

TRACING PUBLIC SENTIMENTS AND POLICY CHANGES TOWARD CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS USING LLM

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Abstract

Recent Canadian higher education policies, such as the federal international student cap, reflect a growing nationalist-populist orientation. To understand how such policy directions emerge and gain traction, our study moves upstream from policy content to public discourse. We conduct a thematic analysis of social media posts (on Twitter/X) using a large language model (ChatGPT-5), comparing pre-pandemic (2015–2020) and post-pandemic (2020–2025) discourse. Our findings reveal a post-pandemic surge in negative sentiments, increasingly framing international students as competitors for housing, jobs, and public resources. We demonstrate that public discourse not only reflects individual perceptions but also drives national agenda-setting and gives momentum to restrictive policy measures within Canadian international higher education. Consequently, it is important for higher education leaders and policy makers to account for the policy implications of discursive scapegoating and to consider the role of social integration in sustaining internationalization efforts.

Keywords: Twitter/X, international students, Canada, ChatGPT, LLM, policy

Résumé

Les récentes politiques canadiennes en matière d'enseignement supérieur, comme le plafonnement fédéral du nombre d'étudiant[e]s internationaux, témoignent d'une orientation nationaliste-populiste croissante. Afin de comprendre comment de telles orientations émergent et gagnent en influence, notre étude se déplace en amont du contenu des politiques pour s'intéresser au discours public. Nous réalisons une analyse thématique de publications sur les médias sociaux (Twitter/X) à l'aide d'un grand modèle de langage (ChatGPT-5), en comparant les discours des périodes pré-pandémique (2015–2020) et post-pandémique (2020–2025). Nos résultats révèlent une recrudescence des sentiments négatifs après la pandémie, les étudiant[e]s internationaux étant de plus en plus présenté[e]s comme des concurrents pour le logement, l'emploi

et les ressources publiques. Nous montrons ainsi que le discours public ne se contente pas de refléter des perceptions individuelles, mais qu'il oriente également la définition du programme national et donne de l'élan à des mesures politiques restrictives dans le domaine de l'enseignement supérieur international au Canada. Il importe donc que les responsables de l'enseignement supérieur et les décideur[-euse]s politiques tiennent compte des implications politiques de cette désignation de boucs émissaires dans leurs discours et considèrent le rôle de l'intégration sociale dans la pérennisation des efforts d'internationalisation.

Mots clés: Twitter, étudiants internationaux, Canada, ChatGPT, LLM, politiques publiques

INTRODUCTION

Our study seeks to understand how nationalist-populist discourses in public online conversations about Canadian international students influence higher education policy decisions. While existing literature has examined the implementation of nationalist-oriented international student policies (Trilokekar & Tamtik, 2025; Harden-Wolfson et al., 2025), there remains a gap in understanding of how public discourse, especially through participatory social media, amplifies such sentiments and generates political and policy pressure. Exploring digital discourse is important to understanding how international students become symbolically positioned within broad Canadian socio-political debates. The perspective also helps to explain why national interest-focused policies, such as the federal international student cap, can gain momentum quickly within the political agenda.

Canada has traditionally been regarded as a safe, welcoming, and attractive destination for international students. Policy makers have viewed international students as ideal candidates for transition to permanent residency for their Canadian credentials, language proficiency, and domestic experience (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018; Scott et al., 2015). Unlike the United States, which has more restrictions to international student off-campus employment to protect the domestic talent pool, Canada, since 2008, has offered international students greater flexibility in employment-settlement pathways (Lowe, 2008; She & Wotherspoon, 2013). However, the post-pandemic era marks a shift in pol-

icy orientation. In January 2024, the Canadian government introduced a series of restrictive measures, including tighter immigration pathways and a federal international student enrolment cap.

In the period leading up to aforementioned policy developments, racialized online commentary about international students has increased (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2023), as observed by rising volumes of posts on platforms such as X (Twitter)¹, YouTube, and Reddit. We anticipate that the growth of negative public sentiments on social media platforms is linked to the emergence and legitimization of restrictive policy measures targeting international students. This categoric alignment points to a broad nationalist-populist turn in Canadian higher education policy, in which public discourse operates not only as a reflection of societal concerns, but also as a potential driver of policy changes. By foregrounding public sentiments in the policy formation process, our study brings attention to an important but often overlooked driving force of international student policy making in Canada.

Specifically, our research question is: In what ways do public discourses on social media articulate nationalist-populist sentiments about international students in Canada, and how might these discourses influence policy agenda-setting? Our study has two key contribu-

1 Twitter/X are used interchangeably. For consistency, this article will refer to the platform as X.

tions: It empirically documents the emergence of nationalist-populist discourse surrounding international students in Canada, and it also advances the methodological approach of using LLMs to conduct thematic analysis in higher education internationalization research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the existing literature shows that scholarship has developed along three mostly separate areas: studies of Canadian international student policy, the post-COVID-19 rise in nationalist and anti-international student sentiment, and using digital political communication and computational social science to investigate online social media discourse. However, the three areas have never been combined and examined under one framework. Our study addresses this knowledge gap by integrating these perspectives to observe the ways that nationalist-populist sentiments toward international students are expressed, potentially contributing to policy agenda-setting.

International Students in Canada

International student mobility has long been both a politically strategic and economically significant policy area, cutting across aspects of the education, immigration, and labour market systems (Knight, 2008; Tamtik et al., 2020). In the process of higher education internationalization, Canada has emerged as one of the most popular destinations of study for its high-quality education system, greater public safety, and favourable immigration prospects (Jing et al., 2021). The early depiction of international students as fee-paying outsiders gradually evolved into a national economic strategy that linked studying in Canada with pathways to immigration through a two-step model (McCartney, 2021). This education (higher education-immigration) process was designed for international students to study in Canada, generate revenue, participate in the labour market, and, ultimately, transition into “ideal immigrants” and future Canadian citizens (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). As a result of both recruitment efforts and student interest, inter-

national student enrolments have surged. Between 2013–2014 and 2022–2023, the number of post-secondary international students more than doubled from 199,116 to 468,087 (Statistics Canada, 2024a).

The model has produced substantial economic value for Canada. In 2022, international student expenditures on tuition, accommodation, and discretionary items contributed approximately \$30.9 billion (~1.2%) to Canada’s GDP (Global Affairs Canada, 2024), with roughly a third of the total coming from tuition payments (Qadeer, 2022). Universities and colleges have become increasingly reliant on international student tuition as a source of revenue, covering 100% of all increases in institutional operating expenditures since 2010 (Usher, 2024). Declining levels of funding, especially in Ontario, which has the most international students enrolled, further drive institutions to expand recruitment abroad and sustain budgets (Loo, 2024). While international students have generated clear economic benefits to Canada, their growing presence has also positioned them as the focus of contentious debates.

Re/surgence of Nationalist-Populist Discourse and Policy in Higher Education

Addressing the (re)surgence of neo-racism and neo-nationalism has been a central task for higher education globally, as international students are often stereotyped in racialized ways that deepen their exclusion (Lee, 2016). Scholarship on host country discourse highlights how international students are frequently positioned in contradictory terms. A dominant theme is the economic framing of students as “cash cows,” valued for their tuition revenues and consumer spending, but simultaneously exploited for their financial potential (Robertson, 2011; Tannock, 2018; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, negative portrayals have also intensified, especially for students of Asian descent, who were stigmatized through “yellow peril” tropes and represented as bearers of disease (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2023; Yao & Mwangi, 2022).

In the United States, the “Make America Great Again (MAGA)” campaign intensified anti-immigration sentiment by framing foreign students and workers as threats to domestic employment (Weimer & Barlete, 2020). In the United Kingdom, Brexit-inspired nationalism tightened student selection policies that opened doors to only the “best and brightest” international students. Both contexts illustrate how nationalist-populist logics cast international students as outsiders whose presence must be carefully managed to safeguard national opportunities. A similar pattern has emerged in Canada. In the post-pandemic period, international students have become subject of nationalist-populist discourse that links their presence to housing shortages, strained public services, and diminished opportunities for citizens (Hamilton & Su, 2024). These everyday systemic disjunctures have created widespread frustrations that, at times, spill over into resentment for international students who are similarly competing for limited housing and jobs (Kalb & Halmai, 2011; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024). As the public sentiment pressures gained visibility, they were increasingly mirrored by policy responses targeting international student inflows. In 2024, the Government of Canada announced a two-year international student cap that reduced the number of study permits issued by 35% in 2024, followed by an additional 10% reduction in 2025 (Government of Canada, 2024; Lone, 2025). At the same time, pathways associated with post-study settlement have become more restrictive, including increased difficulty in obtaining Post-Graduation Work Permits (PGWPs) and spousal open work permits. The introduction of the provincial attestation letter (PAL), which requires provinces to confirm that each international student falls within their allocated cap, has further constrained student mobility. Collectively, the aforementioned policy changes have been presented under the rationale of protecting domestic housing conditions and reducing pressure on labour markets and public services. However, they have also contributed to a growing perception of unwelcomeness, eroding Canada’s previous cordial image and leading international students to consider alternative destinations (“Is Canada Losing Ground,” 2023).

Computational Social Science and Digital Political Communication

In the age of new media, digital platforms enable active, decentralized, and participatory forms of communications (Jenkins, 2006). Computational social science and digital political communication have emerged as two complementary fields that offer important insights for understanding contemporary public discourse. Computational social science (Lazer et al., 2009) builds on those digital systems, such as online platforms and social media, generating large-scale data traces that can be used to examine individual and collective behaviour. By powerfully analyzing the data, computational social science enables the systematic study of sentiment formation, belief expression, and discursive broadcast. In our study, the nationalist and anti-international student sentiments are conceptualized as digitally produced and mediated social phenomena that circulate through network clusters and online interactions. On a related note, digital political communication highlights how social media and online activities reshape the formation and circulation of the public’s political opinion. Instead of following traditional broadcasting logic, online social media platforms operate through rhizomatic networks characterized by multiple, non-hierarchical points of connection (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). These structures facilitate the appearance of collective discourses through dispersed, self-articulated public expressions, creating feedback processes that can influence political institutions and governance (Gurevitch et al., 2009).

As one of the most widely used platforms for public expression and discourse analysis, X possesses the immediacy and ability to capture public interests and concerns (Xue et al., 2020). Its microblogging feature and lower barriers of participation allow diverse users to publish their ideas, respond to events, and circulate narratives rapidly (Malik et al., 2019). There have been separate previous studies of X discourse in the topic of higher education and nationalism. In the higher education context, X was used to study international student mobility and communication networks (Park & Park, 2021), as well as the discursive framing of international students

during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2023). Existing scholarship have also highlighted X's role in measuring nationalism, such as constructing quotidian displays of Hindu nationalism (Bhatia, 2022), and the proliferation of Trump's nationalist-populist remarks (Schertzer & Woods, 2020). Together, the studies highlight how X plays a key role in normalizing sentiment through discourse and informing our understanding of how public narratives about international students may acquire broader political salience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We reference Kingdon's (1984) multiple streams approach to explain the emergence of restrictive Canadian international student policies. The framework is used in situations to understand agenda-setting, as well as the logic behind how floating ideas capture the attention of politicians and policy makers (Reardon, 2018). Specifically, the multiple streams framework (comprising problem, policy, and political streams) proposes that policy change happens when three independent "streams" join to create the opening of a policy window. The problem stream highlights conditions that are framed as issues requiring governmental attention, such as claims that international students are straining Canadian public resources. The policy stream includes policy proposals that are generated by experts, academics, and politicians (Hoefer, 2022). Our study, however, concentrates on the political stream, which captures the national mood and public opinion that together determine when policy action becomes viable. We analyze nationalist-populist discourses on social media as indicators of the political stream. By situating the discourses alongside the timeline of Canadian international student policy changes, we assess how shifts in public sentiment take part in creating and reinforcing conditions for restrictive policy frameworks. In other words, the multiple streams framework strengthens our analysis by providing a mechanism through which public sentiment, previously comprehended as mainly descriptive, can be interpreted as a policy-relevant signal.

METHODS AND DATA

The study introduces an innovative approach by employing large language models (LLMs) for the thematic analysis of social media public discourse. Specifically, LLMs are trained on extensive textual data and can generate and interpret human-like language at scale (Thapa et al., 2025). Although LLMs offer scalable capabilities for interpreting large textual datasets, they remain underutilized in research on the (de)internationalization of higher education. Sabzalieva & Valentini (2023) have explored ChatGPT's potential in higher education research, very importantly in suggesting themes or topics for analysis. We use ChatGPT to assist our thematic analysis, as it is one of the most widely utilized LLM tools. Approach-wise, we collect and analyze publicly available posts from X to capture a broad spectrum of public sentiment about international students in Canada. In this context, X operates as a rhizomatic network of multiple connection points to allow public opinion to form collective discourses (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Its low entry barriers and reliance on user-generated content (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020) allow local residents to voice their opinions on societal concerns, such as attributing housing shortages and job insecurity to international students. Our dataset spans from 2015–2020 and 2020–2025, with the former period reflecting pre-pandemic narratives of globalization and multiculturalism, and the latter reflecting concerns of economic uncertainty and resource competition. March 11, 2020, the date of the World Health Organization's official COVID-19 pandemic declaration, serves as the temporal watershed for this comparison. The cut-off date for our data collection is May 31, 2025.

We used the search phrase "Canada international students" in X to retrieve relevant posts. Although our focus is on post-secondary international students, we selected the search phrasing because it reflects the most common way post-secondary students are referenced in public online spheres. Moreover, the public and political debates most frequently associated with international students, such as tuition rates, housing shortages, work permits, and permanent residency pathways, are already overwhelmingly tied to post-secondary educa-

tion. While graduate and undergraduate international students may experience higher education differently, an initial scan suggested that public discourse rarely differentiates between the two subgroups. Introducing additional keywords (e.g., undergraduate, master's, or doctoral) would possibly exclude relevant discussions and sentiments.

In total, our dataset captures 90,524 tweets across the course of 10 years. All data is organized by year and stored in Excel spreadsheets, including tweet ID, URL, username, tweet content, and timestamp. To prioritize original expressions of opinion and reduce amplification effects from highly circulated content, we selected original posts only and excluded retweets and replies. For conducting the study, we reference the step-by-step framework outlined by Naeem et al. (2025), which details how to use a large language model (ChatGPT) for thematic analysis. The framework is grounded in Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase methodology, encompassing data familiarization, initial keyword generation, coding, theme development, conceptual categorization, and final justification. Moreover, our prompt is designed with the six R's (Realness, Richness, Repetition, Rationale, Repartee, and Regal) in mind, tapping into the depth of analysis (Naeem et al., 2025). We further edited the recommended prompt to fit our study's context, with the exact prompt listed below:

You are assisting with a thematic analysis of social media discourses about international students in Canada.

The research question is: "In what ways do public discourses on social media articulate nationalist-populist sentiments about international students in Canada, and how might these discourses influence policy agenda-setting?"

Please follow these steps:

Step 1:

For each year, identify the main themes in the discourse about international students. Focus on broad conceptual categories.

Step 2:

For each year, identify which broad elements of discourse appear. These elements can include social, economic, cultural, political, or nationalist-populist dimensions—but do not assume any of them must be present. Only note the ones that actually show up in that year's data.

Step 3:

For the elements identified in a given year, briefly describe how they are articulated and how they are situated within the broader discourse (e.g., whether framed in economic terms, cultural identity, fairness, exclusion, opportunity, or policy demands).

Step 4:

Output the results as a year-by-year list. For each year, provide:

- Year label,
- Themes (with brief conceptual explanations), and
- Notes on whether nationalist-populist discourse is present, and if so, how it is expressed.

Do not yet do a cross-year synthesis. The goal at this stage is to map themes within each year separately and to trace the point at which nationalist-populist discourse emerges.

We focus on a year-by-year analytical approach in order to track the temporal development of the discourse more effectively. The research design recognizes that thematic elements, such as nationalist-populist-oriented discourse, may emerge gradually rather than being present since 2015. By examining each year independently and deliberately avoiding cross-year inference at the initial stage, we document within-year dynamics before proceeding to comparative analysis. Only after the first stage do we compare patterns across the years to identify broader shifts in trajectory, including

a focused comparison between pre- and post-pandemic discourse. Another key feature of our approach is the intentional avoidance of assuming that the nationalist-populist discourse will necessarily appear. Instead, we allow broader categories of discourse to emerge naturally from the data. This reduces the risk of ChatGPT hallucination (Özer, 2024; Sun et al., 2024) to engage in unfounded fabrication in identifying themes that do not exist, and having the hallucination snowball (Zhang et al., 2023) across the entirety of the analysis.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A comparative analysis of X data before and after March 2020 reveals a sharp increase in the volume of tweets discussing international students in Canada during the post-pandemic period. This is also accompanied by a change in nature and tone of public discourse.

Pre-Pandemic Discourse

Before the pandemic, commentary about international students on X was relatively limited in both volume and scope. Much of the activity came from institutional actors, such as universities, education agents and service providers for promotional purposes. Two dominant narratives characterized this period: marketized international student mobility, and Canada as an imagined educational utopia.

First, Canada was frequently depicted as a transnational pathway, where investment in Canadian education was exchanged for both academic credentials and enhanced migration opportunities. Tweets often referenced study permits, PGWPs (Post-Graduation Work Permits), and permanent residence as key outcomes, positioning Canadian education as opening up to an attainable and feasible immigration pathway. For example, one post described Canada as “one of the best potential offers to international students in terms of the opportunity to study and work” (January 8,

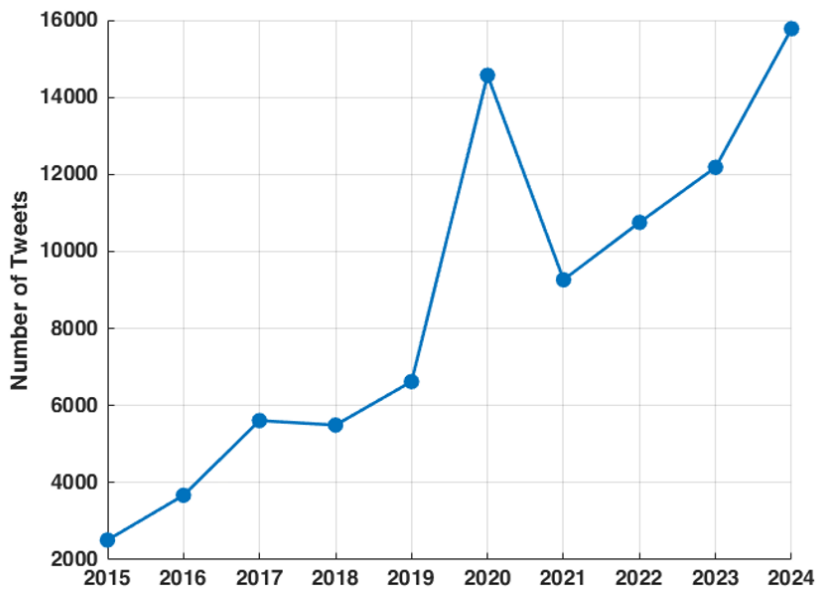
2016)². Importantly, while the marketized framing often drew concerns about higher education deviating from domestic or meritocratic priorities, resentful sentiments toward international students were relatively scarce, and the commodified nature of Canadian higher education was broadly normalized.

Second, Canada was constructed as a welcoming, safe, and inclusive destination for international students. Posts frequently linked national identity to opportunity, reinforcing the idea of a collective educational utopia where diversity and prosperity intersected. Examples include: “Canada’s mixed culture creates an environment that is supportive of international students! Canadians are the nicest people” (June 15, 2016), and “Students r looking 4 alternatives & Canada is a good one in terms of stability, safety and inclusiveness” (September 3, 2017). Such messaging amplified host country pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), portraying Canada as a place where newcomer students will not feel isolated and stigmatized.

Third, a key distinction between pre- and post-pandemic discourse was in scale. Figure 1 shows that pre-COVID tweets about Canadian international students remained relatively modest in numbers, with entries averaging ~4,781 per year. In 2020, the discourse spiked sharply, likely a shock effect of the pandemic. While the frequency dipped slightly in 2022 as everyday life gradually normalized, the volume of tweets never returned to pre-pandemic levels. Instead, tweets published in 2020 and later averaged ~12,510 per year, almost triple the pre-pandemic amount. Beyond the pandemic’s initial disruptive role in social media discourse, international students have also become more politicized and contested in public debate. Whereas pre-pandemic discourse was more confined to universities, agents, and students themselves, the post-pandemic discourse attracted a wider range of newly emerged stakeholders, such as key opinion leaders, local residents, and political figures, to broaden the volume and impact of debate.

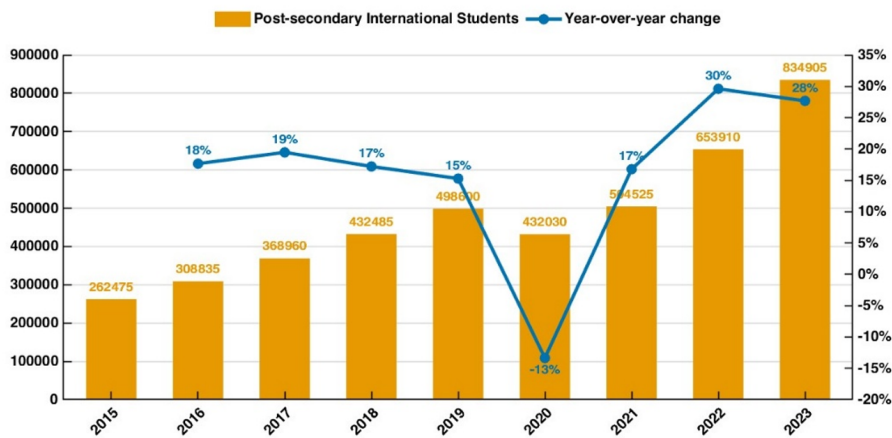
2 Given their illustrative role, we have chosen to identify tweets by dates, rather than full APA7 citations.

Figure 1
Annual Volume of Tweets Referencing International Students in Canada, 2015–2024



Source: Graphed by author with data derived from X (Twitter).

Figure 2
Post-secondary International Students in Canada, 2015–2023



Note. Data from Government of Canada (2024). Visualization adapted from Loo (2024).

Finally, comparing discourse volume with yearly enrolment of post-secondary international students in Canada also reveals interesting correlations. As Figure 2 exemplifies, international student enrolment expanded rapidly from 2015 to 2019, declined in 2020 due to pandemic-related border restrictions, and then rebounded drastically through 2023. Over the longer term, the volume of X discourse generally follows this upward trajectory. However, a divergence occurred in 2020, when discourse volume increased despite a decline in student numbers. Such a divergence suggests the presence of additional driving forces beyond enrolment alone, which surfaced during a period of unprecedented outbreak of epidemic. We strive to better understand such dynamics by looking beyond enrolment volume and examining the content of discourse, such as shifts in sentiment and narrative, that reveal how international students are positioned in broader socio-political debates.

Post-Pandemic Discourse

March 2020–End of 2021: Pandemic Shock and Anxiety

The immediate early pandemic discourse about international students was characterized by shock, anxiety, and stigmatization, particularly toward Chinese international students, echoing findings from previous studies (Ma & Zhan, 2020; Ji & Chen, 2023; Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2023). In the spring of 2020, much of the public conversation centred on health risks and mobility controls, focusing on border restrictions and government decisions regarding whether international students would be permitted entry. One tweet, for example, highlighted their inclusion within essential travel exemptions: “Ottawa will allow temporary foreign workers, international students into Canada” (March 18, 2020).

As the pandemic unfolded, attention gradually shifted away from mobility logistics toward the lived experiences of students and the (in)adequacy of available support systems. Some cited the loneliness and disconnection international students felt upon arrival: “While classes

remain online at the University of Windsor, some international students still made the trip to come to Canada. With the pandemic, they say the process was a lonely one” (February 2, 2021). This turn in discourse reflected a more empathetic framing, emphasizing isolation during the pandemic was a shared challenge and affirming a sense of solidarity across the Canadian community. At the same time, discourse also drew attention to the more troubling dimensions of vulnerability, especially mental health risks. One post warned: “There is a mental health crisis in the international student community in Canada. Exploitation, isolation, and the lack of support networks are leading to suicides” (June 9, 2021). Even in raising these concerns, the overall narrative of public discussion remained supportive rather than adversarial, focusing on the international students’ precarity and need for protection.

2022–Now: Increasing Frustration

Starting in 2022, discourses surrounding international students shifted to economic blame and social competition. Students were increasingly portrayed as drivers of the housing crisis, contributors to the rising cost of living, and strains on public services and the labour market. As such, these narratives echoed broader national anxieties about affordability and economic stress. Typical of nationalist-populist rhetoric, the discourse adopted a sharp “us vs. them” framing, drawing a symbolic boundary of xenophobic narratives. Employment emerged as a widely discussed point of contention. International students were accused of displacing Canadians’ job opportunities and depressing wages, with one X user lamenting that the government was “giving away jobs to foreign students vs. Canadian” (March 17, 2023). It is likely such sentiment also sprang from worsening domestic labour market conditions. By September 2024, Canada’s unemployment rate had climbed to 6.5%, up from 5% earlier in 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2024b). Youths were especially impacted, with unemployment in this age group reaching 13.5%.

Housing also emerged as a dominant focal point of frustration, with posts questioning why international students were permitted to

purchase property during a housing crisis. One tweet alleged that international students were buying houses with “their parents’ undeclared black money” (April 7, 2022), thereby worsening the unaffordability of the Canadian real estate market. Another took the argument further, claiming that “international students and immigration has been the sole responsibility of the fact that Canada is in a severe housing crisis” (August 6, 2022). In these portrayals, international students were recasted as paradoxical figures who are at once wealthy elites, yet simultaneously draining public systems. Intense sentiments also spilled into debates over necessities. Controversies arose over whether international students should be allowed to access food banks at all, with critics asserting that “International students with \$60K in the bank accounts shocked to learn they can’t access the food banks... Food banks are for the needy, not the greedy” (November 7, 2023). Simultaneously, narratives of illegitimacy expanded, with tweets accusing students of manipulating the system, with one critic claiming students were “[using] the Canadian students visa as [a] back door to enter Canada” (September 23, 2022) with the goal of settling permanently.

Geographically, international students in Atlantic Canada were frequently discussed. One user complained that “Trudeau has dumped immigrants & refugees in Nova Scotia. There’s also 12k international students. Rental vacancy rate lowest in Canada. Uni in old cinema’s” (July 13, 2023). The expressed discourse reflects increased pressures experienced by small and mid-sized Canadian cities, where the limited housing stock and rapid international student population growth continued to magnify tensions. Comparatively with existing research, the rhetoric aligns with findings from interviews with international students in the Atlantic region who reported encountering discriminatory barriers when trying to secure housing (Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024). The intersection of local housing shortages and limited employment opportunities appears to intensify public frustration, producing hostile sentiments locally that may even exceed levels found both nationally and in larger metropolitan cities (e.g., Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal).

The announcement of the international student cap in January 2024 sparked a second, and even more intense, wave of public discussion. For supporters, the cap was not only welcomed, but portrayed as “a long overdue correction” (November 23, 2024). Others reinforced this strong sentiment by invoking priorities, insisting that it was “about time to educate Canadians first” (August 27, 2024). The “Canada first” rhetoric gained momentum across X postings, fuelling even harsher criticism of international students and expanding the debate to question whether they should have *any* right to work in Canada. As one user stated, “international students are here to study, not work, they should not be allowed to work in Canada” (January 1, 2025).

However, perhaps most alarming was the emergence of deportation as a future direction of policy. What began as grievances over housing affordability and job security escalated into explicit calls for the “mass deportation of international students” (January 18, 2025). These demands were frequently justified by the belief that removing international students would reduce inflation and ease pressure on the housing market. In a way, international students become scapegoats for Canada’s wider economic failures.

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS

Our analysis reveals a drastic shift in public discourse around international students in Canada, from narratives of support during the pandemic to escalating antagonism that frames students as depleting resources, taking jobs, and inflating housing costs. Similar patterns of political scapegoating of international students and immigrants have been observed during periods of economic and social crisis globally. A possible explanation of why international students became targets of blame may stem from their limited political voice and voting power. However, in the Canadian discourse there is more focus on introducing the possible mass deportation of international students as an ultimate solution to restore affordability.

When the discursive shifts are situated against the timeline of Canadian internation-

al student policy changes, a striking parallel emerges. As part of post-pandemic efforts to address domestic labour shortages and generate revenue, international student enrolment grew 30% in 2022, and an additional 27% in 2023 (“Canada Hosted More,” 2024). It was at a similar moment of rapid, seemingly uncontrollable growth that social media discourse in Canada took a negative turn to depict international students as resource competitors and reinforce an “us vs. them” narrative. What became expressed as public frustration over concentrated international student presence also foreshadowed political cues.

Analyzed with Kingdon’s (1984) framework, our findings show that the politics stream (national mood and public sentiment) categorically conditions the policy stream (the menu of possible solutions). As social media discourse increasingly framed international students as a core exacerbator of the housing crisis, restrictive proposals within the policy community, such as capping study permits, began to gain more momentum. The federal government’s January 2024 announcement of the two-year international student cap was officially justified as a long-overdue housing intervention. Set at 360,000 permits, a 35% reduction from 2023 enrolment levels, the cap in practice issued only 267,890 permits, resulting in an even sharper 40% decline (“Measuring the Impacts,” 2025). It could be speculated that the proposal to reduce international student numbers was already in circulation, but the public discontent toward international students presented more pressure and opportunity for action. In other words, the politics stream did not simply accompany the emergence of the policy stream, but instead actively shaped its content and timing to channel restrictive proposals into the agenda-setting window and legitimize them.

Yet, to fully establish the connection between the politics and policy streams, we need to first decipher the origins of the problem stream. Specifically, *how* did international students come to be portrayed as the root cause of broader societal challenges? And *why* did rising international student enrolment in Canada become so closely linked with housing un-

affordability and labour market strain in the first place? Only by unpacking such constructions can we assess if the international student cap holds *any* effectiveness in addressing structural shortages. Canadian economists have already cautioned that the cap will provide, at best, temporary relief without addressing underlying issues (Alsharif, 2024). As Hamilton and Su argue, the policy risks being “overly simplistic, untrue and xenophobic” (2024, Who’s Responsible section), diverting attention from the chronic undersupply of housing that long predated the surge in international student arrivals.

Our study suggests that public discourse on social media is not only reflective of, but also contributes to driving, policy change. Nevertheless, several approaches can strengthen and extend our research. First, there is room for methodological advancement. Future work can conduct a comparative sentiment analysis of nationalist-populism emergence, polarity, and intensity by contrasting ChatGPT with other LLM models such as Gemini and LLaMA. This form of benchmarking can quantitatively analyze results and also clarify both the strengths and limitations of training specific LLM models (Buscemi & Proverbio, 2024). Second, while our current study identifies associations between discourse trends and policy outcomes, it cannot establish causation. As highlighted in the previous paragraph, it is important to first clarify the problem stream and comprehend the reasoning behind international students being constructed as “problematic” before determining if the observed alignment between the politics and policy streams reflects a causal relationship or merely a parallel response to a misconcluded issue. To address this limitation, future research could adopt a qualitative design, incorporating interviews with key informants, such as federal policy advisors, politicians, and higher education leadership to offer insight into how public concerns are interpreted and potentially transmitted into the policy process. Finally, X users are not representative of the entire Canadian population, and there may be an overrepresentation of politically vocal individuals. Toward the latter stages of our analysis, many X users also departed the platform and were replaced by

new users with potentially differing sentiments, Nevertheless, X is a valuable site for examining agenda-setting dynamics, and future research can also explore other social media platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study contributes to existing literature by empirically documenting the rise of nationalist-populist sentiments in Canada. These anxieties expressed online are projected onto international students, positioning them at the heart of national debates about immigration, housing, and resource distribution. Through analyzing public sentiments, we also offer more ways to understand policy drivers, challenging the belief that agenda-setting is exclusively controlled by political elites and institutional actors. It is important to note that we do not try to establish correlation in all aspects of policy agenda-setting, but rather within the context of the political stream of the multiple streams framework.

Although the phenomenon extends beyond conventional institutional factors, it remains central to higher education policy because changes in the macrosystem of ideologies can profoundly influence the exosystem of internationalization in Canada, altering patterns of student mobility (Zha, 2024). In essence, policies introduced as quick fixes to broader structural issues risk undermining the foundations of Canada's international education system. Instead of patchworking reforms to alleviate public dismay, policy makers should address root causes in housing and economic planning to better uphold the Canadian higher education sector and its global prestige. Policy makers and institutional leaders should recognize that the future of higher education in the context of internationalization must be justified, not only on economic grounds but also in social terms. Recruitment strategies driven primarily by revenue considerations should be accompanied by equal, if not more, investment in community integration and realistic planning of international students' educational and settlement pathways. Framing international student mobility and education as a public good, rather than solely as an economic instrument, is essential for sustaining the legitimacy of internationalization.

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