FRAMING LATINO IMMIGRANTS: THREAT AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES IN NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

by

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Abstract

This study examines how U.S. news and social media portray Latino immigrants through threat-based framing and the counter-narratives that challenge it. Drawing on Chavez's (2008, 2013) concept of the Latino Threat Narrative, this study combines deductive coding of threat frames with inductive thematic analysis of newspaper articles and posts collected from X. The findings show that threat-based portrayals remained prominent across both media environments but took different forms. Latino-targeted threats appeared more directly on X, while news coverage relied more often on generalized anti-immigrant framing and emphasized criminality more heavily. The inductive phase identified five recurring counter-narrative themes that challenged threat-based discourse through different persuasive pathways, including coherence and fidelity. These findings suggest that immigration discourse across media is shaped by competing portrayals rather than a single dominant narrative and that the Latino Threat Narrative remains active even as its contemporary forms continue to evolve.

Framing Latino Immigrants: Threat and Counter-Narratives in News and Social Media

Chavez (2008, 2013) argued that the Latino Threat Narrative portrays Latino immigrants as culturally incompatible, criminal, and demographically overwhelming, often casting them as a danger to American society. He noted that the narrative's power lies in repetition, which normalizes these associations and makes them appear justified. This discourse has endured across both traditional and digital communication spaces and gained visibility amid the rising polarization of U.S. politics. Although quantitative research has documented its prevalence, fewer studies have examined emerging counter-narratives or explored how threat-based portrayals vary across media environments.

To address this gap, the present study uses a mixed content analysis of newspaper coverage and social media discourse. Chavez's (2008) framework guides the identification of threat-based frames, while an inductive approach is used to identify positive or humanitarian portrayals that challenge these threat-based narratives. The study focuses on how Latino Threat Narrative frames appear within traditional and social media and documents their frequency and thematic characteristics. This approach provides a foundation for understanding both the persistence of threat portrayals and the rise of alternative stories that offer competing perspectives on Latino identity.

Literature Review

The Latino Threat Narrative

Chavez (2008, 2013) described the Latino Threat Narrative as a recurring storyline that portrays Latino and Mexican immigrants as endangering American stability. It often raises questions about their willingness to integrate with American society, links them to criminal behavior, and casts doubt on their social worth. Researchers have shown that while the terms

illegal immigrant and *undocumented immigrant* describe the same population in a literal sense, they differ in meaning and tone. The first tends to evoke law-breaking and exclusion, whereas the second frames the issue as one of legal status rather than criminality (Merolla et al., 2013; Webson et al., 2020). Although Latinos are legally classified as "white" under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, this narrative has continued to marginalize them and sustain assumptions of inferiority (Chavez, 2008).

While this narrative has been recently amplified through traditional and social media outlets, its historical origins run deep. During the 1980s, U.S. President Ronald Reagan classified illegal immigration as a national security concern, which catalyzed long-standing rhetoric that positioned Latinos as a danger to American culture (Massey, 2012). Throughout the following decades, Mexicans were subjected to racialization processes that were aimed at justifying their social exclusion among American voters and questioning their loyalty to the American way of life (Martinez Brawley & Zorita, 2018; Aguirre et al., 2011). After 9/11, the immigration debate became even more intense, and security-focused language that was previously used for Middle Eastern communities was applied to Latinos (Rivera, 2014).

Nevertheless, the experiences of Latinos are frequently juxtaposed with those of other immigrants to substantiate anti-Latino sentiments. For example, Asian American stereotypes portray them as ideal minorities who show a strong work ethic and blend easily into American culture (Chou & Feagin, 2015). This comparison bolsters the idea that Latino immigrants somehow do not meet acceptable standards of assimilation. As a result, these narratives have been extremely detrimental to how Latinos are viewed in American culture, as well as any positive discussions to move past this damaging rhetoric.

Beyond influencing perceptions, the Latino Threat Narrative also shapes real outcomes. Framing Latinos as outsiders has been used to justify restrictive immigration laws, limit access to social services, and intensify economic competition narratives that pit immigrant workers against American citizens (Espenshade & Calhoun, 1993; Espenshade & Hempstead, 1996; Fraga & Segura, 2006; Massey & Sánchez, 2009). These portrayals have reinforced stereotypes that support exclusionary policies and contribute to continued marginalization. As a result, anti-Latino bias extends beyond political debate into workplaces, schools, and communities and, in turn, reduces opportunities for participation and deepens existing inequities (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016).

The harmful impact of this narrative also reaches into institutions such as education and public policy. For example, Spanish-speaking students in emerging Latino communities often encounter marginalization within anti-immigrant frameworks that limit resources and reinforce stigma (Carter, 2014). Policy outcomes show similar patterns. For example, Arizona's SB1070 included a "show your papers" provision and other enforcement measures that drew criticism for enabling racial profiling of individuals perceived as undocumented (Aguirre et al, 2011). Vaquera et al. (2022) found that undocumented immigrants are frequently omitted from both news coverage and policy narratives or portrayed only in contexts that emphasize dependence on state aid or crisis relief. These portrayals diminish their visibility and reinforce public perceptions that they are passive recipients rather than active contributors to society.

Table 1 summarizes the six threat frames derived from Chavez's (2008) framework that guided the deductive coding phase of this study.

Table 1

Latino Threat Frames

Threat Name	Threat Description
Economic	References to job competition, wage depression, overuse of welfare, or strain on public services.
Moral/Legal	References emphasizing legality, punishment, moral judgment, or compliance with the "rule of law." Often used to justify exclusionary policies or reinforce distinctions between "legal" and "illegal" immigrants.
Criminal	Associations with crime, drugs, gangs, lawbreaking, or violence.
Cultural	Portrayals of immigrants as resistant to assimilation, undermining American identity, or threatening national values.
Demographic	Rhetoric invoking invasion, demographic replacement, population growth, or takeover language.
Security	Discussions of border control, terrorism, sovereignty, or immigrants as national security risks.

Note. Frames adapted from Chavez (2008).

Narrative Reinforcement Through the Media

These narratives are also deeply embedded in U.S. immigration discourse and media coverage. For example, Latino men appear disproportionately in crime reporting, which reinforces a perceived connection between this population and public safety concerns (Mohamed & Farris, 2020). Similarly, stories about immigration often highlight crime and gang activity while giving far less attention to the structural and humanitarian forces that drive migration (Deckard et al., 2020). These patterns reuse familiar threat portrayals and deepen public suspicion.

Media portrayals of immigration often echo and intensify the language used in political discourse. The framing choices made by major outlets both reflect and reinforce rhetoric that targets vulnerable groups. When coverage highlights negative traits or incidents involving immigrants, audiences develop stronger perceptions of threat and heightened emotional responses (Wei et al., 2019). Political leaders who describe immigrants as dangerous or undeserving draw on these same themes, ensuring continued coverage and sustaining a cycle that normalizes exclusionary attitudes and weakens public support for immigrant inclusion (Tremblay-Boire et al., 2020).

Although most media coverage of Latino immigrants' centers on tension or perceived differences, some research identifies moments of more balanced representation. These instances are far less common but meaningful because they broaden how Latino life and contributions are perceived and understood by the public. Bleich et al. (2021) found that U.S. newspaper reporting occasionally featured positive themes focused on community achievement and cultural celebration. When those two appeared together, the coverage was notably favorable, although those stories represented only a small portion of the overall sample. Other themes, such as group identity, leadership, and growth, appeared inconsistently but still added nuance to the portrayal of Latinos. Although limited, culture-based coverage offered one of the few steady sources of positive framing and served as a modest counterbalance to the prevailing pattern of threat-oriented narratives. In this context, counter-narratives are defined as stories told from the perspective of groups whose experiences are often excluded from mainstream discussions that challenge the dominant narratives that normalize unequal social structures. (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Whether audiences encounter these more favorable portrayals, however, depends on factors beyond the coverage itself. Rendón (2024) examined how U.S. audiences perceive these media portrayals. He found that individuals with higher levels of education, income, and news exposure, as well as those who identify as Latino or Hispanic, were more likely to report seeing positive portrayals in the media. At the same time, many respondents indicated that negative or stereotypical coverage remains widespread. These findings highlight how demographic characteristics and media habits shape which frames audiences encounter, which supports the need to study how positive and negative narratives circulate across platforms and reach different groups.

De Trinidad Young et al. (2022) also found that mainstream reporting on immigration policy does not rely entirely on restrictive or exclusionary frames. Early coverage often emphasized immigrants' economic value through their contributions to the labor force, tax base, and essential industries. Later reporting shifted toward portraying immigrants as families and active community members. This humanitarian framing emphasized relationships, belonging, and shared social responsibility. Although these portrayals did not eliminate negative depictions, they added nuance and provided counter-narratives that presented immigrants within broader social and moral contexts.

Patterns of positive and negative framing are not limited to the United States. Comparative studies show that media in other countries reflect similar tensions between sensational threat narratives and more empathetic portrayals. Scherman and Etchegaray (2021) found that immigration coverage in Chile varied across platforms, with television leaning heavily on sensational and negative frames, while print and digital outlets devoted more space to human-interest stories and political debate. Their research also revealed that not all immigrant groups

were framed the same way. For example, Venezuelan migrants were more often linked to political discussions and regulatory debates than to crime or cultural threats, which is a difference shaped by both their educational background and the political context of migration.

Spanish-language newspapers often provide more coverage of immigration and present it in more supportive or community-centered terms than English-language outlets, which tend to focus on illegality or conflict (Branton & Dunaway, 2008). This creates a divide in how immigration is understood across linguistic audiences. Research from the Pew Research Center (2025) shows that many older and foreign-born Hispanic Americans rely on Spanish-language media that align with their experiences and values. As a result, positive or humanitarian portrayals of Latino immigrants often circulate primarily within Spanish-speaking communities, while English-speaking audiences encounter fewer of these counter-narratives.

Gonçalves and David (2024) conducted a comparative content analysis of conservative media in the United Kingdom and Brazil and identified how negative portrayals of migrants were the most prevalent. They reported that threat frames appeared most often. However, some stories employed victim frames that focused on migrants' vulnerability and suffering, while less often, they used hero frames that emphasized migrants' resilience or societal contributions. While threat frames overshadowed the others, the authors argued that victim portrayals varied more noticeably between the two countries, whereas levels of threat and hero framing were relatively similar, which demonstrates that migration discourse is not entirely one-dimensional (Gonçalves & David, 2024).

Although negative portrayals of Latinos remain widespread, research also highlights recurring counter-narratives found across outlets, languages, and countries. Studies focusing on positive, humanitarian, and community-centered depictions demonstrate that immigrant

representation is more complex than the Latino Threat Narrative alone suggests. The evidence suggests that framing practices and audience exposure interact to shape the coexistence of threat and empathy in public discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The patterns identified in extant research show that portrayals of Latino immigrants depend on what information is presented and how that information is framed and communicated. To explain these patterns, this study draws on Entman's (1993) Framing Theory and Fisher's (1984) Narrative Paradigm. These two perspectives clarify both the structural processes that guide media coverage and the narrative reasoning that gives certain portrayals, including counter-narratives, their meaning and persuasive strength.

Framing Theory

Goffman (1974) first introduced the concept of frames as the mental structures individuals use to organize and interpret social experience. He described frames as organizing principles that help people recognize, interpret, and categorize information within everyday life. This foundational idea established framing as a process of meaning-making that occurs on cognitive and social levels.

Entman (1993) later built on Goffman's work by conceptualizing framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in a text to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation (p. 52). He suggested that framing decisions often reflect the communicator's beliefs and values, which are evident through their language choices, repetition, imagery, and the use of specific sources. These textual cues shape how audiences interpret information, although interpretations often diverge from the intended message.

Entman (2007) later expanded the concept of framing by explicitly linking it to agenda-setting and priming. Agenda-setting focuses on which issues audiences perceive as important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), while priming concerns the standards people use to evaluate those issues (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In Entman's view, framing encompasses both because the way issues are presented influences not only what people think about, but also how they think about those issues. In a similar vein, Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) examined how framing, agenda-setting, and priming function as three interrelated models of media effects. They argue that while agenda-setting affects issue salience and priming alters evaluative criteria, framing deals with the selection and presentation of information that guides interpretation. They also observed that framing functions at both the macro level (e.g., journalistic and institutional practices) and the micro level (e.g., individual audience interpretation).

Chong and Druckman (2007) analyzed how framing operates within environments where multiple perspectives compete for attention. They observed that when audiences are exposed to contrasting frames, the influence of any single frame often weakens. Their research showed that factors such as message strength, repetition, audience predispositions, and the surrounding context shape whether framing effects endure or diminish. This perspective is especially relevant to this study, which examines traditional and social media spaces where competing narratives about immigration circulate simultaneously.

Media Framing Across Platforms

D'Angelo (2017) defined media frames as written, spoken, graphical, or visual devices used to contextualize a topic. Frames guide interpretation but function as interpretive lenses rather than direct persuasion. In journalism, media and news frames often overlap, with journalists deciding which perspectives reach the public. Frames develop as recurring patterns

that organize meaning through emphasis and repetition. Digital platforms complicate this process by allowing audiences to act as both receivers and producers of content. Identifying frames involves locating textual cues and connecting them to broader meaning structures through deductive, inductive, or hybrid approaches that strengthen reliability and validity.

Framing research now extends into social media, where information spreads quickly and users play a more active role in shaping public discussion. López-Rabadán (2021) found that platforms such as X and Facebook altered the communication flow by enabling politicians, organizations, and ordinary users to interact directly, while also creating new risks for misinformation. Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013) reported that social media discussion during the 2012 U.S. presidential election often repeated the same ideas and narratives already found in mainstream news, showing a strong connection between professional and user-generated content. Hubner and Dixon (2023) observed that users frequently respond to news on social media by sharing, commenting, or reframing it in ways that either reinforce or challenge the original story.

Research has provided detailed insight into how online framing supports community and activism. For example, Aruguete and Calvo (2018) examined the #Tarifazo protests in Argentina and found that users clustered into networks that reinforced either pro- or anti-government narratives. Hon (2016) identified similar patterns in the United States, where the Million Hoodies campaign used Facebook messages focused on justice and shared identity to mobilize participants. These studies demonstrate that while traditional and social media often disseminate similar narratives, digital spaces provide audiences with new opportunities to reshape, amplify, and contest how issues are framed.

The present study applies framing theory to analyze how the Latino Threat Narrative is constructed and represented across traditional and social media. Framing provides a lens for

identifying recurring patterns that define social problems, attribute responsibility, and shape public understanding of immigration. This framework supports the analysis of how often threat-based frames appear and how they are expressed across platforms, leading to the following research questions:

RQ1: How frequently do Latino Threat Narrative frames appear in traditional news coverage and on X?

RQ2: Which types of threat frames (economic, moral/legal, criminal, cultural, demographic, security) appear most often within each medium?

Narrative Paradigm

Framing Theory explains how media shape meaning through selective emphasis, while Fisher's (1985, 1989) Narrative Paradigm explains why those framed elements resonate with audiences. Fisher described humans as *homo narrans*, or storytelling beings who make sense of the world through narrative rather than formal logic. According to this view, communication is persuasive when it takes the form of a story that feels coherent and true to lived experience.

Narrative rationality, which represents the central premise of the Narrative Paradigm, describes how people judge the overall rationality or believability of a story based on its coherence and fidelity. Coherence refers to a story's internal structure and consistency, while fidelity reflects its alignment with the audience's values, emotions, and experiences (Fisher, 1985) When both are present, narratives appear authentic and credible, often exerting greater influence than factual or statistical appeals (Dahlstrom, 2014; Freling, 2020; Graeber et al., 2024). This framework helps explain why stories about immigration can shape attitudes and reinforce or challenge dominant frames more powerfully than data alone.

Building on Fisher's foundation, scholars have expanded the Narrative Paradigm across disciplines and communication settings. Spector-Mersel (2010) presented narrative inquiry as a qualitative paradigm, showing that stories serve as both data and an interpretive lens. Ball (2023) traced its development from early skepticism to widespread use in political, cultural, organizational, and digital research. Georgakopoulou (2017) applied the narrative paradigm to online spaces by analyzing short forms of storytelling such as posts, memes, and videos. She introduced the ideas of narrative stance taking, which refers to cues that signal storytelling, and rescripting, which occurs when audiences reshape stories through sharing and commentary.

Narrative rationality, which hinges on coherence and fidelity, provides a framework for interpreting the stories identified in this research. While the initial two questions focused on how threat-based portrayals appeared across various media, they only tell part of the story. Immigration discourse is also influenced by the reactions these portrayals provoke and the alternative meanings that arise in response. The last two research questions emphasize the inductive and interpretive aspects, exploring the counter-narratives that emerged and how they challenged the Latino Threat Narrative through different persuasive methods. This approach shifts the focus from merely documenting threats to understanding how such meanings are challenged in various media contexts.

RQ3: What counter-narratives emerge inductively in news articles and X posts?

RQ4: How do the identified counter-narratives reflect coherence and fidelity in the ways they construct meaning, values, and emotional resonance?

Methods

This study uses a mixed content analysis that combines deductive and inductive coding to examine how the Latino Threat Narrative and related counter-narratives appear in traditional

news and on social media. Content analysis provides a systematic approach for identifying recurring patterns in communication messages and remains a widely used method in media and communication research (Neuendorf, 2017; Krippendorff, 2019). This mixed design aligns with the study's two analytic phases, which include a deductive phase guided by Chavez's (2008) framework to identify established threat frames, and an inductive, reflexive phase informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) thematic analysis approach. These phases combine structure and interpretive depth and allow the study to document both the persistence of threat-based portrayals and the emergence of alternative narratives.

Data Collection

Traditional Media Dataset

News coverage was collected from Nexis Uni, which provides full-text access to national and regional U.S. newspapers. Only American newspapers were included in the final article dataset. Articles were retrieved using the search string ("undocumented immigrants" AND "illegal immigrants") for the period spanning January 1, 2024, through November 1, 2025. The inclusion of both search terms was intended to capture coverage across differing linguistic frames, including more neutral or human-centered terminology as well as language more often associated with stigmatizing or enforcement-focused discourse. This strategy allowed the sample to reflect a broader range of how Latino immigrants were framed in U.S. newspaper coverage. Articles were included in the final sample if they contained at least one reference to Latino or Mexican immigrants or to immigration from Latin America. Editorials, opinion pieces, letters, sports stories, and Spanish-language newspapers were excluded to maintain a focus on straight news coverage in U.S. English-language newspapers, where the language and framing conventions most directly aligned with the study's examination of the Latino Threat Narrative.

The final sample included approximately 100 articles. Duplicate and near-duplicate articles were removed before coding. The unit of analysis in this dataset was the full article.

Social Media Dataset

Data from X were collected through the Meltwater media monitoring platform, which provides access to publicly available posts through a licensed X API. Using the search terms "undocumented immigrant" and "illegal immigrant," two large source datasets were identified, containing 684,323 and 898,092 posts, respectively. Meltwater's proprietary systematic sampling procedure was then used to draw approximately 20,000 posts from each dataset. These sampled datasets were combined into a single social media corpus, from which a secondary random sample of approximately 4,000 posts was drawn for analysis.

The sampled posts included original posts and quote posts. Replies and simple reposts were not treated as standalone sampled units because, when separated from the focal post, they often provided limited narrative context. Only English-language posts were retained. Although Meltwater supplied several metadata fields, the key variable used in analysis was the direct post URL, which allowed the researcher to open each sampled post on X and review the full post in its native context. No engagement metrics, such as likes or shares, were analyzed.

Coding Procedures

Deductive Coding

The first analytic phase applied Chavez's (2008) framework to identify Latino Threat Narrative frames across both datasets. Each article and post received one code reflecting the frame most clearly supported by the item's overall meaning, emphasis, and evaluative direction. This dominant frame approach was used rather than binary present/absent coding to ensure that each coding decision reflected the primary message of each item and to strengthen intercoder

reliability. Frames were identified when the dominant meaning of the article or post aligned with the frame definition rather than when a specific keyword appeared in isolation.

Six substantive frame categories were derived from Chavez's framework: economic threat, moral or legal threat, criminal threat, cultural threat, demographic threat, and security threat. Additional categories were used to classify items that fell outside these six frames. A no-threat category was used for items containing no identifiable threat frame. An unavailable or irrelevant content category was used for items that were inaccessible or contained no relevant content, including deleted posts, suspended accounts, and broken links. Both categories were excluded from substantive frame analyses.

During coder training and calibration, two additional categories were introduced to capture content not fully addressed by Chavez's original framework. An extended Latino threat category was used for items that portrayed Latino immigrants negatively but did not fit any of Chavez's six categories. Each item in this category was accompanied by a descriptive label in the notes column that identified the type of threat depicted, enabling later assessment of whether the data supported extending Chavez's framework. A generalized anti-immigrant threat category was used for items containing negative portrayals of immigrants more broadly, without specific reference to Latino or Mexican identity. Because Chavez's framework addresses the racialized targeting of Latino immigrants specifically, these items were retained and analyzed separately as a substantive finding about the broader immigration discourse surrounding Latino-targeted threat framing.

The two coders met across three training and calibration meetings to review category definitions, clarify decision rules, and address discrepancies that emerged during pilot coding. Reliability was assessed on 10% of the total sample and calculated across all substantive frame

categories using Krippendorff's alpha (α), a standard reliability coefficient for nominal content analysis data (Krippendorff, 2004). Overall reliability was strong, with α = .87. Category-level reliability was then assessed by comparing each frame with all others using a binary coding approach. Economic Threat (α = .97), Moral/Legal Threat (α = .85), Criminal Threat (α = .82), Cultural Threat (α = .89), Security Threat (α = .85), and Demographic Threat (α = .80) each met or exceeded the .80 threshold. Most disagreements occurred at the boundaries between Criminal and Moral/Legal Threat and between Security and Demographic Threat. These areas of overlap likely reflect the conceptual proximity of those categories within Chavez's (2008) Latino Threat Narrative framework rather than broader coder inconsistency.

Inductive Coding

Following the deductive phase, the datasets were analyzed inductively to identify counter-narratives that challenged the Latino Threat Narrative through positive, humanizing, or explicitly oppositional portrayals. Because prior research offers limited guidance on how such counter-narratives are constructed across news and social media, this phase used reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Coding was conducted by the student researcher through iterative reading, memo writing, and theme refinement, with attention to reflexivity and the evolving relationship between researcher and data.

For the tweet dataset, the inductive phase differed from the deductive phase in its analytic focus and use of contextual interpretation. During deductive coding, each sampled post was coded according to the single dominant frame reflected in the focal post itself. In the inductive phase, the student researcher returned to those posts using the direct URLs provided by Meltwater and, when relevant, examined the surrounding reply thread to identify counter-narrative discourse that challenged, corrected, or reframed threat-based claims. These replies

were not treated as independently sampled units. Instead, they were used as contextual material to support the interpretation of how counter-narratives emerged in direct response to the focal post.

The inductive analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process. The first phase involved repeated reading of the counter-narrative corpus to develop familiarity with its range, tone, and variation. The second phase generated initial codes capturing rhetorical strategies, content claims, and narrative moves across the data. In the third phase, these codes were grouped into candidate themes based on shared underlying arguments or interpretive functions. This process initially produced an eleven-theme map. The fourth phase involved reviewing those candidate themes for internal coherence, analytic distinctiveness, and fit across the full corpus. That review led to the consolidation of the initial eleven themes into five broader themes, each supported by subthemes that preserved the specificity of the original coding while strengthening the overall interpretive structure. In the fifth phase, each theme and subtheme was refined and named more clearly. The sixth phase produced the thematic account presented in the findings chapter.

Theme interpretation drew on Fisher's (1985, 1989) Narrative Paradigm through the concepts of coherence and fidelity. Coherence refers to the degree to which a narrative functions as a believable and internally consistent account. Fidelity refers to the extent to which a narrative resonates with shared values, lived experience, and moral expectations. These concepts provided an interpretive framework for examining how counter-narratives established authenticity, plausibility, and emotional force in response to threat-based portrayals. An audit trail of coding decisions, theme revisions, and reflexive memos was maintained throughout the analytic process to support transparency and methodological clarity. Analysis continued until the themes were

fully developed across the fixed corpus, and no further review yielded substantially new interpretive patterns.

Results

Quantitative Findings

RQ1: Frequency of Latino Threat Narrative Frames

The deductive phase of the content analysis examined the frequency of Latino Threat Narrative frames across two datasets, one comprising posts from X (formerly Twitter) and the other comprising news articles collected through Nexis Uni. Tweets and articles that were irrelevant to the analysis were excluded, leaving a final analytic sample of 3,580 tweets and 100 articles.

In the dataset of tweets, Latino Threat Narrative frames consistent with Chavez's (2008) framework were the most common, appearing in 1,907 posts (53.3% of the analytic sample). Another 36 posts, or 1.0%, were coded as Extended Latino Threat Narrative frames, capturing threat portrayals of Latino immigrants that did not fit neatly within Chavez's original categories. This means that 54.3% of the analytic tweet sample contained threat content directed at Latino immigrants. Another 651 tweets, or 18.2%, used negative or threatening language about immigrants more broadly without specifically referencing Latino or Mexican identity. The remaining 986 posts, representing 27.5% of the sample, showed no identifiable threat frame.

The article dataset reflected a different pattern. Latino Threat Narrative frames consistent with Chavez's framework appeared in 34 articles, representing 34.0% of the analytic sample, while one additional article, or 1.0%, was classified as an extended Latino Threat frame. The largest share of articles, 46.0%, used negative or threatening language about immigrants in broader terms without explicitly centering Latino identity as the main focus of the article.

Nineteen articles, representing 19.0% of the sample, contained no threat frame at all. This distribution suggests that the news coverage in the sample relied more often on generalized anti-immigrant framing than on the more racially specific Latino Threat Narrative described by Chavez, a pattern that differed substantially from that observed in the tweet dataset.

RQ2: Frame Type Distribution Within and Across Media

For RQ2, the distribution of frame types within the tweet sample showed a clear concentration in a few categories. Among the 1,943 tweets coded as containing Latino-targeted threat content, the Economic Threat frame appeared most often, accounting for 855 posts (44.0% of threat-coded tweets). Criminal Threat followed with 504 posts, representing 25.9%. Moral or Legal Threat appeared in 248 tweets, or 12.8%, while Demographic Threat was identified in 195 tweets, or 10.0%. Security Threat accounted for 84 posts, or 4.3%. Extended Latino Threat frames appeared in 36 tweets (1.9%), and Cultural Threat was the least common, appearing in 21 tweets (1.1%).

The article sample showed a much narrower framing pattern. Among the 35 articles identified as containing Latino-targeted threat content, Criminal Threat was by far the most common frame, appearing in 24 articles (68.6% of threat-coded articles). Moral or Legal Threat followed at four articles, representing 11.4%. Economic Threat, Security Threat, Cultural Threat, Demographic Threat, and Extended Latino Threat frames were each rare, appearing in no more than three articles and ranging from 2.9% to 5.7%. Compared with the tweet sample, where threat framing was spread across several categories, the article sample was far more heavily centered on criminality.

To test whether the distribution of Latino Threat Narrative frame types differed by medium, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The results showed a significant

association between frame type and medium, χ^2 (6, N = 1,978) = 38.19, p < .001, Cramer's V = .14. Because five cells, or 35.7%, had expected counts below 5, likely due to the relatively small article subsample of 35 Latino-targeted threat cases, the likelihood ratio chi-square was also examined. It yielded the same conclusion: LR χ^2 (6, N = 1,978) = 38.33, p < .001, which strengthens confidence in the result. A second chi-square analysis using all frame categories across the full analytic sample of 3,680 cases also found a significant association, χ^2 (8, N = 3,680) = 74.18, p < .001, Cramer's V = .14. In that test, 16.7% of cells had expected counts below 5, which remained within an acceptable range. Overall, these results indicate that frame distributions differed significantly across media, although the size of that relationship was modest.

Qualitative Findings

RQ3: Counter-Narratives Across News Articles and X (Twitter) Posts

The inductive phase of this study examined how counter-narratives to the Latino Threat Narrative emerged across the tweet and article datasets. This analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach. After repeated readings of the full counter-narrative corpus, the data were coded for recurring rhetorical strategies, interpretive patterns, and claims that countered Chavez's (2008) threat categories. These initial codes were then grouped into candidate themes and reviewed in relation to both the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole.

This process initially produced eleven candidate themes spanning several broad areas, including economic contribution and exploitation, criminal threat rebuttal, enforcement harms, humanization and belonging, racialized and historical critique, and Latino civic and political presence. Although each candidate theme was supported by the data, the review process showed

that several were more accurately understood as closely related dimensions of broader interpretive patterns.

As a result, the final thematic map was refined into five overarching themes, each supported by subthemes that preserved the specificity of the original coding while allowing for a more interpretive account of how counter-narratives were constructed. Table 2 depicts the five overarching themes identified in the inductive analysis.

Table 2

The Five Counternarrative Frames

Counternarrative Frames	Counternarrative Description
Economic Reframing	Shifts the narrative from immigrants as burdens to contributors; anchored by concrete figures like $89.8B in tax contributions, while also naming the costs of enforcement and exploitation.
Dismantling the Threat Frame	Challenges criminalization narratives through data, critiques disproportionate enforcement, and uses irony to expose internal contradictions in anti-immigration rhetoric.
Humanization and Belonging	Operates at the cultural and linguistic level, reclaiming language, centering family stories, and building coalitions across racial lines to foster a sense of shared community.
Historical and Structural Reframing	Contextualizes current rhetoric within long cycles of scapegoating (going back to the Great Depression) and connects enforcement disparities to colonialism and racial bias.
Latino Civic and Political Agency	Counters narratives of passivity or threat by highlighting documented political representation, military service, and institutional belonging, affirming presence and contribution within formal U.S. structures.

Note. Table 2 presents the five counter-narrative themes identified through the inductive phase of this study.

The qualitative findings also showed that counter-narratives did not take the same form across the two media environments. In the tweet dataset, counter-narratives appeared both in original posts and, more frequently, in reply threads attached to threat-framed content. This pattern is consistent with how counter-narrative discourse functions on social media, where users respond directly to threatening or misleading claims in the reply space. As a result, tweet-based counter-narratives more often took the form of direct rebuttals, irony, data challenges, and coalition-building arguments addressing a specific claim or speaker.

In the article dataset, counter-narratives more often appeared through humanizing accounts of specific individuals, families, and communities, reflecting journalism's capacity for sustained narrative depth. Overall, the two datasets revealed that resistance to the Latino Threat Narrative took multiple forms, each shaped in part by the communicative structure of the medium in which it appeared.

Theme 1: Economic Reframing

The first theme in the counter-narrative thematic map reframes the economic relationship between Latino immigrants and the United States by challenging the idea that immigration is primarily a story of burden or extraction. However, the material in this theme points to contribution, exploitation, and interdependence. Across the dataset, this counter-narrative took shape through three connected lines of argument. One emphasized that undocumented immigrants often pay into public systems from which they are often excluded. Another focused on the ways economic and policy structures keep immigrant labor vulnerable while continuing to profit from it. A third highlighted the disruption that communities experience when that labor is removed. These subthemes combine to form a broader response to Chavez’s Economic Threat frame, making this one of the most developed themes in the counter-narrative corpus.

The tax contribution subtheme is grounded in recurring fiscal claims that directly challenge the notion that undocumented immigrants primarily drain public resources. Multiple posts in the dataset cited estimates placing undocumented immigrants' annual tax contributions at roughly $100 billion. One post contrasted that figure with the $163 billion in taxes reportedly evaded each year by the top one percent of earners, shifting the focus of fiscal blame away from immigrants and toward broader patterns of tax avoidance.

Another post cited figures from the American Immigration Council, reporting that undocumented immigrants contributed $89.8 billion in taxes in 2023, including $55.8 billion in federal taxes and $33.9 billion in state and local taxes. These posts did more than claim that undocumented immigrants contribute financially. They paired that claim with the argument that many of the people making those contributions remain legally excluded from the programs their payments support. One post stated that undocumented immigrants "pay into government-funded healthcare programs, but can't access them except in case of emergency," using exclusion from benefits to challenge the resource-drain frame.

The labor exploitation subtheme repositions undocumented immigrants as workers whose economic vulnerability is structurally produced rather than incidental. Multiple posts across the dataset described corporations recruiting undocumented labor because legal precarity suppresses wages and weakens workers' ability to organize. One post argued that capitalism exploits undocumented and minority workers by keeping them in a precarious legal position, casting immigrants as subjects of systemic economic exploitation rather than threats to the economy. Another described construction companies paying immigrant workers far below standard wages for work that Americans could also perform, locating the source of wage depression in employer practices rather than immigrant presence.

Another post argued that enforcement policy functions to preserve exploitative labor arrangements rather than to protect national security or uphold neutral legal principles. The significance of this subtheme lies in how it shifts responsibility. Rather than arguing that immigrants deserve inclusion because they contribute enough, it suggests that the larger system has produced and benefited from their vulnerability and therefore cannot credibly cast them as the source of economic harm.

The community economic interdependence subtheme documents what communities lose when immigrant labor is removed, which shifts the counter-narrative from national statistics to local disruption. Posts across the dataset described ICE operations that emptied farms of migrant workers, with the effects extending into agriculture, roofing, construction, and landscaping. Two posts also described an ice cream shop that closed after ICE raids, with the owner explaining that most of his customers were Latino and that he did not want to place his employees at risk of detention. One post captured this sense of rupture at the household level by describing homes left behind with “pizza still on the stove,” “food in the pantry,” and “belongings everywhere,” framing deportation not as an abstract policy outcome but as the sudden interruption of ordinary family life.

What distinguishes this subtheme from the tax contribution subtheme is its analytic focus. The tax contribution argument centers on what immigrants give to public systems. This subtheme centers on what communities become when the people who helped build and sustain them are suddenly removed. The pattern that emerges is not framed through abstract national loss alone, but through visible disruption in workplaces, businesses, homes, and neighborhoods. In this regard, the counter-narrative asserts that immigrants deserve to remain because of their contributions and even suggests that their presence is already integrated into the social and

economic fabric of these communities. This argument frames enforcement as less about restoring order and more about dismantling something already embedded.

Theme 2: Dismantling the Threat Frame

The second theme captures counter-narratives that more directly confronted the Latino Threat Narrative than the first theme. Rather than offering an alternative account of immigrant economic life, these responses challenged the threat narrative at the level of its core claims, the institutions that enforce it, and the contradictions that sustain it in public discourse. Some posts used research findings and public testimony to dispute the routine association between Latino immigrants and criminality. Others redirected attention to the harms produced by raids, detention, and weakened due process when those practices affected workers, families, and citizens. Still others worked by exposing claims about immigrants that could not be logically maintained simultaneously. In this theme, the counter-narrative expresses sympathy and weakens the credibility of the threat frame itself.

One of the clearest expressions of this pattern appeared in the criminal threat debunking subtheme. Because Criminal Threat framing was the most common form of Latino Threat Narrative content in the article sample, its repeated rebuttal in the counter-narrative corpus carries significant analytic weight. Multiple posts cited research indicating that undocumented immigrants commit crimes, including violent crimes and DUIs, at lower rates than native-born Americans. One post stated that “U.S.-born Americans commit violent and other crimes at far higher rates than undocumented immigrants,” framing the issue as one that should be evaluated through evidence rather than anecdote or political rhetoric. Other posts drew on statements from the father of a murder victim who publicly rejected efforts to turn his daughter’s death into a broader indictment of immigrants. The force of this subtheme lies in the way it resists a broader

generalization. It does not deny that crime occurs, but it does challenge the conclusion that Latino immigrants should be understood as a criminal population.

A different rhetorical move appeared in the enforcement overreach subtheme, which shifted the focus from immigrants as alleged threats to enforcement institutions as sources of harm. Across both tweets and articles, this pattern included workers detained at job sites without any allegation beyond immigration status, U.S. citizens stopped or detained because they appeared Hispanic, and family members swept into enforcement actions that extended well beyond any narrow law-enforcement rationale. Some posts described ICE activity at construction sites by emphasizing the ordinariness of the people targeted, portraying them as workers rather than dangerous offenders. One article similarly recounted the arrest of an undocumented Mexican father while he was dropping his autistic child off at school, framing the event through family vulnerability rather than public threat. In the tweet dataset, one post made the broader stakes explicit by warning that if undocumented immigrants were denied due process, ICE could arrest U.S. citizens by "claiming they were undocumented and never letting them raise any challenges." The post closed by insisting that rights "protect us all," recasting due process as a civic safeguard rather than a narrow immigrant protection. Framed this way, the counter-narrative widened the issue beyond immigration alone and presented enforcement as a point where civil liberties, state power, and community vulnerability converged.

The irony and contradiction subtheme relied on a different rhetorical strategy, drawing less on outside evidence and more on internal inconsistency. A recurring pattern in the dataset challenged claims that reducing undocumented immigration would make homeownership more attainable by pointing to the contradiction between blaming undocumented immigrants for housing pressures while also portraying them as unemployed and dependent on public benefits.

The force of the rebuttal came from the contradiction itself. If immigrants are portrayed as economically inactive, blaming them for labor market or housing pressures becomes harder to sustain.

A particularly striking pattern emerged in a subset of posts where users directed their claims directly at Grok, the AI system integrated into X. Rather than arguing with other users, these posts addressed Grok as a fact-checking mechanism, tagging the AI with threat-framed claims about immigrant crime, economic burden, or border security and expecting it to validate their position. In several cases, Grok's responses produced statistics and contextual information that directly contradicted the premise of the original post. Users who had framed undocumented immigrants as uniquely responsible for crime or economic strain received responses that included comparative data, such as lower crime rates among undocumented populations relative to native-born citizens, or figures showing substantial tax contributions from undocumented workers. Rather than serving as a tool for confirmation, Grok functioned as a source of counterevidence in those exchanges. This pattern is analytically significant because it illustrates a form of contradiction that did not depend on another user pushing back. The instability of the threat claim was exposed by the platform's own embedded system. In Fisher's (1985, 1989) terms, these interactions lean toward coherence challenges. The original posts assumed that their claims would hold up under scrutiny, but when Grok surfaced data that could not be easily dismissed, it revealed that the threat narrative often rested on assertions that were less factually grounded than they appeared. The contradiction was not produced through debate or partisan disagreement. It emerged through the AI's retrieval of information that the original post had implicitly treated as settled. This dynamic adds a dimension to the irony and contradiction subtheme that extends beyond interpersonal rebuttal and into the structure of the platform itself.

Similar patterns appeared in posts addressing taxation. Some challenged the claim that undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes by pointing out that tax records and employment documentation were never invoked in enforcement contexts. In these cases, the counter-narrative worked by showing that the threat narrative often rested on claims that were difficult to hold together consistently. In this context, contradiction itself became a rhetorical resource, which allowed users to challenge the frame by exposing its instability rather than rebutting each claim individually.

Theme 3: Humanization and Belonging

The third theme encompasses counter-narratives that restore humanity and social membership to Latino immigrants through two distinct but reinforcing strategies. The linguistic and symbolic humanization subtheme argues that dehumanization begins at the level of language and that dignity is recoverable through deliberate, principled word choice. The family and community belonging subtheme argues that dignity is socially recoverable through recognition of the relationships, roles, and shared life that immigrants occupy in communities across the country. Both subthemes serve the same core counter-narrative purpose, which is to oppose the systematic reduction of Latino immigrants to mere legal status or threat categories. However, they accomplish this through different registers and rely on different types of evidence.

The linguistic humanization subtheme was most explicitly developed in content that directly contests the use of terms like illegal alien, illegal immigrant, and undocumented immigrant as neutral or interchangeable descriptors. Across the dataset, this subtheme appears in multiple forms. One post framed the term illegal immigrants as a deliberate misspelling of undocumented immigrants, characterizing the terminology choice as a politically motivated act rather than a factual description.

One article in the dataset argued throughout against dehumanizing language toward immigrants, and this paper argues that the piece functioned as a sustained challenge to the linguistic foundations of the threat narrative. This example is important because it shows that language-based counter-narratives appeared not only in social media posts but also in longer-form written commentary.

This subtheme makes a claim that goes beyond style or tone. By connecting contemporary terminology choices to broader patterns of linguistic dehumanization, these texts suggest that the Latino Threat Narrative depends in part on stripping its targets of linguistic humanity before exclusionary treatment can be justified. In that sense, changing the language is presented not as a cosmetic adjustment but as a challenge to the deeper structure of the narrative itself.

The family and community belonging subtheme appeared more strongly in the news article dataset than any other counter-narrative subtheme, which is consistent with journalism's capacity to center individual lives through sustained narrative detail. Articles across the sample profiled families navigating enforcement, including a Guatemalan family deported despite years of legal effort and deep community ties, undocumented pregnant women living in fear after executive actions targeting birthright citizenship, and a Mexican father arrested while dropping his autistic child off at school. In each case, the focus was on the social roles that immigrants hold, such as parent, neighbor, worker, or long-term resident, rather than solely on their legal status. The intent was to emphasize belonging over legality, encouraging audiences to acknowledge the human connections that already exist before assigning a political or legal designation.

In the tweet dataset, this subtheme often expanded beyond family ties into a broader language of solidarity and shared vulnerability. One post described two Black men in Chicago protecting a Hispanic man from ICE agents, casting belonging as something that crossed racial lines and locating immigrant dignity within a wider community ethic. Other posts worked through more intimate expressions of separation and care. One user wrote that their "heart goes out to undocumented immigrants who are far away from their families" and who had not spent Christmas with them "in years," using distance from loved ones to frame immigrant life through loneliness rather than threat. A similar move appeared in posts about undocumented wildfire workers. One described how the United States relies on undocumented immigrants to fight fires, then narrowed its focus to a single worker, noting that one immigrant had done that work for 20 years and was now facing both cancer and possible separation from his 11-year-old son. What makes this example representative of the belonging subtheme rather than the economic subtheme is its orientation toward relationship rather than transaction. The immigrant described in the post is not presented mainly as a labor input or fiscal contributor. He appears as a father, a long-serving worker, and a person whose ties to others make the question of belonging moral and relational before it becomes economic.

Theme 4: Historical and Structural Reframing

The fourth theme includes counter-narratives that engage with historical and structural analysis on a deeper level than in earlier themes. Rather than working only within the contemporary legal and political terms of the immigration debate, this theme questioned whether those terms alone provided an adequate framework for understanding the issue. The historical and structural reframing subtheme interpreted Latino illegality as a condition shaped by longer histories of territorial conflict, racial exclusion, and recurring public scapegoating rather than as

a purely neutral legal category. The racialized scapegoating subtheme examined the recurrent association between undocumented immigration and Latino identity, treating that linkage as a socially and politically constructed pattern rather than a neutral descriptive fact. Across both subthemes, the counter-narrative argued that contemporary portrayals of Latino immigrants were linked to broader historical patterns and could not be understood fully through present-day policy language alone.

The historical and structural reframing subtheme was the most historically expansive counter-narrative in the dataset and the one that most directly challenged the moral and legal assumptions underlying threat-based portrayals. Posts in this group reconsidered the label illegal through references to Indigenous history, territorial change, and earlier episodes of exclusion and deportation. A school board member's statement that immigrants should not be deported because America is "stolen land" appeared in multiple posts and was presented as a historical argument about prior claim rather than simply as provocation. A related thread drew on Cesar Chavez and earlier deportation campaigns. One post stated, "after the Great Depression was blamed on Mexican workers," mass deportation followed, using that history to frame present-day rhetoric as part of a longer recurring pattern rather than a new development.

This historical framing draws a parallel between earlier periods when Mexican workers were blamed during economic strain and contemporary rhetoric surrounding immigration. It also places Cesar Chavez within a longer tradition of labor organizing and civic participation, allowing posts in this subtheme to frame present-day Latino immigrants not simply as outsiders seeking entry, but as connected to an established history of work, activism, and public life. Other posts drew historical parallels to broader patterns of scapegoating. Some referenced the Holocaust and Nazi persecution of Jews to argue that undocumented immigrants were being cast

as convenient objects of blame during periods of social and political tension. Another linked dehumanizing rhetoric about Latino immigrants to the 2019 El Paso mass shooting, suggesting that repeated threat-based language can have consequences beyond public debate. In these instances, the counter-narrative moved beyond historical analogy alone and toward arguments about the broader social effects of sustained dehumanization.

The racialized scapegoating subtheme focused less on historical precedent and more on patterns visible in the present. Posts in this subtheme argued that undocumented immigrants from Latino backgrounds were often treated differently from undocumented immigrants in other groups, and that this difference reflected more than neutral enforcement practice. Multiple posts pointed to enforcement activity concentrated in Latino and Black communities while contrasting that pattern with the relative invisibility of white undocumented populations. One post described the issue directly as a pattern in which Latinos and Black individuals were pursued while white undocumented people remained largely uncontested. Another referenced a Supreme Court ruling to argue that Mexican appearance had itself been treated as grounds for suspicion, using the legal record to support claims of racially uneven enforcement. Posts from outside the United States echoed this pattern by treating undocumented immigration as a disproportionately Latino issue, reinforcing the idea that the association was socially produced rather than purely descriptive. Across these examples, the counter-narrative challenged readers to reconsider whether the Latino Threat Narrative functioned as a neutral account of immigration at all.

Theme 5: Latino Civic and Political Agency

The fifth theme differs from the others in its overall orientation. While the preceding themes respond to the Latino Threat Narrative by challenging specific claims about economics, criminality, language, or racialized targeting, this theme advances a more affirmative account of

Latino presence in American public life. Rather than focusing primarily on rebuttal, it highlights forms of civic, political, and institutional participation that position Latinos as active contributors within American institutions. As a result, the counter-narrative is less defensive than the earlier themes and broader in its implications for how Latino identity is understood in relation to public life in the United States.

This theme throughout both tweets and articles highlighted examples of Latino civic engagement and institutional participation at prominent levels of American public life. These included the Congressional Hispanic Caucus's oversight role in immigration enforcement, a DACA recipient elected to a city council seat, California senators publicly defending immigrant communities, and posts citing figures that placed Latino Americans at approximately one quarter of U.S. military membership. In these examples, Latino presence was framed not as marginal or exceptional, but as embedded within political, civic, and military institutions. This mattered rhetorically because the argument was not simply that Latinos should be allowed greater inclusion. It was that public discourse often understates the degree to which Latino participation is already woven into American institutional life.

A widely circulated post quoting a Catholic statement captured the moral register of this theme, declaring, "You have contributed to this nation. You have earned our respect. We stand with you." The significance of this example lies partly in the authority of the institutional voice. The message did not come from a single social media user, but from a recognized public institution affirming contribution, dignity, and belonging. Other posts extended this pattern across ideological lines.

Another post cited a Republican elected official and business owner who argued that undocumented immigrants working in construction should not be deported, grounding the

argument less in partisan alignment than in labor, community, and economic reality. Viewed through Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, this theme differed from the earlier ones because it did not merely argue that threat-based portrayals were inaccurate. It instead presented a broader account of Latino civic, military, and political presence that challenged narrower understandings of who is recognized as part of American public life.

RQ4: Coherence and Fidelity in Counter-Narrative Construction

After the five counter-narrative themes were identified through reflexive thematic analysis, each was interpreted through Fisher's (1985, 1989) Narrative Paradigm. This phase examined whether the counter-narratives challenged the Latino Threat Narrative by weakening coherence, fidelity, or both. In this study, coherence refers to the internal consistency and plausibility of threat-based portrayals. Fidelity refers to their alignment with values audiences recognize as fair, humane, and morally defensible. Applying these criteria clarified that the counter-narratives in the dataset worked through distinct persuasive pathways.

Theme 1: Economic Reframing

Economic Reframing functioned primarily as a coherence challenge. Across this theme, the counter-narrative weakened the idea that Latino immigrants could be understood simply as economic burdens by exposing contradictions in the resource-drain frame. Fiscal contribution claims, depictions of labor exploitation, and accounts of local disruption following enforcement actions each made that burden narrative harder to sustain. Together, these patterns shifted attention away from immigrant presence as the source of economic harm and toward the systems, employers, and communities already structured around immigrant labor.

This theme also carried a secondary fidelity dimension. In cases describing disrupted homes, abandoned meals, or employers unwilling to place workers at risk of detention, the

counter-narrative appealed to values tied to responsibility, ordinary community life, and humane treatment. These examples asked whether the values underlying enforcement aligned with what audiences would recognize as fair when confronted with visible human consequences.

Theme 2: Dismantling the Threat Frame

Dismantling the Threat Frame challenged both coherence and fidelity more directly than any other theme. It confronted threat-based portrayals on their own terms by disputing factual claims, exposing contradictions, and questioning the institutional practices used to sustain them. Its coherence challenge appeared most clearly in subthemes that rebutted criminality claims and highlighted contradiction. Posts citing lower crime rates among undocumented immigrants weakened the plausibility of treating Latino immigrants as a criminal population. Other posts exposed the inconsistency of portraying undocumented immigrants as economically inactive while blaming them for labor market or housing pressures. In these cases, the counter-narrative worked by showing that the threat frame often relied on claims that could not be held together without tension.

Its fidelity challenge emerged most strongly in the enforcement overreach subtheme. Here, the focus shifted from immigrants as alleged threats to the moral and civic implications of state action. Examples involving workers, family members, and even citizens vulnerable to detention without meaningful challenge reframed due process as a shared democratic safeguard. The persuasive force of these counter-narratives came from asking whether such practices were consistent with values of fairness, legal restraint, and equal protection.

Theme 3: Humanization and Belonging

Humanization and Belonging operated primarily as a fidelity challenge. The counter-narratives in this theme did not focus first on disproving threat-based claims. Instead, they

challenged the moral assumptions that made those claims persuasive by restoring dignity, relationality, and social membership to people reduced by the threat narrative to legal status or abstract risk.

The linguistic humanization subtheme contested the terms through which immigrants were described, treating the phrase illegal immigrant as morally loaded rather than a neutral descriptor. In doing so, it suggested that the threat narrative depends partly on language that strips its targets of personhood before exclusion can appear justified. The family and community belonging subtheme extended this fidelity challenge through stories of care, separation, service, and solidarity. Accounts of parents, workers, and community members drew their force from recognizable forms of human attachment and vulnerability. In these examples, belonging became a moral claim rooted in relationship and shared life.

Theme 4: Historical and Structural Reframing

Historical and Structural Reframing also operated mainly through fidelity, though in a different register. This theme challenged the moral legitimacy of the threat narrative by placing it within longer histories of exclusion, scapegoating, and racially uneven enforcement. Its force came from historical and structural interpretation.

The historical reframing subtheme situated present-day immigration rhetoric within recognizable patterns of public blame, labor exploitation, and territorial conflict. By linking contemporary discourse to earlier episodes of exclusion, these counter-narratives questioned whether the values supporting present-day threat claims could be separated from histories many audiences would already regard as morally consequential. The racialized scapegoating subtheme made a parallel argument in the present by emphasizing that enforcement and public suspicion were not distributed evenly across undocumented populations. By drawing attention to selective

targeting, these narratives exposed a gap between public ideals of fairness and the unequal realities described in the data. The challenge here centered on the moral neutrality of the framework itself.

Theme 5: Latino Civic and Political Agency

Latino Civic and Political Agency challenged both coherence and fidelity in the most affirmative form. This theme offered a competing account of Latino identity grounded in institutional presence, civic participation, and public contribution. In doing so, it weakened outsider portrayals by making them less plausible and less morally sustainable.

Its coherence challenge rested on visible evidence that Latino presence was already embedded within American public life. Examples of political officeholding, congressional advocacy, military service, and institutional leadership complicated narratives that positioned Latinos as marginal to the nation's civic and political structures. Its fidelity challenge emerged through the values attached to recognition, contribution, belonging, and service. Statements affirming that immigrants had earned respect and solidarity argued that participation in the life of the nation should carry moral recognition. This made the theme especially strong because it moved beyond rebuttal and toward redefinition.

Synthesis

Viewed through Fisher's framework, the five themes challenged the Latino Threat Narrative through different combinations of coherence and fidelity. Economic Reframing and Dismantling the Threat Frame leaned most heavily on coherence by exposing contradiction, weak plausibility, and evidentiary instability in threat-based claims. Humanization and Belonging and Historical and Structural Reframing relied more heavily on fidelity by challenging the values and moral assumptions that made those claims persuasive. Latino Civic

and Political Agency brought both dimensions together most fully by pairing institutional evidence with appeals to contribution, recognition, and belonging. These findings suggest that the counter-narratives in the dataset were doing different kinds of persuasive work. Some undermined the threat narrative by reducing its internal consistency, while others challenged its alignment with broadly accepted values. Some did both.

Discussion

This study examined how the Latino Threat Narrative and counter-narratives appeared in traditional news and on social media and focused on how immigration discourse is shaped by threat-based portrayals and competing interpretive responses. Prior research has repeatedly shown that threatening portrayals of Latino immigrants persist across media environments and digital communication spaces. The present findings support that broader pattern, but they also extend the literature by addressing a less developed area, namely the emergence of counter-narratives that challenge those negative portrayals. This study revealed that public discourse surrounding Latino immigrants is shaped less by a single dominant story and more by competing portrayals whose emphasis shifted across communicative settings.

The discrepancy in findings between the tweet and article samples suggests that threat-based immigration discourse was common in both, but its significance varied by media type. On X, Latino-targeted threat framing appeared more directly, which suggests that social media provides a space where racially specific portrayals are allowed to circulate with greater openness and intensity. In the article sample, threat framing was used frequently, but it more often appeared as generalized anti-immigrant rhetoric rather than explicitly targeting the Latino population. That distinction is important because exclusionary discourse does not need to identify Latinos by name to reproduce the broader logic of the Latino Threat Narrative. Even

when the language is less explicit, it can still position immigrants as a social problem or source of public anxiety. As a result, these findings identify a meaningful difference between overt racialized threats and broader anti-immigrant framing, both of which reinforce restrictive understanding of immigration across media contexts.

This difference in framing between traditional news and social media can be partly explained by the distinct communicative conditions of each medium. News articles typically undergo editorial review and follow professional newsroom conventions that discourage overtly racialized language in favor of broader, more standardized immigration terminology. Even within that environment, exclusionary discourse can still appear through generalized anti-immigrant framing rather than direct references to Latinos. Social media users, by contrast, are more anonymous and are not bound by the same editorial gatekeeping or professional language norms, which allows more direct Latino-targeted threat framing to appear in public discourse. Content that is emotionally charged, conflict-driven, or provocative may also attract greater engagement, giving some users an incentive to frame immigration in sharper and more polarizing terms.

The fact that only 35 of the 100 news articles were coded as Latino-targeted threat narratives reflects the difference between the search strategy and the coding criteria used in this study. The article search intentionally included both “illegal immigrants” and “undocumented immigrants” to capture a broad range of immigration coverage rather than only explicitly hostile content. As a result, the dataset included positive, neutral, and generalized immigration discourse alongside negative portrayals. Many articles discussed immigration policy, border enforcement, or immigrants in broader terms without constructing Latinos as the specific source of threat described in Chavez’s framework. The 35 articles coded as Latino-targeted threat narratives were

therefore the ones that most clearly reflected that threat logic. This distinction is important because it shows that general immigration coverage and Latino-specific threat framing are not interchangeable.

Another key insight from this research is that framing shapes media discourse and often prevents a full discussion of the complexity of immigration issues. As Entman (1993) suggests, traditional and social media users often emphasize certain aspects of the issue while pushing other important components into the background. In this study, social media discourse named the target of the threat frame directly and reduced the issue to short, emotionally charged claims that were easy to repeat and circulate. Traditional news used broader anti-immigrant language that sounded less explicit on the surface, but still guided audiences toward understanding immigration as a risk or strain on American society.

Findings from the second research question identified which threat frames appeared most frequently across media. The economic threat was most used in the tweet sample, whereas the criminal threat narrative dominated the article sample. One plausible explanation is that each medium tends to express anti-immigrant discourse in the form that best fits its own style and structure. On X, economic threat claims are easy to share and often repeated because they attach immigration to general everyday frustrations about jobs, housing, taxes, and public resources. That gives them a wider range than criminal threat, which usually gains traction through a specific publicized case or accusation. Economic grievance does not need a single triggering event. It can circulate as a standing explanation for why material conditions feel strained, which makes it easy to repeat across users and contexts. News coverage operates differently, with criminal threats often receiving greater emphasis because journalism tends to concentrate on reportable incidents, official sources, and conflicts with well-defined boundaries. Arrests, raids,

prosecutions, and public safety concerns provide a ready-made news hook that attracts readers in ways that generalized economic blame does not. Even when economic resentment is present in general discussions, it is less likely to manifest as a clear, documented event in the newsroom. In contrast, crime provides journalists with tangible incidents that are more likely to provoke a reaction.

Moral, Legal, Cultural, and Demographic Threat frames appeared less frequently in the two datasets analyzed in this study, which contrasts with Chavez's findings that identified these as core elements of the Latino Threat Narrative. Their lower occurrence here does not mean they have disappeared. Rather, it suggests a shift in emphasis during the period studied, likely reflecting the broader issues dominating public discourse and the themes political figures were most actively highlighting on their platforms. Additionally, these frames may now operate less often as stand-alone arguments and more often as assumptions built into economic and criminal threat claims. Key elements of the Latino Threat Narrative may remain active even when they are no longer expressed directly.

This study found that counter-narratives were present in the broader discourse surrounding Latino immigrants. Their emergence in the data shows that threat-based portrayals did not circulate uncontested. Instead, they prompted responses, corrections, resistance, and alternative storytelling, revealing a public discourse shaped by ongoing struggles over meaning, legitimacy, and who has the authority to define what Latino immigrants represent. Prior research has focused much more on documenting threat-based portrayals than on examining how those portrayals are resisted once they begin circulating. The findings here show that counter-narratives were not isolated moments of positivity. They appeared in recognizable forms and

served different functions, including challenging distorted claims, restoring moral perspective, and offering alternative accounts of Latino presence in public life.

The medium also shaped the nature of that resistance. On X, counter-narratives were more immediate, public, and adversarial. They often appeared alongside the threat frame itself, making resistance part of the same circulation process. That matters because social media accelerates threat narratives, as well as creates opportunities for users to challenge them in real time. Even when those responses did not replace the original claim, they disrupted its stability and interrupted the kind of repetition that can make a frame feel settled or natural.

The immediacy of social media also changes what counts as participation in public discourse. Many X counter-narratives appeared as quick responses rather than polished arguments or carefully composed statements. Even so, they carried out important work. Some challenged factual distortions with data or direct correction. Others exposed contradictions in threat-based claims through irony or rebuttal. Others broadened the conversation by appealing to solidarity, dignity, and shared vulnerability. Resistance came from institutions, experts, advocacy groups, and ordinary social media users who tried to defend Latino immigrants in the same space where threatening discourse was circulating. In that sense, counter-narratives on social media functioned as a form of discursive citizenship, with users actively debating the meaning of Latino immigration rather than simply absorbing the dominant frame.

Counter-narratives in traditional media articles more often restored personhood to people who had been reduced to stereotypes or threats. Rather than arguing point by point, these stories shifted the terms of recognition by reintroducing immigrants as family members, workers, neighbors, and community participants. This type of counter-narrative carried its own force. It challenged the emotional distance that threat narratives depend on and made it harder to sustain

broad claims about danger when readers were confronted with individual lives, relationships, and forms of contribution. Across both media, then, counter-narratives worked through different pathways. Some corrected false or misleading claims. Some confronted moral indifference. Others replaced the threat frame altogether with stories of belonging, contribution, and shared social life. Their presence shows that the public meaning of Latino immigration is still being contested, and that those contests are visible in the alternative narratives emerging across platforms.

The fourth research question examined how the counter-narratives challenged the Latino Threat Narrative through coherence, fidelity, or both. In this study, coherence refers to whether the threat narrative holds together logically, while fidelity refers to whether it aligns with values audiences see as fair, human, or morally acceptable. The clearest takeaway is that the counter-narratives did not all resist the dominant narratives in the same way. Some challenged the internal logic of threat-based portrayals. Others challenged their moral appeal. This matters because it suggests that the Latino Threat Narrative persists not only through claims that appear believable, but also through stories that resonate with deeper assumptions about belonging, danger, and social order. The most effective counter-narratives weakened one or both of those foundations.

Economic Reframing and Dismantling the Threat Frame worked most clearly through coherence. These counter-narratives introduced evidence, contradiction, and concrete examples that made familiar claims about burden, criminality, and public risk harder to sustain. Their importance lies in showing that some forms of resistance work by exposing instability within the threat narrative itself. Rather than asking audiences to simply feel differently, they push audiences to see that the story does not fully hold together on its own terms.

The Humanization and Belonging and Historical and Structural Reframing themes worked more strongly through fidelity. These counter-narratives relied less on factual correction and more on values such as dignity, family, fairness, and historical accountability. Fisher's idea of fidelity is useful here because a narrative can lose force even when it is not disproven line by line. A story may continue to circulate despite factual challenges, but it becomes more vulnerable when it no longer aligns with the audience's sense of justice or moral decency. In this study, humanizing and historically grounded counter-narratives did that work by making threat-based portrayals feel less acceptable and less consistent with values audiences were likely to recognize. Latino Civic and Political Agency challenged both coherence and fidelity, which made it the most complete counter-narrative in the dataset. Rather than only rebutting the outsider frame, it replaced it with a different public story centered on participation, contribution, and institutional presence. That matters because it moved beyond defense and toward redefinition. When Latino presence is narrated through civic membership, military service, political representation, and public contribution, the claim that Latinos exist outside the national community becomes harder to sustain both logically and morally.

These findings suggest that counter-narratives in immigration discourse do not all do the same kind of work. Some challenge the logic of the threat narrative. Others challenge the values that give it force. Some do both at once. This is an important contribution because it shows that threat-based discourse cannot be understood only as a problem of misinformation or negative representation. It is also a narrative problem. These portrayals endure because they can seem both believable and value-consistent to some audiences. The counter-narratives in this study mattered because they challenged those portrayals at the very points where they draw their persuasive strength.

Extension of Chavez's Original Framework

One pattern in the data appeared to extend Chavez's (2008) original framework. In a small number of posts, Latino immigrants were portrayed as carriers of disease, contamination, and bodily risk. This Public Health Threat frame differed from Chavez's criminal or security categories because the danger was framed in epidemiological rather than behavioral terms. The central claim was that immigrants violated laws or disrupted public order, while endangering the health of the broader population by bringing illness across the border. In that sense, Public Health Threat functioned as a distinct form of Latino-targeted danger not fully captured by Chavez's original six categories, yet consistent with the broader logic of exclusion that defines the Latino Threat Narrative.

Implications

These findings carry implications for researchers, journalists, social media platforms, and the public. For researchers, the study suggests that immigration discourse should not be examined only through threat-based portrayals. Scholarship that documents hostile frames without giving similar attention to the counter-narratives that emerge around them risks producing an incomplete picture of the discourse. That matters because academic work does not remain confined to journals. It is cited, taught, summarized, and sometimes carried into public-facing outlets. When counter-narratives are omitted from research, threat-based portrayals may seem more definitive and uncontested than they truly are. Future research would benefit from examining not only how hostile narratives circulate but also how they are challenged, by whom, and which forms of resistance gain visibility across different media environments.

The findings also have important implications for journalism. In the article sample, the criminal threat frame was the most prominent, suggesting that routine news practices may

narrow immigration coverage to incidents, law enforcement, and public safety. That tendency is understandable in an event-driven news environment, but it can leave broader structural, economic, and human dimensions of immigration underdeveloped. More complete coverage would not require abandoning conflict or public accountability, but it could bring broader attention to the wider conditions shaping immigration, including labor, family life, community membership, and the lived consequences of policy. Coverage that includes both evidence and lived experience offers a fuller account of the issue than coverage built primarily around episodic crime and enforcement.

The study also points to an important implication for media literacy for the public. Repeated exposure to selective frames can make them feel typical, representative, or self-evident even when they are not. In this study, social media often tied Latino immigrants to economic grievance, while the news more often renewed associations with criminality. Audiences need to be cautious about drawing broad conclusions from highly visible but selective stories. Sensational examples and repeated anecdotes can quickly shape perception, especially when they appeal to fear, resentment, or frustration. Generalizing an entire population from a small number of incidents weakens public dialogue, journalism, and civic debate.

The findings suggest that platform visibility can create a version of social reality that feels immediate and persuasive even when it is not representative of the broader world. On X, emotionally charged claims about jobs, housing, taxes, and public resources were easy to repeat and circulate, helping the economic threat spread widely. What appears dominant on social media may therefore reflect engagement incentives, repetition, and provocation more than proportion or accuracy. For that reason, public understanding of immigration should not be built only from what becomes most visible in fast-moving platform environments.

A broader implication of the study is that the Latino Threat Narrative appears to be evolving rather than fading. Some of its older components were less visible as stand-alone frames in this sample, yet they may still remain active as assumptions embedded within more dominant economic and criminal narratives. At the same time, the study found that counter-narratives were present in both media environments, indicating that threat-based portrayals do not circulate without challenge. The larger lesson is that immigration discourse is neither uniform nor settled. It is shaped by platform structure, journalistic routines, political emphasis, and the ongoing struggle over which stories come to define Latino immigrants in public life.

Overall, these implications reinforce the central argument of the thesis. Immigration discourse is shaped not only by whether threat-based portrayals appear, but also by which versions of threat become most visible, which counter-narratives emerge in response, and how different media environments influence what audiences come to see as normal, credible, or socially meaningful.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting these findings. First, the study focused on two specific media environments, U.S. newspaper coverage collected through Nexis Uni and posts collected from X through Meltwater. Although this design allowed for a clear comparison between traditional news and social media, it does not capture the full range of immigration discourse circulating across other platforms such as television, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, or Spanish-language news. The findings speak most directly to the two media environments analyzed here rather than to all contemporary media discourse about Latino immigrants.

The sampling design places limits on the generalizability of this study's findings. The article dataset comprised approximately 100 newspaper articles, whereas the social media dataset was drawn from a much larger pool via systematic sampling. This approach was appropriate for identifying patterns across a manageable corpus, but the uneven sample sizes and the relatively small number of article cases in some frame categories mean that differences across media should be interpreted with appropriate caution. The findings are best understood as evidence of patterned differences within this sample rather than as definitive estimates of all U.S. news and social media content.

The qualitative phase was interpretive, and the reflexive thematic analysis was designed to identify how counter-narratives were constructed and how they challenged threat-based discourse through coherence and fidelity. That approach was valuable for uncovering deeper narrative patterns, but it also means that the themes reflect analytic interpretation rather than objective categories that would necessarily emerge in identical form across all researchers. For that reason, the qualitative findings should be read as theoretically grounded interpretations of the corpus rather than as exhaustive or final classifications of all possible counter-narratives.

Conclusion

The Latino Threat Narrative did not emerge from a single headline or political movement. It has accumulated through decades of repetition, adapting its shape across platforms and finding its way into economic grievance and criminal association, while older frames have migrated inward as embedded assumptions rather than explicit arguments. This study documented that persistence, but it also documented something the literature has often left in the margins, which is the persistence of resistance. Across more than 3,500 tweets and 100 newspaper articles, threat-based portrayals appeared most often through economic frames on X

and criminal frames in traditional news, a pattern that reflects the durability of exclusionary discourse. Different media environments produced different versions of the same impulse, each shaped by platform structure, editorial convention, and communicative norms that influence which stories reach which audiences. Yet within these same spaces, counter-narratives continued to push back. They challenged the internal logic of threat-based claims, exposed contradictions, and restored humanity to people who had been placed into a legal box. They also offered alternative accounts of Latino identity grounded in contribution, belonging, and civic presence. These counter-narratives were not marginal. They were acts of discursive citizenship that appeared in the same digital threads, the same news cycles, and the same public conversations where threat framing often circulated most freely, showing that the narrative has never gone unanswered.

This study ultimately argues that immigration discourse is not a settled story. It is a live contest, and its outcomes have consequences far beyond academic debate. The undocumented father arrested while dropping his autistic child off at school, the wildfire worker facing cancer and separation from his son, the families who left food on the stove and belongings on the floor, these are the human costs of a narrative that has been repeated long enough to feel like common sense. When a story is told often enough, it stops sounding like a story and starts sounding like reality.

This study found that people across both media environments refused to let that happen. They challenged the coherence of threat-based claims with evidence and contradiction. They challenged fidelity through appeals to dignity, family, history, and the moral ideals audiences claim to hold. The most powerful counter-narrative did both. It rebutted the outsider frame and replaced it with a different account of who Latino immigrants are and what their presence means

in this country. This extends beyond a defensive gesture to a full redefinition, and it is visible in reply to threads, news articles, and acts of solidarity across racial lines, in every space where someone decided that the dominant story was not the only one worth telling. The Latino Threat Narrative has endured because repetition is powerful. The question that remains is which story will be repeated next, and who gets to decide.

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