# Refugees Welcomed? A Computational Approach to Identifying and Documenting Toxic Anti-Immigrant Narratives on Twitter Against Ukrainian Refugees

*Anatoliy Gruzd* and *Philip Mai*

# Case Study: Refugees Fleeing Ukraine

- On Feb 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, forcing a large number of refugees to leave the country in search of safety and security.

- As of Feb 2023, **>8M** refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe (the UN Refugee Agency).

- This case study examines the anti-immigrant and anti-refugee narratives on social media (Twitter).

# Research Questions

RQ1: Which thematic narratives are frequently present in toxic tweets concerning Ukrainian refugees?
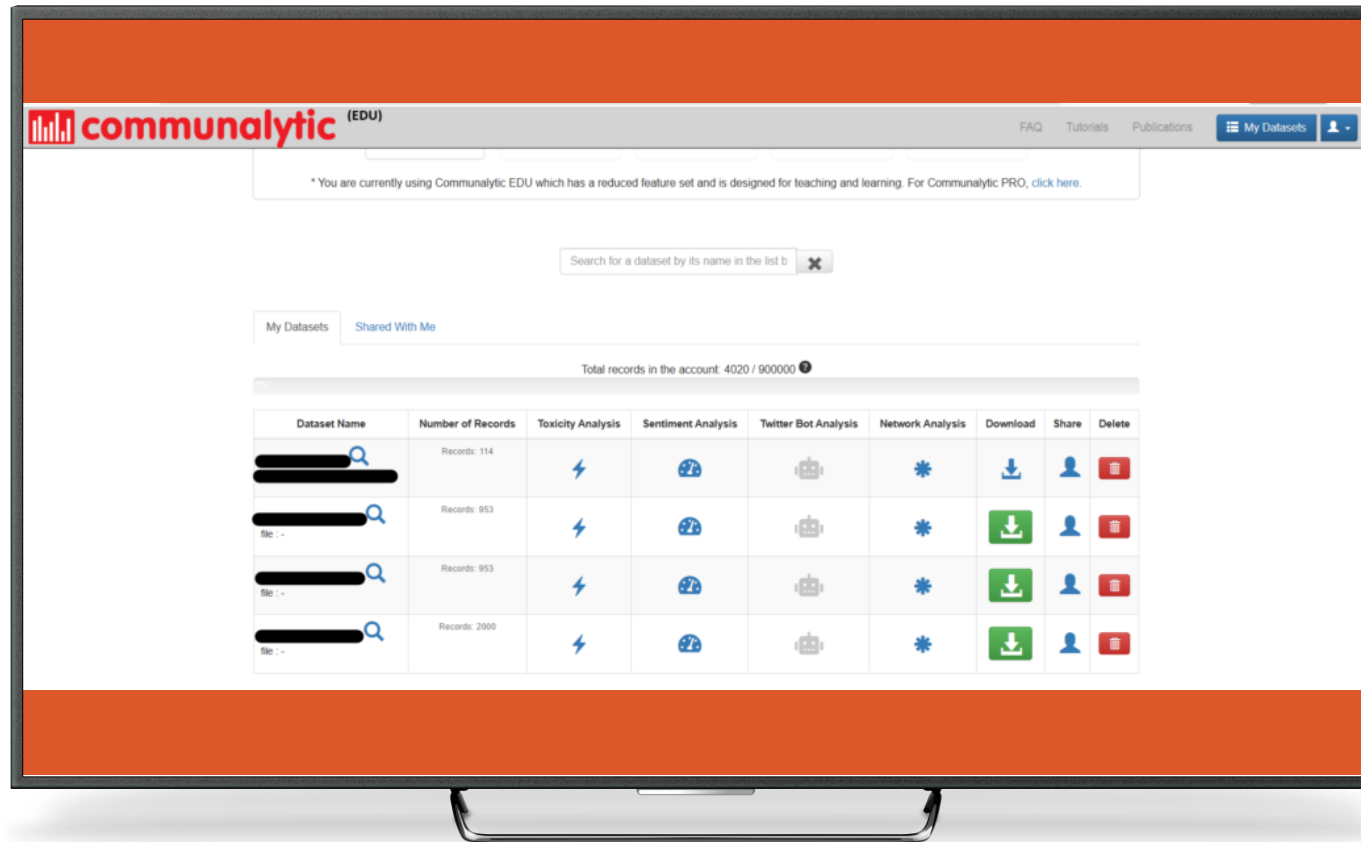
RQ2: What types of users are involved in toxic replies, either as targets or instigators?

By understanding the language and sentiment of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee narratives, we can develop effective strategies to counteract potentially harmful discourses on social media.

# Automated Toxicity Analysis

### via Google's Perspective API

- Toxicity

- Severe toxicity

- Insult

- **Identity attack** ← Assessment of toxic language attacking someone based on identity (**nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, religion ...**)

- Profanity

- Threat

# Communalytic

A research tool developed by TMU's Social Media Lab for studying online communities and discourse



Communalytic can collect, analyze, and visualize public data from social media (e.g. Reddit, Telegram, Twitter) or CSV/JSON files.

https://communalytic.org

# Data Collection and Analysis

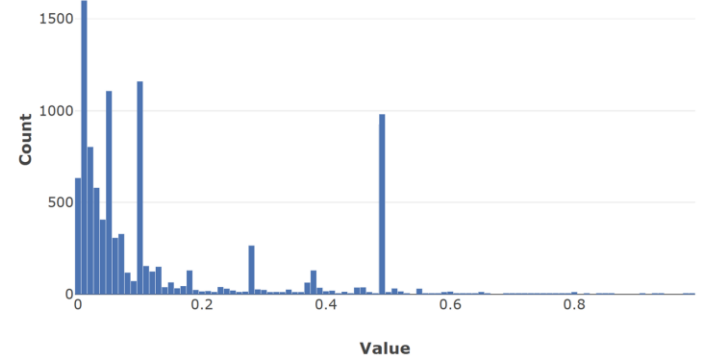We collected **811,933** tweets between Feb. 24, 2022 (start date of Russia's invasion of Ukraine) and March 31, 2023

**7,497** tweets received the '**identity attack**' score over 0.6

**3,143** tweets (original posts or replies), after excluding retweets

Identity Attack Scores Distribution Chart

# Research Questions / Method

RQ1: Which thematic narratives are frequently present in toxic tweets concerning Ukrainian refugees?

RQ2: What types of users are involved in toxic replies, either as targets or instigators?

**Conducted a manual content analysis on 10% of 3,143 tweets w/Identity Attack score > 0.6**

*\* Future Work - Analyze all 3,143 tweets w/Identity Attack score of > 0.6*

**Analyzed a 'Who Replies to Whom' network, consisting of 3,334 accounts and 1,123 edges representing potentially toxic replies**

# RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees

### 1. Appealing to Fear

Ukrainian refugees are untrustworthy and dangerous

### 2. Appealing to Fairness

Criticizing preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees

### 3. Appealing to Stereotypes and Xenophobia

Accusing Ukrainian refugees of being racist or ungrateful

# RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees

**Translation**: "Ukraine refugee kills sleeping man with ax and rapes woman"



## 1. Appealing to **Fear**

- Claimed that Ukrainian refugees are dangerous and are criminals

# RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees



### 1. Appealing to **Fear**

- Claimed that Ukrainian refugees are deceitful and are abusing the system

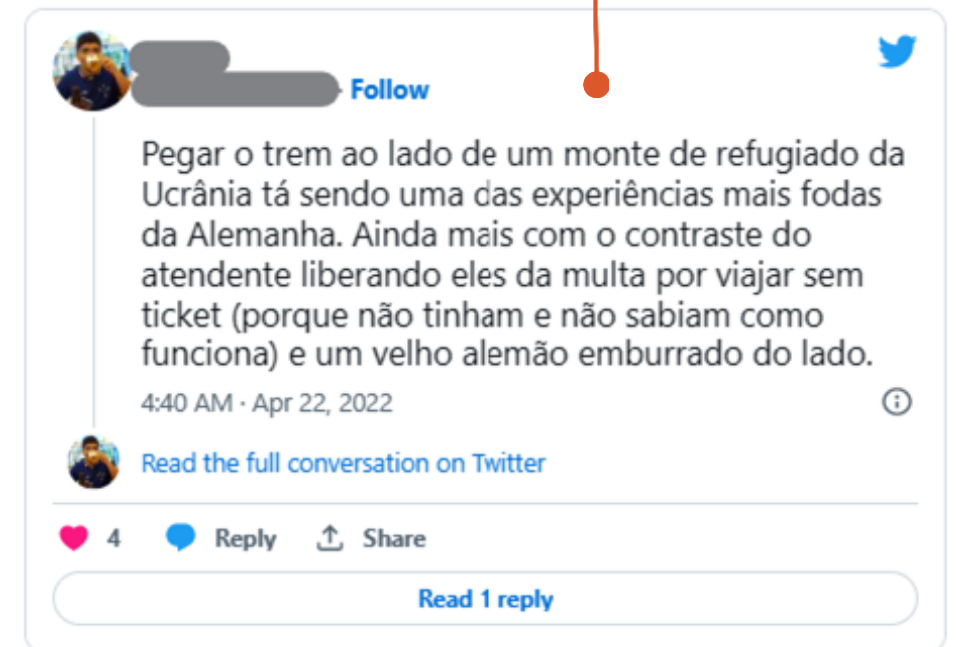- Questioned the legitimacy of their status

# RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees

2. Appealing to **Fairness**

- Criticized the amount of money spent on Ukrainian refugees

- Argued that accepting Ukrainian refugees strains public services

**Translation**: "Taking the train next to a bunch of refugees from Ukraine is being one of the most fucked up experiences in Germany. Even more so with the contrast between the attendant releasing them from the fine for traveling without a ticket (because they didn't have one and didn't know how it works) ..."

Follow

Pegar o trem ao lado de um monte de refugiado da Ucrânia tá sendo uma das experiências mais fodas da Alemanha. Ainda mais com o contraste do atendente liberando eles da multa por viajar sem ticket (porque não tinham e não sabiam como funciona) e um velho alemão emburrado do lado.

4:40 AM · Apr 22, 2022

Read the full conversation on Twitter

♥ 4      💬 Reply      ⬆ Share

Read 1 reply

# RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees



2. Appealing to **Fairness**

- Ukrainian refugees received preferential treatment

**Translation**: "Yes, such a white refugee from the Ukraine is something fine. But Syrians and Afghans are bah."

Jun 5, 2022 · Follow

Replying to @l_sachslehner

Hier braucht es einen effektiven Außengrenzschutz. Ukrainer sollen weiter uneingeschränkt Hilfe und Aufnahme in der EU erhalten. Gleichzeitig muss jedoch illegale Migration mit Nachdruck unterbunden werden. An den EU-Außengrenzen sind lückenlose Kontrollen notwendig.

· Follow

Ja, so ein weißer Flüchtling aus der Ukraine ist schon was feines. Aber Syrer und Afghanen sind bäh. 🤡🤮

3:09 PM · Jul 19, 2022
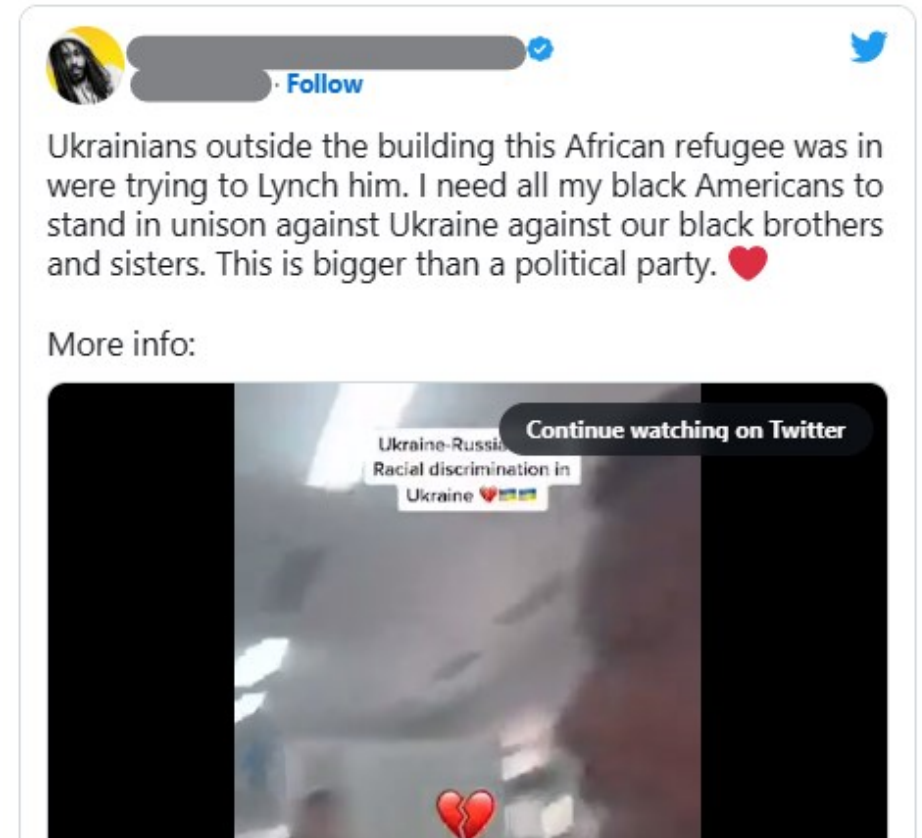
Reply  Share

Read more on Twitter

# RQ1: Thematic Narratives of Toxic Tweets Concerning Ukrainian Refugees
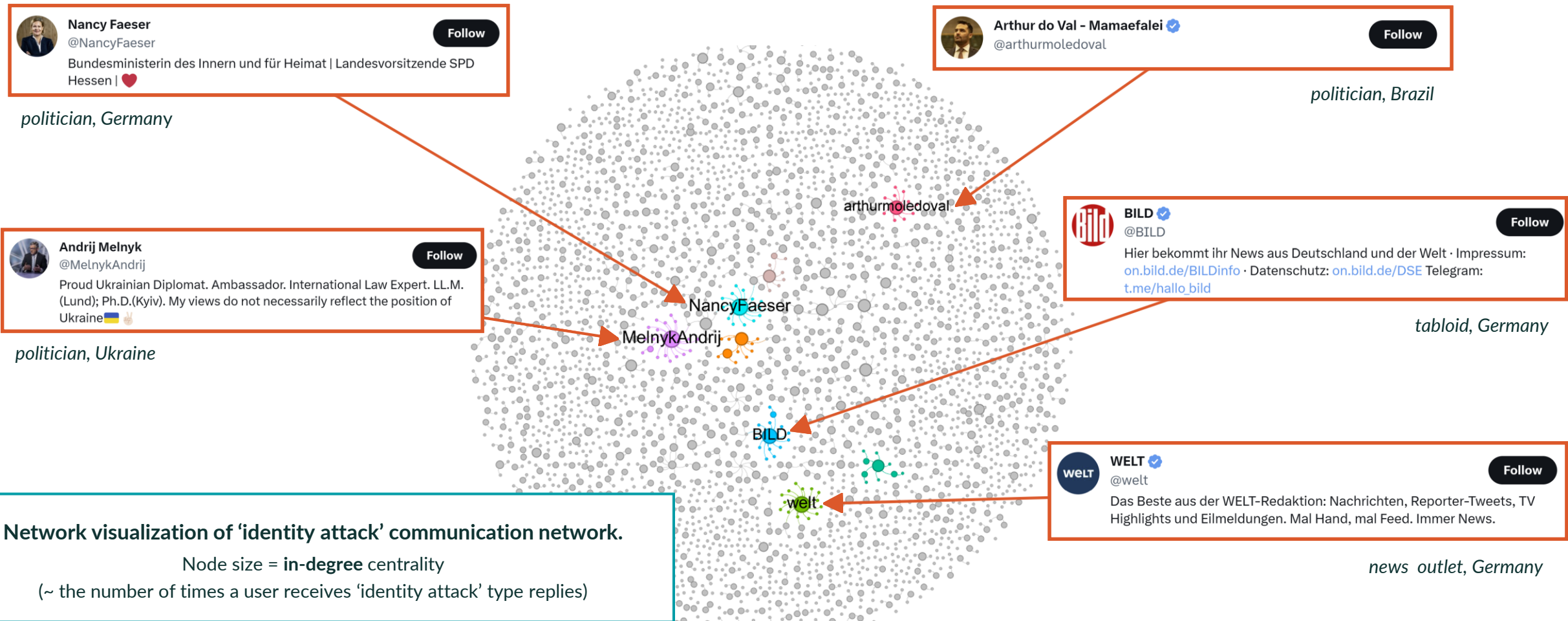


### 3. **Stereotyping** and **Xenophobia**

- Accused Ukrainian refugees of being racist or ungrateful

# RQ2: What types of users are involved in toxic replies, either as targets or instigators?

## Top 5 Targets of Toxic Replies



**Nancy Faeser**
@NancyFaeser
Bundesministerin des Innern und für Heimat | Landesvorsitzende SPD Hessen | ❤️

*politician, Germany*

**Arthur do Val - Mamaefalei** ✓
@arthurmoledoval

*politician, Brazil*

**Andrij Melnyk**
@MelnykAndrij
Proud Ukrainian Diplomat. Ambassador. International Law Expert. LL.M. (Lund); Ph.D.(Kyiv). My views do not necessarily reflect the position of Ukraine 🇺🇦 ✌️

*politician, Ukraine*

**BILD** ✓
@BILD
Hier bekommt ihr News aus Deutschland und der Welt · Impressum: on.bild.de/BILDinfo · Datenschutz: on.bild.de/DSE Telegram: t.me/hallo_bild

*tabloid, Germany*

**WELT** ✓
@welt
Das Beste aus der WELT-Redaktion: Nachrichten, Reporter-Tweets, TV Highlights und Eilmeldungen. Mal Hand, mal Feed. Immer News.

*news outlet, Germany*

**Network visualization of 'identity attack' communication network.**
Node size = **in-degree** centrality
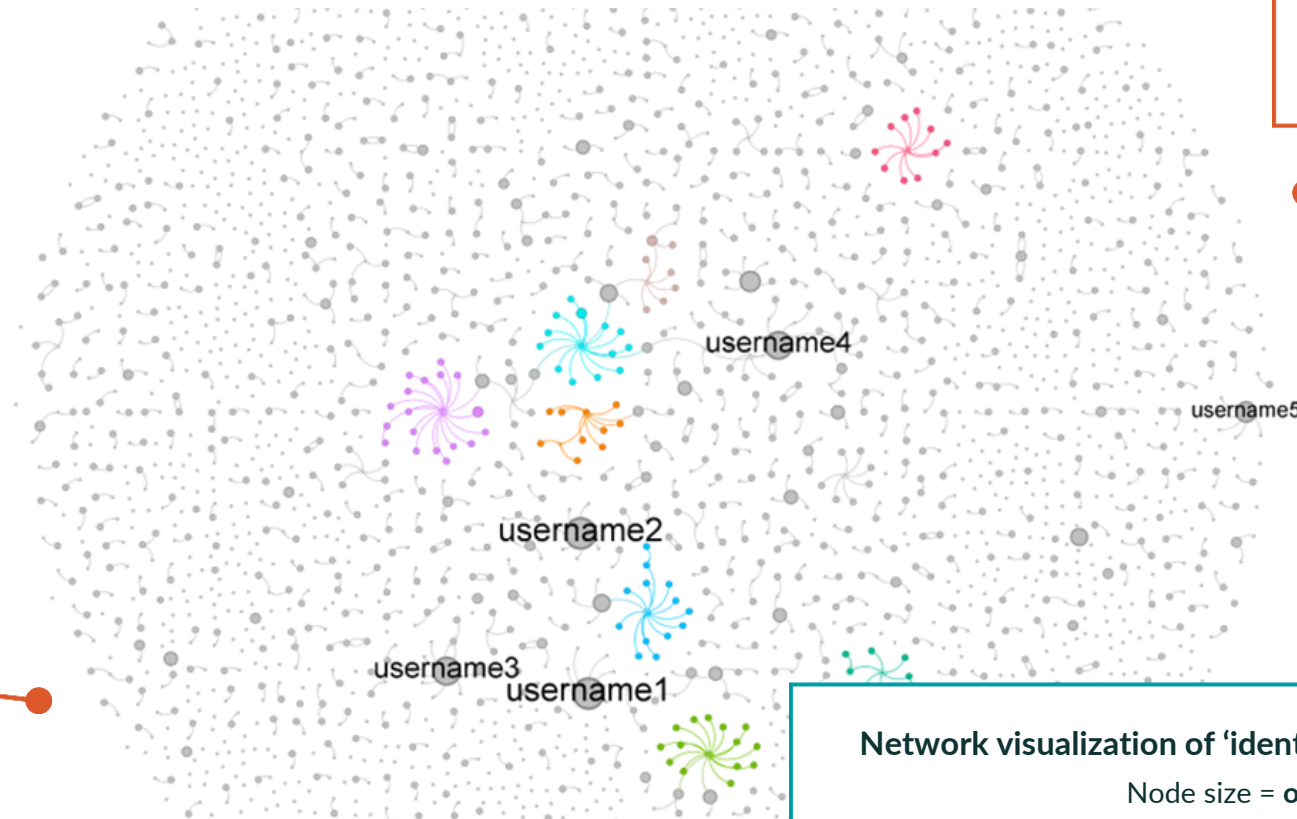(~ the number of times a user receives 'identity attack' type replies)

# RQ2: What types of users are involved in toxic replies, either as targets or instigators?

## Top 5 Instigator of Toxic Replies



Accounts often repost same tweet multiple times to reach wider audience, targeting different accounts, orgs, or influencers.

Accounts typically had a smaller number of followers

Accounts often express their political opinions, criticize Western governments' refugee aid, question the stereotypical view of refugees as either 'good' or 'bad', and debate the effect of having a large influx of refugees.

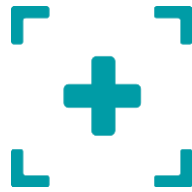**Network visualization of 'identity attack' communication network.**
Node size = **out-degree** centrality
(~ the number of 'identity attack' type replies)

# Conclusions

**Identified negative narratives about Ukrainian refugees**

Including accusations of fraud, criminal behavior, undeserved financial support, or racism

**Primary targets of 'identity attack' tweets**

Public figures, politicians, journalists, and media organizations

**Not all users with 'identity attack' language expressed anti-immigrant/anti-refugee views**

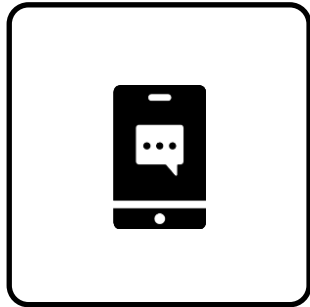Some accounts were countering racist and sexist remarks by public figures

**Many accounts from Germany**
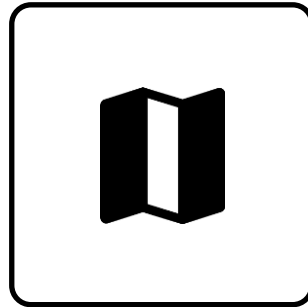
Warrants further examination

This study stresses the need for a nuanced approach to detecting toxic social media posts, considering both the posters and intended targets.
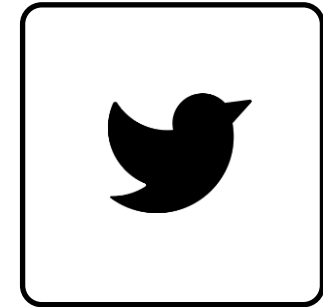
# Study Limitations and Future Work

### Text-based Analysis Only

**Future work**: Analyze visual content (in addition to textual content) to detect toxic interactions

### Language Restrictions

**Future work**: Analyze posts in additional languages such as Polish and Turkish

### Twitter Only

**Future work**: Analyze other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok

# Closing Thoughts:
## The West's immigration policies and schisms will be exploited

### Example of an Anti-Immigration Foreign Information Operation

In an era of inflationary pressures and budgetary constraints, immigration issues may be exploited by Canada's adversaries.

*RollingStone* | POLITICS | Pro-China Internet Trolls Just Got Busted for Doing Something Wild

**Pro-China Internet Trolls Just Got Busted for Doing Something Wild**

The New Europe Observation looked just like another far-right online-media outlet. But something more sinister was at work

BY ADAM RAWNSLEY

MAY 3, 2023

Last week, Meta exposed a Chinese troll operation that had set up a fake company in London and was looking to hire anti-Soros protestors to stir up anti-immigrant sentiments in the West both online and offline.