

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees: Different labels for immigrants influence attitudes through perceived benefits in nine countries

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## Abstract

The world is witnessing the highest level of displacement of people on record. Public discourse often uses labels to describe people on the move such as ‘migrants’, ‘asylum seekers’, or ‘refugees’ interchangeably. A preregistered study in nine countries (Australia, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom;  $N = 2844$ ) tested experimentally the effect of these three labels on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration policies. We found a significant difference between the label ‘migrant’ and both ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ on the social distance scale. Participants were happier if migrants, rather than asylum seekers and refugees, were their neighbours, friends, or partners. The effect was mediated by perceived benefits, but not threats, whereby migrants were perceived to bring more benefits to receiving societies than asylum seekers and refugees. To increase the acceptance of immigrants, speakers may consider specifying the given group and emphasize benefits that immigrants bring to receiving societies.

## KEYWORDS

attitudes, labels, language, migration, threats and benefits

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations (UN) refugee agency, reports an unprecedented 70 million people around the world who have left their homes for another country. A third of these people are refugees (26 million) and

another 5% are asylum seekers (3.5 million; UNHCR, 2020a). Asylum seekers and refugees have a clear legal definition, both of these terms referring to individuals who have been forced to flee their home country for serious reasons such as a conflict or persecution. Refugees have already obtained a refugee status ensuring their protection under international laws, whereas asylum seekers have no legally determined

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status in the country of their destination (International Organization for Migration, IOM, 2020).

The year 2015 marked the beginning of an unprecedented arrival of immigrants to Europe that was largely covered by the mass media. From 2015 onward, the labels of 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', and 'migrants' were used interchangeably in public discourse to describe people coming to Europe. Unlike 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees', the term 'migrant' does not have a clear legal definition. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2020) describes international migrants as persons who are outside a state of which they are citizens or nationals, or in the case of stateless persons, their state of birth or habitual residence. Importantly, the definition of migrants does not contain reasons for leaving their country, unlike the definitions of refugees or asylum seekers. In this sense, migrants subsume both refugees and asylum seekers but also persons who left their countries for economic or other reasons.<sup>1</sup> Despite the critiques of the imprecise use of labels for different immigrant groups (e.g., Sajjad, 2018), to-date empirical evidence is at best inconclusive about whether denoting people on the move with distinct terms impacts social perceptions and attitudes towards immigrants as well as immigration policies in the receiving societies. To this end, the present research experimentally tested the effect of three labels for immigrants—namely 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', and 'migrants'—on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration policies across nine countries, considering the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of the effect.

### 1.1 | The effect of language on group perception and outgroup attitudes

Perception of social groups and resulting outgroup attitudes are dynamic processes depending on contextual cues (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The language used for labelling social groups is one such salient contextual cue. Language guides attention to certain characteristics and helps to chunk continuous dimensions such as skin colour into meaningful social categories (Maass et al., 2014). Moreover, category labels reveal social meaning beyond mere classification, by triggering affective reactions and stereotypes associated with the given category (e.g., Rakić & Maass, 2018).

Using distinct labels for the same category can have serious consequences. For example, the term 'substance abuser' bears greater negative associations than the term 'addict', although both terms denote the same psychiatric diagnosis. This higher negativity associated with certain labels can influence health professionals adversely and result in decreased quality of medical care (Ashford et al., 2019). Comparable detrimental effects of certain category labels have been found for other stigmatized groups—people with different ethnic back-

grounds, illnesses, disabilities, criminal records, or certain professions (e.g., Carrizosa-Moog et al., 2019; Cuttler & Ryckman, 2019; Denver et al., 2017; Litam, 2019; Hall et al., 2015). Based on the ample evidence about the effect of language on person and group perception, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued guidelines about the use of labels for vulnerable populations in practice, research and educational settings (APA, 2020, Chapter 5). In our research, we focused on the effect of distinct labels for such a vulnerable social group often met with negativity—immigrants (Standard Eurobarometer, 2015; 2017).

### 1.2 | The effect of language on immigration-related attitudes

One line of research on the effect of distinct labels for immigrants was carried out in the United States and employed an ethnically homogenous target immigrant group—Mexican immigrants. Despite the same intergroup settings, the results from this line of research differed. For instance, in the studies by Knoll et al. (2011) or Merolla et al. (2013), US participants displayed negligible differences in attitudes towards immigration policies regarding Mexican immigrants who were described as either 'illegal', 'undocumented', or 'unauthorized'. Nevertheless, other studies showed differences in attitudes towards the same immigrant group resulting from distinct labels that denoted it. For instance, US participants favoured 'undocumented workers' to 'illegal aliens'—both referring to Mexican immigrants—because the term 'illegal aliens' was associated with increased perception of threat (Pearson, 2010). In contrast, another US study found a preference for 'illegal aliens' over 'undocumented immigrants' and 'illegal immigrants' although again, all labels referred to unauthorized Mexicans (Ommundsen et al., 2014).

Another line of research employed more ethnically heterogeneous target immigrant groups (e.g., from Iraq and Afghanistan) to investigate the effect of labels on immigration-related attitudes. In a 2003 study, Augoustinos and Quinn found that Australian undergraduates showed more lenient attitudes towards immigration policies concerning 'asylum seekers' than concerning 'illegal immigrants' (between participants) although both terms described the same (even if more ethnically heterogeneous) group of immigrants. This indicates that participants differentiated between immigrants' (un)deservingness of an asylum (i.e., 'illegal'). In contrast, in the very same study, participants did not rate personality traits of 'asylum seekers', 'illegal immigrants' and 'refugees' differently. So, while participants differentiated between immigrants based on their deservingness, they represented them as being quite homogenous when it came to their characteristics (Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003).

Later studies carried out in the United States (Murray & Marx, 2013), Australia (Hartley & Pedersen, 2015), and Europe (Verkuyten, 2004) documented that the difference in attitudes towards distinct immigrant groups is indeed due to the perceived entitlement—those immigrant groups that are perceived as 'deserving' asylum (i.e., authorized and political immigrants in the United States and Europe, or resettled refugees in Australia) are evaluated more positively than

<sup>1</sup> The term 'migrants' implies persons on the move but the term 'immigrants' connotes the intention of long-term settlement in a destination country (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN DESA, 1998). Throughout this article, we will use the term 'immigrants' as the most general category for people with immigration background subsuming 'migrants', 'refugees', and 'asylum seekers'.

those who are perceived as 'undeserving' (unauthorized, 'economic' immigrants in the United States and Europe, or asylum seekers and boat people in Australia). However, the majority of these studies investigated the effect of labels for immigrants in English language (cf. Verkuyten, 2004) and all of them were carried out before 2015, which marked the onset of the so called 'refugee crisis' that drew the topic of immigration into the foreground of public attention in Europe (Standard Eurobarometer, 2015; 2017) as well as worldwide.

### 1.3 | Language describing immigrants after the onset of the 'refugee crisis'

The number of immigrants entering Europe since 2015 (with a break caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) is unprecedented. Despite the differences between definitions of the distinct immigrant labels (e.g., refugees vs. migrants), politicians, journalists and the public at large have used these terms interchangeably (e.g., Berry et al., 2016). In line with results of an earlier study from the Australian context (Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003), a study at the end of 2015 found that German university students perceived 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' similarly with respect to stereotypes (defined along the warmth and competence dimensions; Kotzur et al., 2017). The participants, however, felt more pity and admiration and less anger towards refugees than asylum seekers and were ready to facilitate refugees, both actively and passively, more than asylum seekers.

In contrast, a later German study in the same context determined no differences in helping intentions towards 'refugees', versus 'migrants' (Wyszynski et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the experimental manipulation employed in this study presented the labels for 'refugees' and 'migrants' as part of an identical text stating that: 'The legal procedures are still ongoing and this refugee/migrant has an undefined legal status at the moment' (p. 611). This contradicts the legal definition of refugees, possibly explaining the lack of difference between 'migrants' versus 'refugees' in this study. In research conducted in late 2017, participants from Belgium, France, and Sweden harboured more positive attitudes towards 'refugees' as compared to 'immigrants' (De Coninck, 2020). However, in this study participants were provided the exact definitions of the terms 'refugee' and 'immigrant'. This limits the understanding of the effect of these labels in public discourse because there, exact definitions are most often not used.

Importantly, a series of experiments conducted at different time points (in 2015–2016) in Hungary suggests a crucial role of time and media exposure in the effect of distinct labels on attitudes (Janky, 2019). While in 2015, at the beginning of the so-called 'refugee crisis', Hungarian respondents felt more solidarity towards 'refugees' than 'immigrants'; later on in 2016, this difference between labels was no longer detectable. Interestingly, if the topic of immigration was made salient in the first survey in 2015 by exposing participants to an article about immigration, there were no differences in the effects of labels either (as compared to the low salience condition without exposure to mass media article). The author explains this suppression of the labels effect by the negative contamination of the concept 'refugee'. Such

negative contamination happens, for instance, by repeatedly using contradictory associations such as 'economic refugees' in public discourse. In the Hungarian context, the right-wing populist government and mass media were made responsible for using the labels for refugees and immigrants interchangeably with the purpose of supporting their anti-immigration agenda. The contamination of the term changes the original connotation of 'refugees' as deserving support (Verkuyten et al., 2018), which eventually overlaps with the connotation of less deserving 'immigrants'. Such fading distinctions between originally distinct but interchangeably used terms were also reported in other contexts as a result of intense public debates (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Holzberg, et al., 2018; Merolla et al., 2013).

The most recent study on the effect of labels for immigrants showed that the labels of 'refugees' and 'migrants' may not only be evaluated similarly but that the originally more positively perceived label of 'refugees' yields the most negative attitudes on various attitudinal measures towards immigrants and immigration policies (as compared to 'foreigners' and 'migrants'; Findor et al., 2021). The authors explain this shift in meaning by the Eastern European discourse where an intense re-categorization and de-legitimization of the term 'refugee' was pushed by political elites. Another explanation is the relatively low incidence of immigrants in the Eastern European context and the associated feelings of threat from the unknown. However, this second explanation can be partially rebutted by previous evidence, obtained earlier, about more positive attitudes towards refugees than immigrants in the same context (O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006).

To distinguish whether the effect of labels on attitudes is due to the specific context of one country or whether the shift in meaning during an intense Europe-wide public debate on immigration is a more general phenomenon, the current research sampled data in eight European countries that substantially differ with respect to the share of immigrants, political climate, and acceptance of newcomers migrants, to name but few aspects. To interconnect the two lines of research—before and after the rapid increase of immigration to Europe in 2015—the current research also sampled participants from Australia where many of the pioneering studies on the effect of labels for immigrants were conducted (e.g., Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003). Such a large test of data from distinct countries has so far been missing from the literature.

### 1.4 | Processes underlying the link between labels for and attitudes towards immigrants

Apart from the missing test of the effects of distinct labels for immigrants in distinct settings, only one study in the European context has so far investigated mechanisms underlying the effect of labels for immigrants on immigration-related outcomes (Wyszynski et al., 2020). There, German participants in three experimental conditions did not only show the same helping intentions towards 'migrants', 'economic migrants', and 'refugees' but also perceived similar levels of symbolic and realistic threat from them. In contrast, distinct

labels for immigrants evoked different levels of threat perceived from immigrants across various contexts in studies carried out before 2015 (Hartley & Pedersen, 2015; Murray & Marx, 2013; Pearson, 2010).

Despite the central role of threat in explaining different effects that define the quality of intergroup relations (for a review see Riek et al., 2006), this theoretical background has been criticized for its sole focus on the negative aspects of intergroup relations (e.g., Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016). Recently, Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016) provided a more nuanced account of the effect of group perception on intergroup attitudes, suggesting that outgroup members are not only perceived with respect to threats that they pose but also with respect to benefits that they bring to the ingroup. The threat-benefit model distinguishes four dimensions of threats (i.e., economic, physical, social cohesion, and modernity) and benefits (i.e., economic, physical, cultural diversity, and humanitarian) that represent different realistic and symbolic aspects of immigrant perception.

Linking the threat-benefit model to mass media influence, a recent study in the United States showed that negative mass media portrayals of immigrants and refugees enhanced perception of immigration as a threat, whereas positive portrayals enhanced the perception of immigration as a benefit, in comparison to the negative or control conditions (Wright et al., 2019). To address the processes underlying the effect of labels for immigrants on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, we employed both threats and benefits as independent but simultaneous mediators of the effect.

## 1.5 | The present research

The aim of the current research was to investigate whether and how attitudes towards immigrants vary as a function of the labels used in public discourse to describe immigrants in distinct intergroup contexts. First, using Google Trend and Google Search, we analysed public discourse in nine countries to identify the labels that were most widely used for immigrants after 2015. This approach ensured ecological validity and comparability of findings across the different contexts.

Using an experimental design, we then contrasted the effect of the three most frequently used terms of 'refugees', 'asylum seekers' and 'migrants' on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration. We predicted that both refugees and asylum seekers would receive more negative evaluations than migrants because of the negative contamination of the labels 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' during the heated public debate on immigration from 2015 onwards (for details see our preregistered hypotheses). At the time of designing the study (summer 2017), there was no other published evidence on which we could base our predictions.

To supply evidence missing in the literature, we were interested in how attitudes following exposure to 'migrants', 'refugees', and 'asylum seekers' vary as a function of the studied intergroup context—in the subsamples from nine countries. We expected that the distinct effects of labels on attitudes across the countries would be related to (a) perceived representation (positive and negative) of 'migrants', 'refugees',

and 'asylum seekers' in the mass media in the given country (i.e., the variable 'Exposure to Mass Media') and (b) the perceived degree of using the labels interchangeably in public space of the given country (i.e., the variable 'Confusion Between Labels'). We were not able to formulate specific predictions about which countries would show larger differences in the effect of the labels. However, we expected that in countries where mass-mediated representation of immigrants (both positive and negative) is more extreme and where the labels are more often confused, the difference between attitudes following the three labels would be more pronounced.

As a next step, to test the boundary conditions of the effect of labels on attitudes, we employed several variables relating to individual differences. Previous studies dealing with labels for immigrants indicated that their effects were larger for (a) people who viewed issues regarding immigration as important and (b) those with right-wing political orientation (Knoll et al., 2011; 2014). We also let participants rate their personal understanding of the distinction between the labels (i.e., variable 'Understanding of Labels') because past research indicated that those who were less exposed to confusion between labels showed larger effects of labels on attitudes (Janky, 2019).<sup>2</sup> Finally, we recorded participants' self-perceived social class because social class predicts relevant outcomes related to immigration (e.g., perception of threat and social distance from refugees; Koçak, 2021). Altogether, we tested four moderators: Participants' (a) reported importance of issues regarding immigration, (b) conservative political orientation, (c) understanding of the differences between distinct immigrant labels, and (d) social class. We expected larger effects for those higher on these variables.

Finally, to gain insight into processes underlying the effect of labels on attitudes, we tested the mediating roles of threats and benefits perceived from immigrants. This part of our analytical approach was not preregistered but was decided before we started the data sampling in the eight European countries (except for Australia where data sampling—but not analysis—started first). We expected that a larger difference in the effect of the distinct labels would be connected not only to differences in perceived threats but also to differences in perceived benefits from the distinctly labelled groups of immigrants. Specifically, we predicted that the label 'migrants' would evoke less perceived threats and more perceived benefits than either 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers'. Lower perceived threats and higher perceived benefits would be associated with more positive attitudes towards 'migrants' than 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'.

In summary, the present research extended prior work by investigating differences in immigration-related attitudes resulting from various immigrant labels across nine different countries to secure

<sup>2</sup> The variable 'Understanding of Labels' pertains to an individual difference and thereby represents a condition potentially qualifying the effect of labels on attitudes (i.e., a moderator). In contrast, the variable 'Confusion Between Labels' pertains to a perception on a macro-social level (i.e., 'How often do people in [country] use the words migrant, refugee, and asylum seeker interchangeably to mean the same thing?') and as such was employed as a mechanism potentially explaining the difference in the effect of the labels across countries. These two variables were not correlated,  $r(2806) = .027$ ,  $p = .149$ , indicating that participants distinguished between whether labels were confused in the public space or whether they personally understood the differences between the labels.

**TABLE 1** Number, gender, age, ethnic minority, and student status of participants in nine countries.

	N	% Women	Mean age (SD)	% Minority	% Students
Australia	319	80	23.73 (7.28)	10.7	100
Czech Republic	330	63	32.83 (5.51)	2.1	21
Finland	330	78	25.67 (8.41)	1.0	100
France	337	83	20.29 (2.50)	29.4	100
Italy	342	49	22.58 (2.61)	7.6	96
Portugal	192	59	39.69 (10.53)	3.1	9
Sweden	329	77	29.75 (9.36)	15.8	89
Switzerland	330	65	24.14 (5.06)	6.0	100
United Kingdom	337	55	33.96 (11.55)	12.2	NA
Total	2846	62 <sup>a</sup>	27.53 (9.33)	10.0	48

<sup>a</sup>Twenty participants indicated 'other' gender than male or female.

more generalizable evidence. We also determined the most frequently used labels for immigrants, considered attitudes to both immigrants and immigration policies, and tested relevant moderators as well as mediators of the effect of labels on attitudes.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Participants

An a priori power analysis using Faul and colleagues' (2007) G\*Power 3 computer software was conducted to determine the appropriate number of participants that should be sampled to obtain sufficient statistical power. The estimates of power and required sample size were based on Ommundsen et al.'s study (2014), which determined a main effect of label among three means ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $n = 111$ ;  $M = 2.96$ ,  $n = 103$ ;  $M = 3.22$ ,  $n = 60$ ). The  $f$  effect size was equal to .19, using a two-tailed one-way ANOVA with an  $\alpha$  level of .05 and a power value of .85. The estimated sample size was 306 participants in each country. This figure was increased to 330 to take account of participants who dropped out of part way through the survey or who completed the survey but declined their informed consent. Table 1 provides an overview of participants' demographics in the nine countries. All participants gave their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study.

### 2.2 | Procedure

To improve the ecological validity and generalizability of findings across different cultural contexts, we first analysed public discourse regarding immigration in nine different countries. Using Google Trend and Google Search, we aimed to identify the most widely used labels for people on the move shortly before and after 2015. The comparison of the incidence of the labels across nine countries using both Google Trend and Google Search indicated that the labels of 'migrant',

'refugee', and 'asylum seeker' were the most frequent terms that were used in reference to people on the move from 2013 till 2017 (for details about the comparison see Table 1X in the supplementary materials).<sup>3</sup> The author team comprising native speakers of each of the employed languages made sure that parallel expression for the three labels were used in each country.

We preregistered the design of the planned study (see <https://aspredicted.org/v6vq6.pdf>). The questionnaire was first set up in English and then translated into seven languages by native speakers. Already existing and pre-tested versions of the scales were employed, therefore we refrained from a strict back-translation procedure in non-English speaking countries. The questionnaire was administered either (a) online using Qualtrics (Australia, Czech Republic, Switzerland, United Kingdom), (b) using paper-and-pencil (Finland, France, Italy, Portugal) or (c) a combination of both (Sweden). The participants were recruited from university participant pools (Australia, Switzerland); databases from previous studies (Czech Republic, Portugal); in lectures (Finland); in classrooms at the beginning or the end of a tutorial (France); in public libraries and study halls (Italy), in study halls and social media platforms for students (Sweden); or on crowdsourcing platforms (i.e., Clickworker in the United Kingdom; participants were paid €1.40).

At the beginning of the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (i.e., between-subject design) characterized by a different label for immigrants: 'migrants', 'refugees', or 'asylum seekers'. The study was introduced as dealing with 'people's thoughts and feelings about different social groups'. After expressing their interest in taking part in the study, participants read a short introductory statement which explained that:

The issue of [migrants/refugees/asylum seekers] is now widely discussed at the political level and frequently reported by media. However, little is known

<sup>3</sup> When planning the study, we considered contrasting four labels, including the label 'immigrants'. Yet, since the term 'immigrants' is rather used to describe established immigrant groups, we excluded it from the current study that focuses on newly arriving immigrants.



about what the general public think and feel about [migrants/refugees/asylum seekers]. For this reason, we would like to ask you to report your opinion and feelings about [migrants/refugees/asylum seekers]. We are particularly interested in your opinion and feelings about [migrants/refugees/asylum seekers] that come to [country].

To direct participants' attention to the meaning of the label, they were asked how they would personally define [migrants/refugees/asylum seekers] in an open-ended format. These open responses were used to make participants focus on the particular label and were not planned for further analysis. Subsequently, participants indicated their attitudes towards migrants/refugees/asylum seekers—first on a feeling thermometer, then a social distance scale—and attitudes towards immigration policies because these were the focal outcome variables and the effect of language was shown to be dwindling across measures (e.g., Graf et al., 2013, 2020). Next, participants recorded threats and benefits perceived from migrants/refugees/asylum seekers; the frequency of positive and negative mass mediated contact with migrants/refugees/asylum seekers (i.e., exposure to information about immigrants from the mass-media); and the frequency with which the three labels were used interchangeably in the given country. With respect to individual differences, we asked participants about the extent to which issues regarding immigration were important to them; the extent to which they understood the differences between migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; about their political interest, political orientation, and social status. Finally, participants reported their demographics, including their gender, age, ethnicity, place of birth, immigration background ('Is/was either of your parents a migrant, refugee, or asylum seeker?'), ethnic minority, and student status.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed and asked for consent for the use of their data.

## 2.3 | Measures

### 2.3.1 | Attitudes towards immigrants

We assessed both affective and behavioural aspects of attitudes towards immigrants with (1) a *feeling thermometer*, which asked participants to indicate on a scale from 0 (cold) to 100 (warm) participants' feelings towards migrants/refugees/asylum seekers in their country (adapted from Haddock et al., 1993); and (2) a *social distance scale* (adapted from Esses & Dovidio, 2002). The social distance scale asked participants to indicate the extent to which participants would be happy if a migrant/refugee/asylum seeker was their (a) neighbour, (b) friend, and (c) intimate partner (1 = *not at all*, to 5 = *extremely*);

McDonald'  $\omega = .884$ .<sup>5</sup> Higher values on both measures indicated more favourable attitudes towards immigrants.

### 2.3.2 | Attitudes towards immigration policies

We employed a 7-item measure of attitudes towards immigration policies (e.g., 'While their applications for residence in [country] are being considered, [migrants/refugees/asylum seekers] should be allowed to undertake paid work.' adapted from the European Social Survey, 2002, module on immigration). Participants responded using a scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5), with higher values indicating more favourable attitudes towards immigration policies. The scale was reliable, McDonald'  $\omega = .781$ .

### 2.3.3 | Exposure to mass media

We asked participants about the frequency with which they encountered positive and negative information about migrants/refugees/asylum seekers in the mass-media (adapted from Visintin et al., 2017; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*).

### 2.3.4 | Confusion between labels

One item asked participants to indicate how often do people in their country use the words migrant, refugee, and asylum seeker interchangeably to mean the same thing (1 = *almost never*; 5 = *almost always*).

### 2.3.5 | Intergroup threats and benefits from immigrants

Eight items (adapted from Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016) enquired about economic, physical, social cohesion, and modernity threats and benefits that participants perceived from migrants/refugees/asylum seekers in their country (i.e., four items per construct, e.g., '[Migrants/Refugees/Asylum seekers] look, dress and speak differently to [nationality] citizens, which damages the feeling of cohesion in [nationality] society.' or 'Providing refuge to [migrants/refugees/asylum seekers] is good for creating a global positive image of [country].') with a 5-point response scale from '1 = *strongly disagree*' to '5 = *strongly agree*'. Both scales were reliable: McDonald'  $\omega = .785$  and  $.726$ , respectively.

### 2.3.6 | Importance of immigration

One item (adapted from Knoll et al., 2011) asked participants to indicate the importance of issues regarding migrants, refugees, and/or asylum seekers (1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *extremely important*).

<sup>4</sup> Student status was not sampled in the United Kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> For the estimated internal consistencies of all scales in each of the nine countries, see Table 3X in the supplementary materials.

### 2.3.7 | Understanding of labels

One item asked participants to indicate how clearly they understood the differences between migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (1 = *not at all clearly*, 5 = *extremely clearly*).

### 2.3.8 | Political interest and orientation

Participants also indicated the extent to which they were interested in politics (1 = *not at all interested*, 5 = *extremely interested*) as well as their own political beliefs (0 = *left-wing*, 100 = *right-wing*, with 10 points increments, adapted from Donaldson et al., 2017).

### 2.3.9 | Social class

We assessed participants' social class based on their mother's and father's education (a 5-point scale ranging from *basic* to *university*), prestige and status of their mother and father's occupations (a 5-point scale ranging from *very low* to *very high*), and the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (an 11-point scale ranging from *highest* to *lowest* as compared to other people in the given country, adapted from Adler et al., 2000), Cronbach's  $\alpha = .69$ .<sup>6</sup>

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | The effect of labels on attitudes in nine countries

Prior to the main analysis, we checked the random allocation of participants to the three experimental conditions based on their age, gender, and immigration status. Each of the demographics were distributed randomly across the experimental conditions; gender:  $\chi^2(8) = 6.11$ ,  $p = .635$ ; age:  $F(2, 802) = .74$ ,  $p = .477$ ; and immigration status:  $\chi^2(2) = 1.01$ ,  $p = .603$ . Table 2 displays means, SDs, and correlations between the outcome variables and mediators regardless of the experimental condition.

In the preregistration, we planned to test the differences between the effect of distinct labels on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration with ANOVA. Having later added threats and benefits as explanatory mechanisms for the effect led us to change the analytical approach to the use of SEM (in the case of scales assuming underlying latent factor, i.e., social distance and attitudes towards immigration policies) for the sake of consistency in the presentation of results (see the 'Divergence from the Preregistration' section in the supplementary materials for the detailed explanation). However, we also employed the original approach to be transparent (for the detailed description of

the original analysis see the 'The Effect of Labels on Attitudes in Nine Countries' section in the supplementary materials).

To test the mean differences and effects of labels on attitudes between the nine countries within the new approach, we conducted a structured mean modelling (latent means comparison; Sörbom, 1974) within two individual multi-group confirmatory factor analyses (MG-CFA) with robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) and full information maximum likelihood for handling of the missing data (FIML) using the *lavaan* package (R Core Team, 2019; Rosseel, 2012). For a meaningful comparison of the latent means, the scalar measurement invariance is necessary (Lacko et al., 2022). We therefore established partial metric and partial scalar measurement invariance across nine countries (for details about the procedure see the 'Cultural Invariance across Nine Countries' section in the supplementary materials).

We found that the feeling thermometer,  $F(2, 2622) = 1.14$ ,  $p = .321$ , as well as attitudes towards immigration policies,  $\Delta\chi^2 = .85$ ,  $\Delta df = 2$ ,  $\Delta AIC = -3$ ,  $\Delta BIC = -15$ ,  $p = .655$ , did not statistically differ across experimental conditions. The experimental manipulation of labels had, however, a significant effect on social distance,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 25.52$ ,  $\Delta df = 2$ ,  $\Delta AIC = 22$ ,  $\Delta BIC = 10$ ,  $p < .001$ . In line with our prediction, participants were happier if 'migrants' were their neighbours, friends, and intimate partners as compared to both 'asylum seekers' (latent mean difference =  $-.223$  [95% CI:  $-.323, -.123$ ],  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -.233$ ), and 'refugees' (latent mean difference =  $-.220$  [95% CI:  $-.119, -.226$ ],  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -.225$ ).

Subsequently, to investigate whether the size of the effect of labels on attitudes in the distinct countries is due to the "(a) variation in the countries' media's representation of these labels and (b) the degree to which countries use these labels interchangeably" (quoting the preregistration), we performed multi-group structural equation modelling (MG-SEM) with the same settings as above (i.e., with the established partial metric invariance). First, we examined the effects of labels on attitudes, controlling for age, gender, and immigration background,<sup>7</sup> and whether they differed across countries. To do so, we dummy-coded labels comparing the effect of asylum seekers and refugees to migrants (i.e., the reference category).

The single group model fitted the data very well,  $\chi^2(54) = 243.29$ ,  $CFI = .982$ ,  $TLI = .974$ ,  $RMSEA = .037$  [90% CI:  $.032, .042$ ],  $SRMR = .019$ . We found that the attitudes towards immigrants measured with the social distance scale differed in the case of both dummy-coded variables; representing the comparison between migrants and asylum seekers ( $\beta = -.080$ ,  $SE = .050$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as the comparison between migrants and refugees ( $\beta = -.074$ ,  $SE = .050$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The labels did not differ in their effect on either the feeling thermometer (asylum seekers:  $\beta = .002$ ,  $SE = .047$ ,  $p = .938$ ; refugees:  $\beta = -.024$ ,  $SE = .047$ ,  $p = .280$ ) or attitudes towards immigrant policies (asylum

<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire also featured measures of direct intergroup contact (frequency of positive and negative experiences with migrants/refugees/asylum seekers) and national identification that were not employed in this study.

<sup>7</sup> We did not include student status as a covariate as originally planned in the preregistration because it was not sampled in the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, student status did not change the pattern of results (see the section 'Replication of the Analyses without Non-Student Samples and Participants with Immigration Background' in the supplementary materials) or have an effect on the three outcomes when it was included as a covariate in the remaining eight countries.

**TABLE 2** Means, standard deviations, and correlations between attitudes (outcome variables), threats, and benefits (mediators) regardless of the experimental condition.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Thermometer	-							
2. Social distance	.66***	-						
3. Immigration policies	.66***	.56***	-					
4. Positive mass media	.00	.00	-.06***	-				
5. Negative mass media	.12***	.12***	.13***	-.38***	-			
6. Label confusion	.08***	.09***	.10**	-.12***	.21***	-		
7. Threats	-.63***	-.52***	-.71***	.08***	-.15***	-.12***	-	
8. Benefits	.62***	.56***	.68***	-.04*	.16***	.12***	-.66***	-
M	66.68	3.41	3.52	2.13	3.96	4.03	2.30	3.63
SD	23.03	1.02	.79	.88	.81	.82	.94	.79

Note: The feeling thermometer had a theoretical range from 0 to 100. All other scales had a theoretical range from 1 to 5, with higher values representing warmer feelings, lower social distance, support for more lenient immigration policies, more threats, and more benefits perceived from immigrants.  $N = 2846$ . \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**TABLE 3** Differences in the effect of the migrants versus asylum seekers and refugees labels on the feeling thermometer, social distance scale, and attitudes towards immigration policies across nine countries.

Path:	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta AIC$	$\Delta BIC$	$p$
Asylum seekers → Thermometer	14.31	-2	-49	.074
Asylum seekers → Social distance	15.24	-1	-49	.055
Asylum seekers → Attitudes towards immigration policies	11.61	-4	-52	.169
Refugees → Thermometer	9.79	-6	-54	.280
Refugees → Social distance	10.64	-6	-53	.223
Refugees → Attitudes towards immigration policies	18.47	3	-45	.018

seekers:  $\beta = -.009$ ,  $SE = .054$ ,  $p = .718$ ; refugees:  $\beta = -.004$ ,  $SE = .053$ ,  $p = .864$ ).

As for potential differences in the effects of labels across countries, we tested six models (each for a fixed regression coefficient). We compared the estimated models with respect to a significant difference in the scaled  $\chi^2$  (i.e., a significant worsening of the model fit). The data within the MG-SEM fitted the model well,  $\chi^2(526) = 869.61$ ,  $CFI = .966$ ,  $TLI = .954$ ,  $RMSEA = .047$  [90% CI: .041, .052],  $SRMR = .043$ . Table 3 shows that the differences were rather minor (i.e., the changes in  $CFI$ ,  $TLI$ ,  $RMSEA$ , and  $SRMR$  were not higher than .001) and most of them were statistically non-significant. The only exception was the effect of the refugees (vs. migrants) label on attitudes towards immigration policies. In Australia, the label of 'refugees' (vs. 'migrants') was positively associated with attitudes towards immigration policies ( $\beta = .197$ ,  $SE = .160$ ,  $p = .007$ ) but in the rest of the countries, this effect was statistically non-significant. Because we did not determine differences in the effect of labels on attitudes across the nine countries (with the exception of the differences between the effect of the refugees versus migrants condition on attitudes towards immigration policies that was significant in only one, non-European country), we refrained from testing the preregistered mechanisms (i.e., the mediation effect of mass media and confusion between labels)

potentially underlying the (determined non-existent) differences between countries.

Following the preregistration, we also examined whether the effects of labels on the three attitudinal outcomes were moderated by participants' reported importance of issues regarding immigration, understanding of the difference between the labels, political interest and orientation, and social class. Using a single group SEM with a very good model fit,  $\chi^2(144) = 428.01$ ,  $CFI = .974$ ,  $TLI = .961$ ,  $RMSEA = .028$  [90% CI: .025, .031],  $SRMR = .015$ , we found that none of these variables put forward in the preregistration acted as a significant moderator in the link between labels and attitudes, controlling for the effect of country.

### 3.2 | Mediators of the effect of labels on attitudes

To explain the effect of immigrant labels on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, we investigated the mediating role of participants' perception of threats and benefits that immigrants bring to the receiving societies. In the exploratory (not preregistered) analysis, we tested a parallel mediation model with the two dummy coded variables comparing asylum seekers and refugees to migrants (the reference category) as predictors and perceived threats and benefits as



parallel mediators; with attitude measures as outcome variables. We used the partial metric invariant model (for details about the procedure see the 'Cultural Invariance across Eight Countries' section in the supplementary material).

Despite the relatively high correlation between threats and benefits, the results of a confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the expected two-factor solution provided a significantly better fit,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 155.19$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $\Delta AIC = 182$ ,  $\Delta BIC = 176$ ,  $p < .001$ , than the unidimensional model,  $\chi^2(26) = 286.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CFI = .957$ ,  $TLI = .940$ ,  $RMSEA = .069$  [90% CI: .062, .076],  $SRMR = .032$  (for more details see Figure 1X in the supplementary materials). Threats and benefits from immigrants also represented distinct constructs from the two outcome measures of attitudes towards immigrants on the social distance scale and attitudes towards immigration policies (see Figure 2X in the supplementary materials).

With the partial metric invariant model, we also tested whether the effects of labels on perceived threats and benefits were moderated by country. However, the multi-group SEM with partial metric invariance resulted in a problem known as the Heywood case (i.e., negative residual variance). In one country (Portugal), the correlation between perceived threats and benefits was higher than 1.00. To fix this issue, we restricted the residual latent variance of perceived threats between groups. After this correction, the model converged normally with an adequate fit:  $\chi^2(1291) = 2081.68$ ,  $CFI = .957$ ,  $TLI = .950$ ,  $RMSEA = .046$  [90% CI: .042, .050],  $SRMR = .077$ . We subsequently tested for moderation of the effects of labels on perceived threats and benefits by constraining regression parameters from labels to mediators to be equal across countries. We found no moderation effect,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 40.70$ ,  $\Delta df = 28$ ,  $\Delta AIC = -15$ ,  $\Delta BIC = -179$ ,  $p = .057$ , indicating that the effect of labels on perceived threats and benefits from immigrants did not differ across the eight countries.

In the final step, we performed a single-group SEM parallel mediation analysis without country as a moderator. This model fitted the data very well:  $\chi^2(150) = 643.82$ ,  $CFI = .972$ ,  $TLI = .965$ ,  $RMSEA = .038$  [90% CI: .035, .041],  $SRMR = .024$ . When comparing both labels of 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees', with 'migrants', we found a significant difference with respect to the perception of benefits, but not threats. Participants from the eight European countries did not perceive 'asylum seekers', 'refugees' and 'migrants' as distinctly threatening but they perceived migrants as bringing more benefits to their countries than both 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees'. Perceived benefits from immigrants were associated with all three attitudinal measures positively, while threats were associated negatively (see Figure 1). The effects of 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees' as compared to 'migrants' on all attitude variables were mediated by perceived benefits. The lowest standardized indirect effect was  $-.040$  for the 'asylum seekers' label on thermometer and the highest was  $.060$  for the 'refugees' label on social distance (see Table 4 for details).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Omitting non-student participants and participants with immigration background from the analysis did not change the pattern of the results (for details see Table 4X in the supplementary materials).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

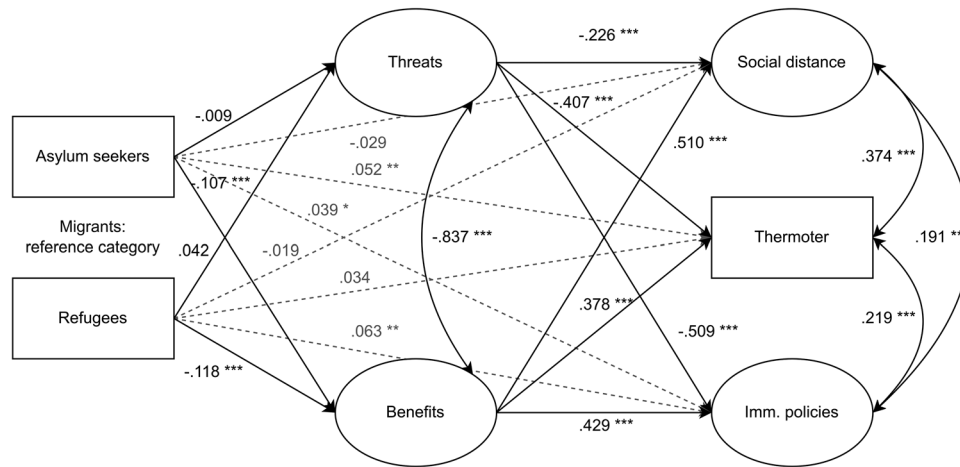
In times of a heated public discussion about immigration, different labels for immigrants are present in public space on a daily basis. Journalists, politicians, policymakers, and others communicating about immigrants have been criticized for confusing labels for people on the move (e.g., UNHCR, 2020b). In line with our preregistered predictions, we found that attitudes towards immigrants indeed depended on the label used for describing immigrants. Specifically, participants were happier if 'migrants' were their neighbours, friends, or family than both 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'. The effect of labels on attitudes was explained by participants' perception of the benefits but not the threats that immigrants bring to receiving societies. Participants perceived 'migrants' as bringing more benefits to their countries than both 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers', which translated into more positive attitudes towards immigrants.

### 4.1 | Distinct labels evoke different attitudes

Based on the content of official definitions, more positive attitudes towards 'migrants' than towards 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' is a counterintuitive finding because migrants subsume all people on the move, including those with economic rather than humanitarian concerns. Past research has shown that people in receiving societies are more inclined to accept immigrants who were forced to leave their countries—those with political rather than economic reasons for migration (Verkuyten, 2004; Verkuyten et al., 2018). In our study, however, the status of 'asylum seekers' and the status of 'refugees'—who need to have sound reasons to apply for and to acquire asylum—were evaluated more negatively than 'migrants' (in line with Findor et al., 2021).

This shift in meaning may be a consequence of confusing the terms 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', and 'migrants' in the public space. A study that compared attitudes towards 'refugees' and 'immigrants' at the beginning of, and during, the so-called 'refugee crisis' supports this interpretation (Janky, 2019). At its beginning in 2015, people understood the content of the term 'refugee' as a person in a dire need of help and subsequently were motivated to support refugees more than immigrants (De Coninck, 2020; 2015 data from Janky, 2019) or asylum seekers (Kotzur et al., 2017). However, people's solidarity was dwindling as the refugee crisis unfolded (2016 data from Janky, 2019; Wyszynski et al., 2020) and public discourse negatively contaminated the meaning of 'refugees' by equating them with people without humanitarian reasons for leaving their countries (as illustrated by the widely used term 'economic refugees'; Janky, 2019). This dwindling solidarity has been accompanied by a change of immigration-related coverage in the mass media—from a humanitarian focus to a securitizing focus that emphasizes threats connected with rapid immigration (Hovden et al., 2018; Lams, 2018).

As suggested by the outcomes of our research in nine countries and the other most recently published evidence (Findor, et al., 2021), the continuing de-legitimization of 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers' in the



**FIGURE 1** The effect of dummy coded labels comparing the effect of asylum seekers and refugees to migrants on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, mediated by perceived threats and benefits from immigrants,  $N = 2466$  (without Australia).

**TABLE 4** Indirect and total standardized effects of the migrants versus asylum seekers and refugees labels on the three attitudinal outcomes mediated by threats and benefits perceived from immigrants with bootstrapped 95% CIs (10,000 iterations).

Refugees (vs migrants)		Asylum seekers (vs migrants)	
Indirect effects	$ab_{\beta}$ (95% CI)	Indirect effects	$ab_{\beta}$ (95% CI)
RE → THR → SD	-0.10 (-0.22, .003)	AS → THR → SD	.002 (-0.009, .014)
RE → THR → THE	-0.17 (-0.38, .004)	AS → THR → THE	.004 (-0.17, .024)
RE → THR → IMP	-0.22 (-0.47, .004)	AS → THR → IMP	.005 (-0.21, .030)
RE → BEN → SD	<b>-0.60 (-0.91, -0.29)</b>	AS → BEN → SD	<b>-0.05 (-0.086, -0.023)</b>
RE → BEN → THE	-0.44 (-0.68, -0.21)	AS → BEN → THE	-0.40 (-0.64, -0.17)
RE → BEN → IMP	-0.51 (-0.77, -0.24)	AS → BEN → IMP	-0.46 (-0.72, -0.20)
Total effects	$c_{\beta}$ (95% CI)	Total effects	$c_{\beta}$ (95% CI)
Social distance	<b>-0.89 (-1.37, -0.40)</b>	Social distance	<b>-0.82 (-1.29, -0.35)</b>
Thermometer	-0.28 (-0.73, .017)	Thermometer	.015 (-0.30, .060)
Immigration policies	-0.09 (-0.60, .043)	Immigration policies	-0.02 (-0.54, .050)

Note: Significant effects are marked in bold.

Abbreviations: AS, asylum seekers; BEN, perceived benefits; IMP, support for immigration policies; RE, refugees; SD, social distance; THE, feeling thermometer; THR, perceived threats;  $ab_{\beta}$ , standardized mediated effects;  $c_{\beta}$ , standardized total effects.

public space may have eventually resulted in more negative attitudes towards refugees than migrants. This is the case despite the legal definition of refugees as 'people who have had severe grounds for leaving their home countries', due to the fact that the image of refugees has been conflated with 'immoral' immigrants who want to improve their living at the expense of others (Janky, 2019).

The role of immigration discourse in the mass media is difficult to isolate because electronic media make information ubiquitous in personal and public spaces. People choose distinct sources of information that report about immigration in radically different ways (e.g., private blogs, social media), apart from the traditional, mainstream mass media whose content could be more easily tracked (e.g., Arlt & Wolling, 2016). Janky (2019) employed an experimental design to mimic the effect of mass media and high occurrence of labels for immigrants in public space. The participants either read a short news report about the refugee crisis (high salience condition) or they did

not (low salience condition). In the high salience condition, the labels of 'refugees' and 'immigrants' did not have different effects on attitudes, as compared with the low salience condition where participants supported 'refugees' more than 'immigrants'. This evidence suggests that a mere exposure to immigrant discourse can serve as a cue that evokes the associations of refugees present in public space, eventually deteriorating attitudes towards them (as compared to more generic terms such as 'migrants'). Research from refugee studies indicates that the confusion in the use of labels for immigrants is not accidental or a mere consequence of the lack of knowledge. Negatively contaminating the label 'refugee' in public discourse can happen on purpose with the aim of restricting immigration policies and controlling national borders (Sajjad, 2018) or to avoid sharing resources with newcomers.

In line with recommendations for future studies aimed at explaining contradictory past findings (Knoll et al., 2014), we employed a

number of relevant individual differences as potential moderators of the link between labels and attitudes. However, participants' reported importance of issues regarding immigration, their understanding of the difference between immigrant labels, their political interests and orientations, and their social class did not make a difference to the strength of the effect of labels on attitudes. Future studies may investigate the role of more personality ingrained variables such as right-wing authoritarianism or social dominance orientation that represent potent predictors of prejudiced attitudes (Ekehammar et al., 2004). Such individual differences may alter how people scoring high and low on these variables perceive immigration-related issues following distinct labels for immigrants.

#### 4.2 | Labels for immigrants impact preferred social distance from immigrants

Past studies on the effect of labels for immigrants employed different outcome measures—stereotypical perception, emotions, behavioural intentions (Kotzur et al., 2017; Wyszynski et al., 2020), or distinct conceptualizations of immigration policies (De Coninck, 2020; Janky, 2019). Our research and the study by Findor et al.'s study (2021) used the most extensive measurement of attitudes towards both immigrants (i.e., feeling thermometer and social distance scale) and immigration. In both our research and that of Findor et al. (2021), the overall effects indicate that distinct labels for immigrants make a difference to attitudes towards immigrants rather than towards policies regarding immigrants' integration in receiving societies. The fact that attitudes towards immigration policies are less sensitive to variation in labels for immigrants in comparison with attitudes towards immigrants was previously suggested by research carried out outside of the European context of the 2015 'migration crisis' (e.g., Knoll et al., 2014).

The reason for the effect of labels on attitudes towards immigrants and not immigration policies can be that people's opinions about how immigrants should be treated in receiving societies are strong enough to withhold the effect of language cues in the form of distinct labels. A second explanation can be that deciding about newcomers immigrants on the macro-social level of the whole society may not be as personally relevant for participants as their attitudes towards immigrants. Specifically, in the case of the employed social distance, participants indicated their preferences regarding the level of personal closeness towards immigrants in the contexts of their neighbourhood, work, or even intimate relationships. On such personally relevant measures, the characteristics of immigrants—connoted by the distinct labels—can play a much bigger role than on attitudes towards immigration policies.

#### 4.3 | Mediators of the effect of labels on attitudes

Another contribution of our research to the literature is the nuanced test of mediating mechanisms. Employing the novel threat-benefit model (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016), we showed that perceived benefits (but not threats) from migrants explained the different effects of labels

on attitudes. More specifically, our research showed for the first time that participants from different countries displayed more positive attitudes towards 'migrants' than 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers' because they perceived 'migrants' as bringing the most benefits—especially economic, cultural, and humanitarian. This is surprising because the vast majority of literature on immigration has put forward threat as a primary factor shaping attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Brader et al., 2008; Stephan & Stephan, 1996).

The fact that the perception of threat was not influenced by labels for immigrants can be explained in two different ways. First, as in the case of attitudes towards immigration policies, perception of threat may be firmly associated with opinions about immigration and as such cannot be easily changed by language cues in the form of distinct labels (for converging evidence see Wyszynski et al., 2020). Second, people may be hesitant to express the view that immigrants pose threats to receiving societies due to normative concerns about appearing prejudiced or biased against immigrants. Indeed, the average level of threat across the nine countries was at the middle of the scale measuring the different aspects of threat in our dataset. In contrast, expressing which benefits immigrants bring to receiving societies can represent a much less problematic aspect of perception of immigrants. All in all, the threat-benefit model (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016) is a promising avenue for future studies, focusing not only on negative but also positive consequences of immigration. Relatedly, increasing awareness of the benefits of immigration for stability and prosperity of receiving societies, marked by dwindling population sizes, can contribute to challenging prejudice and discrimination against immigrants.

#### 4.4 | Limitations and future directions

A key limitation of the current findings is the fact that they are embedded in a certain time period and context, particularly early 2018, when the data were sampled. However, rather than a limitation, this can be also perceived as an inherent characteristic of research on the effects of different terms in general and of research on the effects of different labels for immigrants in particular. The construction of connotations of distinct terms is sensitive to sociocultural and historical contexts, preventing the terms from acquiring single, fixed, and universal meanings that would allow for easy comparisons across time and cultural contexts (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Merolla et al., 2013). Likewise, it is of utmost importance to employ longitudinal designs to track the change of connotations of specific terms and associated attitudes, especially in times of rapid social change (Janky, 2019).

Although our research in nine countries attempted to bring more generalizable and extensive evidence than past studies, which were carried out mostly in a single cultural context, the subsamples were not nationally representative. This fact complicates the comparability of findings from the different countries although we established cultural invariance, controlled for demographics that differed between the subsamples and carried out robustness checks (see the supplementary materials and Table 4X). Future research should not only attempt to investigate the effects of different labels across distinct

cultural contexts but also to secure more directly comparable subsamples. Relatedly, cross-cultural studies also need to address the problem of measurement invariance by developing cross-cultural invariant scales, thereby increasing the validity of cross-cultural comparisons (Lacko et al., 2022).

Another limitation relates to the mostly student samples that were recruited in six of the nine countries that we studied (Australia, Finland, France, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland). Previous studies have documented that students may differ in their reactions to labels for immigrants in comparison with the general population (Knoll et al., 2014). Students are more likely to endorse liberal political views than the general population (e.g., Bailey & Williams, 2016). Notably, however, participants' political orientation or interest did not qualify the effect of labels on attitudes in our research. This null finding is at odds with the results of a study that tested the effect of labels on support for punitive policies against immigrants in the United States, in which Republican participants endorsed harsher policies following the label of 'undocumented Mexicans' (vs 'undocumented immigrants'; Knoll et al., 2014). Future studies should employ samples with political views distributed more equally over the political spectrum in order to provide a more rigorous test of the potential moderating role of political orientation in the effect of labels on attitudes.

Finally, the design of our research did not closely explore the representations of the distinct terms for immigrants with respect to the specific groups they may evoke. It is possible that people think of East or South Asians when they see the label 'migrant', but imagine a Syrian or Sudanese when exposed to the label 'refugee', and Indonesian or Sri Lankan Tamil when seeing the label 'asylum seekers'. These distinct groups that people think of can cause the difference in attitudes. Previous research demonstrated that some characteristics made certain immigrant groups more preferable to members of receiving societies (i.e., from Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Sweden), such as the same ethnicity (vs a different ethnicity), coming from 'rich' countries (vs 'poor' countries) or from European countries (vs non-European countries; De Coninck, 2020). Future studies should devote attention to a more detailed analysis of particular representations triggered by the distinct labels for immigrants that could provide important hints about their (changing) connotations.

## 4.5 | Conclusion

The present research in nine countries extends prior work by providing evidence about differences in attitudes towards immigrants as a result of distinct labels denoting immigrants. In contrast with past research, the current study employed only core labels for immigrants that were extracted from a country-specific public discourse on immigration. Our research also offered an explanation for the differential effect of labels on attitudes that refer to the perceived benefits that immigrants bring to their host countries.

The evidence from our research is of particular relevance to journalists, politicians, policymakers, and others who communicate about immigrants and shape public opinion on immigration. We urge such

stakeholders to specify the targets of their communication not only with accurate labels but also with short definitions of the given group in order to avoid shifts in meaning and misunderstandings. More precise communication and explanation of terms in immigrant-related discourse may hinder the confusion and uncertainty that offers a breeding ground for prejudice against immigrants. Based on our research findings, another promising way of increasing the acceptance of immigrants is to emphasize the benefits that immigration offers to receiving societies. The enhanced perception of benefits from immigrants can potentially counteract the detrimental effects of the prevailing negative perception of immigration in most current societies.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The preregistration is available at <https://aspredicted.org/v6vq6.pdf>; data, code, and questionnaire at <https://osf.io/swbze/>.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The research has obtained ethics approval from the ethic committee of the University of Newcastle (H-2018-0001), and the ethic committee of the Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Bern (#2018-04-00003). In the United Kingdom, the researcher completed an ethical self-assessment as per the University of Surrey procedure.

## TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

The authors confirm that their manuscript complies with the open science standards. Preregistration is publicly available at <https://aspredicted.org/v6vq6.pdf>; data and code in an OSF repository: <https://osf.io/swbze/>.

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