



Attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants in Turkey: A Twitter analysis

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ABSTRACT

Data generated by social media platforms such as Twitter provide a unique opportunity to examine large-scale public communication produced spontaneously and in real-time, and consequently, contribute to comprehensively understanding the complex set of attitudes towards refugees. The present study utilises a qualitative approach to explore host members' attitudes towards refugees on social media during the global crisis. In particular, we examine perceptions of a broader population, Twitter users, and analyse public reactions towards Afghan refugees expressed within tweets during the pandemic in Turkey as a response to the 2021 Afghan refugee influx. We analysed and coded 2,686 tweets using qualitative content analysis based on four main categories: 1) Representations of Afghan refugees and immigrants, 2) main causes for rejecting them, 3) taking action against them and their supporters, and 4) positive attitudes towards them. Results highlighted the prevalence of negative perceptions about, dehumanisation of, and racism towards Afghan refugees in Turkey mainly due to perceived realistic, symbolic, demographic, security, moral, and health threats from them. However, the findings also showed there were positive, albeit very few, attitudes towards Afghan refugees in the form of solidarity, help and empathy. We discuss these findings in relation to the existing literature on host society members' attitudes towards refugees and immigrants and why we need to qualitatively examine these attitudes on social media.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees declared that there were 103 million people who had been forcibly displaced in 2022 (UNHCR, 2022a). Of these, 32.5 million are refugees, and 4.9 are asylum seekers. As of 2022, 72% of refugees worldwide are from just five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and South Sudan. Turkey alone hosts 3.7 million refugees and 327,000 asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2022b), and these refugees are mostly Syrians, followed by Afghans, Iraqis, and Iranians. This figure makes Turkey the country with the world's largest refugee population. Given the scope of migration and the diverse background of refugees, Turkey constitutes a unique context for examining the host society's attitudes towards refugees and immigrants.

Residents' attitudes in the host community may have an impact on many areas of life, such as residents' support for migration policies, refugees' and immigrants' responses to integration and inclusion, as well as refugees' psychological health (see Berry and Hou, 2017; Esses,

2021). Therefore, identifying the perspectives of residents and the factors driving residents' attitudes is essential for understanding facilitators of and barriers to integration-promoting processes.

Social media provides platforms for sharing public opinion and plays a critical role in shaping people's attitudes and behaviours. Data generated by social media platforms such as Twitter provide a rare opportunity to examine large-scale public discourse produced spontaneously and in real-time by politically diverse populations (Flores, 2017; Hanzelka and Schmidt, 2017; Rowe et al., 2021). Examining public posts on Twitter contributes to comprehensively understanding the complex background of residents' attitudes towards immigration. However, research on the expression of attitudes towards refugees and immigrants on social media, especially during global crises, has been relatively rare.

The present investigation focuses on Twitter users who express themselves in Turkish and explores their attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants during the global pandemic. We aim to

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qualitatively analyse public reactions towards Afghan refugees and immigrants expressed within such tweets as immediate responses to the 2021 Afghan refugee influx that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also aim to extend previous work by (1) identifying residents' representations of Afghan refugees and immigrants—one of Turkey's most disadvantaged and understudied populations—in the context of emergencies such as the pandemic and (2) examining residents' reactions produced spontaneously and in real-time amongst Twitter users in the context of Afghan refugees and immigrants.

Host society's attitudes towards refugees and immigrants

A wide variety of research has attempted to understand the patterns of attitudes towards refugees and immigrants. Negative attitudes towards refugees are widespread all around the world, such as in Australia (for reviews, see [Haslam and Holland, 2012](#)), the UK ([Crawley et al., 2013](#)), Canada ([Louis et al., 2013](#)), Malaysia ([Cowling and Anderson, 2019](#)), and Turkey ([Bagci et al., 2023](#); [Yitmen and Verkuyten, 2018](#)). A recent meta-analysis in Australia documented a range of demographic factors and ideological variables as predictors of such attitudes ([Anderson and Ferguson, 2018](#)). In particular, being male, less educated, religiously affiliated, politically conservative, having a stronger national identification, as well as right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, were found to be significantly correlated with prejudice against refugees. Another meta-analysis, this time conducted globally, additionally showed that perceptions of refugees as symbolic and realistic threats are the strongest correlates of refugee-specific prejudice ([Cowling et al., 2019](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged at the end of 2019, not only affecting people physically but instigating perceptions of the scarcity of resources and inducing fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and threat associated with spreading the disease ([Ornell et al., 2020](#)). Such perceptions and collective fear during the pandemic are likely to generate various collective responses that pertain to intergroup contexts ([Van Bavel et al., 2020](#)). As such, the COVID-19 threat heightened xenophobia, anti-immigrant attitudes, and policy attitudes ([Croucher et al., 2020](#); [Esses and Hamilton, 2021](#); [Reny and Barreto, 2022](#)). For example, Asian immigrants in the US are likely to experience discrimination because they are blamed for spreading the coronavirus ([Litam and Oh, 2022](#); [Zhang et al., 2022](#)).

Moreover, recent evidence pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic evoked negative attitudes towards other immigrants and refugee groups. For example, COVID-19-related discrimination against immigrants from Turkey, Africa, and the Middle East was reported in Germany ([Dollmann and Kogan, 2021](#)), nationalist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant sentiments and hate speech towards the Roma minority in Romania ([Berta, 2020](#)) as well as xenophobic statements blaming immigrants for spreading the virus in Libya ([OHCHR, 2021](#)).

Research on refugees in the context of Turkey has focused mostly on the antecedents of the host society's negative attitudes towards Syrians, which are nearly 3.6 million in Turkey. Empirical evidence documented that the host society's negative perceptions and tendencies regarding Syrians partly stem from limited intergroup contact ([Bagci et al., 2022](#)), perceived threats from them such as perceived economic, cultural, and safety risks ([Çırakoğlu et al., 2021](#)), negative emotions towards them ([Yitmen and Verkuyten, 2020](#)), stronger right-wing authoritarianism and intergroup anxiety ([Koc and Anderson, 2018](#)), and stronger ingroup identification with the host country ([Yitmen and Verkuyten, 2018](#)).

In the case of COVID-19, attitudes towards refugees in Turkey may have parallel outcomes from studies with other refugee populations in the world described above. In particular, the perception of COVID-19 as a realistic and symbolic threat was associated with more negative feelings towards refugees in Turkey ([Karakulak, 2022](#); [Solak et al., 2022](#)). On the contrary, a few studies documented that the pandemic diminished tension between Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens, increased tolerance towards immigrants ([Ataseven, 2021](#)), and promoted positive

attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey ([Adam-Troian and Bagci, 2021](#)).

Host society members' negative attitudes towards refugees can generate a vicious cycle that evokes negative responses to social cohesion and integration outcomes in refugees, such as reducing one's sense of belonging and motivation to integrate with other groups in society (see [Berry and Hou, 2017](#)). Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, recent qualitative research by [Solak et al. \(2022\)](#) revealed that Syrian refugees in Turkey are aware of prejudice and pandemic-specific negative evaluations towards their group, and such stigma-related processes were obstacles to social cohesion between Syrian refugees and host community members. As the host community's attitudes play a critical role in influencing a wide variety of both residents' and refugees' responses associated with social cohesion, it is essential to understand these attitudes in greater detail, assuming that these attitudes are largely heterogeneous, dynamic, and influenced by several factors.

Host society's attitudes towards refugees and immigrants on social media

The existing research on attitudes towards immigrants and refugees before and during the pandemic was predominantly based on surveys (e.g., see [Esses, 2021](#)). In recent years, social media platforms have been profoundly effective tools that enable individuals from various political ideologies to express their immediate thoughts and feelings on current socio-political events ([Chavez-Dueñas and Adames, 2018](#)). Consequently, while surveys provide useful information about people's reactions towards the topic, data derived from social media platforms such as Twitter can be used to examine public communication produced more spontaneously and in real-time than surveys ([Flores, 2017](#); [Rowe et al., 2021](#)).

Twitter data have provided new ways to investigate people's attitudes towards various topics ([Than et al., 2022](#)). Analysing tweets helps researchers better observe the way of collective sense-making in times of crisis in Germany ([Fischer-Preßler et al., 2019](#)) and reproducing and justifying racism and stereotypes about social groups (see [Daniels, 2013](#) for a review) across different parts of the world, such as US and UK ([Flores-Morales and Farago, 2021](#); [Than et al., 2022](#)). In addition to providing a platform for sharing public opinions, collective discourse on Twitter may also impact people's attitudes and behaviours. Emotions are embedded in tweets, and affective expressions serve to mobilise, connect and distance Twitter users from each other ([Papacharissi, 2016](#)). For example, research revealed that Twitter could influence political participation by mobilising individuals to engage in future protests for racial equality ([Bastos et al., 2015](#); [De Choudhury et al., 2016](#)).

In recent years, immigration has received increased public attention and reactions on social media, and researchers have started to devote more attention to examining public reactions and sentiments associated with immigration on Twitter (e.g., [Righi, 2019](#); see also [Bartlett and Norrie, 2015](#)), in the US ([Flores, 2017](#)), Chile ([Freire-Vidal et al., 2021](#)), and UK ([Than et al., 2022](#)). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, racism and hate speech towards migrants have proliferated on social media ([IOM UN Migration, 2020](#)). So far, few studies have examined attitudes towards immigrants and refugees on Twitter, particularly during the pandemic. amongst these, [Rowe et al. \(2021\)](#) analysed migration-related tweets during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, and the US and found an increase in migration-related tweets in all five countries. However, at the same time, they revealed no evidence of a significant increase in anti-immigration sentiment. Instead, they indicated growing social polarisation concerning migration due to evidence for high concentrations of strongly positive and strongly negative sentiments expressed in tweets. [Flores-Morales and Farago \(2021\)](#) also analysed Twitter data collected from March to July 2020 to examine public discourse about the (un)deservingness of undocumented immigrants in the US. One significant finding was anti-immigrant responses, particularly blaming undocumented immigrants for economic and health problems in the US

during the pandemic.

Representations of refugees in traditional and social media may also intensify negative attitudes towards refugees in Turkey. For example, Syrian refugees were portrayed as poor and in need of help, victims struggling to survive, but also frequently as criminals and threats to social security in the Turkish Press (Pandir et al., 2015; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018). Gökçe and Hatipoğlu's (2021) study examined tweets towards Syrian refugees between May-August 2016 and found that tweets associated with security issues were prevalent and attitudes towards refugees were highly politicised. Likewise, Bozdağ (2020) investigated social media representations of Syrian refugees in Turkey and discussed their role in shaping public opinion. However, neither of these studies was conducted from a social-psychological perspective nor in the context of the pandemic. Moreover, these previous studies focused on the reactions towards Syrian refugees and did not consider other refugee groups in Turkey. Building on past work, in the current work, we examined perceptions of a broader population, Twitter users, and analysed public reactions towards Afghan refugees and immigrants expressed within tweets.

Contextual information about Afghan refugees in Turkey

Pakistan and Iran host more than 1.3 million and 780,000 registered Afghan refugees, respectively, which makes these two countries the biggest hosts of Afghan refugees (UNHCR, 2022c). Turkey is also a host country for a large number of Afghan refugees. There are 7647 refugees and 133,062 asylum seekers from Afghanistan residing in Turkey (UNHCR, 2022b). Like many Syrian refugees, Afghan refugees and immigrants are coming from the Middle East, and the lack of safety and security in their countries are important reasons for their migration to Turkey (Alemi et al., 2018). These refugees had to migrate to neighbouring countries (e.g., Iran and Pakistan), Western Europe and the U.S. due to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the civil war in Afghanistan (Dashti, 2022). However, attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants by host society members are, in general, unfavourable. For example, Afghan immigrants in Turkey are perceived as economic and safety threats by host society members, and the host society members' attitudes convey prejudice and discrimination towards them (Akkaş and Aksakal, 2021). Similarly, news about Afghan refugees in Turkish national newspapers is mostly about adverse events (e.g., being caught on a migration route) or incidents regarding forensic issues (e.g., committing crimes, being cheap labour, and consequently reducing the wages of Turkish workers; Wakili and Cangöz, 2022).

Although immigration from Afghanistan to Turkey increased in 2013 (Ahmad, 2021), the Afghan refugee influx occurred in July 2021 because of the withdrawal of NATO and the United States from Afghanistan and the Taliban taking control of the capital of Afghanistan. A larger number of Afghans in groups attempted to flee the country to reach Europe, and 1000–1200 Afghans daily entered Turkey, bypassing the Iranian borders (Gurcan, 2021). Several photos and videos mainly documenting young males entering Turkey on foot and without any control at the border have been circulating on social media and significantly intensified both political and social tension and hatred against refugees in the country, with hashtags against Afghan refugees and immigrants becoming a trending topic on Twitter in Turkey (Gurcan, 2021; Mas, 2021). While immigrants and refugees have been experiencing attacks in Turkey, one can argue that host society members' racist attitudes and discrimination have increased during the Afghan influx. Therefore, July 2021 may be considered a unique timeframe to comprehensively understand predominantly negative attitudes towards refugees and immigrants on a specific type of social media (i.e., Twitter) following a real-life event.

The current study

The current empirical study aimed to explore the public's responses

on Twitter to the 2021 Afghan refugee influx that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. To capture Afghan refugee-related content, we collected tweets between July and August 2021. This was a specific time when there was heightened tension between host society members and refugees due to the videos of young Afghan men entering Turkey, as seen in Google Trends (see below). Thus, this timeframe provided a snapshot of (predominantly negative) attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants.

Twitter is a more anonymous and accessible social media platform than others (e.g., Facebook; Ott, 2017). Hashtags on Twitter allow researchers to access a large amount of relevant data produced spontaneously and in real-time. In addition to such advantages, right-wing and hate groups use this platform very effectively (Hanzelka and Schmidt, 2017); as a result, Twitter allows researchers to comprehensively understand the reactions of politically diverse groups to race issues and migration. As of 2023, Twitter has approximately 19 million users in Turkey (Kemp, 2023). Considering all these advantages, we collected Twitter data. Using qualitative content analysis, the current investigation sought to examine: Host society members' (1) representations of the Afghan refugees and immigrants, one of Turkey's most disadvantaged and understudied populations, in the context of emergencies such as the pandemic and (2) reactions that may be relevant for large-scale public reactions produced spontaneously and in real-time amongst Twitter users that express themselves in Turkish in the context of Afghan refugees and immigrants.

Method and data analysis

We received ethics approval for this research from the University of Sussex (ER/GDU20/2). We collected the public tweets during this timeframe—between 27/07/2021 and 31/08/2021—after analysing Google Trends (2022) in Turkey for the spike in search of the term “Afgan,” the Turkish word for “Afghan.” The hashtags that were included in the data collection were 1) #afgan (“Afghan”; 3.57% of all the tweets), 2) #multeci (“refugee”; 0.50%), 3) #ulkemdemulteciistemiyyorum (“I do not want refugees in my country”; 6.47%), 4) #afganlariistemiyoruz (“we do not want Afghans”; 47.85%) and 5) #afganlarialmayin (“do not take Afghans in”; 41.61%). We decided to use these specific hashtags because before doing a systematic search for tweets, the five members of the research team (the authors of the current paper) independently read 1000 tweets posted in this time period and then observed that the public widely used these hashtags to express opinions about Afghans in Turkey.

Our data was analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA; Schreier, 2012), which is usually utilised to reduce data and concentrate on the relevant aspects of the data. There were four phases in the coding process. First, a total of 97,151 tweets were collected. The tweets were downloaded through Twitter's Academic Application Programming Interface (Academic API) and Python version 3.10.7, using “requests,” “csv” and “time” packages. To include only Turkish tweets, the tweets were filtered through R, using the “tidyverse” and “textcat” packages, and the remaining number of tweets was 53,772. After these tweets were evaluated in terms of the inclusion and exclusion criteria (e.g., omitting tweets that do not mention Afghan refugees and immigrants; tweets that do not mention any relevant content, such as tweets that include only swear words, punctuation, pictures, links next to the hashtags, or irrelevant content that uses hashtags for outreach on other topics; and tweets that are repeated), 16,006 tweets were excluded from the sample. During this phase, researchers discussed their impressions of the data to identify possible main categories that created the initial draft of the coding framework. The Python and R codes, as well as the coding frame, including main categories and subcategories, can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF) website: https://osf.io/qpbtg/?view_only=e055a9fbd5aa4da5a475291e89ad7d0b.

In the second phase, the remaining 37,766 tweets were split amongst the team members equally. The five team members independently

reviewed the tweets to ensure the coding framework included all possible categories. During this process, the coding framework was improved through discussions amongst the team members. Specifically, the categories were merged, eliminated, revised, and new categories were created. The data were organised into four main categories:¹ (1) representations of Afghan refugees and immigrants, (2) reasons for rejecting Afghan refugees and immigrants, (3) taking action against Afghan refugees, immigrants and their supporters, and (4) positive attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants. In addition, relevant subcategories pertaining to each main category were inductively identified.

In the third phase, to conduct qualitative content analysis and improve the coding framework, we narrowed down the tweets. Each researcher started coding by choosing percentiles to cover different dates from the part that was allocated to them. In total, 15% of the data was selected for coding: 5664 tweets (see [Bogen et al., 2021](#), for a similar application). Amongst those 5664 tweets, some tweets were coded as 0 as they did not belong to our four main categories. The final number of tweets that were analysed was 2686. As each tweet was segmented to cover different topics that were mentioned within the same tweet, this final coding process gave us 3541 segments. In other words, 3541 segments from 2686 tweets that fit the inclusion criteria were split amongst the five members equally and coded manually. For example, whenever a tweet mentioned more than one topic related to Afghan refugees and immigrants, it was segmented, and each segment was coded separately based on the coding frame we developed. The distribution of the segments in the main categories across the data was as follows: The first main category accounted for 39.23% of the data, the second main category 27.43%, the third main category 31.07%, and finally, the fourth main category 2.27%.

During this phase, the five members ensured each coding unit belonged to only one main category and its relevant subcategory. In order for a subcategory to be created under a main category, we used the criteria that the subcategory should be mentioned at least twice in the data. Next, the coding framework was revised to ensure no repetitions in the subcategories. In the fourth and final phase, we conducted QCA on the sections of the sample we worked on during the third phase.

Results

Main category 1: Representation of Afghan refugees and immigrants

The first main category centred on the content describing Afghan refugees and immigrants negatively by attaching negative characteristics to this group. This main category included four frequently mentioned subcategories, which represented Afghans as (1) criminals, (2) disgusting/inhumane, (3) terrorists, and (4) culturally incompetent (see [Table 1](#)).

¹ We also identified four additional main categories: Main Category 5: Outcomes of arrival (and presence) of Afghan refugees and immigrants; Main Category 6: Justification of racism against Afghan refugees and immigrants; Main Category 7: Criticisms towards those in power; Main Category 8: Representation of Turks (please see the OSF link for the coding framework of these additional main categories and their subcategories). Even though Main Categories 2 and 5 have some similarities in terms of seeing Afghan refugees as a threat to Turkey in general, some subcategories were unique to Main Category 5. For example, emotions towards the outcomes of the arrival (and presence) of Afghan refugees and immigrants constitute the biggest part of Main Category 5 (e.g., fear, sadness, anxiety, anger, hopelessness, disgust, hate, contempt, etc.). Similarly, the content of Main Categories 6 and 7 is concerned with qualitative analysis of language. Therefore, we did not focus on these additional main categories in the current article both (1) due to the limited space in the manuscript and (2) these additional main categories require a different level of qualitative analysis such as IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) and discourse analysis.

Table 1

Frequencies for the first main category's subcategories (representation of Afghan refugees and immigrants).

#	Subcategories	Frequency	Percent
1	Criminals	319	23,3
2	Disgusting/inhumane	230	16,8
3	Terrorists	201	14,7
4	Culturally incompetent	193	14,1
5	Coward	158	11,9
6	Afghans as subjects of shared religion	72	5,4
7	Afghans are the reason for the current chaos in Afghanistan	49	3,6
8	Useless	35	2,5
9	Bad guests compared to other refugees	28	2,0
10	Afghans came here to have fun, not to work	17	1,2
11	Afghans as a bad model for Islam	16	1,1
12	Afghans are just as bad as Syrian refugees	11	0,8
13	Migration of tribes analogy	6	0,4
14	Miscellaneous	31	2,2
	Total	1366	100,0

In the first subcategory (i.e., Afghans as criminals; $N = 319$), it was mentioned that Afghan refugees would commit crimes such as harassment, theft and murder, and they would increase the crime rates in Turkey. For example, a Twitter user stated that they see each refugee as a potential murderer and do not want refugees and murderers in the country (tweet no: 20,300; we translated the tweets used as illustrations). In another tweet, it was stated that Afghan refugees increased the crime rate in the country (tweet no: 41,629). A different tweet that exemplified this argument stated that Afghan refugees have already committed every type of crime such as harassment, rape, and theft, and were involved in knife fights (tweet no: 31,597).

The second subcategory (i.e., Afghans are disgusting/inhumane; $N = 230$) included language that dehumanises, derogates, and describes Afghan refugees and immigrants as ugly, disgusting, or even monsters. In a tweet exemplifying this, a user stated that they could not look at the faces of Afghans, whom they described as subhuman, and that their smiles were disgusting, and questioned why their families (e.g., wife, children) were not with them if they fled the war (tweet no: 41,603).

In the third subcategory (i.e., Afghans as terrorists; $N = 201$), Afghan refugees were described as terrorists who came to Turkey to break the country apart. For example, a user stated that Afghans have ties to the Taliban and that refugees, for whom people feel pity, hanged the Taliban flag in Istanbul, harassed babies and were involved in robberies. Therefore, accepting Afghan refugees and immigrants into the country means dividing the country (tweet no: 30,843).

The tweets in the fourth subcategory indicated that Turks on Twitter tend not to see Afghans as culturally competent and do not want them in Turkey (i.e., Afghans as culturally incompetent; $N = 193$). Some tweets expressed cultural and sociopolitical differences (e.g., Sharia law) between Turkey and Afghanistan. In a tweet, Afghan refugees were described as immoral, who harassed women in the country they took refuge in, and therefore they were believed to impose sharia and decapitate the people (tweet no: 42,571). In this tweet, it was emphasised that the sociopolitical context Afghans come from is very patriarchal and violent. In addition, Turkish culture did not align with Afghans' values and way of life. Similarly, some tweets expressed explicit discrimination by humiliating and insulting Afghan culture. In a tweet, it was stated that Afghans have never seen a woman without a burqa, they think every woman who uncovers their hair is a slave, and they grew up with a medieval culture that normalises the rape of women and children (tweet no: 717). Overall, all the subcategories in this main category showed that the representations of Afghan refugees and immigrants were negative.

Main category 2: Reasons for rejecting Afghan refugees and immigrants

We identified four frequently mentioned subcategories within this main category that may explain why Turks, as host society members, reject Afghans in general. These subcategories included 1) perceived privileges of Afghan refugees, 2) conspiracy theories about refugees, 3) claiming Afghans are disturbing Turks, and 4) perceived inconsistent behaviours of refugees (see Table 2). In our first subcategory (i.e., perceived privileges of refugees; $N = 291$), we observed many tweets verbally attacking Afghan refugees and immigrants by pointing out they are privileged in Turkey. According to these tweets, Afghan refugees and immigrants live more comfortably than an average Turkish citizen. In a tweet, for example, a user stated that Turkish citizens could not live comfortably in the country, but that the refugees lived more comfortably than they did. Turkish citizens would not talk if the government invested in the economy, but now they choose to criticise the government constantly because the government helps refugees when their own citizens are starving (tweet no: 3593). Other tweets also emphasised that Afghan refugees were privileged compared to local citizens because they were free from COVID-19-related regulations. For example, a Twitter user questioned why the government asked its citizens for COVID-19 tests and HES codes [trace and track related codes], but took Afghan refugees and immigrants into the country without asking a question (tweet no: 21,524).

In the second subcategory (i.e., conspiracy theories about refugees; $N = 272$), reasons for rejecting Afghan refugees were built on conspiracy theories. In some of the conspiracy theories, people talked about why Afghans are coming and staying in Turkey and what the hidden (political) agenda behind it may be. A user stated that the arrival of Afghan refugees from Van to Istanbul who are below 30 years old and who served in the Afghan army is a big project and that these people will have to choose a side (i.e., either against Turks or with Turks). The user questioned what the government hid from the public (tweet no: 30,828). Many tweets emphasised that the arrival of Afghan refugees is a project of the Turkish government or foreign powers (e.g., the U.S.).

The tweets in our third subcategory stated that Afghans are disturbing Turks (i.e., claiming Afghans are disturbing Turks; $N = 70$). In some tweets, users stated that they were uncomfortable seeing Afghans in their neighbourhoods and could not travel comfortably because of them (e.g., tweet no: 1562). In addition, users emphasised in some tweets that refugees are everywhere, ranging from Istanbul’s seashores to parks and beaches, with disturbing attitudes (e.g., tweet no: 30,773).

In our fourth subcategory (i.e., perceived inconsistent behaviours of refugees; $N = 65$), users stated that refugees behave inconsistently and do not fit into the refugee category, so people in Turkey do not believe that refugees are victims. For example, a tweet mentioned that a refugee should be accompanied by their child, wife, mother, and older relatives, not by a group of men suitable for the military (tweet no: 23,526). Another tweet stated that they [the user] did not believe when Afghans

Table 2
Frequencies for the second main category’s subcategories (reasons for rejecting Afghan refugees and immigrants).

#	Subcategories	Frequency	Percent
1	Perceived privileges of refugees	291	30,5
2	Conspiracy theories about refugees	272	28,5
3	Afghans disturb Turks	70	7,4
4	Perceived inconsistent behaviours of refugees	65	6,8
5	Other countries, not Turkey, can have refugees	60	6,3
6	Only refugees who meet certain criteria should come	58	6,1
7	Afghans don’t deserve to be in Turkey	56	5,9
8	Afghans insult Turks	35	3,6
9	Risk of refugees carrying various diseases	10	1,0
10	We should help refugees in their countries, but not here	10	1,0
11	Miscellaneous	28	2,9
	Total	955	100,0

said they fled the war because as soon as they arrived, they started harassment, rape, theft, etc. (tweet no: 22,343). Tweets about the inconsistency targeted not only Afghans but also Syrian refugees. For example, a user stated that Turks accepted Syrian refugees because of the war in their country. Still, they questioned how people who had the luxury of returning to their country during holidays could become refugees (tweet no: 22,010).

Beyond these frequently mentioned four subcategories, we also observed some other tweets highlighting the risk of diseases brought by refugees. For example, a tweet described Afghans as infected people and that many diseases have emerged in the country after the Syrian refugees came to the country, and stated how dangerous it is that Afghans may not even have a smallpox vaccine as well as COVID-19 vaccine (tweet no: 21,854). Similarly, in another tweet, a user stated that as thousands of undocumented refugees entered the country, COVID-19 would not be over, and therefore those affected would be their children and themselves (tweet no: 10,679). It seems that the arrival of Afghans brings not only higher crime rates, fear of terrorism, crowds, etc., but also the anxiety of health with COVID-19 still being on the agenda in the eyes of host society members in Turkey.

Main category 3: Taking action against Afghan refugees, immigrants and their supporters

The third main category included tweets encouraging action against Afghan refugees and the government allowing Afghans to enter the country. The most frequently mentioned subcategories in this main category were: 1) sending/deporting all refugees, 2) calling for urgent action, 3) reacting to those who stand with refugees, and 4) threatening the government with actions (see Table 3).

In the first subcategory, users stated that refugees should not be admitted to the country and that refugees who are already in the country should be deported (i.e., sending/deporting all refugees; $N = 299$). Users mentioned they did not want more refugees and demanded their deportation (tweet no: 21,439). It was widely observed that Afghan and Syrian refugees were mentioned together in tweets, and host society members wanted both groups to leave the country. For example, one tweet specifically stated that they want neither Afghans nor Syrians in Turkey and that both groups of refugees should return to their countries (tweet no: 3027). Similar opinions were mentioned in other tweets. Users stated they do not want Afghan, Syrian, Iraqi, or Pakistani refugees (tweet no: 23,646) or anyone else to cross the border without police control (tweet no: 21,552).

The second frequently mentioned subcategory targeting the current government and public discussed the urgent need for action (i.e., calling for urgent action; $N = 220$). Some tweets called for urgent action by claiming that Afghans carry the variants of the COVID-19 virus (e.g., tweet no: 2848). Other users called for an early election and stated that sending refugees back is the only condition to vote for a political party.

Table 3
Frequencies for the third main category’s subcategories (taking action against Afghan refugees and immigrants and their supporters).

#	Subcategories	Frequency	Percent
1	Sending/deporting all refugees	299	27,6
2	Calling for urgent action	220	20,3
3	Reacting to those who stand with refugees	173	16,0
4	Threatening the government with actions	138	12,7
5	Threatening Afghan refugees	127	11,8
6	Don’t pity refugees	27	2,5
7	People should ensure their own safety/take precautions	21	1,9
8	Tweeting does not work	17	1,7
9	Keeping refugees in refugee camps	15	1,3
10	Calling for calmness	11	1,1
11	Miscellaneous	34	3,1
	Total	1082	100,0

In a tweet, a user stated that whoever bothers them with Afghans should be sent with an early election (tweet no: 23,539). Another tweet also mentioned the voting criteria and stated that if a political leader came out and said that the refugees should leave, everyone would vote for that leader (tweet no: 38,399). Finally, there were also call-for-action tweets urging the public to take action by stating that the situation is very serious and that if they did not revolt today, these invaders would completely take over the country (tweet no: 20,859).

In our third subcategory (i.e., reacting to those who stand with refugees; $N = 173$), some users were quite reactive towards people who were in solidarity with Afghan refugees and immigrants. For example, a user stated that those who expect empathy from the Turkish public on the Afghan issue should take refugees and feed them in their homes (tweet no: 17,519). There were also tweets suggesting boycotting companies that recruit refugees and urging the public not to help those refugees. In a tweet, a user urged the public not to provide jobs or food to Afghan refugees and to expose and boycott businesses that employ them (tweet no: 17,237). Similarly, some host society members reacted to people who did not make a fuss about refugees and called for action. A user stated that those who make a fuss about the increase in COVID-19 cases do not speak out against the refugees in the country and that there may be COVID amongst refugees. The same tweet stated that even underdeveloped countries do COVID tests, but we only *watch* in Turkey (tweet no: 18,250).

Our last subcategory focused on taking action against the government (i.e., threatening the government with actions; $N = 138$). In some tweets, the current government (i.e., the AKP government²) was blamed for the arrival of Afghan refugees and immigrants in the country and accused of not finding a solution to the refugee problem. For example, a user pointed to the government and stated that they would send the government along with the 10 million refugees they brought, and no one should think that this country was abandoned (tweet no: 41,740). Some users also threatened the government by threatening refugees and specifically mentioned that Turks do not have to beat every refugee they see. Still, the Turkish state should put an end to the issue of the entry of these refugees into the country by stating that Turkey is not a banana republic (tweet no: 45,233). This double threat also signalled an internal crisis in the country, especially if the refugee problem was not resolved very soon.

Main category 4: Positive attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants

Although most coded tweets expressed discontent and objection to the arrival of Afghan refugees and immigrants, there were also a small number of positive tweets about them. In the fourth main category, the most frequently mentioned subcategories were 1) standing in solidarity with Afghan refugees and immigrants, 2) blaming those who are against refugees and immigrants, 3) expressing similarity with Afghans, and 4) stating that Afghans helped us during the War of Independence (see Table 4).

Several users emphasised the importance of solidarity with Afghan refugees and immigrants and helping them (i.e., standing in solidarity with them; $N = 31$). For example, in some tweets, users called on society to show solidarity with Afghan refugees. They said they expect maximum sensitivity from the international community for the Afghan refugees (tweet no: 191). Also, some positive tweets aimed to unite people on common ground, claiming that immigration is something that can happen to anyone. A user stated that everyone in this world is a candidate to be a refugee, worker, second-class, or immigrant, and hoped that those who made racist statements would not experience the same problem. They also added that if there were controlled entry into the country, there would not be a problem (tweet no: 42,488). Relatedly,

Table 4

Frequencies for the fourth main category's subcategories (positive attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants).

#	Subcategories	Frequency	Percent
1	Solidarity with Afghan refugees	31	39,2
2	Blaming those who are against refugees	13	16,8
3	We are similar to Afghans	6	7,7
4	Afghans helped us during the War of Independence	4	5,2
5	Afghan refugees provide a workforce for our country	3	2,6
6	Do not generalise; refugees are not all the same	2	2,6
7	Let's not act racist	2	2,6
8	Miscellaneous	18	22,7
	Total	79	100,0

a user expressed their opinion on supporting refugees and stated that they carried out solidarity actions with Afghan refugees simultaneously in Dublin, Belfast, and Sligo in Ireland, that they would expand these actions, and that they would fight against all kinds of racism, Islamophobia, and double standards (tweet no: 268).

The second subcategory included reactions to people who are racist and discriminatory towards Afghan refugees and immigrants (i.e., blaming those who are against refugees and immigrants; $N = 13$). A user expressed their reaction to racist people in the country and claimed that these people would be silent if French or British refugees came to the country. So, these people were not humanists, and they were even racist because they categorised people based on their clothing and where they were from (tweet no: 31,826). Another user said they were upset when they saw the hashtags on the timeline stating that Afghans and Syrians are not wanted and that everyone supports racism in unity. They also called for hate directed at the person, not at someone's race (tweet no: 9890).

The tweets in the third subcategory (i.e., expressing similarity with Afghans; $N = 6$) emphasised similarities between Turks and Afghans. For example, in a tweet, Afghans were seen as Turks who migrated to Germany, and the user reminded that the Germans did not want the Turks at that time and stated that we should protect each other as brothers and sisters and not marginalise each other (tweet no: 20,914). Although it is very valuable to engage in solidarity by trying to establish a common ground between Afghans and Turks, unfortunately, it should be noted that the number of these tweets was extremely low.

In our last subcategory (i.e., stating that Afghans helped us during the War of Independence; $N = 4$), users stated that Afghans helped Turks during the War of Independence, so now it is Turks' turn to help them. For example, in a tweet, a user stated that, as a nationalist, they see Afghans as their fellows because Afghans exchanged their bracelets for money during the War of Independence and sent them to Turks. Now it is their turn to support Afghans (tweet no: 22,746).

Despite being low in frequency, three tweets stated that Afghans contribute to the country's workforce. For example, a user exemplified the contribution of Afghans to the workforce by saying that since the Afghans arrived, farmers in Turkey have been happy and able to find someone to employ (tweet no: 41,921). In another tweet, a user mentioned that shopkeepers could not find Turkish workers because the work was heavy, so they preferred Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan workers. The user stated that they did not encounter any rudeness or disobedience from these immigrant workers (tweet no: 31,832). Even though in such tweets, the users' motivation for solidarity with the Afghans is based on self-interests, it is still fair to argue that there is a form of acceptance of Afghan refugees and immigrants.

Discussion

Residents' attitudes towards refugees and immigrants in the host community play a crucial role in shaping integration-promoting processes. Understanding the backgrounds of residents' attitudes is an essential mission for social scientists and policy-makers. However,

² Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (in Turkish); Justice and Development Party.

studies on public reactions towards Afghan immigrants and refugees in Turkey expressed on Twitter are scarce. In the current qualitative investigation, we examined host society members' attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants on Twitter. We were interested in specifically exploring host society members' (1) representations of the Afghan refugees and immigrants—one of Turkey's most disadvantaged and understudied populations—in the context of emergencies such as the pandemic and (2) large-scale public reactions that are produced spontaneously and in real-time by Twitter users that express themselves in Turkish in the context of Afghan refugees and immigrants. To this end, we collected a large dataset on Twitter over the 2021 Afghan refugee influx in Turkey. We created four main categories both inductively and deductively from the sampled tweets: (a) representation of Afghan refugees and immigrants, (b) reasons for rejecting them, (c) taking action against them and their supporters and (d) positive attitudes towards them. Thus, we provided the first empirical insight into how host society members use Twitter to express negative and positive attitudes towards Afghan refugees and immigrants.

Our results showed that host society members represented Afghan refugees and immigrants negatively on social media. Afghan refugees and immigrants, but mostly young Afghan men, were often portrayed as a hated group in the country and were evaluated more negatively than the other groups. Although past work has examined the role of attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey (Çirakoğlu et al., 2021; see also Gökçe and Hatipoğlu, 2021), to our ultimate knowledge, there has been no investigation on how Afghan refugees are represented in public discourse on social media as well as what kind of actions against them are called on social media. Our results are consistent with the previous findings showing how other refugees, mostly Syrians, in the country are represented negatively (Bozdağ, 2020). Furthermore, our results are consistent with the previous findings showing that negative attitudes towards Afghan refugees are prevalent in Turkey (Akkaş and Aksakal, 2021).

However, our findings also extend these previous works by showing that for some host society members, it is not about Syrian or Afghan refugees in particular, but they are against all refugees and immigrants in the country. They seem to reject the idea of hosting refugees in the country. One reason for this generalised rejection attitude is that Turkey hosts four million refugees and has been the largest refugee-hosting country in the world for the past eight years (UNHCR, 2022b). According to the report by UNHCR (2022d), host society members' fatigue from hosting refugees is growing rapidly in Turkey, and the reason behind this fatigue is that host society members perceive refugees as the main cause of stretching the limited resources and service, increasing competition over jobs, and fuelling unsocial behaviour. Our results also complement this recent report and show that for some society members, the discontent does not stem from Afghan or Syrian refugees in particular, but refugees in general. On the other hand, for other society members, Afghan refugees represent the *worst* refugee group amongst the refugee population in Turkey due to various reasons. Based on our findings, we can argue that a few possible reasons include, but are not limited to, Afghan refugees' coming to Turkey without going through any control at the border, being composed of mostly young men and thus creating safety problems in the eyes of the public (see also Gurcan, 2021; Mas, 2021).

Conversely, the current study shows there were positive, albeit very few, attitudes towards Afghan refugees. Although global crises can largely evoke negative attitudes in intergroup relations, paradoxically, such crises can also induce positive intergroup perceptions. As COVID-19 is a global pandemic, one can even claim that these positive attitudes might have been bolstered, in part, by the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies have shown that the pandemic may have reduced intergroup boundaries and provided a chance to create room for discussions about inclusive immigration via the implementation of common and shared group identity across different parts of the world (Barragan et al., 2021; Tekin et al., 2021; Uluğ et al., 2022).

Accordingly, a study in Turkey documented that the COVID-19 threat was associated with positive reactions towards Syrian refugees in Turkey through common ingroup identity (Adam-Troian and Bağcı, 2021). Understanding both negative and positive attitudes towards refugees is the first step to detecting obstacles to and facilitators of social cohesion and implementing inclusive policies to reduce refugee-specific prejudice and promote integration-promoting processes.

We aimed to qualitatively analyse public reactions towards Afghan refugees and immigrants expressed within tweets as immediate responses to the 2021 Afghan refugee influx during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results provided rationalised arguments of host society members' reasons for a) rejecting Afghan refugees and immigrants and b) their calls to take action against them. These reasons ranged from perceived privileges of refugees to refugees insulting Turks, from the possibility of carrying diseases (e.g., COVID-19) to how Afghan men left their families behind. There were other political reasons for host society members to reject Afghans such as Turkey should help refugees in general, but in other Muslim countries, and deserves "better refugees." Therefore, on Twitter, host society members called for (mostly negative) actions by threatening Afghan refugees and reacting to those who stand with refugees. Overall, our findings show how the way host society members represented Afghan refugees is related to the reasons why they were rejected by host society members. These results are prominent for integration-promoting processes because host society members' reasons for rejecting refugees and immigrants should be considered in such processes.

Social media is a valuable source of information, particularly for social psychologists, as people share their views on any political issue and engage in discussions with other users on these platforms. While social media platforms are valuable tools for providing samples for survey studies (e.g., Uluğ et al., 2022), the ever-changing nature of political views makes it conducive for qualitative studies. For instance, Twitter has been the subject of various qualitative studies exploring users' opinions on immigrants (Flores-Morales and Farago, 2021; Rowe et al., 2021) and the reasons for (not) supporting certain groups (Uluğ et al., 2023). Through qualitative research, social psychological phenomena on social media can be explored more profoundly and spontaneously, and the examination of qualitative data on social media yields a plethora of information regarding public discourse. Our qualitative findings highlighted Twitter users' fine-grained views on various refugee-related issues.

Limitations and future directions

The current study has a few limitations. First, we did not analyse the replies to the tweets; therefore, we could not analyse the interactions between Twitter users. Instead, our tweets in the dataset show individual tweets without considering the group dynamics. We took a conservative approach in the study to reduce the number of tweets; however, future studies should also analyse the interactions amongst these users to examine within-group dynamics.

Second, in the current study, we focused on five hashtags (i.e., #afghan, #refugee, #Idonotwantrefugeesinmycountry, #wedonotwantAfghans and #don'ttakeAfghansin). Even though these hashtags were quite popular during the timeframes we focused on, one can also argue that our hashtag choice may have overrepresented the negative attitude towards refugees in Turkey (e.g., #Idonotwantrefugeesinmycountry, #wedonotwantAfghans and #don'ttakeAfghansin). In this period, there were no overtly positive hashtags supporting the refugees. We thus chose to investigate hashtags against refugees to detect positive attitudes towards them, as individuals may use Twitter hashtags against refugees as a platform with wide outreach to present counter-arguments and show support for refugees instead (Özerim and Tolay, 2021). However, some people who support refugees, immigrants, and their rights may have avoided using some of these hashtags not to attract racist users and trolls. Future studies may also

identify positive hashtags (if any) and analyse the content of such tweets to complement our findings.

Third, future studies may also compare tweets across different languages (e.g., tweets in English and German) and countries, which particularly host higher numbers of Afghan refugees (e.g., tweets from Iran and Pakistan). In the current study, we only focused on tweets in Turkish as we filtered for Turkish. However, this might include people outside of Turkey as well. Comparing tweets across countries and languages would allow researchers to compare and contrast different perspectives, considering historical migration routes or current migration patterns. Even though Twitter users represent approximately 20% of the total population in Turkey (Kemp, 2023), we should also note that the data we present here are by no means representative.

Last, it is almost impossible to identify the demographic characteristics of Twitter users. However, through qualitative and quantitative studies, one can also identify relevant demographic characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, age, gender) and their relationship with endorsing certain attitudes towards outgroup members. Future studies may also examine these relationships.

Conclusion

What patterns emerged in the host society members' tweets as a response to the Afghan refugee crisis? The 2021 Afghan refugee influx in Turkey that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed us to examine such responses. The results of this study highlighted negative representations of Afghan refugees, calls for action against them and their supporters, and reasons for rejecting them by host society members on social media. As Bozdağ (2020, p. 712) rightly puts it, "social media contributes to trivialisation and normalisation of discrimination and hatred against Syrian refugees [in Turkey] through disseminating overt discourses of '[o]thering.'" Our results show this is also true for Afghan refugees in Turkey. We hope our findings may also pave the way for a discussion on how social media could be used to distribute positive discourses for refugees and immigrants.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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