

# Exploring the Fluctuating Public Interest in the Migration Debate through Digital Traces: A Case Study in South Korea

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## Abstract

This work investigates the dynamic nature of public interest in the migration debate, particularly in relation to significant events and during times of global crisis. By utilizing digital traces, specifically search trends, we aim to analyze the periods of accrued interest in migration, and provide nuances in the understanding of the migration discourse. To gauge the significance of the migration debate within the broader public discourse in South Korea, we examine the frequency of migrant-related searches on Naver (1999), the primary Korean search engine. This analysis is conducted over time using the public Naver API (2016), covering the period from its inception in 2016 to 2023. Our findings demonstrate the varying prominence of migrant-related issues during short and specific periods, specifically in times of changes in governmental policies, and during the global health crisis. These fluctuations shed light on how immigration topics are strategically highlighted or downplayed in mass media, influencing public concerns and potentially shaping negative perceptions of migrants as scapegoats for broader societal challenges. By leveraging Naver trends, we are able to assess the relative interest in specific migration-related topics over time in South Korea, thereby gauging their significance within the public discourse. Notably, we observe significant fluctuations in relative interest, indicating that opinions and values concerning migrants are not static, but rather context-dependent. These perspectives can be strongly influenced by factors such as government policies, news coverage, and social events, underscoring the malleable nature of public opinion on migration. Through this research, we contribute to the understanding of the migration discourse, emphasizing its dynamic nature and susceptibility to external influences. This knowledge can be used to address the challenges associated with migration, with a focus on alleviating migrant responsibilities for integration and promoting the decriminalization of migration.

## 1 Introduction

Understanding public attitudes towards migrants is essential to promote social cohesion. Governmental campaigns aiming to improve migrant integration focus on migrant responsibilities, with language classes and educational programs. Despite a drop in reluctance to accept migrants since 2013 in South Korea (Survey by Gallup Korea, Published by KIP KIPA, 2021), the sharp increase in reluctance during the pandemic highlights the scapegoating of migrants in times of economical crisis. Discriminatory perception of foreigners as native disease carriers and competitors in the job market exacerbated during the global pandemic. The repercussions of the failure to unite native and migrant workers are severe, with xenophobic fears and racial stereotypes spreading on social media and spilling onto the streets in the form of aggression and governmental policies exclusions. It is thus primordial to study the shifts in immigration sentiment. The debate on migration is multi-layered. The negative sentiment towards immigrants can be explained by individuals building their “social identity” (Tajfel, 1982) as opposed to a foreign group (Haidt, 2007), and associating feelings of fears towards immigrants. Migrant populations are subject to a variety of stigmas. Being carriers of native diseases is one of them, increasing negative sentiment during pandemics (Burns and Gimpel, 2000). With the group threat theory (Blumer, 1958), being perceived as competition in the labor market is another stigma. Some researchers strategizing towards the integration of migrants advance that greater interaction would improve integration of migrants. (Allport et al., 1954). However, the criminalization of migration, with laws leading to incarceration and deportation of immigrants and asylum seekers, proves contact theories insufficient. If the general population perceives a person as illegal, relying on interaction

rather than more appropriate visa regulations will prove unsuccessful. In this project, rather than studying the roots of this negative perception, the public interest in migration is studied overtime, and related to local events. The position over time of specific groups of migrants in the center of the immigration debate provides information supporting the analysis of the shifting of migrant perception. Through traditional methods, tracking immigrant sentiment is based on yearly governmental surveys with few questions on the public acceptance of migrants. The limitations are numerous: interviews and surveys are limited to small samples, have a high cost, slow collection, low spatial resolution, and low temporal frequency. Moreover, as simple yes or no questions, they do not provide sufficient information to understand the mechanism of migrant exclusion. On the other hand, with 4.1 billion social media users (2020), new forms of data can overcome the limitations of yearly survey data sets. By tracking digital traces, we can obtain real-time processing of information to measure and monitor anti-immigration sentiment, across the globe, at frequent temporal intervals, and over extended time frames. Using digital traces to study demography, computer science researchers have the opportunity to use voluminous data sets to produce quantitative research to support and expand qualitative research on human behaviors, on themes like migration, gender, identity and citizenship, xenophobia. Among big data is social data, which is useful to examine "behaviors, attitudes and macro-level social processes" (Nina Cesare, Hedwig Lee, Tyler McCormick, Emma Spiro and Emilio Zagheni, 2016) . This social data comes under the form of "digital traces" (Latour, 2007), such as searches on search platforms like Google or Naver. The data available is voluminous and easy to collect through APIs, but most importantly, it allows access to groups inaccessible by traditional governmental surveys. Moreover, as it is generated continuously, both the immediate and long term impact of social events can be investigated. Finally, without the use of survey questions, unsolicited information can be collected, offering a new understanding of the relationship between previously assumed distinct topics. This makes it a perfect tool to study intersectionality. The research project aims to analyze the evolution overtime of the peaks in relative interest in migration. First, baskets of migration related keywords are defined. Then, us-

ing Naver Trends feature, the frequency of word searches by Naver users is obtained, and visualized overtime. The results are then related to the local news events.

## 2 Methodology

Naver's search trends show frequent search terms in Naver's search engine. It can be used for comparative keyword research to discover event-triggered spikes in keyword search volume. With 42 millions users, Naver is the most popular search engine in South Korea. Using the keyword research tool Naver Data Lab, we obtain the frequency over time of keywords searched in Naver. Using Naver Trends feature, we investigate the salience of migrant related queries over time to find correlation between exceptional events and sparks in national interest in migrant related topics. The frequency

Topic	Basket of words (English)	Basket of words (Korean)
Refugees	"refugee"	"난민"
Migrant and migrant workers	"immigrant", "migrant", "foreigner" "migrant worker", "foreign worker", "immigrant worker", "migrant worker"	"이민자", "이주민", "외국인", "이주노동자", "외국인노동자", "외국인근로자", "이민근로자", "이주근로자", "외국인노동자", "이민노동자", "이주노동자"
Irregular migrants	"irregular migrant", "irregular immigrant", "irregular foreigner"	"미등록 이민자", "등록 이주민", "미등록 외국인"
Illegal migrants	"illegal migrant", "illegal immigrant"	"불법체류", "불법체류자", "불법체류 외국인", "불법 이민자", "불법 이주민"
Women and Marriage migrants	"female immigrant", "female migrant", "female foreigner", "female marriage immigrant", "marriage immigrant", "marriage immigrant woman"	"여성 이민자", "여성 이주민", "여성 외국인", "여성 결혼이민자", "결혼이민자", "결혼이민여성"

Figure 1: Basket of words for each topic harvested by the Naver Trends feature

of searches for five topics are studied. The first one is "Migrant and migrant workers". Frequency of searches of related words and synonyms is harvested according to the basket of words described in the Basket of words Table. The second topic is "Irregular migrants", the third topic "Illegal migrants", the fourth topic "Refugee", and the fifth topic "Women and marriage migrants". Frequency of searches Frequency of searches for the synonyms for women migrants and marriage migrants, is harvested. Due to searches for "women migrant" being too few to be detected, searches for marriage migrants were combined.

## 3 Analysis

The monitoring of social data extracted from Naver Trends between 2016 and 2023 shows the dynamics of migration awareness, specifically during the global COVID-19 pandemic, where worldwide migrant communities often became targets of scapegoating and blamed for the spread of the

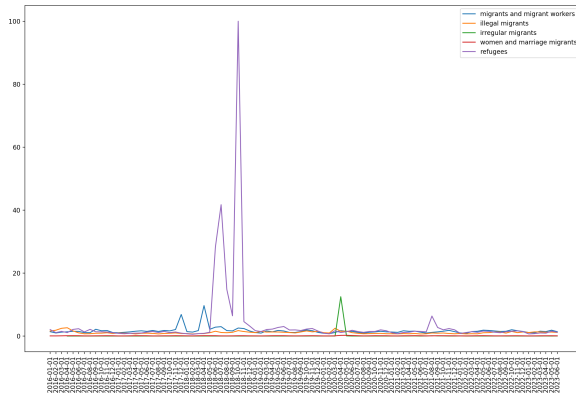


Figure 2: Relative Peak interest in "Migrant" and "Migrant workers", "Irregular migrants", "Illegal migrants", "Women and marriage migrants", and "Refugees", by frequency of searches in Naver (2016/01/01 to 2023/06/01)

virus. The peaks of intensity of migration awareness, here defined as the relative search interest activities using migrant related search terms in Naver, is shown to be related to potential triggers and an accrued news coverage. The Naver

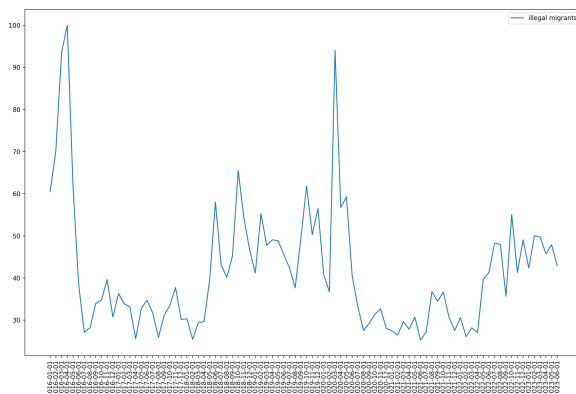


Figure 3: Relative Peak interest in "Illegal migrants", by frequency of searches in Naver (2016/01/01 to 2023/06/01)

Trends data show a peak in “illegal migration” interest occurring in March 2016, when the the South Korean government launched crackdowns with an aim “to repatriate about 70,000” undocumented migrant workers (Buhaykorea, 2016.03.22, ”Crackdown on illegal immigrants in Korea”), in April 2020, when measures to enforce immigration laws were implemented through the introduction of stricter immigration and quarantine measures as number of cases increased, in Mai 2020, when the Ministry of Health inspected construction sites to “strengthen quarantine efforts to prevent infections by undocumented residents and foreign work-

ers from abroad” (ROK Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2020.05.31, “Timeline South Korea’s response covid 19”, csis.org), and in November 2022, when the Ministry of Justice launched numerous crackdowns resulting in the expulsion of 13,000 migrant workers (The Korea Herald, 2023.05.03, “13,000 illegal immigrants leave S. Korea through crackdown over 2 months”, Yonhap). The Naver

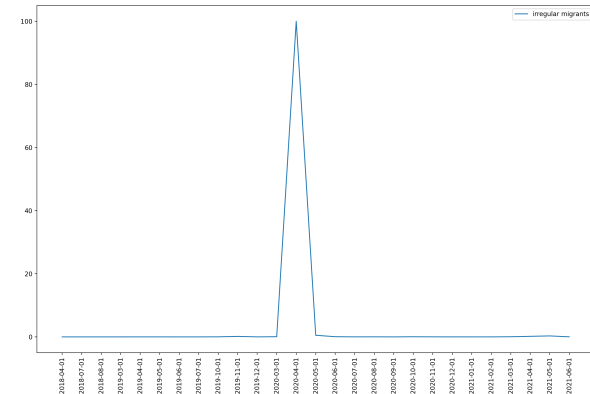


Figure 4: Relative Peak interest in "Irregular migrants", by frequency of searches in Naver (2018/01/01 to 2021/06/01)

Trends data show the first peak of interest in irregular migrants in April 2020, when Covid cases surged after the first easing of social distancing policies and immigrants were blamed for the spread of the virus. The other peak in public interest in

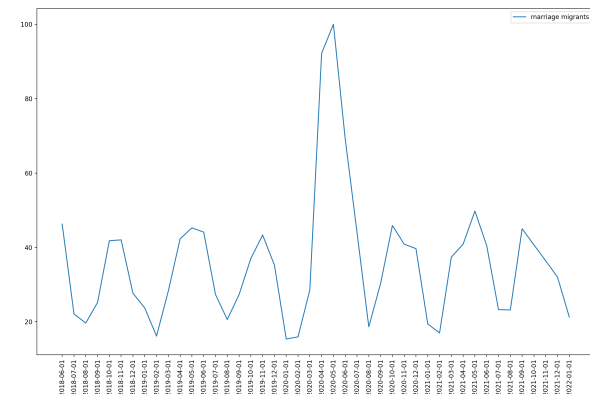


Figure 5: Relative Peak interest in "Marriage migrants", by frequency of searches in Naver (2018/06/01 to 2022/01/01)

women migrants and marriage migrants in April 2020 also follows the accrued news coverage of immigrants’ presence in South Korea during the surge in Covid cases and the reimplement of stricter social distancing, notably restriction of business activities despite strong opposition from trade unions. A peak in relative interest in refugees in 2018 fol-

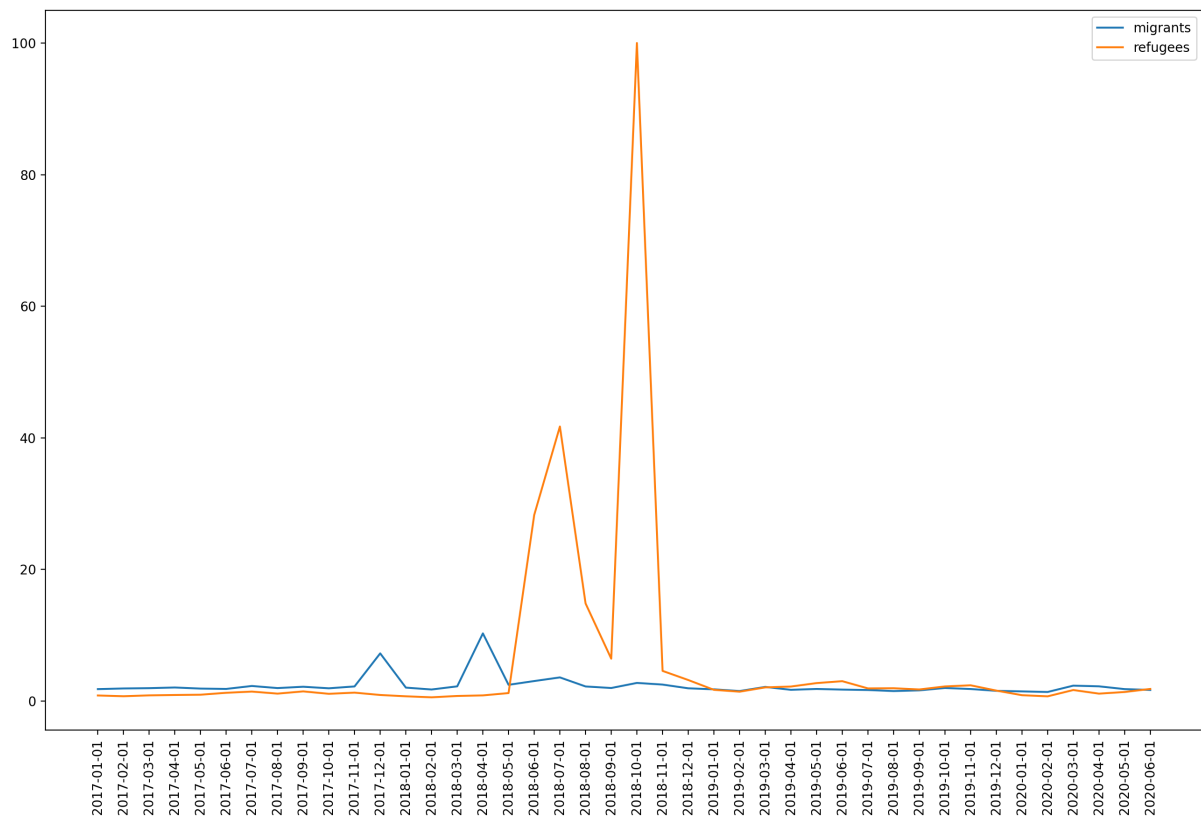


Figure 6: Relative Peak interest in "Refugee" and "Migrant", by frequency of searches in Naver (2017/01/01 to 2020/06/01)

lowed the arrival of asylum seekers escaping the Yemeni civil war in Jeju-do, which was heavily covered in the media, portraying the refugees as dangerous. The public opinion of refugees worsened to the point of the organization of protests to oppose the acceptance of the asylum seekers. The appearance of a new term "fake refugee" illustrates a xenophobic campaign from the media. The term appeared in 2018, and was used to separate "humanitarian" and "economic" refugees, deemed "fake". 99percent of refugees arriving South Korean territory into the "economic" class, which could be used as a justification for the 1 percent recognition rate of refugees. When in the ongoing Yemeni civil war started in 2014, Yemen was then part of the list of countries who did not need a visa to enter Jejudo. Between 2016 and 2018, around 552 Yemeni refugees arrived on Jeju Island in South Korea. In June 2018, South Korea excluded Yemen from the list of visa waiver countries. Immigration also restricted Yemeni refugees from migrating to other regions of South Korea. In July 2018, protests opposing the acceptance of Yemeni refugees took place. Refugees were denounced as "fake", migrating to compete in the

job market rather than to escape the civil war. A new divisive concept of refugee, migrating with either "humanitarian" reasons, or "economic" reasons, is created. In 2019, refugee recognition rate drops under 1 percent. (0.1 percent according to the reports of NANCEN, based on the information shared by the Ministry of Justice) This illustrates the powerful role of mass media in the pushing of governmental policies. Before 2018, few refugees arrived in South Korea, and they were not included in the center of the migration debate. As asylum seekers arrived, to justify the exclusionary policies, a new discourse around refugees was built through mass media, here by creating a new divisive concept for refugees.

#### 4 Discussion

Naver Trends data showed that immigrants are in the center of public interest, and blamed for the spread of the virus and the resulting business suspension policies greatly affecting employees of entertainment establishments. In April 2020, The Ministry of Health and Welfare implemented a measure of imprisonment up to one year for foreign migrants not complying with the quarantine

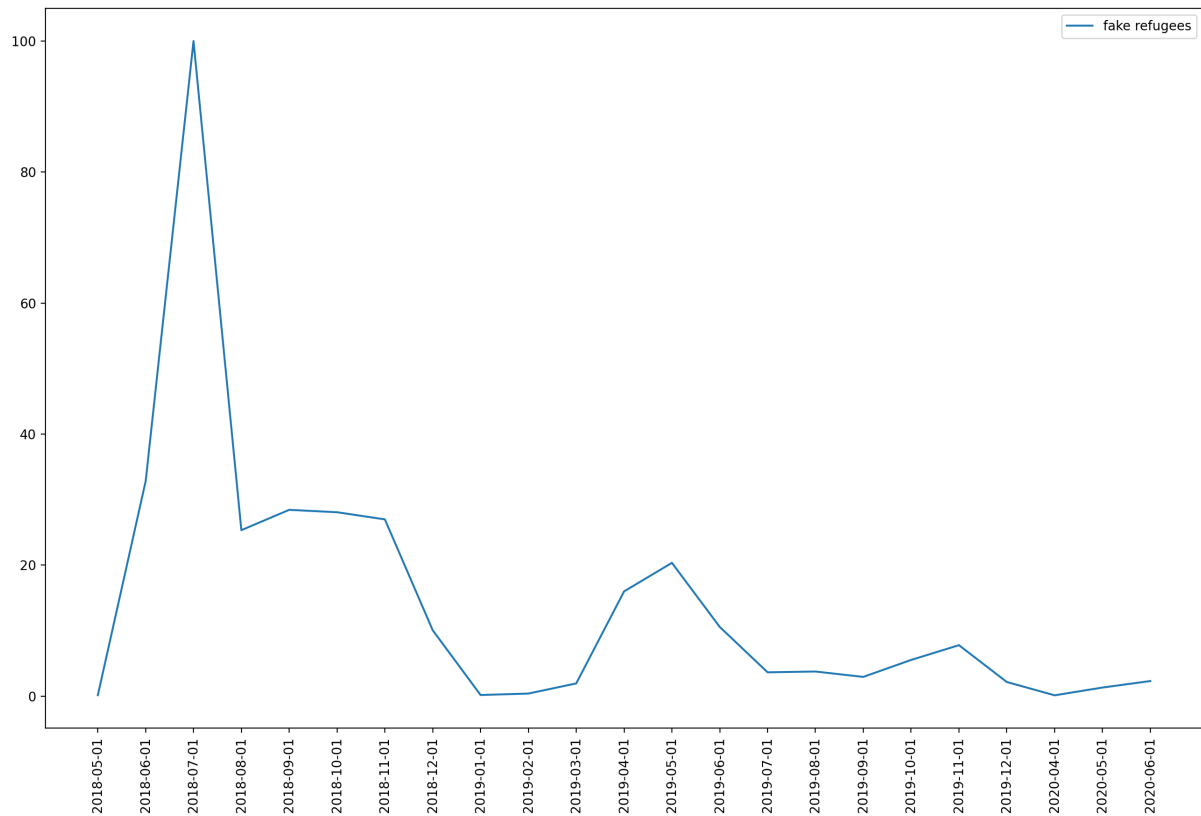


Figure 7: Relative Peak interest in "Fake refugee", by frequency of searches in Naver (2018/05/01 to 2020/06/01)

measures (ROK Ministry of Health and Welfare). Whilst clusters of cases reappeared in the Spring of 2020 after the easing of social distancing policies, an early cluster from May 2020 was highly mediatized. As it took place in the gay and international district Itaewon, blame for the spread of the virus was put on both the LGBTQ+ community and migrant community, and it was turned into a high profile incident. As tension between the government and workers struggling due to business suspension orders were rising, this publicization of one cluster involving the two communities pushed the negative public sentiment over to the oppressed groups. This cluster will later be referred to as the "Itaewon outbreak", and when business suspension orders would be implemented due to the rise of cases, this specific cluster would be named, and followed by restrictive measures exclusively applicable to foreigners. For example, on the 10th of May 2020, gatherings in nightlife establishment are banned for two weeks (Source: ROK Ministry of Health and Welfare), on the 11th of May, the penalty for breaking self-quarantine is increased a sixfold for foreigners exclusively (Yonha News Agency), and on the 11th of May, the reopening of schools is delayed by a week due to the "Itaewon

outbreak" (Source: ROK Ministry of Education). During the same period, a bigger cluster of cases in the Coupang Center, a major South Korean e-commerce company, is reported on the 29th of May, but attention is diverted to immigrants, as the Ministry of Health and Welfare launches highly publicized inspections of construction sites and businesses hiring foreign workers the 31st of May. In May 2020, Naver Trends data show unprecedented peaks of interest in migrant related terms. This accrued interest in migration and implementation of restrictive migration measures could be a result of a media narrative scapegoating migrants. The peaks in salience observed highlights how interest in migrant-related issues is transient and subject to changing circumstances. Consequently, opinions and values regarding migrants cannot be regarded as fixed in time.

## 5 Limitations

This study examined the shifting over time of public interest in migration in South Korea. Governmental policies and mass media appeared to have a role in the increased interest in migration during the global crisis. The experiment provided salience

over time, but no causal relation between media coverage, public opinion, and migrants' conditions was developed. In addition, the limitation to public interest, rather than public sentiment, restricts the interpretation of the results. Finally, the Naver searches dataset cannot be accessed, as the searches saving method of Naver Trends feature is not made public.

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