Do sentiments expressed in YouTube comments about anti-immigration protests in Ireland align with the rise of far-right ideology?

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Abstract

During the covid-19 pandemic, there was a lot of support for migrants throughout Ireland, especially refugees from the Russia/Ukraine War. However, less than 1 year later there is seemingly a significant change in the sentiment from the Irish people towards migrant populations with anti-immigrant protests taking place in late 2022 and early 2023. In this report we aim to understand the point of view of this group of Irish people, their key areas of worry regarding immigrants and hypothesize what may have caused this change of opinion within such a short period of time and if this is indicative of a rise in a far-right point of view. We will undertake this analysis through unsupervised machine learning techniques, specifically topic modelling and sentiment analysis of YouTube comments from 30 videos cantered around the protests.

Keywords

Ireland, racism, anti-immigrant, sentiment, topic modelling

Introduction

Ireland has long been recognized as a welcoming country with a friendly population and a historically limited presence of far-right movements (Garner, 2007). However, in recent years, there has been a notable increase in anti-immigration sentiments, particularly among certain segments of the Irish population (Cannon, et al., 2022). This shift in attitudes is of significant concern and calls for a deeper understanding of the underlying factors contributing to these sentiments.

Of specific interest is the emergence of anti-immigration protests that commenced in November 2022 in Ireland. These protests were triggered by the influx of asylum seekers seeking refuge from the Russian invasion of Ukraine (RTE News, 2022). This sudden shift in sentiment towards immigrants within a previously welcoming country raises important questions about the motivations, concerns, and dynamics driving these protests. Previous studies have shown that attitudes towards the immigrant population can become more negative during an economic crisis (Turner & Cross, 2015). Given the economic uncertainty stemming from the covid-19 pandemic, the added economic pressure from the Russian invasion of Ukraine could be further inflaming the anti-immigrant sentiments.

To address this issue, our research focuses on analysing the Irish anti-immigration protests and aims to shed light on the factors contributing to this shift in sentiment. By examining the events within the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the specific response of Irish society, we aim to gain insights into the drivers of anti-immigration sentiments and their implications for Ireland's social fabric. Understanding the background and nuances of this issue is crucial for policymakers, academics, and the wider society in order to develop informed strategies that promote inclusivity, social cohesion, and a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with immigration in Ireland.

The primary aim of this project is to investigate the sentiment expressed in YouTube comments related to the anti-immigration protests in Ireland and uncover the emerging topics within these comments. By doing so, we seek to explore how these sentiments and topics align with existing research on the subject, particularly in relation to far-right ideology and anti-immigrant sentiment. The overarching research question we aim to address is: Do the sentiments expressed in the YouTube comments provide evidence of growing support for a far-right movement in Ireland through their endorsement of the anti-immigration protests?

Through our analysis of the sentiment and topics within the YouTube comments, we intend to examine whether there is a discernible alignment between the sentiments expressed and the rise of far-right ideology. Furthermore, we aim to assess whether these sentiments are indicative of broader support for the anti-immigration protests, thereby shedding light on the potential growth of a far-right movement in Ireland.

By exploring this research question, we aim to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on anti-immigration sentiments, far-right ideology, and social movements in Ireland. Our findings will provide valuable insights into the dynamics and implications of these sentiments within the context of the Irish anti-immigration protests, allowing for a deeper understanding of the social and political landscape in Ireland and the potential challenges it may pose for social cohesion and inclusion.

Methods of Investigation

We began with web crawling using selenium through a selection of Youtube videos on the anti-immigrant protests and gathering the comments to create our dataset. The dataset was then cleaned by tokenizing the data, removing any specialty characters and ensuring any non-english words were removed. This is to ensure that when undertaking the analysis there are no comments which may skew the results and that all comments are formatted in the same way.

The data is then sorted into n-grams using the NLTK python library, we have chosen to represent these in groups of 3 (trigram) as this will give us a better description of the topic and ideals than a bigram (2 words). From here, we lemmatize the data to reduce it to its base root, this can mean a word is changed from past to present tense (eg played to play) or removes the -ing from words (eg playing to play). Doing this ensures that the meaning of a topic will not be diluted, e.g. if one comment contains the word "want" and another contains "wanting", although the meaning of these are the same, they would be counted differently and potentially change the outcome of our analysis.

The bag of words (BoW) method is used to compile a list of tuples, each containing a token's ID and frequency in the document. They are then assigned to a document-term matrix structure where each row corresponds to a document, and each column represents a token's ID, with the cell value indicating the frequency of that token in the document. We decided to use BoW as it is computationally relatively light as it uses a sparse matrix format, this makes manipulation of the data easy and efficient. However, in using this method we did lose some more nuanced meanings of the comments but considering their overall nature tended to be in praise of the protests, we concluded that this method would be sufficient in determining topics.

Since our data is unsupervised, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was used to establish the underlying topics from the BoW matrix. The topics are categorized by the distribution of words within each comment which allows for latent topics to emerge from the data. These topics would be difficult to identify by manual methods as the corpus contains thousands of comments which seem similar to one another. The number of topics was set to 5 as larger numbers of topics did not reveal more clear patterns. We sampled topics in the range of 2 up to 15 and concluded that 5 topics gave distinct outcomes which were sufficiently different from one another.

We then processed the words in the dataset through the python library, Word Cloud to create a visual word cloud of the most common words within the comments. We also performed a word frequency analysis of the dataset in bigram pairs. These steps allowed us to apply some context to the frequency

of words and phrases outside of their topics and allowed analysis of the overall meaning of certain phrases, instead of their use within the context of their topic.

Finally we performed a sentiment analysis of the data. This allows us to compare the sentiment of the comments, if they are positive or negative, to the context of the video content showing us how people in the comment section are reacting to the video content and ideas.

The research for this report took place from March to May, 2023 in University College Dublin. Our dataset consists of 3264 unique comments from 30 YouTube videos of Irish anti-immigrant protests. We selected the videos based on a number of factors:

1. The videos should be from Irish sources. This is to reduce the number of comments from YouTube users outside of Ireland.
2. There must be a minimum of 30 comments per video to ensure relevance to the broader conversation taking place around migrants in Ireland..
3. The videos should be from protests which took place from 2021 onwards.

We chose the medium of the Youtube comment section as our data sample as the data was free to access and provides a good basis of peoples opinion on a specific topic. As we can search each video to ensure it is related to the topic and can then cross reference it based on our criteria above, we can ensure each of the comments will be relevant to our analysis and discussion.

These comments are publicly available, ensuring no persons privacy is violated when collecting the data as both the Youtube and their parent company Google state within their terms of service and privacy policy respectively that any content published in the responsibility of the publisher, and that this content will be publicly accessible and will include a name and profile picture. We do not include any names or identifying information for individuals within our dataset, we have only chosen to take the comments from these videos.

Findings

The results of our analysis provided 5 unique topic groups, which contain the most frequent trigrams within the dataset, however it is important to note that all topics contain supportive sentiments such as "well done", showing support for the video subject matter. The groups we have identified are as follows:

Topic 1: Electoral anticipation.

In figure 1 below, we can see this distribution of this topic which we have labelled electoral anticipation. Within this topic we see reference to political issues such as housing, crime, racism and reference to the next election cycle. While Irish people have protested strongly throughout the country's history, these are typically to support civil rights movements and request systemic change within Ireland. Some of these protests have included changes to abortion rights also known as the repeal the 8th movement (Fitzpatrick, 2022), protests to end direct provision (RTE News, 2016) and for the government to increase social housing (Lima, 2021). Given the current issues with housing in Ireland, this could also be adding to the rhetoric surrounding the election (Bowers, 2023).

The references in topic 1 to elections are about the "country next general" and "general election interesting" and "illegal fear future", this implication of these terms along with the other terms in the topic would suggest the commenters fear the future of the country, and would want to see change in the next election, referring to "unrest". There is also significant mention of the far right and racism, with the phrase "racist far right", "considered far right", and similar phrases this shows us that while these commenters are engaging in anti-immigration rhetoric, they are seemingly denying association with the far-right and racism and feel they are just standing up for their country and people.
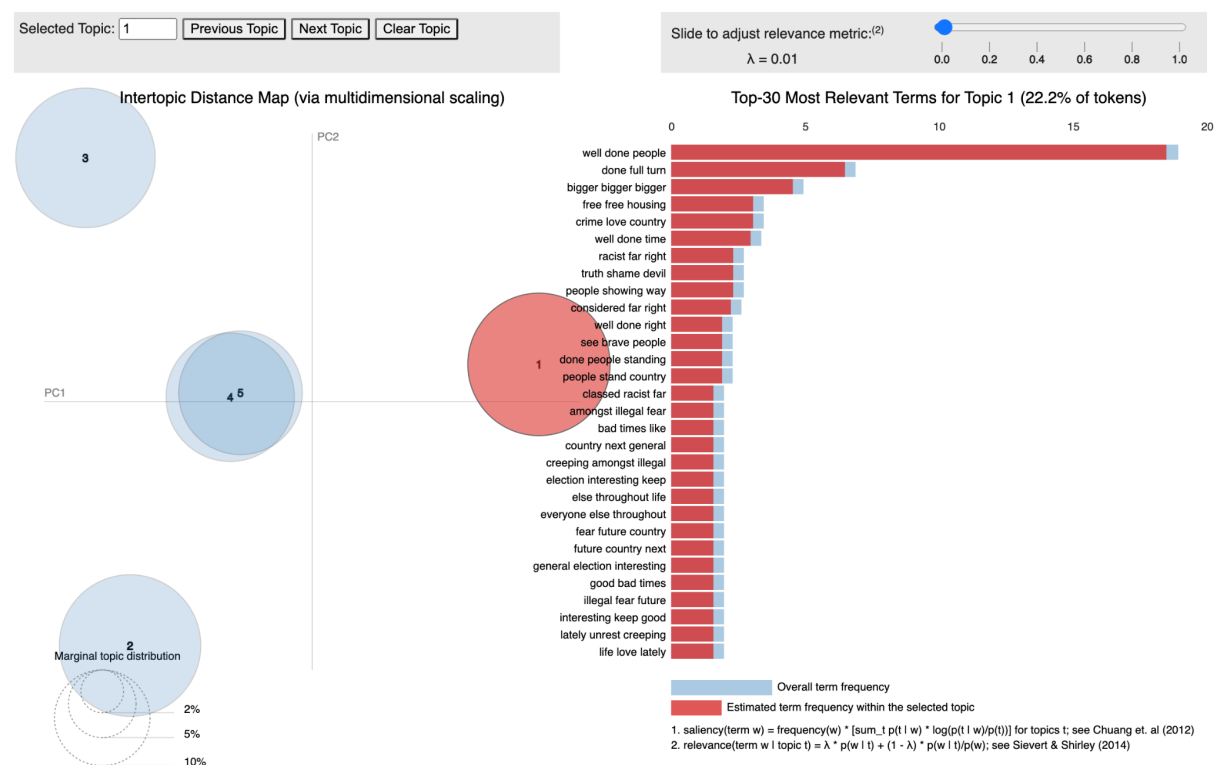

Figure 1: Topic 1 (electoral anticipation) word distribution

Topic 2: Conspiracy theories

In this topic, a particular phrase of note has emerged and gives some indication of the nature of fears and suspicions held by protesters and their online supporters. The term "needs population replacement" appears here alongside general messages of support and solidarity. This notion of replacement is common among far-right, ethno-nationalist movements in Europe and North America (Rose, 2022). The theory claims the existence of a left-wing, elitist agenda which is attempting to replace white European populations with non-white migrants (Ekman, 2022). This shows that some portion of those who are commenting on videos in support of anti-migrant protests are motivated or concerned about such conspiracy theories.
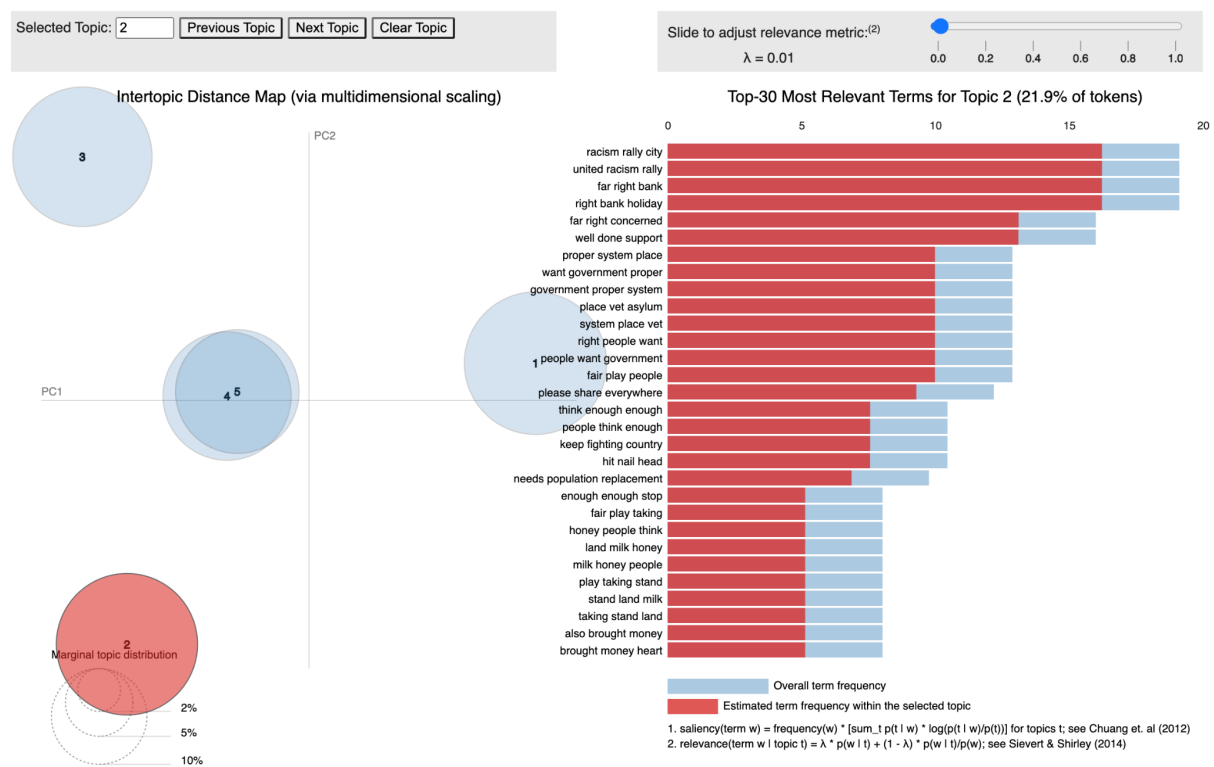

Figure 2: Topic 2 (conspiracy theories) word distribution

Topic 3: Men and Safety

This topic features a number of references to male migrants as groups in public places and making reference to their age, such as "military aged men " and "foreign men hanging [around]". This seems to indicate a particular concern amongst anti-immigrant commenters towards men. There is the suggestion in these comments that as these men are of military age they should therefore not be accepted as asylum seekers. There are tendencies amongst European populations to be more welcoming to some groups, namely women and children who are fleeing war or famine, this may relate to these objections (Hager et al, 2019). Also, there is a well-known stereotype that male migrants are dangerous criminals, and pose a threat particularly to women. This kind of stereotyping and discrimination appears common in comments made in these YouTube videos.
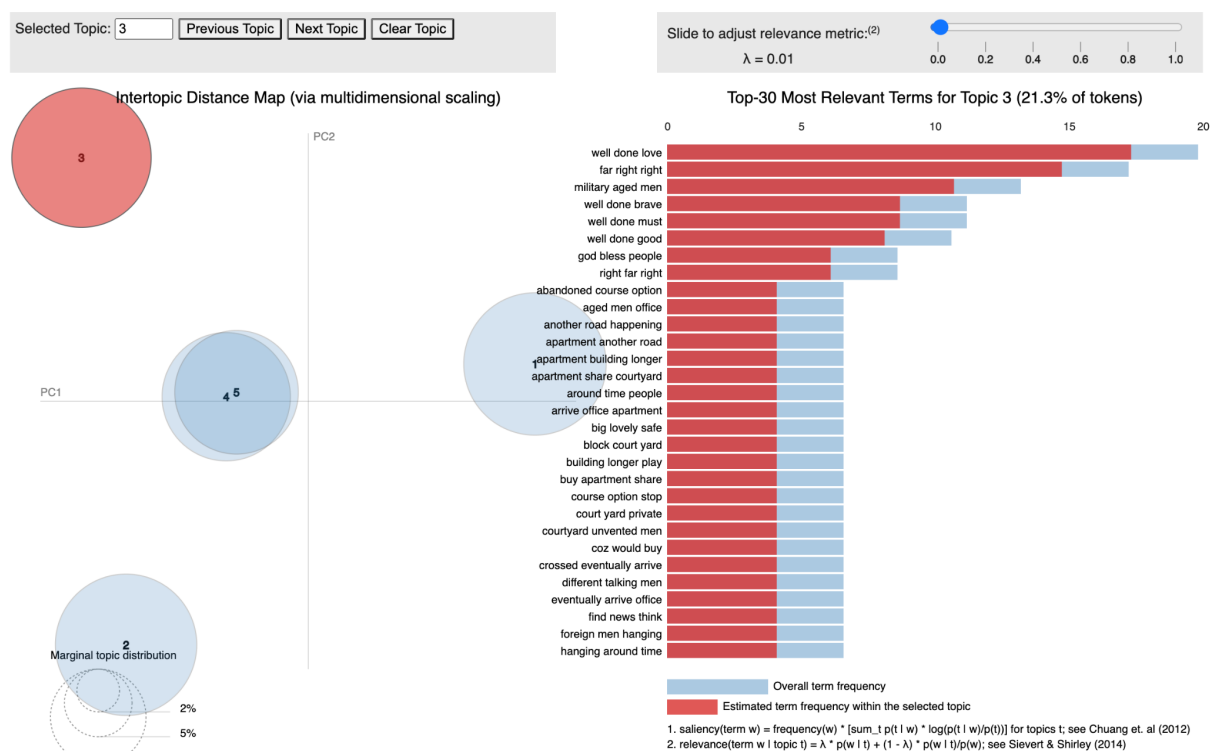
Figure 3: Topic 3 (men and safety) word distribution

Topic 4: Class and community

This topic features many comments relating to the working class background of the protesters (protests took place in lower income areas such as East Wall and Ballymun) and the community aspect of members of a locality publicly demonstrating. Much support was included in this topic and it seems that the comments are praising the communities involved. There have been previous studies which show

that people from lower income areas can be more likely to hold an anti-immigrant stance (Gusciute, 2019)

This topic also refers to refugees and asylum seekers in a negative fashion, phrases such as "citizen country language", "country language learning" and "build refugee instead" as well as the inclusion of words like "legally" and "respect" would imply that the comments do not view immigrants as respecting their community, they believe refugees don't learn the local language and would want them out of their community.

There is also a backlash to the media referring to the protesters as being political extremists, "far - right - media", most likely in defence of those who have been referred to as far-right by the media. Overall we can see a respect, defence of the protesters, and a claim that these protests are the sign of a good community.
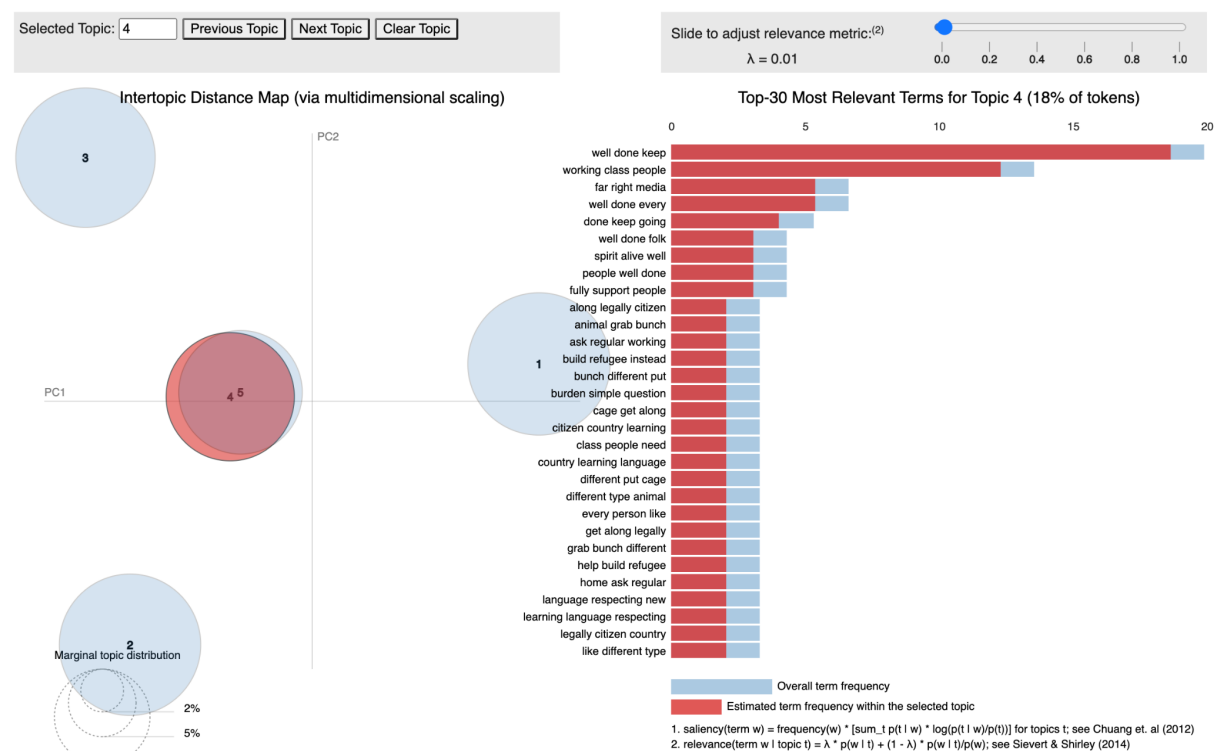

Figure 4: Topic 4 (class and community) word distribution

Topic 5: Civil Unrest

There are numerous mentions with the word civil, however its exact significance is difficult to determine in this context. They may refer to civil unrest or could relate to further defence of protesters conduct by referring to them as civil. The words "government" and "policy" also feature heavily and indicate further discussion and call for change to the government's approach to immigration. These are the more conventional elements of a political protest, ones which seek to influence and compel the government to make changes to policy around a given issue. Use of terms relating to conflict and fighting also feature and indicate a sense that there is a battle being fought and that these protests, which have at times been violent, are central to that effort.
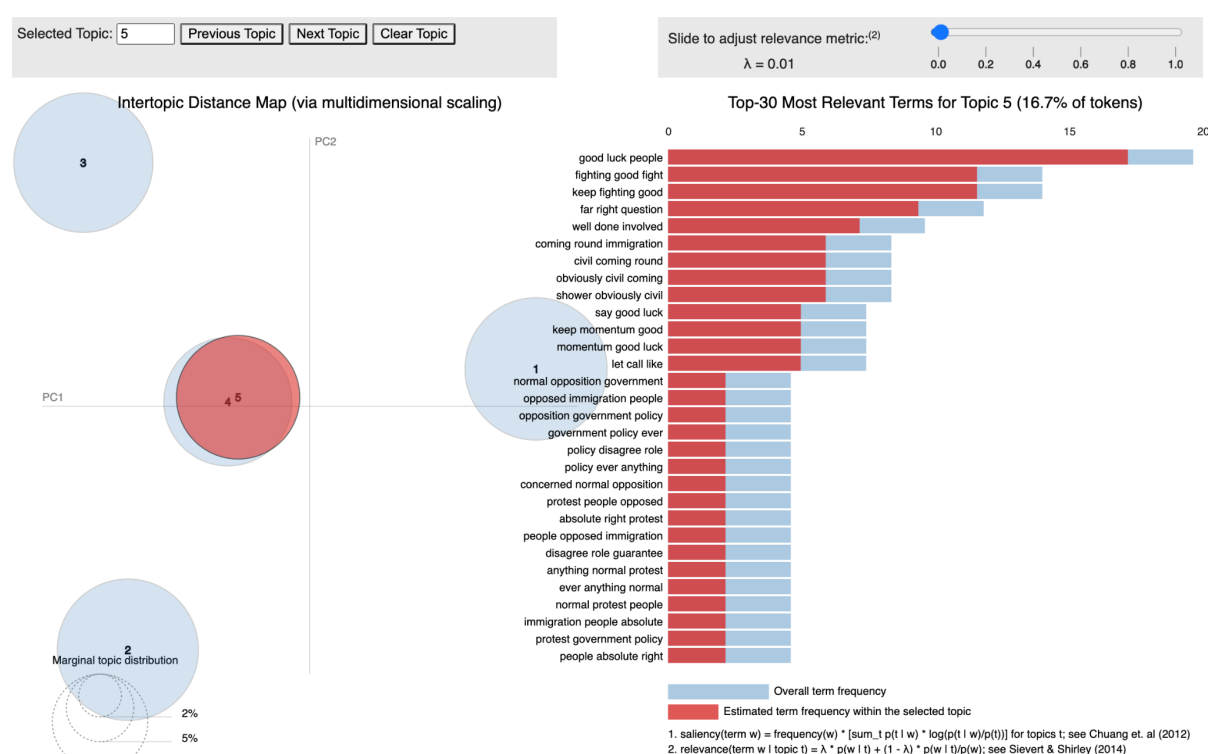

Figure 5: Topic 5 (civil unrest) word distribution

We also conducted a word frequency analysis and word cloud to visualise it using the bigram method to gain insights into the prevalent themes and sentiments expressed in the comments.

Phrase	Count	Phrase	Count
Well done	314	Good work	23

Far right	130	Far left	21
God Bless	48	Done everyone	20
Done people	40	Keep going	19
Fair play	33	Many people	19
Young men	30	Keep good	19
Good luck	28	Homeless people	19
Working Class	28	Well said	18
Enough enough	24	East Wall	17
Right wing	24	Great see	16

Table 1 20 most common phrases (processed as bigrams)

The analysis of word frequency reveals recurring phrases in the dataset, giving us a better understanding of the common topics and sentiments expressed in the comments. It can be seen in table 1 above, phrases like 'well done' (314 times), 'fair play' (33 times), 'god bless' (48 times), 'good luck' (28 times), and 'good work' (23 times) indicate frequent expressions of praise and recognition for the actions taken by the protesters.

Similarly, the phrases 'far right' (130 times), 'right wing' (24 times), and 'far left' (21 times) suggest active discussions and opinions about political ideologies, particularly those on the far-right spectrum. The analysis also uncovers discussions about specific groups, such as 'young men' (30 times), and references to the 'working class' (28 times).

It highlights expressions of praise, political discussions, conversations about socio-economic groups, and words of support and encouragement for anti-immigrant actions.

We can see the importance of these phrases as well within the word cloud in figure 6 below. First and foremost, these comments are referring to their people, country and government. The next largest words are those encouraging the commenters, "well done" showing largely along the bottom. This again reiterates the attitude that these commenters believe they are looking out for their people and their country.

Figure 6: Word cloud of 100 most frequent words displayed by size

Finally we ran a sentiment analysis on our dataset and the findings were not as expected. The Sentiment Polarity was 0.134, this is viewed on a scale from -1 to 1 with -1 being a negative sentiment, 0 is neutral and 1 is positive. As the polarity achieved from our data is 0.134, this is more neutral with a slight skew to positive. Given the frequency of the phrase "well done" we would expect a more positive sentiment however we can also see in figure 6 the frequency of words which may be more negative such as "stop", "homeless" and "racist" which may cause the polarity to be closer to a neutral sentiment. This analysis also provided how subjective the comments made are and is measured on a scale from 0 to 1, with 0 being completely objective or factual statements and 1 is more opinionated or subjective. Our dataset has a sentiment subjectivity of 0.525. This again shows the dataset to be mostly neutral, but leans slightly more to one side, in this case the subjective side.

Analysis

We have seen from the data above that there is a clear anti-immigrant point of view within the YouTube comments we have analyzed. This is compounded by the references within the topics to far right conspiracies, apparent fear of immigrant men and wanting to protect their community. It would appear that within the community created in these YouTube comment sections that an echochamber has been produced, reinforcing these far-right ideals over and over again with little opposition This is evident from the clear calls of "well done" which appear across every topic, is the most used bigram phrase and is clearly prominent in the word cloud.

From this analysis we can conclude that there is an increase in far right ideal and anti-immigrant sentiments within Ireland. All the videos from which our analysis took place are from Irish news sources and are about the protests in Ireland, the comments under these videos show an overwhelming support for the video content. These findings contribute to existing knowledge that the Irish government has an issue with fully supporting immigrants, which we can see through societal integration (Gilmartin & Dagg, 2021) or how the native Irish and immigrant populations are concerned with different social issues (Younus, et al., 2022).

These findings have a far reaching impact, starting with Ireland being a less welcoming, tolerant place for everyone. These findings may also have a political impact as it's clear from the comments being made that these people are awaiting the next election and hope to make a substantial change in government with their votes, one that supports their ideals.

Conclusions

Our main question in this report is whether the ideas expressed in the YouTube comments on videos about anti-immigrant protests in Ireland are aligned with the rise of far-right ideology. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the answer is yes. The comments frequently express support, reference far-right conspiracies, and convey a sense of threat to their communities, which reinforces anti-immigrant and far-right ideals. It is important to recognize that our analysis is based on YouTube comments and may not reflect broader sentiments. However, the prevalence of these views raises concerns about social cohesion and inclusion in Ireland.

To address these issues, policymakers should understand the underlying factors driving anti-immigrant sentiment and far-right ideologies. Efforts should be made to promote inclusivity, social cohesion, and a nuanced understanding of immigration challenges. This could involve supporting lower income areas, organizing integration workshops, and fostering constructive dialogue to dispel misinformation. For example, support from the government for some lower income areas where the anti-immigrant point of view is higher may mitigate some of the anti-immigrant sentiments as if these people do not feel they have enough resources or support for themselves, they are not as open to sharing their community. It could also be worth having integration workshops within communities to show these people that immigrants and asylum seekers are not looking to sap their community of resources, but just find a safe place to have a peaceful life.

Media outlets and social media platforms should also be mindful of the content they promote, ensuring responsible reporting and moderation. By encouraging informed and respectful discussions, we can mitigate the spread of far-right ideologies and cultivate a more tolerant society. In conclusion, addressing the rise of far-right sentiment in Ireland requires a comprehensive approach involving government policies, community engagement, and responsible media practices.

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