

How Twitter—now X—helps with understanding Canadian values and attitudes toward asylum seekers

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The treatment of asylum seekers is [an important issue for many countries](#) as they grapple with polarized public views on the issue. Some

policymakers focus on the need for [border security to keep asylum-seekers out](#) and "protect" their nations, while others focus on the dire needs of asylum seekers themselves.

In March 2023, [the Canadian government announced plans to close Roxham Road](#), an unofficial border crossing between the United States and Canada. Roxham Road had frequently been used by [asylum seekers](#) to enter the country. This announcement added fuel to an ongoing debate in Canada over what to do about people seeking asylum here.

To examine the content of this debate and particularly the role of values, [we analyzed discourse about asylum seekers on Twitter—now X—at the time of the closing of Roxham Road](#).

The role of social media

Social media can play an important part in understanding the drivers of polarized discussions about asylum-seekers because [63% of the world's population uses social media](#). This means social media can be used to analyze a wide range of opinions and world views.

The value of studying public sentiment toward asylum seekers through social media platforms is supported by research demonstrating social media's connection with behavior. For example, [some studies have shown a direct connection](#) between the use of moralizing rhetoric on social media and related incidents of violent protest.

So, what were people saying about asylum seekers on Twitter at the time of the closure of Roxham Road, and what might be driving different views?

Personal values and attitudes

Our research focused on whether people were using [personal values](#) in expressing their attitudes toward asylum seekers. Personal values are well-suited to understanding divergent views on asylum seekers because they reveal a [psychological rationale](#) for viewing asylum seekers in a negative or positive light.

Past research has found that two values are pivotal in understanding why people may hold opposing views on immigration: [conservation and self-transcendence](#). Those who value conservation typically view immigration as negative because they are likely to see it as threatening established traditions, norms and security.

In contrast, those who value self-transcendence typically view immigration as positive because they are likely to believe that it benefits the welfare and interests of others.

To examine whether conservation and self-transcendence were used to express attitudes toward asylum seekers when Roxham Road was closing, we collected tweets spanning eight days in March 2023—those leading up to the closure of Roxham Road, the days of announcement and closure, and several subsequent days. This resulted in 24,531 tweets for our analysis.

We analyzed both the tone of tweets—whether they were negative or positive toward asylum seekers—and the frequency of expressing conservation and self-transcendence values.

On average, the overall tone of the 24,531 tweets was neutral. However, 9.87% of the tweets expressed the value of conservation, and these tweets generally had a negative tone, reflecting a negative view of asylum seekers.

In contrast, 15.36% of the tweets expressed the value of self-

transcendence, and illustrating a positive view of asylum seekers.

Did views change after Roxham Road closed?

We also examined whether closing Roxham Road influenced the content and tone of people's tweets about asylum seekers. Social media's ability to capture data over time allows us to deepen our knowledge of how people express their opinions through a period of important policy change.

We analyzed the content and tone of the tweets at four points in time. These times included: two days before closure of Roxham Road, at the time of the announcement and closure, two days after the closure, and two days after that.

We found that the number of tweets expressing the value of conservation increased immediately after the closure of Roxham Road, but then returned to their pre-closure level. These tweets became somewhat less negative at the time of the announcement and onward.

This reduction in negativity was perhaps because asylum seekers who could not enter the country were seen as less of a threat.

The number of tweets expressing self-transcendence more than doubled immediately after the closure of Roxham Road and maintained this higher level in the following days. These tweets were especially positive immediately after the closure.

This increase in expressing self-transcendence and positivity was perhaps because of enhanced empathy for the asylum seekers who could no longer enter the country.

Values play an important role in attitudes toward asylum seekers and

help to explain polarized views. These views may change in response to policy shifts regarding the treatment of [asylum](#) seekers.

By using Twitter data, we were able to understand these changing attitudes at the time of the closing of Roxham Road.

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