

Same Platform, Different Stories: TikTok and the Battle Over Immigration Narratives

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Abstract

In an era defined by overlapping global crises, immigration has become a key fault line in what scholars term a “polycrisis.” Within this context, social media platforms serve as digital battlegrounds for competing narratives about immigration, with TikTok occupying a distinct and understudied niche. This article examines how immigration-related content in Canada is framed on TikTok and how the platform’s logic of mimesis and interactivity, grounded in its affordances, shape immigration discourse. From a dataset of 5,305 public TikTok videos containing immigration-related terms and hashtags, we selected a sample of 344 English-language videos posted in 2025, each with over 100,000 plays and likely shown to Canadian users. Through a mixed-methods content analysis, we found that, contrary to expectations, the content leaned toward positive portrayals of immigration, accounting for 41% of the sample. Furthermore, despite expressing differing perspectives on immigration, users used TikTok’s affordances in comparable ways. That is, the same affordances that can support immigrants’ information seeking and sense of belonging through practical guidance and relatable storytelling, respectively, can be weaponized to amplify xenophobia by way of manipulated statistics and racist humour performed in skits and AI-generated videos. This highlights how TikTok’s affordances can simultaneously support digital inclusion and community building while also enabling exclusion and hostility. The findings, although rooted in Canada, hold broader relevance for understanding how short-video platforms mediate contentious issues across digitally connected societies.

Keywords

affordances; digital social resilience; framing; immigration; Polycrisis; TikTok

1. Introduction

Immigration has been identified as one of the defining issues of the 21st century (Betts, 2015). As of 2020, 281 million people reside outside their birth country—triple the number in 1970 (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). Concurrent and intertwined crises, like pandemics, environmental disasters, and war, have intensified immigration, inspiring fiercely contentious debate in the Global North (Leblang & Peters, 2022).

These debates increasingly unfold on social media platforms where platforms' democratizing features allow ordinary people to broadcast their perspectives and selectively "frame" the narrative (Gruzd et al., 2024). However, platforms are not mere hosts; they are interlocutors that shape users' capacity to share ideas. These potentials are shaped by platforms' "affordances," which manifest in users' grasp of platforms' material designs that delimit the range of actions possible (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). Platforms thus moderate how we collectively respond to social problems—our "digital social resilience" (Tomkova, 2020). For example, while platforms' affordances can be used to mobilize support for immigrants' rights and express solidarity, they can also be used to call for restrictive policies and disseminate xenophobic rhetoric (Ojala, 2021). However, research on social media users' framing of immigration has largely been limited to X (formerly Twitter; de Rosa et al., 2021; Siapera et al., 2018; Walsh, 2023; Yantseva, 2020) and Facebook (Kelling & Monroe, 2023). This leaves a gap in our understanding of how users' framing unfolds on platforms like TikTok, which have fundamentally different architectures.

TikTok is the fastest-growing platform in history, surpassing 1 billion monthly active users in its first five years (Dellatto, 2021). Its growth is attributed to its addictive recommendation algorithm, the For You page, which curates content based on users' consumption patterns (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). TikTok is also noted for its playful cultures which promote social interactivity through memetic trends, including Sounds, and participatory Challenges (Kaye et al., 2022). These dynamics have also animated new styles of engaging with political topics (Hautea et al., 2021; Matamoros-Fernández et al., 2022; Quick & Maddox, 2024; Zhao & Abidin, 2023). This includes immigration, where recent work has, for instance, explored immigrants' and refugees' tactics for asserting visibility and belongingness (Cabalquinto, 2024; Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022; Marino, 2024).

In this study, we examine an underexplored area: the immigration-focused videos that TikTok users create and their use of the platform's affordances. We first tease out how immigration is popularly framed on the platform. By immigration, we mean users' perceptions of immigrants and the governmental processes that shape immigration. Next, we assess the extent to which users' content is shaped by TikTok's affordances. Our research is guided by the following questions:

RQ1: How do popular TikTok videos frame immigration?

RQ2: What is the relationship between a TikTok video's immigration stance and its use of audio, visual, and sharing affordances that derive from, or promote, mimesis and interactivity?

We centred our research questions in Canada as Canadians' shifting perceptions of immigration provide a useful context for exploring the often contentious framing of immigration. For instance, polling in 2024 revealed that a majority of the country (58%) agreed that there was "too much" immigration to the country,

a level not seen since the early 2000s (EnviroNics Institute for Survey Research, 2024). While immigration has animated political polarization in other Western liberal democracies (Bloemraad, 2012), Canada has historically been defined by a national consensus—both in public sentiment and electoral politics—that immigration is a key part of its national identity (Trebilcock, 2019). Canadians’ anxieties over housing shortages and a rising cost-of-living appear to be responsible for this attitudinal shift (Banerjee et al., 2025). These issues are exacerbated by a post-pandemic record-breaking population growth, fueled by the federal government’s lofty immigration targets (Statistics Canada, 2023), which have since been decreased amidst mounting public pressure (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2024). As the fastest-growing platform by user adoption in the country since 2020 (Gruzd & Mai, 2025), TikTok is playing an important role in Canadians’ engagement with the issue. For instance, TikTok has received criticism as a progenitor of inflammatory xenophobic content (Liddar & Pallapothu, 2024).

Our study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we shed preliminary insight into TikTok’s role in shaping the public’s understanding of immigration. Second, we advance digital methods for TikTok research by devising a sampling strategy that captures popular videos served to geographically-bounded populations, offering a replicable approach for studying the platform’s recommendation dynamics. Overall, we found that TikTok users’ content largely skewed toward positive framings of immigration. We further found that, across these framing categories, users’ videos engaged TikTok’s affordances in a largely symmetrical way. We argue that this illustrates how TikTok’s affordances can function as a double-edged resource for both bolstering and eroding digital social resilience. We conclude by arguing that stakeholders must contend with how TikTok’s novel environment is shaping the public’s engagement with, and understanding of, immigration.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Framing Immigration in the 21st Century: The Role of Social Media*

To understand how TikTok shapes immigration narratives, we draw on two bodies of literature: research on immigration framing and work on platforms’ affordances, with an emphasis on TikTok. Framing is understood here as the selection of particular dimensions of a “perceived reality” to make them “more salient in communicating a text” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Most scholarship has examined elite actors’ framing of immigration, such as newspapers’ coverage of the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017) and politicians’ framing of immigrants in governmental assemblies (Card et al., 2022). This focus on elite actors’ frames reflects their historical narrative authority in a one-to-many media environment.

Analyses of elite actors’ framing strategies have further produced typologies specifying common frames used. For instance, Helbling (2014) identified several immigration frame categories in Western European politicians’ discourse. Those supporting inclusive, integrative policies draw on frames that: situate multiculturalism and cultural openness as net positives; accentuate immigrants’ inviolable rights, thereby humanizing them as deserving subjects; and valorize immigrants’ economic contributions. Pro-immigrant voices also deploy defensive strategies, like counter-speech, as a means to disarm xenophobia through combative and confrontational rhetorical styles (Ziegele et al., 2018). In contrast, those favouring restrictive, exclusionary measures engage frames that configure immigrants as an unassimilable threat, dichotomizing between a native-born “us” versus a foreign-born “them,” while intensifying fears of a cultural takeover, economic competition, administrative drain, and social dysfunction by way of crime spikes and terrorism.

With the rise of many-to-many communication technologies in the 21st century, such as social media, attention has shifted to understanding how non-elite actors frame immigration on these platforms. Several existing studies show that social media users' framing of immigration is highly contested (de Rosa et al., 2021; Kelling & Monroe, 2023; Siapera et al., 2018), and in some cases, skew toward hostile representations (Walsh, 2023; Yantseva, 2020). For instance, in a study of tweets surrounding the 2019 Canadian federal election, Walsh (2023) found countervailing discourses of nativism, Islamophobia, and economic anxieties against sympathetic, humanizing messages centring immigrants' marginality. Similarly, using a corpus of English- and Italian-language tweets between 2017–2019, de Rosa et al. (2021) note that immigrants were framed through their perceived propensity toward deviance in contrast to frames emphasizing states' role in responding to humanitarian emergencies. On Facebook, Kelling and Monroe (2023) found users' comments on American media outlets' refugee-related stories mostly revolved around identity-based frames, centring the need to take care of "our own," where others used their Christian faith as an impetus to take care of refugees.

While these studies illuminate social media users' immigration framing dynamics, their focus on X and Facebook risks overlooking how different platforms' userbases, technical structures, and interactional logics shape public discourse. For example, TikTok's primarily Gen-Z userbase, short-video format, algorithm-driven interface, and "memetic" and "interactive" logics create communicative dynamics that differ substantially from earlier platforms (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Jaramillo-Dent, 2023). Understanding users' interaction with immigration-themed content on TikTok, therefore, requires attending to the platform's specificities rather than assuming generalized insights from other platforms. We adopt the affordance framework to explain how TikTok's socio-technological architecture shapes the dynamics of political discourse on the platform.

2.2. Social Media Affordances in the Era of TikTok

Affordances are defined as the "perceived actual or imagined properties of social media" that are contextually situated in a user's own social location, and which come to "enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms" (Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p. 3178). In this way, affordances are a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the nexus of platforms' materiality and social constructedness, both of which delimit different possibilities for action. Building on this framework, affordances are a useful concept for identifying TikTok's departure from X and Facebook. Where the latter two emphasize users' relationships to one another, TikTok centres users' relationships to content (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). On TikTok, one does not need to follow or friend anyone; you are automatically fed a stream of content on the platform's landing page, the For You feed, that is then iteratively curated to match your interests, inferred by a proprietary algorithm (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This means that users' content often gains visibility not from their existing networks but rather from their ability to capitalize on TikTok's richly memetic and interactive culture.

One popular means of mimesis on TikTok is the Sound feature: an audio-based affordance where an audio snippet serves as the locus for imitation (Abidin, 2020). Sounds give way to popular templates (e.g., dances, skits) that people draw inspiration from to craft their own content. Mimesis is also bound to TikTok's visual affordances, including its library of effects that distort the user's face or modify the video's background and come to popularly stylize users' visuals (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Interactivity, on the other hand, can be identified in the platform's affordances that facilitate engagement and collaboration, like the Duet, Stitch, or Reply to

Comment with Video features. Additionally, hashtags are a formative feature of interactivity on TikTok, similar to X. Hashtags can be markers of Challenges or prompts calling for imitation, ranging from the “Ice Bucket” challenge promoting ALS philanthropy to the “Devious Licks” challenge involving vandalism and theft of public property (Abraham et al., 2022). Hashtags can also be community signifiers on TikTok: They are used to “cluster” content into identity, or interest-based communities known as “Toks” (Kaye et al., 2022). One example of this is #BookTok, which has been used to cultivate an algorithm-driven “side” of TikTok centred around the consumption of literature (Maddox & Gill, 2023).

Scholarship has further begun to trace how TikTok’s affordances are driving users’ political expression. For instance, several works have identified how Sounds can be used to perpetuate (Matamoros-Fernández et al., 2022) or critique racial stereotypes (Zhao & Abidin, 2023), and facilitate non-technical audiences’ affect-laden engagement with climate change politics (Hautea et al., 2021). Elsewhere, other work has explored how Duets and Stitches, while fostering cross-cutting political discussion, often degrade into sectarian politics (Quick & Maddox, 2024). Extending these works, scholars have also examined immigrants and refugees’ use of TikTok’s affordances for politicized self-expression. This work has found that TikTok’s playful and otherwise mundane templates are often wielded to amplify immigrants and refugees’ voices to assert agency, contest hegemonic depictions, and build community (Cabalquinto, 2024; Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022; Marino, 2024).

This literature indicates that TikTok’s affordances are reconfiguring how political discourse is performed and circulated online. It also indicates that TikTok’s affordances are facilitating powerful new means of political self-expression for marginalized groups. What remains underexplored is how these affordances shape the specific framing of immigration among TikTok’s wider user population. Prior scholarship has broadly examined the discursive content of immigration frames in social media settings and TikTok’s affordances in terms of their technical and cultural logics but has paid little attention to their intersection. This leaves a gap in understanding how TikTok’s affordances shape not only how different frames are sonically and visually stylized but also condition how this content gains traction and circulates among TikTok’s userbase. Bringing these two strands into conversation, our study examines how TikTok users’ immigration frames are constituted, disseminated, and amplified through the platform’s affordances. Using this as a point of departure, we now outline the research design that guides our inquiry.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Study Sample and Data Collection

Our sampling strategy was designed to capture popular immigration-focused content that likely surfaced to Canadian TikTok users. We did this by querying TikTok’s search interface using relevant keywords and hashtags (see Supplementary File, Appendix A). Keywords and hashtags were both included as each shapes content recommendation pathways (Anderson, 2020). In selecting candidates, we narrowed our collection to English keywords and hashtags only. We additionally opted to include only those keywords and hashtags that were general in focus and value-neutral. For instance, we avoided terminology likely to be used only in specialist circles by immigration consultants (e.g., “Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada,” #spousalsponsorshipcanada), and phrases carrying politically-loaded language (e.g., “illegals”). We did this to ensure that our sample was generated by keywords and hashtags that were not only popular but also

conducive to contestable discursive spaces rather than sites of ideological homogeneity. In doing so, we were able to assess how otherwise politically neutral keywords (e.g., “Canada immigration”) or hashtags (e.g., #canadaimmigration) are leveraged across the political spectrum.

A key methodological consideration for TikTok research is how the platform’s algorithmic curation impacts keyword- and hashtag-based sampling (Kanthawala et al., 2022). For instance, search results can vary based on the user’s IP address, past viewing history, and the time of search, all of which limit the representativeness of the sample. Therefore, we devised a sampling strategy to maximize coverage while mitigating the effects of algorithmic personalization. First, we sampled our keyword and hashtag corpus twice per day at different times for seven days (July 8–15 2025). Second, we captured only publicly accessible videos without signing in to TikTok and deleted any stored cookies between sessions. Our sample was collected using Zeeschuimer, a semi-automated, web-scraping extension for Mozilla Firefox that is designed to collect and store a social media post’s metadata as you observe it on a desktop browser (Peeters, 2024). This approach was necessary as TikTok’s official Research Tools API is not accessible to those working at Canadian institutions, and even when accessible, it excludes Canadian content (TikTok for Developers, n.d.).

Following each session, Zeeschuimer’s log files were saved and converted to Excel format with duplicates removed based on the videos’ unique identifiers. We then calculated Jaccard similarities between each file’s ID list to assess between-day collection overlap (see Supplementary File, Appendix B). We found moderate overlap across devices and collection times, indicating that our time-varied strategy increased coverage. The datasets were later merged into a master file, removing all rows with duplicate IDs, leading to a preliminary dataset of 5,305 TikTok videos. Given the time-intensive nature of manually reviewing content that is richly multimodal, we narrowed our dataset through purposive sampling. We devised a sample that reflects the logic of TikTok’s recommendation system, exploring content likely to be viewed by a broad audience interested in immigration content. To identify cases for inclusion, we explored the preliminary dataset for each video’s creation date and the number of plays or the number of times a video began on a user’s device, irrespective of time watched.

Most videos were created in 2025 ($n = 3,672$, 69%) and were very frequently viewed ($M = 441,874$, $Mdn = 27,500$). Therefore, we opted to include cases that were shared in 2025 and contained more than 100,000 plays. To further refine the scope of the dataset, we included only videos with English or unknown language metadata codes. Although French is an official language of Canada, and the dominant language of Québec, the country’s second-most populous province (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2024), we analyzed English-language videos only to reflect our research team’s language proficiencies. We also excluded videos with non-Canadian location metadata while retaining videos without explicit location data. If a user had more than one video that met the above criteria, we kept only their most-played video. This is because we were interested in identifying a range of immigration-focused frames, rather than a sample skewed toward the perspectives of a few prolific and popular content creators. This led to a sample of 432 videos. However, after manual review, nine were no longer available (i.e., removed by the user or the platform, or hidden by the user’s profile privacy settings), and 67 were not in English. After filtering out these cases, we were left with a sample of 356 videos.

3.2. Data Analysis

To address RQ1, we manually coded each video into three possible stances—pro-immigration, anti-immigration, and neutral—and a fourth category for unrelated content. To classify videos as pro- or anti-immigration, we investigated the expressions of immigration-specific frames. We generated from the literature a typology of 13 immigration-focused frames that instructed our analysis (Gruzd et al., 2024; Helbling, 2014; Kelling & Monroe, 2023). Similar to past work (Helbling, 2014; Kelling & Monroe, 2023), the frames guiding our analysis were generalist rather than issue specific since our work does not correspond to a particular event. The pro-immigration category was composed of six frames: multiculturalism, humanitarianism, cultural integration, countering, economic benefits, and other. In comparison, the anti-immigration stance consisted of seven frames: nationalism, cultural threats, integration difficulties, economic costs, administrative costs, security threats, and other. The neutral category was operationalized as videos containing an equal proportion of pro- and anti-immigration frames as well as those that did not express an identifiable stance. Finally, videos were coded as unrelated if they did not focus on immigration, such as content on internal migration or non-human migration (see Supplementary File, Appendix C).

Immigration stance, and the corresponding immigration-specific frames, were coded by two of the authors. Coding took place over multiple stages, involving several meetings among coders to review, resolve disagreements, and refine the codebook accordingly. We then calculated Krippendorff's alpha statistics, which is a measure for assessing intercoder reliability that is commonly used in content analyses (Krippendorff, 2019). For all manually coded variables, we achieved alpha levels greater than 0.8 (see Supplementary File, Appendix D), a threshold considered to be the standard for drawing reliable conclusions. We included in our analysis only cases in which agreement was achieved, resulting in an analytical sample of 344 videos.

To answer RQ2, we adapted the *Memetic Interactivity Codebook* (MIC; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Jaramillo-Dent, 2023), a framework for analyzing TikTok content through its audio, visual, and sharing affordances. The MIC operates on two levels of analysis. The first focuses on mimesis (the reuse of sounds, formats, or styles) and interactivity (the ways videos use interactive features such as shares, duets, stitches, or comments). The second level situates mimesis and interactivity within antecedent conditions and effects. Antecedent conditions capture the contexts that shape how mimesis and interactivity appear in a given video, asking whether a video imitates existing content (mimesis) or draws on interaction through audio, visual, or sharing features (interactivity). Effects examine how these same features unfold once the video circulates, assessing whether they encourage further imitation (mimesis) or promote new interactions (interactivity) that shape audience engagement and platform trends.

We used the metadata fields of videos parsed by Zeeschuimer to categorize audio, visual, and sharing affordances, respectively, into subcategories of mimesis and interactivity, as well as antecedent conditions and effects. Audio affordances included the sound applied to the video. Visual affordances pertained to the use of effects that applied visual transformations. Sharing affordances related to the use of the Duet, Stitch, and Reply to Video with Comment features for video creation, as well as the user-generated video description and sticker to invite others to engage in trends, and promote interactivity through calls to like, comment, share, Duet, or Stitch. The video description was also analyzed for users' engagement with hashtags that signalled participation in Challenges, and identification with different communities through

references to specific Toks. For more information on how we operationalized each affordance with respect to the MIC, see Appendix E in the Supplementary File.

Lastly, we conducted chi-square tests of independence to assess the association between a video's assigned immigration stance and its use of affordances. We used Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact tests with Monte Carlo simulations (10,000 sampled tables, seed = 2,000,000) when expected cell frequencies were below five since small expected counts can make Chi-square approximations unreliable (Agresti, 2018). Affordances showing a statistically significant association with a video's assigned immigration stance were further examined using post-hoc pairwise comparisons. In addition to adjusted p -values, we report odds ratios (ORs) to quantify the magnitude and direction of these associations, with accompanying Bonferroni-adjusted 95% confidence intervals (CIs) to account for multiple comparisons.

4. Findings

4.1. RQ1: Immigration Framing on TikTok

We begin by detailing descriptive statistics for our content analysis of videos' stance toward immigration-related topics. Pro-immigration was the most observed category in our dataset, representing 41% of all TikTok videos (Figure 1). In comparison, anti-immigration coded videos were observed much less frequently, at just 13% of our dataset. Those coded as neutral toward immigration were also seldom found at only 8%. While these findings highlight a notable imbalance, the relatively small proportion of anti-immigration content may stem from several factors including algorithmic downranking, the platform's lower prevalence of such narratives, or reduced audience engagement with this type of content. Future research should investigate TikTok's recommender system more directly to clarify the mechanisms driving these patterns.

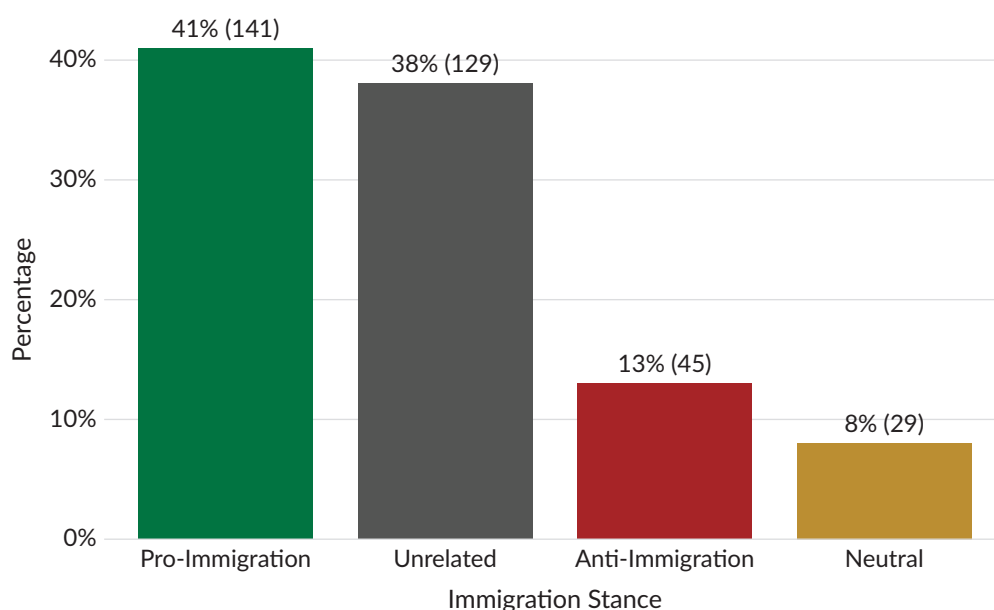


Figure 1. Distribution of assigned immigration stance. Note: The number in parentheses is the raw count of each stance category.

We also found that TikTok's search engine recommended a large proportion of unrelated content, accounting for approximately 38% of our total dataset. This was likely triggered by reference to Canada in all our queries and resulted in a significant presence of content relating to Canadians' condemnation of US President Trump's 51st State rhetoric, Canadian consumer boycotts of US products in response to Trump's tariff policies, and, broadly speaking, patriotism, solidarity, and community-building amongst Canadian TikTok users.

Within the pro- and anti-immigration stance categories, we found an uneven distribution of frames that narrativized immigration-related issues (Figure 2). We observed the pro-immigration other category to be the most common frame, appearing in 62% of all pro-immigration videos. This other category primarily consisted of professional advice by regulated Canadian immigration consultants and peer-to-peer support from recent immigrants, as well as celebrations of individual, spousal, or familial attainment of Canadian permanent residency or full citizenship. This content crucially framed immigration as a lawful, orderly, and bureaucratic process, presenting immigrants as law-abiding and patriotic figures. This stands in stark contrast to Canadians' belief that the country's immigration system is increasingly broken, and that Canada is admitting people who do not embrace its values (EnviroNics Institute for Survey Research, 2024).

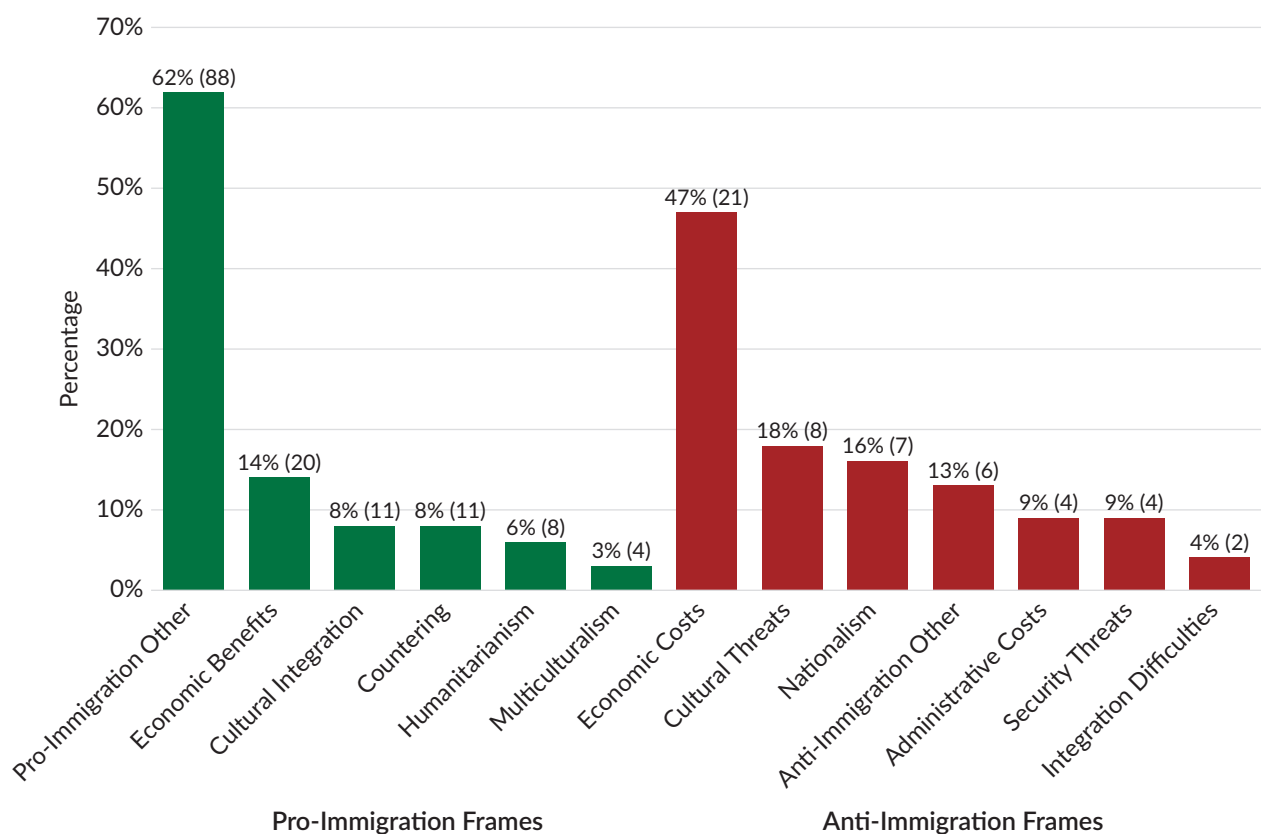


Figure 2. Distribution of pro-immigration ($n = 141$) and anti-immigration ($n = 45$) frames. Notes: The number in parentheses is the raw count of each frame; within each stance, totals may exceed 100% since videos can be assigned multiple frames.

The only other frame category to appear in more than 10% of pro-immigration videos was economic benefits. These videos often showcased sponsored positions to fill labour shortages across Canada, including manufacturing and care work. We also noted a minority of videos that included positive depictions

of undocumented immigrants' economic contributions (e.g., local tax revenues, over-representation in unskilled labour), particularly in response to President Trump's program of mass deportation against "illegal aliens." While not Canada-focused, these cases retain relevance for Canadians' sentiments as the consumption of foreign news can shape individuals' views on domestic issues, shaping how an issue is understood locally (Peterson & Allamong, 2022). This is particularly important in the context of Canada and the US as Canadians regularly consume news from American media outlets online (Newman et al., 2025).

We further observed equal proportions of videos using the countering and cultural integration frame (8% each). Videos deploying the countering frame were centred around calling out generalized trends (e.g., hate toward South Asian immigrants) and specific instances of xenophobia (e.g., a woman decrying the lack of English-speaking customers at a Canadian restaurant), which itself has become a popular genre of activism on the platform (Zhao & Abidin, 2023). Cultural integration, on the other hand, was primarily used by immigrants themselves to humorously document their transition to Canadian culture and its particular idioms, including harsh winters and interpersonal dynamics in the classroom and workplace.

Humanitarianism (6%) and multiculturalism (3%) were the least observed framing strategies for pro-immigration content. This is somewhat counterintuitive as multiculturalism is enshrined in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, while the country's immigration system is often lauded for its protection of pluralism and humanitarian compassion (Banerjee et al., 2025).

Compared with pro-immigration content, the most prominent frame in anti-immigration videos was economic costs, observed in 47% of videos within this category. Videos using this frame undercut immigrants' economic contributions by blaming them for increasing the cost of goods through inflation, placing a downward pressure on native-born Canadians' wages, and exacerbating housing supply issues. The prominence of both economic costs and benefits across pro- and anti-immigration videos, respectively, suggests that users' framing is centred on immigrants' role in Canada's economy. This heightened attention may reflect Canadians' anxieties about the country's post-pandemic affordability crisis and trade tensions with the US (Previl, 2024). This led to disputed representations with anti-immigrant framings blaming immigrants for raising the country's cost of living and pro-immigrant voices challenging this assertion by accentuating immigrants' contributions to the country's economic output.

Beyond economic costs, identity-focused frames, like cultural threats (18%), nationalism (16%), and integration difficulties (4%) were cumulatively observed in about a third of all anti-immigration videos. They expressed claims about federal expenditures for asylum seekers' living expenses, demanding that the federal government's spending should instead prioritize financial support for "real" Canadians. TikTok users also used racist humour to spread anti-Indian narratives, expressing their belief that Indian immigrants were negatively transforming Canada's cultural landscape. Integration difficulties further captured this sentiment, framing South Asian immigrants as responsible for deteriorating cleanliness and order. Additionally, generative AI was used, albeit limitedly, to facilitate some of these anti-Indian narratives by fabricating "speculative" futures (Lc & Tang, 2023). While we cannot know the specifics of users' prompts, the AI-generated video used racist imagery to bleakly depict an Indian "takeover" of Canada, should current immigration levels persist. These videos are a part of a wider wave of hate directed at Canada's South Asian community where TikTok has been a key incubator (Liddar & Pallapothu, 2024).

Anti-immigration other was the only remaining frame to account for greater than 10% of frames observed in anti-immigration videos. A common theme in these discussions was criticism of the government's perceived mismanagement of Canada's immigration system, leading to unsustainable immigration rates. This included claims that the federal government had lost track of its immigrant population, leading to 500,000 undocumented persons and false claims that the federal government was on track to admit more immigrants in 2025 than in 2024. While ostensibly non-ideologically motivated (Helbling, 2014), this sort of rhetoric promoted exclusionary immigration policies under the guise of pragmatism.

Lastly, we observed administrative costs and security threats frames in 9% of all anti-immigration videos each. Administrative costs positioned immigrants as a burden on taxpayers, amplifying misinformation regarding the federal government's provision of funds to temporarily host asylum seekers. Security threats emphasized immigrants' criminality, calling for the deportation of immigrants with criminal convictions and enhancing vetting mechanisms to prevent those with criminal convictions from entering Canada. In each case, the onus was regularly placed on the system itself with blame directed toward the ruling Liberal Party's recent leadership, including former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and current Prime Minister Mark Carney.

4.2. RQ2: TikTok's Affordances and the Shaping of Immigration Frames

Next, we examined the relationship between videos' immigration stance and the use of TikTok's affordances to test for potential differences in how immigration-related content is derived from and promotes mimesis and interactivity. Table 1 presents the raw counts and the proportions of each affordance used across assigned immigration stances.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for TikTok affordance use by immigration stance ($n = 344$).

Condition: Category	Affordance Variable	Immigration Stance Count (% Within Stance)			
		Pro-Immigration	Anti-Immigration	Neutral	Unrelated
Antecedent: Memetic	Audio: Has non-original audio	62 (44%)	7 (16%)	10 (34%)	73 (57%)
	Visual: Has effect	14 (10%)	2 (4%)	4 (14%)	9 (7%)
	Sharing: Has challenge	33 (23%)	11 (24%)	9 (31%)	42 (33%)
Antecedent: Interactive	Sharing: Has community Tok	25 (18%)	11 (24%)	7 (24%)	30 (23%)
	Sharing: Is Duet	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Sharing: Is Stitch	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Sharing: Is Reply to Video with Comment	3 (2%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Effect: Memetic	Visual: Has sticker promoting audio re-use	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Sharing: Has video description promoting audio re-use	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 1. (Cont.) Descriptive statistics for TikTok affordance use by immigration stance ($n = 344$).

Condition: Category	Affordance Variable	Immigration Stance Count (% Within Stance)			
		Pro-Immigration	Anti-Immigration	Neutral	Unrelated
Effect: Interactive	Sharing: Has share enabled	141 (100%)	45 (100%)	29 (100%)	129 (100%)
	Sharing: Has comments enabled	140 (99%)	45 (100%)	29 (100%)	128 (99%)
	Sharing: Has Stitch enabled	139 (99%)	45 (100%)	29 (100%)	128 (99%)
	Sharing: Has Duet enabled	139 (99%)	45 (100%)	29 (100%)	128 (99%)
	Sharing: Has video description promoting user engagement	9 (6%)	2 (4%)	2 (7%)	4 (3%)
	Visual: Has sticker promoting user engagement	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Note: All variables are binary (TRUE or FALSE).

Where TikTok videos' content was derived from mimesis, we observed largely similar use of the platform's affordances across assigned immigration stance categories. The only notable exception was the use of non-original audio in videos. Here, anti-immigration content (16%) drew from TikTok's sound library less frequently than other assigned categories. Non-original audio was a particularly popular affordance used in pro-immigration (44%) and unrelated-assigned TikTok content (57%). Moreover, within these categories, similar audio was repetitiously used between videos. This included pro-immigration TikTok videos' use of the audio, "What Dreams Are Made OF WEDDING by Brent Morgan" ($n = 13$), a cover of the Hilary Duff song. This was used by TikTok users as a celebratory backing track when sharing that they or their family members had received permanent residency or Canadian citizenship. In comparison, unrelated-assigned content most frequently featured the hip-hop audio, "This is Canada" ($n = 5$). This audio was often deployed to promote pride in Canadian national identity, often as a counter to President Trump's annexation threats.

Affordances that allowed for videos to be derived from interaction also showed relative homogeneity across immigration stance categories. Notably, none of the observed videos used the Stitch or Duet features, and very few engaged the Reply to Video with Comment feature. The one exception was community Toks, which was used fairly similarly across all categories, specifically in 21% of all examined videos. Popular Toks used reflected Canadian users' patriotic connection to a larger national community (e.g., #canadatiktok, #canadiantiktok, #tiktokcanada) in the wake of geopolitical tensions between Canada and the US.

We observed no use of affordances that would promote mimesis in TikTok users' immigration-focused videos. Across stance categories, we saw zero use of TikTok's Sticker feature to overlay users' videos with text, calling upon others to reuse their audio to contribute to a trend's growth. The same was true for users' written video descriptions where we saw no attempt to call for participation in a sound-driven trend.

In contrast, virtually all TikTok content analyzed promoted audience interaction by enabling several system settings, including the ability to share a video, comment on it, and Duet or Stitch it. We did, however, see very little effort to promote interactivity through text-based affordances, such as stickers and video descriptions.

For instance, we saw zero use of TikTok's Sticker feature to prompt viewers to engage in sharing, commenting, duetting, or stitching during calls for viewer engagement, across videos assigned to the immigration stance. In comparison, we saw only marginal use of the video description to promote these forms of interactivity.

Next, we tested the relationship between a video's assigned immigration stance and affordance use (Table 2). Only the use of non-original audio had a statistically significant relationship with immigration stance, $\chi^2(3, n = 344) = 24.11, p < 0.001$. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons (Figure 3) showed that anti-immigration videos were significantly less likely to use non-original audio than both unrelated (OR = 0.14, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.06–0.34]) and pro-immigration videos (OR = 0.23, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [0.10–0.56]). These results suggest that anti-immigration videos were less likely to draw on memetic templates built around popular or trending sounds. Instead, they tended to rely on original audio, often in the form of PoV-style footage, selfie-filmed diatribes, or repurposed clips from broadcast media.

Table 2. Chi-square and Fisher-Freeman-Halton test results.

Affordance Variable	Statistical Test	Test Statistic	DF	p-Value
Audio: Has non-original audio	Chi-square	24.11	3	< 0.001*
Visual: Has effect	Fisher-Freeman-Halton	2.75		0.43
Sharing: Has challenge	Chi-square	3.22	3	> 0.05
Sharing: Has community Tok	Chi-square	1.77	3	> 0.05
Sharing: Is Reply to Video with Comment	Fisher-Freeman-Halton	3.40		0.32
Sharing: Has comments enabled	Fisher-Freeman-Halton	1.16		1.00
Sharing: Has Stitch enabled	Fisher-Freeman-Halton	0.93		1.00
Sharing: Has Duet enabled	Fisher-Freeman-Halton	0.93		1.00
Sharing: Has video description promoting engagement	Fisher-Freeman-Halton	2.10		0.54

Notes: Variables with no variation in values (i.e., 100% TRUE or 100% FALSE) are excluded, as statistical tests could not be conducted; results are based on SPSS version 29.0.1.0 (171); * $p < 0.05$.

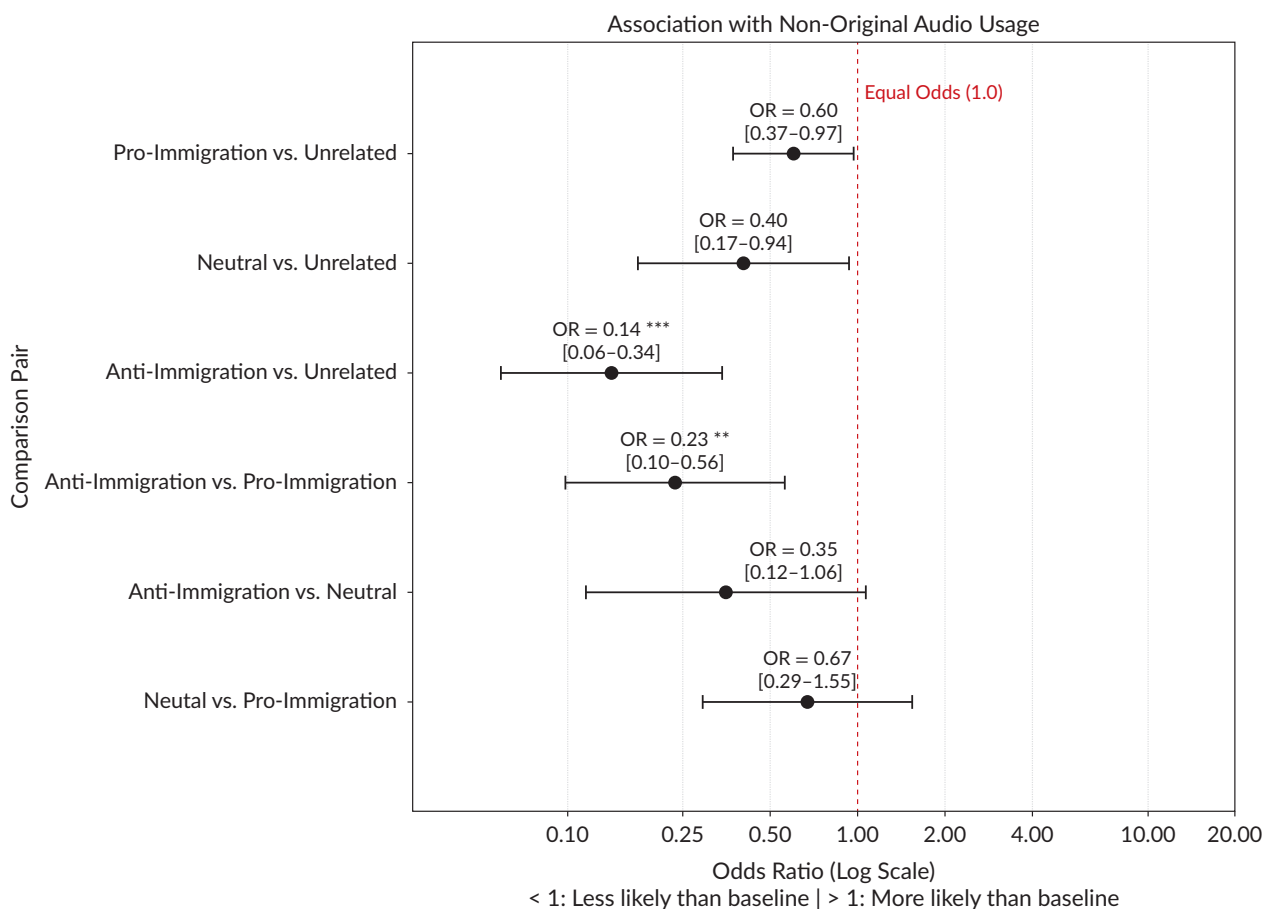


Figure 3. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons of non-original audio use by assigned immigration stance. Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion

Our work sought to advance the understanding of social media users' contentious framings of immigration by exploring the burgeoning short-video platform, TikTok.

Addressing RQ1, our results diverged from existing studies on X (Walsh, 2023; Yantseva, 2020): The prevalence of anti-immigration content was minimal compared to pro-immigration content. A large proportion of the content centres on formal and informal support for immigrants, ranging from recent immigrants' stories that celebrate the often arduous immigration journey to registered immigration consultants offering guidance on navigating bureaucratic systems. Our results echo past work that found immigrants and refugees' TikTok videos often combine narratives of struggle and resilience to humanize their journeys (Cabalquinto, 2024; Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022; Marino, 2024). Social media has also been demonstrated as a key avenue through which immigration consultants' services are advertised (Bastide & Yeoh, 2024). Others have found that social media is often used to document immigrants' experiences navigating foreign bureaucratic systems (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Past work has argued that these online supports strengthen immigrants' resilience by increasing their access to valuable information in real-time during times of need (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Accessing this sort of information can also strengthen immigrants' aspirations to move by demonstrating that a future in the destination country is possible

(Grubarov-Boskovic et al., 2022). Showcasing immigrants' resilience may also have beneficial impacts for the broader public. For instance, past work has shown that these types of stories can reduce individuals' measured xenophobia and foster empathy through narrative relatability (Igartua & Cachón-Ramón, 2023).

Although users' frames featured comparatively less anti-immigration sentiments, their presence advanced a radically different understanding of Canadian immigration. In contrast to Kelling and Monroe (2023), anti-immigrant videos regularly discussed immigrants' impact on Canada's economy as opposed to identity-related concerns. This is not surprising given that the cost-of-living and affordability issues were voted Canadians' top story of 2024 (Previl, 2024). In saying that, nearly a third of the anti-immigration TikTok videos did reference identity-related concerns, including not-so-subtle white nationalist dog whistles that framed immigrants' "mass" arrival as an existential threat to Canadian culture. Often, these videos featured false or misleading claims, citing "official" statistics or figures that had been misrepresented.

Generative AI also played a role in capitalizing on Canadians' increasingly unfavourable views toward immigrants. We observed that TikTok users' content prompted generative AI to envision a future after mass immigration. This practice has been explored in other arenas with users' prompts speculatively creating visuals of a world ravaged by climate change (Lc & Tang, 2023). While this sort of speculative exercise can inspire action in response to an existential threat, such as climate change, it also has significant implications for digital misinformation. It illustrates generative AI's potential for racist worldbuilding, agitating cultural anxieties over mass immigration. TikTok may also serve as an amplifier of this content. Its easy-to-consume format could make it an attractive site for nefarious actors to disseminate dehumanizing content that could, in turn, translate to offline violence against immigrant communities.

For RQ2, we examined how these videos' competing frames were presented using TikTok's affordances. Ultimately, we observed only one statistically significant difference: the derivative use of non-original audio, or Sound. With pro-immigration videos regularly invoking stories celebrating immigrants' mobilities, non-original audio provided a "templatable" device to weave personal histories into viral "audio memes" (Abidin, 2020). Conversely, the largely impersonal tone used in anti-immigration videos—vis-à-vis political commentaries and reused media was far less compatible with this affordance. This speaks to how a particular affordance can be inflected with "registers of meaning" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 258). In other words, affordances are not just objective properties of a platform; they are subjectively shaped by users' engagements, leading to normative uses. This means that some affordances may be suitable for telling some stories, but wholly incongruent with others.

The absence of veritable differences elsewhere between pro-, anti-, and neutral-immigration videos, as well as those labelled as unrelated, is indicative of a "shared language" on TikTok that transcends competing perspectives (Literat et al., 2023, p. 378). For instance, our data showed comedic content was a popular format across stances where pro-immigration content sought to make light of newcomers' transition to their host countries while anti-immigration TikTok videos engaged in racist tropes to diffuse their disdain for South Asian immigrants. The challenge is that humour is a key facet powering memetic trends on TikTok. As a result, it can be an equally effective tool for prosocial outcomes like building solidarity, staking political claims, and mounting challenges to oppressive systems, while also entrenching antisocial systems by reifying harmful stereotypes and trivializing discrimination (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023). In the case of the latter, it also raises additional questions regarding platforms' capacity to moderate humour, walking the delicate line

between harm reduction and free expression. This is particularly important for TikTok, where the threat of radicalization looms large for the platform's young, politically malleable userbase, and where humour is a critical discursive strategy to mainstreaming the far right (Schmid et al., 2025).

6. Conclusion

In today's polycrisis—marked by overlapping challenges such as pandemics, climate emergencies, armed conflict, and social inequalities—the cultivation of digital social resilience is a critical mechanism for preserving social cohesion. Our study sheds light on how the turn to short video, ushered in by TikTok, is altering how we produce, consume, and engage with pressing societal issue such as immigration. Where TikTok has become an increasingly important space for young people to acquire new information and engage politically, it is paramount that policymakers, civil society organizations, and academics continue to partner to build strategies that both counter harmful content and harness the platform's connective potential by developing programs that strengthen citizens' resilience against anti-immigration disinformation. These literacies ought to correctively tackle the threats to public safety fostered by xenophobic misinformation, along with user- and AI-generated racist humour that proliferates on TikTok, all of which threaten immigrants' safety and well-being. However, stakeholders' engagement with immigrant communities should also recognize that TikTok may have positive value. For instance, immigrant-advocacy groups might incorporate TikTok as an additional pathway to disseminate information that empowers immigrants' decision-making in an entertaining format.

Our study also provides ample opportunities for future research. Specifically, as our dataset was generated from a non-random sample of videos utilizing limited keywords, we cannot claim generalizability to searches using additional or alternative keywords (Hollingshead et al., 2022). For example, the relative lack of anti-immigration videos in our dataset likely underrepresents the extent to which this content appears on the platform, particularly as users posting such content may adopt “algospeak,” a type of language used to subvert algorithmic censorship (Steen et al., 2023). Researchers looking to extend this study should consider using non-generic search terms to assess how users' politicized terminologies regarding immigration (e.g., “newcomers” versus “illegal aliens”) shape the framing strategies adopted on TikTok.

Although the study focuses on Canadian content, its methodology can be applied to explore how short-video platforms mediate various other types of contentious issues in other countries or contexts. It introduces a sampling strategy for identifying popular TikTok content and operationalizes the MIC codebook using rule-based, automated analysis of metadata. Furthermore, because TikTok's Research Tools API is only available in a limited number of jurisdictions (e.g., the EU, UK, and US), our approach enables researchers elsewhere to investigate similar questions about immigration or other social issues.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data is available upon request to the corresponding author.

LLMs Disclosure

When preparing this article, the authors used Grammarly and ChatGPT to proofread and improve readability. They then reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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