in the Afghanistan condition and 152 in the Democratic Republic of Congo condition.

The MANOVA revealed a main effect for the country depicted, $F(4, 295) = 3.185, p = .014, \eta^2 = .041$, on levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress together. Similar to the MANOVAs conducted on the larger sample, this MANOVA also revealed main effects for visual frame condition, $F(4, 295) = 19.601, p < .001, \eta^2 = .210$, on levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress together. Once again, there was no significant interaction between visual frame and country depicted, $F(4, 295) = 0.324, p = .862, \eta^2 = .004$.

Tests of between-subjects effects revealed that there was a main effect for the country depicted on the levels of compassion $F(1, 298) = 5.456, p = .020, \eta^2 = .018$, with participants who saw the Afghanistan photos experiencing less compassion ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.58$) than participants who viewed the Democratic Republic of Congo photos ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.43$). Although the country depicted did have an effect on the level of compassion experienced by American participants, it was in the opposite of the hypothesized direction. Therefore, Hypothesis 11a was not supported. There were no significant effects for the country depicted on the levels of empathy, $F(1, 298) = .062, p = .803, \eta^2 = .000$; personal distress, $F(1, 298) = .892, p = .346, \eta^2 = .003$; or other-oriented distress, $F(1, 298) = .113, p = .737, \eta^2 = .000$. Thus, Hypotheses 11b through 11d were not supported.

Finally, Hypothesis 12 predicted that Americans would seek out more additional information after viewing images from the conflict in Afghanistan as opposed to images from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The sample comprised of only
American participants was analyzed to test this hypothesis. A crosstabulation with a $\chi^2$ estimate was run to determine whether the country depicted had an effect on American participants’ choice to view additional information about the conflict. To look simply at whether Americans decided to seek out information or not, the continuous dependent variable of information seeking (ranging from 1 to 6 articles read) was recoded as a dichotomous variable ($0 =$ no additional information, $1 =$ additional information). The crosstabulation revealed that 52 out of 302, or 17.2%, of the American participants in the experiment chose to view additional information. Of the participants who engaged in information seeking, 29, or 55.8%, viewed photos from Afghanistan, whereas 23, or 44.2%, viewed pictures from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Although a few more Americans in the Afghanistan condition sought out additional information than those in the Democratic Republic of Congo condition, this difference was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 302) = 0.935, p = .334$. Therefore, the country-depicted condition did not have a significant effect on whether American participants decided to view additional information or not.

An independent paired samples t-test was also carried out to assess whether the country depicted had an effect on the amount of additional information American participants sought. The t-test revealed that the information seeking scores were slightly higher for American participants who viewed the Afghanistan photos ($M = .247, SD = .623$) than those who looked at the Democratic Republic of Congo images ($M = .178, SD = .462$); however, this difference was not significant, $t(300) = .965, p = .335$. These results indicate that the country depicted did not have a significant effect on how much additional information American participants viewed.
Discussion

This study proposed a model that predicted that images of conflict presented with a human-cost-of-war visual frame would elicit greater levels of empathy, emotional responses, and information seeking compared to photos with a militarism visual frame. The results supported the hypotheses related to the effects of the visual frames on affect; however, the hypotheses about the predictors of information seeking and American identification were unsupported. This study offers experimental evidence of the capacity of photojournalism of conflict to evoke empathy and emotions in general, and it demonstrates that levels of empathy and emotions are influenced by visual framing. Although questions about whether visual frames, empathy, and emotions relate to information seeking are left unanswered, perhaps this study provides some clues for future research on the linkages between the affective and cognitive processing of photos of war. As a whole, this study makes important theoretical contributions to visual communication and has implications for journalism practice.

Influence of Visual Frames on Empathy and Emotions

The findings of this study lend empirical support to newsroom anecdotes about the power of photos of war to encourage empathy and stir emotions. Although it has long been assumed that photojournalism of conflict has the ability to foster concern in audiences, this notion has been largely untested. This experiment demonstrated that participants were indeed moved to empathize with the subjects depicted in both the Afghanistan and Democratic Republic of Congo pictures, and they experienced high levels of compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress. So while photographs of conflict may be polysemous, the exact meaning of each image resonating differently

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for every individual, we saw in this experiment that war pictures do have the capacity to reliably evoke significant levels of empathy and emotions when they focus on human suffering.

This study showed that some types of conflict photographs are more effective at arousing empathy and emotions. The way war is depicted matters: Pictures that employed a human-cost-of-war visual frame led to significantly higher levels of empathic processing, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress than the pictures with a militarism visual frame. In the larger sample, the country-depicted condition did not have a significant effect on empathy or emotions. Regardless of whether participants viewed images from Afghanistan or the Democratic Republic of Congo, their empathic and emotional responses were consistent across the country-depicted condition. Participants’ political ideology, news use, and previous knowledge were also all insignificant in affecting the levels of empathy and emotions. Therefore, it appears that the visual frame condition influenced participants’ empathic and emotional responses regardless of the conflict they saw depicted, their political ideology, news use, and previous knowledge.

The gender of the participants significantly influenced their responses: Females experienced higher levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress than their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with other studies (Batson, 2011; Trobst, Collins, & Embree, 1994) that have found females to respond with more empathy, compassion, and distress than males. Although it was not one of the aims of this study, the results add to knowledge about gender differences in empathic and emotional reactions. However, although both visual frame and gender produced significant
differences in the levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented
distress, there was no significant interaction effect. Therefore, the visual frame and
gender had independent influences on the empathic and emotional reactions.

Predictors of Information Seeking

Although this study produced convincing evidence of the potential of war photos
to move audiences empathically and emotionally, it left questions unanswered about how
those responses connect to information seeking behavior. This study indicated that
neither visual frame condition nor the empathic and emotional responses resulting from
the visual frame condition were significant predictors of participants’ information seeking
behavior. Country-depicted condition, gender, news use, and previous knowledge also
failed to predict information seeking. The only tested factor that significantly predicted
information seeking was political ideology. This result supports Aday’s (2010) assertion
that political predispositions are a stronger predictor of attitudes toward war than the
influence of specific media, with liberals more likely to oppose military action than
conservatives. However, political ideology accounted for little more than one percent of
the variance, leaving the majority of the variance in participant information seeking
unexplained.

However, the fact that this study did not uncover significant predictors of
information seeking does not necessarily mean that visual frames of war photos and the
related empathic and emotional responses do not play a part in people’s decisions to pay
more attention to media coverage about conflict. At this point, it would be imprudent to
simply accept the null hypotheses from this experiment. As mentioned in chapter two, a
pilot study conducted prior to this dissertation revealed that visual frame condition did
have a significant effect on participants’ information seeking behavior, where participants in a high-graphic human-cost-of-war visual frame condition sought out significantly more information than those in a militarism visual frame condition. This finding leads to the question of what might account for the differences in the results between the two studies.

There are a number of possible explanations. The content in that experiment depicted the conflict in Syria. Although the current study found that the country depicted did not have a significant effect on empathic, emotional, and information seeking responses, there could be a difference in the way the Syria conflict was processed by participants compared to the conflicts in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The conflicts in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo have been going on longer than the one in Syria. Therefore, it is likely that participants in this study may have previously seen images from the wars in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and they may have become desensitized to the visuals from that exposure. If participants in the previous experiment were not familiar with photos from the conflict in Syria the images may have been more novel and led to the difference in the affective response results.

Another possibility is that the pilot study divided the human-cost-of-war visual frame into three conditions, which distinguished between graphicness and content that included death and that which did not. In that study, there were no significant differences between the three visual frames in terms of emotional responses. It is possible, however, that eliminating those distinctions in the human-cost-of-war visual frame in the current study limited the ability to predict information seeking. The human-cost-of-war visual frame conditions in the pilot study also contained numerous photographs of young
children. In the current study, there was only one picture of a teenager in each of the conflicts, which may have also been a factor in the varying results between studies.

One final possibility relates to the measurement of information seeking. In the pilot study, the links for additional information took participants out of the experimental software and directly to live websites. This move meant that each time participants clicked on a new link they saw material that was different from the other links. The websites were dynamic, with photos, graphics, and links to a variety of articles. Therefore, participants were likely to remain engaged with the content as they moved from link to link. In the current study, the links for additional information led to six different articles of plain text (with no images, graphics, or sidebars) that were displayed within the software program. The decision to present the information in this simplified manner was made in part because, with the Qualtrics software, sending participants directly to websites outside of the program required coding skills that were beyond the scope of the investigator’s skill set, and it would not allow for the recording of the number of different links visited. Additionally, although sending participants to websites might allow for greater engagement, it also introduces greater variance in terms of what type of content (text versus photos versus video) might be driving that engagement.

That the outcome variable of information seeking in this study was highly skewed, which could not be entirely corrected for through a power transformation, suggests that the results of the regressions should be interpreted with caution. There was clearly not enough variance in the measurement of information seeking to run regressions with reliable results. It was anticipated that using a scale with increments of only 1 through 6 might lead to this issue. Therefore, the survey was designed to also record the
amount of time each participant spent looking at additional information. This would have ideally resulted in an outcome variable with greater variance. Unfortunately, due to a technical mistake in the survey design process, the times were not recorded, and an alternate outcome variable was not available.

**Influence of Ingroup Identification on Empathy, Emotions, & Information Seeking**

One focus of this study was to investigate whether American participants would respond differently in terms of empathy, emotions, and information seeking when viewing a conflict involving the United States versus one that did not. The subset of American participants experienced significantly lower levels of compassion when viewing the photos from Afghanistan as opposed to pictures from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Interestingly, this result was in the opposite of the hypothesized direction, as it was thought that American participants would feel greater compassion. The lower compassion score may be due to ambivalence created by seeing a mix of photos that included not just U.S. soldiers but also Afghan soldiers, Afghan civilians, and Taliban fighters. For example, it is possible that American participants felt high levels of compassion when looking at images of U.S. soldiers, but very low levels of compassion when viewing pictures of Taliban fighters. Participants may have also had mixed emotions when processing the photos of the Afghan soldiers and civilians.

American participants did not report significantly different levels of empathy, personal distress, or other-oriented distress based on the country-depicted condition. Additionally, American participants did not seek out significantly greater amounts of additional information after looking at the Afghanistan photos rather than the Democratic Republic of Congo. Therefore, the effects were limited to differing levels of compassion.
The subset of American participants did show significant differences in the mean scores for empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress based on both the visual frame condition and gender. Thus, it appears that visual framing and gender have greater influence on empathic and emotional responses to images of war than national identification.

**Implications**

These findings have both theoretical and practical value. Visual communication scholars and photography critics continue to debate the extent to which pictures of war influence audiences. The questions and disputes tend to center on theoretical downstream effects: Can such images stop war? Do they actually foster anti-war attitudes? Is it possible for pictures to stir people to write letters to representatives, donate to humanitarian organizations, or volunteer their time? However, before these types of questions can be answered, the notion that photojournalism of the human suffering in war causes empathy, compassion, and distress must first be tested instead of assumed. The findings of this study confirm that conflict pictures do indeed have the capacity to rouse empathy and emotions. This is an important foundational step in moving toward answering the important questions about downstream attitudinal and behavioral effects of war imagery.

More specifically, this study has demonstrated that war photos that put a human face to the conflict are more powerful than those that show military activity when it comes to prompting empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress. It also appears that visual framing is effective at piquing empathy and emotions regardless of the country depicted or people’s political ideology, news use habits, or
previous knowledge. Although gender does affect empathy and emotions as well, it does so independently of the visual framing. Therefore, these results confirm what visual communication scholars have theorized and what photography editors have articulated anecdotally: Pictures depicting the human suffering of war move audiences more than those that show military action.

Unfortunately, this study has not offered much insight into the link between empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress and information seeking. Whether empathy and emotions translate into information seeking or other types of action is key to answering theoretical questions relevant to communication, journalism, psychology, and political science scholarship. This information would also enable editors to make more informed decisions about what type of photos of conflict to publish. If higher levels of empathy, compassion, and other-oriented distress really do compel people to learn more about war and potentially inspire them to become involved in some way, that may justify the personal distress people may experience. The benefits may also validate imperatives to display such images despite ethical issues such as showing the subjects of the pictures in vulnerable situations. On the other hand, if fostering empathy and emotions does not result in any type of action in viewers it may not be justifiable to upset audiences with images of war. Therefore, it is necessary to further investigate the potential connection between conflict photos, empathy, emotions, and information seeking.

It should be acknowledged that there are some limitations to this study and the results. First, the sample was comprised of college students, and it cannot, therefore, be assumed that the findings are representative of the entire U.S. population. However,
many other studies exploring empathic and emotional responses and reactions to visual depictions of war have been carried out using undergraduate participants, and testing theory allows this sample to be useful and appropriate. Using a similar sample makes comparisons between studies more logical and reliable. Second, this study only explored responses to images from two conflicts. Every war has a specific historical and political context that makes it unique. And the political and news discourses surrounding one conflict may differ from those about another. Thus, these results cannot be applied to other wars without taking those factors into consideration and accounting for differences between wars.

However, there are particular aspects about the conflicts in this study that guided the predictions about how participants would respond. This study focused on Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo because of the similarities between the conflicts. Both are protracted wars that have been reported on widely in the U.S. media. They each involved an outside, Western military force intervening in battle between government forces and opposition groups in a country in the Global South. The conflicts in both countries have resulted in widespread civilian casualties and have garnered attention from human rights groups concerned with the human toll of the wars. One major difference in the conflicts, which was intended to test the influence of participant identification, is that the U.S. has been directly and deeply involved in Afghanistan and not in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Further research is needed to support the predictive usefulness of these specific features. This study provides heuristic direction for such research.

The greatest limitation of this study is that it has not sufficiently addressed the relationship between empathy and emotions in response to war photos and information
seeking. However, the next study in this dissertation will shed light on that relationship. The next chapter presents a qualitative analysis of focus group discussions with participants who read and viewed the same stimulus materials. The focus group participants talked about the emotional reactions they had to the stories and photographs, the ways they experienced empathy, and the factors that made them more and less likely to seek out further information about the conflicts. Key to the portions of the discussions that centered on desire to learn more about the wars was the participants’ sense of efficacy in relation to the conflicts depicted. This aspect was not explored in the experimental portion. The insights gleaned from the analysis of the focus groups in the next chapter, combined with the results from this experiment, will provide a more complete set of answers to the questions this dissertation poses about the complex relationship between images of war, empathy, emotions, and information seeking.
CHAPTER 4: FOCUS GROUP STUDY

Focus group discussions were used for the second study in this dissertation to further examine the overarching question of how visual frames in war photojournalism affect media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses. Sixteen focus group sessions (with different participants than in the experiment) were conducted concurrently with the experiment. In the first half of the focus group sessions, participants were asked to talk in general about their thoughts and feelings about war and the role of U.S. media in shaping their perceptions. Participants were then shown a sample of photographs from the conflicts in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the second half of the sessions, the discussions revolved around participants’ responses to the pictures. To gain a deeper understanding of how participants make meaning out of media about conflict in general and war images specifically, this study investigated the research questions listed below. Some of the research questions address similar questions as the model proposed in Chapter 3 using a qualitative, open-ended approach, while the other research questions investigate the general process of meaning making in response to war coverage.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do participants make sense of war in general and the emotions it provokes?

RQ2: Do images of conflict evoke concern for the people depicted, or do they overwhelm participants, or both? How do participants resolve ambivalent reactions?
RQ3: Is the emotional experience of viewing images with a human-cost-of-war frame different than viewing images with a militarism frame? If so, how and why?

RQ4: What thoughts and feelings cause participants to engage with or turn away from war photos? How do those cognitions and emotions connect with intentions to seek out additional information about the conflict?

RQ5: Do participants’ levels of empathy and information seeking vary according to whether the conflict depicted is one where the U.S. military is directly involved?

Method

Participants

The participants were 87 undergraduate students (26 males, 61 females) from a large, urban university on the East Coast of the United States. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for the study, participants were recruited from strategic communication, journalism, media studies, and advertising classes. They were offered extra credit in their classes in exchange for participation in the study and were treated in accordance with IRB procedures.

Procedure

Sixteen focus group sessions were conducted, with half of the sessions incorporating materials focused on the war in Afghanistan and the other half using materials reporting on the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The number of participants in each session ranged from three to seven, and the total number of participants in the Afghanistan sessions was 44, and 43 participants took part in the
Democratic Republic of Congo sessions. After signing the IRB informed consent forms, participants were asked to fill out a short demographic survey in paper form. The survey asked participants about their age, gender, race, citizenship, political ideology, and news use. The questions used in this survey were exactly the same as the corresponding questions from the online experiment. After the surveys, participants were invited to briefly introduce themselves to one another. They also selected their own pseudonyms to be used in the transcripts and dissertation text. Then, in the first half of each session, participants were asked about how they respond in general to media about war. Midway through, they read an article about conflict in either Afghanistan or the Democratic Republic of Congo and viewed a gallery of related photographs. The remaining half of the discussion focused on participants’ responses to the materials. Each session lasted an hour and fifteen minutes. Saturation was reached early on, after the first several sessions, as participants responded similarly across sessions and as clear themes began to emerge.

The interviews made use of a semi-structured set of open-ended questions (Appendix A). This approach allowed for consistency in the discussions across all the focus group sessions, while leaving enough flexibility for participants to take the conversations in directions that reflected their feelings and opinions. All of the questions were derived from the theories outlined in the literature review. The first half of the interview questions aimed to elicit descriptions of the role of media about war in participants’ lives and how they process it emotionally. Therefore, these questions focused broadly on media use and other sources of information about conflict. To avoid the assumption that participants’ feelings and views about war were influenced by media, questions specifically mentioning media were withheld until participants brought up
media sources unprompted. The second half of the questions were intended to assess participants’ responses to the materials, and the photographs in particular. Questions directly about the photographs were not asked until participants had mentioned them independently.

**Demographics**

The participants ranged in age from 18 years to 49 years ($M = 21.23$, $Mdn = 20$). The majority of participants (95.4%) were American, whereas the remaining 4.6% of the sample listed other nationalities. Participants were identified by ethnicity as 60.9% White, 19.5% Black, 9.2% Asian, 7% mixed, and 3.4% Hispanic. Overall, participants were slightly more conservative ($7 = \text{very conservative}$) than liberal ($1 = \text{very liberal}$) in terms of political ideology ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.292$). On average, participants reported engaging with some type of news between two and five times a week ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.632$, where $1 = \text{not at all}$, $2 = \text{once a week}$, $3 = 2-3 \text{ times a week}$, $4 = 5 \text{ times a week}$, $5 = \text{once every day}$, $6 = 2-3 \text{ times every day}$, $7 = \text{many times every day}$).

**Materials**

The same materials were used in the focus group sessions as the experiment to allow for some comparison across the two studies. However, in the focus group portion of the dissertation, participants were only divided into two different groups, according to which conflict they were exposed to. Therefore, all of the participants read about one conflict and saw a photo gallery that included a mix of all six human-cost-of-war and all six militarism photos from that conflict. The format of the materials was different in this portion of the study as well. In the focus groups, participants read a paper copy of the
article. Then, when all the participants indicated they were finished reading, the photos were shown (in randomized order) on a large television screen at the front of the room.

**Analysis**

A qualitative analysis was performed on the data from the focus group interviews. This analysis followed a grounded theory approach, which allowed for flexibility in the analysis to both answer the specific research questions and to uncover unexpected results (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). All of the sessions were audio recorded, and those recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions were read several times and analyzed to assess the research questions and to identify any other relevant themes. While the analysis made note of the differences and the similarities between sessions from the two conflicts, it also examined responses across all the sessions to understand how participants make meaning out of war coverage and of viewing images of conflict. Therefore, the analysis looked across the two groups for patterns in the way participants explained their emotional reactions to images of war and how such coverage influences their behavioral intentions to seek more information about conflict.

**Findings**

**Making Sense of Media About War**

The focus group discussions revealed several themes about how participants make sense of war in general and the emotions evoked by the topic. First, participants, who are college students, have largely come to view it as a norm that the U.S. is in a perpetual state of war, and that perspective has influenced the way they interact with media about conflict. Second, many of the participants expressed skepticism about the information they receive about war. Such distrust of statements from government officials and media
coverage affects how participants react to war stories and visuals. Third, war and related media provoke a range of emotions in participants that are primarily negative.

**War as the norm and desensitization.** Most of the participants were in elementary school when the attacks of 9/11 were carried out in 2001 and when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan that year and Iraq in 2003. Many participants explained that their outlooks on conflict were connected to growing up in a country engaged in two protracted wars. “I just know that there's not a time I can remember when we were not in war. Growing up, one of my earliest memories is 9/11, and past that, we've always been in a war of some type,” remarked Elizabeth. “I think this is the longest war in U.S. history,” observed Tom, who elaborated on how that affected his perception: “Being 18, I feel like… it hasn't been going on my entire life, but I feel like it has. Yeah. It's sort of like this ubiquitous thing that's just always been existing somewhere off in the distance.”

When asked simply what came to mind when he thought about war, Ryan shared, “I think mainly of the Middle East, because that's the first big war I knew. 9/11 happened when I was in 6th grade.”

Like Ryan, the majority of the participants associated war primarily with 9/11, with the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and with conflict in the Middle East and surrounding regions in general. Responding to Ryan’s comment above, Nicole explained that when she thought about war, she didn’t recall a specific story. Instead, she said, “They all, most of the news coverage, tends to be similar. The pictures they show are similar, the storyline's always similar. Always showing pictures of the desert and the Middle East.” One of the effects of the perception that the stories are all just variants of each other is that participants do not feel compelled to continue following news about
specific conflicts. As Nicole concluded, “I feel like I just stop paying attention to them all because it just all kind of runs together.” Marie explained the way she has come to process war coverage:

At this point, it's almost like any story is like moot, like, I read it last week, I read it the week before, I know I'm going to read it next week. So it always seems like it's a similar story, like, 'This many people dead. This is who we've killed.' It's like, 'Great, who's gonna be your next goal next week?' It's never, it's just like, the news stories are never ending, so they're becoming like, I just ignore them at this point.

Another participant, Michelle B., showed her exasperation at the repetitive nature of news coverage of war, saying, “Okay, how many times are you going to say the same thing over and over again, you know? And it's kind of like as far back as I can think there's always been some type of conflict going on.” The end result for many of the participants is that they lose interest in war, as Lauryn articulated, “Part of me doesn't even really want to watch the news because I don't want to hear about it. Like I just want it to be over.”

Another effect of the continual media coverage of conflict is that war has become normalized. For example, Sarah A. stated, “This has been going on for the entirety of my life because when this all started I was like five. So I don't know. I kind of, this is just like the usual I guess.” Melissa expressed a similar sentiment: “It’s been going on for so long, you just kind of forget about it.” Responding to her, Nicole agreed, saying, “It's just the norm…Same thing, different day.” This normalization relates to participants feeling desensitized and disassociated from conflict and media about war.

Talking about war journalism, Rob observed, “People are becoming desensitized from it. Like they see it all the time so it's like, ‘Oh this is happening again’…People seem to, not care less, but not pay attention as much as time goes on.” Referring to how
he has personally become desensitized to news about war, John A. said, “The scary part about it is, I'm getting numb…Especially the whole Al Qaeda thing, you just hear so much about the skirmishes and this happened and this happened and you just become numb to it.” Steve A. spoke specifically about how he no longer reacts to news photographs of war, saying that the reason is “because it's thrown at me every single day, and you really don't get an emotional response. … I think it's because the media has thrown so much of violence at us. We've just become numb.” In addition to feeling desensitized from being exposed to continual war coverage, participants also experience a sense of being disconnected from conflict.

Although participants described the United States’ ongoing involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq as omnipresent in their lives, many spoke of feeling disassociated from these wars. Part of the disassociation stems from the geographic distance of the U.S. from the conflicts. Tom spoke to this when he explained, “I also feel really distant from it just because, at least with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it's so far away from us, it's not like we have a domestic war in the United States.” Many participants spoke about how being physically removed from and immune to the effects of frontline combat makes war in other countries something that doesn’t relate to them. Talking about her awareness of war, Rebecca said, “I'm not involved, and it's not my everyday life, and it's like, as awful as that may sound, because it's not affecting me each and every day, I sometimes just forget.” Jade also spoke about feeling disconnected from war because it does not impact her day-to-day experience: “It's something that kinda happens all the time so it's like, ‘Oh another war' or whatever, and also because it's not directly affecting me, I don't think as much about it, you know, as if it were here.”
A few participants explicitly stated their opposition to the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and this ideological difference gave them a sense of disconnectedness. For example, James stated, “I feel disassociated from sort of all conflict that goes on because, I don’t, I don’t want to feel connected to it…I’m no major patriot. I’m not really invested in what the US is doing necessarily.” The normalization of war and feelings of desensitization and disassociation all connect with participants’ desire to seek out information about conflict. This connection will be explored in depth later in the analysis.

**Skepticism about war news.** Another theme that emerged was that, on the whole, participants are highly skeptical of the information they receive about war. Their sense of distrust extends to both the U.S. government and to U.S. media. Unsure of the accuracy of much of the material they encounter, many of the participants are left feeling frustrated and confused by U.S. news reports about conflict. Cameron summarized the skepticism many participants conveyed about both the U.S. government and media:

> When I think of war, I think of the media and the government, and what we don't know, and what they're showing us. I often think that there's always more to the story, and I always want to know what's actually going on.

Participants talked about being suspicious that what government officials tell the public is not necessarily the whole truth. For example, Jack said, “The government could tell you why they're fighting, but there could be other reasons beyond that that they're just not revealing to the public.” Jeremy pointed out that Bush administration officials told the country we were invading Iraq because there were weapons of mass destruction; however, they were never found. As a result, he said, “when I read the newspaper now,
it's like, now I'm skeptical. Is this actually why we're over in this foreign country or is there another motive for it?”

Participants expressed skepticism of media coverage in two ways. Some participants voiced concern that news outlets intentionally present information in a manner that supports the U.S. government’s official military policies. For example, Jim and Nicole spoke about media coverage as being government propaganda, and Michelle B. argued,

They're never going to tell us actually how many villages have been blown up and how many children have died and stuff like that because the numbers are probably astronomical, and that would probably not look so good for the American government.

Most of the participants explained that their distrust of the media had more to do with news being a constructed form or communication. These participants emphasized that news stories are usually told from a certain perspective that only highlights certain information. These comments about the constructed nature of media are not surprising considering the participants were all studying communication. Lauryn’s perception was that news outlets “show you what they want you to see and not everything, so it’s kind of one-sided.” Many participants observed that U.S. media rarely offered coverage about how Afghans and Iraqis have been affected by the recent U.S.-led wars. Dee also relayed the same cautiousness about interpreting news about war, saying, “Everything is structured around the way they want it to, what media wants it to be. So you have to keep that in the back of your mind when you’re reading something.” A few participants, like Isabella, specifically used the term framing to describe the selective storytelling technique that leads to distrust of media coverage: “When they're framing the war in certain ways, it's just like, you just have to do research on your own in other ways cause
you just really can't trust what you're being fed.” The sense that reliable information about war is unavailable causes many participants to feel frustrated and confused when it comes to trying to make sense of conflict.

**Emotional responses to war.** The third theme related to Research Question 1 was that, despite claiming to be desensitized, participants reported experiencing different emotions when thinking about war or when engaging with media about conflict. The primary emotions participants spoke of were the negative emotions of sadness, fear, and anger and the positive emotion of pride.

When asked what emotions they felt when thinking about war, participants most often spoke of sadness first. Natalie stated, “My emotion is a lot of sadness. When you hear the stories- it’s hard to talk about.” Similarly, Felicity shared, “I don’t like to focus on it cause it’s very depressing, and I just wish that war didn’t exist. But it does, so it’s just kind of just a reality.” Participants explained that their sorrow came from considering the people involved in conflict. Some participants, like Katie A., felt sad when thinking about U.S. soldiers in combat: “It makes me sad when I think about people who have lost their lives to protect their country…It’s saved us, but, at what cost?” Others attributed their feelings of sadness to contemplating civilian suffering and casualties. For example, Christine said she felt grief, explaining, “I bet there’s innocent civilians being killed, and even though we have our differences, they’re still innocent civilians. I feel like nobody should ever have to lose their life.”

The emotion mentioned most often after sadness was fear. Anna very succinctly stated, “That really terrifies me when I think of war.” For some people their fear was rooted in concern about their personal safety. Jordan described her fear as a general sense
of unease over the unpredictability of current conflicts: “I kind of feel like scared that there's just so much chaos going on. And, I don't know, it's kind of scary. You don't know what's gonna happen next.” Elizabeth spoke of her fear that conflict might move closer to home, saying she was “nervous that maybe, at some point, we could experience a war on American soil.” Responding to Elizabeth, Lauryn said, “Or, what if, in the future, we’re gonna be required to go and fight? I don’t want to do that.” Jack expressed a similar concern, confessing he was scared “to think if war actually escalated to the point where there is another draft again, I could find myself in that position. That's something that actually really does scare me a lot.” Other participants vocalized fear over the wellbeing of friends and family in the military. Carrie described feeling anxious because, as she said, “My friend is now in the Marines, and all these kids in high school, if they didn't go to college, they went to the war, and I don't know. It just... it's not really good feeling.” Grace stated that she felt shaken when thinking about war because she has both friends and family currently engaged in combat. “My cousin is in Iraq right now,” she said, “and it’s scary to think that he could be in that situation and he could be in danger.”

Thirteen participants brought up the emotion of anger, although it was spoken of less than sadness and fear. Some of the anger was aimed at the idea of war in general. “I just get angry about the whole idea of it,” said Guadalupe, “Here's two countries that don't agree on something so they're willing to sacrifice a large section of their population to just, for what, land or oil, or just something.” A few others expressed feeling angry toward terrorists. Speaking of the beheadings carried out by ISIS, Kate said, “It just makes me really angry that they do that to people.” Following up on Kate’s comment, John A. agreed: “It’s hard not to get pissed off about this kind of stuff...I mean, there are
people all over the world who are going to get pissed.” The majority of participants who spoke of anger, however, directed it at the U.S. government and military. For example, Angela, described the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as being senseless and pointless, and she was also angry about “how the veterans don’t get treated fairly, you know, when they’re done with their service. They don’t get compensated and well taken care of, and I think that’s really unfair.”

Ten of the participants also mentioned feelings of pride or patriotism connected to war. Aubrey said that she associates feelings of courage and bravery with war because, she explained, “I think it takes a certain person to have that bravery and, you know, to go to war and fight for the country knowing that they could lose their life.” Similarly, Imani felt “appreciation for those who are wiling to put their life on the line for this stuff.” Some participants spoke more specifically about their feelings of pride and patriotism in response to media about conflict. Henry said that when he that when he encounters war stories he feels “Strong, as a nation. Protected. I feel nothing can really harm us at this point.” War movies in particular make Webster appreciative of soldiers’ service and he said, “It inspires me a little bit. It kind of gives me warmer feelings, almost, is that weird?” Felicity spoke specifically about photos of war, commenting, “When we see our soldiers and our flag, I don’t know, it gives you a sense of pride. And seeing images like that, I don’t know, it gives me hope.”

Photographs Evoke Concern

Research Question 2 investigated whether images of conflict evoke concern for the people depicted, or if they overwhelm participants, or both. It also asked how participants resolve potential ambivalent reactions. This research question was answered
by analyzing participants’ responses after reading the article and viewing the photographs. In all of the focus groups, participants expressed compassion for the people affected by the conflicts, they demonstrated empathic processing, and they largely attributed their concern to the influence of the photographs, as opposed to the text. Participants did not talk about feeling overwhelmed by the pictures; however, some people did mention feeling helpless to act on the concern they felt for those depicted in the photos. Some participants spoke about having conflicting responses to the images, and this ambivalence appeared unresolved.

**Photographs drive emotions.** Recall that the materials were introduced to the participants halfway through the sessions, after a general discussion of how people process stories and media about war. Once participants read the article and looked at a slideshow of the images, they were asked simply, “What did you think?” In most of the sessions, participants first responded to that question with analytical statements about the political implications of the articles or with criticisms about the text. Typically, participants would then mention the photographs and start speaking about their emotions, as opposed to their thoughts. In the few sessions where participants did not spontaneously make the shift to talking about emotional reactions and photographs, they were asked directly what emotions they experienced while reading the story and looking at the pictures. Again, once participants started talking about their emotions they made reference primarily to the images. In a few sessions, participants spoke of their emotional reactions and the photographs before talking about their thoughts and the articles. Across all of the sessions, it was clear that the images were largely provoking participants’ emotional and empathic responses.
Many of the participants explicitly talked about the experience of viewing visuals of conflict as being more emotional than reading an article. “Usually when I read information, there's this sort of sense of detachment,” said Jenny B., “but when I see pictures, when I see people actually getting hurt, like videos and stuff like that, I do feel more sympathy and empathy towards them.” Responding to Jenny B., and talking specifically about the article and photos, Scott commented:

When I read this, I didn't really feel much other than I was just reading information on a page, and I have obtained information. I guess that was how I was feeling like, 'Okay. I just obtained information,' but then when I saw the picture, it's a little bit more emotional.

Similarly, Hailey reported:

When I read this I didn't really feel much. I mean, I was obviously interested in what was going on, but I didn't feel any emotion. But when I saw the pictures, it just gave it context and made me feel sad about it.

Taylor also related a similar experience, saying, “When I was reading this, it kind of goes over your head, but the pictures, they actually make you think and make you feel something.”

When talking about the difference in the way that they processed the images and the text, several participants mentioned more specific reasons explaining why the photos had more emotional impact. Many people observed that they were moved more by images of a few people suffering than they were by the statistic in the article of the civilian death toll exceeding 10,000. Referencing that statistic, Jim explained, “I feel more for the kid who lost his home, or for seeing the one man in the street than seeing 10,000 on a page. I feel- I have more of an emotional response to that.” Similarly, Cameron said when she read about the 10,000 casualties, “It’s crazy, but it didn’t affect me, which it should. But you see pictures of one dead person and you’re more affected.”
Justin explained the power of photos of conflict compared to text when he observed, “You could turn away from looking at a paper and forget about it, but, you know, you see the images and have sympathy for the families and civilians.” Some participants spoke about photographs being more moving because of their presumed evidentiary quality. “If you see the picture,” Jade asked, “It’s like, how can you dispute that?” Elizabeth explained, “When you see a picture, you believe it’s happening, and you understand what’s happening.” Some participants summed it up more simply, like Tom, who said, “Pictures, they bring about the raw emotion that is further explained by text,” or Victoria, who claimed, “Articles give you the facts and the pictures give you the emotions.”

**Compassionate and empathic responses to images.** The emotional experience most participants described in response to the photos was compassion. Some people described this response as feeling sad or bad for the people depicted and expanded on that by expressing concern for their suffering. Referring to photos from Afghanistan, Tom said he felt “sad in seeing the little boy and the guy who was crying at his brother's funeral because those are like- it's so unfortunate that there are people in those countries who have to live like that everyday.” Speaking about the two parallel photos from the Democratic Republic of Congo, London echoed Tom’s thoughts:

> I felt sad for the guy losing his son and stuff. To walk up and have to actually see that- I would never want to personally go through that. Or to come and see my home- to come and not have a home.

Jake also described feeling compassion, saying, “You see all these pictures- of the little boy who came back to his hut that was destroyed. You just, you feel bad for everyone. That’s how I feel. I feel bad for literally everyone there.” A few participants actually used the terms compassion and empathy, as opposed to describing them. For example, Devin
stated, “Definitely, when I saw the pictures, it definitely brought up, I guess, empathy or sympathy.” Angela expressed a related thought, saying, “I definitely felt a deeper sense of sadness because seeing the images— it’s the visual effect— and I just have a lot of empathy and compassion for people who have to experience this.”

Participants described the process of empathizing with the people depicted in the photos in various ways. Some made general statements about how the photos drove home the gravity of the effects of war that people experience. Carrie commented,” Going through the images, once I saw the father reacting to his son's death, it just, I don't know it just made me realize that it's just not something that anyone should have to get used to.” One participant, Webster, touched on the idea of actually experiencing the same emotions as the people in the photos, saying:

> You kind of feel a sense of what, I don't want to say you're feeling what they're feeling, but you can just kind of, just by looking at their face, you can tell the type of emotion or the type of thoughts that are potentially running through their head. Other people made comments that indicated they were thinking about how the people depicted in the images felt. Reacting to pictures that showed the human cost of war, many participants posed questions about what the future would hold for the victims. Talking about the photo of the boy from the Democratic Republic of Congo who lost his home, Rob asked, “What’s he going to do for the rest of his life?” Others made mention of wondering how the people in the pictures might have felt. For example, speaking about the photo of an Afghan man in the hospital, Christine claimed, “I can't even imagine like what that must feel like, or just being horrified to go outside and be afraid to get injured like that.”

The way that most participants appear to have experienced empathy was by thinking about how they would feel if they or their loved ones were in the situations
depicted in the photos. Talking about a photo of an injured man in the Congolese hospital, Grace explained, “I think a way to connect with things and really have sympathy for it and really feel for it is to connect it back to yourself.” Steve A. described a similar experience when he was looking at the images, saying, “I'm trying to image myself, like if I was there in person, how I would react?” Referring to a photo from the Afghanistan set, Michael said:

I feel like the picture that resonated most with me was the one of the man that had his brother killed in the cross-fire and just to see that, I felt it was like, 'Wow like what if one of my- what if I were in Afghanistan- that was my family member?' It just, I thought of- uh it was a very humanizing thing.

Alison had a similar reaction to that photo, “When I saw the guy crying about this brother, I was like, 'Oh my God. If that was my brother, I'd be like the same exact way.' So I mean, I guess, I don't know.” Jimi exhibited similar empathic processing when she said, “The one picture that stuck out to me was the one with the guy missing his arm because he, his life is changed forever, and just imagining myself in that situation...he's never going to be the same person.”

Interestingly, there were several participants that claimed in the first half of the discussion that they were desensitized to media coverage of war, and specifically visuals. However, when they read the article and viewed the photos, they spoke about feeling concerned for those depicted in the photos. For example, in the beginning of one session, Antonio stated:

I know that war is violent and very bloody and horrible but it’s something I cannot bring myself to empathize, sympathize, [with] in a way. It’s like seeing an accident somewhere in the news, and even though I know that it’s a bad thing it doesn’t affect me that much.
Mary A. agreed with him and elaborated, “Yeah I feel the same way. It’s upsetting to look at, but I don’t feel like that connection to it because I feel like I’m not affected by it, and I’m not really connected to it, you know?” Yet, talking about the photos, Antonio said:

Only ones that impacted me in any way were the one where the brother, the guy who lost his brother, and the child who lost his house because it was something actually I felt that involved people who were not involved in the war whatsoever. And that made me feel empathically, because they had to be a victim for something that they had no role or impact into.

Again, Mary A. felt similarly, explaining, “I was going to say the same two pictures… yeah cause you get, you see it and go, ‘Oh I would not want that happening to me.’” In another group, participants were asked directly about the contradiction of claiming to be desensitized, then talking about being moved emotionally by war photos. Jack explained it like this, “You think you can handle it, like play video games, watch movies, watch TV shows, and you're like, ‘Ahh I’ve seen that stuff before.’ But when it's really in front of you, it's just a lot different.”

Ambivalent responses to war photos. In addition to investigating whether war photos evoke concern, Research Question 2 asked if such pictures also overwhelm people and, if so, how they resolve ambivalent emotional responses. The focus group sessions indicated that the majority of participants felt the emotion of compassion and engaged in empathic processing, and they were not overwhelmed emotionally in terms of being able to process the article and the images. However, many participants did talk about feeling helpless or powerless to do anything about the concern they felt in response to the materials. They reported that these feelings of helplessness and powerlessness affected their likeliness to seek out information about the topic in the future; therefore, this
reaction will be analyzed in the section below about information seeking behavior.

Although participants did not speak about conflicting emotions in terms of feeling concerned versus overwhelmed, they did exhibit ambivalence in other ways.

A good number of participants spoke about being torn between feelings of pride or patriotism and sadness about war in general and the U.S. conflict in Afghanistan specifically. There were also many participants who talked about having guilt along with feelings of concern when confronted with the materials. These comments were most often related to feeling guilty about the relative safety and prosperity of the United States compared to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Participants described their ambivalence as something that was frustrating and confusing, and they did not mention ways that they were able to resolve the tension of conflicted emotions.

The ambivalence between feeling pride or patriotism and feeling sadness was summed up by Ted, who commented on war in general, “Like any war, it's such a conflicted thing that even the good, you know, patriotic emotions are like kinda muddled.” For some participants the conflicting emotions were related to having family or friends in the military. Marie described the recent U.S. wars as being unnecessary, then went on to say, “But at the same time, I am also grateful for what they're doing just because I have family who are fighting so, I mean, it's just like conflicting feelings I think.” Other participants experienced similar ambivalence despite not having any military connections. Kim characterized war as senseless and claimed that thinking about war made her sad. Yet, she added, “I don't know if I have a sense of pride for war per-se for America, but I do have a sense of pride for people that go and fight for our country and then come home.” Alison called her experience of processing the materials about
Afghanistan “multi-emotional” because, as she said, “I have mixed feelings on it. Of course I'm prideful of America, but then I'm thinking of the other land. These people, they only have so much. They only know what they're taught, just like we are.”

A few participants pointed out the mix of pride or patriotism and sadness that they felt when looking specifically at pictures of dead Taliban or FDLR fighters, designated the enemies of U.S. and U.N. forces. Reacting to the photos from the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Riley confessed, “weirdly enough, seeing a picture of the rebel death made me happy in a weird way.” Reacting to photos of Afghan casualties, Melissa was also conflicted: “I don't feel bad for them, but then at the same time, it's like you do when you see someone upset like that…You're just kind of taught to look at them as the bad guy, but they're human too.”

The other predominant type of ambivalence that participants experienced was feeling compassion and guilt at the same time. After sharing thoughts that conveyed feelings of compassion and empathic processing, many participants followed up with confessions of guilt. The following exchange from one focus group captures this sentiment:

Elizabeth: I feel guilty because I am always so concerned about myself and my own problems and the people around me that I don't think about other people enough and how much worse they have it compared to my minor problems and the minor problems of my friends and family.

Lauryn: Yeah, my biggest worry is, ‘Oh, what am I going to do after I graduate,’ and other people are like, ‘Am I gonna live today? Am I gonna get shot when I leave my house?’ I mean, that's crazy.

Sullivan: … Sometimes it's just life or death over there, and we live a sheltered life honestly for the most part in America.
In another session, Molly expressed feelings of guilt when comparing her life to the lives of those depicted in the photos. She said, “I get to walk back to my house without thinking twice about the safety of my life, when they’re walking through center of their town and there’s two military forces, and you might be caught in the crossfire.” This tension between guilt and compassion had implications for participants’ information seeking behavior, and those implications will be discussed later in the analysis.

**Emotional Responses to Visual Frames**

Research Question 3 asked whether the emotional experience of viewing images with a human-cost-of-war frame was different than viewing images with a militarism frame. It also asked if so, how and why. The overwhelming majority of participants felt more emotion and engaged in more empathic processing when they looked at the photos with a human-cost-of-war visual frame compared to the ones with a militarism frame. This difference was evident because participants explicitly spoke about feeling more moved by the images of human suffering and referred almost exclusively to these pictures when describing their experiences of empathy. Based on participants’ comments, it appears that the photographs with a human-cost-of-war frame were more effective at evoking compassion and empathy because some of them depicted innocent victims of war, because they humanized conflict, and because they were more novel than the pictures with a militarism visual frame.

*Human-cost-of-war frames evoke more compassion and empathy.* In all of the focus groups, participants were shown a gallery that contained images with both human-cost-of-war and militarism visual frames. In the majority of the sessions, participants spontaneously mentioned which images had affected them the most, which were
primarily the ones depicting human suffering. Without being prompted, many participants also spoke of particular pictures that caused them to feel compassion and engage in empathy. After these voluntary comments, all the participants were asked to specify which one or two photographs they would select to illustrate the article if they were acting as editor. This question was designed to obtain an inventory of which photograph or photographs resonated with each participant. In all 16 sessions, participants referred to the photographs with a human-cost-of-war frame more often than the ones with a militarism frame as they talked about their emotional reactions. In fact, only eight participants in five of the sessions said that they would illustrate the story using images with a militarism frame. Four of those participants reported feeling moved by the militarism photos, and the other four participants explained that the militarism images simply fit the article best. The two types of photos that were mentioned most often (in 14 out of the 16 sessions) were the ones in each conflict that showed a boy standing outside of his destroyed home and a man crying over the loss of a relative. Many of the participants also talked frequently about images that showed the deceased and injured.

Participants made it clear that they experienced more emotion when viewing the photos of human suffering than when viewing the ones of soldiers in action. Comparing the photo of an Afghan man mourning to a photo of U.S. soldiers engaged in a firefight, Gail said, “When you see the man crying, you’re like, ‘Wow.’ That hits you more than just seeing people running.” He went on to talk about the picture of American troops transporting their fallen comrades in flag-draped coffins, and elaborated, “I could feel that emotion in both those pictures. And you’re like, ‘What happened?’ You know- you
want to know what happened.” In the same session, Mary A. agreed with Gail’s comment about the picture of the brother crying, saying:

That was the one that struck me the most cause you actually see how it affects people, where as [in the] others you are always seeing soldiers, soldiers, and soldiers, so like you don’t feel connected to that at all. I don’t get any emotional response really. They’re all pictures of soldiers.

In a different session, Jack brought up his response to the same photo, “Seeing a picture of a brother bawling his eyes out at his own brother's funeral just really got to me.”

Summing up a discussion where participants mentioned various human-cost-of-war photos as stirring emotions, Webster said, “I kind of think the more powerful images would be of any…any really civilian images or things that aren't directly military related. So anyone that's caught in the crossfire; any village that got blown up for no reason.”

When participants described engaging in empathic processing toward the people involved in the conflict, they almost always illustrated their points using pictures with a human-cost-of-war frame. The photos of a Congolese boy outside of his destroyed home and a father crying over the death of his son hit Angela hard, and she said, “definitely seeing the casualties and the losses just makes you more conscious of, you know, this is someone's reality everyday.” Responding to Angela, Natalie commented on the picture of the boy, saying, “He barely had anything, and now he really doesn't have anything because it was blown up or something. And he was alone in the picture so I just can't imagine what that is like.” Ryan was also moved to think empathically by the picture of the boy, remarking, “I could never imagine that happening to me as a child or even now, just losing my house because of war and terrorism.” Other participants, like Jordan, experienced empathy when confronted with photos of injured and dead people. She said
of the photo of an injured Afghan man, “That was just like so sad cause that could have been any- any of us if we lived there so, I don't know. It's just sad.”

Pictures with a human-cost-of-war visual frame also caused some participants to feel empathy for people they perceived as enemies in the conflicts. In most cases, this response was limited to sessions with materials focused on the conflict in Afghanistan. For example, Devin spoke about how the photos helped her see the war in Afghanistan from another perspective:

The Afghani man, he was definitely heart broken because his brother got accidentally killed. So it's not just that war affects us because we're the top dog or the bigger country helping. But it does affect everyone from people in that country who also are fighting against the Taliban and then the kid who was standing where his house used to be. So, it definitely affects everyone.

Audrey suggested, “I think we get so wrapped up in what's happening to our own people and we don't ever really take the time to think of what's happening to the people who are innocent over there.” She went on to say that the photo of the Afghan boy who lost his home made her think about the Afghan people. John B. said that because of U.S. media coverage of conflict,

You kind of have this subconscious assumption that everyone in the Middle East is out to get us, which isn't true at all. And then you see pictures of civilian casualties and realize that they're experiencing almost the same thing we are, just from a different point of view.

Relatedly, Kate commented that she and others have a “patriotic American narrative” that can be disrupted by photos of human suffering. John A. said seeing images of civilian loss made him see that “they're people who are not involved in these skirmishes. They don't hate America. They're just living their lives and they're losing people too.”

**Why human-cost-of-war frames are effective.** In addition to asking if and how the emotional response to pictures with a human-cost-of-war frame is different than the
reaction to those with a militarism frame, Research Question 3 asked why such differences might occur. First, many participants talked about feeling compassion and experiencing empathy for the civilians in many of the pictures with a human-cost-of-war frame because of their innocence. Molly explained why she didn’t feel anything in response to the militarism pictures compared to the ones of human suffering, saying “‘Cause you’re soldiers and you’re actually committing the violence right now. So what’s more heart wrenching for me to see is people who aren’t engaged in conflict but are affected by it. Like the child, like the dad.” Many participants mentioned innocence in connection to the photos showing the crying relative and the boy who lost his home. Jade explained that those photos show the “real impact” on people who have nothing to do with war, and “That it's not just the people fighting- that- who are- hurt by this. It's just anyone who can be affected by these things.” Talking about the same photos, Dee said, “They put into perspective what’s happening with citizens. They’re not the people that are fighting. They are just people caught in the crossfires. You know?” Participants also shed light on why the photo of the boy resonated with so many. “I think anytime children are involved,” said Aubrey, “it's a lot more impactful.” Anne shared a similar thought: “If I see children in it, that's when it affects me the most because it's not something you want children to go through. I mean, it's traumatizing.” Finally, Steve A. said, “Any time you see children involved in those types of situations it's kind of- you know- kind of takes away the numbness.”

Some participants also articulated that the reason they were more moved by pictures that focused on civilians was because they could personally relate to them more than the ones showing military action. This reaction has been partially demonstrated
above in comments where participants said that the photos of the relative crying, the boy without a home, and the injured man in the hospital caused them to imagine what they would feel in those situations. Referring to the photos of the mourning Congolese father and the Congolese boy, Katie A. explained that the images brought “some form of relatability” to the people involved in the conflict, and she argued that it makes people more likely to gain a deeper understanding of the story and to want to learn more.

Similarly, Hailey identified the photo of the father crying as being the one that stood out most to her, explaining, “because it gives the war, makes it more personal. And I feel like it was just a crazy picture just of him just completely distraught and it really resonated with me.” Emma said she didn’t get much out of the pictures of the soldiers, “but the child and the person who's injured, you see the effects of - how it affects everyone. And it's more - it's closer. You have children everywhere, so it's closer to home.”

Another reason why there was a difference in participants’ emotional responses could be that the images with a human-cost-of-war frame were more novel than the ones with a militarism frame. Many of the participants claimed that they typically see pictures of soldiers and military action in the war coverage they encounter, and not images of the way war affects civilians. Piper said that pictures of U.S. soldiers or Taliban fighters are the most common ones she has seen in U.S. media, and those do not affect her. She continued, “But if you see a kid standing there in a rubble or somebody hugging a reporter with - you see the emotion in his face - you want to know the pain behind his eyes.” Steve A. also argued that U.S. media tends to primarily illustrate war with photos of destroyed buildings or soldiers in combat, and he wished there were more images in the media like the photos of the Congolese father crying and the dead body in the street.
He continued, “They never show the other side of the story, and I think that if you started showing those type of pictures, I think you'll get more of an emotional reaction out of people.” Kate also identified a gap in U.S. visual war coverage:

The photos of the people in Afghanistan are photos that we don’t see a lot. I don't know if that's just me or not, but I feel like we don't really ever see that side - like the civilians and stuff like that: the guy who was wounded in the suicide attack and the other guy who was crying at his brother's funeral. We never see that.

Like Kate, Jack pointed to a lack of visual war coverage in U.S. media that draws attention to civilian loss in Afghanistan. For him the most poignant pictures were of the crying brother and the injured man in the hospital. He explained, “Because then you're seeing how much of an impact it has on the people over there. You don't really get to see that. You only get the American perspective.”

Information Seeking

Research Question 4 investigated what causes participants to engage with or turn away from war photos, and what influences information seeking behavior about conflict. Although participants spoke specifically about how images of war influenced their desire to learn more about war, these comments were contextualized in a larger discussion of the effects of various forms of U.S. media about conflict. Many participants seek out news about war because they feel a responsibility to be informed about such a serious topic. Others do not actively look for coverage of conflict, but they engage with it when specific stories dominate news cycles and social media feeds. There were particular formats that made participants more likely to be interested in war: movies, comedy, and photographs. On the other hand, many participants tend to avoid media related to conflict when it does not relate to the United States (this reason will be explored in the section addressing Research Question 5). Participants also spoke about the effects of an
overwhelming media environment where they do not have time to consume all the information they are presented with. As a result, many participants said they opt for media that is more entertaining than media that provide war coverage. Many participants said their feelings of sadness caused them to turn away from news about conflict. Closely connected to that explanation, participants spoke about the futility of engaging with media about war because they felt powerless to do anything to help.

Factors that drive information seeking. One reason many participants said they regularly consume media about war, and specifically news coverage, is that they feel a social obligation to do so. For some participants this view was expressed as a general responsibility to stay informed about a serious topic such as conflict. Anne commented that she grew up being taught it was important to be aware of significant events and said, “I mean war's going on. We should be aware of it. So I read it.” Michelle B. connected that responsibility to her status as a college student, asserting, “I think it's kind of our obligation to be educated about it because we comprise part of the population that actually has a chance to be educated about it.” Katie A. argued, “It’s your job to know these things so that even if there’s not anything you can do about it, at least you know what’s happening.” Steve A. shared, “As much as I don't want to see it, you know, you kind of have to. You know, it's kind of, it is a very sobering reality.” He went on to say that people should engage with stories about conflict to become aware of the serious issues that need attention.

Participants also felt they should be aware of war news out of respect for those involved. Felicity knows people currently enlisted, and she said, “They're fighting for all of us. So to me, to pay attention- it's serious. You know, they're fighting for our freedom,
so I feel like you should be concerned.” Jordan has family in the Middle East and said that influences why she follows news about U.S. involvement in the region, and she added, “You should have some knowledge about it cause it is our country so we need to know what's going on.” Thinking about civilians, Zainab said there is a story behind every military action, and she asserted that we “have a responsibility towards learning that story, especially since so many people who are killed in wars end up dying anonymously or not being heard.”

Other participants admitted they do not actively seek out media related to conflict, but pay attention only when certain stories become popular in mainstream news or social media. “Unfortunately in today's world, if it's not in your face, you don't think about it,” remarked Gail, “If it's not in the news constantly, you're not going to-- you don't think about it.” Jenny B. explained how she encounters news about war:

To be honest, I don't go out of my way to watch news or anything like that, but certain things are prevalent enough that you'll like come across it like on your computer, social media, your teachers will bring it up, or even your peers will talk about it, and then if something's prevalent enough, I'll go and do more research on it.

Like Jenny B., Katie B. only takes in media about conflict when it has been brought to her attention by various sources and is a topic everyone is talking about:

When I do finally hear about it, it's, that's because everybody has. It's been a huge, just a huge story. Because and the only reason I know about it is because it's so popular and the media has covered it so much. And it's not because I'm going on scholarly journals or trying to educate myself more.

Audrey made a similar comment: “If it's on the news, I like to know what's going on. But if it's not something that's being talked about, I don't like Google it or look it up. It's just something that's relevant at the time.”
Format is also a factor that influences whether participants engage with media about war. Many participants talked about being more likely to seek out the topic when it was in the form of a movie, a comedy show, or a photograph, as opposed to a hard news story. Many participants criticized news stories because they often fail to personalize war. For example, Piper critiqued, “I feel like with the news, I'm kind of distant from it. Like okay, this person died. Like, they become another number.” In the same conversation, Olivia chimed in: “Yeah, I agree. If it was like more on a personal level, I might actually watch it or be engaged a little bit more.”

On the other hand, many participants explained that they prefer movies because the narrative format personalizes the experience of war and makes it easier to relate to. Victoria put it succinctly, “I think especially through movies, you sympathize almost more because you get to know a character.” Henry said he prefers to read news articles to get the facts about developments in war, but he said movies “are a good way to depict the emotions of things, to kind of give an empathic feel to it.”

Many participants also said they favored learning about war through comedy shows like The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and Last Week Tonight. Using satire to tackle the heavy topic of conflict makes it more digestible. As Stephanie put it, the comedy “doesn’t make you uncomfortable anymore. Makes you laugh.” Elizabeth explained that this approach “draws light on how this [development in war] is happening, but we're not trying to scare you with what's happening.” Rick clarified that it’s “not necessarily [that] the subject is funny, but it makes it- you know- pulls you in. The comedy is just to pull you in so you pay attention to the substance.”
Participants also spoke about being more engaged with war coverage when they view photographs as opposed to news articles. “Let's be real,” said Ned, “people are way more inclined to look at something when there's a picture.” Kim shared a similar thought and explained, “I'd be more apt to open an article that also has a picture than just to see text because I see text all day long, and like I don't- It doesn't catch my attention.” Zainab also observed that pictures have a “more lasting and direct impact” than reading text about war. She continued, “The same doesn't really happen, I mean it can happen with text, but pictures, especially if it's something that happened in real life, accomplish that more effectively.”

Other participants spoke about preferring photographs specifically because they felt that images have the potential to arouse concern in audiences. Talking about the materials, Mary B. said:

You see an article like this, but then you see pictures next to it, you're like, 'Oh my gosh what's going on?' because you're captivated by the images, and that might get you to read the article and educate yourself more about it.

Steve A. asserted, “We're a society who likes to look at pictures, and you know when we look at those pictures, it'll conjure up bunch of emotions.” He also felt that the photos were effective at generating compassion and action, saying that the images would cause people to “look at the situation more and maybe- then maybe- they might have an idea of the situation and might say something or might advocate on doing something about it.” Elizabeth also spoke about the potential power of photos of war, remarking, “When we see the picture, it's- you're being- you have to acknowledge that this is happening. You can't just push this aside and be ignorant of it.” Grace put it more passionately, arguing that pictures can cause people to become involved in movements. She pointed out that
photojournalists who cover war aim to “shake up how easy everything is and to look at what's really going on all around the world and to make it a call to action and make you want to get involved and do your part to help.”

**Factors that discourage information seeking.** In terms of why people turn away from media about conflict, participants said one reason is that the constant flow of news and entertainment in U.S. media makes it feel overwhelming to completely keep up with current events. As a result, participants end up just choosing media that interests them the most. “It would take a lot of effort to be informed on everything that's going on in the world,” remarked Jim, and followed up, saying, “That's where some of the response of- um- to just tune it out comes from. Cause it's this information overload.” Responding to Jim, Sara agreed, “society just has so much information that it's impossible for us to get everything, and it's just overwhelming.”

Talking more specifically about the age of online news and social media, Sullivan observed, “news get refreshed by the second now with everything. And you want to read so much, but when it just keeps updating and updating and updating you have to really be selective of what you want to read.” Elizabeth explained how this results in avoiding news about war in favor of other media:

We are kind of inundated with so much news and so many problems that it could be overwhelming. And you just want to look for the stuff that interests you because you know that it's going to satisfy your needs and you're not…you're not going to feel sad. You're not going to feel overwhelmed and stressed because of all the problems going on.

Ned put the same concept a bit differently, saying, “War is a heavy topic. There's a lot of different aspects, politics, people tie in religion, morals, stuff like that. We can watch the Kardashians. It's mindless.” Speaking about his reaction to the materials, Jack
said he was becoming more interested in the topic of war, “but I know deep down, when I get back to my dorm, if I had the choice of playing video games or actually reading about this stuff, I'm probably just going to play video game.”

One reason many participants gave for choosing media about other topics is that coverage of conflict simply leaves them feeling too sad. Some participants avoid news altogether because they feel it contains too many negative stories. Ashley explained it this way:

I get very sad and depressed when I see news stories on the television or read anything. It's just, if I continue to do it and I’m keeping up on it everyday, I just tend to find myself more and more sad and depressed that's why I don't really follow it as much.

Katie A. expressed the same feeling and said of bad news in general, “You don’t want that to be part of your world, so you kind of don’t want to take part in it at all.” Other participants spoke more specifically of turning away from news about war, despite feeling that it was information they should be aware of.

Talking about war coverage, Christine remarked, “It's obviously good to be informed, but sometimes you want to back away from reality and kind of stay in your own little comfort zone.” Mary B. made a similar comment:

I think it's really important to educate myself on it, like I said earlier, but at the same time, I just- I don't- I guess I get in a mood when I do it, and I don't necessarily want to bring in negative stuff into my mind.

“When I read war stories they’re all sad, and, I mean- I don’t know- I know I should be informed, but it kind of puts a damper on- whatever- my time,” said Sarah A., and she explained that this sadness kept her from seeking out information about conflict.

One key reason that these feelings of sadness prevent participants from engaging with war news and images is that they also feel powerless to do anything to help people
affected by war. Many participants spoke at length about feeling frustrated because they care about the people caught up in conflict, but do not have any recourse to act. Talking about war coverage, John B. said, “It makes you feel a little bit helpless cause all these things are happening and there really isn't much you can do.” Ashley spoke of feeling particularly saddened by the image of the Congolese boy who lost his home and displayed empathic processing. Yet, she expressed frustration over what to do with her emotional response: “I'm here and that's- it's over there so I don't really know what I can do. Like how I can make a difference?” Katie B. described feeling deflated because of the seeming impossibility of responding in a meaningful way to images of war. She lamented, “If you're being a realist, I'm not going to have a meeting with Obama. He's not gonna listen to me. I can't get a group and be like, oh these pictures are terrible; a call to action.” As a result, participants said they avoid media about conflict. “If I feel like there's nothing I can do about it, I'll just not watch it at all,” Riley stated. Similarly, Paige explained that she doesn’t seek out conflict coverage “because it's so sad and depressing sometimes. It's like, why would I want to know all these horrible things if I can't do anything about it?”

Michelle B. projected these type of feelings onto a wider population, saying, “I think that people kind of get this sense that, ‘Oh my god, this problem is so much bigger than we can even imagine. What could I possibly do? What's the point of even knowing about it?’” Rick felt conflicted about staying informed about war news, and commented, “I don’t want to be ignorant of people suffering, I don’t just wanna ignore what’s going on, but at the same time, I don’t know what I can do to help it.”
When participants discussed their frustration over feeling helpless to effect change, they usually paired that with vocalizing a need for media that offers information about potential solutions to conflict or ways that people can help. Speaking about war movies focused on veterans, Antonio said the films send the message that “I can, should think about the soldiers that come back from war, I should help them wherever I can.” He continued, “That’s a good message and all, but it doesn’t explain how I should do it. Angela avoids media about war because she doesn’t feel she has any way to make a tangible impact, but she said, “If I could help and knew that it would go to really help that little boy and his village and rebuild for his education or something, yeah it would be different for me.” Tom criticized news stories for reporting developments in wars by simply recalling the events of a battle or tallying the number of people killed. He argued that a better approach is “when it speaks of bigger developments, because that's what the people really want to hear. Like, when is the war ending? When are we getting out? Or when are we achieving the mission?” Ted also critiqued current news coverage of war, but he was concerned about the lack of solutions offered:

I feel like when we switch to those type [sic] of [war] stories, there's never any way to say, ‘This is awful, but here's something you can do.’ I realize they only get thirty minutes, but like I very rarely anymore ever hear about the charities and all that stuff that are involved.

Like Ted, Carrie expressed a desire for media to focus more on potential solutions to conflict as opposed to just reporting the details about fighting. She said, “There's multiple solutions that I'm sure would be much better than war, but I guess I would be more interested in finding those solutions than actually researching and, you know, kind of reporting on war itself.”

Influence of Identification on Empathy and Information Seeking
Research Question 5 asked whether participants’ levels of empathy and information seeking vary according to whether the conflict depicted is one where the U.S. military is directly involved. To answer this question, the responses of the participants exposed to the materials about Afghanistan, where the United States has been involved in a protracted war, were compared to the responses of the participants who were given materials about the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the United States has not been directly involved. The discussions revealed, first, that participants think primarily about conflicts that affect the United States, as opposed to others around the world, when they think about war. Second, participants’ empathic reactions were similar across the groups with different conflicts. What differed, however, was participants’ interest in seeking out additional information about the two conflicts. Participants in the Democratic Republic of Congo groups felt they were less likely to engage with news about that conflict than the participants in the Afghanistan groups.

The first question asked in all of the sessions was, “What kinds of stories or images come to your mind when you think about war?” In response, participants overwhelmingly talked about wars that involved the United States. In every session participants were quick to mention the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and terrorism. Many people also referred to World War I and II and to the Vietnam War. Conflicts that did not involve the United States were mentioned (before the introduction of the materials) in just five of the sessions. In those instances, the conflicts were brought up briefly by one or two people, and the group did not discuss them further. In some of the Democratic Republic of Congo sessions, a few participants actually commented on the tendency of Americans to think about war exclusively in terms of conflicts the United States is
involved in. After considering the materials about the Democratic Republic of Congo, Jake remarked,

> When we talk about war, we immediately think we're talking about the U.S. and then something else, and that's what we all focused on. And then you also- and then I remember that, you know, war happens all over the world all the time.

In another session with Democratic Republic of Congo materials, Angela reflected on her initial thoughts about war compared to her reaction to the materials, saying, “In my mind, I think of war more so with the ones that we've been fighting, dealing with, you know, not thinking about other areas of the world specifically. It was an eye-opener for me.”

Overall, there appeared to be a baseline of ethnocentric thinking among the participants in terms of conflict.

This ethnocentricity, however, did not seem to dampen empathic responses among the participants in the Democratic Republic of Congo groups. Recall from the findings related to Research Questions 2 and 3 that participants in both groups displayed empathic processing. The examples in these two sections were drawn equally from sessions with material from both of the conflicts. Participants responded with more empathy to the photographs than the text, and to the images with a human-cost-of-war frame than the militarism frame. Specifically, participants across both groups empathized the most with the boys who had lost their homes and with the men who were crying for killed relatives. Therefore, the visual frame and the presence of innocent victims are factors that affected participants’ empathic responses, whereas the country depicted did not.

On the other hand, the country depicted did influence participants’ stated intent to pursue additional information about the conflicts in the future. Many participants
acknowledged that they experienced concern for the people depicted in the photos of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, yet they admitted that these feelings were unlikely to influence their information seeking about the topic. “I felt empathy towards people caught up in that conflict,” said Jim, yet he explained a bit later, “I don't want to say it's meaningless to me, cause it's not, and I understand that there's this going on, but it's like- I don't know- it's just very removed from me.” Based on this sense of distance from the issue, he said probably would not keep up with news about the issue. Similarly, Kim said, “Seeing the images, it did make me feel sad, but it's- so far from, removed from my little world.” These feelings of sadness were unlikely to compel her to engage further with news about the conflict, as she explained, “It sounds terrible, but after I leave here, I probably won't reflect on it or think about it so... I don't know how much of an impact it'd really have.”

Some participants specifically explained that they would opt for news stories that deal with conflicts related directly to the United States. For example, Victoria stated, “I would be more inclined to read about ISIS than to read about this because that affects more. That's like bigger, like that's affecting the whole world.” Carrie also expressed the same idea, saying, “Unless it's relevant to something that concerns the U.S., I'm not sure that I would feel so inclined to read.” Capturing the sentiment expressed by many other participants, Aubrey said that when it comes to what type of information people seek out in terms of war, “It's what affects you. You're more likely to pay attention to things that affect you or maybe your family than things that don't.”

Discussion
This study investigated how media consumers make sense of photographs of war and how such visuals connect to emotional, empathic, and information seeking responses. The findings from the focus group discussions revealed that the context within which participants encounter images of conflict play a crucial role in understanding the varying emotional responses. The responses also demonstrated that participants did experience feelings of compassion and empathic processing when viewing the pictures of conflict. Specifically, participants felt concerned primarily for the people depicted in the images that employed a human-cost-of-war visual frame as opposed to a militarism frame.

Photos drawing attention to the ravages of conflict were a factor in some participants’ intentions to learn more about the conflicts in the material, but information seeking seemed to be driven by a complex combination of many factors. This study also revealed that participants were moved to feel compassion and engage in empathic processing when looking at human-cost-of-war pictures regardless of whether the conflict involved the United States or not. However, participants in the Democratic Republic of Congo groups reported they were less likely to pursue news about the issue in the future. Taken together, these findings contribute to visual communication theories and offer valuable insights into journalism practice.

**Making Sense of Media About War**

In general, photographs are polysemous, with their meaning defined differently by every viewer and influenced by the context of presentation. Pictures of war are no different. In fact, due to the gravity of their content and the complexity of the politics surrounding conflicts, their meaning is arguably harder to pin down than most images (Sontag, 1973). Therefore, context matters when it comes to questions about how media
consumers make sense of pictures of conflict. Most of the participants in this study grew up with their country engaged in war in Afghanistan and Iraq. War, for them, has become the norm; it has been an ever-present backdrop in their daily lives. As a result, participants have become desensitized to media related to conflict. This group of participants is also highly skeptical of information about war they receive from the U.S. government and media outlets. The combination of feeling numb to coverage of conflict and mistrustful of the sources delivering it, sets the stage for participants to be disinterested in war. Therefore, the findings of this study must take that context into account.

Participants usually do not come across war photos in isolation. Rather, they see such images as part of their overall media consumption and interpret them in conjunction with their own worldviews and the influence of the opinions of others. Therefore, it is important to identify how media about war, in general, makes participants feel. The dominant emotion participants reported feeling about war was sadness. The sadness they described was an emotion that was felt on behalf of the people involved and affected by conflict. It was, based on participants’ descriptions, a sadness linked to compassion. A majority of participants also expressed feelings of fear when thinking about war. Their fear was primarily related to nervousness about whether they would become victims of a terrorist attack or would be drafted into the military at some point. This fear was an emotion that focused on the well being of the participants themselves and could be interpreted as a form of personal distress. Some participants spoke about feeling angry in response to war. Their anger was directed outward at the U.S. government and military, at terrorists, and at the idea of war in general. It was an anger driven by concern for
others, and as such, was a type of other-oriented distress. Last, a small portion of participants talked about having feelings of pride or patriotism related to war. This was the only positive emotion reported, and it was usually experienced in combination with one of the other three emotions mentioned above.

**Photographs Evoke Concern**

Participants responded emotionally and empathically specifically to the pictures shown in the sessions. The overwhelming emotional reaction to the images was compassion. In some cases, participants actually used the word compassion. In other cases participants described feeling sad for those depicted in the photos, which can be interpreted as compassionate sorrow felt on behalf of others. Participants spoke at length about how the images provoked them to think about how the people in the pictures might have felt, or how they themselves would have felt in a similar situation. In this way, participants showed evidence of empathic processing.

When participants talked about their feelings of compassion and their experiences of empathy, they almost universally attributed these reactions to seeing the photographs. When participants shared their thoughts about the political aspects of the conflicts in the materials or critiqued the news format, they typically made reference to the articles. However, when they spoke about their emotional and empathic reactions, it was the images they referred to. Additionally, many participants explicitly observed that the pictures, as opposed to the text, were what moved them to feel concern for those involved in the conflict. The finding that photographs were the catalyst of compassion and empathy, and not the articles, is not surprising in light of other studies that have shown pictures are more effective at eliciting emotion than text alone (Brantner et al., 2011; Iyer
& Oldmeadow, 2006; Pfau et al., 2006). Indeed, this study adds to research in visual communication research that demonstrates photographs are particularly effective at moving people affectively (Höijer, 2004; Slovic, 2007).

**Emotional Responses to Visual Frames**

Not all of the photos evoked compassion and empathy equally. Participants consistently pointed to the images with a human-cost-of-war frame when speaking about their feelings of concern. The shots that showed the consequences of war resonated more with almost all of the participants. This finding was evident by the way they talked about specific human-cost-of-war photos to illustrate their feelings and by making direct comparisons about the effect of those images versus the ones with a militarism frame. Again, result this is consistent with previous visual communication research that has shown people respond with specific emotions to certain types of visual frames (Brantner et al., 2011; Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006; Pfau et al., 2006). In particular, this study corroborates the findings of studies that demonstrated participants react differently to images of conflict depending on whether they emphasize human suffering or military activity (Aday, 2010; Gartner, 2011). The findings in this study also reveal that the human-cost-of-war photos were effective at generating compassion and empathy, in part, because they showed innocent civilians, humanized conflict, and were novel. The two types of photos participants spoke of most frequently in regard to compassion and empathy (the crying relative and the boy who lost his home) embodied all three of these factors.

**Information Seeking**
Some participants confirmed anecdotes and newsroom assumptions about the power of war photographs of human suffering to move people to action (Kennedy, 2012). These participants spoke about conflict pictures in general, and the photos in particular, as being an effective call to action for people to become more informed, or even involved with finding ways to help. However, looking at the full range of comments participants made about their intentions to engage with news about the conflicts in the future, it is clear that compelling photos are just one factor in what motivates information seeking. Many participants said they consume media related to war because they feel a sense of responsibility to stay informed about news in general and about serious topics like war in particular. On the other hand, a good number of participants reported engaging with media about conflict only when certain war stories were so big that they pervade mainstream news outlets and social media.

Participants spoke in depth about feeling an obligation to stay current with news about war yet avoiding it because such content leaves them feeling too sad or depressed. They described experiencing compassion and empathy, but ultimately feeling left with a great sense of sadness. In a media environment with a plethora of options of stories that do not have this same depressing effect, participants simply choose not to read or view stories that make them feel downhearted. This finding confirms what scholars of compassion fatigue have theorized about media consumers becoming too overwhelmed by sadness to be willing to engage with news about human suffering in conflict (Moeller, 1999; Slovic, 2007).

Feelings of sadness were closely connected to the finding that participants reported withdrawing from news about war because they were not able to take any
meaningful action that would ameliorate the suffering of those involved in conflict. Many participants spoke about their frustration over feeling concerned for the victims of war, but being powerless to do anything in response to those feelings. As a result, they felt that continuing to pursue information about war was useless. This reaction substantiates theories that war photos can have a crippling effect on people if they do not have means to make any type of change (Berger, 1980; Sontag, 2003). Some participants criticized U.S. media for not presenting audiences with stories that focus on solutions or with information about what people can do to get involved, and they expressed a desire for media outlets to change the way that war is presented.

**Influence of Identification on Empathy and Information Seeking**

Half of the participants in the focus group study were given materials related to the U.S. war in Afghanistan, whereas the other half were presented with materials from conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This method provided a comparison to see if identification, in terms of nationality, had any effect on participants’ empathy and information seeking responses. The findings indicated that nearly all of the participants held an ethnocentric view of war that revolved around the United States. When asked broadly about their thoughts on war, most of the participants spoke exclusively about conflicts that the United States is or was involved in, as opposed to other wars. This ethnocentricity did not appear to factor into participants’ empathic responses, but it did affect their information seeking intentions. Participants in the Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo groups engaged equally in empathic processing of the photographs. The tendency of participants to think about how the people involved in
conflict felt, or to think about how they would feel in a similar situation, appeared to be influenced primarily by the visual frame.

Yet many participants in the Democratic Republic of Congo sessions confessed that they were not likely to follow up on news about the conflict, because it did not involve the United States or affect them personally. Therefore, these findings are in line with previous research that has shown U.S. audiences have a tendency to react to local and national news and imagery with more interest than international coverage (Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001). This pattern in news consumption has been incorporated into newsroom decision-making in the form of the unwritten proximity rule, which limits the amount of coverage of conflict that does not impact the United States (Emmett, 2010; Moeller, 1999; O’Brien, 1993).

**Implications**

The findings in this study contribute to visual communication theory and have practical implications for journalism practice. In terms of theory, this study reiterates one of the foundational assertions of qualitative communication research, which is that the context of the media environment and participants’ agency are vital to understanding any type of media influence on people (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This study also provides evidence that photographs do have the potential to evoke compassion and empathic processing and they can be more effective at doing so than text. In this sense, it furthers visual communication scholarship that has theorized about the affective influence of war photographs (Brantner et al., 2011; Höijer, 2004; Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006; Pfau et al., 2006; Slovic, 2007).
The potential of war photographs to stir compassion and empathy, however, is determined largely by the specific type of visual frame. This study demonstrated that images of conflict employing a human-cost-of-war visual frame were the ones that consistently caused participants to experience compassion and empathy, whereas the pictures with a militarism visual frame did not. Hence, these findings add to a small body of work that has gauged whether visual frames emphasizing human suffering over military action actually affect audiences (Aday, 2010; Gartner, 2011).

The study also found that, although some people said that the photos caused them to be concerned for the victims of war to such an extant that they would engage with news about the conflicts in the future, for the majority of participants, the motivation behind information seeking was more complex. This finding furthers theory about compassion fatigue and audience engagement in relation to international news (Moeller, 1999; Slovic, 2007).

Finally, participants responded similarly in terms of empathy, however, those in the Democratic Republic of Congo groups were less likely to seek out additional information about the conflict in the future. Therefore, this study adds to theory about how identification and proximity play into news consumption (Emmett, 2010; Moeller, 1999; O’Brien, 1993).

In addition to advancing communication theory, this study offers insights into best practices for war photojournalism. The findings confirm, in part, the long held assumption in newsrooms that photographs of war have the ability to spark concern in audiences that leads to some type of action. However, this study reveals that there are specific parameters on what kinds of photos have this affect and in what context. It was
clear that among the study’s participants the visual frame was a key element in how they reacted to the images. Pictures with a human-cost-of-war visual frame were the ones that piqued compassionate and empathic responses as opposed to the ones with a militarism visual frame. Therefore, if photo editors at news outlets want their audiences to feel concerned about those in the midst of war, it is imperative for them to publish images that highlight the consequences of conflict (when they are available) rather than military action. This approach would go against the current trend.

Yet, simply showing audiences these type of photos may not be enough to encourage them to pursue more information about particular conflicts. If, for example, the photos are of a war that has no obvious connection to the United States, news organizations may need to look for ways to help audience members feel as though the news is relevant to them. Perhaps more importantly, news publications may need to consider showing images of human suffering in conjunction with stories that shift the focus from episodic accounts of military developments to solutions being pursued to end conflicts or assist the victims of war.

It must be noted that the findings and implications of this focus group study have some limitations. Like the experiment, this study relied on undergraduate participants and used materials from two specific conflicts. Therefore, the findings of this study are specific to a certain age group and demographic and are constrained by the specific political contexts of the conflicts represented. Another limitation was that participants might have made statements about feelings of compassion or empathic processing because they felt those were the socially appropriate responses that were expected of them. Certainly, in a focus group setting, some element of social demand characteristics
may be unavoidable. However, many of the participants were quick to make statements about their feelings that they self-described as less than ideal, such as being desensitized, not feeling anything for soldiers, and caring less about people in the Democratic Republic of Congo than those in the United States. This response indicates that many of the participants felt comfortable enough to express their opinions and that their responses are reliable.

The format of focus groups comes with another limitation. Because there were only 87 participants involved, the findings are not applicable to a wider population in terms of statistical inference. Yet this limitation is offset by the rich data provided by the in-depth answers participants gave to open-ended questions. Although the findings cannot be assumed to be largely generalizable, they reveal significant and multi-layered answers to the research questions about how media consumers make sense of photos of war.

The following chapter synthesizes the findings of the focus group discussions and the results of the experiment and relates the implications of the focus groups to the hypothesized model in the experiment. Analyzing both studies together amplifies the individual results and findings of each study and provides a more holistic understanding of the overarching question of how visual frames in war photojournalism affect media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses. The concluding chapter will summarize the theoretical and practical implications of the dissertation as a whole and will suggest directions for future research.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The two studies in this dissertation each offered insight into the overall question of how visual frames in war photojournalism affect media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses. However, one of the strengths of a mixed methods design is that data, collected with different approaches, can be examined in tandem to reveal a more informed answer to a research question. The triangulation design used in this dissertation generated findings with greater depth and breadth than would have been possible using solely a quantitative or qualitative approach (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989). Employing triangulation also lends greater validity to the analysis because it capitalized on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and because the results from the experiment and focus groups corroborated each other (Myers, 2014). Taken together, the results of the experimental study and the findings of the focus group study provide a more complete picture of how the visual framing of conflict pictures influences people’s reactions and how people make meaning out of war imagery, more generally. Although these two studies independently yielded valuable theoretical and practical contributions, the combined implications go further in advancing communication theory and suggesting improvements in photojournalism practice.

Synthesis of Experimental Results and Focus Group Findings

This dissertation lends empirical support to the long held assumption that photographs of war are capable of evoking concern in audiences. The experiment demonstrated that participants experienced empathy, compassion, personal, and other-oriented distress after being exposed to photographs of conflict from Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These results imply that for similar conflicts these
responses are likely to occur in a wider population. The focus group discussions corroborate the results of the experiment in relation to the potential of war pictures to pique empathy and emotions. Many of the participants in the focus groups attributed the images as being the source of their emotional reactions as opposed to the news stories. They made the distinction that they processed the articles analytically and the pictures emotionally. When participants spoke about empathic processing, they referred consistently to the photographs and not the articles. In sum, both studies together offer evidence for what has been long assumed, but little tested: Pictures of war are capable of arousing empathy and compassion from those who see them.

Yet the power of conflict photos to generate concern is constrained by visual framing. Both the experiment and the focus group studies revealed that participants’ empathic and emotional reactions reflected the frame viewed. The results of the experiment showed that the levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress were higher in participants who viewed the images with a human-cost-of-war visual frame compared to those who looked at ones with a militarism visual frame. Hence, the hypotheses in the proposed model relating to the effects of visual frames on empathy and emotions (H1 - H3b) were supported. This difference held true in light of the conflict depicted, participants’ political ideology, participants’ news use, and participants’ previous knowledge of the conflict. Although women were more prone to experience higher levels of empathy, compassion, personal distress, and other-oriented distress than men, there was no interaction with the visual frame condition, indicating that the effects of visual framing were independent of gender differences.
Likewise, participants in the focus groups spoke almost exclusively about the images that employed a human-cost-of-war frame when they tried to convey their emotional and empathic reactions to the materials. When participants were explaining their feelings of compassion and empathic processing, they overwhelmingly pointed to the pictures that portrayed the suffering of people in conflict as opposed to those that showed military action. In many cases, participants specifically mentioned they were moved emotionally by the pictures with a human-cost-of-war frame in contrast to the ones with a militarism frame.

There were two types of photographs with a human-cost-of-war frame that resonated with participants more than others: those of a boy whose home was destroyed due to fighting and those of a man crying over the loss of a relative. These images included three factors that participants indicated made them feel the most compassion and empathy, which were the presence of innocent victims, the novelty of the shots, and the humanizing effect of the frames. Thus, the findings of the focus groups add more depth to the experimental results and shed light on important distinctions within the human-cost-of-war frame. Participants were asked open-ended questions and often spoke spontaneously about the different ways they responded to the frames.

This dissertation investigated the relationship between visual framing of war photos, empathic and emotional responses, and information seeking. Unfortunately, the experiment did not yield significant effects for the hypothesized predictors of information seeking. More specifically, the hypotheses in the proposed model addressing the effects of visual framing (H4), empathy (H5), and emotions (H6 – H7b) were not supported, as were the hypotheses about potential mediators (H8 – H10). As previously discussed, this
finding could mean that the hypotheses were off base, but it could also be due to the execution of the behavioral measure used in the experiment.

Fortunately, the focus group sessions produced information about participants’ information seeking intentions and behavior that answer some of the research questions about information seeking. Some participants in the focus groups talked about feeling inspired by the photos of human suffering to pursue further information about the conflicts depicted, and they extended this effect to pictures of war in general. However, comments about information seeking made by the majority of participants indicated that there are many factors that play into the motivation to engage with war coverage or not. The finding with the most relevance to the research questions in this dissertation, and that calls for further research, is that many participants felt compassion and empathy toward the depicted subjects, but they expressed powerlessness to respond in a way that would actually help the situation.

Another question posed by this dissertation was whether ingroup identification had an effect on participants’ empathic, emotional, and information seeking responses to images of war. The experimental results indicated that U.S. participants who saw the Afghanistan stimulus materials reported less compassion than those who looked at the Democratic Republic of Congo materials. Levels of empathy, personal distress, other-oriented distress, and information seeking were not significantly different based on the country depicted. The difference in compassion went in the opposite of the hypothesized direction, which may be due to ambivalence, where participants felt more compassion toward the U.S. soldiers shown in the images but decreased compassion toward the Taliban fighters in the other images. Therefore, the hypotheses in the proposed model
that focused on the influence of ingroup identification on empathy (H11a), emotions (H11b – d), and information seeking (H12) were not supported.

Here, the findings of the focus group sessions are critical in making sense of the experimental results. Participants in the focus group sessions reacted with a great deal of compassion and empathic expression to the human-cost-of-war pictures regardless of the country depicted. In the Afghanistan sessions, some participants spoke about feeling sympathetic toward the U.S. soldiers and civilians but feeling negatively toward the Taliban fighters. Interestingly, other participants shared that seeing the human-cost-of-war photos as a group enabled them to relate more to Afghans as people as opposed to the enemy, as they are often depicted as in U.S. media. In terms of information seeking, many participants in the sessions focused on the Democratic Republic of Congo stated that, although the photos touched them emotionally, they were unlikely to seek out additional information because the conflict did not directly relate to them or to their country.

Implications

The findings in this dissertation contribute to both communication theory and journalism practice. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this work answers several calls within communication scholarship.

First, employing quantitative and qualitative research methods, this dissertation has added to a growing number of audience studies that promote the use of mixed methods designs (Brannen, 2007; Benoit & Holbert, 2008; Darling-Wolf, 2014; Robinson & Mendelson, 2012; Schroder et al., 2003; Splichal & Dahlgren, 2014; Ruddock, 2001). The experimental study produced statistically significant results that can be applied to a
wider audience, and the focus group study provided rich descriptions of how media consumers make meaning out of war visuals. Together, these studies revealed a more holistic answer to the overarching question of how visual frames in war photojournalism affect media consumers’ emotional and behavioral responses than either study would have individually.

Second, this project probed how media consumers make sense of war coverage in general, but it also investigated how they responded to articles and images about conflicts in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Therefore, the dissertation took up Bird’s (2014) challenge to examine audiences’ reactions to particular media texts in order to understand how people incorporate news into their lives.

Third, the focus of this study was largely on affective responses to visuals of war, so it filled in a gap in communication research that has focused disproportionately on cognitive reactions (Morley, 2006). By exploring participants’ empathic and compassionate reactions to images of war, this dissertation adds to visual communication research about media consumers’ emotional reactions to photographic frames, which has been understudied.

Fourth, Kaplan (2008) advocated for the integration of psychology and media studies in examining audience responses to traumatic global images. This dissertation drew on theory from psychology and visual communication to do just that.

Finally, this project has added to knowledge about how media consumers are affected by pictures that focus on human loss in war (Aday, 2010), which has been lacking in visual communication research.
The idea that photographs of the ravages of war have the power to compel viewers to care for the victims depicted and take action is one that has long been accepted and promoted, despite a lack of empirical evidence (Kennedy, 2012). One of the main contributions of this dissertation is that it provides empirical evidence of the influence of war photos on affective responses. In answering the hypotheses and research questions posed, this work advances visual communication theory and is relevant to newsroom practices. Both the experimental and focus group studies supported the notion that images of war do, in fact, have the potential to grip people emotionally and cause them to empathize with those involved in conflict. Therefore, this dissertation adds to a limited number of visual communication studies that have looked at the potential of conflict photographs to spark emotions (Brantner et al., 2011; Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002; Pfau et al., 2006, Zillmann et al., 1999).

The focus groups revealed that, among the participants, the pictures were the catalyst for compassionate and empathic reactions, as opposed to the articles, which corroborates previous studies that found images were more effective at eliciting emotion than text (Brantner et al., 2011; Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006; Pfau et al., 2006). It should be noted that these results were observed in this study only in the short term, and whether there is a lasting, long-term effect is a fruitful question for future research. When applied to the newsroom, these findings could help empower photographers and editors in their efforts to lobby for the inclusion of photographs in stories where emotional responses are desirable. Even in digital publications, which do not have the content limitations of their print counterparts, the trend has been to limit space allotted for extensive photo essays to photography sections or blogs (Ritchin, 2013). Perhaps if editors can provide evidence
for the effectiveness of pictures to stir affective reactions, they can advocate more successfully for the more prominent display of images of war.

One of the most important theoretical and practical implications of this dissertation is that the ability of conflict photos to induce empathy and compassion is limited by visual framing. The results of the experiment and the findings of the focus groups clearly demonstrated that participants reacted significantly more empathically and emotionally to the images with a human-cost-of-war frame than to the ones with a militarism frame. Participants in the focus groups spoke of feeling desensitized and unaffected by photos of soldiers in action. These findings align with studies that found visual frames emphasizing human loss instead of military action led to higher levels of anti-war attitudes (Aday, 2010; Gartner, 2011). Although that scholarship determined that human-cost-of-war visual framing influences attitudes, this project deduced that such framing influences affective responses. This particular finding lends support to assertions by scholars that have argued that the dominance of militarism photographs in U.S. media potentially dampens anti-war attitudes and feelings and promotes support for U.S. military policies (Griffin, 2004, 2010; Lester & King; 2005). Participants in the focus group discussions commented on the nationalistic effect of the militarism images, and some spoke about empathizing with Afghans after seeing pictures of civilian loss, which they had not been exposed to before.

The empirical evidence in this study, demonstrating that the human-cost-of-war visual frame moves audiences in a way that the militarism frame does not, may equip photo editors with new persuasive power to lobby for illustrating stories about war with photos that show the suffering of those involved. There is a clear pattern of U.S. news
publications regularly opting for militarism images over human-cost-of-war images (Griffin, 2004, 2010; Griffin & Lee, 1995; Lester & King; 2005; Schwalbe, 2006; Schwalbe, Silcock & Keith, 2008). In part, this trend is attributable to U.S. military policies since the Vietnam War that have constrained photojournalists’ access in theaters of war (DeGhett, 2014; Griffin, 2010; Ritchin, 2013). In the recent U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, journalists were granted access though the process of embedding with U.S. military units. Therefore, photographers working in these conditions were predisposed to capture photos that presented the conflicts mainly from the perspective of U.S. soldiers. In an age where journalists have increasingly become the targets of kidnappings and assaults, news organizations undoubtedly have to weigh the risks of assigning journalists to work outside of the parameters of military protection. However, knowing that photos showing the casualties and losses of war cause audiences to experience compassion and empathy might compel editors and publishers to push back harder against military policies that seek to limit this type of exposure. And, certainly, when editors are presented with images of human suffering in war from their photographers or photo providers, there is now more reason for them to opt for running these over images of military action.

In terms of information seeking in response to photographs that humanize war, this dissertation demonstrated that some people do indeed respond to pictures of suffering with an increased desire to learn more about the conflict and perhaps to do something to help. However, the motivation to seek out additional information about a specific war is more complex, and involves many factors. Participants in the focus groups had diverse news use habits, consumed a variety of news publications, and placed differing
importance on the value of news about war. The most vital finding in this dissertation about information seeking was that many focus group participants felt compassion and empathy in response to the photographs in the study, but they were pessimistic about their ability to enact any meaningful change. As a result, many of them indicated they would likely not pursue more information about the conflicts in the future. From a theoretical perspective, this pattern supports arguments that pictures of war paralyze people when they perceive that there is no way to assist in the trauma depicted (Berger, 1980; Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2003). This finding also bolsters calls for photojournalists and photo editors to engage in practices that stray from current journalistic norms and highlight efforts at peace efforts in the midst of war (Moeller, 1999; Ritchin, 2013).

In addition to providing empirical evidence of the potential of war photos to evoke emotional responses, this dissertation makes some broader contributions to the field of communication. First, this work demonstrated some of the benefits of using a mixed methods design to investigate complicated questions about visual communication and reactions to war imagery. These areas of inquiry may be best explored with an approach that accounts for ambivalent, multi-layered responses from participants. Although the triangulation design was employed to address the specific hypotheses and research questions in this dissertation, it would be useful for future visual communication studies because images are particularly polysemous (Barthes, 1980; Hall, 1973). The meaning of conflict pictures, in particular, is prone to a range of interpretations because they can tap into sensitive political issues, personal attitudes about war, and emotional reactions (Sontag, 2003). When there is potential for significant latitude in the meanings that people ascribe to images of interest, qualitative methods are most effective at
understanding such an array of responses (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). However, the polysemy of photos has limits (Condit, 1989), and quantitative methods are best suited to identify patterns in response to pictures that are generalizable (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Triangulation designs offer scholars exploring questions about visual communication and responses to war photos the opportunity to gather nuanced data with increased validity (Myers, 2014).

This dissertation also contributes to the study of communication by illustrating the value of using emphasis framing in visual communication research, despite criticism of this approach by Scheufele and Iyengar (2014) and Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar (2016). These scholars argued against the practice of testing media frames that have variations in content, labeled emphasis framing, and advocated instead for the use of media frames that manipulate the presentation of the same content, labeled equivalence framing (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). Their concern is that emphasis framing is not capable of being as tightly controlled as equivalency framing. Such ambiguity, they argued, leads to a proliferation of emphasis framing research that perhaps errantly identifies differences in media messages as differences in framing (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014).

In stressing the importance of precise message manipulation, however, they are too quick to dismiss concerns about the ecological validity of content being tested. For studies, like this dissertation, that are interested in how audiences respond to actual media content, the authenticity of stimulus material is an important concern. Any research that examines the influence of media on participants in a manufactured context, such as an experiment or focus groups, sacrifices some amount of realism (Hesse-Biber & Leavy,
2011). Yet efforts to use stimulus material that most closely resembles the actual media in question are likely to produce more accurate results. In this study, an equivalency frame would require manipulating a singular element in an image or set of images. Compared to using different authentic news photos with different content, such an equivalency frame would introduce more artificiality into the research than necessary.

Oddly, Scheufele and Iyengar (2014) argued that researchers can exert tighter control over equivalency frames when using visuals as opposed to texts. They pointed to examples in psychology studies where elements of faces were manipulated slightly to determine participants’ assessments of similarity and dissimilarity. This suggestion, like their overarching argument, glosses over the benefits of using genuine media content, but it also ignores foundational visual communication theory that has argued for the complexity of visuals compared to text (Barthes, 1972, 1981; Hall, 1973; Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Gamson (1975, 1989) recognized both the advantage of using authentic media content and the challenges of using visuals, which are multi-layered. He advocated for the use of what Scheufele and Iyengar (2014) later labeled emphasis framing, and he argued that the problem of ambiguity could be addressed with careful operationalization of themes and precise coding of content (Gamson, 1975, 1989).

In line with Gamson’s (1975, 1989) approach to framing, this dissertation employed methods to ensure that the frames were tightly controlled despite the differences in content. The photographs in both the human-cost-of-war and militarism visual frames were pilot tested to ensure that they evoked similar levels of valence and arousal. As detailed in chapter three, the images were kept parallel in terms of content
and composition. Most importantly, the visual frames were derived from theory (outlined in chapter two) and built on previous research.

The findings of the focus groups illustrate that the visual frames were precise because there were clear dominant readings that emerged. In response to the human-cost-of-war visual frames, participants across the groups spoke almost unanimously about realizing that war affects everyone involved, empathizing with innocent victims, and questioning the validity of war. Participants did not comment as much on the militarism visual frames, but the most dominant reading was simply that war had become normalized and did not elicit many emotions. In sum, there was a clear and consistent difference in the way that participants talked about the two types of frames. The way that participants interpreted the visual frames also aligned with theories (summarized in chapter two) about how human-cost-of-war and militarism visual frames would resonate with audiences (DeGhett, 2014; Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Griffin, 2004; Keith & Schwalbe, 2010; Kennedy, 2008; King & Lester, 2005).

Another contribution this dissertation makes to the field of communication is that it sheds light on the process of meaning-making through photographs. As mentioned above, there was a dominant reading of both visual frames that emerged from the focus group discussions. Certainly the participants each interpreted the photographs in ways that connected to their own individual lives, and not everyone experienced exactly the same emotional responses. This response illustrates the polysemic nature of photos (Barthes, 1980; Hall, 1973).

Yet, in session after session, participants reacted similarly to each of the visual frames. Participants vocalized concern for the people depicted in the human-cost-of-war
frames and questioned the nature of war, while they talked about the militarism images conveying a sense of war as part of everyday life. In Hall’s (1980) terms, the participants largely adopted the dominant reading of the images, where the messages they derived from the photos were parallel to the ideologies attributed to the different visual frames by journalists and scholars alike. Although participants varied in how they connected the meaning of the pictures to their lives, there was very little evidence of negotiated readings of the actual meanings of the images, and virtually no oppositional readings (Hall, 1980). For a topic as messy and complicated as war, there was surprisingly little variance in the meaning participants ascribed to the human-cost-of-war and militarism frames.

The focus groups in this dissertation revealed that the process of meaning-making is not limited to how people decode photographs or to cognitive assessments in general. The responses to the images in the focus group sessions were overwhelmingly emotional. This emotion stood in stark contrast to the intellectual approach participants used to make meaning out of the accompanying article. This result implies that models of visual processing that focus exclusively, or primarily, on cognitive processes would be improved by incorporating affective processing. Particularly when it comes to photographs depicting human suffering, an understanding of the photographic construction of meaning that omits affect is insufficient.

Future Directions

To move this work forward, some suggestions are offered for future research. First, both the experiment and the focus groups relied on self-report measures, where participants gave cognitive evaluations of their affective reactions. Although these
measures yielded valuable data and provided new insights into how media consumers respond to images of war, investigating related questions without relying on self-report measures would be an excellent way to corroborate the findings in this dissertation. Using alternate measures would also provide greater validity and reliability in results, since participants are not always able to accurately assess their cognitive (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) or automatic (Eberhardt, 2005) processing. The topic of war is inherently political and emotional; therefore, when participants are asked to share their responses to media about conflict they may be particularly susceptible to demand characteristics (Orne, 1962). In future studies, indirect measures, such as the implicit association test or lexical decision tasks, or physiological measures, such as heart rate monitoring, eye tracking, electrodermal activity, and functional magnetic resonance imaging, could be used to minimize social desirability issues and to evaluate participants’ subconscious responses more precisely (Eberhardt, 2005; Lang, 1994).

This research could also be advanced by a more in-depth examination of how participants’ political ideology and views about war may affect the sway of responses to conflict pictures. In the experiment, political ideology did not influence participants’ affective responses, but it did predict information seeking. Although it only accounted for a small portion of the variance of information seeking, political ideology is a factor that merits further exploration in connection to reactions to war photos. After all, research has demonstrated that partisanship, or identification with a political party, encourages people to support their political party’s positions on issues (Gerber, Huber & Washington, 2010). Perhaps more relevant is the finding that people who identify strongly with a particular political party will often interpret facts in a manner that is in line with their pre-existing
attitudes about a political topic (Gaines et al., 2007). Therefore, it is worth looking into whether partisanship affects how people interpret war photos, and how that interpretation relates to their emotional responses. The fact that other studies have found interaction effects for political ideology and attitudinal responses to visual frames of conflict images (Aday, 2010; Gartner, 2011) is further impetus to investigate the relationship between political ideology and war photos.

Finally, future research may benefit from drawing on theories from peace journalism to extend the work of this dissertation. In contemplating the current state of war photojournalism, Ritchin (2013) posed the question, “Why don’t we have a more developed photography that explores in some depth the move from pain to its resolution, creating reference points for those striving to move forward, rather than continually searching for, and dwelling on, the cataclysm?” (p. 123). Although not specific to photography, there is a body of scholarship that has advocated for such a different approach to presenting news about war to audiences in a manner that shifts the focus from military action to potential solutions to conflict (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2012; McGoldrick & Lynch, 2014; Ottosen, 2010; Webel & Galtung, 2007). Peace journalism aims to contextualize war instead of presenting play by play of recent military and political developments, to include the perspectives of all parties affected as opposed to relying primarily on officials, and to draw attention to peace efforts of all kinds and not just the dominant political actions. Research has demonstrated that peace journalism framing of television news casts lead to audiences responding with greater empathy for the victims of conflict and with more support for peaceful solutions to the conflicts (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2012; McGoldrick & Lynch, 2014).
Incorporating these peace journalism concepts into future research that stems from this dissertation, it may be worthwhile to examine how visual frames that focus on relief efforts, grass roots peace movements, rehabilitation of injured victims, acts of reconciliation, and other peace and rebuilding efforts may influence empathic, compassionate, and information seeking responses. Additionally, it could be fruitful to explore whether war photos with human-cost-of-war visual frames more effectively inspire information seeking when they are presented in conjunction with news articles that take a peace journalism approach as opposed to ones that do not. This dissertation revealed that pictures that draw attention to the human suffering in war are capable of evoking compassion and empathy in people. Yet, when these type of images are viewed in a context where solutions to the conflicts seem improbable or out of reach, in most cases, that compassion and empathy stagnates. Both communication theory and journalism practice would benefit from further exploration of how news organizations can capitalize on the emotional and empathic responses evoked by humanizing war photos by offering solutions and hope to their audiences.
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feeling for a member of a stigmatized group improve feelings toward the group?


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Afghan and U.S. Forces Conduct First Strikes Since End of Combat

KABUL, Afghanistan — United States and allied aircraft struck Taliban fighters in eastern Afghanistan last week in the first confirmed operation in support of Afghan forces since the start of the new U.S. military mission in the country.

Air attacks were launched in Kunar province to assist Afghan efforts to push back Pakistani and Taliban fighters, according to a U.S. coalition spokesman and Afghan officials.

Although Dec. 28, 2014 marked the end of the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan, NATO forces will provide training and support for the Afghan military over the next two years. Roughly 11,000 U.S. troops will aid Afghan forces and engage in operations against the Taliban and al-Qaida.

"According to our new agreement, the NATO forces will support Afghan security forces until the Afghan military is sufficient," said an Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman.

U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, declared that the U.S. “will use every means at its disposal, in accordance with its mandate to assist the Afghan army in disarming the Taliban.”

The new joint mission has led to a spike in violence, with the Taliban claiming it as an excuse to step up operations aimed at destabilizing the government. In mid-December, about 1,500 Taliban fighters, which include insurgents from Afghanistan and Pakistan, descended on the eastern Afghanistan district.

The past year was one of the deadliest of the conflict, according to the United Nations, with civilian casualties reaching over 10,000 for the first time since the agency began keeping records in 2008. Most of the deaths and injuries were caused by Taliban attacks, the U.N. said. It was also a deadly year for Afghanistan's security forces with around 5,000 casualties recorded.
KINSHASA, Democratic Republic of Congo — United Nations and Congolese troops struck Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) fighters in eastern Congo last week in the first confirmed operation in support of Congolese forces since the start of the new U.N. military mission in the country.

Ground attacks were launched in North Kivu province to assist Congolese efforts to push back FDLR and other rebel fighters, according to a U.N. coalition spokesman and Congolese officials.

Although Jan. 2, 2015 was supposed to mark the end of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the FDLR did not follow through with the agreed upon disarmament. U.N. forces will now provide training and support for the Congolese military over the next two years. Roughly 11,000 U.N. troops will aid Congolese forces and engage in operations against the FDLR and other rebel groups.

"According to our new agreement, U.N. forces will support Congolese security forces until the Congolese military is sufficient," said a Congolese Defense Ministry spokesman.

U.N. Force Commander, General Dos Santos Cruz, declared that the U.N. “will use every means at its disposal, in accordance with its mandate to assist the Congolese army in disarming the FDLR.”

The new joint mission has led to a spike in violence, with the FDLR claiming it as an excuse to step up operations aimed at destabilizing the government. In mid-December, about 1,500 FDLR fighters, which include Rwandan Hutus who committed the 1994 massacres, descended on the eastern Congo district.

The past year was one of the deadliest of the conflict, according to the United Nations, with civilian casualties reaching over 10,000 for the first time since the agency began keeping records in 2008. Most of the deaths and injuries were caused by FDLR attacks, the U.N. said. It was also a deadly year for Congolese security forces with around 5,000 casualties recorded.
APPENDIX B: STIMULUS PHOTOS

Afghanistan (Human Cost of War Visual Frame)

A boy stands next to the rubble of his home, which was destroyed in a U.S. airstrike in Azizabad, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)

An Afghan man cries over the loss of his brother, who was accidentally killed in crossfire, in Kabul, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)
An Afghan man, who was wounded in a suicide attack, is treated in a hospital in Talaqan, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)

Afghans prepare a civilian for burial who was killed in a roadside bomb blast in Herat, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)
Afghan security forces gather around the body of Taliban fighter who was killed in a clash in Herat, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)

U.S. soldiers ride in a helicopter with the bodies of soldiers who were killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. (AP Photo)
Democratic Republic of Congo (Human Cost of War Visual Frame)

A displaced child returns to the ruins of his hut that was destroyed during fighting in Kibumba, DRC. (AP Photo)

A man cries over the loss of his son, who was accidentally killed by the army, in Kibumba, DRC. (AP Photo)
A Congolese man, who was wounded in an attack by the FDLR, is treated in a hospital in Bunia, DRC. (AP Photo)

Congolese men carry the body of a civilian who was killed in the crossfire in Kibumba, DRC. (AP Photo)
FDLR fighters stand around the body of a fellow fighter who was killed in a clash in Kiwanja, DRC. (AP Photo)

Motorists drive past the body of a Congolese government soldier, who was killed in a fight near Kibati, DRC. (AP Photo)
Afghanistan (Militarism Visual Frame)

Afghan policemen take up positions near the site of a suicide attack in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)

U.S. soldiers fire and run for cover during a firefight with Taliban fighters in Badula Qulp, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)
U.S. soldiers search for cover during an attack by Taliban forces in Asmar, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)

Taliban fighters hold their weapons as they prepare for an attack in an undisclosed location near Jalalabad, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)
Taliban fighters prepare their weapons at a defensive position at an undisclosed location in Ghazni province, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)

Taliban fighters assemble their weapons as they prepare for combat near Herat, Afghanistan. (AP Photo)
Democratic Republic of Congo (Militarism Visual Frame)

FDLR fighters run for cover with their weapons during an operation in Tebero, DRC. (AP Photo)

FDLR fighters shout and hold their weapons as they ride on a truck during a patrol in Goma, DRC. (AP Photo)
An FDLR fighter looks back as he and others take defensive positions during a fight in Goma, DRC. (AP Photo)

U.N. troops assemble a mortar launcher in preparation for an attack in Dele, DRC. (AP Photo)
A Congolese government soldier mans a position at the front line of a fight, near Goma, DRC. (AP Photo)

Congolese government troops hold their weapons as they ride on a tank during a patrol near Goma, DRC. (AP Photo)
APPENDIX C: SELF-ASSESSMENT MANIKIN

9-point Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM)
Bradley and Lang, 1994

Arousal

Valence
APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUPS INTERVIEW GUIDE

General Questions

- What kinds of stories or images come to your mind when you think about war, conflict, or combat?

- Where do these stories and images come from?

- How do these stories or images make you feel?

- Is war generally a topic that interests you? Why or why not?

  (Compared to other topics, how often do you read or view media about war?)

- Where do you typically learn about about war?

- What are some specific emotions you feel?

  (Compassion, sympathy, anger, sadness, fear, disgust, guilt, etc.)

  - If so, which emotions tend to win out, or which ones are stronger?

- Do you think your emotional responses to war stories influence how willing you are, or are not, to read or view similar stories in the future?

  - In other words, does war coverage pique your interest in conflicts or does it have a different effect?

- Why/why not?

- Are there some types of stories and visuals that make you more or less interested in war coverage, compared to others?

  - Hard news vs. human interest?

  - Types of subjects? (Politicians vs. soldiers; soldiers vs. civilians; men vs. women vs. children; nationality; side of conflict)
- Is there any type of coverage that makes you want to avoid stories of war in the future? If so, what kind of coverage? (Same prompts as above)

- Is there any type of coverage that makes you care more about the people depicted? If so, what kind of coverage? (Same prompts as above)

- Do you ever find yourself thinking about how the people in war stories and photos felt? Or how you would feel if you were in their shoes?

- What types of stories or photos make you have these types of thoughts?

**Topic- and Photo-specific Questions**

- Was this news story one that you were familiar with before?

- What did you think of the story?

- Would you be interested in learning more about this topic? Why or why not?

- How do you feel after reading this story and viewing these photos?
  
  (Compassion, sympathy, anger, sadness, fear, disgust, guilt, etc.)

- If you feel a mix of emotions, which ones are the strongest?

- Were you more affected emotionally by the text or the photos?

- Why do you think this is?

- Were there any specific pictures you reacted to more than others? Why?

- Did you have different responses to different photos?

- Which pictures do you think you would use in a news publication if you were the photo editor? And why?

- Do any of these photos make you care more about the story? Do any make you care less?
- Do any of the photos in particular make you think about how the people depicted in them may have felt? Or how you would feel in their situation? Why?

- Do any photos capture your attention more than others? Why?

- If these photos involved/did not involve the United States, do you think your emotional response would be any different? Why or why not?

- Do you think that photo editors should run pictures of war? Why or why not?