

Supporting and challenging hate in an online discussion of a controversial refugee policy

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Abstract

Online hate is a serious problem affecting a range of minoritised people. Existing theories suggest that poor behaviour online is due to anonymity but fail to explore how such discussions unfold. This is where a discursive and rhetorical psychological approach is appropriate as it offers a micro-level analysis. In this research paper, a discursive/rhetorical approach is applied to an online debate about a controversial refugee policy in the UK containing 586 comments, to address the question: How are arguably hateful arguments, or those challenging hateful arguments, supported and challenged in the context of an internet discussion about a controversial refugee policy? Analysis demonstrated that support for posts is shown to come in the form of additional points to bolster existing ones. Opposition to posts took the form of simple rejections and counterpoints, sometimes taking a three-part structure of (a) simple rejection, (b) counterpoint and (c) upgrade, but also included insults, ridiculing and name calling. Discursive and rhetorical analyses have been shown to have potential to understand online behaviour offering more detail than relying on anonymity to explain controversial and hateful speech.

Keywords

CMC, cyberpsychology, discursive psychology, hate speech, online hate, rhetorical psychology, refugee policy

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Literature and context

Explaining online hate

Online hate has come to be recognised as a serious problem within recent years. In their research, Paterson et al. (2018) illustrated the extent of the problem which showed that, for example, 83% of LGBT people and 80% of Muslims have experienced online hate for their group membership, while also suggesting that online hate is underreported, indicating that levels could be even higher than this.

A number of different theories have attempted to explain why hate appears so prevalent online and why it may be that this type of behaviour is more likely to occur in online rather than offline settings. Many of these theories revolve around the anonymity that can be found in online settings, which is linked with classic deindividuation theory, a concept that states that when people are less identifiable, they are more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour (Festinger et al., 1952).

Suler (2004) offered six reasons to explain why people may engage in more antisocial behaviour online than offline, which he terms toxic disinhibition. These are (1) *Dissociative anonymity*, whereby the anonymity that being online offers allows internet users to dissociate their online and offline identities, so they feel less vulnerable to repercussions and are able to remove responsibility from their negative actions, (2) *Invisibility*, where internet users cannot be seen, (3) *Asynchronicity*, where the lack of immediate response allows people to feel emboldened and disinhibited, (4) *Solipsistic Introjection*, in which online behaviour comes to mimic the safety of their own internal thoughts, (5) *Dissociative Imagination*, where being online can feel like a ruleless game, and (6) *Minimization of Status and Authority*, where the lack of social hierarchies can lead to further disinhibition. Despite a lack of evidence for these presented in Suler's paper, there is some experimental support for the impact of anonymity. For example, Nitschinsk et al. (2022) found that participants who were in an anonymous condition engaged in more trolling behaviour than those who were not, whereas Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) argue that it is a lack of eye contact in online settings that leads to negative disinhibition online. Suler (2004) claims that individual differences can also play a role in determining online disinhibition, which is supported by D'Agata and Kwantes (2020) who found that honesty-humility, emotionality and risk-taking are all positively associated with toxic disinhibition.

The theories that we have discussed are all grounded in the concept of 'deindividuation', which has been criticised from a social identity perspective. Reicher et al. (1995) argue that deindividuation wrongly presents individual identity as the only legitimate type of identity, so that being part of a group will always result in a loss of this superior individual identity, which can lead to a loss of socialisation, leading to bad behaviour when deindividuated. Instead, Reicher and colleagues argue that operating at the level of group identity (of which all individuals have many group identities) is an equally legitimate type of identity and, importantly, that shifting to a group level identity does *not* represent a loss, but rather a gaining of the social identity. Reicher et al instead put forward the 'The Social Identity/Deindividuation (SIDE) Model' which claims that individuals self-identify as group members and then act according to the norms of that group. Postmes et al. (1998) then applied this model to

computer mediated communication, where deindividuation can form the basis of explanations for negative online behaviour. They show that despite the more optimistic view of SIDE when compared to deindividuation, that the SIDE model and its emphasis on group identification, can also lead to bad behaviour online, as social groups become salient which can lead to group polarisation and an increase in stereotyping and group favouritism, and with it more intergroup prejudice.

Törnberg et al. (2021) argue that online interaction leads to exchanges of differing and conflicting views and associated identities which leads to additional polarisation, challenging the idea of the online ‘echo chamber’. Pettersson and Sakki (2023) shows how there are a range of studies showing how prejudicial talk online can appear more extreme and less guarded than offline and that, to some extent, this can be due to the possibilities of online communication that go beyond the written text so that it can also include images, ‘memes’ and links to a range of other (online) content. See Bliuc et al. (2018) for a review of research on online racism.

Goodman et al. (2023a) have argued that a rhetorical and discursive psychological approach should be taken to understanding online hate interactions. Such an approach takes a radically different approach to hate, where the hate is viewed as residing in the design and components of communication itself, so in the case of online behaviour, this may refer to texts, images or videos posted online. They argue that this approach allows for a more detailed understanding of what actually counts as hateful or offensive (see for example Greenland et al., 2018), which is particularly relevant given research showing that what counts as hate can often a feature of discussions about arguably hateful topics (e.g., Goodman and Rowe, 2014). Another benefit of this approach is the ability to offer a detailed understanding of exactly how (arguably) hateful comments are either supported and aligned with, or challenged and criticised, which has the potential to offer possibilities for understanding how best to effectively challenge hate. To this end, Goodman et al. (2023b) applied this approach to online debates about Black Lives Matter and demonstrated that a range of differently formulated ‘Lives Matter’ slogans, most notably ‘All Lives Matter’ and ‘White Lives Matter’ were used to challenge and undermine the message of Black Lives Matter.

The Rwanda refugee policy

The context of the current research is a part of the UK government’s refugee policy, called the ‘UK and Rwanda migration and economic development partnership’ (UK Government, 2022) in which refugees arriving in the UK could be sent to Rwanda to have their claims processed and would then stay in Rwanda if their claim is accepted. This specific policy comes within a wider UK government policy of a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants and refugees in which the UK has arguably failed in its international obligations to protect refugees (e.g., UNHCR, 2022).

The then UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel said of the Rwanda policy:

we have signed a world-leading Migration Partnership with Rwanda which can see those arriving dangerously, illegally or unnecessarily into the UK relocated to have their claims for asylum considered and, if recognised as refugees, to build their lives there. This will help break

the people smugglers' business model and prevent loss of life, while ensuring protection for the genuinely vulnerable. (UK Government, 2022)

The policy was announced in April 2022, with the first flight to Rwanda scheduled for June 2022. However, the proposed policy proved to be controversial which led to a number of court battles over its legality. The UK High Court approved the policy in June 2022, but the European Court of Human rights prevented it from being enacted until ongoing cases in the UK ended. In December 2022 the High Court again deemed the policy to be legal, but that the small number of people being affected by the scheme had to have their cases reconsidered on an individual basis. In June 2023 the Court of Appeal ruled that the plan is unlawful, and in November 2023 the Supreme court upheld the Court of Appeal's decision. In December 2023 the UK government made a new treaty with Rwanda in an attempt to bypass legal opposition to the plan.

Explaining online hate towards refugees

There is compelling evidence that the 'hostile environment' for migrants and refugees in the UK reaches online discussions (e.g., Gibson et al., 2017; Lynn and Lea, 2003; Parker, 2015). The explanations for this from the broad 'toxic disinhibition' school of thought would be that in the online environment, individuals feel freer to express hatred towards refugees because of the anonymity, lack of eye contact and reduced fear of negative consequences that being online provides. The SIDE model would argue that people are more likely to take up group identities based around either supporting or opposing refugees, perhaps based on political affiliation, but neither of these presents a compelling case for why there is such overwhelming hostility towards refugees specifically, or what form this hostility takes.

To address what this hate looks like, there is a growing body of discursive and rhetorical literature addressing online debates about refugees. Goodman (2007) showed the use of extreme dehumanising language that was used to describe refugee families in an online discussion following a news article about refugee policies, Burke and Goodman (2012) identified some extreme hate talk about refugees in Facebook debates where some contributors made parallels with Nazi death camps, calling for refugees (described as migrants) to be gassed. Goodman and Narang (2019) showed that in an online discussion forum following a Daily Mail article that there was strong opposition even to child refugees, who were presented as not really children and as a financial burden to the UK. Anti-refugee arguments in online settings can be found outside of the UK context too, for example Yılmaz et al. (2023) show how twitter debates about refugees in Turkey are prejudicial to the point of constituting hate and racism and Krishnamurti (2013) showed how recognisable anti-refugee arguments, such as them being a financial burden (e.g., Hynes and Sales, 2009) illegitimate (Lynn and Lea, 2003) and potential terrorists (Leudar et al., 2008) are used in online debates about Tamil refugees in Canada.

While these discursive studies have provided a detailed picture of what online hate towards refugees can look like, these existing studies have not yet provided a detailed understanding of how hateful comments are responded to in online debates about refugees. The research question for the current research is therefore: How are arguably

hateful arguments, or those challenging hateful arguments, supported and challenged in the context of an internet discussion about a controversial refugee policy?

Method

Data

Data were gathered in early 2023, shortly after the point at which the UK High Court had deemed the Rwanda refugee policy to be legal (after the earlier rejection by the European Court, but before the later Court of Appeal decision found the policy to be unlawful) when it appeared that the Conservative UK government would be able to implement the plan, albeit with caveats. To explore online discussions around this topic, the popular social media site Facebook was searched using the term ‘Refugee Rwanda’ to identify a discussion about the issue. When this did not generate a match, a google news search was conducted instead to identify a news source that could be searched in Facebook. This search, conducted on the 3rd of January 2023, identified online news stories about the policy (in this case, the BBC news article ‘Sunak says Rwanda plan “common sense” after court win¹’). While the BBC article did not come up in the search, a Sky News post about the policy ‘BREAKING: A government plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda is lawful, the High Court has ruled²’ did and this was a good match that contained a substantial discussion. Using the ‘all comments’ filter gave 553 original comments on the video. Most of these (476) did not generate any responses, therefore, given the focus of the research on interaction, the remaining 77 comments that did generate at least one reply were considered. These 77 original comments and their replies resulted in a total dataset of 586 comments involved in interactions about the policy. Two complete threads comprising 31 posts in total are presented in the analysis. These comments can be found by following the search steps outlined here The number in brackets following a post is the total number of emoji responses to the comments. The first P number refers to a unique contributor. A second P number refers to who the post is in response to.

Approach and analysis

The approach used in this study draws upon rhetorical (Billig, 1988) and discursive (Edwards and Potter, 1992) psychology in a hybrid approach that can be broadly understood as critical discursive psychology (Locke and Budds, 2020; Wetherell, 1998). This aligns with the approach that Goodman et al. (2023a) argue is ideal for addressing online interactions because of the detailed analysis of posts and how they are responded to, especially in terms of how they are supported and challenged. All data were coded by the first author, loosely following the steps set out by Goodman (2017). This meant that initially posts were coded simply for whether or not they displayed support or opposition which helped to identify threads that contained examples of both. From this it became possible to identify threads that were useful for further analysis. These threads were coded for more detail on what strategies and features were used to accomplish these ‘action orientations’ (Edwards and Potter, 1992), for example the use of the ‘you be deported too’ argument. Subsequent analysis focussed on threads that contained longer stretches of interaction, as these tended to include

more techniques for supporting and challenging previous comments. In the end a decision was made to present two of the longer threads included in the overall discussion to allow for a detailed focus on the different ways that comments were aligned with or critiqued. Other than anonymising posters, the extracts are presented as they appeared, including any typographic errors. The focus of this analysis is specifically on responses to comments. However, it can be noted that there may be entrenched political ideologies and opinions associated with support and opposition to refugees that may be evident in the data.

Ethics

While some (e.g., Suler, 2004) argue that being online leads to problematic anonymity, a bigger problem ethically is the *lack* of anonymity found on platforms like Facebook, where users can be too easily identified. To overcome this issue, all identifying information including names and profile photographs have been removed to protect users' identity. Otherwise, all data included are freely put into the public domain where there is an expectation that they may be shared and commented upon, as is the case in the data included in the analysis. Ethical approval was granted from the first author's institution.

Findings

Two extended threads are presented here, both are complete 'threads' in response to the Sky News post of Facebook. Both include a variety of features of supporting and challenging previous posts. The first extract begins with a post displaying opposition to the Rwanda policy; however, this support is controversial and generates further debate, with further posts showing support for the policy and so challenging the original post.

Extract One

1. **P1** Is unlawful [32]
2. **P2 P1** just like it is unlawful
3. to enter this country illegally ! [54]
4. **P3 P1** unlawful if I come to your house through
5. the back door will you like it. [16]
6. **P4 P1** 😂😂😂😂😂😂
7. **P5 P1** then you take a dozen
8. or so to stay with you for a while, [7]
9. **P6 P1** go back to Ghana
 10. **P1 P6** No
 11. I will not go back, I am gonna hide somewhere
 12. Western world is my home 😊😊 [5]
13. **P7 P1** well at least it stops
14. your brothers coming over [3]
15. **P8 P1** no is lawful, lo
16. that's why it went to court, [2]
17. **P9 P1** Seems not lol, have a
18. nice flight.

19. **P10 P1** think you'll find the high court just said it
20. legal to send them to Rwanda 🌍 [11]
21. **P11 P1** sorry was you planning on
22. hopping on a boat here? Unlucky
23. **P12 P1** no it's not [2]
24. **P10 P1** 😄
25. **P13 P1** arrive in Accra without
26. a passport and you will be put on the first plane
27. out and be detained until you leave. [3]
28. **P14 P1** no its lawful and thank god for
29. common sence and all you do-gooders should
30. be made to take a migrant into your home
31. if you want them to stay

This thread begins with P1 simply claiming that the policy presented in the Sky News article is unlawful. This works to criticise and challenge the policy, and so implicitly support refugees. However, it also rejects the decision of the High Court, which the report had shown had just ruled the policy to be legal.

P2 responds (12–3) to this claim not with a direct rejection of the point, but by claiming that it is also illegal to enter the UK illegally. This point therefore avoids a direct rejection of P1's claim, but nevertheless places accountability onto the refugees (rather than the government) whose illegal behaviour implicitly provides the justification for the Rwanda policy in the first place. P3 (14–5) uses a similar strategy to shift the blame and accountability on to the refugees who are likened to illegally entering homes. The rhetorical 'will you like it' (15) which is emotive, works to present the refugees' behaviour as a problem that needs addressing, therefore supporting the government policy and P2, while rejecting P1's objection to the policy.

The responses to P1's post continue and become less polite, for instance P4 (16) rejects P1's post by presenting it as ridiculous, which is achieved without text and simply through the use of five laughing emojis. P5 (17–8) also rejects P1's comment. Like P3, P5 draws on the 'own house' analogy and here directs the comments to P1 who is challenged to house some refugees themselves. While previous challenges to P1 have come by arguing over what is legal, here there is no discussion of legality and instead opposition to the policy is equated with open borders, hence the retort that someone opposing the policy should be personally willing to house refugees.

P6 (19) rejects P1 on yet more personal grounds, making no response to the legality comment, but instead orients to the poster's African sounding name (all names have been anonymised to protect identities) and uses the racist 'go home' argument (see Stollznow, 2020), in this case Ghana, hence suggesting that people with African sounding names may not belong in the UK and do not require a reasoned response to their comments. This is the one response that P1, the original poster, responds to (110–12), suggesting that the 'go home' comment is the most impactful of all the responding comments. P1's counter begins with a simple rejection ('no' 110) which is followed with a more elaborate rejection (111) and then possibly a joke ('gonna hide') and a more defiant rejection,

claiming that the general ‘Western world’ (not the more specific UK) is home, which is followed with two emojis with two sticking out tongues to depict defiance. There are no follow up comments to defend, or further attack, P1 for having an African sounding name, P7 (113–14) also orients to P1’s African sounding name and orients to them as a possible migrant. This also works to reject P1’s original point, but again rejects their legitimacy to post rather than the content of the post itself. Here, legal or not, the policy is supported for its potential to prevent more migrants reaching the UK.

In the next posts in the sequence, P1’s comment about the policy being unlawful is further debated. P8 (115–16) is picked up and directly rejected with a counterpoint ‘no is lawful’ (possibly repeating P1’s odd grammar, missing ‘it’) and supports this by drawing on the court’s decision, as reported in the news item, that the policy is legal. P9 (117–18) makes a similar comment to P8 by rejecting P1’s point and drawing on the court’s decision that the policy is legal, which is followed by a laugh token to ridicule the point (‘lol’ 117). The second part of this post ‘have a nice flight’ sarcastically suggests (like P6 and P7) that P1 is also a migrant who has a stake in opposing the policy because they too are at risk of deportation themselves, and like many posts in the wider online discussion, suggests that the poster being disagreed with should also be on a deportation flight. P10’s post (119–20), like P8’s, rejects P1’s claim that the policy is illegal, again drawing on the court’s decision and again using a laugh token, this time in the form of a laughing emoji, to emphasise the point and ridicule P1’s claim. The construction of P1 as a migrant continues in further posts, for example, in P11’s rhetorical question which demonstrates wider opposition to people from abroad where there is support for anti-refugee policies. P12 simply and explicitly rejects P1’s claim (‘no its not’ 123) and P10 who had ridiculed P1’s comment above returns to further ridicule it, here with the simple use of the clown emoji (124) which works as an insult.

The Ghana reference that came in earlier (19), comes up again where P13 (125–27) rejects P1’s comment by making a comparison with the UK and Ghana where it is suggested that anyone arriving there will be deported. In doing so, P13 shows support for the policy and opposition to P1’s criticism of it on legal grounds. Rather than presenting Ghana’s actions as harsh, this is used to present the UK not doing this as a deficiency. The choice of reference to Accra, rather than a more general ‘other countries’ is noteworthy as ‘Accra’ is the capital of Ghana, which is where P6 suggested P1 comes from and should return to.

In the final response to P1, P14 (128–31) begins with a simple rejection of P1’s claim, with the format ‘no’, followed by the counterpoint ‘its lawful’ This explicit rejection is followed by an upgrade with a positive evaluation (128–29) which presents the decision by the government as reasonable and obvious. This turn is followed by presenting those who oppose the policy and support refugees as ‘do gooders’ (129) who have the ‘stay in your home’ argument invoked. This suggests that those that do support refugees should be responsible for looking after them, as it argued here that the majority of people (those who are not ‘do-gooders’) do not want them. The argument moving into more general discussions about refugee policy demonstrates that the debate over the legality of this specific anti-refugee policy is acting as a proxy for the extent to which there should be measures to prevent refugees reaching, and living in, the UK.

This second post begins with support for the Rwanda policy, the opposite of the first post, however as with the critical initial post, this supportive initial post also proves controversial, with a range of supportive and challenging responses.

Extract Two

1. **P15** Good. Let's get cracking then. Plenty of our own who have
2. contributed into the system need help. [211]
3. **P16. P15** perhaps they could be joined by some of the feckless
4. scroungers born here whose only contribution to society has been
5. to inflict the product of their writhing loins on the taxpayers? [13]
6. **P17 P16** id much prefer to send all of the tory voting
7. gammons there tbh ! The mess they have got this country
8. into ! Cough cough [8]
9. **P18 P16** yeah like the Royal family [2]
10. **P19 P15** does that mean you want "our own" deported, you do
11. know that the Rwanda scheme is a swap scheme, they get the
12. fit and able that survived the channel, in return UK gets the
13. special needs Rwanda can't deal with and UK pays for it all. Did
14. you know that? [8]
15. **P7 P19** Special needs, mentally ill, gay, trans . . . who
16. knows what comes under 'most vulnerable'
17. **P20 P19** where did u get this information conspiracies r
18. us 😂😂😂
19. **P21 P15** yes you are first 😂😂👉 [3]
20. **P17 P15** comments like this lol ! The common xenophobic
21. gammon dont care about anybody but themselves so dont act
22. like you care about OUR OWN as you put it !! You don't [3]
23. **P22 P15** He got the Gammon comment out, he feels better
24. now. 😂 [7]
25. **P23 P22** oh bore off and grow up 😞 [2]
26. **P24 P15** what happened to Humanity?? Did Africa track down
27. the colonizers and sent them back to UK? [2]
28. **P25 P15** say that when Indians are coming with a free visa,
29. wait UK will be like Bombay soon. Don't be coming to Africa
30. **P7 P15** If you think this will improve things for 'our own' you
31. are an utter fool. This is costing billions and we still have
32. 100,000awaiting assessment and Tory donors being paid
33. millions a day to look after them
34. **P26 P15** indeed

This extract begins with P15's post which displays support for the ruling that the policy is legal, drawing on in-and out-group discourses that we should be supporting 'our own' first. This is a standard argument uses in discussions in the UK about how support should be given (e.g. Lynn and Lea, 2003). This support is brought about through a

simple agreement token (good), an upgrade in the form of encouragement to start the deportations (see Baym, 1996, on how online agreements include an agreement token and an upgrade) and then a justification for the support by drawing on the ‘differentiating the self’ (Lynn and Lea, 2003) argument which draws on the need of UK citizens to oppose supporting refugees. The first response to this (from P16) contains neither a direct agreement or disagreement, but brings in a criticism of unspecified British ‘feckless scroungers’ (13–4) who are criticised for not making a proper contribution. This works to both present refugees as a financial burden too, whilst also criticising some British people, seemingly making an anti-benefit claimant argument simultaneously. P17 responds to P16’s with an implicit agreement that some people should be sent away, and suggests those Tory (Conservative Party) supporting people, who are described with the insult ‘gammon’ (17) to be sent away. This turn makes this particular group accountable for problems in the country. P18 then responds to P16 (19) with an implicit challenge, here bringing the royal family into the wider category of ‘scrounger’. It is interesting how a discussion that initially began with an endorsement of a potentially racist policy has moved quickly to targeting other groups within our society – ‘benefit scroungers’, ‘gammons’ and, finally, ‘the royal family’.

The next set of turns begins with P19 picking up P15’s original comment and challenging it. This post begins with a question, that problematises the idea of deporting British people (but not refugees). The next part of the post suggests a lack of knowledge about the Rwanda policy on P15’s part which is followed by a critical explanation of the policy which is presented as not in the UK’s interest because it will mean taking people, described as ‘special needs’ (113) from Rwanda. This comment receives two responses, one aligning and one challenging. The first, from P7, aligns with P19 by agreeing that the policy is a problem which is done by elaborating on what is meant by ‘special needs’ (115 + 16) citing a list of supposedly undesirable groups including those who are ‘mentally ill, gay and trans’. P20, on the other hand, ridicules P19’s post, with another rhetorical question that positions P19’s argument as a conspiracy. The ridiculing is completed with three laughing emojis.

The thread moves to direct responses to P15’s initial post where P21 initially directs a negative response to P15 drawing on the ‘others should be deported’ argument, here suggesting that it is P15 that should be deported, a point punctuated with two laughing and one ‘ok’ emoji. P17 then also criticises P15’s original post first with a ridiculing comment, which is punctuated with a laugh token (lol, l20), followed by a counterpoint and an insult. The counterpoint is that the poster, and, by insinuation, people like them, do not care about anyone. This serves to undermine P15 and others’ earlier arguments that needy British people should be prioritised over refugees, and instead suggests that they are selfish and uncaring. The insult is two part containing ‘xenophobic’ (l20), a weaker version of an accusation of racism (van Dijk, 1992), and ‘gammon’ (l21, also used earlier in 17) which is an insult directed at right wing older white men who typically vote Conservative and for the UK leaving the EU.

The responses to this comment are very critical. The first, from P22 directly refers to the use of ‘gammon’ (l23) belittling its usage, and, along with it the poster, as something obvious that ‘someone was going to say’. This is punctuated with a laughing emoji. P23 also belittles the gammon comment with a mild ‘go away’ comment and insult (‘grow

up’) punctuated with an eye rolling emoji which symbolises a sarcastic frustration with the post. While both of these posts challenge the gammon comment and belittle the poster for using it, neither post addresses the more substantive point about not offering support for refugees or British people alike.

The final set of posts begin where P24 adds a new reply to the original post by challenging it with an appeal to ‘humanity’ through the use of a rhetorical question (126) which is followed by a criticism of historic British colonialism which inferentially in this post is present in the new Rwanda policy. This post is the closest that the thread gets to ‘calling out’ the inherent discrimination in discussions around the policy. Such a concern is short lived however, when P25 responds to P15 to suggest that the new policy is going to allow Indians into the UK, using the recognisable ‘migrants will take over’ (what Lixinski (2018, p15) calls a ‘fantasy of domination’ argument (129)). The final part of the comment seems to be about not sending Indians to Africa. P7, who has earlier challenged P19, now responds to P15 by challenging their initial comment about supporting British people ahead of refugees, by further criticising the UK’s government and its refugee policy. The suggestion that the policy will be beneficial for needy British people is presented as ridiculous to the point that it warrants the insult of ‘utter fool’ (130) for believing it. Following this, P7 elaborates on the criticism of the refugee policy for being costly and doing nothing to address the backlog of asylum claims. The Conservative (‘Tory’, 132) government and their donors are then blamed for this, because they are deemed to financially benefit from it. This stretch of conversation ends with P26 offering a simple token of support to the original point (‘indeed’, 134).

Discussion

This analysis has shown the many different ways that internet users engage with a debate about the treatment of refugees. The analysis has therefore also identified examples of internet users both aligning with, and challenging, posts. In doing so it has shown how these discussions can descend rapidly into insults and name calling with very little quality debate. Related to this, the analysis has identified a number of well recognised arguments in refugee discourses, including both anti-refugee and supporting refugee arguments. These points will now be addressed in turn.

The focus of the analysis is how comments are challenged or supported and there are many examples of both actions in the data analysed, with support and alignment coming on both sides of the argument in favour and against the Rwanda refugee policy. One of the most noteworthy ways that alignment and challenges are enacted is through the way that other internet users, who do not appear to be acquaintances, enter the debate either to challenge an existing comment (such as in P2’s first contribution), to agree with an existing post (such as with P26’s contribution stating ‘indeed’ to support P5’s statement that the policy is ‘good’). One common feature of this is bringing in additional arguments or (supposed) facts to bolster earlier points (see Baym, 1996), for example in extract one, P13 adding a scenario about arriving in a different country without a passport and being turned away, to support the argument (e.g., that of P2) that those arriving in the UK without a passport should also be turned away.

A particularly notable feature of this talk is how disagreement and challenges to existing posts are enacted. Some of these come in the form of counterpoints (such as P9’s

'seems not lol') and others in the simpler form of a rejection (such as P20's 'where did u get this information') or ridiculing of a point (P17's response to P21 'comments like this lol !' or P4 directing laughing emojis to P1). On some occasions a more complex structure can be seen in the form of (a) simple rejection, (b) counterpoint, (c) upgrade, such as P8's (a) 'no' (b) is 'lawful', (c) 'that's why it went to court'

One commonly used argument that is directed at supporters of refugees (i.e., those criticising the policy) to reject their point is that they should have refugees live in their own houses. This (false) equating of people coming into a country and people coming into individual's homes is routinely used to attempt to undermine pro-refugee arguments. This can be seen, for example, in P3's response to P1's opposition to the Rwanda policy which picks up the point about law, but applies it to a home invasion 'unlawful if I come to your house through the back door will you like it' and P5, also replying to P1, 'then you take a dozen or so to stay with you for a while'. This argument presents the incoming of refugees into a host country as an individual, rather than collective, issue.

Another recognisable feature of the debate is a 'you be deported too' argument, in which posters make claims about other people who should also be deported. Those to be deported are always opponents in the debate. This is less prominent in extract one, but P9's 'have a nice flight' to P1 suggests that P1 should be deported. The feature is more prominent in extract two where much of the discussion is around whether other people (ranging from 'feckless scroungers' to 'tory voting gammons' to 'the Royal family' and also the initial contributor) should also be deported.

While this analysis has demonstrated that there are a range of strategies used to support and reject previous points, in some way, there is little debate on display as the discussion often descend quickly into insults (e.g., 'utter fool' or 'xenophobic gammon'), ridiculing ('oh bore off and grow up' and the use of laughing and clown emojis) and name calling (including 'Brexiters' and 'do-gooders'). In addition to this, is the use of the recognisably racist 'go home' argument (Goodman et al., 2023b) 'go back to Ghana' directed towards someone that was understood to be of African heritage who opposed the policy. It is noteworthy that no one came to this person's defence when this argument was used. This does suggest the lack of quality debate throughout the discussion.

As part of these arguments, there are some well recognised and less well recognised anti-refugee arguments in use throughout this debate. Refugees are presented as illegal (e.g., Leudar et al., 2008) and as attempting to gain British resources which both work to delegitimise refugees and to remove their special (category bound) status of being people seeking refugee because they are fleeing dangers (i.e., they are migrants, not refugees, see e.g., Goodman and Speer, 2007). There are other anti-refugee arguments being used in this data too, notably the 'first safe country' argument which states that refugees cannot go to the UK because they must have travelled through other safe counties (such as France) to get there; this argument ultimately means that no refugees should travel to the UK unless invited. Another argument that is prevalent in the debate is that those who support refugees are also bad, and sometime worse than refugees themselves. This can be seen in the hostility directed towards people supporting refugees (or 'do gooders') in the debate or more broadly, such as the criticism of the leader of the opposition party and the courts. As well as anti-refugee arguments that are prominent in the data, there are also

pro-refugee arguments, such as criticism of the UK's system, references to the legal right to claim asylum and claims that most asylum seekers are deemed to be 'genuine'.

The discussion here, to an extent, reflects pre-existing arguments around refugee issues (see for example Goodman and Kirkwood, 2019 for a review) which suggests that the specific argument about the Rwanda policy is working as a proxy for wider debates about refugees (and migrants and non-White people more broadly). Therefore, this is why recognisable established anti and *pro*-refugee arguments are found amongst the specific arguments about the legality of the Rwanda refugee policy in the data presented here. What this analysis offers which is novel is the way in which some of these arguments are supported and challenged by internet users.

The findings of this analysis offer little to support Suler's (2004) concept of 'toxic disinhibition', most clearly because those posting on Facebook are *not* anonymous, with contributors' names on display (although they have been anonymised for the purposes of this analysis and report) so it seems unlikely that dissociative anonymity or invisibility, for example, are impacting the debate. There is perhaps more support for Postmes et al. (1998) explanation that people identify more strongly with group identities, particularly as we see terms associated with the ongoing refugee (and migration) debate which has clear supporters and opponents (such as Brexiteers and do-gooders) being deployed in the debates. This analysis has begun to shed light on how contentious posts are supported and challenged, albeit within a very specific context. This analysis therefore demonstrates the potential for an interactional approach to understanding online arguments and online hate.

Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated some of the techniques that are used in an online discussion about a controversial refugee policy to both support and challenge comments. Alongside well recognised *pro* and *anti*-refugee arguments, such as presenting refugees as illegal and as an economic threat, or instead as documented in the threads, support for posts is shown to come in the form of additional points that build on and bolster existing ones. Opposition to posts tended to be more diverse and included simple rejections and counterpoints, sometimes taking a three-part structure of (a) simple rejection, (b) counterpoint, (c) upgrade. Opposition also took the form of insults, ridiculing and name calling as well as the use of the recognisable racist 'go home' argument. It is suggested that the specific argument about the one refugee policy works as a proxy for the wider debate about refugees where entrenched identity-based positions are already in place. Discursive and rhetorical analyses have been shown to have potential to understand online behaviour offering more detail than relying on anonymity to explain controversial and hateful speech.

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Notes

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/uk-64007371>
2. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=3303967316523811&external_log_id=beb87ac2-5223-4fca-8169-96e7746382fc&q=%22Rwanda%20asylum%20plan%3A%20PM%20backs%20%27common%20sense%27%20scheme%20after%20court%20win%22

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