“I arrived with just $1 in my pocket”: Narratives of immigrant exceptionalism on X
by Stein Monteiro

Abstract
Narratives of immigrant exceptionalism such as “I arrived with just $1 in my pocket” are commonly used by established immigrants in Canada to signal their personal achievement, their resilience, their claims to legitimacy on Canadian issues, or simply to counter narratives of an unwelcoming place. The convenience of the temporal and seemingly causal communicative form of the narrative, further combined with the social position of the established immigrant, the narratives of immigrant exceptionalism are highly amenable for reproduction. These narratives must be contextualized within the wider discourse of Canadian exceptionalism that allow such narratives to be further reproduced over generations and cohorts of new immigrant arrivals through the creation of the imaginary integrated immigrant. The framing of the narratives of immigrant exceptionalism tells us about the spectrum of meanings that people attach to immigrant exceptionalism, as well as what Canadian exceptionalism means to them. I collected 165 posts from X/Twitter and categorized the tweets into frames. I find that relevant problem frames such as “taking responsibility” and “threat” stand out, as well as benefit frames such as “solidarity”.

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Introduction
The attitudes of Canadians towards immigration have changed substantially over time. In 1977, 61 percent of Canadians said that there was too much immigration to Canada, but by September 2022 this decreased to just 27 percent (Neuman, 2022).

Even though Canadians are generally positive about immigration, they are also acutely concerned about the type of immigration and the objectives of immigration (Neuman and Adams, 2023). For example, in 2022 about half of all Canadians recognized that more immigrants were needed to grow the population and 85 percent agreed that immigration has a positive impact on the economy.

The increase in positive attitudes toward immigration was mainly among those who believed that immigrants contributed positively to the Canadian economy (Bloemraad, 2012).

It is not clear whether the increase in positive attitudes among Canadians toward immigration can be attributed to real-life interactions or actual observations on immigrants’ contributions to the economy. In fact, approximately 71 percent of Canadians strongly agree that younger Canadians are fortunate to have the opportunity to interact with racially and religiously diverse people (Neuman, 2022). This indicates that Canadians value multiculturalism, but also may not have close relationships with diverse peoples. This motivating evidence suggests that some part of the attitudes Canadians have about
immigration is probably due to the narratives of exceptionalism in the work ethic or entrepreneurialism of immigrants they are exposed to in the media and when they connect with others. In this paper, I refer to these narratives held about immigrants as immigrant exceptionalism.

This paper is about the narratives held by Canadians and established immigrants because it is an important indicator for how society sees immigrants and may influence how immigrants see themselves. In addition, they are important for the way policies are communicated to the public and may even influence the integration of immigrants as they try to fit within the limits of the expectations set out in the immigration program. These narratives shape the immigrant’s behavior. In particular, they signal to immigrants their role in Canadian society as contributors through hard work and entrepreneurialism. In other words, narratives of exceptionalism present immigrants as contributors to the growing Canadian economy, which could develop into self-fulfilling prophecies when immigrants internalize those narratives as a part of their integration into Canadian society.

As an empirically testable hypothesis, I could say that even after accounting for strict selection criteria and the high cost of migration, I might find that there is strong correlation between narratives of immigrant exceptionalism and immigrants exceptional labour market outcomes. Although, there are no studies on how narratives of exceptionalism shape migrant behavior.

The emergence of the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism is not entirely surprising given that it is situated within the discourse of “Canadian exceptionalism”, which is defined by Canada’s ability to skillfully select migrants through the administration of the points system (Bloemraad, 2012). But also due to Canada’s unique geographical location, which makes it insular to the political problems associated with illegal immigration, in addition to the growing need for immigrants to help address depopulation and a shrinking workforce (Trebilcock, 2019).

According to Boyd and Ly (2021), some of the main features of Canadian exceptionalism are: (1) a high number of regular immigrant admissions through a well-managed immigration system, (2) consensus among political parties and the general public of the need for immigration, (3) policies of multiculturalism and inclusion of diverse newcomers, and (4) a human rights-based system of laws and institutions to process refugee claimants and asylum seekers.

When I discuss immigrant exceptionalism throughout this paper, it must be remembered that it must be contextualized within this wider discourse of Canadian exceptionalism and not removed from the political, economic, geographical, and the administration of public policy in Canada.

Narratives may be created by formal public communications by representatives from the government (i.e., state actors), by researchers in academia through publications, and by journalists and spokespersons in the media. Narratives may be created in informal exchanges between people in face-to-face conversations or through an intermediary such as social media.

State actors and voting citizens are motivated to create and reproduce certain narratives. For instance, narratives of immigrants’ exceptionalism as hard workers and entrepreneurs are deeply embedded in institutions such as Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship.html). For example, the story of the hard worker is deeply embedded in the names and descriptions of policies, such as the Federal “Skilled Worker” Program. Similarly, the story of the resourceful entrepreneur is clearly defined in the “Entrepreneur” Program.

Even the objectives attached to these programs clearly define the set of expectations of immigrants. For example, the objective stated for the Federal Skilled Worker Program is to “help address key labour market pressures faced by the Canadian economy” (Government of Canada, 2014). This discourse signals to newcomers that integration into Canadian society means filling jobs where there are labour shortages.

In a similar way, Canadian citizens, who may be native-born Canadians or immigrants, create or reproduce narratives about immigrant exceptionalism that are motivated by their own first- or second-hand experiences. Adams and Neuman (2018) suggested that Canadians have positive attitudes toward new immigrants precisely because many Canadians have an immigrant background. This further motivates our study of narratives of immigrant exceptionalism by immigrants themselves.

Migration narratives can appear anywhere and from anyone. Migration narratives and discourses appear in social media (Maneri, 2023; Walsh, 2022), newspapers (Maneri, 2023), journal articles and policy documents (Li, 2003), and television (Maneri, 2023). Migration narratives are produced by state actors, politicians, journalists, celebrities, and incumbent non-migrant communities, all of whom have motivations attached to the creation and reproduction of narratives that either uphold or tackle preexisting beliefs about immigrants.

However, there is a lack of research on the framing of narratives of immigrant exceptionalism, where the source of those narratives may be state actors, non-migrants, or the immigrants themselves. This paper attempts to narrowly fill this gap in the literature by exploring the framing of narratives of immigrant exceptionalism using data obtained from the social media.
platform X/Twitter.

By exploring the framing of the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism I am attempting to better understand the underlying qualitative features of its reproduction. For example, immigrant exceptionalism may be re-produced positively when framed as a form of “resilience” or a “benefit to society”. On the other hand, it may be reproduced negatively when framed as immigrants should be “taking responsibility” or should be “grateful”.

A broad spectrum of the framing of the immigrant exceptionalism narrative and the fact that it is still situated within Canada’s exceptionalism as a place that excels in immigrant integration and social cohesion, tells us something about the broad meanings that people attach to Canada’s immigration program.

In this paper, I am interested in the informal exchanges between newcomers and more established immigrants. In particular, the use of specific narratives in mediated settings where the mediator is an asynchronous social media platform where the sender is one person, but the receiver may be one or more people.

I collected posts from X (formerly Twitter) on how established immigrants reproduce exceptionalism narratives and how their personal stories can be linked to temporal themes such as nostalgia, resilience, and economic mobility. But they are also rooted in themes of Canadian exceptionalism, community building, survivor bias, and counter narratives of an unwelcoming society.

The X/Twitter posts collected in this study specifically includes the phrase, or similar phrases to “I [came to/arrived in] Canada with (.*) in my pocket”, where the exact amount of financial resources they came with to Canada can be described in any currency and in any amount.

After collecting the posts, I categorized each post into a frame. In essence, I am interested in the process of narratives (Maneri, 2023), that is, their reproduction and spectrum of meanings attached to the frames they are embedded within.

I found that the immigrant exceptionalism narrative was predominantly associated with the “struggle or hard work”, “take responsibility”, “contribution to the Canadian economy or a non-economic contribution”, and “gratefulness to Canada or Canadians” frames symbolic of the reproduction of the immigrant exceptionalism narrative by established immigrants.

I also found that the “solidarity” and “threat” frames were common, which was also indicative of the spectrum of views attached to the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism.

The evidence from this paper articulates the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism as a communicative form that is versatile across a spectrum of frames, such that it continually upholds existing beliefs about the wider discourse of Canadian exceptionalism.

The following section will define the narratives more clearly and I will show that the claim “I [came to/arrived in] Canada with $x in my pocket (.*)” is indeed a narrative. The third section is a review of the narratives of migration and Canadian exceptionalism literature. Fourth, I will construct a theoretical framework that shows that discourses on Canadian exceptionalism could have an effect on narratives of immigrant exceptionalism. Fifth, I will describe the data that was collected on X/Twitter. Sixth, I will present the results of the categorization. Finally, I will discuss the results and conclude this study.

2. Is it a narrative?

Before discussing literature on the topic of migration narratives, I must be clear about the definition of narratives and whether claims of the form “I [came to/arrived in] Canada with $x in my pocket (.*)” is indeed a narrative. The third section is a review of the narratives of migration and Canadian exceptionalism literature. Fourth, I will construct a theoretical framework that shows that discourses on Canadian exceptionalism could have an effect on narratives of immigrant exceptionalism. Fifth, I will describe the data that was collected on X/Twitter. Sixth, I will present the results of the categorization. Finally, I will discuss the results and conclude this study.

Narratives are “selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time that include one or more causal claims” (Dennison, 2021; Boswell, et al., 2021). The key characteristic of this definition that qualifies a claim as a narrative is “selection” and “causality”.

In this way, narratives may be false depictions of reality because they selectively present two pieces of information which
may be independently true or false, but together appear causal (Boswell, et al., 2021). Narratives may be falsely causal but appear causal and sensible to the receiver of the message.

Narratives offer stories of what happened and how things evolved. The strict temporal structure of a narrative claim makes them distinguishable from discourses and frames (Dennison, 2021; Boswell, et al., 2021). Frames are static and concerned with a single point in time, while discourses are broader sets of ideas and concepts from which meaning is derived.

For completeness sake, I should mention that narratives are different from hypotheses (Dennison, 2021; Boswell, et al., 2021), which are testable predictions within a specific context. Finally, narratives are distinguishable from propaganda (Dennison, 2021; Boswell, et al., 2021), which are strategic tools to influence rather than inform or make sense of a complex reality.

Since narratives are a form of communicative interaction among different actors, they are relational, providing specific interpretations of perceived reality and organise it into a coherent whole.

Stories of migration depict the journey of migrants and refugees, providing communicative form to their achievements and challenges. These stories may be produced by state actors through traditional media or through newer forms of social media (Krzyżanowski, 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2018) to depict migration as a problem, a solution, as an explanation of reality, or to anticipate future trends (Sahin-Mencutek, 2020; Dennison, 2021).

The literature on migration narratives is broad. Most of the previous literature attempts to identify master frames, frames, and narratives within those frames for migration-related topics discussed or reported in news media and social media. I do not discuss the complete literature on this topic because it is beyond the scope of this study, but I encourage the interested reader to refer to these studies for a complete overview: Maneri (2023), Banulescu-Bogdan, et al. (2021), and Boswell, et al. (2021). Instead, I will situate this study within the existing literature on migration narratives. The previous literature noted that the purpose of a narrative was to provide some meaning to complex information in a coherent and accessible way. But a narrative can have more strategic purposes as a tool for persuasion, influence, or manipulation. Narratives are often used by politicians, government, and non-profit organizations in strategic communication (Boswell, et al., 2021). Whether a narrative works to achieve these goals depends on various factors, such as its canonicity, credibility, framing, timing, and effective coordination between stakeholders.

The literature identifies four master frames that migration narratives that tend to be used: the benefit/hero frame, victim frame, threat/villain frame, or frameless (Banulescu-Bogdan, et al., 2021; Maneri, 2023).

Based on this discussion of narratives, all claims of the form “I [came to/arrived in] Canada with $x in my pocket (.*)”, where $x can be any amount of money, and (.*) means any statement, are narratives. This statement represents a single point in time (i.e., the time of arrival in Canada), followed by a second independent piece of information about their current socioeconomic position (i.e., “(*)”).

The two pieces of information are strung together in a way that is meant to causally connect arriving in Canada with little financial resources and the certainty of future material successes out of either personal determination or Canada’s exceptionalism at integrating newcomers.

Keeping in line with the idea of a causal claim, the narrative may be viewed in two parts. The first part of the phrase “I [came to/arrived in] Canada with (.*) in my pocket” is referred to as the sufficiency condition. The second part of “... in my pocket (.*)” is referred to as the necessary condition.

3. Discourses on Canadian exceptionalism

There are several studies on Canada’s exceptionalism at integrating newcomers and managing social cohesion between newcomers and incumbent Canadians (see Adams and Neuman, 2018; Kymlicka, 2021; Kazemipur, 2006; Bloemraad, 2012), but a lack of research on the narratives of immigrant exceptionalism, where the source of those narratives may be government actors, non-migrants, or immigrants themselves.

Li (2003) demonstrated how the discourse on immigration in Canada within policy documents and academic literature contradicts its own character of multiculturalism and integration. There were inconsistencies between what the policy intends and measured action at the institutional level.

For example, Canada’s integration strategy is intended to be a “two-way process that encourages adjustments on the part of
both newcomers and the receiving society,”, but the measurement of successful integration is described as a one-way process (Li, 2003). Li (2003) mentioned a specific passage from a strategic policy document on immigrant integration: “Immigrants who are successfully integrated into all aspects of Canadian life should compare favourably with other Canadians in measurable aspects of social and economic life”.

Similarly, Li (2003) also illustrated that the predominant discourse in academic literature has tended towards comparing immigrants to native-born Canadians, rather than critically questioning whether immigrant integration should be measured in relative terms to the model average native-born Canadian, or whether the value of immigration was the achievement of some population or economic goal.

Some would argue that Li’s (2003) critique of academic discourse is unfair and that there are several empirical studies that compare new immigrants to established immigrants as well. I would instead argue that there is little observable difference between the model average native-born Canadian and established immigrants in labour market outcomes, health outcomes, living arrangements, or cultural factors precisely because of the salient role that narratives and discourses play in integrating immigrants.

The paradox is the seeming coexistence of few studies on the narratives of immigrant exceptionalism, alongside several works devoted to Canada’s exceptionalism in immigrant integration and social cohesion. The growth in the literature on the latter contributing to the reproduction of the former.

An argument that can be made against this seeming paradox is that the literature on Canadian exceptionalism is critical, and not all studies portray Canadian exceptionalism in a positive way. For example, Kymlicka (2021) has shown that Canadian exceptionalism derives from the pride of Canadians in the values of multiculturalism, but these values can be measurably resilient and precarious at the same time.

If I also take into account Canada’s history of refugee resettlement, the claims of exceptionalism are very weak considering that refugee admissions have not grown at the rate of economic immigration or at the pace of global demand for humanitarian assistance (Triadafilopoulos, 2021). Between 2017 and 2020, more than 58,000 irregular migrants entered Canada from the U.S. (Boyd and Ly, 2021). This period of irregular arrivals showed how Canadian exceptionalism was severely limited when considering irregular border crossings. The country saw protests, negative attitudes towards the irregular migrants among the general public, increasing intergovernmental tensions over costs associated with accommodating border crossers in Toronto (Ontario) and Montréal (Québec), and also divergence in views across parties on how to handle the situation.

Moreover, when I consider the factors that allow Canada an exceptional position in its community of nations, it is due to its (1) unique geographical location that makes it insular to political problems associated with illegal immigration, and (2) depopulation and a shrinking workforce (Trebilcock, 2019).

Furthermore, Besco (2021) found that the history of Canadians’ positive attitudes on immigration were relatively recent. Moreover, he noted that even though Canadians were, on average, more positive of immigration overtime, this tended to mask an increased polarization in attitudes on immigration issues since 2005.

Certainly, the values of diversity and multiculturalism in Canada is unique. Canadians themselves see it as a distinctive feature among the major immigrant receiving countries of the U.S., U.K., Australia, and Germany. Feinstein and Bonikowski [1] discussed such exceptionalism in the context of nationalism and anti-immigration attitudes in Israel, but I could analogously argue that “Multicultural Nationalism” could stand for monocultural nationalism in discourses of exceptionalism that instead produced the pro-immigration attitudes of Canadians.

Note that I am not suggesting that “Multicultural Nationalism” is a salient feature of Canada’s multicultural character, or a key feature of Canadian exceptionalism. I am only suggesting it as a possibility based on the empirical evidence presented by Amarasingam, et al. (2016) that noted that Canadian multiculturalism functioned as a daily practice of nation-building.

Either way, regardless of the type of nationalism on display, or the factors that have contributed to Canadian exceptionalism, it still remains that immigrant exceptionalism does appear to except the immigrant from the shared experiences of their community (Han, 2014) and places them within the discourse of Canadian exceptionalism.

The narrative of immigrant exceptionalism can be viewed as a mode of integration into the dominant culture by removing the immigrant from their community of shared experiences while at the same time reproducing the master narrative of Canada’s exceptionalism at integrating newcomers and creating a socially cohesive multicultural society. It is then not so surprising that the phrase being studied in this paper is adopted by more established immigrants.
4. Narratives of immigrant exceptionalism within the context of discourses on Canadian exceptionalism

In this section, I will theorize how discourses on Canadian exceptionalism are linked to the reproduction of narratives of immigrant exceptionalism at the level of interaction between new and established immigrants.

Firstly, I will discuss how the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism can be a persuasive tool in immigrant integration. Essentially, what are the features of the narrative that except the immigrant from the shared experience of their community and create the imaginary of the integrated immigrant. These features are discussed below as survival, nostalgia, and finality.

Secondly, I will discuss how these narratives are contextualized within the wider discourse of Canadian exceptionalism as being influenced by the wider discourse but also contributing to its reproduction.

The narratives that are created and reproduced by established immigrants is important to consider because those stories form an integral part of their identity that have been internalized over years of living in Canada, and then reproduced with new cohorts of immigrant arrivals. The effects of these narratives may surface in the attitudes expressed in public opinion polls in a “virtuous cycle” of “good feeling” and against “fear-mongering” (Adams and Neuman, 2018).

The attitudes of established immigrants towards living in Canada are mixed, depending on their income level and time spent in Canada (Monteiro and Haan, 2022). Immigrants are more positive upon arrival but become less satisfied with the time that they spend in Canada. Incomes are positively associated with life satisfaction suggesting that established immigrants with higher earnings tend to have a more positive view of their life in Canada. Those who are least successful in terms of income would have also left Canada or are least visible. In this way, narratives of immigrant exceptionalism are reproduced as a form of survival, or in this case survivor bias.

It may not just be about earnings; for example, Li [2] suggested that integration discourse highlights an unequal relationship between new and older cohorts of immigrants: “immigrants are powerless in relation to those already established in Canadian society in being able to claim their legitimacy to chart the future of the country”. While Li (2003) was analyzing the discourse that compared older cohorts of arrivals from Europe with newer cohorts from Asia and Africa, there is a possibility of a similar power dynamic between new and established immigration regardless of source country. In other words, established immigrants from any source country claim greater legitimacy on Canadian issues than new immigrants.

In this way, the narratives of survivors (i.e., established immigrants) are reproduced because they can claim legitimacy on Canadian issues or may themselves be viewed as economic success stories.

Stories of immigrant exceptionalism, when told by established immigrants, have nostalgic elements. The form of the narrative, because of its temporal qualities, is a useful communicative form to portray an immigrant’s personal experiences of struggle and success. The long struggle is linked to resilience where the expectation is that any immigrant can eventually overcome their burdensome but temporary situation.

The stories are also attached to the socioeconomic status of the storyteller, who as expected, are likely better-off than when they first arrived in Canada. The stories are linked to a change in the immigrant’s status overtime, which combined with temporary struggles creates a sense of hopefulness.

The stories also indicate finality, because they “arrived in Canada”, where “arrival” could signal the start of the journey in Canada, but also the eventual end of a long struggle.

Overall, narratives of immigrant exceptionalism are situated within Canada’s exceptionalism as a place that excels in immigrant integration and social cohesion. As discussed earlier, Canadian exceptionalism may derive from Canadians’ own pride in values of multiculturalism, external political forces (Besco, 2021; Taylor, 2021), bureaucratic structures in place (Paquet, 2021), or external factors such as geography and economic necessity (Triadafilopoulos, 2021).

At the same time, the special issue devoted to Canadian exceptionalism published in the American Review of Canadian Studies (Triadafilopoulos, 2021) demonstrated that values of multiculturalism and Canada’s position of exceptionalism on immigration can be threatened by divisive politics (Kymlicka, 2021) and unauthorized border crossings (Boyd and Ly, 2021).

Canada’s exceptionalism is a representation of Canadian institutions that have served to develop Canada’s multicultural character. In particular, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Neuman, 2022; Adams and Neuman, 2018), democracy, and liberalism (Li, 2003) are highly valued by Canadians. The stories attached to immigrant exceptionalism reinforce personal achievement and serve as a counternarrative to Canada being an unwelcoming place, which may be derived from discourses of Canadian exceptionalism.
The underlying features in the narratives of immigrant exceptionalism (i.e., survival, nostalgia, and finality) jointly contribute to the creation of an imaginary community of integrated immigrants that are survivors, have legitimacy on Canadian issues, are resilient, and have arrived in terms of their economic or non-economic successes.

These features of the immigrant exceptionalism narrative create a community of exceptional immigrants that newcomers aspire to, where the “community” that is created has the socioeconomic characteristics of incumbent Canadians. Integration by adopting the values of the imaginary community of integrated immigrants amounts to immigrants becoming more alike to incumbent Canadians by transcending the struggles of the newcomer identity.

Li (2003) briefly discussed the policy discourse surrounding the newcomer community, in particular, the policy discourse of the ethnic enclave. Ethnic enclaves are seen as temporary shelters for “immigrants [to] move through ... using its resources in order to enter the mainstream society”. In other words, immigrants must become excepted from the shared experience of their community to become integrated in mainstream (i.e., Canadian) society. This would suggest that the discourses of Canadian exceptionalism contextualize the narratives of immigrant exceptionalism.

5. Data collection and categorization

The data used in this study comes from searching X/Twitter for the phrase “I [came to/arrived in] Canada with (.*) in my pocket (.*)”. This search was carried out intermittently between 15 January 2024 and 13 April 2024. I found 165 tweets posted by 135 unique users. The earliest tweet in the dataset was posted on 20 August 2011, and the latest tweet was posted on 12 April 2024.

Since only English keywords were used to search for tweets, several tweets in other languages were excluded from the analysis. Furthermore, I also collected location data; only nine tweets were geocoded, so I excluded location from further analysis.

Note that the narrative I am studying in this paper is quite short. This makes it ideal for the 140–280 character limit of X/Twitter. In addition to its brevity, the cultural resonance and recognizability of the narrative make it ideal for appropriation across multiple frames.

I read the content of the tweets and categorized them into themes. I also used the text, videos, and images used in a tweet in the categorization. The frames that were used in the categorization were based on categories used in previous studies on migration narratives.

6. Results

We start by providing a summary of the key variables that were collected in this dataset (see Table 1). On average, a post received 53 likes, 10 retweets, 5 replies, and 177 views. Most of the posts were original (62 percent) and the remaining were replies (38 percent). A quarter of the posts were made by an organization, a celebrity, or notable personality. Most of whom were politicians, political or religious organizations, followed by notable police officers, lawyers, realtors, authors, speakers, or radio personalities. However, 74 percent of the posts were made by individuals.

About 13 percent of the posts were sarcastic or comedic in nature, mainly people making fun of their parents using this phrase in their daily lives. Most likely, these sarcastic and comedic posts were made by the 1.5 and second generation children of immigrant parents. Many posts (30 percent) mentioned family as a part of their migration journey when they first arrived. This does not mean that authors of the other posts did not come with their families. It just says that the narrative did not feature family as part of their use of the narrative.

We divided the discussion of the results into two parts, where the first part of this discussion was the variables associated with the first part of the phrase “I [came to/arrived in] Canada with (.*) in my pocket”, which I refer to as the sufficiency condition. The second part of “... in my pocket (.*)” is referred to as the necessary condition.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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<tr>
<td>Likes</td>
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<td>Views</td>
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<td>5,750</td>
</tr>
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<td>Organization/celebrity profile</td>
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<td>0.261</td>
<td>0.440</td>
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<td>Financial resources were mentioned</td>
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<td>Came with family</td>
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<td>0.458</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came with hopes dreams or looking for a better life</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>Lack of language proficiency was mentioned</td>
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<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.313</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of education was mentioned</td>
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<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of networks was mentioned</td>
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<td>0.202</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0.341</td>
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<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.313</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Pride in Canada or Canadian values</td>
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<td>Personal success was mentioned</td>
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<td>0.500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal success: education</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.250</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal success: retirement</td>
<td>165</td>
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<td>0.110</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal success: business</td>
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<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.250</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal success: language</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.110</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal success: life satisfaction</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal success: family or friend</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.134</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal success: permanent residency</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal success: not mentioned</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.558</td>
<td>0.498</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>0.215</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take responsibility</td>
<td>165</td>
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<td>0.354</td>
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Note: All variables are dichotomous (Yes = 1, No = 0).
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Amount of financial resources mentioned</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Unique Count</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Unique Count</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>not mentioned</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.370</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>nothing, zero, or very little</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.218</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0–100</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.218</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>100–500</td>
<td>165</td>
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<td>305</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>500–1,000</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1000</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Organization/celebrity type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Unique Count</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Unique Count</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>activist, philathropist</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>author, speaker, radio personality</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>diaspora association or other association</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>education institute</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.018</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>individual (not an organization/celebrity)</td>
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<td>0.739</td>
<td>440</td>
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<td>job placement agent</td>
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<td>78</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>news agency</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>notable police officer, lawyer, realtor</td>
<td>165</td>
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<td>172</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>other business</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politician, political or religious organization</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>settlement service or non-profit organization</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>110</td>
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<td>writer, photographer, musician, podcaster</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>0</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentioned other personal belongings: clothes on my back,</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Unique Count</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Unique Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>165</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As expected, many of the posts involved mentioning a specific amount of money that immigrants arrived with in Canada. About 65 percent of the posts indicated a specific amount of financial resources.

Others who did not mention a specific amount of money instead mentioned personal belongings, such as a suitcase, bags, or backpack. The distribution of amounts is shown in Figure 1.

Several users who mentioned a specific amount said that they came with nothing or very little (20 percent), while 23 percent mentioned that they came with an amount more than $0 and less than $100. The remaining 17 percent said they came with more than $100.

Instead of, or in addition to, a specific sum of money they might have arrived with, 18 percent of posts mentioned arriving with just a suitcase, a bag, or a backpack. Another four percent and one percent mentioned they arrived with just their clothes on their back (including those that mentioned they arrived with clothing not suitable for Canadian winters) or educational credentials, respectively.

In addition to arriving with limited financial resources in the form of money or personal possessions, several posts also mentioned arriving with hopes and dreams (18 percent), a lack of language proficiency (11 percent), a lack of education (two percent), and/or a lack of networks (four percent).

The second part of the narrative typically mentions some personal success to complete the story. About half of the posts (46 percent) mentioned some form of personal success in their journey. The most common successes mentioned are money or financial security (14 percent) and housing (10 percent). Followed by general life satisfaction (i.e., “being happy” or “living the Canadian dream”; eight percent) and owning or starting a business (seven percent).

Other forms of successes were expressed which may not be considered personal successes, for example contributions to the Canadian economy (four percent) or other non-economic contributions (seven percent).

Posts also mentioned how these successes were achieved. Predominantly through struggle or hard work (36 percent). Several authors also believed that it was due to external factors, which they expressed as pride in Canada or Canadian values (six percent), and/or gratitude toward Canada or Canadians (11 percent).

I did not find posts mentioning a change in physical or mental health as well as social relationships. Although, I identified a few cases where posts mentioned that after living for a long time in Canada they were unable to speak the language of the home country as well as they could. A few posts also mentioned a disappointment with their personal, social, economic, and political position since arrival.

In this section, I consider both the sufficiency and necessary conditions together. Mentioning a financial resource at the time of arrival was strongly correlated with mentioning a personal success among these established immigrants because that was how the data was collected from X/Twitter.
However, there is some uncertainty with the type of personal success that was mentioned. It is not always the case that people mention a personal success in economic terms.

Among the 78 percent \((n = 129)\) of posts that satisfy the sufficiency condition \((i.e., \text{posts mentioned arriving with limited financial resources, a few belongings, a lack of language skills, a lack of education, and/or a lack of networks; posts that mentioned arriving with hopes and dreams, or did not clearly state their condition of arrival were not included})\), the majority mentioned that they achieved personal successes in monetary terms (17 percent), followed by buying a house or paying off a mortgage (11 percent).

That being said, 47 percent did not mention any form of personal success. Among these, few mentioned contributions to the Canadian economy (five percent) or some non-economic contribution (five percent). Generally I found that personal successes or contributions to society may not be linked to these established immigrants’ initial financial constraints or lack of language skills, education, and/or networks.

This suggests that within posts, the form of the narrative may be embedded within wider frames of the conversation that the authors were engaged in \((i.e., \text{how these narratives are being used as replies to other posts})\), or placed in relation to the authors’ personal biographies.

Figure 1: Distribution of amounts mentioned in posts by tweet authors.
The frames that emerged within the collected data were “struggle or hard work” (36 percent of all posts), “take responsibility” (15 percent), “contribution to the Canadian economy or a non-economic contribution” (11.6 percent), “gratefulness to Canada or Canadians” (11 percent), “solidarity” (8 percent), “threat” (5 percent), “pride in Canada and Canadian values” (6 percent), and “racism or xenophobia” (1 percent).

7. Discussion

The framing of these narratives is the main point of discussion in this paper. There are certain frames that are particularly relevant when discussing migration narratives which have also emerged as salient frames in the data.

Prior research examined frames and narratives reflecting beliefs and attitudes held in the general population. In this study, I specifically examined narratives and the frames associated with narratives typical among established immigrants.

As I previously mentioned, the frames are situated in the context with which the narrative is placed. This may be in how these narratives are being used as replies to other posts, or as it is placed in relation to the authors’ biographical profiles. The posts cannot be disconnected from the social position of the storyteller (i.e., the poster) and their audience. All of which tells the story of the exceptional immigrant, framed across different dimensions, but still situated within the wider discourse of Canada’s exceptionalism.

I found that the frame related to “struggle or hard work” was commonly used in the posts, signaling resilience. Similarly, the “take responsibility” frame was used to note that disappointments, a person’s socio-economic situation, or unmet expectations should be dealt with personal resilience. This frame countered the “victimization” frame that emerged in previous studies of the general population, such as Maneri (2023).

When these narratives were presented by the elevated position of the established immigrant they described immigrant exceptionalism adjacent to predefined notions attached to Canadian exceptionalism. In this way, it was presented as a counter narrative to the “victimization” frame.

The frames “struggle or hard work” and “take responsibility” were also indicative of how immigrants were excluded from their communities of newcomers. It was through hard work and taking responsibility for successes and failures that newcomers could become the imaginary integrated and established immigrant.

Aside from these frames I also found that posts would include phrases to signal personal resilience as a part of the integrated immigrant community, such as “I am one of those immigrant types” and “Took guts. #CanadianImmigrant”.

The frames of “take responsibility” and “contribution to the Canadian economy or a non-economic contribution” were also linked to existing or emerging frames in Maneri (2023) that typically depicted immigrants and refugees as a “burden on social services” or a “threat to public order”.

When the narrative of arriving in Canada with few resources and yet achieving personal success was used within the frame “take responsibility”, it was a clear articulation of how narratives of immigrant exceptionalism were contextualized within a wider discourse of Canadian exceptionalism.

We also found that this was emphasized when established immigrants used phrases such as “That’s how you get ahead in life, not by wallowing in past grievances and victimhood...”, “We didn’t take a single penny from the government ... Not like these people now ...”, “If I can do it, anyone can do it.”, and “The closers [losers] blame the government be [but] they can’t work hard”.

“Threat” frames were commonly seen in previous studies (Maneri, 2023), so it was not surprising that I also saw these in X/Twitter data. The narrative of immigrant exceptionalism provided a degree of legitimacy to threat frames because posters were comparing their own struggles and constraints when they first arrived in Canada to what they saw as “freebies” and “handouts” provided in the form of social services.

For example, in this post an established immigrant was concerned that there will not be sufficient resources to provide services to refugees and support Canadians: “But what I see now is y’all giving free housing, free bus passes and free everything to refugees while most Canadian people are in debt due to expensive costs of living.” Similarly, I saw the threat narrative more blatantly exposed in phrases such as “This supports refugees. I pay taxes to help Canadians not free loaders”.

The frames “racism or xenophobia” depicted the views of more established immigrants in the more diverse group of
"I arrived with just $1 in my pocket": Narratives of immigrant exceptionalism on X

newcomers. Statements such as “The immigrants of old were from good stock — and hard times ... Not ‘Canada gave me $$$ as soon as I arrived’” and “Stop mass immigration” provided additional evidence of the unequal power relationship between established immigrants and newcomers. Similar findings were also identified in the discourse analysis of Li (2003).

That being said, only few posts fit within the “racism or xenophobia” frames compared to other frames identified in the data.

Besides the problem frames I just described, I also found benefit frames (Maneri, 2023). For example, there was a “solidarity” frame in which established immigrants posted anti-racism and anti-immigration sentiments surrounding a narrative of their own struggles of arriving with few resources.

For example, phrases such as “I came to Canada with one agenda and that was to raise our next generation in a nation free of petty prejudice and inhuman attitudes” and “I will fight hate and promote love. Join me!” were made in the context of addressing injustices, racism, and xenophobia.

Other phrases such as “Newcomers to Canada come w so little and give so much. They teach our kids, keep our cities moving, care for us when we’re sick, build strong businesses, create good jobs” and “When you support immigrants, you support your own country.” were sympathetic to the needs of newcomers but also recognized their contributions.

Although I did not find a large number of posts within the “solidarity” frame, its existence meant that there was a wide spectrum of individuals supporting the notion of immigrant exceptionalism.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I am interested in understanding how narratives of immigrant exceptionalism were reproduced as well as the spectrum of meanings attached to this narrative by examining frames within which they were embedded.

This study contributes to our understanding of the narratives of immigrant exceptionalism produced and reproduced by immigrants themselves. Moreover, this analysis found that the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism cannot be studied in isolation, but instead must be understood within a wider context of discourses of Canadian exceptionalism.

On the one hand, the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism is the underlying mechanism that makes real the wider discourse of Canadian exceptionalism at the level of interaction between new immigrants and established immigrants, but also across generations.

This study used data from X/Twitter, an emerging outlet for migration narratives. I collected 165 posts from X (formerly Twitter) on a salient narrative commonly used by immigrants phrased as “I [came to/arrived in] Canada with $x in my pocket (.*).” The posts were categorized into themes and frames for further analysis.

I found that the immigrant exceptionalism narrative was predominantly associated with the frames “struggle or hard work”, “take responsibility”, “contribution to the Canadian economy or a non-economic contribution”, and “gratefulness to Canada or Canadians”, symbolic of the reproduction of the immigrant exceptionalism narrative by established immigrants.

I also found that the frames “solidarity” and “threat” were common, indicative of the spectrum of views attached to the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism.

The evidence from this paper points to the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism as being a versatile form of communication for established immigrants to frame their personal beliefs, but also to uphold values held in a wider discourse of Canadian exceptionalism.

About the author

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Notes
1. Feinstein and Bonikowski, 2021, p 744.

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Michał Krzyżanowski, 2018. “‘We are a small country that has done enormously lot’: The ‘refugee crisis’ and the hybrid discourse of politicizing immigration in Sweden,” Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, volume 16, numbers 1–2, pp. 97–117.


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