

Article

The Interacting Power of Words in Immigration News: How Actors and Frames Shape Public Attitudes

Emmi Verleyen ^{1,*}, Laura Jacobs ¹  and Kathleen Beckers ² ¹ Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium² Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, 1018 WS Amsterdam, The Netherlands

* Correspondence: emmi.verleyen@outlook.be

Abstract

The current immigration debate is frequently characterized by a negative tone in news, which can fuel public disapproval. Previous research demonstrates that news framing regarding immigration can arouse, for example, negative attitudes among the public. However, these studies often take the three protagonists of this debate (asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants) together. This study aims to fill the gap by exploring the extent to which the strength of the news framing effect on anti-immigration attitudes is assisted by the explicit categorization of these actor terms. A survey experiment with fictional news stories was conducted among Flemish citizens ($n = 1591$). The framing (negative, victim, positive) and the type of actors (asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants) were manipulated. The results indicate that the effect of framing on anti-immigration attitudes seems conditional on the actor term used in the news article, even though the found effect was small. Anti-immigration attitudes were highest when a negative frame was combined with the term immigrant and lowest when a positive frame was combined with the term asylum seeker. Combining the actor term with victim framing does not yield a significant effect. However, overall, framing exerted significantly stronger effects than actor terminology. The findings indicate that words in terms of framing and actor type matter in the immigration debate.

Keywords: immigration news; refugees; asylum seekers; immigrants; framing; survey experiment; public opinion

1. Introduction

A wealth of research has examined news coverage of immigration and its impact on public opinion and policy. Most studies on the framing of immigration coverage in the European context found that immigration is covered largely in a negative manner (Eberl et al., 2018; Jacobs, 2025), often featuring frames in which immigrants are portrayed as intruders or victims (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Van Gorp, 2005) or as a cultural, security, or economic threat (Benson, 2013; Masini et al., 2018; Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019; Van der Linden & Jacobs, 2017). Studies examining the effects of such coverage have found that it reinforces public attitudes and perceptions of immigration, often in line with the news frame (Czymara & Dochow, 2018; Eberl et al., 2018).

A blind spot in many of the studies that examine the framing and representation of actors in immigration news is that they often fail to distinguish between different categories of actor terminology, such as refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, instead grouping them together as a single category (Van Gorp, 2005; Masini & Van Aelst, 2017;



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Masini et al., 2018; Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019). However, this is potentially problematic, as research on hierarchies in prejudice shows that citizens evaluate some groups of immigrants, typically those that are more distant and seen as less deserving, more negatively than others (Hagendoorn, 1995; Hellwig & Sinno, 2017; Meeusen & Jacobs, 2017). Given the variety of terms used to describe migrants, there appears to be considerable confusion among journalists about how to apply them correctly (Verleyen et al., 2025; Torkington & Ribeiro, 2019). In this study, we refer to these labels as “actor terminology” and systematically distinguish between them. Specifically, we focus on the terms most commonly used in official immigration discourses (e.g., UNHCR, 2016) and media coverage (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Torkington & Ribeiro, 2019): (im)migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.

The limited research that does differentiate between these groups suggests that public perceptions vary; for instance, refugees are generally perceived as more in need of help than migrants (De Coninck, 2020). There are also indications that specific actor terms are linked to specific news frames (Baker et al., 2008; Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). Building on this, the present study aims to disentangle the effects of news frames and actor terminology in immigration news, examining not only how these factors shape citizens’ perceptions of immigration but also how they interact. To this end, we conducted a pre-registered experiment¹ among Flemish (Belgian) citizens ($N = 1591$), where we exposed participants to different versions of a constructed news story based on typical patterns in immigration news coverage. Both the framing (negative, victim, neutral, positive) and actor terminology (asylum seeker, refugee, immigrant) were manipulated in the news article.

The findings indicate that negative framing generates stronger general anti-immigration attitudes, compared to exposure to news articles featuring victim or positive framing. Actor terminology alone did not significantly influence participants’ attitudes. However, the interaction between framing and actor terminology suggests that the strength of framing effects varies depending on the term used. Positive framing combined with the term asylum seeker was associated with the lowest levels of anti-immigration attitudes. These results demonstrate that framing and terminology matter not only independently, but especially in combination, highlighting the importance of journalistic language choices in shaping public attitudes toward immigration.

2. Framing Immigration News and Its Effects

Since news media are one of citizens’ primary sources of information, how journalists frame an issue plays an important role in shaping how that issue is understood and perceived by audiences (Scheufele, 1999). News frames assist audiences in interpreting and comprehending societal issues, serving as a means of making sense of reality. Entman (1993) described framing as a tool that allows journalists to shape the depiction of issues, pinpoint causes and solutions, and offer moral evaluations. These news frames can be a conscious decision made by journalists, but often also happen unconsciously, as an inherent part of journalistic storytelling (Boesman & Van Gorp, 2018; Boesman et al., 2017).

In immigration news, frames can broadly be categorized into three recurrent types across countries and media systems (Eberl et al., 2018). First, immigration coverage is predominantly framed negatively, often emphasizing threats related to security, economy, or cultural identity (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Van der Linden & Jacobs, 2017; Van Gorp, 2005; Masini et al., 2018). Second, positive frames, though less common (Masini & Van Aelst, 2017), often highlight multiculturalism and integration, portraying immigration as beneficial to society (Parrott et al., 2019). Third, the victim frame, particularly in the European context, is mainly used for women, refugees, and asylum seekers, portraying them as vulnerable and passive, lacking agency (Van Gorp, 2005; Vliegenthart & Roggeband, 2007).

Empirical studies have consistently shown that negative framing of immigration in news coverage reinforces exclusionary attitudes, increasing opposition to immigration and support for restrictive policy measures (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Lecheler et al., 2015; Van der Linden & Jacobs, 2017). In contrast, positive frames seem to promote more favorable evaluations of immigrants and foster support for more inclusive policies, such as welcoming reception strategies and integration initiatives (Borah & Irom, 2021; Bos et al., 2016).

Victim framing, though although mostly resulting in positive attitudes, has been found to evoke mixed responses—while it can generate empathy and compassion, it may also reinforce perceptions of dependency (Lecheler et al., 2015; Liu, 2023; Vliegenthart & Roggeband, 2007). This suggests that while victim narratives can foster more sympathetic attitudes, especially when adopting human interest framing (see Aalberg & Beyer, 2015), they may simultaneously limit agency and contribute to paternalistic perceptions of migrants. Given the well-documented effects of framing in immigration news, our first objective is to replicate these framing effects by examining how different portrayals of asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants influence citizens' attitudes towards immigration.

H1. *When asylum seekers/refugees/immigrants are framed negatively in a news article, respondents will report more negative attitudes towards immigration than when asylum seekers/refugees/immigrants are framed as victims or positively.*

3. Actor Terminology

Research on (the effects of) media coverage of immigration is often complicated by inconsistencies in terminology and overlaps between different categories of migrants. Most studies conflate the actor terms refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, grouping them together as a single category (e.g., Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019; Hoewe, 2018; Van Gorp, 2005; Masini & Van Aelst, 2017; Masini et al., 2018). Such conflation can shape how various groups are perceived and treated, influencing both public attitudes and policy responses. However, (legal) definitions do distinguish between terms such as “migrant”, “refugee”, and “asylum seeker”.

The term ‘migrant’ is often used as an umbrella category for individuals who leave their home countries to settle in another country, often driven by factors such as economic opportunities, educational prospects, or family reunification (Czaika & De Haas, 2013). Refugees are people who have been forced to flee their countries due to fear of persecution, war, or violence (Kirkwood et al., 2016). The 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugees as individuals who are outside their country of nationality and cannot count on protection of their government due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (UNHCR, 1951, p. 3). Refugees are typically granted protection under international law and are entitled to certain rights, such as the right not to be expelled or returned to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened (UNHCR, 2016). In contrast, asylum seekers are individuals who seek refugee status to enjoy the protections described above. However, unlike refugees, asylum seekers have not yet been granted official status, and their claim for protection is still under review by the authorities of the host country (Amnesty International, 2023). However, despite the different legal meanings of the terms, these categories are also somewhat ambiguous and often difficult to apply in practice, as real-life situations and motives are often complex and dynamic.

Several studies have already looked into public opinion related to the use of actor terminology. In a study across nine European countries, Graf et al. (2023) found that citizens expressed more positive attitudes towards ‘migrants’ than towards ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum seekers’. Similar results were found in Slovakia by Findor et al. (2021), who found that

refugees were perceived in a less positive vein than migrants. This could be because of the very extensive coverage of the 2015 ‘refugee’ crisis, where, over time, support for refugees seemed to be dwindling (Janky, 2019; Bjånesøy, 2019). In contrast, other studies (e.g., De Coninck, 2020; Kotzur et al., 2018; Lawlor & Paquet, 2022) found attitudes among people in Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden toward refugees are generally more positive than towards immigrants or asylum seekers. However, specifically for Belgian citizens, an earlier study by De Coninck et al. (2018) came to other results. The findings indicate that the Belgian audience has more positive attitudes towards immigrants than towards refugees. Taken together, these findings suggest that terminology itself can function as a framing device, shaping public evaluations even in the absence of additional narrative cues.

The mechanism behind these differing public perceptions seems to be rooted in the perceived ‘deservingness’ of various immigrant groups. Attitudes toward different immigrant groups are heavily influenced by this perception of entitlement—those seen as ‘deserving’ of assistance (such as legal and political immigrants) tend to be evaluated more positively, while those perceived as ‘undeserving’ (like illegal or ‘economic’ immigrants) are viewed less favorably (Wright et al., 2016; Rosstalnyj, 2022). Hence, studies that found refugees were perceived more positively than other groups often give this framing—as individuals fleeing persecution, which elicits greater empathy—as an explanation (Murray & Marx, 2013). Some studies also pinpointed that this pertains to specific categories, with Eastern European migrants, for instance, being evaluated less negatively than those from North Africa (Meeusen & Jacobs, 2017).

The choice of actor terms in immigration coverage is not always neutral and may reflect journalistic or editorial considerations. For example, Blinder and Allen (2016) found that UK newspapers used distinct actor terminology across different media genres. While tabloids predominantly referred to “immigrants” or “migrants”, broadsheets tended to focus more on the term “refugees”. The authors suggest that this distinction may reflect a strategic use of terms like “migrant” or “immigrant” to potentially delegitimize the political and personal struggles of refugees and asylum seekers. In a content analysis in the Belgian context (Verleyen & Beckers, 2023), we see that whereas elite newspapers consistently use the broader term “migrant” more often than popular newspapers, who refrain more to “refugee” or “asylum seeker”. However, in both media types, crisis periods trigger a move toward more specific categories (“refugee”, “asylum seeker”) and away from “migrant”. However, there also exists evidence for journalists being confused about the differences between the actor terms and struggling to find the right ones (Verleyen et al., 2025; Torkington & Ribeiro, 2019).

Overall, while some discrepancies exist in the findings, there is a general pattern: refugees tend to be viewed as the most deserving, whereas immigrants—and especially asylum seekers, although studied less—are more often linked to negative attitudes.

H2. *Regardless of the frame used in a news item, news items referencing ‘refugees’ as compared to asylum seekers or immigrants will result in more positive attitudes towards immigration.*

4. The Interaction Between Framing and Actor Terminology

Several scholars (e.g., De Coninck, 2020; Dempster & Hargrave, 2022) highlight a strong connection between media framing and the terminology used to describe migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. As mentioned above, actor terminology itself can function as a framing device, shaping audience perceptions by activating specific interpretive schemas (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). These linguistic choices are not merely descriptive but ideologically loaded, influencing how the public interprets the legitimacy, threat level, and deservingness of various groups.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that different actor or target group labels—such as “migrant”, “refugee”, or “asylum seeker”—are associated with distinct frames in news coverage. A comprehensive literature review covering 78 studies across Europe finds that migrants are predominantly framed in terms of realistic (economic, cultural) or symbolic (cultural) threats (Eberl et al., 2018). In the UK, Baker et al. (2008) observed that “migrants” and “immigrants” were commonly linked to economic threat frames—suggesting labor market competition—while “refugees” and “asylum seekers” were more often associated with economic burden frames, invoking concerns about strain on the welfare state. Parker (2015) further identified a recurrent framing of asylum seekers and refugees as “unwanted invaders” in UK and Australian print media, though other studies, such as Lawlor and Tolley (2017), point to more humanitarian portrayals of refugees, particularly in contexts that emphasize vulnerability or trauma.

Portrayals vary, even within the same group of actors. For instance, BBC coverage of Ukrainian refugees has been markedly more empathetic and humanizing than coverage of Afghan refugees, illustrating the role of national origin and geopolitical context in shaping framing effects (Strömberg, 2023). Likewise, Verleyen and Beckers (2023), in a study of Belgian newspaper coverage, demonstrate that asylum seekers are generally framed more negatively than other groups, even when controlling for contextual factors.

Such frames are far from neutral—they may influence public opinion. A growing body of research suggests that how the media depict specific groups within the broader category of “immigrants” shapes perceived threat levels and attitudes toward immigration more broadly (Meeusen & Jacobs, 2017; Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016; Boomgaarden & Vliegenhart, 2009; Van der Linden & Jacobs, 2017). These effects are not uniform across groups, reinforcing the idea that different types of actors (e.g., asylum seekers vs. refugees vs. economic migrants) elicit different psychological responses in audiences. Media frames resonate with pre-existing mental schemas, serving as cognitive shortcuts, especially when individuals lack personal experience with immigration (Van der Linden & Jacobs, 2017). Actor terms such as “asylum seeker” or “migrant” can thus activate stereotypical associations—e.g., illegality or threat—without requiring deep processing.

Theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1979) provide a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Media portrayals activate social categorization processes, whereby audiences compare these groups to their own in-group identity. Frames that emphasize threat or undeservingness intensify out-group differentiation and can fuel exclusionary attitudes. Conversely, frames that depict refugees as victims or vulnerable individuals may elicit empathy and increase perceptions of deservingness, particularly if the portrayed group is seen as culturally or politically proximate. According to Brewer’s (1991) optimal distinctiveness theory, individuals seek a balance between in-group affiliation and out-group differentiation, and media framing can modulate where different immigrant groups fall on that continuum. Importantly, media portrayals also contribute to the construction of moral hierarchies among immigrant groups—where some (e.g., war refugees) are deemed more deserving than others (e.g., economic migrants). These symbolic rankings shape public sympathy, political attitudes, and notions of civic inclusion.

At the same time, research suggests that the independent effect of actor terminology may be limited when audiences already hold well-established mental representations of immigrant groups. In a study of the US context, Merolla et al. (2013) found that the labels used to refer to immigrants (“illegal”, “undocumented”, or “unauthorized”) did not affect public opinion, and that it was actually the frames used that mattered most. They found that people have pre-existing images of immigrants, so the actor terminology used does not change much. Hence, it could be that terminology alone may have limited

persuasive power unless it is embedded within a broader narrative frame. This points to the importance of studying framing and terminology jointly, rather than in isolation.

In sum, there is ample evidence of how the interplay between specific combinations of frames and actor terms elicits different attitudinal outcomes. Despite extensive research on media coverage of immigration, it remains unclear to what extent the effects of framing are conditional upon the type of actor depicted. This leads to our central research question:

RQ1. *How do different news frames (positive, negative, victim) and the use of terminology (refugees vs. asylum seekers vs. immigrants) interact to influence public attitudes toward immigration?*

5. Data and Methods

Case selection. We study Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region in northern Belgium. Belgium has a highly professionalized media environment that fits the hybrid model (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Humprecht et al., 2022). Flanders features a robust public broadcaster, independent news sources, and a varied media landscape, with high but declining consumption of mainstream media (such as television, radio, and newspapers) (Newman et al., 2023). At the same time, social media use is gaining traction as a primary information source, especially among young citizens (Schwaiger et al., 2022; Van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021). Belgium has a high level of internet penetration at around 94 per cent (Newman et al., 2023). In addition to social media, Flanders hosts several alternative news platforms with both left and right-wing orientations (Buyens & Van Aelst, 2022). Hence, Belgium can be characterized as a high-choice information environment with a large diversity of professionalized outlets (Van Aelst et al., 2017). It still hosts many traditional news media outlets, but the media landscape is becoming increasingly digitalized with social media sources complementing or, for some groups (e.g., younger audiences), partially replacing traditional news channels (Van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021).

In terms of immigration, Belgium has a long and diverse history of immigration across multiple waves. Notably, it hosted guest workers as part of economic migration waves during the sixties of the prior century from North Africa (e.g., Morocco), Turkey, and Southern Europe (e.g., Italy, Greece). The 2015 refugee crisis further increased the salience of immigration, and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Ukraine, Belgium received, like other EU countries, a rising number of asylum applications. Immigration is consistently ranked as one of the top priorities for the public opinion in Belgium (Lefevere & Walgrave, 2024). Moreover, prior research shows that Belgian immigration news coverage reflects patterns similar to those observed across other European media systems, including similar framing patterns and attitudinal responses, making Belgium a theoretically informative case for understanding broader media effects (Verleyen et al., 2025; Eberl et al., 2018; Jacobs, 2025).

Sample. We rely on data from a pre-registered experiment which has been collected using the panel of (anonymized research group). This is an online citizen panel that was founded at the (anonymized university) and consists of citizens who participated in a voting advice application (VAA) and indicated to be willing to stay involved in scientific research. As such, we rely on a convenience sample. Fieldwork for this study took place from 19 September to 10 October 2024. A total of 3898 citizens were invited to participate, of which 2377 did in our original 16 conditions, resulting in a response rate of 61 percent.

The sample is not representative of the adult population as our participants are, on average, more highly educated, politically interested, and male. We applied standard data-quality filters, excluding respondents that displayed undesirable behavior (speeding, straightlining, or failing two attention checks). In this study, we report only on a subset, encompassing only the relevant conditions (see below). Our final sample (adopting listwise deletion for missings on any of the key variables) is $n = 1721$ for the randomization check,

and for the main effects analyses (where we could not rely on all experimental conditions) our n is 1591.² In the Supplementary Section S1 we provide the participant flow chart.

Because our primary goal is to estimate causal effects by comparing experimental conditions rather than population parameters, the use of a convenience sample is less problematic. A recent study has highlighted that in political science, findings from convenience samples in experiments are often replicated in representative samples (Krupnikov et al., 2021).

Design. Participants were invited via e-mail to participate in an online study using a cover story, stating that the study dealt with citizens' views on current affairs, politics, and media use. Participants were directed to a Qualtrics environment of the university, where respondents had to give informed consent to participate in the study. They were first directed to a page where they had to answer some questions on their sociodemographic background, and the moderators. Next, we presented participants with a fictional news story on immigrants, asylum seekers, or refugees by asking them to read the news story very carefully. We conducted a 4×3 between-subjects design³ in which we manipulated either the frame of the news story (positive, negative, neutral, victim) or the actor (refugee, immigrant, asylum seeker). This neutral condition in terms of framing will serve as the primary reference point for the factorial frame-by-actor analysis.

Next to a neutral condition, we also included a supplementary control condition, which consisted of a news story that was totally unrelated to the topic under study, which dealt with infrastructure works⁴. Since this news story does not contain any actor manipulation, this story is just a robustness check. After the news story, the dependent variable, exposure, and manipulation checks followed. We conducted two manipulation checks, measuring the topic and the actor recognition of the news article and, secondly, the experimental manipulation of the actor term and framing of the news story. Manipulation checks that only focused on the actors mentioned were not included. At the end of the survey, all participants were thoroughly debriefed and informed about the study's actual objective. The experiment was approved by the university's ethical board.

Stimuli. We designed, for the purpose of this study, thirteen different versions of a news story reporting on the balance of immigrants, asylum seekers, or refugees in Flanders (Belgium), in which we manipulated both the framing and actor term. We also had a supplementary news story that did not deal with immigration (see above) which serves as a robustness check only, as we cannot test the hypotheses on the effects of terminology or the interaction effects. Participants were randomly exposed in a between-subjects design to one of these thirteen conditions. The stimuli were fictional news stories, although they were closely informed by an actual content analysis of news about these types of actors (Verleyen & Beckers, 2023). This enhances the realism of the stimuli and strengthens external validity.

The framing of the news story was manipulated so that the actor (a refugee, immigrant, or asylum seeker) was either framed neutrally (i.e., acting as a control, which we will refer to as a neutral frame news story), positively, negatively, or as a victim. All news stories followed an exact same set-up, were equal in length, and followed an identical structure. The title always read: "Balance of [asylum seekers]/[immigrants]/[refugees] in Belgium", followed by a description depending on the condition, summarizing the frame of the text (see overview in Table 1). Next, the article discussed some findings of a report published by Myria, the Belgian Federal Migration Centre: "On 1 January 2024, Belgium's population reached 11,763,650. In 2023, 194,887 [asylum seekers]/[immigrants]/[refugees] were registered in Belgium, according to a recently published report by Myria." These statistics were then framed as bringing "challenges", "obstacles", or "opportunities", depending on the experimental condition, particularly in terms of economic and cultural integration. The remainder of the text elaborated on these themes in line with the assigned frame.

Table 1. Question wording experimental study design: news stories.

Manipulation				
Factor 1: Actor	“Refugees”	“Asylum seekers”	“Immigrants”	
Factor 2: Framing	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Victim
	“Balance of [actor] in Belgium: both opportunities and challenges.” “On 1 January 2024, Belgium’s population reached 11,763,650. In 2023, 194,887 [actor] were registered in Belgium, according to a recently published report by Myria. These statistics reflect a changing dynamic within Belgian society, bringing both challenges and opportunities, particularly in terms of economic and cultural integration.”	“Balance of [actor] in Belgium: integration is successful.” “On 1 January 2024, Belgium’s population reached 11,763,650. In 2023, 194,887 [actor] were registered in Belgium. According to a recently published report by Myria, it is found that the arrival of [actor] [contributes to the economy and enriches the society]. Figures from the Myria report show that the majority of [actor] are active in the labor market and play a crucial role in various key sectors of our society, such as healthcare, technology, and construction. Most [actor] hold full-time jobs, allowing them to contribute a [very significant portion] of their income to the local economy. Additionally, they make [substantial] contributions to Belgium’s social security system. In parallel, the integration of [actor] is generally [smooth]. Many [actor] actively participate in social life; they learn the language, pursue education, and are involved in local communities and associations. This [smooth] integration [contributes to] the positive balance of diversity in society.”	“Balance of report on [actor]: integration has failed” “As of 1 January, Belgium’s population reached 11,763,650. In 2023, 194,887 incoming [actor] were registered in Belgium. A recently published report by Myria reveals that [actor] [contribute little to the economy and are disrupting society]. Figures from the Myria report show that the majority of [actor] are [not] active in the labor market and do [not] play a crucial role in key sectors such as healthcare, technology, and construction. Most [actor] do [not] have full-time jobs, meaning they can contribute only a [very limited portion] of their income to the local economy. Additionally, they make [minimal] contributions to Belgium’s social security system. In parallel, [actor] integration is generally [difficult]. Many [actor] are [not] actively participating in social life; they are [not] learning the language, pursuing education, or involved in local communities and associations. This [failed] integration of [actor] thus [undermines] the positive balance of diversity in society.”	“Balance of report on [actor]: integration is hindered” “As of 1 January, Belgium’s population reached 11,763,650. In 2023, 194,887 incoming [actor] were registered in Belgium. A recently published report by Myria reveals that [actor] [are prevented from contributing to the economy and face discrimination in society]. Figures from the Myria report show that the majority of working [actor] are [denied opportunities] in the labor market, which [limits their ability to contribute] to key sectors such as healthcare, technology, and construction. [As a result], most [actor] do [not] have full-time jobs, [restricting their capacity to] contribute to the local economy. Moreover, they are [hindered] from contributing to Belgium’s social security system. In parallel, the integration of [actor] is generally [slower due to discrimination]. Many [actor] [attempt to] actively participate in social life. They are [willing] to learn the language, pursue education, and engage with local communities and associations. [However, this obstructed integration] of [actor] [reduces] the positive balance of diversity in society.”

It should be noted that we also preregistered manipulations on voice. However, we only manipulated these in the immigrant actor conditions and not for the refugee actor or asylum seeker actor conditions. As the scope of the present article is to compare framing across target groups, the effects of voice were not considered and we only used the conditions where this element was kept constant. Thus, by excluding the voice conditions in this study, we deviate from our preregistration. The effects of voice are assessed in a follow-up study.

The layout was adapted from a widely read quality newspaper in Belgium to resemble an actual news article. Still, we deliberately did not include a source as this could result in biased evaluations, as some news outlets may be more or less widely trusted by participants and this could be a potentially confounding variable. Figure 1 offers a detailed overview of the conditions and the stimuli materials are reported on in Table 1. An English example is included in the Supplementary Section S2.

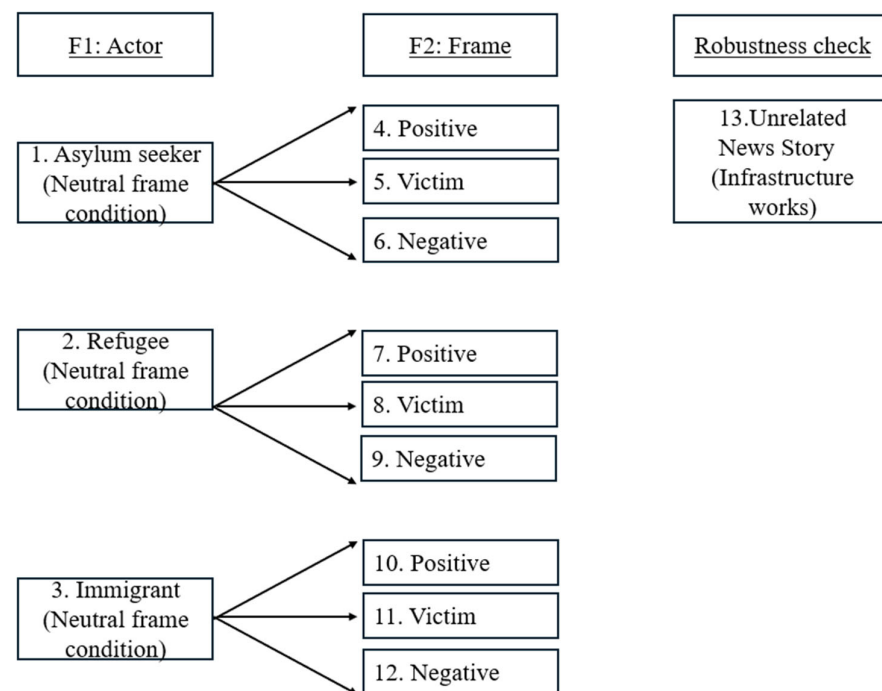


Figure 1. Overview of experimental conditions.

Dependent variables. We measured *anti-immigration attitudes* using the validated scale from the European Social Survey (ESS), using three items: “Would you say that, in general, it is bad or good for the Belgian economy that people from other countries come to live here?”; “Would you say that, in general, Belgian cultural life is undermined or enriched by people from other countries who come to live here?”; “Does Belgium become a worse or a better place to live due to people from other countries who come to live here?” These were all assessed on an 11-point scale (e.g., “0” = Bad for the Belgian economy, 10 = “Good for the Belgian economy”). We created a summative scale and recoded it such that higher scores reflect more negative views on immigration or higher anti-immigration attitudes ($\alpha = 0.879$). Hence, the dependent variable captures respondents’ general anti-immigration attitudes and does not measure attitudes toward asylum seekers, refugees, or immigrants as separate target groups; this is needed because we need to be able to compare effects of our experimental manipulations of frame and target group.

Controls. A set of covariates was measured. Sociodemographic variables were measured, namely *gender* (binary, 0 = ‘male’, 1 = ‘female’, or 2 = ‘other’), *age* (measured as birth year after which we calculated the respondent age), and *citizens’ socioeconomic background*, which we measured via considering the *highest diploma* that participants have obtained

(measured as an ordinal scale, from ‘none or primary education’, ‘secondary education’, ‘higher education: professional bachelor’, ‘higher education: academic bachelor’, ‘higher education: master’, or a PhD). Respondents’ *migration background* was assessed via asking a binary question (0 = “No”, 1 = “Yes”): “Were you or at least one of your parents or grandparents born in a country other than Belgium?” We include citizens with a first, second, or third-generation migration background. Finally, we also asked respondents about their level of *political interest* and *self-reported left–right ideology*. For political interest, we asked respondents on an 11-point scale “How interested in politics are you?” which could range from 0 (“Not at all”) to 10 (“Very much interested”). For self-reported left–right orientation, we asked respondents “In politics, people often speak of “left” or “right”. Could you place your own views on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “left”, 5 means “in the center”, and 10 means “right”? Missing data were handled through listwise deletion, whereby observations with missing values on any of the variables included in the analyses (except for the manipulation and exposure check variables, see below) were excluded.

6. Results

Randomization check. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions or the control condition. Table 2 shows the final number of participants per condition (after deleting non-completes). Randomization across the experimental and control conditions was effective. To establish whether the random allocation worked, we compared participants’ characteristics (age, gender, highest diploma obtained, political interest, left–right self-placement) across all 13 conditions. One-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance, for continuous variables) and χ^2 tests (for categorical variables) verify that the participants in the various conditions did not significantly differ in terms of these variables (Table 3). These tests were conducted on the analytical sample, $n = 1721$ namely the sample with all respondents of all 13 conditions that completed the full survey and did not have any missings on any of the variables reported, including the control news story (=robustness check). Randomization checks indicate no significant differences across conditions for gender, $\chi^2(24) = 18.7$, $p = 0.767$, or education level, $\chi^2(72) = 83.9$, $p = 0.160$, suggesting successful random assignment. The same holds for political interest, self-reported left–right orientation, and age. ANOVA analyses show no significant differences across conditions for political interest, $F(12, 1720) = 0.60$, $p = 0.844$, left–right placement, $F(12, 1720) = 1.53$, $p = 0.108$, or year of birth, $F(12, 1720) = 1.12$, $p = 0.340$, indicating successful random assignment. Therefore, we report analyses without covariates. Analyses including covariates yield identical results for our experimental factors.

Table 2. Overview of participants per condition.

Condition	<i>n</i>
C1: Neutral frame—asylum seekers	133
C2: Neutral frame—refugees	119
C3: Neutral frame—immigrants	140
C4: Positive frame—asylum seekers	128
C5: Negative frame—asylum seekers	132
C6: Victim frame—asylum seekers	135
C7: Positive frame—refugees	133
C8: Negative frame—refugees	138
C9: Victim frame—refugees	133
C10: Positive frame—immigrants	135
C11: Negative frame—immigrants	133

Table 2. *Cont.*

Condition	<i>n</i>
C12: Victim frame—immigrants	132
C13: Control condition (infrastructure works)	130
Frame	
Neutral (C1, C2, C3)	392
Negative (C5, C8, C11)	403
Positive (C4, C7, C10)	396
Victim (C6, C9, C12)	400
Control (C13) (robustness check)	130
Target group/actor term	
Asylum (C1, C4, C5, C6)	528
Refugee (C2, C7, C8, C9)	523
Immigrant (C3, C10, C11, C12)	540
Control (C13) (robustness check)	130

Table 3. Randomization of factors (ANOVA).

Name Variable	df (Between, Within)	F	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>n</i>
Political interest	12, 1721	0.60	0.844	0.004	1720
Left–right placement	12, 1721	1.53	0.108	0.011	1720
Birth year	12, 1721	1.12	0.340	0.008	1720

Exposure and manipulation checks. We asked follow-up questions to participants to assess both whether the exposure worked and whether the manipulations were effective. As a first exposure check⁵, we asked respondents “What was the news article about?” This was a multiple-choice question with the following options: (1) a report on asylum seekers, (2) a report on immigrants, (3) a report on refugees, (4) infrastructure works, and (5) “I am not sure”. There were also seven missings on this variable that were next omitted, meaning the *n* here is *n* = 1713. Our results show that for the analytical sample, 64.9% of the participants answered this question correctly; this also serves as a check whether participants indeed noticed that the article was about any of the three target groups. Unfortunately, we do not have another manipulation check specifically enquiring about the actors mentioned. Consequently, we cannot conclude unequivocally that all respondents correctly identified the actor manipulation, and this should be considered when interpreting the findings.

We also included manipulation checks to measure whether respondents picked up correctly on our experimental manipulation of the actor term and framing of the news story. For the frame we asked three questions: “In general, [actor] was portrayed in a positive manner in the article”; “In general, [actor] was portrayed in a negative manner in the article”; “In general, [actor] was portrayed as a victim in the article”. Finally, a general question asked respondents to rate the overall tone of the article on an 11-point scale from 0 (“Very negative”) to 5 (“Neutral”) to 10 (“Very positive”). ANOVA results indicate that our manipulations regarding frames were effective. A one-way ANOVA showed a significant effect of condition on recognition of the positive frame, $F(11, 1583) = 225.9$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.612$; the negative frame, $F(11, 1582) = 222.0$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.609$; the victim frame, $F(11, 1583) = 103.5$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.419$; and perceived tone, $F(12, 1712) = 167.0$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.541$. We provide full details in Tables 4 and 5 where we present an overview of all means per condition and for pooled conditions. The results for this latter tone variable show that the news story with a negative frame was indeed perceived most negative ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 2.02$) and the positive news story most positive ($M = 7.73$, $SD = 1.78$), with neutral ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.93$), control ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.47$), and victim ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.79$)

news stories in between as we would expect. Thus, the manipulations were effective, and respondents correctly picked up on the framing of the article.

Table 4. Manipulation checks (ANOVAs per condition).

Variable	df (Between, Within)	F	<i>p</i>	η^2	<i>n</i>
Positive frame	11, 1583	226.0	<0.001	0.612	1584
Negative frame	11, 1582	222.0	<0.001	0.609	1583
Victim frame	11, 1583	103.5	<0.001	0.419	1584
Tone	12, 1712	167.0	<0.001	0.541	1713

Note. Manipulation checks for positive, negative, and victim frame can only be tested on the conditions that reported on migration, not on the control news story, which explains the lower *n* and degrees of freedom for these tests.

Table 5. Manipulation checks: means per condition and pooled conditions.

Condition	M Positive	M Negative	M Victim	M Tone
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Neutral conditions				
Asylum seekers neutral	3.12 (0.72)	2.47 (0.71)	2.29 (0.76)	5.02 (0.72)
Refugees neutral	3.27 (0.74)	2.41 (0.64)	2.30 (0.78)	5.29 (0.89)
Immigrants neutral	3.32 (0.72)	2.34 (0.71)	2.33 (0.81)	5.37 (1.09)
Neutral total	3.23 (0.73)	2.40 (0.69)	2.31 (0.78)	5.23 (0.93)
Negative conditions				
Asylum seekers negative	1.77 (0.77)	4.07 (0.86)	1.85 (0.69)	2.39 (2.00)
Refugees negative	1.88 (0.79)	4.02 (0.82)	1.97 (0.81)	2.42 (1.93)
Immigrants negative	1.89 (0.87)	4.04 (0.79)	1.84 (0.81)	2.64 (2.10)
Negative total	1.85 (0.81)	4.04 (0.82)	1.89 (0.77)	2.48 (2.01)
Victims conditions				
Asylum seekers victim	3.67 (0.71)	2.23 (0.80)	3.65 (0.82)	4.73 (1.73)
Refugees victim	3.69 (0.73)	2.23 (0.80)	3.47 (0.88)	5.14 (1.93)
Immigrants victim	3.60 (0.73)	2.29 (0.75)	3.65 (0.79)	4.89 (1.68)
Victims total	3.66 (0.72)	2.25 (0.61)	3.59 (0.83)	4.91 (1.79)
Positive conditions				
Asylum seekers positive	4.28 (0.60)	1.59 (0.65)	1.89 (0.79)	7.77 (1.74)
Refugees positive	4.25 (0.54)	1.64 (0.63)	2.14 (0.86)	7.72 (1.75)
Immigrants positive	4.33 (0.63)	1.53 (0.56)	1.95 (0.90)	7.69 (1.85)
Positive total	4.28 (0.59)	1.59 (0.61)	1.99 (0.86)	7.73 (1.78)
Control condition	N/A	N/A	N/A	5.81 (1.47)
Total	3.25 (1.15)	2.58 (1.17)	2.45 (1.06)	5.12 (2.46)
<i>n</i>	1584	1583	1584	1713

N/A = Not applicable.

Main effects. First, we test our main effects hypotheses on frame and actor terminology. H1 was formulated as follows: “If asylum seekers/refugees/immigrants are framed negatively in a news article, respondents will report more negative attitudes towards immigration than when asylum seekers/refugees/immigrants are framed as victims or positively.” A factorial ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of framing condition and target group on anti-immigration attitudes, namely H1 and H2. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of framing condition, $F(3, 1585) = 33.75, p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.038, 0.083], indicating that anti-immigration attitudes significantly differed across the framing conditions. In contrast, there was no significant main effect of target group, $F(2, 1585) = 0.06, p = 0.943$, partial $\eta^2 < 0.001$. This means that H2 was rejected. The overall model was significant, $F(5, 1585) = 20.26, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.06$. Estimated marginal means showed that anti-immigration attitudes were highest in the negative framing condition ($M = 4.93, SE = 0.11, 95\% \text{ CI } [4.72, 5.14]$), followed by the neutral condition ($M = 4.06$,

$SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [3.85, 4.28]), the victim framing condition ($M = 3.94$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [3.73, 4.15]), and the positive framing condition ($M = 3.43$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [3.22, 3.64]). Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that immigration attitudes were significantly higher in the negative framing condition than in the neutral condition, $b = 0.87$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(1585) = 5.68$, $p < 0.001$, the victim condition, $b = 0.99$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(1585) = 6.52$, $p < 0.001$, and the positive condition, $b = 1.50$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(1585) = 9.88$, $p < 0.001$. Furthermore, anti-immigration attitudes were significantly lower in the positive framing condition than in the neutral condition, $b = -0.64$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(1585) = -4.16$, $p < 0.001$, and the victim condition, $b = -0.51$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(1585) = -3.38$, $p = 0.004$. Finally, the difference between the neutral and victim framing conditions was not statistically significant, $b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(1585) = 0.80$, $p = 0.423$. In line with the nonsignificant result for target group, Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons revealed no significant differences in anti-immigration attitudes between any of the target groups. Anti-immigration attitudes ($M = 4.12$, $SE = 0.09$) did not differ significantly from attitudes toward asylum seekers ($M = 4.08$, $SE = 0.09$), $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(1585) = 0.27$, $p = 1.000$, or refugees ($M = 4.08$, $SE = 0.09$), $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(1585) = 0.32$, $p = 1.000$. Likewise, attitudes toward refugees and asylum seekers did not differ significantly, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(1585) = -0.05$, $p = 1.000$. Figures 2 and 3 plot the marginal effects.

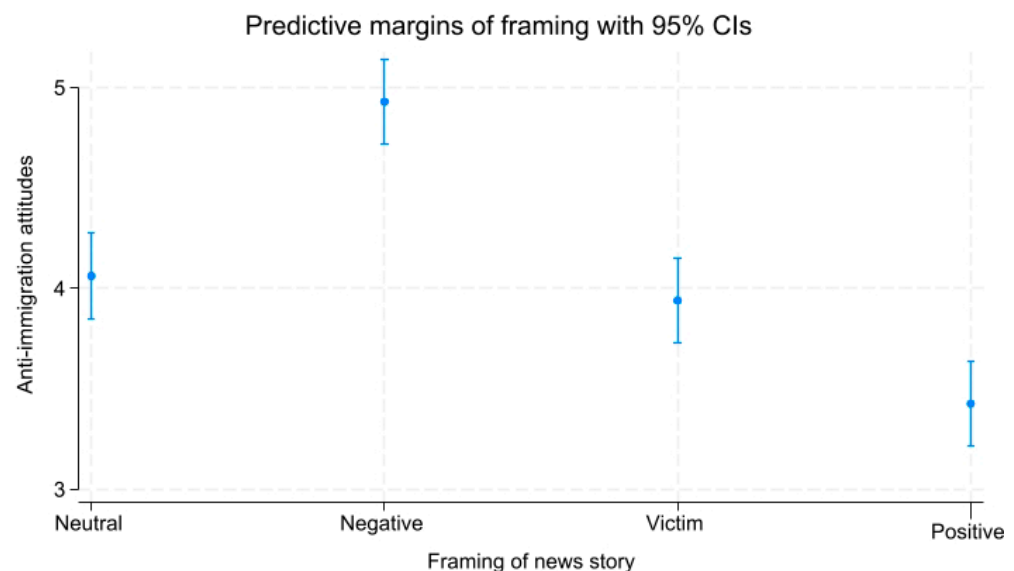


Figure 2. Marginal effects of frame condition on anti-immigration attitudes.

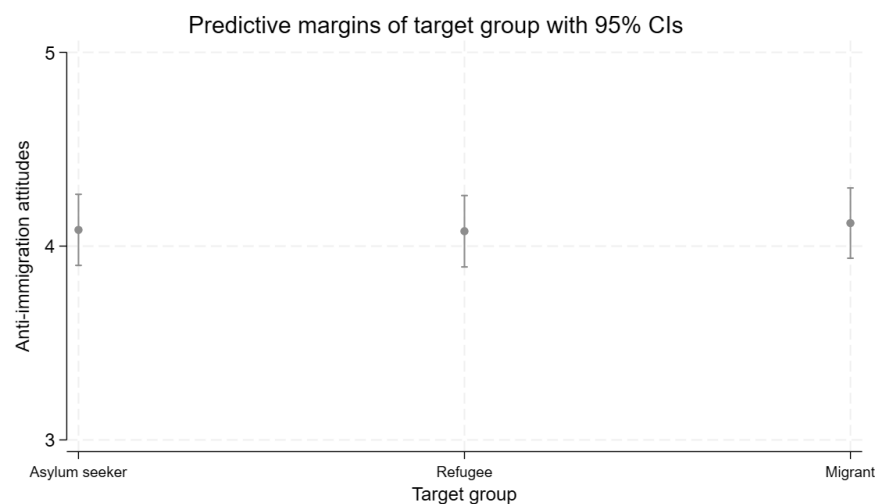


Figure 3. Marginal effects of target group on anti-immigration attitudes.

Moderation analyses. We also posed a research question (RQ1) on how the different news frames (positive, negative, victim) and the use of actor terminology (refugees vs. asylum seekers vs. immigrants) interact to influence anti-immigration attitudes. To that end, we report the results of a two-way ANOVA including interaction effects between frame and actor terms. The interaction between framing and target group was significant, $F(6, 1579) = 2.45, p = 0.023$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.007$, indicating that framing effects varied slightly across target groups. However, the effect size is very small and thus the finding modest. To get more insight in its meaning, Figure 4 displays the marginal effects of the interaction between actor frame and actor term on anti-immigration attitudes. The interaction reveals that the effect of framing is conditional on the actor term used. To further examine the significant interaction between framing condition and target group, simple-contrasts analyses were conducted. The results showed that framing significantly affected anti-immigration attitudes for all three target groups. Specifically, framing had a significant effect when the article referred to asylum seekers, $F(3, 1579) = 16.28, p < 0.001$, refugees, $F(3, 1579) = 9.08, p < 0.001$, and migrants, $F(3, 1579) = 13.47, p < 0.001$. These findings indicate that respondents' attitudes varied substantially across the neutral, negative, positive, and victim frames regardless of the target group under consideration. Additional simple-effects analyses examined whether anti-immigration attitudes differed across target groups within each framing condition. No significant differences between asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants were observed in the neutral frame, $F(2, 1579) = 0.12, p = 0.891$, or the negative frame, $F(2, 1579) = 0.40, p = 0.669$. The effect of target group approached significance in the positive frame, $F(2, 1579) = 2.88, p = 0.057$. However, a significant effect of target group emerged in the victim frame, $F(2, 1579) = 4.01, p = 0.018$, indicating that respondents reacted differently to victim-framed articles depending on whether the group was described as asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants. Thus, these findings suggest that the overall interaction between framing and target group was primarily driven by differences between target groups in the victim frame mostly, somewhat followed by the positive frame. Within the positive framing condition, anti-immigration attitudes were lowest for asylum seekers and highest for refugees. While some pairwise differences reached statistical significance, these effects were modest and should be interpreted in light of the overall small interaction effect. Within the victim frame, attitudes were significantly higher when asylum seekers were targeted compared with migrants and refugees. The victim frame did not produce a clear directional effect overall, which may reflect the fact that this condition simultaneously emphasized discrimination and vulnerability while also portraying reduced agency. Thus, the findings suggest that framing effects were substantially stronger and more consistent than actor-label effects, with target group labels only modestly shaping responses under more favorable framing conditions. The interaction between framing and target group was statistically significant, $F(6, 1579) = 2.45, p = 0.023$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.007$. Supplementary Section S6 reports the exact cell sizes, estimated marginal means, and 95% confidence intervals for all frame $\times$ target-group combinations. Bonferroni-adjusted simple contrasts were conducted to probe the interaction. These analyses showed that differences between target groups emerged primarily in the victim frame and, to a lesser extent, in the positive frame, whereas no significant differences were observed in the neutral and negative frames. Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons used to probe the interaction are reported in Supplementary Section S7.

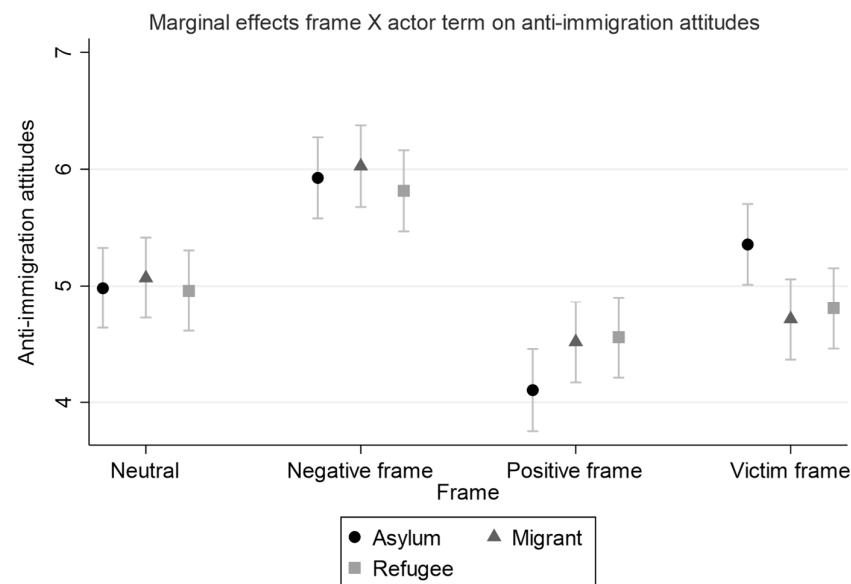


Figure 4. Marginal effects (interaction effect).

7. Discussion

Immigration news involves reporting on different types of actors. However, the terms asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants—although often used interchangeably—refer to distinct categories with different legal and social meanings. Journalists frequently face uncertainty about which term to use due to unclear legal statuses, ambiguous definitions, and practical constraints such as deadlines and limited information (Gemi et al., 2013; Verleyen et al., 2025).

Previous research shows that the public expresses distinct evaluations toward these categories, with certain groups being evaluated more negatively than others (Graf et al., 2023; Findor et al., 2021; De Coninck, 2020; Meeusen & Jacobs, 2017). These differences are often linked to how these groups are represented in the media and the mental images audiences associate with them. Our findings, however, do not fully align with these earlier results. Exposure to immigration news in which the actor terminology was varied did not, by itself, lead to significantly different anti-immigration attitudes. A possible explanation could be that, over the years, the increasing number of new actor-related terms in the immigration debate makes it more difficult for people to distinguish between the various actors mentioned in immigration news. As a result, this confusion may have a weaker influence on attitudes toward a specific actor.

That said, actor terminology is only one aspect of how immigration can be represented in the news, as immigration reporting often also includes a narrative frame. Such coverage is typically categorized as negative, victim-oriented, or positive (Van Gorp, 2005; Masini & Van Aelst, 2017). Prior studies have shown that these frames can lead to various responses, such as increased support for restrictive policies, perceptions of dependency, or greater backing for integration measures (Van der Linden & Jacobs, 2017; Bos et al., 2016). Our results confirm that negative coverage is associated with more negative attitudes towards immigration. Positive news, on the other hand, appears to result in more positive attitudes toward immigration. Victim framing, in line with previous research, yields more mixed and inconclusive effects.

However, we went one step further by exploring the *combined effect* of the used actor terminology and framing in immigration news. Our findings indicate that the effect of framing on attitudes toward immigration is slightly conditional on the type of actor term that is being referenced in the news story. Regarding RQ1, we found a statistically signifi-

cant interaction between news framing and actor terminology. However, the effect size was very small, suggesting that the substantive impact of actor labels was limited compared with the much stronger effects of framing. This finding aligns with research suggesting that the broader interpretative context in which migration is presented may matter more for public opinion than the specific terminology used to describe migrant groups. Whether individuals were described as asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants generally had little impact on attitudes in the absence of a supportive or sympathetic frame. At the same time, the results indicate that terminology is not entirely irrelevant. Differences between actor labels emerged primarily under the victim frame, and to a lesser extent under the positive frame, suggesting that labels may shape responses when citizens are exposed to more favorable portrayals of migrant groups. One possible explanation is that positive and victim frames activate different normative expectations associated with specific categories. For example, refugees are often perceived as more deserving of protection because they are forced to flee persecution, whereas migrants and asylum seekers may evoke more ambiguous associations. Under negative or neutral framing, however, these distinctions appear to be largely overshadowed by the broader evaluative tone of the message. Taken together, these findings suggest that framing and terminology do not contribute equally to attitude formation. While media and political actors often devote considerable attention to debates over the appropriate terminology for migrant groups, our results indicate that the overall narrative surrounding these groups is likely to be more influential than the specific labels used. The findings therefore highlight the importance of studying actor terminology within broader communicative contexts rather than treating labels as isolated cues. At the same time, the modest size of the interaction effect suggests caution in interpreting these differences and points to the need for further research examining when and for whom actor labels become politically meaningful. None of the actor terms, in combination with the victim frame, has a significant increasing or decreasing effect on the anti-immigration attitudes. This likely reflects the inherently ambivalent nature of victim framing, which simultaneously emphasizes the vulnerability of immigrants and discrimination, but also portrays them as having little agency. This might activate empathetic and paternalistic responses at the same time.

These findings underscore that actor labels in immigration news are not neutral descriptions. Yet, both academic and media discourse often treat the immigration debate as a monolithic whole, failing to distinguish between different categories of actors (Van Gorp, 2005; Masini & Van Aelst, 2017; Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017; Parker, 2015). Our study shows that while actor terminology alone may not substantially affect citizens' attitudes, it does shape how audiences respond to framing, especially when these terms are combined with particular frames. In short, actor terminology matters, and it matters in interaction with how the story is told.

In broader terms, the findings also draw attention to the shaping role the media play on people's perceptions and attitudes about immigration. The idea of 'mass-mediated experiences' or vicarious contact prescribes that people mainly consume immigration news through the lens of the media via parasocial interactions (Schemer & Meltzer, 2020). As most people rarely interact directly with asylum seekers, refugees, or immigrants, their impressions are largely shaped by how these groups are portrayed in the news. Repeated exposure to specific framings and labels may have a cumulative effect, potentially influencing behavior toward outgroups over time (Szczebanik, 2016; Jacobs et al., 2016). At the same time, it is important to recognize the practical challenges journalists face in covering immigration. Finding the "right" words—accurate, respectful, and legally sound—can be difficult in fast-paced newsroom environments. Uncertainty about legal status, evolving terminology, and the desire to avoid stigmatizing language all complicate reporting (Gemi

et al., 2013; Verleyen et al., 2025). However, our results suggest that these choices are not without consequences: the words journalists use do seem to shape public opinion.

The study by Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) showed that the negative and victim-oriented framing was prevalent in immigration news across eight European countries. In the present study, we focus on the case of Belgium (Flanders) and, more concretely, investigate the attitudes of Flemish citizens. Because Belgium shares several characteristics with media environments of other European countries—such as a high level of professionalism or strong role of public service broadcaster—these findings may also provide some insights into how immigration news affect public opinion in comparable media systems. This is particularly the case for some northern and eastern European countries that are classified as democratic corporatist system, just like Belgium (Brüggemann et al., 2014). Our experimental design has some limitations that should be noted, which offer valuable opportunities for further research. Firstly, asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants are considered as broad actor terms in our study, but future research could put more emphasis on subtypes of these actors, such as climate refugees or people fleeing from specific countries, considering the countries of origin or their religious backgrounds, as prejudice hierarchies may exist there as well (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017; Meeusen & Jacobs, 2017; Hagedoorn, 1995). Secondly, studies in the future could also test the impact of having real-life contact with each of these actors. Can real-life contact with those groups reduce prejudice, as is shown by studies on intergroup contact with regard to real-life interactions? Thirdly, this study relied solely on textual cues. Given the growing impact of visual framing in news, images might affect the prejudice among respondents even more. Thirdly, in terms of the design, the manipulation checks were focused on simultaneously measuring the topic and the actor of the news article and secondly, whether participants correctly identified the experimental manipulation of the framing and actor term in the news story. Future research could cope with it differently by including separate manipulation checks for the actor condition. An explicit limitation of our study is also that about 35.1% did not pass the exposure check, although results show that only running the analyses on those that were correctly exposed results in nearly identical results. Lastly, as the present article did not examine the preregistered hypotheses concerning the effects of providing minority group members with a voice (as opposed to portraying them as passive actors), future research should investigate this question more directly. From a theoretical perspective, giving minority group members a voice may constitute an important form of humanization (Aalberg & Beyer, 2015), as it allows audiences to encounter these individuals as agents with thoughts, experiences, and perspectives rather than merely as objects of discussion. Such portrayals may shape perceptions of agency, empathy, and identification, and in turn influence attitudes toward minority groups. Future studies should therefore examine whether and under which conditions voice-based representations affect prejudice, support for minority rights, and broader intergroup attitudes, as well as how these effects interact with other communicative cues such as framing, personalization, and emotional appeals.

Despite these limitations, we believe our study is a valuable addition to the framing literature related to immigration news, as it demonstrates that the effects of news frames are robust, but not uniform, and sometimes dependent on the actor terminology used in news coverage. So, as reporting on immigration is a complex endeavor, language can be a powerful tool that deserves careful attention.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/journalmedia7030140/s1>, Supplementary Section S1: Participant flow chart; Supplementary Section S2: Overview experimental conditions (Dutch–English translations); Supplementary Section S3: Informed consent (Dutch and English translation); Supplementary Section S4: Decision Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities; Supplementary

Section S5: Robustness checks with those failing the manipulation checks; Supplementary Section S6: Cell sizes, estimated marginal means, and 95% confidence intervals by framing condition and target group (interaction model); Supplementary Section S7: Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons between experimental conditions.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study (see Supplementary Section S3).

Data Availability Statement: The data, analysis code, study materials, and Supplementary Materials associated with this study will be made publicly available via OSF upon publication. The repository includes the questionnaire, experimental stimuli, replication code, and English translations of the original Dutch-language stimuli.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Link to the pre-registration (https://osf.io/8juy6/overview?view_only=03b43dde1c744ff8bb88d4bfadb825cc) (accessed on 2 July 2025).
- ² In the experiment, we originally, next to the 13 that we report on here, also included 3 conditions where we varied ‘voice’, namely conditions for the immigrant target group where either an immigrant was given a voice or not in the news story. This was pre-registered, but is beyond the scope of the current study (as it was part of a broader project). As it might otherwise contaminate the findings, we do not include these experimental conditions here and report analyses without these conditions. On this point, hence, we deviate from the preregistration. This resulted in a drop of $n = 435$ cases (of which 414 completes).
- ³ Our study was preregistered, meaning that we followed the steps as outlined there.
- ⁴ For this condition we cannot do all analyses as they of course did not include a term for the target group. Hence, this control story is mostly used as a robustness check that we report to align with the pre-registration.
- ⁵ Hence, about 35.1% of the answered this incorrectly. We have re-run our analyses, excluding participants that failed the exposure check, reported in Supplementary Section S5. Findings remain identical, which is why we decided to report the results also including these respondents.

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