

## #REFUGEESWELCOME: IDENTITY DISCOURSES ON TWITTER DURING THE EUROPEAN 'REFUGEE CRISIS'

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The aim of this paper is to examine how Twitter was used as a forum of self-expression during the peak of the 'refugee crisis' in Europe at the beginning of September 2015. More than 900 tweets using the hashtag #refugeeswelcome were analyzed over a two-day time period, based on three main themes: the construction of national and European identity, reflections on the role and responsibility of a country or the European Union and the use of Twitter as a tool for social activism. The research shows rather positive sentiments among those using the analyzed hashtag and noteworthy willingness for activism. Both positive and critical opinions were observed concerning national identity and one's own nation, highlighting examples to follow from other countries as well. Despite this, European identity was not reflected on very frequently: tweeters were overwhelmingly critical towards European leaders and the European Union. At the same time humanitarian values, human rights and transnational identity became salient throughout the analysis. This paper studies a recent social phenomenon, through a 21st-century source of analysis, and it serves as a starting point for further research concerning identity discourses and activism on social media during the recent refugee crisis.

This paper aims to examine how Twitter was used during the height of Europe's "refugee crisis" in the autumn of 2015. Through the analysis of more than 900 tweets using the hashtag "#refugeeswelcome" on September 1 and 2, 2015, we explore how people in Europe reacted when the influx of refugees suddenly became very visible and tangible. We focus in particular on the construction of national and European identities and the use of Twitter as a tool for social activism. September 1 and 2, 2015, can be considered the peak of the refugee crisis that swept Europe during 2015. On September 1, Hungarian authorities closed off Keleti train station in Budapest for the thousands of refugees camping outside. Outrage soon grew as all trains bound for Western Europe were suspended (Nolan & Connolly, 2015). A day later, the dead body of the three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi was found on the shores of a Turkish beach (Smith, 2015).

Those and other closely related events caused a major uproar throughout Europe. It seemed the European Union and nation-states were incapable of and unwilling to handle the stream of refugees, causing people to sleep on the streets and babies to drown at sea. In the meantime, more welcoming voices could be heard. Particularly in Germany and Austria, people gathered under the slogan 'refugees welcome' to try and assist refugees on their troublesome journey to Western Europe.

The slogan also found strong resonance in social media, most notably on Twitter. #refugeeswelcome was to become one of the most influential hashtags of 2015, according to Twitter itself (“Most Influential, #YearOnTwitter”, 2015). It was used in various ways to gather support for the cause of refugees. The response was enormous. When Harry Potter author JK Rowling voiced her opinion using the hashtag, her tweet was retweeted more than 25.000 times (Rowling, 2015). In mid-September all football players of Germany’s first and second division carried patches with “We’re helping, #refugeeswelcome” to show their solidarity (AP News, 2015). Eventually even the US White House started to promote the hashtag in an effort to increase goodwill towards refugees (Pope, 2015).

This of course poses questions about the impact of social media on activism and humanitarian aid. “Hashtag activism” has been coined as the term that describes internet activism through the use of Twitter hashtags (Carr, 2012). As humanitarian aid organizations are slow to capitalize on social media (Cone, 2012), it seems it is up to grassroots movements to make use of the full potential of social media. The Huffington Post marked several advantages of hashtag activism: its broad audience, the possibility of fair and balanced news coverage, its platform for advocating against injustices and its international involvement and accessibility (Khan-Ibarra, 2014). Some critics argue that hashtag activism actually induces a form of ‘slacktivism’ whereby people passively support a cause without getting physically involved (Hodges, 2014).

However, it may be, the events that occurred in September of 2015 showed that there was a lot of grassroots activism to be found throughout Europe (Raptopoulos, 2015). We will analyze this willingness to help through focusing on the construction of European and national identities. Hereby we aim to contribute to the growing literature on constructions of European identity that has emerged in recent years (see for instance: Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009), and offer insight into the power of social media in shaping activism.

## Methodology

The analysis presented below is an exploratory research of a current global phenomena. The focus of the research is social media, but rather than looking at the effect it has on people or social actions, our main interest is how people reflect on the events of the refugee crisis within a surface of everyday self-expression (Shirky, 2011). The main question is how people relate to the events of the crisis and what the general sentiments are, not only toward the refugees, but towards the situation and the debate around the issue of the refugee crisis. We used Twitter for the analysis for two main reasons: first, it is easier to search for information thanks first and foremost to the hashtags—in contrast to Facebook, where closed groups were (or are) used by experts or volunteers discussing the matter of helping refugees—; second, while Facebook was used more frequently to ask for or offer help, Twitter is rather a forum for expressing sentiments and opinions in relation to the refugee crisis as well (Coyer, 2015). To have a narrower scope of analysis we looked at the hashtag “#refugeeswelcome” to see general views and attitudes of people. Another important aspect of why we chose this approach is that the hashtag was also used world-wide and became very popular in a very short period of time (Twitter, 2015).

From the large dataset of the posts using the hashtag #refugeeswelcome on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, we analyzed a sample of 932 tweets—526 from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 406 tweets from the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September. The sample was selected in line with the three main topics of analysis: 1) reflections of own national identity, the role, (the issue of) the responsibility of the country or nation in the situation; 2) reflections on European identity, the role, (the issue of) the responsibility of Europe in the crisis; 3) the presence of offering or asking for help within the tweets. The relevance of the first two topics lies in that the massive flow of refugees and migrants brought up a number of sentiments concerning national identity—not only nationalist sentiments but also non- or anti-nationalist feelings (it was and still is in most countries the cause of opposition of the right and left wing in political debate). It also raised the topics of European values, cultural heritage and identity to the forefront of discourses and debates. The question of responsibility and the role of Europe, the European Union or each nation was also a frequent topic of public debates (Vick, 2015). The third point was included because the question of help was the initial starting point of our research and—even if Twitter is used less for making direct contacts (with volunteers or refugees)—if it is present in any form, we wanted to look at what these forms of help are in this context.

For the analysis of #refugeeswelcome on Twitter on September 1-2, 2015, we propose the following hypotheses: 1) given the positive nature of the hashtag itself we expect that people using it have a positive attitude toward refugees; 2) we assume that people reflecting on the question of responsibility (either national or European), would be very critical toward the countries or governments which offer a more conservative approach toward refugees; 3) we expect tweets to be reflective of the events of the crisis, specifically the incidents happening on the day when subjects post on Twitter. Furthermore, we assume that many tweets from outside Hungary would express comments on the Hungarian events.<sup>1</sup>

## Analysis

The larger data set of posts consisted of many different themes which are not analyzed in the framework presented above. However, without mentioning them we cannot place our narrow analysis within the wider context of #refugeeswelcome on Twitter. Therefore, the topics and examples below show the recurring messages people posted out to the world.

The most frequent theme was about morality and humanity to take refugees in to different countries. These were based on human rights, questioning where the humanity is in people and stating that everyone deserves the right to live and be safe. The phrase “no human is illegal” also appeared many times, just as commonly as the very affectional sentence: “nobody puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.” (Twitter, 2015) The second theme was more personal, with two frequent type of posts: one put forward the idea of a

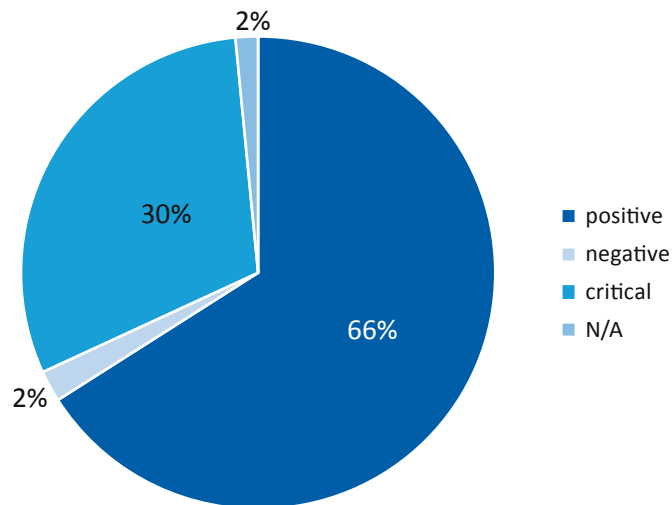
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<sup>1</sup> The analysis has its methodological limitations: the sample chosen might not be representative in numbers, but even with this amount of posts it is possible to identify patterns and trends. Although we cannot draw definitive conclusions, we can show that there are certain patterns present within the data that should not be neglected and which also require further examination.

reversed situation whereby one would have to find refuge in another country; the other includes personal stories of family or friends who used to be refugees. The third theme consisted of those tweets that expressed negative or critical views on accepting refugees. One of the more negative approaches was, for example: “we’ve already taken millions of immigrants”. The rather critical subjects were raising questions about what happens if refugees are let into the country.

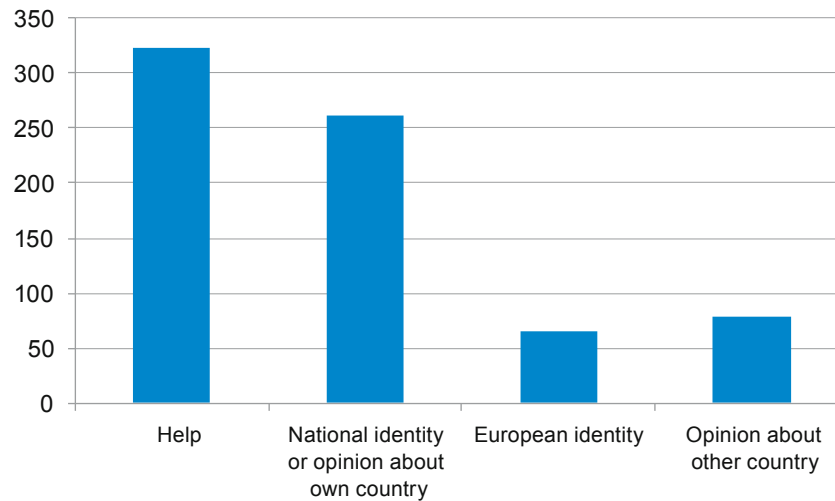
These themes already show the varying attitudes in this question. Throughout our analysis we expected to find more positive sentiments toward refugees, since the examined hashtag already reflects positivity. This was supported by the data: 60% of the tweets had a positive attitude, while 30% were critical, which means that they criticized the situation in any way—whether criticizing one’s government for not taking any action or criticizing the liberal viewpoint of letting refugees in the country. The results can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: General sentiments toward the refugees and the situation ( $N=932$ )



In Figure 2, we can see the frequency of each topic mentioned in tweets, and as it very clearly shows, some kind of help was included in the posts. Reflection on national identity was the next most frequent topic, followed by opinion on other countries (which is very closely related to the opinion about one’s own country). Last came those tweets related to European identity. In the next sections, we present our analysis of these categories.

Figure 2: Frequency of tweets dealing with each categories

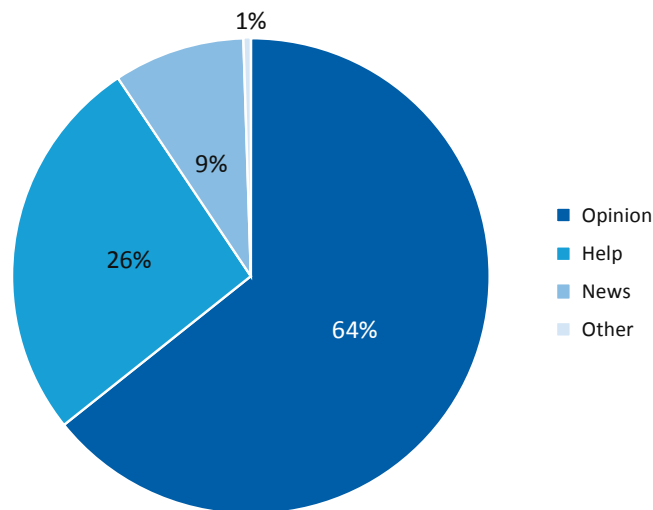


## Help

Although voluntary helpers communicated with each other mainly through Facebook (Coyer, 2015), it seems that Twitter saw its fair share of activism. One out of every four tweets analyzed had to do with individual people showing their willingness to engage positively in the refugee issue (see Figure 3). This means a significant proportion of the people using #refugeeswelcome, actually did it to rally support for the cause of refugees.

Given the fact that most refugees wanted to reach Germany from Hungary by train, three cities and their respective train stations came into the center of attention of everyone wanting to assist refugees in their journey: Budapest, Vienna and Munich. Especially the latter two were often mentioned on Twitter. #refugeeswelcome was often accompanied by #Vienna and #Westbahnhof or #Munich and #Hauptbahnhof or #Hbf. Another closely related hashtag was #trainofhope, which together with #refugeeswelcome came to symbolize the receptive responses in Austria and Germany.

Figure 3: Most frequent formats of tweets



In some cases, the hashtag was used directly to call for action and help refugees at the designated train stations. Information was spread about what kind of assistance was needed and when new trains would arrive. Very rarely people also offered their help directly through Twitter. Especially towards the end of the day, people used the medium to voice their satisfaction on the help delivered and to thank fellow volunteers. Furthermore, there were calls for gatherings and rallies in support of refugees in several cities around Europe; like Osnabruck, Ljubljana, London, Belfast, Birmingham, Essen, Edinburg and Stuttgart.

Sometimes the appeal for activism was rather general. This is where the concept of ‘slacktivism,’ as outlined in the introduction, appears. People were calling for help and assistance for refugees, but it was not clear how they actually were contributing. In other cases, users urged their own governments to be more supportive of the issue. This is particularly apparent in the case of the UK. On September 2, hours before the pictures of dead Aylan first appeared, British prime minister David Cameron stated: “taking more and more refugees is not an answer” (BBC News, 2015a).

After the shocking images of the boy on the Turkish beach reached the internet, Twitter users in the UK reacted fiercely. Blaming their government for a lack of empathy and benevolence towards refugees, a petition quickly spread, urging the UK government to accept more refugees. More than one out of three tweets related to helping was actually advocating the signing of this specific petition. The campaign seemed to have some success, as two days later Cameron announced the UK would accept “thousands” more Syrian refugees (BBC News, 2015b).

## National identity

28% of the tweets in the sample dealt with some aspect of national identity (see Figure 2). This included both positive and negative sentiments towards one's own nation, which highly depended on where the post originated. Germans and Austrians were generally proud of their country or nation and mentioned several positive events such as the demonstration in Austria or the “refugees welcome” signs on the German football games. Vienna and Munich were highlighted several times, either in hashtags or simply mentioned in the post. These sorts of positive examples were also mentioned in tweets from other countries, where it was a way to express criticism, or to show what example should be followed. Other mentioned good examples were Airbnb offering housing for refugees in Germany and Icelanders letting refugees staying in their homes. The latter was mentioned several times in tweets from the UK and Ireland. Within the UK, from England, the Scottish example was brought up as well, opposing Nicola Sturgeon to David Cameron—as good example to bad example.

In the United Kingdom, from where the vast majority of tweets were posted on September 2, the dominant attitude was very critical toward the country, the UK government and David Cameron himself. His public statements that day and the (low) number of refugees accepted brought out temper and emotion in a number of people: “I’m so ashamed to be British tonight”; “I’m embarrassed because of my PM”. But there were positive or proud posts as well: “Brit public is waking up. Finally feeling that not everyone is an inhumane, intolerant racist.” Another example is where someone posted that he is proud of the British people signing a petition so quickly (i.e., the petition mentioned above that was shared almost a hundred times out of the thousand in our sample). It is also important to mention that these tweets in many cases were calling for action. Action of the nation, everyday people or in most cases the government was addressed by: “Act now!” or “Step up!”.

One of our hypotheses was that we expected the tweets to reflect on the events in Hungary. In contrast with our expectation there were barely any reflections on the Hungarian incidents. Of the 932 tweets there were less than 10 mentioning Hungary. These few varied, since some were criticizing Hungary, a few were quite neutral (just sharing news), while there were positive examples as well—it was tweeted more than once that volunteers at Keleti welcomed refugee kids with cartoon screenings.

To summarize, most of the tweets concerning national identity were from the UK, Germany and Austria, and the clear pattern was that in the UK the posts were rather negative about the country or the nation, or sometimes just about the government, while in Germany and Austria the posts were more positive toward their actions, their cities and their nations. Good examples were tweeted from every country, not only from those where events took place, and many people called for action, addressing politicians or the whole nation.

## European identity and humanity

Although the European Union was and still is a much-debated topic within the refugee crisis, this seemed less apparent on Twitter. Less than one in every ten tweets voicing an opinion on the issue commented on Europe or the EU. Still, some general conclusions can be drawn from these statements.

First of all, with 66% of the comments on Europe being critical, people on Twitter seem more critical toward Europe than toward their own country. People accuse Europe and its leaders of inactivity, while thousands of volunteers are helping out at train stations. One commenter from Greece put it this way: “Do not forget: the governments of Europe rely on volunteers to take on their burden and make them look good.” According to many people, this lack of political action leads to violations of human rights and is against European values. Just as national governments were urged to take more action, these appeals were also voiced against Europe as a whole. This underlines the fact that people understood the influx of refugees as a European problem that should be sorted out collectively and not by individual states.

A similar proportion of tweets reflected not so much a European but a ‘humanitarian’ or ‘global’ identity. A call for a humanitarian approach to the refugee crisis was often heard. The hashtags #humanity and #humanrights popped up several times in support of this argument. An Austrian commenter voiced his satisfaction over what he saw at Vienna train station; “Faith in human race has just increased - Ein gutes Land”, thereby alluding to both his national and ‘human’ identity. Others stressed the fact that we are all human, refugee or not: “We belong to one another. We lose our humanity when we fail to help one another.”

## Conclusion

Although we acknowledge the limited scope of this research, some interesting and thought-provoking conclusions can be drawn. First of all, the hashtag #refugeeswelcome gathered mostly positive reflections on the refugee issue, voicing willingness to help and critical reflection on national and European government inaction. Although Twitter can hardly be considered the primary locus of activism and help-gathering during the refugee crisis, it turns out more than 25% of our sample actually included some sort of activism. #refugeeswelcome proved to be a useful way to gather information on helping and a good way to push campaigns advocating for more receptive refugee policies.

Second, it turns out the hashtag was often used to positively reflect on one’s own national and local identities. Especially in the case of Germany and Austria, users found (national) pride in their country helping refugees and this was reflected in a good amount of tweets about the positive German and Austrian examples of helping refugees. These examples were also widely shared outside the countries from which they originated. Especially in the UK, people used these examples to voice criticism against their own government’s lack of action.

Third, although reflections on European values and identity make up a rather small proportion of the total of tweets analyzed, it turns out commenters are considerably more critical toward Europe. People blame Europe for not taking action and for disowning its common values. Closely related, people think of themselves as part of a ‘humanity’ that spans borders and even continents. This transnational identity makes them highly critical of nationalistic and protectionist actions going against humanitarian values and human rights.

To conclude, we argue that #refugeeswelcome poses an interesting locus for reflections on identity and activism and therefore deserves further research. The limited scope of this paper can therefore be a starting point for further exploration in the field of identity discourses and activism on social media during the recent refugee crisis.

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