

# ‘Breadth – depth - back to breadth’:

What can we learn about migration narratives amongst non-elites on Twitter through the application of computational and qualitative social science analytical strategies?

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# Social Context


Lifting of transitional controls for Romanian and Bulgarian migrants in the UK in 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014.

Anti-immigrant narratives circulated in mainstream British media and some UK politicians.

What about social media? Did anti-immigration consensus predominate, or did social media platforms provide digital space for challenging such a consensus?

I argue that social media can offer insights into uncensored public views of the nation & the cultural politics of belonging.

# Social Media Data

- Initial Data: Tweets posted around the time of lifting transitional controls on Romanian & Bulgarian migration to UK – 1 October 2013 to 1 March 2014 using keywords (immigration, immigrant, migration, migrant)  2m tweets (full historical firehose or 100% of undeleted tweets matching keywords).
- Filtered data on keywords (Bulgaria/Bulgarian, Romania/Romanian, England, UK, Britain & geo-location & time zone
- Final corpus- **47,978** tweets.

# Abductive Interpretivist Analytical Strategy

The abductive model involves an iterative filling of a theoretical gap in a particular substantive field, putting together theories from quite different fields, moving back and forth between data and theories, making comparisons and interpretations, and rethinking and refining best possible plausible explanations. It is a logic of movement that actively seeks out and moves from general theory gap to specific empirical puzzle (in light of existing theories) to novel theory explanation

(Edwards et al., 2021:1278-79)

Implemented abductive logic by adapting the '**breadth-and-depth**' method for working with large amounts of qualitative data proposed by Davidson et al. (2019)

# Stage 1 – 'breadth work'

Social media data comprises 3 facets – *communication*, *action*, & *experience* (Beneito-Montagut, 2019).

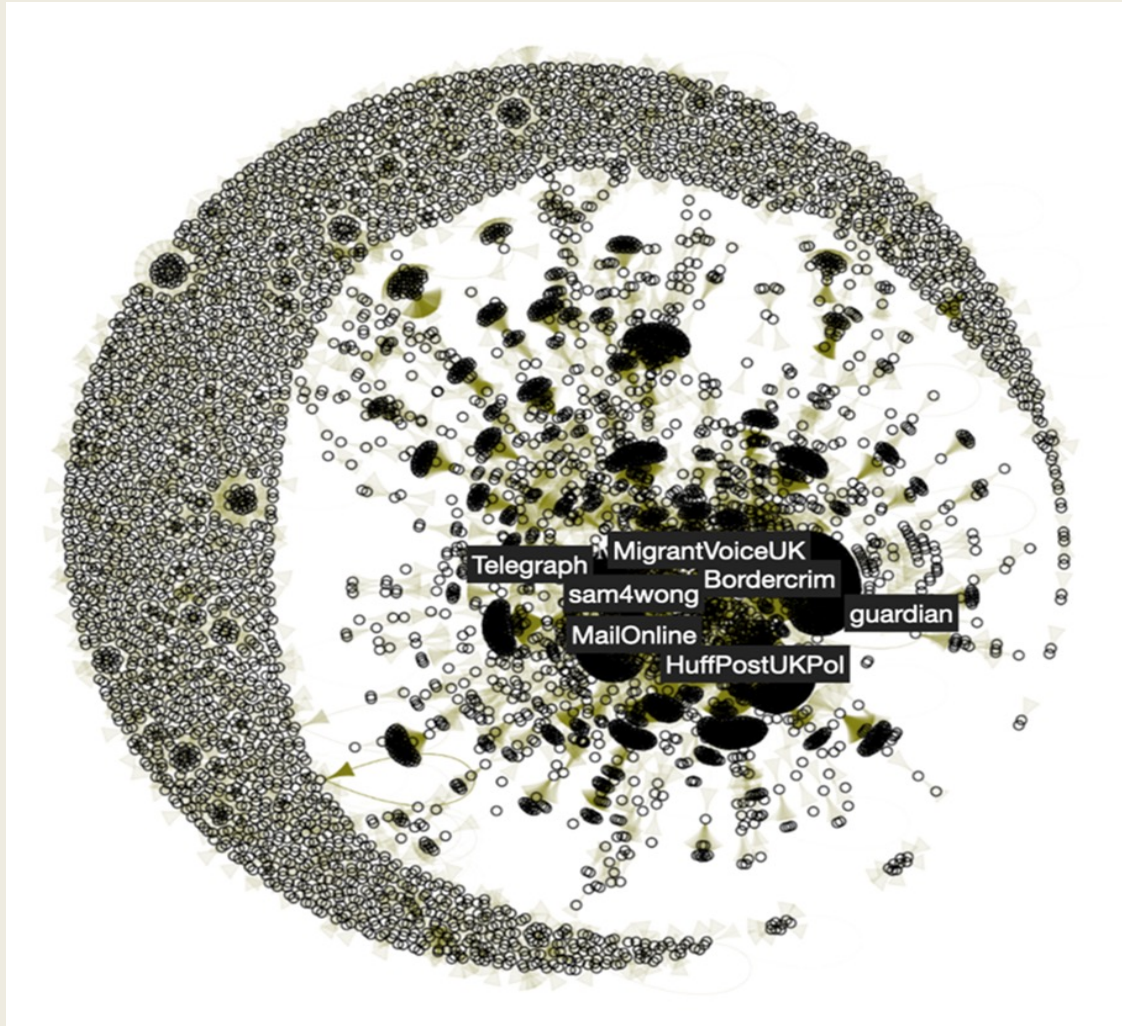
Focus on each facet implies a distinctive ontological position & invites particular analytical techniques.

Computational techniques (e.g. R programming language) useful for initiating analysis – 'breadth work'

Focused on *action*.

On Twitter action includes **Retweets**, **@-mentions**, **@reply**

## Stage 1 – ‘breadth work’



- Network graph revealed 95% of tweets never Retweeted.
- We define these isolated users as ‘**non-elites**’ or those with low digital capital (low online network influence measured in terms of reach and scale) - (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017:952)

Figure 1: October 1, 2013 to March 1, 2014 retweet network showing a band of isolated ‘non-elites’ in the periphery of the network

# Stage 2 – ‘depth work’ – theoretical context

- Scholarship on narratives of migration and their implications for cultural politics of belonging focuses on mainstream political elites and mass media.
- Limited understanding of *how* and *whether* elite discourses & values are absorbed and accepted or contested by wider public.

Thompson (2001:28-29) suggests scholars examine:

‘the values, beliefs, customs, conventions, habits and practices of the ‘British nation’ that individuals actively draw on to make sense of events, individuals or characters encountered can lead to a sociological understanding of how differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are conceptualised and the symbolic boundaries of the nation are constructed by individuals’.

Revised research questions:

- What values embedded in attitudes to immigration among non-elites?
- What do these tell us about constructions and contestations of the symbolic boundaries of the nation amongst non-elites.

## Stage 2 – ‘depth work’

Published in:  
Shah, B. and Ogden, J.  
(2021) ‘Immigration,  
Race and Nation in UK:  
The Politics of Belonging  
on Twitter’. *Sociological  
Research Online*

- Focused on **communication** by non-elite users.
- Qualitative coding of 5% random sample of tweets from non-elite users for sentiment & themes:

### Findings:

- ❑ presence of highly polarised immigration attitudes among non-elites;
- ❑ anti-immigration sentiments demonstrate cohesive set of values expressing exclusionary nationalism based on assumptions about race, ‘whiteness’ & entitlement.
- ❑ Also present pro-immigration attitudes that contest racialized understandings of the nation and construct inclusive symbolic boundaries. But pro-immigration attitudes draw on multiple, and sometimes contradictory values.



Stage 3 – back to  
'breadth work'

Two new research  
questions

What are the patterns of information consumption & sharing on the topic of migration/immigration among non-elite Twitter users in the UK?

Are there structural differences in information flows among non-elite users who are anti-immigration/immigrant and those who are pro-immigration/immigrant?

## Stage 3 – back to ‘breadth work’

To address new RQ 1 focused on ***communication***:

1. Natural Language Processes (NLP) to carry out thematic content analysis (Davidson et al. 2019) of the whole corpus of tweets through a search for different key words in the tweet, related to:
  - ‘entire media environment’ (Dobois & Blank 2018):
    - media sources
    - political parties and/or political actors linked to parties,
    - organizations and activists/individuals.
2. A count of the number of times each of these keywords appeared in the corpus was kept.

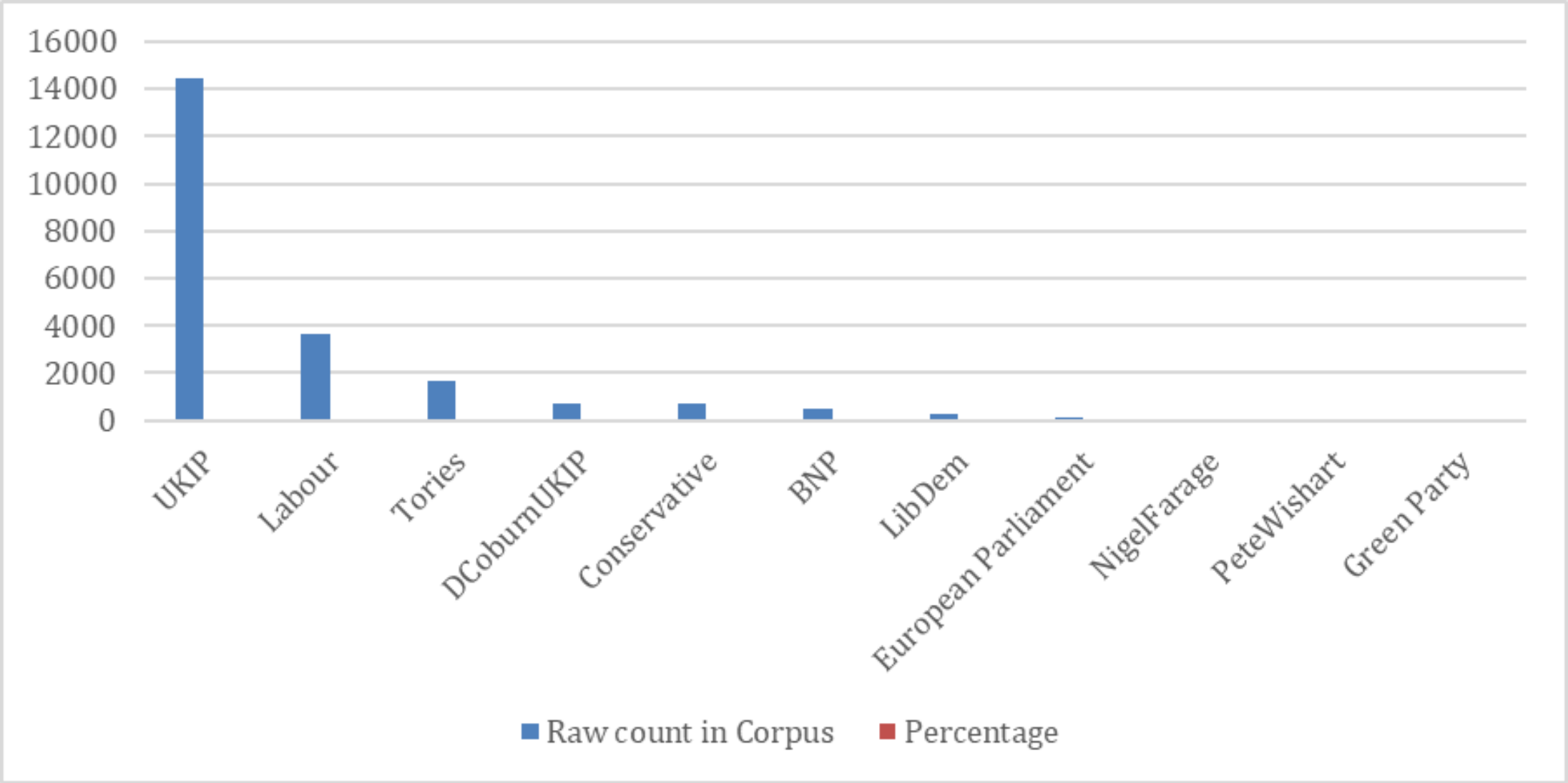
To address new RQ 2 focused on ***communication & action***:

1. Lead author labelled a 4.6% sample of whole corpus as negative, positive or neutral in terms of sentiment towards immigration to train a machine learning model .
2. After completing data cleaning co-author used a machine learning model to predict whether a tweet had positive, negative or neutral sentiment. Found:
  - 20% pro-immigration
  - 41% anti-immigration
  - 39% neutral
3. Then a regular expression search was done to find hashtags & @mentions in tweets classified as expressing negative or positive sentiment.

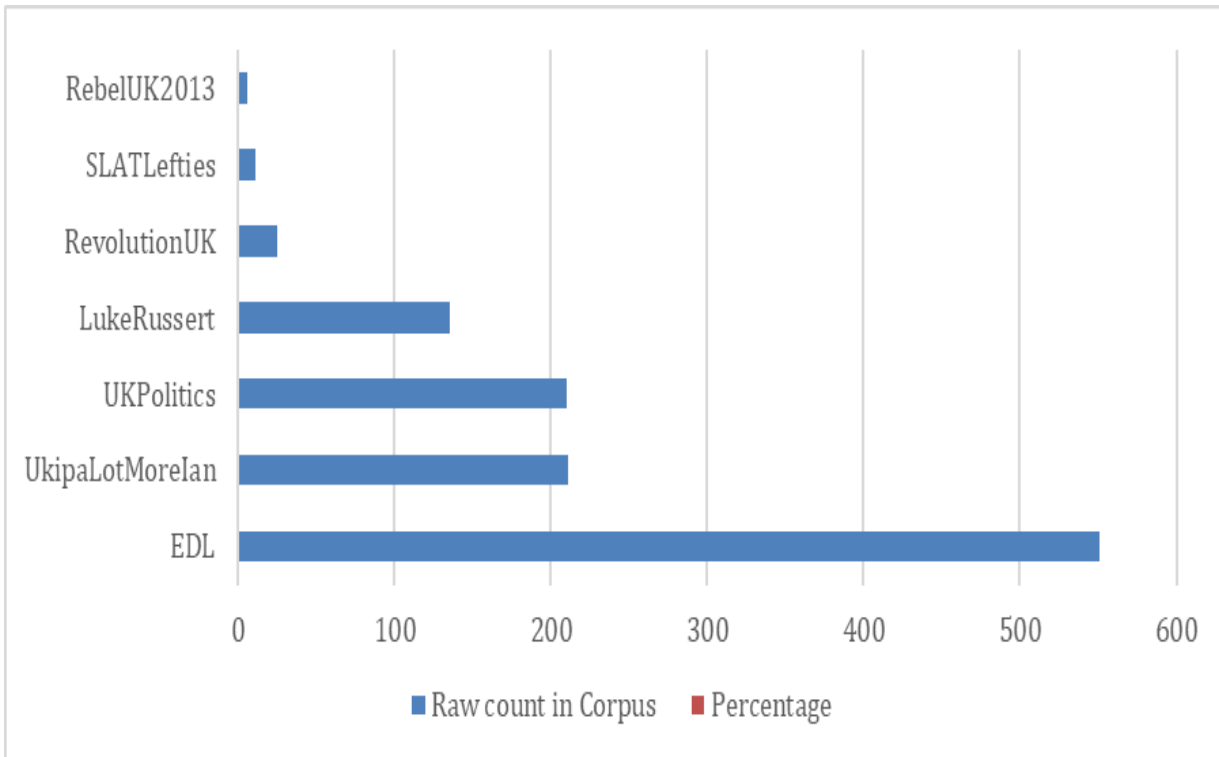
## New RQ1 - References to traditional news media, online news organizations, & social media sites in whole corpus

Mainstream Media (Tabloid, Broadsheet, On-line)	Raw count in Corpus	Percentage
BBC	6575	5
Telegraph	1662	1
HuffPost	1291	1
HuffPostUK	1233	1
Daily Express	1068	1
MailOnline	940	1
theguardian.com	780	1
Daily Mail	750	1
The Guardian	550	0
BBCNews	532	0
Youtube	458	0
SkyNews	449	0
Economist	253	0
CNN	176	0
Huffington Post	158	0
The Independent	140	0
Fox News	128	0
nytimes	126	0
The Times	79	0
guardiannews	71	0
Standardnews	45	0
VICEUK	40	0
DMail	17	0
NBCNewsBusiness	7	0
DailyStar	6	0
Daily Mirror	2	0
DMirror	2	0
DExpress	1	0

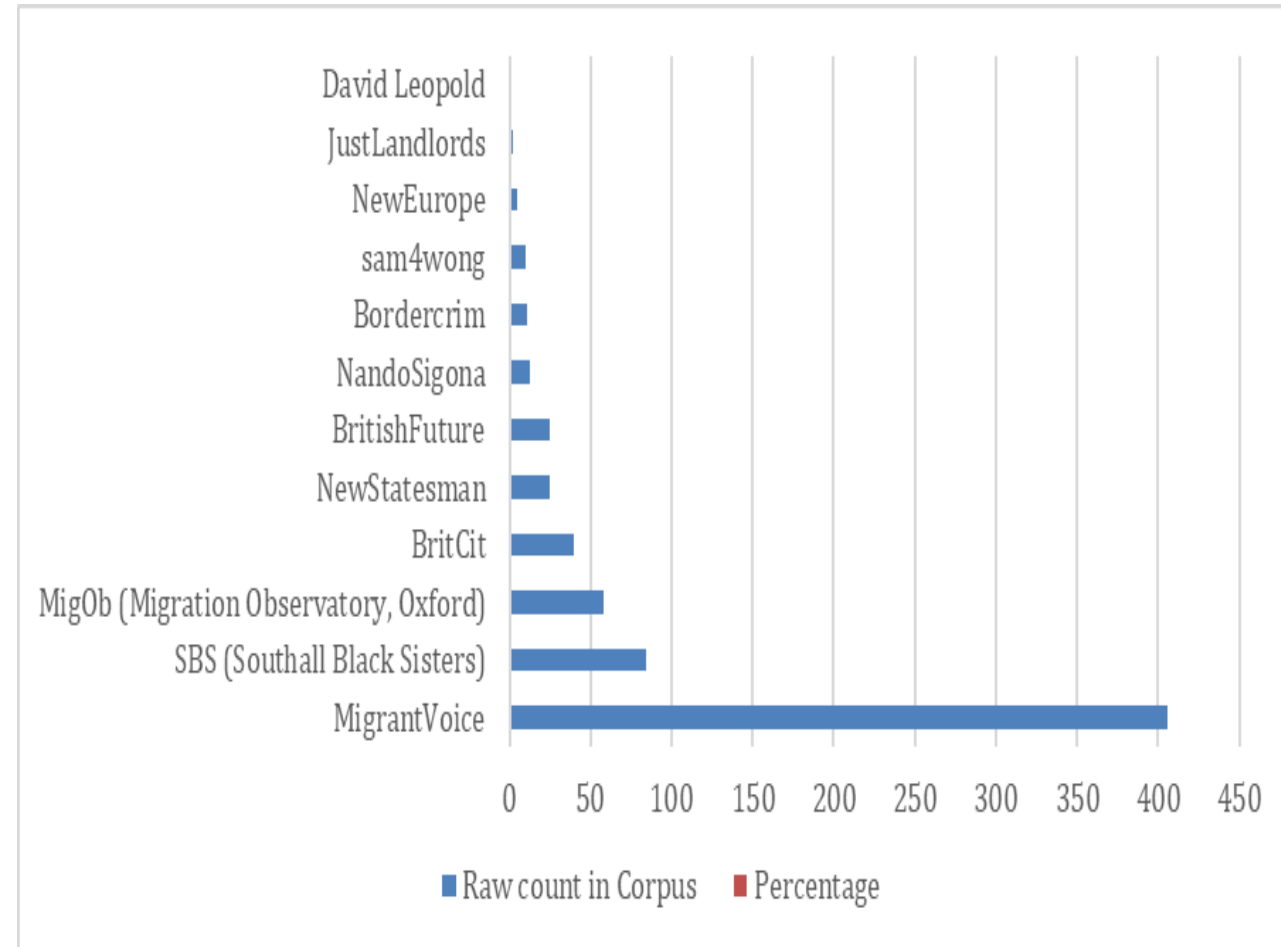
New RQ1 - References to political parties and politicians in whole corpus



## New RQ 1



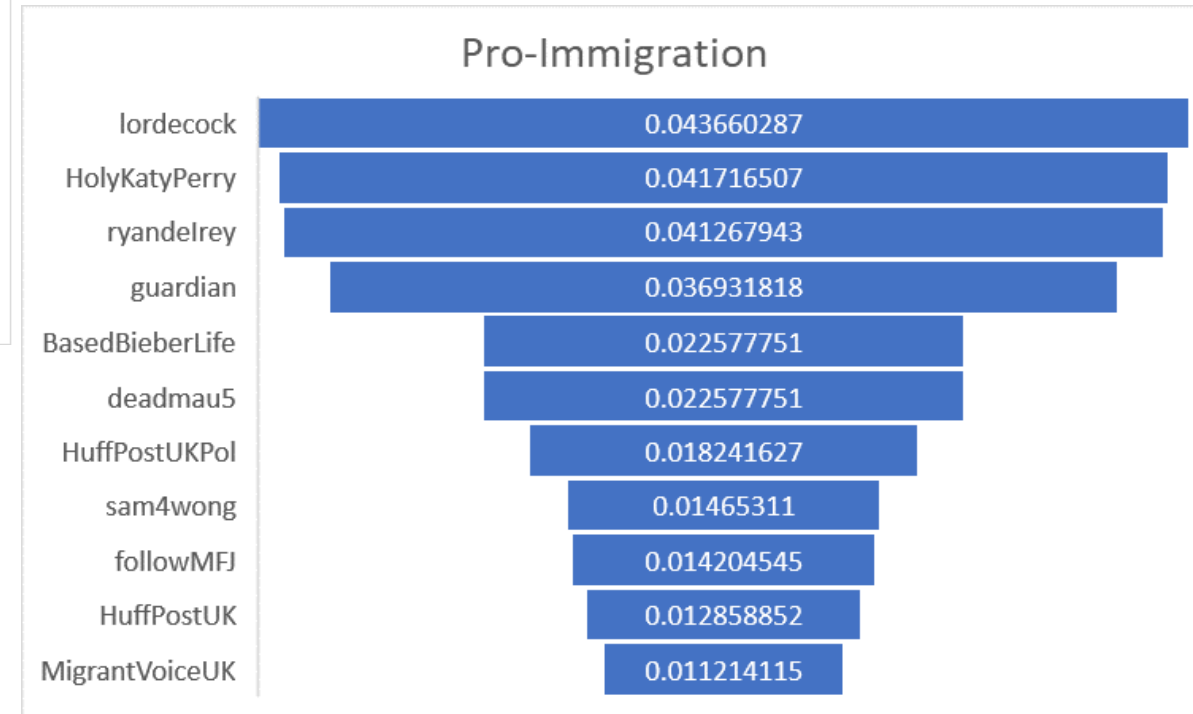
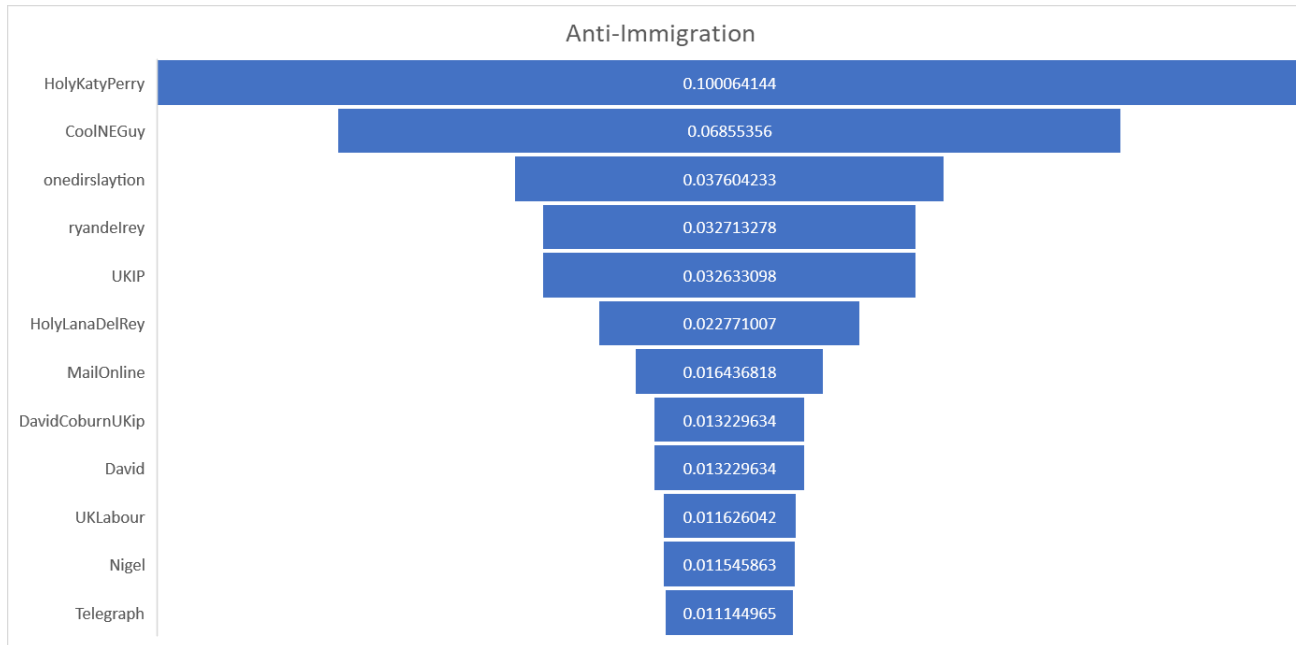
Organisations, activists or individuals promoting anti-immigrant/immigration views



Organisations, activists, or individuals promoting pro-immigrant/immigration views



# New RQ 2 -Degree of Centrality of those @mentioned



# Stage 3 findings link to concerns about polarization of attitudes/opinions on social media

Bandy and Diakopoulos (2021) identify 3 factors influencing attitudes/opinion on social media:

➤ Algorithms seem to play a supportive rather than an amplifying role.

Also need to consider:

➤ Individual cognition (motivated reasoning and media literacy)

➤ Social context (groups and communities)

➤ Our findings suggest all 3 factors, but last two will be of interest to policy-makers.



## Concluding thoughts

An iterative abductive interpretivist analytical strategy that draws on cross-disciplinary methodologies:

- ❑ Enables exploration of the different facets of 'Big Social Media Data';
- ❑ Has potential to lead to theoretically informed and policy relevant understandings of migration narratives on social media.