Iranian Twitter users' dissatisfaction with the presence of Afghans in Iran; Case study: The Hashtag "#Expel_Afghans_a_National_Demand"

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Article Info	Abstract
	Background: Afghans are the main group of migrants in Iran, and in recent years, their presence has been met with negative reactions from the Iranian public. For example, recently on Twitter, hashtags such as #Expel_Afghans_a_National_Demand (in Persian: #اخراج_افغانی_مطالبه_ملی) have been widely used by Iranian users. **Aims:** This study aims to examine Iranian users' perspectives on Afghans by analyzing tweets written with this hashtag about Afghans living in Iran. **Methodology:** Using thematic analysis, it investigates the negative views expressed by Iranian users. This analysis is based on Bennett's six-stage model of intercultural sensitivity. The extracted themes from these tweets include five main categories: dissatisfaction with the lifestyle and behaviors of Afghans living in Iran, financial-related dissatisfaction, nationalism-related dissatisfaction, xenophobia-related dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction due to internal factors. **Finding:** The dissatisfaction of Iranians toward Afghans aligns with the Defense stage of Bennett's model, as this stage is characterized by individuals distinguishing between themselves and others, perceiving their own culture as superior, and viewing other cultures as inferior. **Conclusion:** Based on the themes present in the tweets, it seems that some targeted actions can help reduce xenophobia and counter dominant narratives.

1. Introduction

Among those who have migrated to Iran, Afghans constitute the largest group. According to statistics, Iran is the primary migration destination for Afghan migrants. As the head of the National Migration Organization reported in April 2023, 55% of Afghan migrants reside in Iran (*Tasnim*, 2023). Additionally, according to figures provided by the president's special representative on Afghan affairs in February 2023, approximately six million Afghan migrants live in Iran (*Mashregh News*, 2023). This number surpasses all other foreign national groups, making it necessary to implement appropriate policies regarding them.

Given the high number of Afghan migrants in Iran, the implementation of proper policies undoubtedly requires the cooperation of Iranians, who are the primary owners and residents of the country. Therefore, if dissatisfaction regarding the presence of migrants exists, it may be necessary to revise the policies implemented or reconsider how media and information campaigns are conducted alongside policymaking.

One of the spaces where dissatisfaction with the presence of Afghans in Iran is evident in Twitter. A significant amount of content opposing Afghan migrants can be found on this platform, and dissatisfaction is sometimes expressed through personal narratives, with individuals tweeting about their negative experiences with Afghan migrants. While dissatisfaction with the presence of Afghans had occasionally been observed on Twitter before, the emergence of the hashtag #Expel_Afghans_a_National_Demand (in Persian: #اخراج_افغانی_مطالبه_ملی) and the subsequent surge in tweets opposing Afghan migrants have primarily occurred since 2022. Despite negative sentiments toward Afghans accounting for around 20% of related content in early 2023, by December 2023, this share had risen to over 50%. These tweets have continuously spread from X (Twitter) to other widely viewed platforms such as Telegram and Instagram, exposing large audiences to the prevailing sentiment of "Afghanophobia". Consequently, it seems unlikely that this phenomenon has occurred without organization and planning. As Hadian believes, perhaps the biggest sign of the organized nature of this matter is the hashtag #Expel_Afghans_a_National_Demand. Except for a few individuals, most members of this group created their Twitter accounts in 2021, 2022, and 2023. Among approximately 100 accounts engaged in spreading hatred against migrants and the regulation plan in cyberspace, there is no personal content—only hate speech. Additionally, there have been reports of briefing sessions being held for some Twitter users on this subject, although no verified users have yet joined this wave. On the other hand, some Iranian activists in the field of migration have been threatened and interrogated during this period. The only solution proposed by this group is the mass expulsion of all migrants, like Pakistan's approach (Hadian, 2023). Furthermore, based on the timing of these tweets, the rise of the Taliban government appears to have

intensified this wave of dissatisfaction, as many tweets associate Afghan migrants with the Taliban, reinforcing this perception.

Although Twitter cannot provide a fully accurate reflection of all segments of society, its impact on Iran's political and social discourse is significant. In some cases, Twitter functions as a narrative creator, influencing public opinion by launching campaigns, hashtags, and narratives, which other media platforms help disseminate among different groups of people. As a result, examining Twitter content related to Afghan migrants can provide valuable insights. For instance, the hashtag #Expel_Afghans_a_National_Demand has been widely used by various individuals, sparking heated debates in Persian-language Twitter. Studying these tweets can help identify the reasons behind Iranian users' dissatisfaction with Afghan migrants in Iran, offering guidance for policymakers and media professionals.

The main questions of this article are as follows:
- Why are Twitter users dissatisfied with the presence of Afghans?
- At which stage of Bennett's six stages of intercultural sensitivity do Iranian users currently stand?

2. Theoretical foundations and background
2.1. Migration in the modern era
Migration refers to the permanent or semi-permanent change of residence, typically involving crossing governmental borders. To classify someone as a migrant at the most basic level, one can use defined territorial units to distinguish between internal and international migration. International migration differs significantly from internal migration, presenting greater barriers for migrants. It involves issues such as claims of people vis-à-vis states, citizenship, integration into labor, educational, and housing markets, and cultural adaptation (Faist, 2000). Various theories categorize migration differently, reflecting the complexity of the topic. Furthermore, new issues, especially globalization-related ones, have significantly influenced both the quantity and quality of migration in the modern era.

It is unclear whether globalization has led to migration on this scale or if migration has accelerated globalization in terms of both quantity and quality. However, what is clear is that whereas migration was previously examined solely within the framework of national borders, globalization has necessitated a new perspective on this concept (Khajeh Nouri, 2021). For example, Afghan migrants, aware of the negative perceptions toward their compatriots in Iran via social media, may reconsider migrating to Iran.

2.2. Attitudes toward migrants
Milton J. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is a theoretical framework grounded in constructivist perception and communication theory. It posits that reality is constructed through perception, with more complex perceptual

categories leading to more nuanced experiences of intercultural differences. Specifically, DMIS suggests that people construct boundaries between "self" and "other", shaping their intercultural experiences. The most ethnocentric construct is denial, where people possess vague, undifferentiated categories of "others" from different cultural backgrounds. At the other continuum, integration implies that complex self/other categories are incorporated into one's personal identity and ethical decision-making in multicultural relationships. The DMIS model, originally documented observations of individuals becoming more competent intercultural communicators in academic and corporate settings. These observations were intended to identify the next steps in intercultural training programs, helping individuals progress through different stages (The term "stage" referred to sequential positions along a continuum, not discrete conditions.) (Bennett, 2017).

DMIS stages interpret both the perceptual structures underlying individuals' perceptions of cultural differences and specific "issues" associated with these stages. The names of the stages reflect these issues, while the descriptions of each stage pertain to their perceptual structures.

The first three stages— Denial, Defense, and Minimization— are ethnocentric, meaning they involve experiencing one's own culture as more central to reality. The last three stages— Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration— are ethnorelative, representing experiences of all cultures as alternate ways of organizing reality.

Movement through the stages is not inevitable; rather, it depends on an individual's need for greater intercultural competence outside their primary social environment. Once this need arises, more complex perceptual structures develop, enabling individuals to navigate cultural differences more effectively (Bennett, 2017). Here's a summary of Bennett's stages:

a) Denial
The default condition in the DMIS is denial of cultural difference— failing to perceive the existence or relevance of culturally distinct others. The perceptual categories for "otherness" are not sufficiently refined to differentiate among different types of people, who may vaguely be considered as "foreigners" or "minorities", or may not be recognized at all. Existing constructs for understanding one's own culture are far more complex than those available for other cultures, so individuals experience themselves as "more real" than others, to the extent that others may not even appear fully human. People show little interest in intercultural communication or may even dismiss it with hostility.

In organizations, denial manifests as the absence of structures (policies and procedures) recognizing and addressing cultural diversity. An experience of denial occurs when individuals who prefer stability

(sameness) are forced into awareness of others (difference) due to external circumstances. This may happen, for example, when a significant number of refugees or migrants enter a community, or when people must confront cultural differences in an evolving workforce or globalized organization. Initially, the sameness pole is exaggerated, while the difference pole is suppressed. The self and compatriots are seen as complex in comparison to the simplicity of "others".

Conflict resolution involves beginning to perceive others in more specific and complex ways. On a personal level, this occurs when others are individualized through media exposure or direct contact. Organizationally, overcoming denial happens when differences are acknowledged through practices such as multilingual forms or visible diversity in corporate publications (Bennett, 2017).

b) Defense

Once denial is addressed, individuals may experience a defense against cultural differences. This cognitive structure creates a dualistic categorization of "us vs. them", where others are perceived more fully than in denial but still in highly stereotyped ways. People at this stage tend to criticize other cultures and attribute societal problems to cultural differences. They experience "us" as superior and "them" as inferior.

A variation of defense is reverse defense, in which individuals invert the poles, seeing "them" as superior and "us" as inferior. People in this form tend to romanticize or exoticize another culture while expressing a more complex critique of their own. In international contexts, informal terms like "becoming native" describe this inversion. Domestically, the term "false ally" may refer to a member of the dominant culture engaging in reverse defense by adopting a presumed stance of advocacy for the "oppressed" without fully understanding their lived experience.

Organizations demonstrate defense through rhetoric that glorifies national cultural roots or existing corporate culture. Sometimes, defense manifests in simplistic support of non-dominant groups based on stereotypes; for example, organizing shopping trips for presumed wives of executives at conferences, even though: a) Not all spouses may be women, and b) Even if they are women, they may not conform to the stereotype or might find it inappropriate.

Conflict arises when "us" and "them" are forced into contact. Increased visibility and exaggerated stereotypes of "others" generate a sense of threat, reinforcing exclusivity, membership restrictions, and separation strategies. When unavoidable contact occurs, power differences (privilege or oppression) may become focal points supporting polarized or reverse defensive experiences.

Conversely, resolving defense involves focusing on commonalities— shared humanity, mutual values, and interdependence. In organizations, defense is often mitigated through team-building exercises emphasizing interdependence, reframing

differences as intra-group diversity of personality and style (Bennett, 2017).

c) Minimization

The "us vs. them" distinction enables movement toward minimizing cultural differences. As the term suggests, the cultural differences defined in the Defense stage are now downplayed in favor of highlighting similarities between oneself and others. These perceived similarities are based on familiar elements of one's cultural worldview. Individuals assume that others share their experiences or that some core values and beliefs transcend cultural boundaries and apply to everyone, whether they recognize them or not.

Emphasizing cross-cultural similarities fosters "tolerance", where superficial cultural differences are seen as variations within common global human themes. However, minimizing cultural differences obscures deeper intercultural complexities for both individuals and organizations.

At the organizational level, entities tend to exaggerate the benefits of impartial equal-opportunity policies**,** concealing the ongoing privilege of dominant cultures. Facing deeper cultural differences may cause individuals to revert to the ethnocentric Defense stage. The core challenge of minimization is the desire to impose sameness within a broader global framework, resisting the genuine presence of cultural distinctions.

This means that the more individuals seek connections with others based on shared values, the more likely they are to encounter substantial cultural differences. A similar tension arises in organizations, where excessive emphasis on "uniformity" leads to forced homogeneity, prompting structural decentralization and a renewed focus on diversity, sometimes resulting in division.

In both individual and organizational contexts, resolution occurs when similarities and differences, unity and diversity, are understood dialectically— assuming similarity enables understanding differences, and unity provides the foundation for appreciating diversity (Bennett, 2017).

d) Acceptance

Transitioning out of ethnocentric minimization enables individuals to organize cultural differences within categories as complex as their cultural frameworks. In other words, people develop awareness of themselves and others in equally complex yet distinct cultural contexts.

Acceptance of cultural differences does not imply agreement— a cultural difference may be negatively evaluated— but this evaluation is not ethnocentric, meaning it is not automatically based on deviation from one's cultural perspective.

Just as a bibliophile aims to finish a novel, individuals in Acceptance become curious about cultures and cultural differences. However, their limited knowledge and nascent perceptual flexibility may not yet enable them to adapt behavior fluidly across cultural contexts.

At the organizational level, organizations in this stage express commitment to "diversity and inclusion", yet have not fully integrated intercultural sensitivity as a criterion for global or multicultural leadership.

The core challenge of Acceptance is reconciling cultural relativism with ethical considerations. People seek to respect other cultures, sometimes adopting an overly simplistic and paralyzing stance like "It's neither good nor bad, just different". However, all behaviors require judgment— even choosing inaction is a form of decision-making.

The key is to develop ethical principles that do not stem from ethnocentric superiority (Defense) nor forced universalism (Minimization) (Bennett, 2017).

e) Adaptation

Resolving the ethical dilemma enables movement toward cultural Adaptation. The perceptual mechanism for adaptation is perspective-taking or empathy.

This involves a shift in perception, theoretically triggered by neurological executive functions, allowing individuals to "experience the world as if" they were part of another culture. This imagined participation creates a sense of cultural alignment, fostering authentic behavior within the alternative cultural context.

The most advanced form of this shift is biculturalism, which parallels bilingualism. In both cases, the result is the ability to competently execute culturally appropriate behaviors suited to different contexts.

At the organizational level, organizations in this stage implement flexible policies designed to operate effectively across diverse cultural settings without imposing unjust cultural dominance.

The challenge of Adaptation revolves around authenticity. If individuals navigate multiple cultural contexts, where does their true identity reside?

Resolution comes by expanding the definition of identity, embracing a dynamic framework that incorporates a broader range of cultural experiences.

At an organizational level, Adaptation embodies the essence of inclusion, integrating both global and domestic diversity into organizational processes (Bennett, 2017).

f) Integration

Resolving the authenticity dilemma enables the sustained integration of cultural differences in communication.

In this integrated state, communication transitions from intra-cultural modes to inter-cultural modes, facilitating meta-harmonization of meaning and action— the defining aspect of intercultural communication.

At the personal level, Integration is experienced as a developmental

intercultural space, where one's self-awareness expands to include movement within and outside various cultural worldviews.

This intercultural fluidity enables building cultural bridges and conducting advanced intercultural mediation.

At the organizational level, organizations in the Integration stage foster "third culture" environments**,** where multicultural workgroups embrace mutual inclusion as a driving force. The expectation is that third-culture solutions create added value (Bennett, 2017).

2.3. Background

Several studies are related to policy-making. One significant issue, often overlooked, is the ethnic diversity within Afghanistan, meaning that migrants cannot be treated uniformly. For instance, a study on residents of Gholshahr settlement in Mashhad found that Shia and Hazara respondents, while completing their questionnaires, expressed deep concerns regarding hostility from certain Afghan ethnic groups. The researchers argue that religion and ethnicity, alongside gender, education level, and previous residence, should be the five key factors in shaping Iran's migration policies toward Afghan migrants. Additionally, they emphasize that the Islamic Republic should not enforce punitive or coercive policies, though incentivizing voluntary return is acceptable. The resettlement of Afghan migrants in third-party host countries is also suggested as a viable policy approach for *Iran* (Alibabayi & Jamshidiha, 2002).

Regarding migration-related policies, one study examined the lived experiences of Afghan students residing in Iran during the COVID-19 crisis. It found that the most significant positive shift brought by the pandemic was the visibility of migrants in public discourse and policymaking, which partially facilitated their structural integration. In effect, the COVID-19 crisis strengthened the concept of shared destiny, forcing policymakers to recognize that all members of society are interconnected, and neglecting a portion of the population poses national risks. As a result, by making millions of migrants visible, the process of structural integration was accelerated, albeit in a limited and selective manner (Saeedi, 2020).

Ahmadi-Mohedd's study on the demographic, economic, and social characteristics of foreign migrants, with a particular focus on Afghans in Iran, asserts that the majority of foreign migrants entered illegally, with only about 1% holding official permits. Furthermore, nearly half of foreign migrants do not intend to return to Afghanistan, posing challenges for repatriation policies. Overall, foreign migrants, due to low education levels, lack of specialized skills, and irregular entry patterns, are not beneficial for Iran's economy. The country primarily accepted Afghan migrants on humanitarian grounds and due to religious *commonalities* (Ahmadi-Mohedd, 2003).

A crucial point regarding employment distribution is that Afghans

are no longer confined to construction work or jobs perceived as undesirable by Iranians. Instead, Afghan workers are now present in various industries, and their right to education will likely lead to expanded employment opportunities in the future.

In another study on factors influencing Afghan migration to Iran**,** Janzadeh states that Afghans in Iran have greater employment access compared to Pakistan. The second generation of Afghan migrants has achieved notable progress in both education and occupational specialization. However, illegal migration into Iran remains persistent. Health-related concerns among Afghan migrants, such as potential disease outbreaks, are highlighted, as undocumented migrants evade health regulations, making disease containment difficult. The study suggests Iran should focus on rebuilding Afghanistan, implementing unified migration policies, ensuring oversight, and conducting research-driven decision-making to better manage Afghan migration**.** Some critics, citing Iran's 14% unemployment rate, argue that continued Afghan migration may not align with national interests, with long-term consequences expected to become more evident. Additionally, Iranian employers who hire Afghan workers often violate labor laws to maximize profits (Janzadeh, 2021).

A study on Afghan women migrants in Tehran explores integration pathways, identifying ethnicity, education level, and previous residence as key determinants. Women with better educational and occupational conditions demonstrate higher integration levels in Iranian society. Educated Afghan women integrate more successfully compared to housewives, while discriminatory experiences in education and urban settings hinder integration for others. Several legal barriers, such as restrictions on higher education, limited access to social insurance, economic constraints, and lack of formal employment opportunities, act as major obstacles preventing Afghan migrants from fully integrating (Alaeddini & Rahimi, 2023).

Another study examines the presence and integration of Afghan migrants in the Herandi neighborhood, Tehran. Since the late 1970s, this area has become a preferred settlement due to affordable housing, job opportunities, and NGO support. Most Afghan residents are second or third generation, yet many lack legal residency documents. While they have gradually assimilated into Tehran's culture, traditional patriarchal norms persist, negatively impacting women's opportunities. Social networks among Afghan migrants remain mostly kinship-based, with little group solidarity beyond familial ties. Despite high ethnic diversity, Afghan migrants are developing a collective identity, potentially delaying their sense of local belonging. At the time of the study, 16 NGOs actively provided support in Herandi—a significant number compared to other Tehran neighborhoods (Alaeddini & Mirzaei, 2018).

Several studies explore the social distance between Afghan migrants and Iranian society. Zandi Navgaran et al. investigate generational

differences in interpreting social separation and the mechanisms shaping this divide. Findings highlight seven key dimensions influencing Afghan migrants' social distance: Institutional segregation, Media-driven distancing, Emotional separation, Limited aspirations, Problematic sense of belonging, Preference for intra-network interactions, and international marriages as both challenge and opportunity. The study identifies "mutual boundary-making" as a core theme, arguing that social separation is constructed through institutional, structural, and symbolic processes, leading to two-way boundary reinforcement within Afghan migrant communities (Zandi Navgaran et al., 2022).

A survey of 100 Afghan households in Gholshahr, Mashhad, finds that migrants receive most financial and emotional support from kinship networks. Informal social networks facilitate decision-making, economic assistance, and community engagement. While 19% of Iranians participate in Afghan social networks, 42% of Afghan migrants reside in Gholshahr, demonstrating high residential stability (24 years). Additionally, 90% of Afghan social connections are concentrated in this area, fostering cultural preservation while reinforcing spatial segregation between migrants and Iranian society (Youseofi et al., 2013).

A study on Afghan students in Shiraz examines factors influencing adaptation. Survey results indicate that discrimination, satisfaction, sense of belonging, host society acceptance, parental emphasis on Afghan culture, national identity, and maternal birthplace all play significant roles in student integration. The study suggests that reducing discrimination in schools, implementing cultural awareness programs, and increasing interactions with non-migrant groups can enhance adaptation (Khosravi et al., 2019).

The application of intercultural sensitivity theory in the analysis of social media has also been explored. For instance, Zhang has done research on Cross-Cultural Adaptation. Through a content analysis, this study investigates cross-cultural adaptation as reflected in online interactions. It specifically examines two Chinese digital platforms, Mitbbs and Wenxuecity, both catering to overseas Chinese communities. The extent of cultural adaptation is assessed by analyzing the proportion of U.S.-related topics in the "living abroad" sections of these platforms, alongside the precise levels of intercultural sensitivity, as outlined in Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Findings indicate that Wenxuecity exhibits a broader influence on intercultural sensitivity compared to Mitbbs (Zhang, 2025).

This study builds upon prior research on Afghan migrants and applies Bennett's Intercultural Sensitivity Theory to analyze Iranian Twitter discourse regarding calls for the expulsion of Afghan migrants. By examining direct expressions within Iranian tweets, this research aims to closely engage with public narratives to uncover the root causes behind dissatisfaction with Afghan presence in Iran.

3. Methods

To study the approaches of Iranian Twitter users toward Afghan migrants residing in Iran, several tweets using the hashtag #Expel_Afghans_a_National_Demand were analyzed. A thematic analysis was conducted, and after examining the themes, major patterns within these tweets were identified. Thematic analysis is a widely applicable qualitative research technique used to identify patterns within qualitative data (Abedi Jafari et al., 2011).

It can be stated that this method is not merely another qualitative method, but rather a process that can be utilized alongside most, if not all, qualitative research methods. This method serves as a process for encoding qualitative information, requiring an explicit code for classification. A theme is a pattern identified within data, which at a minimum level describes and organizes observations, while at a maximum level interprets aspects of a phenomenon. Themes may initially emerge inductively from raw data or may be derived deductively from existing theories and prior research (Boyatzis, 1998: 4).

In this study, themes were generated inductively from raw data, but since Bennett's theory serves as the foundation, the extracted themes were analyzed in alignment with this theoretical framework.

To establish a clearer definition of a theme, specific guidelines can be applied.

First, identifying themes is never merely about finding elements within the data, akin to discovering a fossil embedded in a rock. Researchers are always engaged in selection, deciding what to include, what to exclude, and how to interpret participants' statements.

Second, the term "theme" implies a degree of recurrence— a topic mentioned only once, even if strongly articulated, should not be considered a theme, though it may still hold relevance in the analysis. Typically, recurrence refers to two or more instances (such as interviews), yet it may sometimes be valuable to recognize unique themes tied to specific cases.

Third, themes must be distinct from each other. Although some degree of overlap is inevitable, if boundaries between identified themes become too blurred, clarity in interpretation diminishes, making it difficult for readers to grasp analytical distinctions.

Based on these considerations, King and colleagues propose the following definition of a theme in thematic analysis: "Themes are recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question" (King et al., 2019).

In this study, we sought to identify themes based on these guidelines. Another crucial point is that themes can be categorized into higher-order (main) themes and lower-order (sub) themes. In hierarchical coding, clusters of similar codes are grouped to form broader, high-level codes. This type of coding allows researchers to analyze texts across different levels of specificity.

Higher-order codes provide a general overview of the text's direction, whereas lower-order codes facilitate more precise distinctions both within and across cases. The number of coding levels should remain practical, as excessive levels can hinder clarity in data organization and interpretation (King, 2004: 258).

In this study, we adopted this approach and identified both higher-order and lower-order themes.

The tweets analyzed in this study were selected using Twitter's (X) search function. For sampling purposes, only tweets with over 2,000 views were included. Using a purposeful sampling method, tweets were chosen, and after extracting both major and sub-themes, the study's findings were derived from them. The data search took place on May 30, 2024, during which relevant keywords, such as "Afghan expulsion", were searched on Twitter. Lots of tweets were found, so the threshold of 2,000 views was chosen as a selection criterion to ensure that the analyzed tweets originated from influential accounts actively participating in the campaign. Considering a minimum number of likes, such as 1,000, would have significantly reduced the dataset of influential tweets. Additionally, searching solely by the hashtag resulted in a high volume of non-impactful tweets. Thus, keyword-based search was employed to refine the selection. A total of 69 tweets with over 2,000 views that had used the hashtag #AfghanExpulsionNationalDemand or similar ones in some cases (like#AfghanExpulsion) were finally chosen and analyzed. To ensure representative sampling, efforts were made to select tweets from a variety of accounts, and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Table 1. Subthemes and sample tweet codes

Main theme (Higher order)	Subtheme (Lower order)	Tweet codes
Dissatisfaction with the lifestyle and behaviors of Afghans living in Iran	General dissatisfaction with the Afghan lifestyle and behavior	• Parasitic living • Playing the victim and avoiding medical expenses • Dissatisfaction with the high number of children • Complaint about Afghan children harassing a kitten • Labeling Afghans as "infertile" (چراغ‌کور in Persian) (a historical accusation tied to clandestine mourning ceremonies for Imam Hussein and now used by Iranian X users)

Main theme (Higher order)	Subtheme (Lower order)	Tweet codes
	Dissatisfaction regarding the Afghans' behavior toward the Iranians	• Complaints about Afghan insults and unethical behavior, especially visible online • Dissatisfaction that Afghans are entering professions like photography instead of just manual labor • Claiming that Afghans use the term "racism" for manipulation and gaining advantages from Iranians • Complaints about Afghan ingratitude, such as a statement by an Afghan girl dismissing Iranian values over a Kabul restaurant • Complaints that Afghans have forgotten they are guests in Iran • Criticism of Afghan narratives, such as exaggerating struggles upon entering Iran while claiming they were teachers back home
	Dissatisfaction regarding the Politica behaviors of Afghans	• Complaints about Afghan political views aligning with Palestine or the Islamic Republic • Linking Afghans to policies like the hijab Law • Discontent with Afghans photographing unveiled women
Financial-related dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction related to begging	• Afghan child beggars reportedly earn five million tomans a day • Afghan children allegedly earn much more than Iranian workers through begging
	General Financial Dissatisfaction	• Claim that Afghans are responsible for rising housing prices and rent • Afghans accused of consuming Iran's subsidies
Nationalism-related dissatisfaction	Broad Dissatisfaction related to nationalism	• Calls to expel Afghans for protecting Iran's identity • Iran's reputation among foreign tourists • Expulsion of Afghans for the future of Iranian children • Concerns about national integrity, identity, and culture • Complaints about demographic changes in Tehran, Kerman, Isfahan, Shiraz, Rafsanjan, and Mashhad • Indirect dissatisfaction expressed by praising border guards preventing Afghan entry
	Dissatisfaction about ownership and Afghan claims on Iran	• Complaints that Iranian emigration is high, while Afghans remain • Anger at an Afghan suggesting establishing an Afghan province within Iran

Main theme (Higher order)	Subtheme (Lower order)	Tweet codes
		• Statements that Iran has been "sold" • Discontent with Afghan opinions on Iran's presidential elections • Complaint about an Afghan comment claiming "Iran belongs to Afghans" • Comparing Iran's situation to Palestine • Concern that Afghans claim Iran as their rightful land • Fear following an Afghan's claim that "we are Taliban, and we will conquer Isfahan" • Complaints that cultural symbols like Zoroaster and Avicenna are being appropriated • Claim that Afghans have occupied Iran • Allegations that Afghans have taken over two million Iranian homes and ten million jobs
Xenophobia-related dissatisfaction	General xenophobia or broad negative associations	• Accusing Afghans of hostility toward Iran and Iranians • Comparing resistance against the Afghans to the war • Associating Afghans with the Mongol conquests • Claiming Afghans are worse than ISIS • Labeling Afghans as untrustworthy • Calling Afghans "Zionists" (based on their claims about Iran belonging to them) • Depicting Afghans as primitive • Characterizing Afghans as invaders and aggressors • Describing Afghans as inherently corrupt
	Xenophobia-related Dissatisfaction linked to crimes committed (or alleged to have been committed)	• Linking the murder of a family in Sirjan to an Afghan worker • Listing crimes committed by Afghans • Stating that Afghans only steal in Iran • Allegations of Afghans sexually assaulting Iranian women • Mentioning violent crime incidents involving Afghans in Mashhad • Citing murder cases attributed to Afghans • Reference to human trafficking and forced marriages in Afghanistan • Complaints about authorities providing Afghans with residency despite criminal actions • Accusations of Afghan men abducting Iranian women
	Xenophobia-	• Claiming the Afghan ethnic group

Main theme (Higher order)	Subtheme (Lower order)	Tweet codes
	related Dissatisfaction linked to Afghans' beliefs	"Oughan" sees Shia Muslims and Iranians as apostates • Mentioning an Afghan insulting Iran and its martyrs • Alleging that Afghans do not care about Shia causes, as they did not fight the anti-Shia Taliban
	Xenophobia-related Dissatisfaction linked to potential threats they may pose	• The possibility of an Afghan uprising and control over the city • Concern about Taliban operatives entering Iran • Risk posed by Afghans to the life, financial security, and honor (ناموس in Persian) of the Iranian nation • Concern about Taliban infiltration among Afghans who have entered Iran without resistance • Statement that if in the future half of Afghans take up arms against Iranians, repelling them will be costly • Xenophobia in response to Afghan accounts threatening to take over Iran's future • Public health is at risk due to an Iranian employer's greed (hiring Afghan workers in the food court of a shopping mall in Tehran) • Lack of public safety, especially for Iranian women, for example, in metro carriages • Concern about sexual assaults on children and the honor of the people • Statement that Afghanistan is safe and migration to Iran is not due to insecurity, but rather to settle in Iran and turn it into Western Afghanistan
Dissatisfaction due to internal factors	Dissatisfaction of officials and organizations	• Dissatisfaction with the Immigration Organization and accusations of espionage • Dissatisfaction with the establishment of the National Migration Organization and considering it illegal • Dissatisfaction with the performance of charities assisting Afghans with permits from the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation[1] • Dissatisfaction with Red Crescent aid sent to Afghan flood victims, arguing that they insult Iranians • Mentioning organized betrayal by

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1. Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, established post-revolution in Iran, aids the needy through Islamic principles and empowerment programs.

Main theme (Higher order)	Subtheme (Lower order)	Tweet codes
		officials and religiously motivated administrators • Explicitly calling officials traitors • Dissatisfaction with the Minister of Interior, accusing him of lacking patriotism
	Dissatisfaction with political decisions or lack of oversight by authorities	• Dissatisfaction with unchecked migration policies ("The Islamic Republic indiscriminately brings Afghans into the country without any oversight.") • Complaints about the exemption of Afghans from taxes: "We pay taxes, but the metro is for Afghans." • Expressing dissatisfaction through support for a potential presidential candidate who promises to "throw Afghans back to their country." • Complaints about the use of Afghan nationals for electoral campaigns. • Criticism of officials residing in areas without an Afghan presence. • Complaints about open-border policies: "Border guards risk their lives to stop Afghan smugglers from entering." • Dissatisfaction with granting residency to Afghans • Dissatisfaction with free vocational training for Afghans, labeling it as a betrayal • Accusing the government of being anti-Iran due to its policies regarding Afghanistan • Dissatisfaction with Afghans not paying taxes and additional fees • Dissatisfaction with Afghans easily conducting their affairs using Iranian IDs and passports • Dissatisfaction with Afghans occupying professions such as running unlicensed hair salons • Linking the influx of Afghans into Iran to hardline officials.
	Dissatisfaction and criticism of fellow Iranians	• Calling smugglers transporting Afghans "traitors." • Complaints about news articles using "foreign nationals" instead of explicitly mentioning Afghans. • Dissatisfaction with discrimination between Iranians and Afghans in a mobile phone repair class. • Complaints about the deteriorating state of the country and smugglers

Main theme (Higher order)	Subtheme (Lower order)	Tweet codes
		advertising migration services online. • Dissatisfaction that an entire workforce in one organization consists of Afghans.

4. Findings

Various topics concerning Afghan migrants residing in Iran have been discussed in tweets. Generally, dissatisfaction with the presence of Afghans is noticeable, with multiple reasons contributing to this sentiment. In the thematic analysis of these tweets, the expressions of dissatisfaction were examined, leading to the identification of five major themes: dissatisfaction with the lifestyle and behaviors of Afghans living in Iran, financial-related dissatisfaction, nationalism-related dissatisfaction, xenophobia-related dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction due to internal factors. Subthemes and sample tweet codes have been categorized under these identified themes.

4.1. Dissatisfaction with the lifestyle and behaviors of Afghans living in Iran

This theme includes three sub-themes: General dissatisfaction with Afghan lifestyle and behavior, Dissatisfaction regarding Afghans' behavior toward Iranians and Dissatisfaction regarding Political behaviors of Afghans.

In tweets related to dissatisfaction with Afghan lifestyles and behavior in general, tweet authors express dissatisfaction with how Afghans live, for example, their high number of children, even though this issue is not directly related to Iranians. In some cases, Afghans are accused of immorality, such as the "Cheragh-Koor" accusation (associating Afghans with prostitution), which supposedly originated when Hazaras secretly mourned Imam Hussein (AS) and has since been reiterated by Iranian users. Additionally, even witnessing a single mistake, such as an Afghan child mistreating a kitten, has led to demands for their expulsion, as seen in tweets using the hashtag #ExpelAfghans.

Tweets related to the second sub-theme— Dissatisfaction regarding Afghans' behavior toward Iranians— include instances of Afghans being perceived as ungrateful. For example, one user expresses outrage over an Afghan girl saying that all of Iran is not worth a single Kabul restaurant, leading to demands for Afghan expulsion as a national demand.

The third sub-theme— Dissatisfaction regarding Political behaviors of Afghans—includes complaints about Afghans aligning with Iran's morality police or supporting the Islamic Republic. These criticisms often come from accounts opposing these policies.

4.2. Financial-related dissatisfaction

Sub-themes include Dissatisfactions related to begging and General financial Dissatisfaction:

Some tweets criticize Afghan beggars, while others reference broader financial issues, such as rising property prices and rental costs attributed to the Afghan presence.

4.3. Nationalism-related dissatisfaction

Sub-themes are Broad Dissatisfaction related to nationalism and Dissatisfaction about ownership and Afghan claims on Iran.

Tweets in the Broad Dissatisfaction related to nationalism category discuss preserving Iran's integrity, maintaining Iran's reputation among foreign tourists, and demographic changes in cities like Tehran, Kerman, Isfahan, Shiraz, Rafsanjan, and Mashhad.

Tweets related to Dissatisfaction about ownership and Afghan claims on Iran express outrage over an Afghan user suggesting that a province should be designated for Afghans in Iran, declarations that Iran has been "sold off," dissatisfaction with Afghan opinions on Iran's presidential elections, and frustration with Afghan users commenting on Instagram that "Iran belongs to Afghans."

This territorial claim may also extend to cultural appropriation, such as tweets expressing anger over Afghans claiming Zoroastrianism, the Kavyani flag, and Avicenna as part of Hazara heritage. Another noteworthy aspect is that, rather than expressing direct dissatisfaction, some tweets glorify border guards preventing Afghan entry, reinforcing nationalist sentiments.

4.4. Xenophobia-related dissatisfaction

Some tweets frame Afghans as enemies of Iran and Iranians. Sub-themes include General xenophobia or broad negative associations, Xenophobia-related Dissatisfaction linked to crimes committed (or alleged to have been committed), Xenophobia-related Dissatisfaction linked to Afghans' beliefs, and Xenophobia-related Dissatisfaction linked to potential threats they may pose.

Examples of general xenophobia include likening Afghans to Genghis Khan and statements that their "nature is corrupt." One user calls Afghans "Zionists", claiming: "An Afghan Hazara, claiming to be Shia, says that just as Israel reclaimed its ancestral land, Iran belongs to Afghans—especially the Hazaras. Now you keep insisting they are Shia and talk about your imaginary unity, but all Afghans are Zionists. #Expel_Afghans_a_National_Demand#second_palestine"

Tweets accusing Afghans of crimes include allegations such as the murder of a family in Sirjan by an Afghan worker or violent incidents involving Afghan criminals in Mashhad. One user even claims that Afghan individuals killed an Iranian soldier in Bushehr, demanding their expulsion.

Another tweet asserts that Afghans consider Shiites and Iranians

apostates, reinforcing fear of their beliefs. Xenophobic concerns about potential threats emerge in tweets speculating that Afghans could rise and take control of Iranian cities or expressing worries about Taliban agents entering Iran.

Despite the diversity among Afghan migrants, who hold different religious and ideological views, many tweets generalize Taliban actions to all Afghans. This perception has been reinforced by Afghan accounts allegedly confirming their ties to the Taliban (e.g., stating that "We are the Taliban and will conquer Isfahan"). Consequently, users treat this claim as proof and overlook the diversity among migrants.

Xenophobia also stems from threats by Afghan accounts, such as one user tweeting: "Why struggle against the inevitable? The future of Iran belongs to Afghans, especially Hazaras—the true heirs of Balkh, Bamyan, and Sistan's civilization. Whether you like it or not, this cultural domain will be revived, and powerful Turkic tribes will rule once more. The Shahnameh was written for Balkh and Bamyan, so our resurgence is only natural."

This tweet was then cited by Iranian users to justify anti-Afghan sentiments.

4.5. Dissatisfaction due to internal factors
Sub-themes are Dissatisfaction of officials and organizations, Dissatisfaction with political decisions or lack of oversight by authorities, and Dissatisfaction and criticism of fellow Iranians.

Some tweets express Dissatisfaction of officials and organizations. For instance, one user criticizes Kazemi Qomi, stating: "Kazemi Qomi in Mashhad: 'We support any initiative that helps Afghanistan grow.' One of Iran's traitors—though it's unclear if he's even Iranian! #ExpelAfghans as a national demand."

Other tweets criticize Iranian authorities or the immigration office's lack of oversight, such as one user condemning Iran's unrestricted Afghan entry: "The Islamic Republic brings in Afghans en masse without any regulations."

Another tweet praises border guards for preventing Afghan smugglers from entering: "Border guards risked their lives to stop Afghan traffickers from crossing."

Dissatisfaction also extends to complaints about Iranian citizens. One user shares an instance of discrimination at a vocational center: "I signed up for mobile repair training, but on the first day, the instructor said we didn't have equipment. Today, I found out that another workshop in the same center was fully equipped for Afghans, and we're not even allowed to enter! This city is strange… #ExpelAfghans as a national demand."

Another tweet criticizes those facilitating Afghan migration: "One of the biggest traitors in this country are the drivers smuggling Afghans like cattle, cramming more than ten of them into a single vehicle."

Interestingly, many tweets reference the presence of Afghans in

Iran's metro system, which may signify their occupation of urban spaces or their extensive integration into Iranian society.

5. Conclusion

The predominant stance of Iranian Twitter users toward Afghans, as observed in the studied tweets, appears to align with the defense stage of Bennett's six-stage Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). At this stage, individuals draw clear distinctions between themselves and others, considering their own culture superior while devaluing the other. The characterization of Afghans as "primitive," evident in certain tweets, exemplifies this defensive stance against intercultural engagement with this group.

Progress beyond this stage, even toward minimization, seems distant. Iranian users concern— sometimes rooted in crimes committed by Afghans, cultural claims by some regarding Iranian symbols, or explicit insults directed at Iranians—are unlikely to be easily resolved. For societal acceptance of migrants, beyond governmental measures such as migrant management and regulation of undocumented immigration, cultural initiatives emphasizing shared heritage are also crucial.

Regarding Afghan migration causes, determining precise motivations requires further case-specific studies on Afghan migrants themselves, rather than solely considering the grievances of Iranians dissatisfied with migration. However, in the analyzed tweets, migratory rights for Afghans are largely rejected.

- If migration was security-related, some users assert that Afghans should have stayed and fought against the Taliban.
- If migration was economically driven, users argue that Iran's current economic struggles leave no room for Afghan migrants.

These tweets largely avoid acknowledging any justification for Afghan migration, steering clear of content that grants even minimal legitimacy to their presence.

Based on the themes present in the tweets, it seems that some targeted actions can help reduce xenophobia and counter dominant narratives. Subjects such as "Parasitic living," "Afghans are responsible for rising housing prices", "Afghans consume Iran's subsidies" may have been rooted in undocumented assumptions about migrants' economic impact, so publishing factual data on migrants' contributions to the economy, labor market, and public expenses may be used to reduce xenophobia. Tweets like "Iran has been sold," "Afghans have occupied Iran," and "Afghans are taking over cultural symbols" reinforce fears of cultural erasure. So, promoting shared historical and cultural narratives that highlight long-standing Iranian-Afghan interactions may be helpful. Tweets such as "Afghans are responsible for all theft in Iran," "Taliban infiltration among Afghan migrants", and

"Afghans only commit crimes" may be based on misinformation or sweeping generalizations. Enhancing media literacy and encouraging users to verify sources before sharing content is recommended.

6. Limitations & Future research
It is important to note that this study analyzed tweets without verifying the accuracy of all of their claims. Therefore, the xenophobic content present in these tweets may have been written based on misinformation or weak claims. It was not feasible to examine all tweets on this subject, nor to trace the origins of accounts that posted these views. However, tweets from a range of accounts across the political spectrum—both supporters and opponents of the Iranian government—were identified.

For further research, quantitative content analysis of tweets and studies on the lived experiences of Iranians coexisting with Afghans could provide deeper insights into intercultural dynamics. Another important point to be addressed in future research is whether the mere presence of Afghans in Iran has led to such widespread dissatisfaction or whether these tweets have been influenced by external motives. Is this campaign a spontaneous grassroots movement, or is it coordinated? Understanding the origins of this campaign could be valuable for future studies.

Conflict of interest
The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations
The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability
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