Journalistic ethics in photojournalistic representation of natural disaster victims: Comparing VietnamPlus and VnExpress

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Abstract: This article evaluates how two Vietnamese online newspapers, VietnamPlus and VnExpress, depicted flood victims during the 2025 Central Vietnam floods. A total of 386 photographs were examined through a comparative content analysis based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) Grammar of Visual Design and established principles of journalistic ethics, privacy, dignity, and minimizing harm. The findings reveal two different editorial approaches. VietnamPlus emphasized collective experience, recovery, visual distance, and privacy protection, while VnExpress placed greater emphasis on individual experience, identifiable victims, and emotional proximity. These differences were reflected in shot size, victim identifiability, caption content, and the emotional impact of images. VietnamPlus had a higher proportion of fully acceptable photographs and stronger privacy protection, whereas VnExpress produced stronger emotional engagement but also a higher proportion of ethically questionable images. At the same time, both outlets maintained several common ethical boundaries: neither published images of deceased victims or highly graphic injuries, most images were taken at eye level, and both showed restraint in portraying children. The study argues that the central ethical issue is not simply whether disaster photographs are emotional or restrained, but how visual choices balance public interest, emotional engagement, privacy, and dignity.
Keywords: Journalistic ethics, disaster victims, visual framing, journalism in Vietnam

1. Introduction

Vietnam is one of the countries most severely affected by natural disasters. In 2025, it suffered exceptional flooding due to 15 storms and 6 tropical depressions that occurred in the East Sea. At least 409 people were reported dead or missing due to the floods, and the estimated economic damage was approximately $3.2 billion [1]. When natural disasters occur, the media serves a significant function beyond simply witnessing events; it serves as a public catalyst for the allocation of humanitarian aid.

Photojournalism is critical in providing coverage of disasters. Images are capable of capturing human emotions evoked by natural disasters, including loss, resilience, fear, and hope. Additionally, these photos shape public perception and reaction to a disaster more profoundly than written language. While photojournalism provides powerful tools for influencing public opinion, it also creates significant ethical difficulties. At what point does documenting reality become exploitative? How do journalists meet the needs of informing the public while respecting the victim's privacy and dignity? These issues have significant implications for disaster photojournalism and require careful consideration by journalists, editors, and news organizations.

Professional journalism ethics worldwide emphasize principles such as truthfulness, minimizing harm, respect for dignity, and privacy. These general principles translate into specific practices, including not depicting violent acts, protecting the identities of vulnerable subjects, and treating people with compassion. As Asemah and Ottah (2015) remind photojournalists, "you are a human being first, a photojournalist second" [2, tr. 147]. This means professional duty should never override basic human compassion. Similarly, the Society

of Professional Journalists (SPJ) advises that journalists should "show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage" and "balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort." [3]. In the Vietnamese context, the Code of Professional Ethics of Vietnamese Journalists similarly requires respect for human dignity and prohibits violations of privacy or the intention to harm the honor, dignity, or legitimate interests of organizations and individuals [4].

However, the existence of ethical principles does not automatically determine how they are applied in visual reporting. A photograph can be factually accurate and still raise ethical concerns because of how the subject is framed. A wide shot may place individual suffering within a broader account of recovery, while a closer and more identifiable image may encourage viewers to engage with a particular person's experience. Neither approach is inherently ethical or unethical. Their implications depend on what information is conveyed, how the subject is positioned, and whether the image unnecessarily exposes a vulnerable person.

Previous studies have investigated various forms of visual framing techniques used in disaster coverage and the ethics of visual representations of traumatic events. However, while Vietnamese journalism has established its own professional codes, research on Vietnamese photojournalists and news outlets applying these ethical standards when covering victims of natural disasters remains extremely limited. This gap in evidence is problematic, particularly considering the frequency of natural disasters and the crucial role of photojournalism in influencing public perception and response.

Therefore, this study addressed the gap through a comparative content analysis of photographs published by VietnamPlus (the official online newspaper of the Vietnam News Agency) and VnExpress (the large-circulated Vietnamese online newspaper) during the 2025 Central Vietnam Floods. This research explores two primary research questions: (1) How do the two newspapers visually represent natural disasters and victims? (2) What are the ethical implications associated with their respective visual representations? By providing practical evidence of the application of professional ethics in disaster photojournalism, this study contributes to understanding journalistic practice in the Vietnamese context.

2. Literature review

2.1. Visual communication and photojournalism

Throughout journalism's history, photography has always been an important tool for capturing reality and an observer of what occurs. However, media studies have stated that news photographs are never "transparent windows" that neutrally reflect the world. Instead, they consistently embody a "way of seeing" shaped by the processes of selection, information framing, and social power structures [6, tr. 9]. In other words, what appears in a photograph depends not only on what happened, but also on how the photographer chooses to present it. The distance from the subject, the angle of the camera, and what is included or left outside the frame can all affect how viewers understand the people and events being shown.

In Vietnam, journalism emphasizes authenticity and the obligation to reflect reality. Mão, N.T. (2005) provides a more systematic account of the principles, characteristics, and social functions of photojournalism in Vietnam. Truthfulness and authenticity are two fundamental attributes of press photos, according to the scholar, who further argues that photojournalism not only documents reality but also shapes public opinion and orients audiences toward socially valued ideals [7, tr. 29]. Similarly, Bình, D.Q. (2024) describes photojournalism as a form of information expressed through one or multiple photographs to reflect objective reality and carry social significance in social life [8, tr. 18]. Taken together, Vietnamese literature has established a strong connection with both local and international standards of the social role of journalism.

Thus, photojournalism is a complex activity because it reflects reality while conveying messages (with both social and ideological implications), using the material of actual events. When photojournalists photograph disaster scenes, they are forced to make subjective choices

(camera angle, shot size, lighting). Therefore, when they are taking pictures of an objective occurrence, they are making ethical decisions about how to frame it.

2.2. Journalistic ethics and legal frameworks

Ward (2009) defines journalism ethics as the investigation of both micro problems of individual conduct and macro problems concerning the media's role in society [9, tr. 296]. In Vietnam, Giang, N.T. (2014) also defines journalistic ethics as "the rules and standards of professional relationships," [10, tr. 15] which emphasize that reporters must resist sensationalism, avoid presenting events out of context, and respect the dignity of victims and the private grief of their families, which shares the same view as the international frameworks reviewed above. Journalism ethics, however, is not only about fulfilling strict rules. Keeble (2009) further states that, besides the rules, there are other important aspects for journalists: "compassion and humanity are essential attributes of the journalist" [11, tr. 18]. It is highlighted that journalists bear heightened ethical responsibilities when representing vulnerable populations. Keeble also provides specific guidelines for coverage of race, gender, mental illness, and suicide to prevent further harm.

By combining professionalism and compassion to create international principles, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics (2014) establishes four principles: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable. Specifically, it requires showing compassion for those affected by news coverage and exercising heightened sensitivity with vulnerable subjects. [3]

This restrictive approach toward the protection of individuals has been institutionalized legally and professionally in Vietnam. The Press Law (2025) prohibits the disclosure of information classified as state secrets and prohibits violations of individual privacy and confidentiality as prescribed by law [12]. The Code of Professional Ethics of Vietnamese Journalists (2016) requires journalists to practice with honesty and objectivity, and prohibits harming the honor, dignity, and legitimate interests of individuals [4]. In particular, the boundaries of what defines an ethical right to use an individual's image were further restricted by Decree No. 13/2023/ ND-CP, in which an individual's image is classified as an element of their personal data, and therefore requires consent before being collected and used for purposes of publication [13]. While the Decree allows a few exceptions where consent is not required, these do not remove the need to justify the publication of identifiable images.

2.3. Trauma Journalism and the Representation of Victims

Covering disaster victims raises ethical challenges. Coté and Simpson (2002) observe that "privacy is often the first casualty of any devastating, unexpected event," [14, tr. 2]. Victims may be displaced, injured, grieving, or otherwise unable to control how they are represented. The public, however, may also have a legitimate need to see the consequences of a disaster. The ethical problem is therefore not simply whether suffering should be shown, but how it should be shown and under what conditions.

The debate has produced two related concerns. On one side, powerful photographs can make distant suffering visible and may encourage public attention or humanitarian action. On the other, repeated or intrusive representations can turn suffering into spectacle, objectify victims, or contribute to compassion fatigue. Photographic representations of suffering can reduce people to objects of observation when their individual subjectivity is lost. Captions and editorial framing can intensify or reduce this effect.

Azoulay (2008) offers a different perspective through the "civil contract of photography," which places the photographed person, photographer, and spectator in a relationship of responsibility [15, tr. 122]. From this perspective, photography can also create a public relationship through which the person remains visible as a citizen rather than as an anonymous object. This perspective is useful for disaster photojournalism because it shifts the question from whether an image is emotionally powerful to how the image positions the victim in relation to the viewer.

Following this idea, Englund (2018) presents the concept of "professional eyewitnesses" and analyzes the boundary between truthful reporting and respecting victims' privacy [16, tr. 20]. For practical guidance, Langmann and Pick (2018) propose a two-step consent process: "consent at collection" and "consent at re-contact," which gives subjects the right to review their images before publication to protect victims' dignity and agency [17, tr. 67]. Although this process can be difficult during emergencies, it highlights an important principle: a person's immediate agreement to be photographed does not mean they have understood how the image may later be used. This issue is particularly relevant in the digital environment, where photographs can be rapidly copied, reshared, and separated from their original context. As a result, victims may have limited control over how their images continue to circulate after publication. The ethical consequences of a photograph therefore may extend beyond the immediate news event, making privacy and long-term exposure important considerations in disaster photojournalism.

While international scholarship has examined disaster photojournalism, most studies are conducted in Western contexts. These works provide valuable insights into visual framing and ethical issues, yet their findings may not fully reflect journalistic practices across different media systems. In Vietnam, previous studies have mainly discussed legal requirements, professional ethics, and general standards of journalism. However, there has been less research on how these principles are applied in the visual representation of disaster victims. This study addresses this issue by examining the relationship between visual choices and ethical considerations in two major Vietnamese online newspapers.

3. Theoretical framework

To evaluate the ethical implications of visual framing, this study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives. Azoulay's "Civil contract of photography" frames the ethical relationship between photographer, subject, and viewer; Silverstone's concept of "Proper distance" addresses the appropriate emotional and moral distance; and Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) "Grammar of Visual Design" provides a direct theoretical basis for the specific visual choices, camera angle, and shot size, examined in the coding instrument.

3.1. The civil contract of photography

This study also draws on Ariella Azoulay's concept of the "civil contract of photography" to frame the ethical relationship between photographer, subject, and viewer in disaster reporting. During a disaster, many victims lose their most basic rights and voice. Azoulay argues that this contract "enables citizens and noncitizens alike to produce grievances and claims that otherwise can't be seen and to impose them by means of, through, and upon the citizenry of photography." [15, tr. 182].

However, there are also significant risks involved in photographing the vulnerable. Azoulay cautions that the same act can also cause harm, since "the photograph is liable to exploit the photographed individual, aggravate his or her injury, publicly expose it, and rob the individual of intimacy. This threat of violation always hangs over the photographic act." [15, tr. 112]. This dual potential positions disaster photography not as a neutral record but as a relationship of mutual responsibility, in which photographers and viewers share an obligation to protect the dignity of the people depicted.

3.2. Proper distance

Building on this relational view, the study incorporates Roger Silverstone's concept of "proper distance," which treats ethical distance not merely as physical closeness but as the degree of connection required to sustain "a duty of care, obligation and responsibility" toward the people represented [18, tr. 47]. According to Silverstone, "the proper distance should be found between two extremes of excess and deficiency, echoing the Aristotelian concept of mesotes (which means 'mean' or 'intermediate point'). Misrepresentations can be produced when the media is 'too close' to either the most excessive or the most deficient representation… "too far" and too deficient in their ability to convey understanding of the other." [18, tr. 144]

Applied to photojournalistic framing, this perspective suggests that neither an intrusive close-up nor an emotionally detached long shot is inherently more ethical; what matters is whether the chosen distance allows viewers to recognise the victim's humanity without exploiting their vulnerability.

3.3. Camera angles and power dynamics

As Kress and van Leeuwen state, "if the viewer is positioned by the image's perspective to look down on it... they are given some sort of power over its subject matter; if they look up to it, then they are positioned as in some way inferior to it; and if they look at it on the same level, then a relationship of equality between spectator and pictured is suggested" [5, tr. 146-148].

Consequently, shooting a disaster victim from a high angle can create a visual power imbalance, portraying the victim as vulnerable and helpless and potentially undermining their dignity. On the other hand, shooting at eye level will establish a relationship of mutual respect between the viewer and the victims, thereby allowing a better connection with them as equals rather than as objects of pity.

3.4. Social distance and shot size

The choice of shot size, whether to use a close-up, medium shot, or long shot, according to Kress and van Leeuwen, reflects the social distance between the viewer and the portrayed person. More specifically, close shots showing only the head and shoulders correspond to intimate distance, medium shots from the waist up correspond to personal distance, and long shots showing the full figure within a wider space correspond to public distance, "the distance between people who are and are to remain strangers." [5, tr. 125]

A close-up brings the viewer closer to the victim, making their emotions more visible and creating a stronger sense of personal connection. In contrast, a long shot creates greater distance, presenting the victim as someone the viewer observes rather than directly engages with.

4. Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach, with content analysis as the main method. This method allows visual content to be systematically coded and compared across the selected sample. It was chosen to identify patterns in photographic choices and examine differences between the two newspapers using the same coding categories.

4.1. Analytical framework

The coding frame was developed based on the "Grammar of Visual Design" framework by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). The variables were categorized into three dimensions of visual analysis.

First*, Content variables* focus on the basic denotative content. In disaster photojournalism, this includes the type of damage (flood, landslide, crop failure, infrastructure damage,…) presence of human figures; the presence of rescue forces; the subject's demographic characteristics (age, gender, group size); their physical condition (injured, uninjured, deceased); their actions (mourning, waiting for rescue, being rescued, recovering); and their mental state (calm, anxious, grieved, or optimistic). This level determines what kind of vulnerability is revealed to the audience.

Second, *Visual variables* examine the technical framing choices. Three variables are particularly important: shot size (close-up, medium, long), which signifies intimacy or distance; camera angle (eye-level, high-angle, low-angle), which establishes power relations between viewer and subject; and subject identifiability (fully identifiable, partially hidden, unrecognizable), which directly concerns the right to privacy.

Third, *Ethical risk indicators* translate the visual findings into broader meanings and measurable ethical indicators. These variables include the caption content (the event description, victim information, interview quote, call to action, or there was no caption) that represents the editor's decision in providing further information; respect for dignity (whether

the dignity of the subjects being photographed was maintained and respected); privacy exposure (a measure that an individual's right to privacy was either respected or violated); graphic level (on a three-point scale from low to high rating the visual intensity and possible distress potential) and emotional impact (estimating the effect of emotion produced by each image).

To define overall ethical evaluation, this study identified four indicators of potential ethical concern in disaster victim photojournalism:

(1) Exposure of identifiable children: Children are considered a particularly vulnerable group in disaster contexts. Photographing them in identifiable ways without clear parental consent raises privacy issues and psychological concerns.

(2) Close-up depiction of intense emotional distress: Close-up shots that feature visible grief can invade the victim's psychological privacy and risk secondary trauma through repeated public viewing.

(3) High-angle shots that position subjects as vulnerable or powerless: Camera angles that look down upon victims can establish an unequal power relationship, potentially damaging their dignity by visually positioning them as objects of pity.

(4) Loss of dignity through undignified portrayal: Images showing victims in compromising or helpless physical positions that compromise their basic human dignity.

These criteria were based on established ethical principles, particularly the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics (2014), which emphasizes minimizing harm and protecting vulnerable subjects, as well as Vietnamese legal frameworks on privacy and personal data protection (Press Law 2025; Decree No. 13/2023/ND-CP) [3], [12], [13].

Photographs containing at least one of these indicators were coded as "ethically questionable." While these four indicators do not constitute a comprehensive ethical checklist, they provide a practical, measurable framework for assessing the level of ethical risk in visual disaster coverage. The following analysis applies these criteria systematically across both online newspapers.

4.2. Data collection and sample

The research objects were photographs depicting victims of natural disasters. Data were collected from VietnamPlus and VnExpress during the peak flood season in Central Vietnam from October to December 2025.

VietnamPlus is the online newspaper of the Vietnam News Agency (VNA), the official state news agency of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Launched in 2008, it was established as part of VNA's broader strategy to expand into digital media and strengthen the country's external information capacity. VietnamPlus represents a model of journalism that emphasizes reliability, official communication, and ethical restraint. These characteristics make it a relevant case for examining how photojournalism ethics are practiced in the coverage of victims of natural disasters.

VnExpress is an online newspaper established in 2001. It operates under the Ministry of Science and Technology. Since its launch, it has grown into a large and diverse readership. VnExpress is known for its professional content and advanced technology. It was among the first Vietnamese news sites to develop responsive designs to accommodate various devices used by its readers, as well as mobile apps and multimedia formats such as magazines, videos, and livestreaming. It is often described as neutral and easy to read, which appeals to a broad audience, particularly intellectuals and the middle class. In addition to its Vietnamese edition, the newspaper publishes VnExpress International, an English-language version aimed at overseas readers.

Overall, VnExpress published 613 photographs in 152 articles, of which 238 images (38.8%) contained identifiable victims. VietnamPlus published 424 photographs in 178 articles, of which 148 images (34.9%) contained identifiable victims. In total, 386 victim-related photographs were selected for analysis.

4.3. Data analysis

Data collected from the content analysis were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software for processing. Descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages, were calculated to analyze the distribution of content, visual, and ethical variables across the photographs from VietnamPlus and VnExpress. Since the coding process was conducted by a single researcher, a detailed codebook with clear operational definitions for each variable was strictly followed to ensure coding consistency and internal reliability throughout the analysis.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Content analysis

Table 1. Content of victim representation

	Newspaper			
	VnExpress		Vietnam+	
	n	%	n	%
Scale of victims				
Single person	93	39.1	47	31.8
2-4 people	41	17.2	48	32.4
Crowd	104	43.7	53	35.8
Presence of rescue forces				
Yes	66	27.7	45	30.4
No	172	72.3	103	69.6
Age group				
Children	5	2.1	2	1.4
Adults	113	47.5	36	24.3
Elderly	10	4.2	38	25.7
Mixed	110	46.2	72	48.6
Gender				
Male	64	26.9	25	16.9
Female	37	15.5	25	16.9
Mixed	132	55.5	78	52.7
Unidentified	5	2.1	20	13.5
Physical condition				
Uninjured	227	95.4	148	100.0
Injured	11	4.6	0	0.0
Dead	0	0.0	0	0.0
Unidentified	0	0.0	0	0.0
Mental state				
Calm	56	23.5	49	33.1
Anxious	69	29.0	18	12.2
Grieved	28	11.8	3	2.0
Optimistic	17	7.1	1	0.7
Unidentified	68	28.6	77	52.0
Victim's action				
Self-coping	93	39.1	48	32.4
Awaiting rescue	12	5.0	6	4.1
Being rescued	84	35.3	55	37.2
Mourning	26	10.9	4	2.7
Recovering	23	9.7	35	23.6

Note. N = 386 photographs (VnExpress n = 238; VietnamPlus n = 148). The analysis examined visual content, including victim demographics, physical and mental conditions, and actions depicted during the 2025 Central Vietnam floods (October-December 2025).

As shown in Table 1, both newspapers frequently used crowd scenes (VnExpress 43.7%, VietnamPlus 35.8%). However, VnExpress emphasized single-person shots (39.1%) more than VietnamPlus (31.8%), while VietnamPlus featured a considerably higher proportion of small groups of two to four people (32.4% compared to 17.2% on VnExpress). This suggests that VnExpress tends to individualize the disaster narrative, whereas VietnamPlus more often presents victims in families or communities.

This can be attributed to the different visual storytelling techniques used in each paper. VnExpress uses either extreme single-subject photography to provoke emotional responses from readers or large group photography to portray the magnitude of the disaster. Conversely, VietnamPlus uses small-group photography to provide readers with both an individual story and context about the community.

In terms of mental state, calm was the most commonly identified emotion in VietnamPlus images (33.1%), while anxiety was the most notable in VnExpress images (29.0%). Unidentified emotions were significantly more frequent in VietnamPlus images (52.0% vs. 28.6%), likely because VietnamPlus used long-distance or crowd shots, making facial expressions harder to read. Anxiety (29.0%) and grief (11.8%) were significantly more prominent in VnExpress images than in VietnamPlus images (2.0% and 12.2%, respectively), showing a more emotive visual narrative in VnExpress.

It is also shown that VietnamPlus displayed a slightly larger percentage of photos featuring rescuers (30.4%) than VnExpress (27.7%). Images portraying victims coping on their own or being rescued comprised 39.1% of VnExpress images and 37.2% of VietnamPlus images. A distinction between the two newspapers based on recovery scenes: 23.6% of VietnamPlus images show recovery scenes, compared with 9.7% of VnExpress images, indicating that VietnamPlus focuses more on recovery scenes post-disaster. In contrast, VnExpress appears to prefer documenting mourning scenes (10.9% vs. 2.7%), supporting its overall tendency to produce visually intensive images related to disasters.

5.2. Visual analysis

Table 2. Visual framing elements

	Newspaper			
	VnExpress		Vietnam+	
	n	%	n	%
Shot size				
Close-up	12	5.0	0	0.0
Medium shot	140	58.8	86	58.1
Long shot	86	36.1	62	41.9
Camera angle				
High angle	25	10.5	5	3.4
Eye-level	213	89.5	143	96.6
Low angle	0	0.0	0	0.0
Identifiability of victims				
Identifiable	93	39.1	44	29.7
Partially identifiable	84	35.3	32	21.6
Unidentifiable	61	25.6	72	48.6

Note. N = 386 photographs (VnExpress n = 238; VietnamPlus n = 148). Analysis focused on technical photographic choices, including shot composition, camera angles, subject identifiability, and captions that influence viewer interpretation and ethical implications.

As shown in Table 2, medium shots dominated both newspapers (58.8% on VnExpress, 58.1% on VietnamPlus). However, VnExpress used close-ups in 5.0% of its images, while VietnamPlus used none. It appears that VnExpress has a strong tendency to engage viewers emotionally through individualized visual storytelling. Eye-level framing was mainly used in

both newspapers (89.5% on VnExpress, 96.6% on VietnamPlus), with VnExpress using slightly more high-angle shots (10.5% vs. 3.4%). The significant use of eye-level frames in both outlets suggests a similar editorial attitude toward showing victims with respect and equality, thereby avoiding the dehumanizing effects commonly seen with high-angle views.

Regarding identifiability, VnExpress featured fully identifiable subjects in 39.1% of images, compared to 29.7% on VietnamPlus. Furthermore, VietnamPlus had a much higher proportion of unidentifiable victims (48.6% vs. 25.6%).

These findings support the idea that VietnamPlus relies on long shots and crowds where individual faces can be hard to identify. In contrast, VnExpress used more close-ups and medium shots of individuals, which could raise additional concerns about maintaining victim anonymity and obtaining consent to capture their images.

5.3. Ethical assessment

Table 3. Ethical evaluation of photographic content

	Newspaper			
	VnExpress		Vietnam+	
	n	%	n	%
Caption content				
Event description	170	71.4	140	94.6
Victim information	68	28.6	7	4.7
Interview quote	0	0.0	1	0.7
Respect for dignity				
Fully respected	177	74.4	143	96.6
Partially respected	61	25.6	5	3.4
Violative	0	0.0	0	0.0
Respect for Privacy				
Fully respected	61	25.6	87	58.8
Partially respected	177	74.4	61	41.2
Violative	0	0.0	0	0.0
Graphic level				
Low	213	89.5	148	100.0
Medium	25	10.5	0	0.0
High	0	0.0	0	0.0
Overall ethical evaluation				
Appropriate	220	92.4	145	98.0
Questionable	18	7.6	3	2.0
Among questionable	n=18		n=3	
Identifiable children	*3*	*16.7*	*0*	*0.0*
Close-up grief/injury	*9*	*50.0*	*0*	*0.0*
High-angle shots	*4*	*22.2*	*1*	*33.3*
Loss of dignity	*2*	*11.1*	*2*	*66.7*
Violative	0	0.0	0	0.0
Emotional impact				
Low	203	85.3	141	95.3
Medium	25	10.5	7	4.7
High	10	4.2	0	0.0

Note. N = 386 photographs (VnExpress n = 238; VietnamPlus n = 148). Ethical assessment based on 5 criteria: caption, respect for dignity, respect for privacy, graphic content level, and emotional impact intensity. Photographs coded as "questionable" contained at least one of four ethical risk criteria: identifiable children, close-up depictions of intense distress, high-angle framing that positions subjects as vulnerable, or loss of dignity through undignified portrayal.

Both publications used event descriptions in most captions. However, VietnamPlus was far more likely to do so (94.6% vs. 71.4%). In contrast, VnExpress included the victims' personal details in 28.6% of its captions, compared with only 4.7% of VietnamPlus's. Thus, there is evidence that VnExpress takes a more personalized caption style, naming or describing specific victims to create a stronger emotional bond with readers. At the same time, VietnamPlus retains a more objective tone, emphasizing the event over the individual.

The data in Table 3 shows a clear difference between the two newspapers. The majority of photographs in both newspapers were rated as fully appropriate: 98.0% on VietnamPlus and 92.4% on VnExpress. However, 7.6% of VnExpress images were coded as ethically questionable under predefined ethical criteria, compared with only 2.0% at VietnamPlus.

A closer look demonstrates distinct ethical risks between the two outlets. VnExpress's questionable images mainly involved close-up shots of severe suffering (50.0%), followed by high-angle shots (22.2%), identifiable children (16.7%), and loss of dignity (11.1%). In contrast, VietnamPlus's questionable images were solely related to loss of dignity, often showing undignified postures (66.7%) and high-angle shots (33.3%).

These findings suggest that both newspapers generally follow acceptable ethical standards when covering natural disasters. However, VietnamPlus takes a more cautious, restrained approach, consistently avoiding visuals that could be seen as intrusive or disturbing. VnExpress, while still operating within ethical boundaries, shows a greater tendency to use emotionally powerful images and personal stories, even if this sometimes places it closer to the line of what is considered ethically acceptable.

5.4. Overall comparative

The comparison between VietnamPlus and VnExpress reveals two distinct approaches to disaster photojournalism: a macro-narrative and a micro-narrative. As shown in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, VietnamPlus used a broader, collective framing that emphasized the scale of the disaster and communal recovery. In contrast, VnExpress chose an individualized framing that focused on personal experience and emotional proximity.

This difference can also be understood through Kress and van Leeuwen's framework. VietnamPlus created greater social distance through long shots (41.9%) and event-descriptive captions (94.6%), presenting the disaster as a broader and more objective event. VnExpress, by contrast, created greater intimacy through shorter shot lengths, identifiable faces, and captions containing personally identifiable information (28.6%). Although close-up shots accounted for only 5.0% of its images, they still established a more direct relationship between the viewer and the photographed individual.

These approaches have different ethical implications. VietnamPlus demonstrated a cautious approach, with 98.0% of its photographs rated as fully acceptable and 58.8% showing significant privacy protection. Its visual distance and focus on collective recovery reduced the likelihood of exposing individual suffering or causing secondary harm. However, this distance may also weaken the emotional connection between viewers and victims, potentially limiting the ability of photographs to evoke sympathy and encourage public engagement. VnExpress, in contrast, created stronger emotional connections by focusing on the personal experiences and psychological trauma of disaster survivors. By turning abstract statistics into human stories, such images may increase public awareness and support. At the same time, this approach has greater ethical risks, reflected in the higher proportion of ethically questionable images (7.6%), particularly those involving identifiable individuals, closely framed depictions of distress, and personal information.

These risks become more complex in disaster settings, where obtaining informed consent can be difficult. Even when a victim verbally agrees to be photographed, a rushed response during trauma, grief, or physical injury may not be considered fully informed consent. Victims may also be unable to understand the long-term implications of having their image permanently available online. Furthermore, such images may cause secondary harm if victims

or their families are exposed to them later, potentially triggering painful memories and interfering with their recovery.

Overall, the findings reveal a tension between emotional engagement and ethical protection in disaster photojournalism. Visual strategies that bring viewers closer to individual suffering can strengthen empathy and public engagement, but they also increase the risk of violating privacy and dignity. Conversely, greater visual distance can better protect victims but may reduce the emotional impact of the photographs.

Despite these differences, VietnamPlus and VnExpress share several common ethical practices. Neither publication used images of deceased individuals or graphic injuries, thereby avoiding sensationalism. Most photographs were taken at eye level, representing victims as equals rather than as objects of pity. Both publications also showed restraint when photographing children. These shared practices suggest that both outlets operate within common ethical boundaries in Vietnamese disaster photojournalism.

6. Conclusion

This thesis investigated how two leading Vietnamese newsrooms, VnExpress and VietnamPlus, used photojournalism to depict flood victims in the 2025 floods that affected central Vietnam. Using a theoretical perspective (Azoulay, Silverstone, Kress, & Van Leeuwen) and an analysis of 386 photos, it was shown that both outlets respect certain ethical boundaries when covering natural disasters, although they have different approaches to ethical decision-making.

These findings can serve as a useful guide for developing editorial policy within Vietnamese newsrooms. As online journalism continues to expand, it is necessary to develop visual ethics guidelines for Vietnam that address issues such as privacy, consent, and the psychological impact on individuals who experience tragedy through media coverage. These guidelines would assist journalists in balancing their obligation to report the truth with their responsibility to maintain the mental health and dignity of victims. While these guidelines would reflect International Professional Codes of Ethics, they should also take into consideration local laws and culture in Vietnam.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that suggest areas for further research. First, the analysis is limited to two major newspapers; print outlets, television programs, and social media platforms were not included in this study. Future research may wish to include other types of outlets or platforms. Second, while quantitative analysis provides an objective overview, qualitative methods, such as interviews with journalists and editors, are essential for understanding the reasoning behind editorial decision-making processes. Third, this study did not include the viewpoints of disaster victims, which could provide an understanding of how they perceive their photographic representations, nor the audience reaction to these photographs. Finally, as this study focuses only on the 2025 floods, longitudinal research would be required to understand whether the above-mentioned ethical patterns exist over time. Future studies should also investigate audience reception to strengthen the practical foundation for visual ethics guidelines. The limitations mentioned above create opportunities for future research to expand on these foundational findings, paving the way for a comprehensive framework for visual ethics in Vietnamese journalism.

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