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## D5.4. Evaluation Report of New Media

UCLan Cyprus

[22/01/2026]



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## Document Control

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| Abstract            | This report examines how middle-aged adults (45–65) engage with SMIDGE counter-narrative videos, focusing on the <i>Family Tea</i> immigration video and comparative reflections on two additional SMIDGE videos addressing immigration and vaccination. Drawing on nine focus groups across seven European countries and a complementary think-aloud study, the analysis explores how the newly developed audiovisual SMIDGE content shapes emotional engagement, epistemic evaluation, and reasoning about misinformation and belief formation. Findings indicate that <i>Family Tea</i> functions as a reflective scaffold rather than a didactic intervention, prompting emotional attunement, causal reasoning, perspective-taking, and critical reflection on online information practices. Focus group discussions further reveal that realism, credibility, and character plausibility are central to engagement across all SMIDGE videos, including vaccination-related content. While participants did not report attitude change, they consistently framed the videos as catalysts for discussion and guided reflection. The findings suggest that SMIDGE counter-narratives are best understood as tools for facilitated dialogue rather than stand-alone persuasive interventions. |
| Key Words           | SMIDGE videos; Counter-narrative videos; Critical reasoning; Perspective-taking; Reflection                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

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## Executive Summary

This report presents the results of T5.3 Evaluative Focus Groups and Interviews of the SMIDGE project, assessing the impact of newly developed counter-narrative media addressing online misinformation and conspiracy theories on various socioscientific topics (immigration, vaccination, climate change).

In the 1<sup>st</sup> part of this report, the primary focus groups evaluated a SMIDGE immigration counter-narrative (Family Tea: a UK-set family drama in which relatives challenge a mother’s anti-immigration claims through dialogue) against a comparative UN video (an animated account of migrants’ dangerous journeys and experiences). In addition, two further SMIDGE prototypes were explored more briefly, Phone In (vaccine safety) and Brain Box (climate change), to assess whether the same persuasive and credibility dynamics surfaced across topics. Across nine focus groups conducted by partner institutions in Belgium, Denmark, Greece/Cyprus, Italy, Kosovo, and the UK, 74 middle-aged participants (45–65) viewed one of the videos and discussed emotional engagement, cognitive reflection, and perceived persuasiveness. Using thematic analysis, researchers examined how these contrasting approaches differed in generating emotional engagement, cognitive reflection, and perceived persuasiveness.

Thematic analysis of focus groups revealed five major themes:

1. **Evaluation of information, media, and bias** - prevalence of misinformation,

2. **Pathways Into Conspiratorial and Extremist Frames,**
3. **Emotion as a persuasion tactic,**
4. **Immigration as a Governance and Systems Problem, and**
5. **Credibility and Shareability Hinged on Format Choices** (Realism, identification, and cultural transferability).

**Key Findings:** Overall, participants engaged with the **SMIDGE immigration video (*Family Tea*) in a more discursive and analytically demanding** way than the UN video. SMIDGE more often prompted discussion of how misinformation works, why people become vulnerable, and how conversational dynamics can escalate or de-escalate conflict; themes aligned with conspiracy and extremist belief trajectories. The UN video, by contrast, generated more consistent empathy and emotional resonance, but tended to elicit fewer sustained reflections on misinformation mechanisms, online radicalization dynamics, or conspiracy-style reasoning.

However, participants also raised substantial concerns about whether either approach would shift entrenched attitudes without supportive conditions (e.g., facilitation, repeated exposure, or integration into educational/community formats). Many participants did not report leaving with “new” knowledge. The most significant critique concerned the central character portrayal. The middle-aged mother was perceived by some to be depicted as helpless, and dependent on her husband's guidance, eliciting concerns over negative gender stereotypes. Rather than enabling identification and reflection, this portrayal offended mainly women participants, creating defensive reactions that hindered receptivity. Participants also criticized the video's dialogue as unnatural and stiff, and noted that the video's UK-specific setting and English language did not translate effectively across different European cultural and linguistic contexts, limiting its relevance for the included audiences.

#### *Vaccine and climate change videos*

Beyond the main immigration comparison, two additional SMIDGE videos were briefly explored: *Phone In* (vaccine safety) and *Brain Box* (climate change). These segments were not part of the same structured comparative design as *Family Tea* versus the UN video, so interpretations are necessarily more cautious. Nonetheless, participants' reactions to the vaccine and climate-change videos echoed similar determinants seen in the immigration findings: perceived credibility, felt realism, clarity of the underlying message, and whether the video provided audiences with a meaningful entry point for evaluating claims rather than simply receiving conclusions. Compared with *Family Tea*, the vaccine and climate-change topics appeared to invite less discussion of extremist trajectories specifically.

#### *Conclusion on SMIDGE's efficacy for constructive engagement*

Across focus groups, participants tended to respond differently to the two approaches: the SMIDGE immigration video more often prompted broader discussion about misinformation dynamics (e.g., how claims are checked, how social media shapes exposure, and why certain narratives feel persuasive), whereas the comparative UN video more often elicited empathy for migrants' experiences and was generally evaluated more positively as a communication product. At the same time, many participants indicated they did not learn substantially new information, and several framed both videos as conversation starters rather than tools that would change entrenched views; in the SMIDGE groups in particular, concerns about realism, character portrayal, and cultural/linguistic transferability were raised as factors that could undermine credibility, identification, and willingness

to share, suggesting that any perceived value may depend on careful adaptation to audience and local context rather than a one-size-fits-all format.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of this report, fifteen middle-aged participants from Cyprus reflected on one of the counternarrative videos (Family Tea) in the moment (think-aloud technique). Despite qualitative limitations, the think-aloud data suggest the video functions as a **counternarrative scaffold** rather than a didactic message. It prompts emotional attunement, causal reasoning, epistemic questioning, and perspective-taking without instructing viewers what to think. Participants independently reflect on how personal loss, misinformation, and algorithms contribute to ideological blame and prejudice. Viewers actively enact perspective shifts, particularly when family relationships complicate exclusionary beliefs. Overall, the video stimulates reflective processing that supports critical credibility assessment and recognition of bias formation.

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### 1. Part 1 - Introduction

Social and online media has become an integral part of citizens' daily lives, affecting individuals' understanding of the political, social, and environmental context in which they live (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2023). Simultaneously, the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories on social media platforms has become a critical societal challenge, particularly affecting middle-aged adults who often face distinct vulnerabilities in digital environments. Since older generations were introduced to the digital world at later stages in their lives, Brashier and Schacter (2020) describe the "gray digital divide" – a clear divide in digital literacy skills between younger generations, native to the digital climate, and older generations that have missed crucial skill development and training. These individuals, born between 1960-1980 and currently aged 45-65, encountered social media technologies later in their lives and may face unique vulnerabilities to online misinformation, especially on polarizing issues where existing beliefs and values are strongly held.

While previous research has extensively examined younger demographics' engagement with digital media (e.g., Chang & Chang, 2023; Faverio & Sidoti, 2024; Kops et al., 2025; Livingstone et al., 2017; Nivette et al., 2021), the experiences and responses of middle-aged adults to counter-narrative interventions remain underexplored. Research suggests that Generation X users (born between 1960 and 1980), who are currently in the middle-aged demographic (40-65), have specific priorities in their social media use. This group is more inclined to use social media for professional purposes (Fietkiewicz et al., 2016), maintaining connections with friends and family (Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019), and gathering information or fostering personal growth, while placing relatively less emphasis on purely social interactions (Berezan et al., 2018; Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019). Studies also suggest that middle-aged users may approach online content with greater skepticism (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019) and exhibit higher concerns about privacy (Euajarusphan, 2021; Lissitsa & Kol, 2016). However, this skepticism of information online might be selectively applied, since politically polarizing topics, such as immigration, climate change, and vaccination safety may be particularly susceptible to confirmation bias (Vedejová & Čavojová, 2022). Often described as "digital immigrants," individuals currently in midlife adapted to technological advancements later in their lifespan (Gurunathan & Lakshmi, 2024) and may face unique challenges in navigating digital misinformation, especially on topics where existing beliefs and values are deeply held.

#### Narrative Based Interventions

Approaches to countering misinformation online often involve factual corrections or pre-bunking users on specific topics (e.g., Arechar et al., 2023; Biddlestone et al., 2024). However, when addressing polarizing issues like immigration, climate change, and vaccination, traditional fact-checking approaches may prove insufficient, as they can trigger defensive responses and backfire effects in

audiences with strong pre-existing beliefs. For this reason, narrative-based counter-narrative strategies have been proposed as a complementary approach, aiming to foster reflection, reduce defensiveness, and engage audiences through relatable contexts rather than overt persuasion.

The development of counter-narrative strategies has evolved significantly since early observations of extremist internet use during the Chechen-Russian conflict (Thomas, 2009). As Thomas documents, institutional responses have proliferated since 1989, yet a substantial gap remains between the sophistication of extremist propaganda and the effectiveness of countermeasures.

Building on Bilazarian's (2019) framework identifying three critical success factors; messenger credibility, interactive approaches, and broader network contexts, our focus group evaluation examines how these theoretical principles translate into audience reception. Bilazarian's analysis of failed campaigns like the U.S. State Department's "Think Again, Turn Away" demonstrates the importance of credible messengers, while successful initiatives like the Redirect Method show the value of targeted, interactive engagement. Despite earlier findings, SMIDGE was eager to explore the impact of videos released on social media, reflecting the realities of the "online world" that individuals encounter daily. This is particularly relevant because credibility on social media is often constructed through authenticity cues, emotional thinking, and narrative clarity rather than the recognizability of the presenter. Insights from SMIDGE's exploratory focus groups suggested that participants engaged with videos from both well-known and unknown presenters, noting that their interest was driven not only by the celebrity or credibility status of the presenter but also by other factors such as video features, entertainment value, and emotional tone. Although counter-narrative content has been empirically under-studied and their effectiveness at targeting extremist beliefs outcomes is not well understood (Carthy et al., 2020). The details of what makes a counter-narrative intervention successful are unclear. Hence, many counter-narratives vary greatly in focus. For one, research has shown that counter-narratives can succeed when they are delivered by individuals who possess pre-existing relationships of trust and reputation within target communities (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Helmus, York, & Chalk, 2013). This, however, is not always possible in the online world, and additional features such as perceived authenticity, narrative coherence, and emotional resonance have been identified as important contributors to effectiveness. Studies also highlight the role of message framing – particularly approaches that promote reflection rather than direct persuasion (Miller et al., 2015; Silverman et al., 2016). Furthermore, interactivity, opportunities for empathetic engagement, and content which prompts discussion within social networks can also enhance impact (Davies et al., 2016).

SMIDGE's evaluative focus groups also indicated that individuals were largely involved in specific online groups and communities. However, evaluating SMIDGE content within such forums may be difficult, as these spaces often require restricted access and tend to be organized around shared ideas or interests. This highlights the importance of the network context in which counter-narratives circulate. As Archetti (2015) argues, narratives lack meaning without the appropriate networks to convey them. Thus, successful counter-narratives must not only provide compelling content but also mobilize broader social networks capable of amplifying and validating alternative perspectives. This network dimension is particularly relevant in the context of immigration discourse, where local community dynamics, historical experiences, and socioeconomic factors strongly influence how counter-narratives are received and interpreted across different European settings.

With these considerations in mind, SMIDGE's evaluative focus groups proceeded to explore participants' reactions to the newly created counter-narrative videos. These videos were primarily developed based on findings from earlier SMIDGE tasks and incorporated key recommendations from the focus groups, such as selecting presenters perceived as trustworthy or relatable, ensuring clarity

and accessibility of content, using an engaging and reflective rather than didactic tone, adopting dialogic or debate-style formats, integrating respectful humor where appropriate, and keeping videos short and concise to sustain attention. Immigration, climate change, and vaccination represent issues where misinformation frequently exploits emotional vulnerabilities, making narrative approaches that can engage both cognitive and affective processing particularly valuable.

The comparative analysis primarily focused on immigration. Two additional SMIDGE videos were also included: one on climate change (*Brain Box*) and one on vaccine safety (*Phone In*). *Brain Box* is formatted as a quiz show in which a host answers viewer questions about climate change but repeatedly responds incorrectly, resulting in viewers “losing” potential prizes. *Phone In* is structured as a talk show debate, featuring a moderator, a professor arguing for vaccine safety, and a guest arguing against vaccines; callers also contribute questions and opinions. Because these two videos were not directly compared to traditional videos on the same topics, findings related to them are reported only briefly. The main analysis therefore centers on the direct comparison between the SMIDGE immigration video and a traditional educational video on immigration.

The SMIDGE immigration video and the UN immigration video differed across several dimensions: the SMIDGE video featured real actors, whereas the UN version used animation; the SMIDGE narrative centered on family network communication, while the UN video focused on immigrant and refugee stories, portraying the struggles and dangers of their stories; the SMIDGE video adopted the perspective of nationals, in contrast to the UN focus on the immigrant perspective; and the SMIDGE production emphasized clear and accessible language, whereas the United Nations Commission on Human Rights material reflected a more authentic immigrant communication style. Importantly, the SMIDGE video employed a non-didactic, dialogic style, while the traditional video relied on more direct narration. Both videos were deliberately kept short to sustain attention, and minimal humor was incorporated in either version.

## 1.2 Objectives

This deliverable reports on the thematic analysis of focus group discussions evaluating SMIDGE counter-narrative videos addressing immigration-related extremist narratives. The primary objectives were to:

- a. **Assess engagement** with SMIDGE counter-narrative video
- b. **Evaluate content and perceptions** of SMIDGE counter-narrative video
- c. **Identify design elements** that enhance critical thinking and reduce susceptibility to misinformation

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Procedure

This study employed a comparative focus group design to evaluate SMIDGE counter-narrative videos against traditional educational media (e.g., UN content) on immigration topics. The study was conducted across eight partner institutions in seven European countries, following established protocols for cross-national qualitative research.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The study received bioethical approval centrally from the Cyprus Bioethics Committee and each organizing partner's local ethics committees, as required. Participants were compensated with €25 vouchers for their time and contribution or were recruited through online crowdsourcing websites (e.g. Prolific) and were equally compensated. All

sessions were conducted via secure, GDPR-compliant Microsoft Teams platforms, with recordings stored securely and anonymized during transcription.

Before joining, participants completed a linked MS form to provide informed consent and register for the study. Confirmed participants then completed an online demographics form and provided an email address to receive the meeting invitation on a pre-agreed date. Participants were informed about the study objectives, their right to withdraw, and that sessions would be recorded for research purposes. Additionally, participants were requested to answer a series of brief pre- and post-focus groups questions on immigration.

Extensive focus group interview schedules were developed through cross-consortium discussions (see Appendices 1 & 2). All facilitators received standardized training through a 2-hour online workshop delivered by two experienced researchers, ensuring consistency in facilitation techniques across partner institutions. Questions focused on the use of social and online media among middle-aged adults, including how it influences beliefs, behavior, reactions to online content, and how individuals deal with inaccurate content on online platforms.

#### 2.1.1 Session Structure and Video Presentation/

Online focus groups were conducted via Microsoft Teams (GDPR compliant). Each 90-minute focus group was guided by two facilitators from the organizing partner. Sessions followed a standardized structure:

1. Welcome and introductions (5 minutes): Facilitators welcomed participants, encouraged camera use, introduced themselves and the project, and invited brief participant introductions to support open discussion.
2. Pre-video discussion (5 minutes): Initial discussion about participants' social media usage and participation details.
3. Video presentation and evaluation (40 minutes): Participants viewed the assigned video content (either SMIDGE counter-narrative videos or traditional educational videos) followed by structured discussion using the predetermined protocol.
4. Post-video reflection and recommendations (15 minutes): Final discussion about participants' responses to the content and suggestions for improvement.
5. Closing (5 minutes): Participants were thanked for their participation and informed about the €25 voucher compensation.

For partner institutions conducting comparative groups among SMIDGE and traditional videos, different participants were recruited for each condition to prevent cross-contamination between SMIDGE and traditional media evaluations. The project employed both single-video and comparative experimental designs across focus groups to evaluate counter-narrative effectiveness. This mixed approach enabled assessment of SMIDGE videos both in isolation and in direct comparison with alternative formats. The UK focus group compared the SMIDGE immigration video with the SMIDGE vaccine-related video (*Phone In*). Kosovo conducted two focus groups: the first evaluated the SMIDGE video only, while the second compared it directly with the animated United Nations video depicting the refugee experience. Denmark evaluated the SMIDGE video only. Belgium compared the SMIDGE immigration video with a climate change video (*Brain Box*). Italy conducted two focus groups through different institutions: UMIL evaluated the SMIDGE video only, while FVM evaluated solely the animated United Nations video. Greece/Cyprus conducted two focus groups: the first evaluated the SMIDGE video only, while the second evaluated the animated United Nations video only. The English

SMIDGE video was presented to participants in the Greek/Cyprus and Italian focus groups with subtitles.

The main focus of this analysis is the immigration corpus, including the direct comparison between SMIDGE and UN immigration videos where this matched comparison was implemented. Although some focus groups also viewed additional SMIDGE videos on vaccination safety or climate change, these topics were not paired with matched traditional comparison videos and are therefore summarized only briefly. Focusing the detailed thematic analysis on immigration supports cross-group comparability and avoids introducing additional variability associated with comparing responses across different topics (e.g., vaccination vs. climate change).

## 2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited using multiple strategies to ensure diverse representation: Social media outreach (targeted advertisements on platforms commonly used by middle-aged adults, such as Facebook, LinkedIn), survey respondent invitations (direct contact with individuals who completed the SMIDGE national survey), use of a crowdsourcing website, snowball sampling (referrals from initial participants within social networks), professional networks (recruitment through community organizations and professional associations). All participants were between the ages of 45 to 65 years of age.

A total of 74 participants took part in the 9 focus groups across 7 partner institutions. The participants were from six different countries: Italy (16), the UK (8), Greece/Cyprus (18), Kosovo (15), Belgium (11), Denmark (6). An equal number of male and female participants participated (37 and 37) and the majority was highly educated with 61 participants holding graduate level degrees.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

### 2.3.1 Analytical Approach

Sessions were recorded and transcribed using the in-built Teams function, with participants reminded of the recording at the outset of each session. Partner organizations translated and proofread the transcripts into English before providing them to UCLan Cyprus for centralized analysis. To ensure participant confidentiality, all transcripts were anonymized during processing; identifying information was removed and pseudonymous codes were assigned.

All transcripts were imported into NVivo (v15, 2025) and analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). This approach was selected for its flexibility and rigor in capturing participants' explicit thoughts and experiences while also allowing for comparative analysis across the different focus groups. An inductive, semantic orientation was adopted, prioritizing participants expressed meanings rather than seeking to interpret latent or ideological positions.

### 2.3.2 Six-Phase Thematic Analysis Process

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. In the first phase, researchers engaged in a process of familiarization, carefully reading and re-reading the transcripts to develop a deep understanding of the material and noting preliminary patterns of meaning. The second phase involved generating initial codes. Two independent researchers undertook systematic coding of all transcripts, having previously received training in thematic analysis under the supervision of an experienced qualitative researcher (VC) as part of an earlier project deliverable in April 2025. To establish consistency, the researchers jointly coded two transcripts, refining their approach through discussion before proceeding to code the remaining transcripts independently.



In the third phase, codes were collated into potential themes. This process was carried out collaboratively, with the researchers examining the relationships between codes and organizing them into broader thematic categories while maintaining sensitivity to the comparative design of the study (SMIDGE versus traditional videos). The fourth phase entailed reviewing themes at two levels: first in relation to the coded extracts, to ensure internal coherence, and then in relation to the dataset as a whole, in order to confirm that the thematic structure adequately represented the range of participant experiences across conditions.

During the fifth phase, the candidate themes were refined and defined in greater detail. Under the guidance of the senior researcher (VC), clear definitions and labels were developed to capture the essence of each theme and to ensure that they collectively conveyed a coherent account of the data. Finally, in the sixth phase, the analysis was consolidated into a reportable form, with representative extracts selected to illustrate key points and the findings contextualized in relation to the overarching research questions on the effectiveness of counter-narratives.

### 3 Results

The thematic analysis of 9 focus groups across 6 EU countries reveals 5 major themes describing participants' critical evaluation of the SMIDGE counter-narrative videos on the topic of immigration: 1. Evaluation of information, media, and bias; prevalence of misinformation, 2. Pathways Into Conspiratorial and Extremist Frames, 3. Emotion as a persuasion tactic, 4. Immigration as a Governance and Systems Problem, and 5. Credibility and Shareability Hinged on Format Choices: Realism, identification, and cultural transferability.

The following results section will break down the comparison between the SMIDGE and comparative focus groups in detail for each theme and sub-themes. This is followed by a brief summary of themes of the vaccine and climate change focus groups. Lastly, a summary of the results is presented before the discussion.

#### Evaluation of information, media, and bias; prevalence of misinformation

Participants extensively discussed the role of media, both traditional and social, in shaping immigration discourse and the critical importance of media literacy skills. As illustrated in Figure 1 the SMIDGE focus groups engaged with this theme predominantly.

##### *The Need for Source Verification (especially on social media)*

**Participants in the SMIDGE focus groups predominantly discussed the frequency of mis- and disinformation online and the need for source verification.** Comparative focus groups barely discussed this theme. Only one Kosovar participant discussed a personal recollection of an event where disinformation was spreading across media. After being explicitly asked whether the video portrays disinformation, they explain: *"Migration isn't a luxury – it's a sacrifice. If not for disinformation, many people would understand that better. I remember that famous photo of the little boy found on the beach – it sparked global outrage, but also a lot of disinformation."*<sup>1</sup> This participant recognized the role of misinformation in shaping migration narratives but drew on lived experience rather than analyzing the video's portrayal.

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<sup>1</sup> The participant is most likely referring to Alan Kurdi, a 2-year-old Syrian boy, of Kurdish background. His image made global headlines after he drowned on 2 September 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea along with his mother and brother.

SMIDGE focus group participants on the other hand engaged with this theme extensively. Many participants from the Kosovo, Greece/Cyprus, Belgium, and UK focus groups articulated the crucial need for fact-checking sources and information online. **They connected the family drama and the mother's frustrations directly to her lack of source verification.** They recognized how the mother's reliance on unverified social media content drove her anti-immigration stance. One of the Belgian participants explained it:

*"Yeah, after watching the video I've come to realize that you know sometimes you don't have to trust everything you see online. Some things you have to make a proper research before concluding and also people have developed a [...], self trust to online stuff like the woman did, which is not bad, but sometimes you need to verify [...] some folks before believing what they said online."*

Many SMIDGE participants reported **that the video helped them recognize their own vulnerability to misinformation.** As another Belgian SMIDGE participant stated plainly: *"The video has helped me to be careful of whatever I see online."* This suggests that the SMIDGE video's narrative approach made abstract media literacy concepts concrete and personally relevant. Participants recognized their own vulnerabilities and at least some of them reflected on their online behavior.

However, SMIDGE participants also acknowledged the practical barriers to verification. An Italian SMIDGE participant reflected:

*"I think the protagonist's response when she says, 'I don't have time to check,' is actually a very common consideration. We often tell ourselves that we don't have time to check, which is why we often rely on newspapers or websites we trust. It's a problem, but it's also understandable that in everyday life we can't spend a lot of time checking every single piece of news, especially because we are constantly bombarded."*

Acknowledging the gap between knowing one should verify information and the practical ability to do so. This reveals that a few participants considered that **misinformation does not only require knowledge of media literacy skills, such as verification skills, but also the resources (cognitive and physical).**

Additionally, some SMIDGE participants engaged critically with the **systemic causes of widespread misinformation.** A UK SMIDGE participant identified economic motivation: *"I do blame quite a bit of it on what comes out of the US especially Over the last few decades because there's an awful lot of money to be made in incorrect information because of there is a massive anti-establishment underculture there, which feeds it."* Another UK participant articulated how algorithmic amplification perpetuates misinformation:

*"You're battling social media that runs on algorithms that's constantly feeding people the very stuff that they want to biasedly watch as well. So you're constantly going to battle against that every time they turn the computer on a new bit of information that is so attuned to the way that they already start to see the world, possibly incorrectly or a very false representation of whatever topic it is, and you're having to battle against that, and that that's really difficult to do."*

These reflections suggest that the SMIDGE participants not only engaged with misinformation as an individualized problem, but also understood it more holistically, with systemic problems embedded in media economics and technology design. They illustrated digital literacy knowledge on algorithms



and the underlying mechanisms of social media that can influence public perceptions and individual biases.

### *Media Bias and Declining Trust*

A critical divide emerged in how the two groups discussed traditional media. Only a few comparative participants expressed frustration with biased media coverage but maintained that reform or critical engagement with mainstream sources remained viable. **SMIDGE participants articulated deeper skepticism about the viability of trusting traditional media, at all.**

A handful of Italian participants from the comparative group criticized traditional media for spreading biased and fear-based narratives about migrants. An Italian comparative participant observed: *"Because their narrative [those with opposing views] is the same as that on television; they're bombarded with somewhat mainstream information that tells them that foreigners are the dark wolf and are scary."* They acknowledged media gatekeeping: *"There is television that could very well broadcast this video or many other [similar] things, but they don't do it... we all know a little about the reasons behind it."*

However, rather than rejecting media entirely, comparative participants advocated for media reform and alternative use of powerful platforms. An Italian comparative participant argued:

*"We should use television or the mainstream media, because so many people are intoxicated by television, use the most powerful medium to get the message across, this is what I'm saying, to see these people as human beings, not as numbers, not as people who are annoying... people who just want to improve their lives, we need to get this message across."*

This suggests comparative participants believed media could be reformed to serve counter-narrative purposes rather than being fundamentally compromised.

**SMIDGE participants, by contrast, expressed deep skepticism about traditional media's trustworthiness and structural capacity for reform.** Many Greek SMIDGE participants articulated the most radical critique. One stated bluntly: *"I have over 15 years without watching news. That thing is no longer news, it's shaping of consciousness, it's propaganda. It's something which is not news, really."* Another explained their information strategy: *"I open the Internet, I read the headlines to know what's happening on the planet, if something interests me I can look at it a bit more, and that's it."*

These participants identified structural patterns rather than individual bias. One Greek SMIDGE participant observed: *"Regarding news and especially the way they present them, the skeleton is the same in all news bulletins. The same topics in the same order—the classics—for many years now."* Another noted selective coverage: *"One piece of news they report, another one they won't report at all because it's pro-government, anti-government, and so on."* Suggesting **SMIDGE participants understood media bias as systematic and structural rather than individual editorial choices.**

Two Kosovo SMIDGE participants similarly identified media as actively shaping fear narratives around immigration and immigrants. One explained: *"It's a fear narrative, fed by politics and media. In reality, globalization has enabled population movement and more opportunities for all."* Another articulated how media frames immigrants: *"From the discourse in which foreigners, newcomers, are presented in such a way that if they are anathematized, their arrival is a huge problem, and every action of theirs is demonized."*

A few of the Danish SMIDGE participants also drew on their own experience with starting to distrust traditional media, drawing parallels with those who hold extremist beliefs. One of them described:

*"And then, with the coverage of Israel and Gaza, I've found myself growing skeptical about something—how the media covered that. And suddenly, I could hear myself saying things that sounded almost like what I had strongly rejected before. Like: 'The mainstream media aren't showing what I see elsewhere. Why not? What's going on? What's at stake here?'"*

They recognized themselves mirroring the mother's skepticism and information-seeking behavior from alternative sources, even though they previously held beliefs that those who seek alternative sources engage in extreme behavior.

Another Danish participant explained why **it is easier to continue seeking alternative news, once one started:**

*"But once you've crossed that threshold of no longer trusting the news providers, then you start seeking information elsewhere. And then maybe it matters more that the news feels easy to accept because you agree with it, rather than actually trying to investigate: 'When do you really find the truth? Is there even one truth?'"*

This describes the post-truth phenomenon well, where truth does not matter as much as emotion or how something feels.

An Italian participant also reflected on the role of questioning, verification, and trust in media. They critiqued:

*"An interesting part is when the husband and son explain that mainstream media outlets have journalists who are supposed to fact-check and are professional. I don't think that's right, because it only reinforces the narrative that mainstream media is always true, whereas I think the message of this video is that we should also evaluate mainstream media critically."*

Highlighting a paradoxical approach reflected in the video; misinformation through social media may drive prejudice but reinforcing naive trust in professional journalism, without verification might also produce skepticism.

Figure 1 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Evaluation of information, media, and bias; prevalence of misinformation

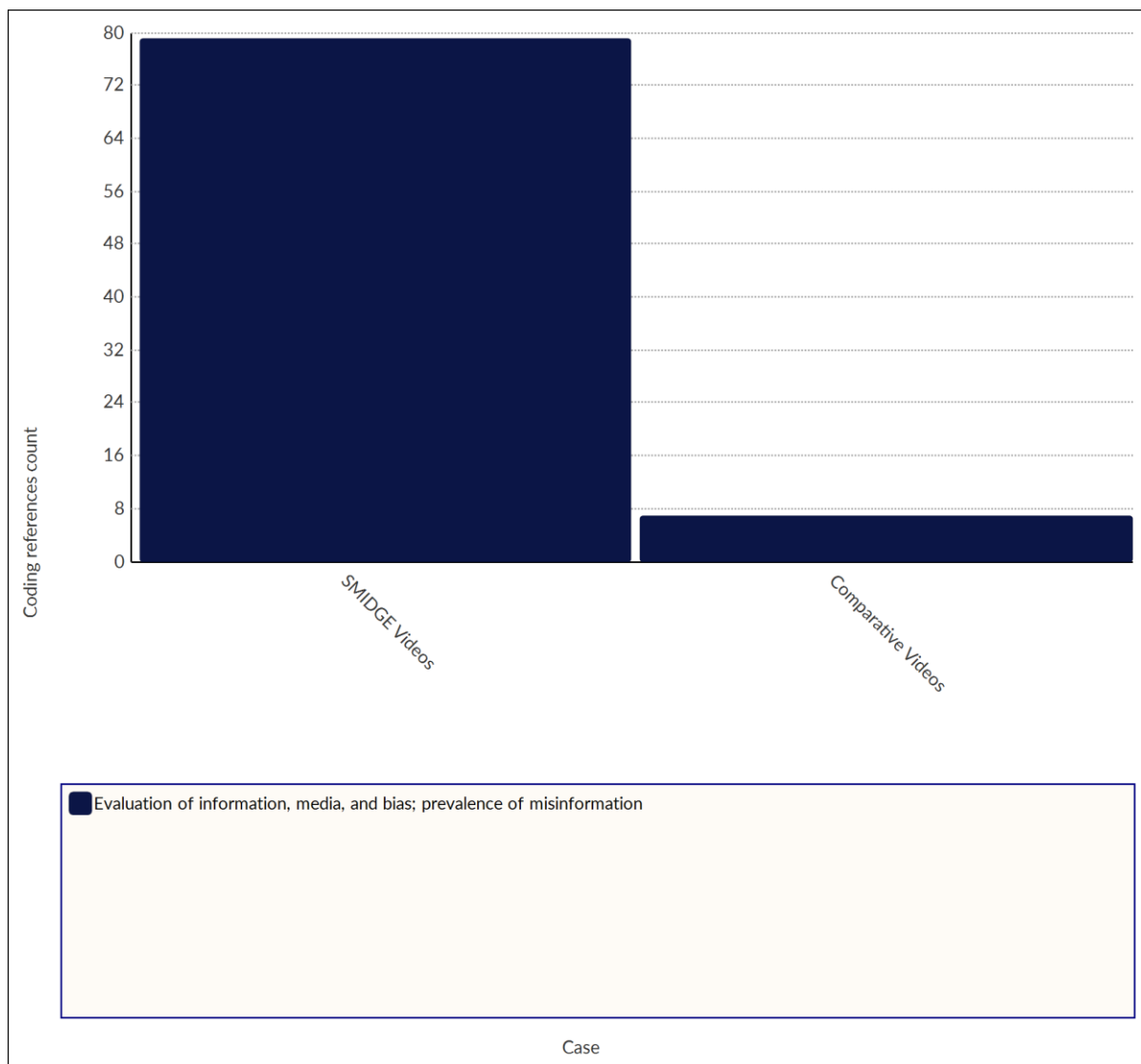


Figure 2 Sub themes per video group for the Evaluation of information, media, and bias; prevalence of misinformation

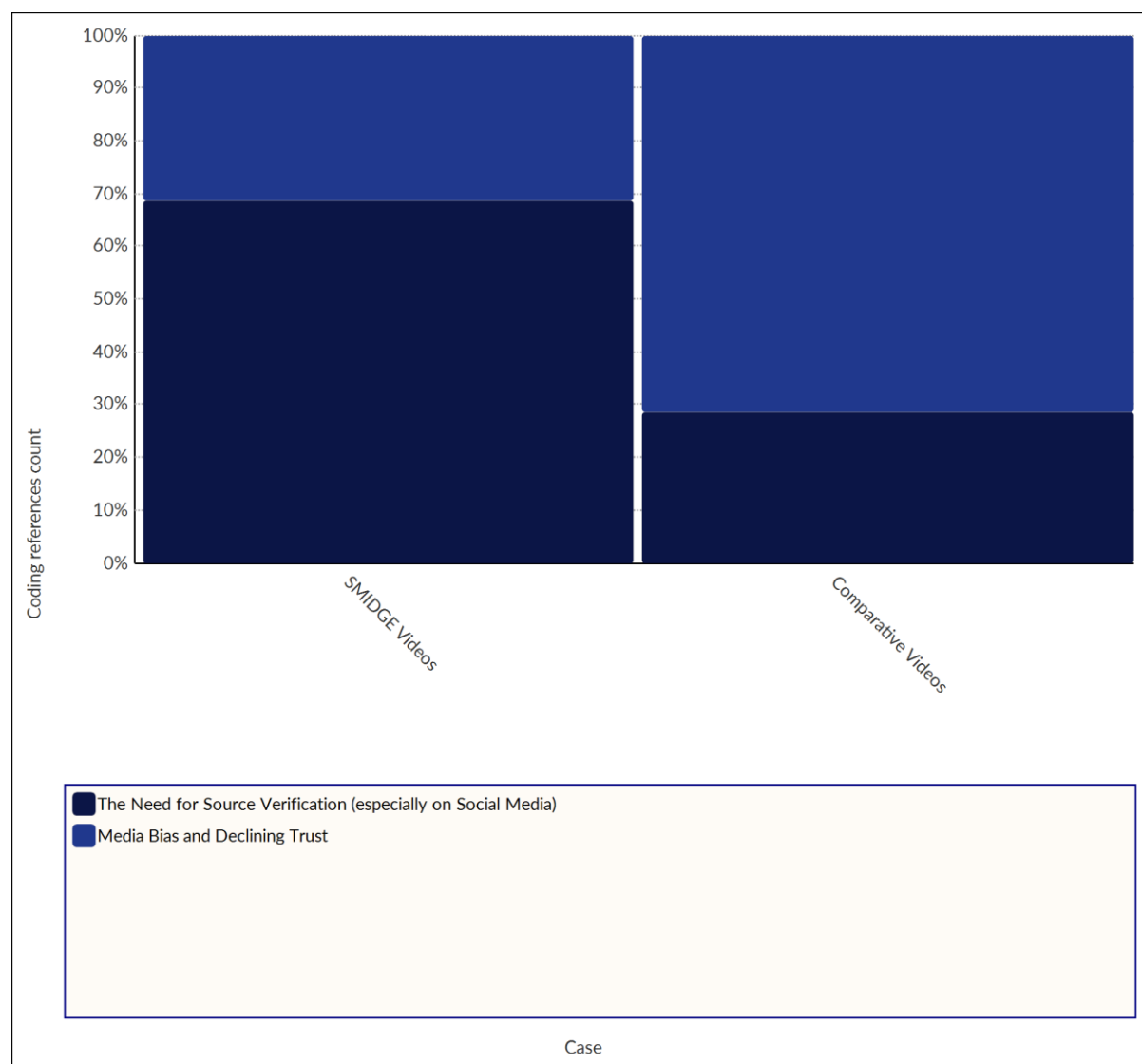


Figure 3 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for The Need for Source Verification (especially on Social Media)

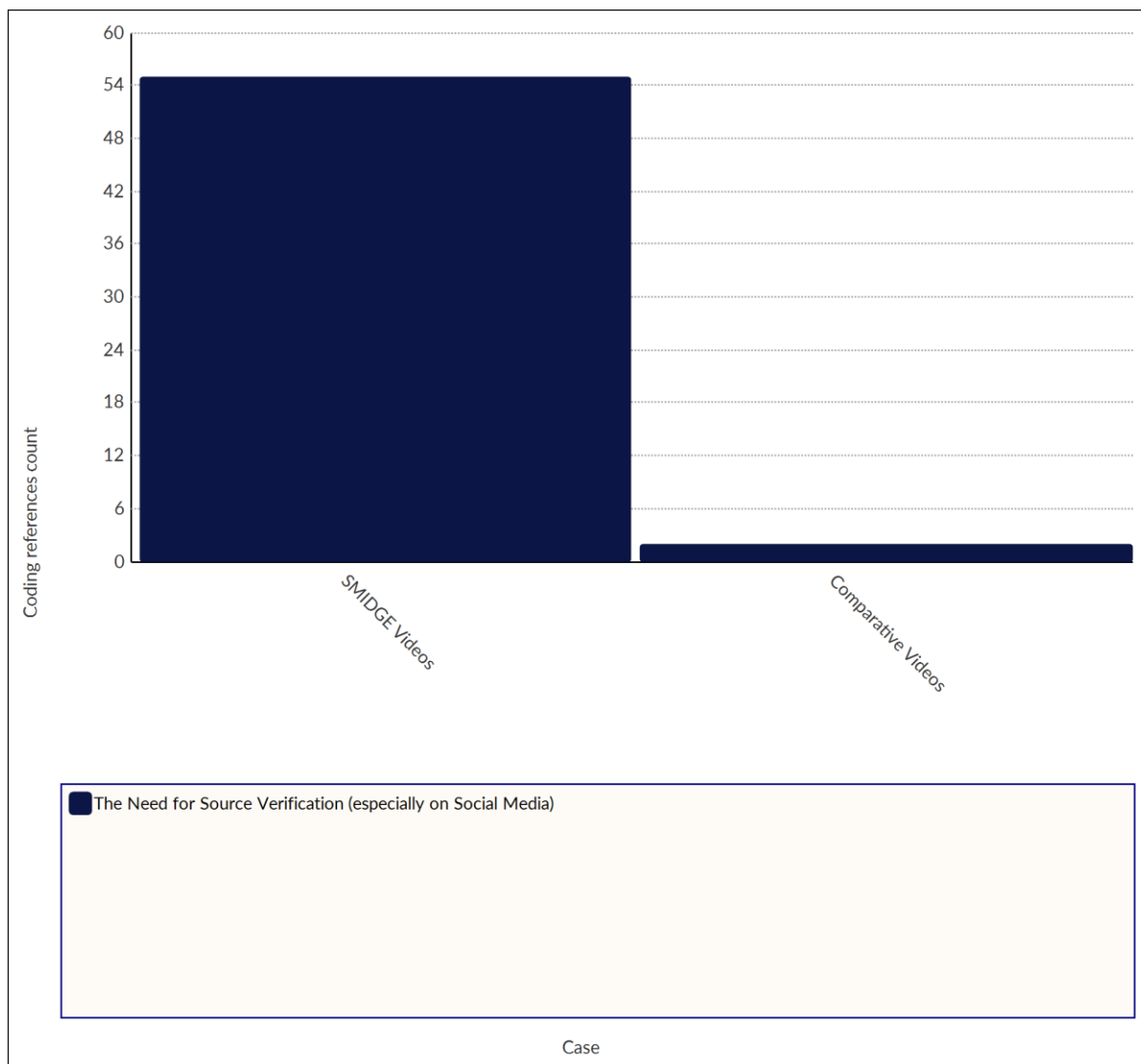
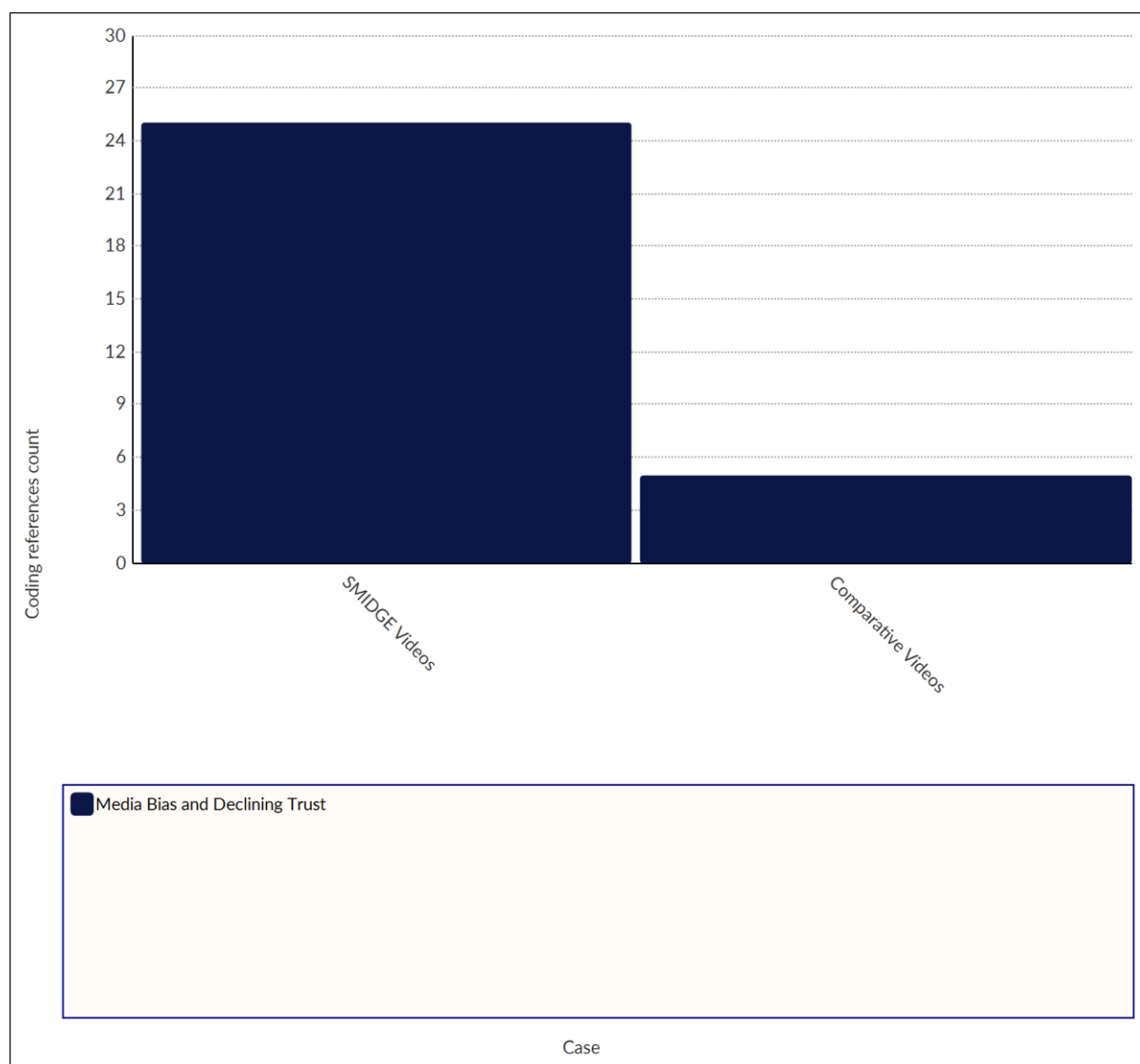


Figure 4 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Media Bias and Declining Trust



### Pathways Into Conspiratorial and Extremist Frames

Participants identified several psychological, social, and structural factors that make individuals vulnerable to extremist narratives about immigration. As illustrated in Figure 5, both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups engaged with the theme, although the comparative groups did minimally. Notably, **SMIDGE focus group participants engaged more deeply with the psychological and emotional dimensions of radicalization** (e.g., how biases, perceived injustice, and blame attributions can shape how immigration narratives are interpreted) (see figure 6).

### Individual Cognitive Factors

Across both comparative and SMIDGE groups, participants identified how cognitive patterns shape susceptibility to extremist narratives (see figure 7). In the comparative focus groups, engagement was minimal (raised by a few participants), typically framed in broad terms rather than as a step-by-step pathway. In the SMIDGE focus groups, cognitive factors were raised by many participants, most frequently in the UK and Italy, with additional mentions in Kosovo, Greece, and Denmark. One of the

UK SMIDGE participants articulated the fundamental problem: *"The way in which humans inherently, unless that it's trained and beaten out of them for a different for a lack of different meaning, how much to rely on bias. Bias is a massive influence in people's brains."* Additionally, other participants also identified how our seeking behavior (i.e., how we seek out information) can confirm our existing beliefs. An Italian SMIDGE participant articulated a progression from disliking specific information to wholesale distrust of mainstream sources, alongside resistance to counter-information:

*"The problem is when you go from saying 'I don't like that news' to 'that type of news source only reports news that I don't like'. So, you are facing a bias, as the lady said, the mainstream media, and you turn to other sources, and in this case, we're lost because we no longer want to hear, as the saying goes: there's none so deaf as those who will not hear. So even if I tell you something different, you don't believe it and you don't go and check the news"*

The participant is describing confirmation bias; ignoring information that is inconsistent with our existing beliefs, while only processing and looking for information that confirms our beliefs.

Participants also mentioned underlying attitudes, and lack of critical thinking or desire to learn as factors that influence individuals to hold more extremist beliefs. Additionally, as shown in Figure 8, **only SMIDGE participants explicitly described scapegoating**: Attributing one's hardships or personal shortcomings to another group. This was closely linked to the mother's behavior in the video, where she blames an immigrant for her own failure (i.e., not receiving the promotion). Participants identified this mechanism in the narrative and then discussed it in broader terms. As one Italian SMIDGE focus group participant put it:

*"what I have seen is a fairly simple transition: we tend to blame a single person or a single case for some of our shortcomings, when perhaps we think that something has been taken away from us and that it is like in this case. I refer to the video only so as not to go into other cases, but obviously there are millions of them. So just thinking that there has been or that we have suffered an injustice, this is the word that then triggers in some way a need to defend ourselves because we think we have suffered an injustice and therefore we generalize, we try to blame someone for taking something away from us."*

By contrast, comparative focus group participants engaged with the cognitive factors less critically and more individually, suggesting that those who want to understand immigrants "would," while also acknowledging that some commitments are difficult to change. One of the Italian participants explained that they would like facts to reflect on *"because sometimes key points in life, such as faith or political affiliations, are difficult to eradicate."*

#### *Emotional manipulation and vulnerability; fear, loneliness, and belonging*

Participants also **considered motivations of individuals who fall for extremist beliefs and conspiracies, and those who spread them**. This theme appeared in both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups but was discussed predominantly in SMIDGE; in the comparative dataset it was raised only sporadically by few (see figure 9). However, as illustrated in figure 10, participants from both focus group types engaged equally in the sub-themes. A Danish SMIDGE group participant explains the community-seeking behavior she witnessed in the video: *"What stood out to me was that it showed how the mother, in her vulnerability—her worries and so on—was met by people outside the family before her own family engaged with her feeling."* Another participant from the same group elaborated further:

*"I think you can fall into them very quickly, because you get that sense of togetherness and community you might be missing. And then you can end up in the wrong groups, but if the majority believes something, then maybe it feels okay. So you can really be swept along in the wrong direction because you're vulnerable, right? And I think it's that lack of community. So you have to [...] be careful."*

Comparative participants similarly emphasized emotion, though with less elaboration. One Greece/Cyprus comparative participant framed despair as a driver of escalation: *"I think despair is the main emotion that can make someone reach something extreme."*

In the Italian comparative group, participants linked vulnerability to **fear and demonization**, arguing that distraction and avoidance can sustain "othering," and reduce humanization: *"...to confront the fear of strangers... this is very often the approach to the topic: demonization... we often forget to humanize these problematic stories."*

Participants also acknowledged the actors of misinformation who may **prey on vulnerability** and deliberately push conspiratorial/extremist content online. As one of the UK SMIDGE focus group participants explains, people start to trust certain figures online which can be con artists, *"they tell these people. If you understand what I'm saying to you, you are smarter than most people around you. And it makes it, it makes them believe that they are... they're the ones with the truth and smarter than most of the other people who are just following the mainstream."*

Another UK SMIDGE focus group participant addressed some of the motivations of those who purposefully spread these extremist narratives: *"...another entity in the background that's purposely throwing this information at you... whether it's division in society... let's deflect..."*

#### *Strategies to combat extremist beliefs*

**Only the SMIDGE focus groups engaged in this sub-theme, discussing combating extremism requires more than simply presenting counter-information** (see figure 11). A few participants from the Italian, Kosovo, UK, and Greek SMIDGE focus groups framed it as a collective endeavor. An Italian SMIDGE focus group, participant explicitly argued for emphasizing interdependence and participation to address the appeal of conspiratorial thinking:

*"...we realize that we are dependent on the actions of others... this idea that we are not autonomous or independent... should be emphasized more... we do nothing alone... It is therefore a desire for democracy, i.e. the desire to participate... resolving this cry for help, for participation, which is at the root of every conspiracy theory, in my view."*

Some participants also stressed that de-radicalization is slow and incremental rather than immediate, particularly in the UK SMIDGE group, where changing entrenched beliefs was repeatedly described as requiring sustained, stepwise engagement. As one UK participant put it: *"I think it takes baby steps to take people out of the sort of psychological barragement that they've probably gone through for months and months and months..."*

Finally, a smaller subset of SMIDGE participants proposed engaging conspiratorial claims through guided reflection, starting from the "solutions" people advocate and prompting them to consider feasibility, trade-offs, and downstream consequences, aiming to "sow doubt" and support self-correction rather than escalation.



Figure 5 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Pathways into conspiratorial and extremist frames

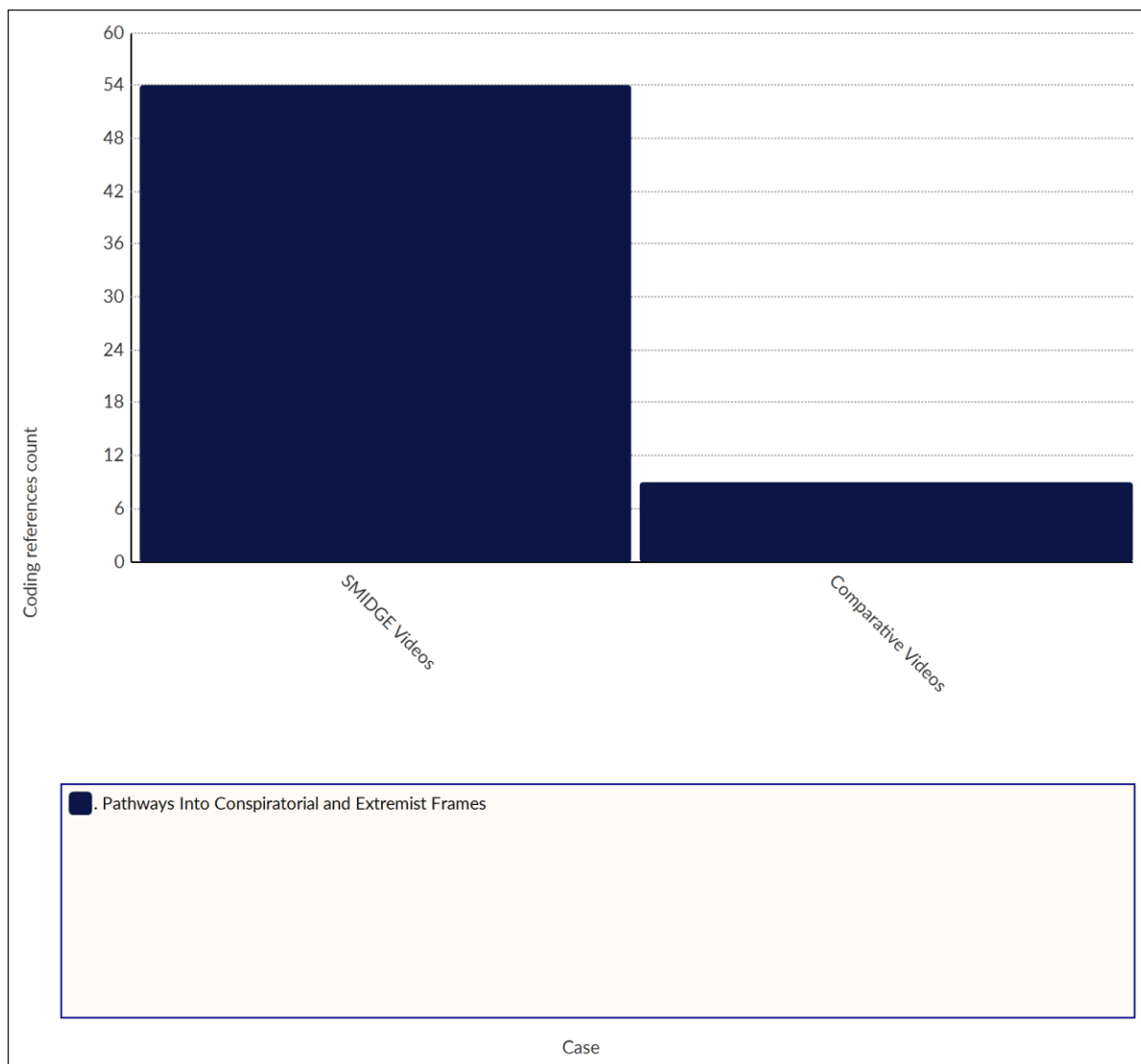


Figure 6 Sub themes of the pathways into conspiratorial and extremist frames across both video groups

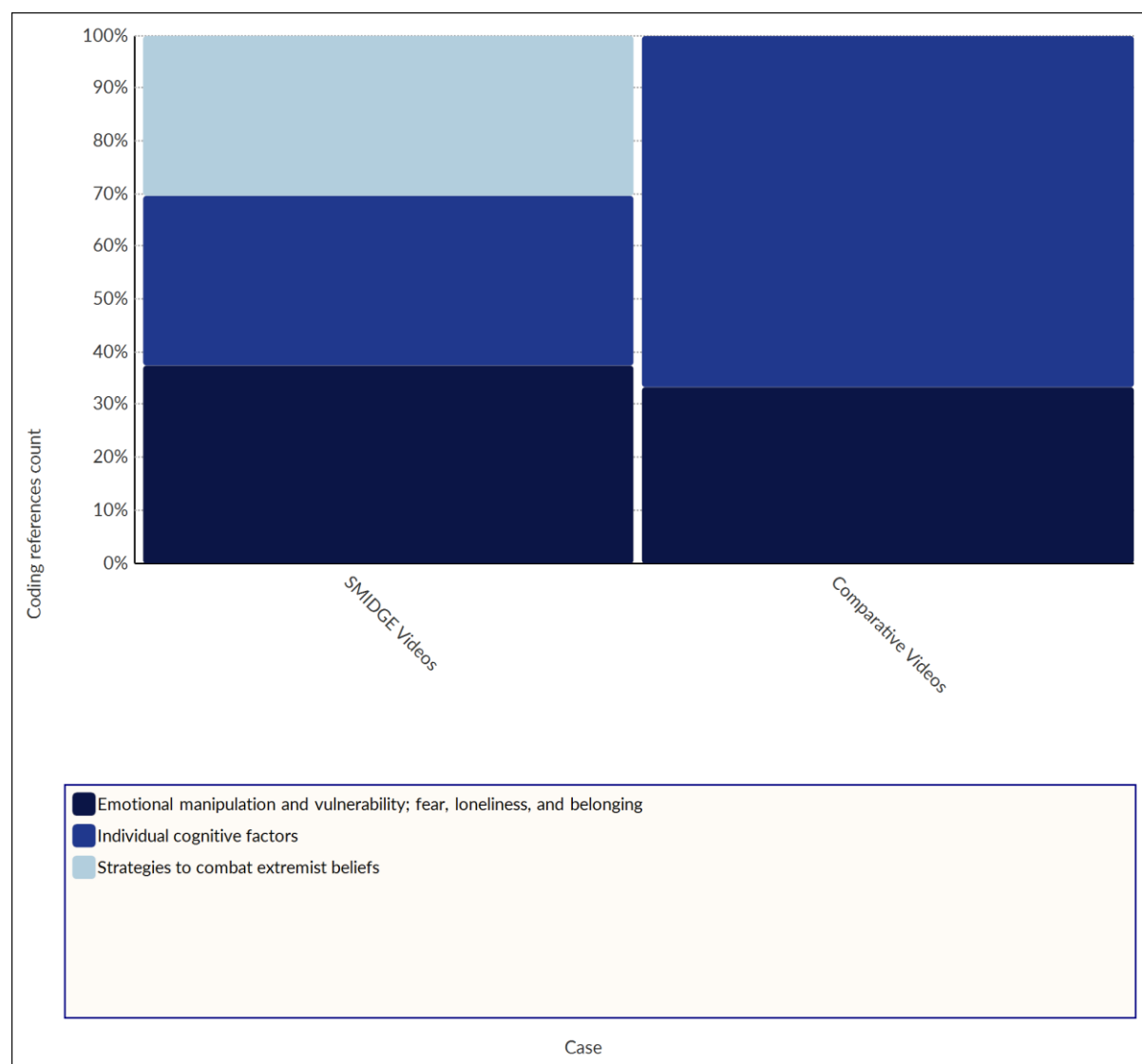


Figure 7 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Individual cognitive factors

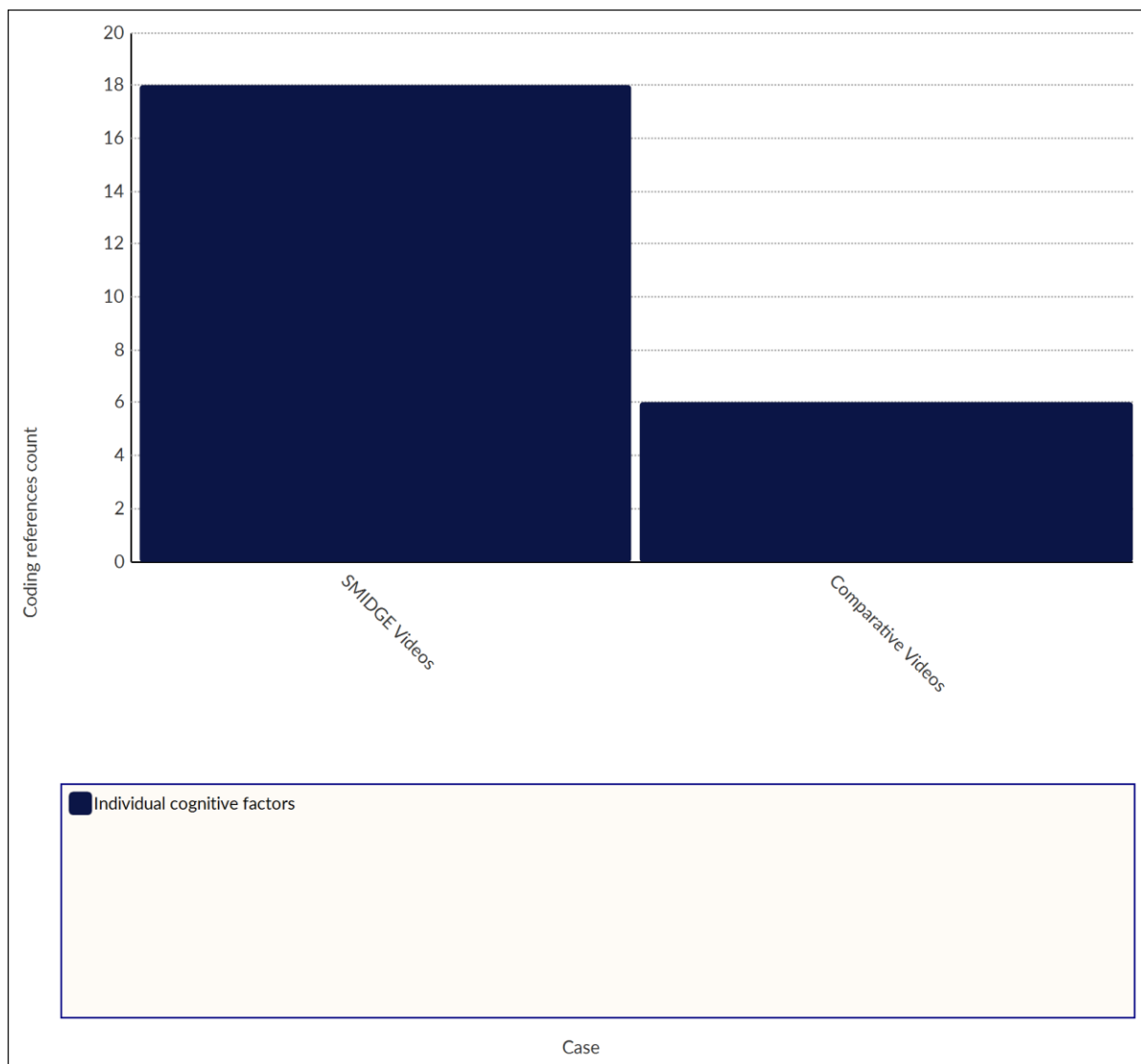


Figure 8 Breakdown of the sub-themes of Individual cognitive factors theme

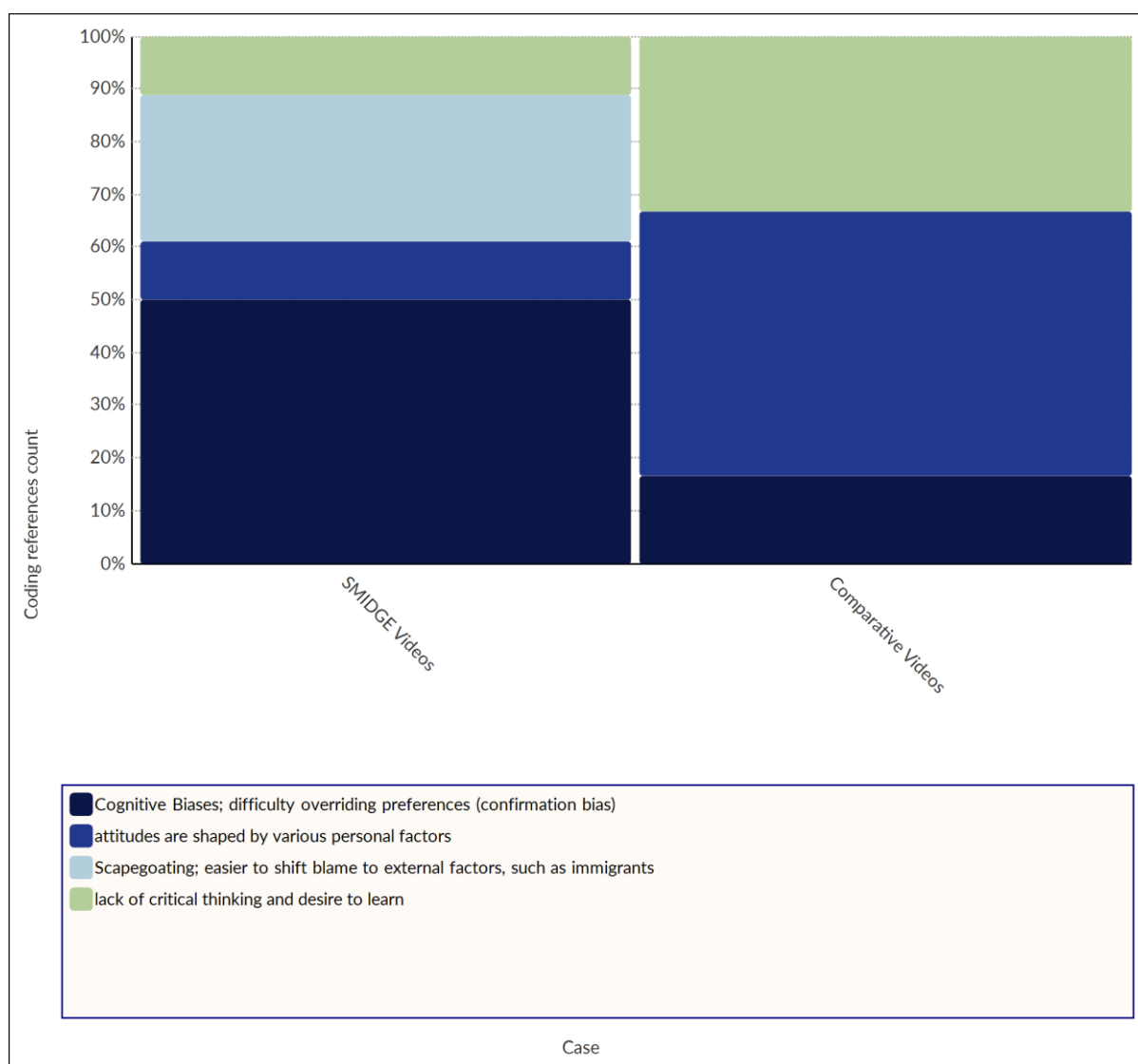


Figure 9 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Emotional manipulation and vulnerability; fear, loneliness, and belonging

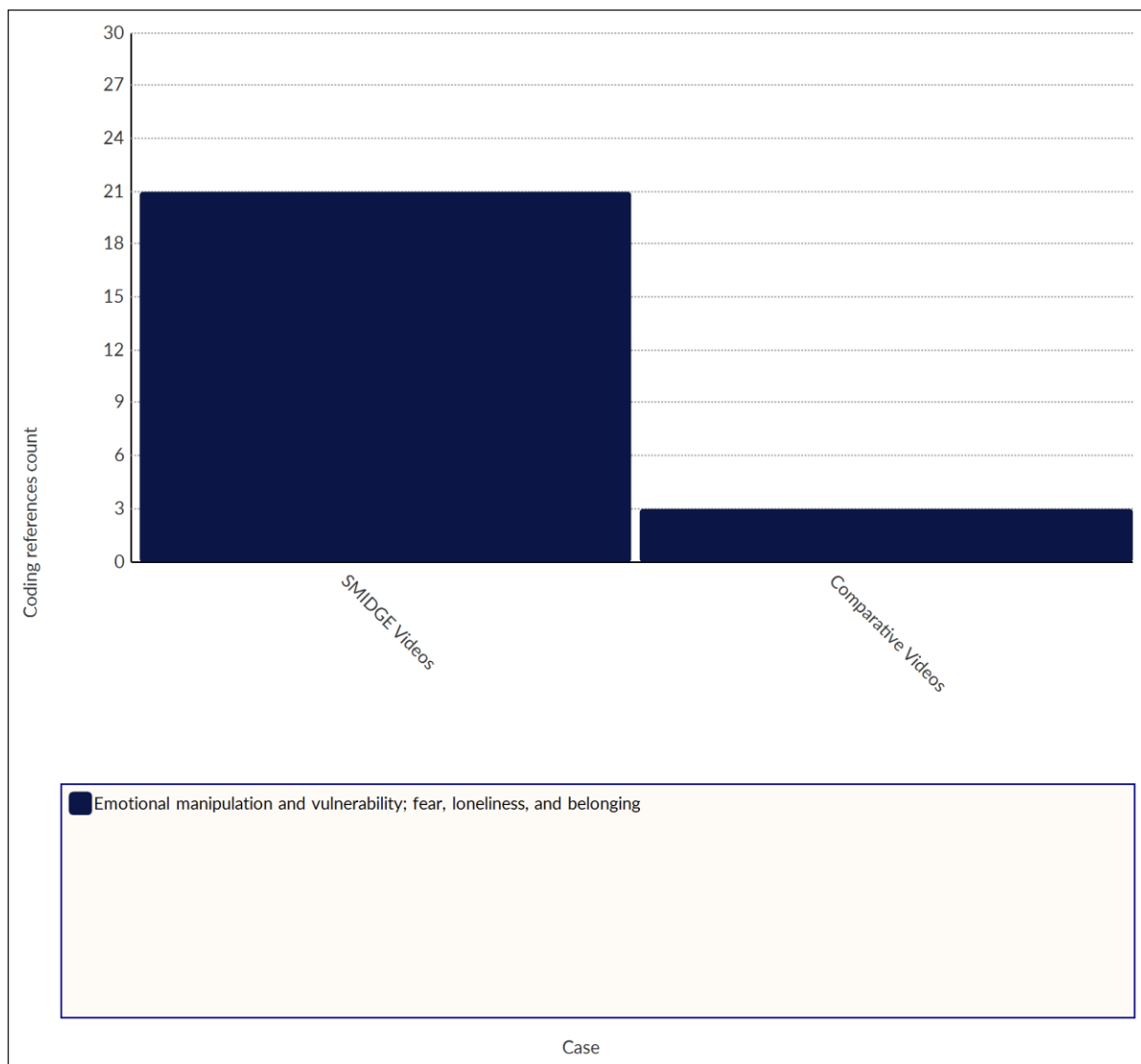


Figure 10 Breakdown of sub-themes of Emotional manipulation and vulnerability; fear, loneliness, and belonging

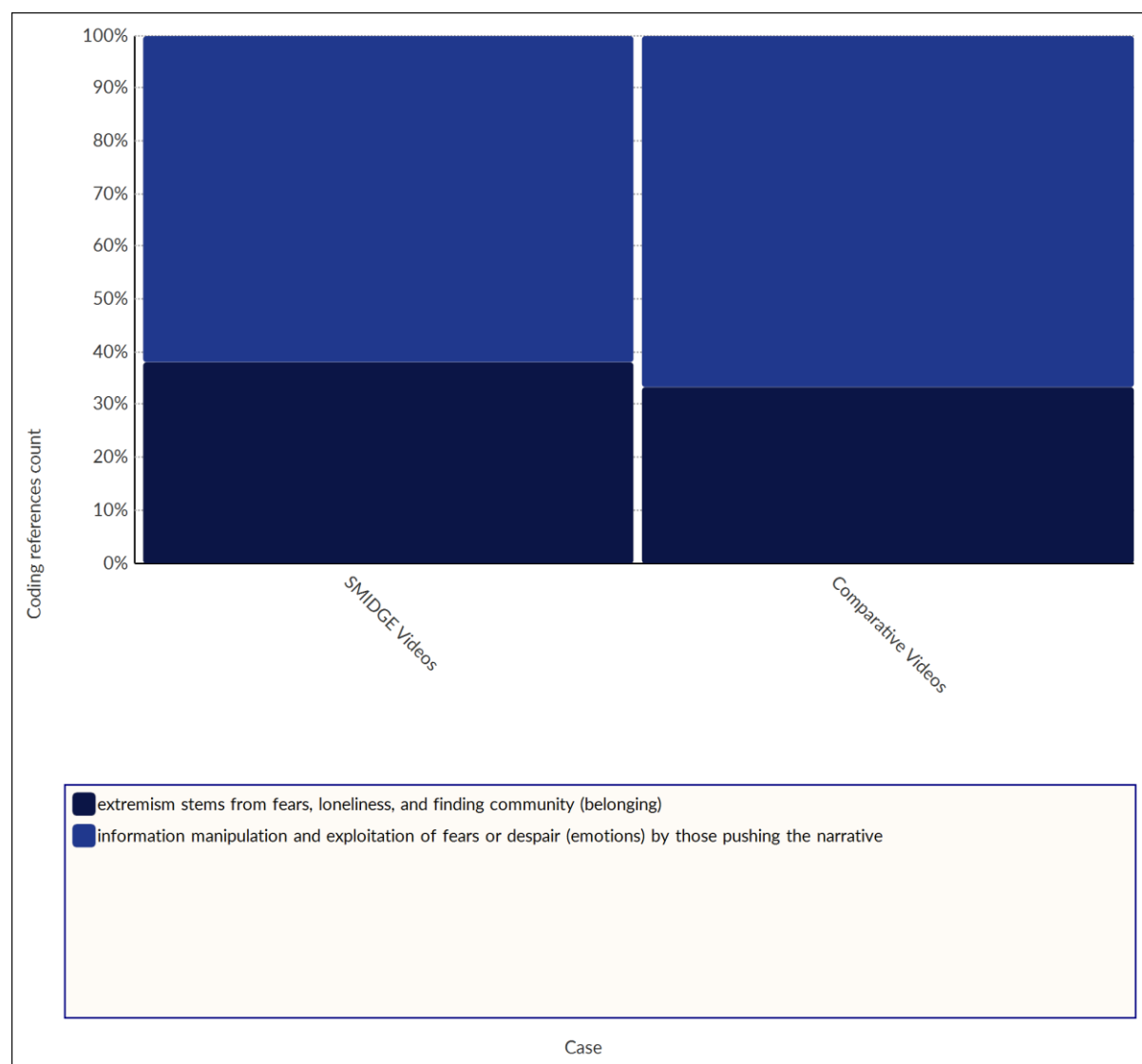
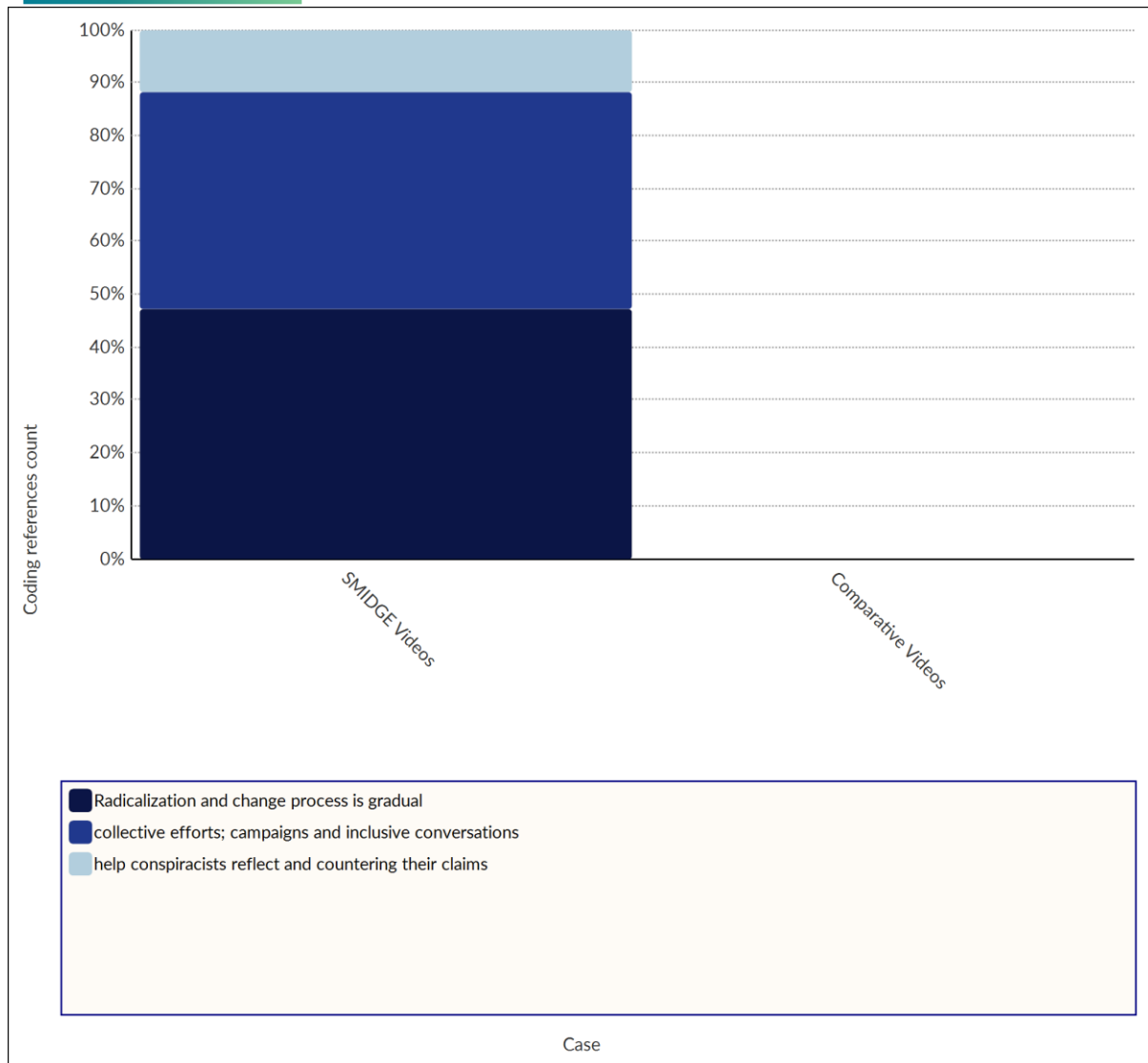


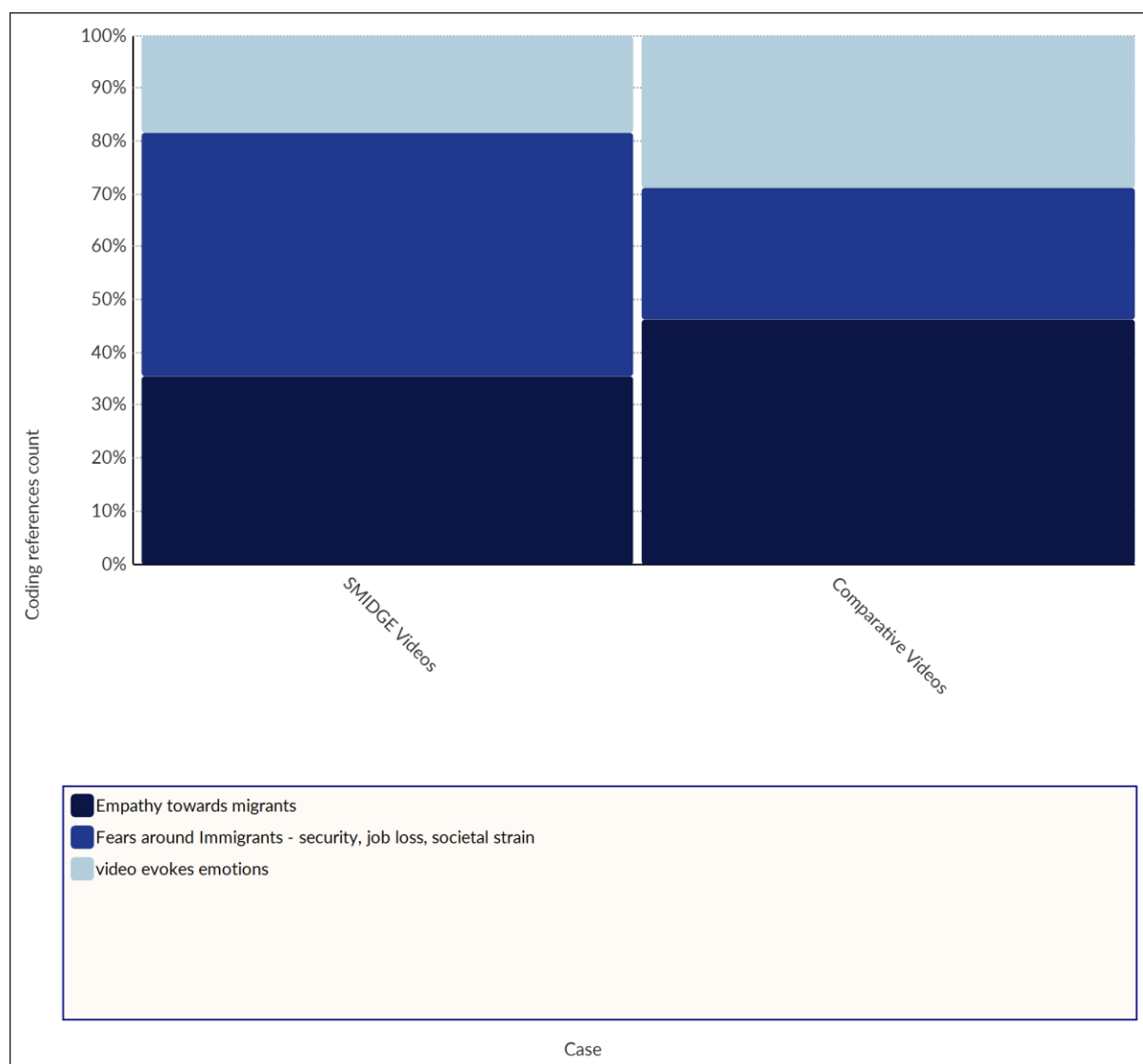
Figure 11 Breakdown of sub-themes of Strategies to combat extremist beliefs



### Emotion as a persuasion tactic

Another major theme concerns the emotional dimensions of immigration discourse. Across both focus groups, participants expressed complex and sometimes conflicting emotional responses, including empathy toward migrants' struggles, fears about immigration's impacts (e.g., security, job loss, societal strain), and strong emotional reactions to the video content. Overall, this theme was discussed in both datasets, with higher engagement in SMIDGE focus groups. However, the pattern of emphasis differed across sub-themes, as illustrated in Figure 12.

Figure 12 Sub themes of Emotion as a Persuasion Tactic across both video groups



### Empathy Towards Migrants

A substantial portion of participants expressed empathy and support toward migrant struggles across both focus groups, in virtually equal amounts but different approaches. Empathy was voiced as compassion for hardship and recognition that migration is often driven by necessity rather than ambition. One of the Italian comparative focus group participants articulated this clearly: *"I feel a bit of compassion for those who come here, because they face serious problems in the countries they live in... so I feel compassion, and sadness, even though suffering is part of this world."* Similarly affective responses were expressed by the Greek comparative focus groups, as one described the process as "very sad" and "very difficult," emphasizing the risk to life during journeys.

Across SMIDGE focus groups, empathy was frequently grounded in proximity, contact, and everyday experience, with participants positioning themselves as witnesses to migrants' struggles in their communities. The Greek/Cypriot SMIDGE focus group emphasized migrants' dignity and humanity. As one described *"They need help and protection... with dignity. Not for us to... treat them as if they are trash..."* and anticipated their own family's potential migration: *"My child will be an immigrant... I hope they will be received humanely..."* Kosovo SMIDGE participants likewise described migration as deeply



challenging in terms of adaptation and acceptance: *“it’s difficult to be in any country... to be accepted...”* and UK SMIDGE participants drew on outreach volunteering to counter stereotypes and highlight deprivation and trauma: *“they’ve got nothing... what they are coming from... is so horrendous... the amount of... post-traumatic stress...”*

Comparative participants also grounded empathy in lived experience, for instance, in the Italian comparative focus group several participants described their personal experiences with migrants and migrant children (manly as educators or through local, long-term involvement): *“I too have lived with these kids for many years... they’re not stories... but... people I know, people I love.”* Many other participants in the comparative groups voiced anger and understanding of sacrifice of migrants. One of the participants in the comparative Kosovo group explained: *“Migration is not an easy choice – it’s often a last resort... Migration isn’t a luxury – it’s a sacrifice.”*

As illustrated in Figure 13, both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups expressed empathy toward migrants. However, as seen in figure 14, the nature of this empathy differed slightly between groups. SMIDGE video participants more frequently grounded their empathy in personal relationships and lived experience with migrants, while comparative group participants more often expressed empathy as an abstract humanitarian recognition of migrant suffering. **This distinction suggests that the SMIDGE videos’ narrative approach fostered more personalized emotional connection, whereas the comparative educational videos prompted more generalized compassion.**

Figure 13 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Empathy Towards Migrants

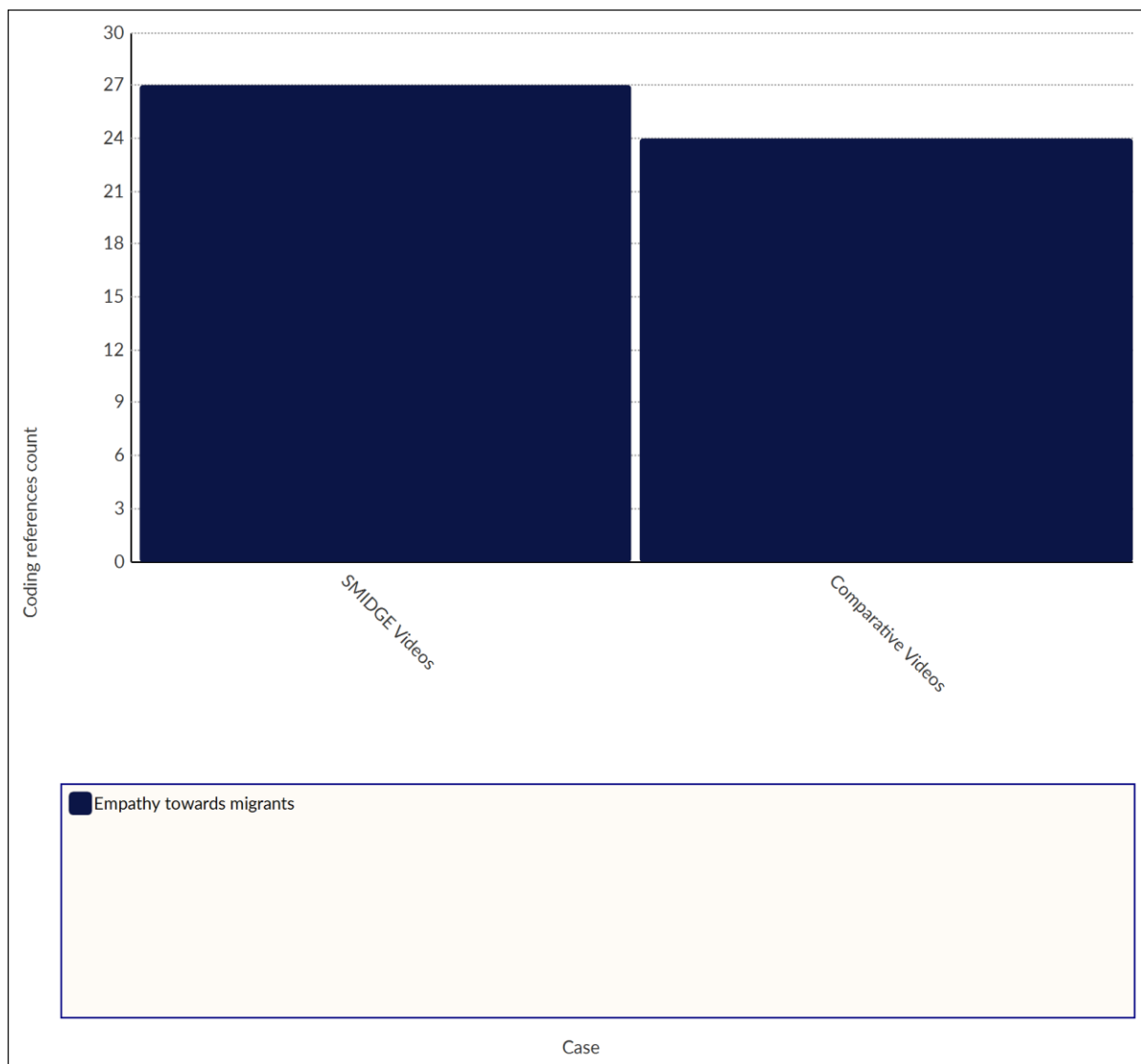
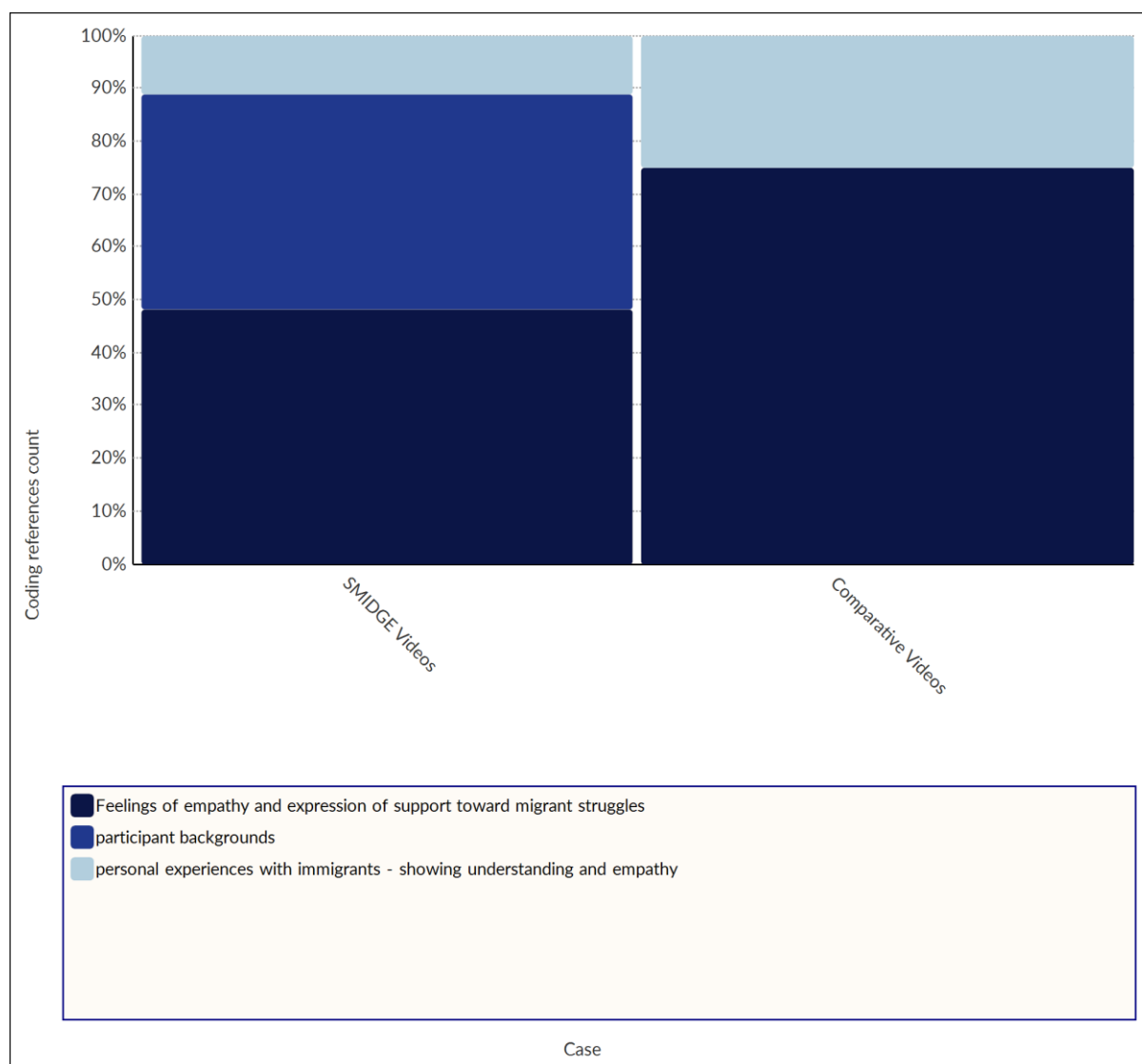


Figure 14 Breakdown of Sub-themes of Empathy towards migrants



*Sub-Themes: Feelings of empathy and expression of support toward migrant struggles; participant backgrounds; personal experiences with immigrants - showing understanding and empathy*

### Fears Around Immigrants - Security, Job Loss, Societal Strain

Concurrently, participants articulated various fears around migrants. As illustrated in Figure 15 these fears were expressed predominantly in SMIDGE focus groups. Figure 16 further shows that the content of these fears differed across video groups. **Importantly, fears appeared more frequently in SMIDGE focus groups than comparative groups, indicating that the family drama format may have prompted participants to confront anxieties that the comparative, educational video did not evoke.**

A major concern centered on migrants as economic threats and the fear of job loss. Various participants felt that migrants and refugees impact the job opportunities of locals and are seen as a threat. One Belgian SMIDGE participant explained: *"But then a lot of indigenous people might actually feel that migrants are fully competing with job opportunities, which actually makes it very difficult for them to be able to get access to a lot of jobs."* However, there were also discussions taking place and

some other participants disagreed with this narrative. For example, one Kosovar SMIDGE participant explains after watching the video: *“But in Kosovo, unlike elsewhere, we don’t have an oversupply of labor – quite the opposite. Businesses are complaining about a lack of workers, especially in construction and gastronomy. So we don’t share the fear that migrants are “taking our jobs.”*

Another fear-based narrative that crystalized were participants’ concerns about cultural change and lack of integration, with particularly Greek participants worrying about ghettoization of local communities. As one Greek comparative participant explained: *“When there are many, inevitably they associate with each other, they socialize together, which means they create a kind of ghetto that makes integration even more difficult.”* Various others highlighted how the culture will change, but they are not sure how, which is worrisome to them.

Related to this was fear of erosion of identity due to migration, with participants expressing worry about losing national or cultural identity. For instance, a Greek comparative participant asks: *“Now, will you tell me, will we reach a point where we’re all united, a universal state where we no longer have character, ethnicity, race and we’re all uniform?”* This illustrates the sense of anxiety and fear that others expressed as well, regarding the erosion of national and ethnic identities due to migration. However, a few SMIDGE participants also rejected any kind of fear-based narratives around immigration, claiming that we should not be afraid of immigrants.

These fears (i.e., about jobs, culture, identity) reveal underlying anxieties about what immigration means for communities experiencing rapid demographic change, particularly in Greece and Kosovo where discussions of these fears were most prominent. The fact that SMIDGE groups articulated these fears more frequently than comparative groups suggests that the narrative, personal approach of SMIDGE videos may have made these anxieties more salient, prompting participants to voice concerns they might otherwise have kept implicit.

Figure 15 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Fears Around Immigrants - Security, Job Loss, Societal Strain

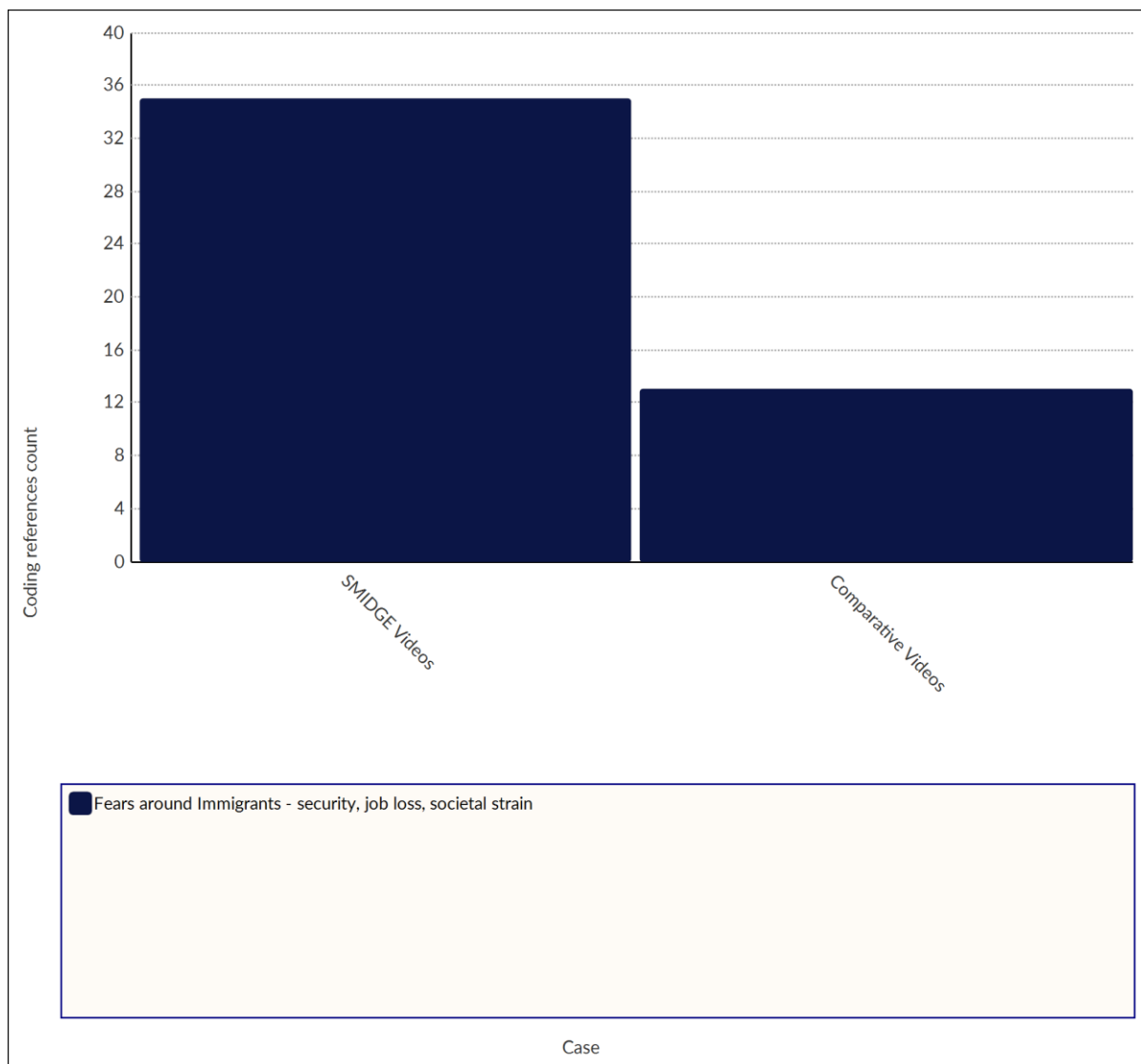
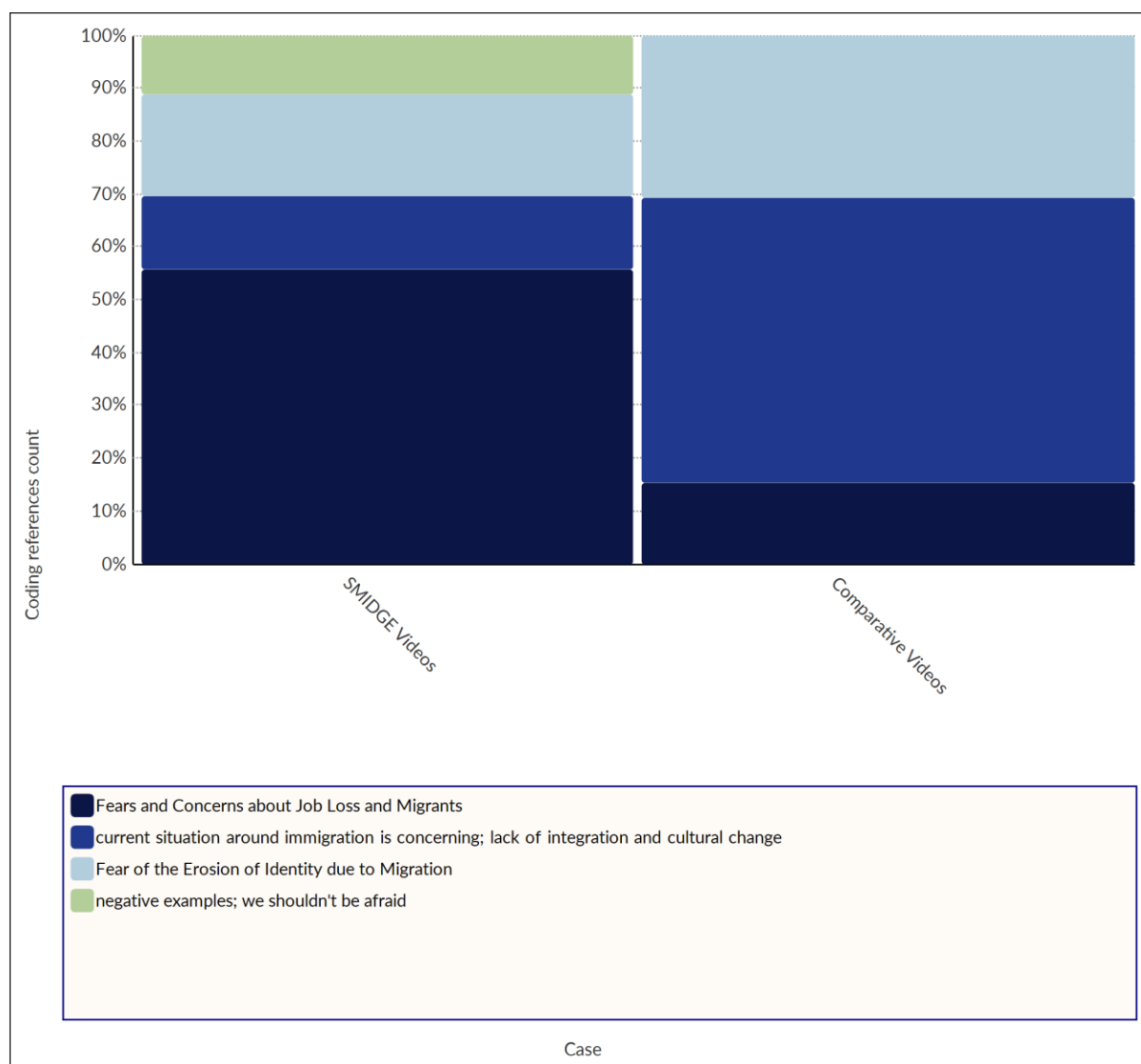


Figure 16 Breakdown of Sub-themes of Fears Around Immigrants - Security, Job Loss, Societal Strain



### Video Evokes Emotions

**Both SMIDGE and comparative videos generated strong emotional responses, though the nature and intensity of these responses differed between groups.** As illustrated in Figure 17, both video types prompted emotional engagement and slightly higher engagement by participants in the comparative focus groups. Figure 18 reveals important distinctions in how participants experienced these emotions. While participants in the SMIDGE focus groups mainly discussed emotional responses toward immigrants and their empathy for the mother character, while comparative focus group participants discussed their emotional responses toward immigrants and the comparative video.

Participants across both groups reported feeling moved by the videos. A Belgian SMIDGE participant captured this impact: *"OK, this video was very effective to me because it didn't just tell a story, it made me feel something. It helped me understand how deeply it can hurt when someone is not believed or supported."* Highlighting that it moved them emotionally which made the video more effective. Similarly, a Greek comparative participant acknowledged being emotionally affected: *"The truth is that the video moved me emotionally."*

However, the emotional responses diverged in important ways. Comparative video participants frequently reported experiencing empathy alongside anger and other negative emotions regarding systemic injustice. Italian comparative participants were particularly articulate about this. One Italian participant described intense emotional overwhelm: *"when I listen to stories like the ones narrated in the video, I can't deny that I can't breathe. I can't breathe thinking about the nights, the sea, the violence—that kind of thought overwhelms me."* Which emphasizes the strong emotional reaction and connection to the video following immigrant's journey. Other participants mentioned being emotionally moved more frequently in the comparative groups compared to the SMIDGE groups. Another Italian participant linked emotional response to anger at systemic injustice:

*"The emotion of anger comes from the fact that there's a systemic injustice, for example, in the specific case of what's happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo. You wonder how those people who have been dying for 30 years in this war that no one talks about don't want to go to a better place."*

**SMIDGE video participants, by contrast, reported more complex emotional responses centered on character empathy and ambivalence.** Notably, SMIDGE participants developed sympathy and empathy specifically toward the mother character. A Belgian SMIDGE participant reflected on the mother's isolation: *"The woman was actually trying to keep the worry to herself until a point that maybe she could not actually go on with it anymore. That was when she set it out. And then when she said it out, she now had different opinion, which I think actually helped her too."* This sympathy for the mother extended to understanding her as someone with legitimate grievances rather than simply as a bigot. One Kosovo SMIDGE participant articulated: *"We need to see more what she's losing, not who is gaining. Someone foreign gained, but this woman, in this case, is frustrated because first and foremost she lost a position which she aimed for."* A Greek SMIDGE participant expressed identification with the mother's emotional state: *"I identified with the tension of the woman."*

Besides empathy for the mother, participants also expressed empathy and understanding for immigrants. A Kosovo SMIDGE participant reflected: *"Most of us have either been migrants or have family members abroad, so we understand the feeling of not being accepted."* An Italian SMIDGE participant expressed a more critical emotional stance: *"My first reaction is mostly annoyance because, unlike my colleagues, for me the issue is normality. The woman's behaviour is predominant. And so, since she is distant from me, I feel a little annoyed."*

Both focus groups succeeded in generating emotional engagement. **However, comparative videos prompted predominantly outward-directed emotions (anger at injustice, despair at systems, strong empathy for migrants) that positioned viewers as witnesses to injustice. SMIDGE videos prompted more complex, inward-directed emotions (sympathy for a flawed character, understanding of how misinformation creates fear, recognition of personal loss underlying prejudice) that positioned viewers as moral interpreters navigating ambiguity.**

Figure 17 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Video Evokes Emotions

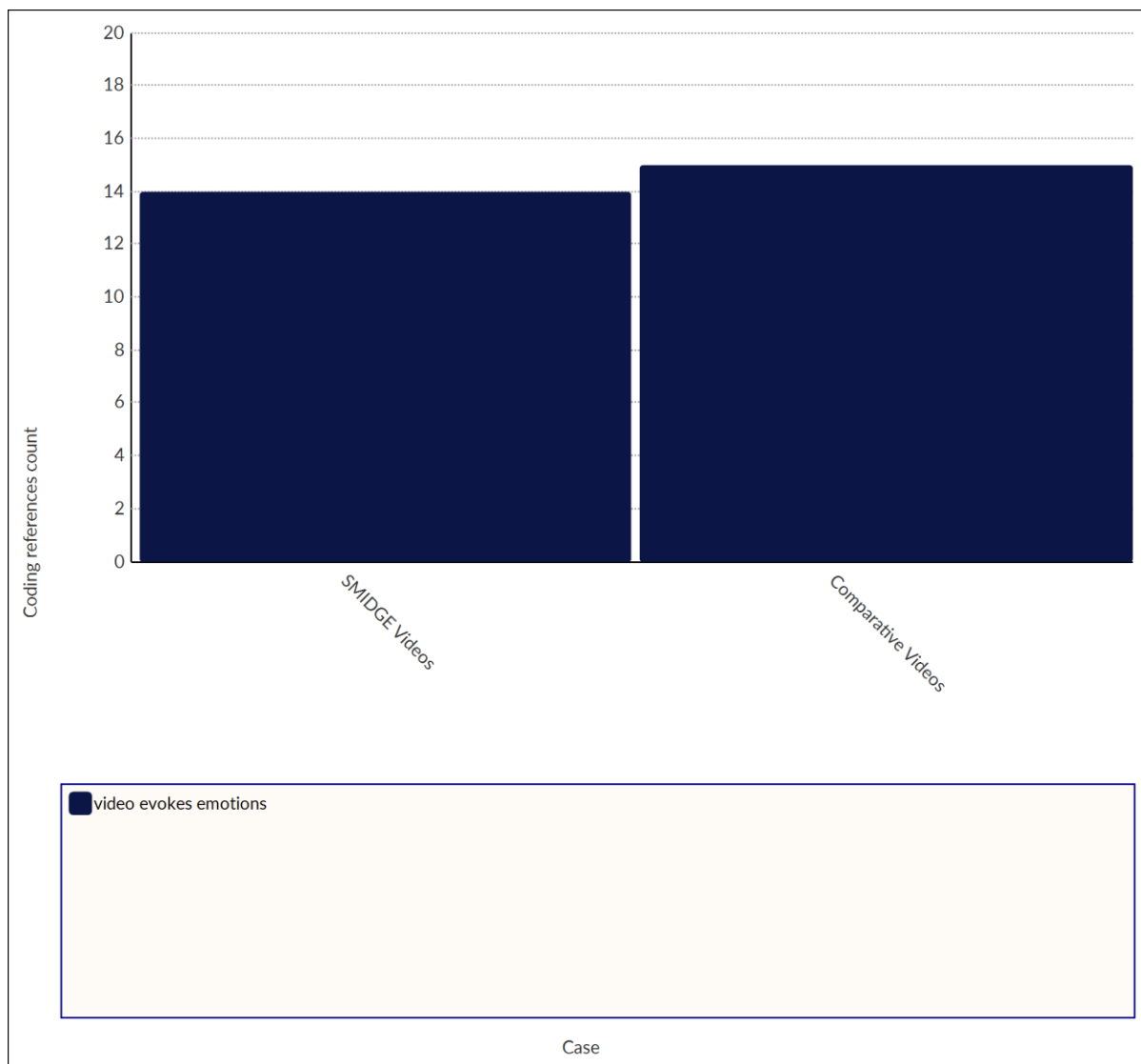
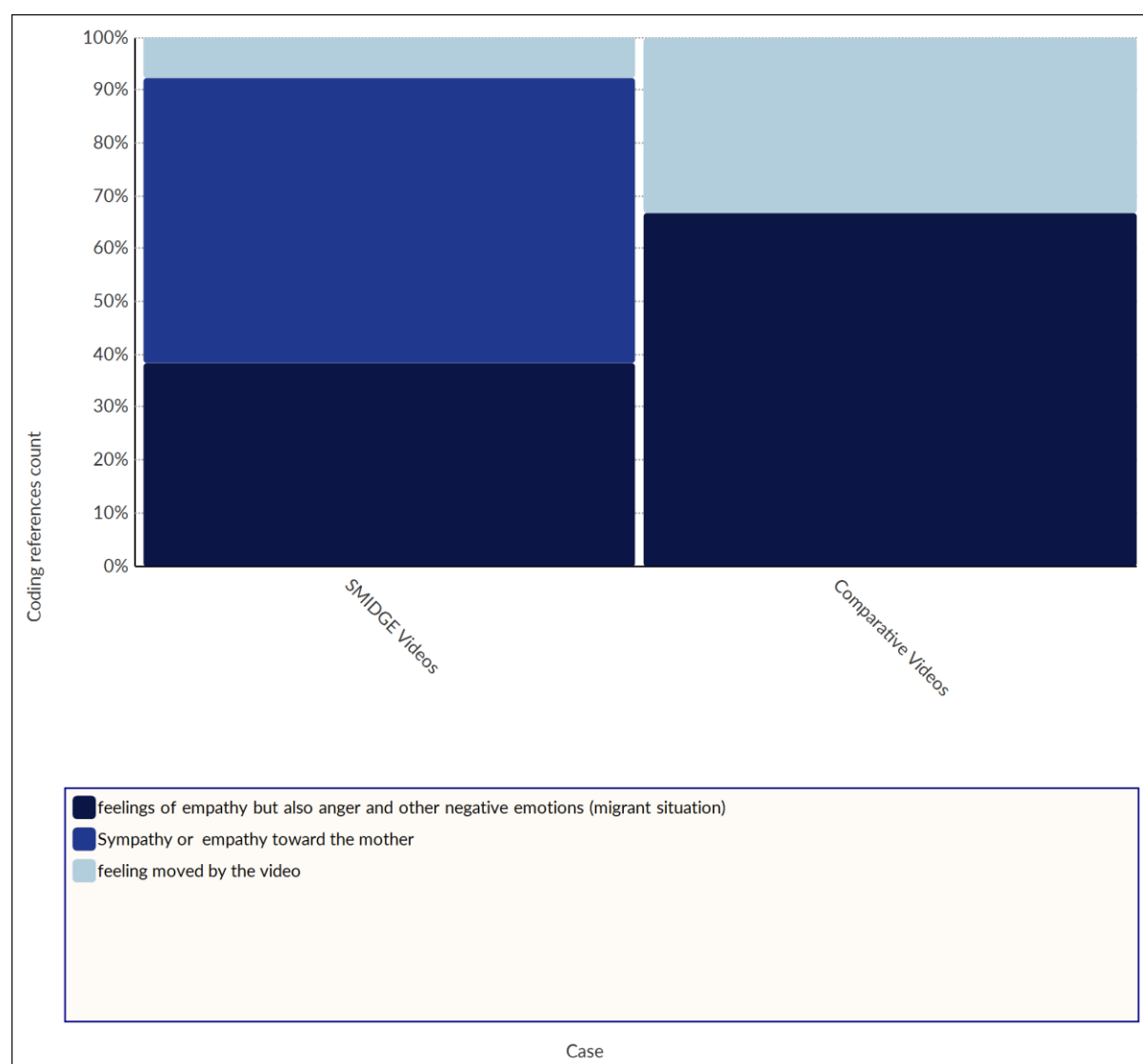




Figure 18 Breakdown of Sub-themes of Video Evokes Emotion

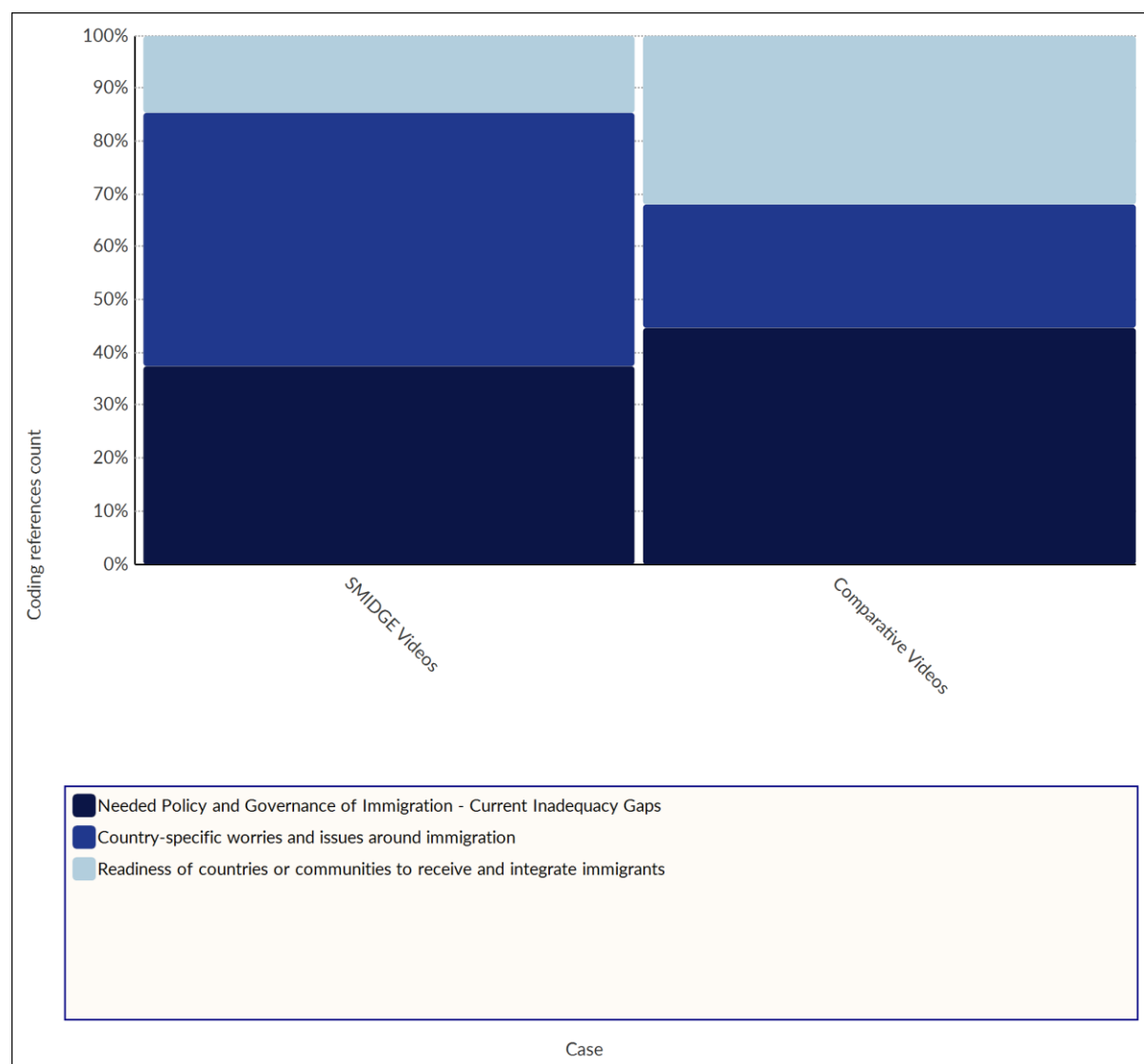


## Immigration as a Governance and Systems Problem

The second largest theme revealed participants' deep engagement with broader political and governance issues surrounding immigration. Discussions frequently moved beyond video evaluation to examine systemic challenges at local, national, and European levels. Participants focused particularly on the adequacy of current immigration policy, country-specific concerns about immigration, and the readiness of host communities to receive and integrate migrants.

As Figure 19 illustrates, both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups engaged with these three sub-themes, though with differing emphases. **SMIDGE participants discussed these political and governance dimensions more frequently** and placed particular emphasis on country-specific immigration challenges and concerns.

Figure 19 Sub-themes of the Immigration as a Governance and Systems Problem theme across both video groups



### Needed Policy and Governance of Immigration - Current Inadequacy Gaps

Participants in both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups raised concerns that current political systems - and, in EU contexts, EU governance - lack adequate frameworks to address immigration. Discussion of this sub-theme was **uneven across countries** and was **driven primarily by the Greece/Cyprus groups**, with **more frequent engagement in the SMIDGE focus groups** than in the comparative groups (Figures 20 and 21). Across both SMIDGE and comparative groups, critiques clustered around two linked claims: (1) that the current political climate is inadequate for managing immigration as a sustained governance challenge, and (2) that EU-level coordination and burden-sharing are perceived as ineffective, inconsistent, or unfair. Given the strong country clustering, these patterns are best interpreted as **topic- and context-sensitive**, rather than clearly attributable to video format alone.

### *Need for National and International Immigration Policies and Reception Structures*

Participants from the SMIDGE focus groups frequently called for clearer legal frameworks and reception infrastructures, often linking this to moral and procedural order. One of the Greek participants from the SMIDGE groups expressed: *“There must be some logic, some decision-making in European institutions.”* An Italian participant from the SMIDGE group brought in an emotional argument: *“The welcome must be empathetic and affectionate because there is a pre-existing situation of horror.”* In contrast, an Italian comparative focus group participant framed reception as both administrative and explicitly humanitarian: *“These children who arrive... the welcome must be empathetic, and also affectionate because there is a pre-existing situation of horror.”*

Comparative focus group participants voiced broadly similar calls for regulation and structure, but the **overlap across conditions suggests that these discussions were not uniquely elicited by the SMIDGE narrative format**. Rather, they appear to reflect a more general tendency for immigration discussions to activate policy-oriented reasoning, with the key difference lying less in whether participants raised governance, and more in how they justified it (e.g., procedural “order” versus humanitarian “reception”).

#### *Current Political Climate is Inadequate in Addressing the Issue*

Participants in both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups argued that **immigration is frequently treated as a politically dismissed and/or instrumentalized issue**, rather than addressed as a sustained governance challenge. An Italian comparative focus group participant captured this dismissal directly: *“I say this because the matter is often dismissed, even at a political level, [with phrases like] ‘they should stay at home, let’s help them at their own home.’ That’s how the matter is dismissed.”* Similarly, another Italian comparative group participant described broader political failure: *“politics is collapsing dramatically at every level of management,”* suggesting an absence of coherent policy direction.

Importantly, the comparative groups contributed more frequently with this sub-theme overall than the SMIDGE groups, with the clearest difference in the emphasis that the current system needs to change and currently prevents proper integration. In the comparative groups, particularly in the Greece/Cyprus comparative focus group, participants repeatedly positioned governance as structurally stuck; *“It’s just that it’s very difficult to change the system when the system clings on and doesn’t want certain conditions to change, because they exploit people or exploit situations in order to influence the whole situation politically, militarily, and geopolitically.”* In this sense, the comparative discussions tended to foreground policy inadequacy as a practical, institutional barrier to integration.

By contrast, SMIDGE participants were relatively more likely to frame political inadequacy through instrumentalization and geopolitical interests. For instance, a Greek SMIDGE focus group participant argued: *“Especially when the whole issue is instrumentalized, because behind all this there is the economic [factor], which some exploit greatly,”* and another Greek SMIDGE focus group participant described system-level manipulation through border politics: *“Either it’s a large country like Turkey. It opens and closes borders... and sends them by the thousands.”* Together, these contrasting emphases suggest that the SMIDGE and comparative groups differed not only in frequency but also in **how political failure was reasoned about (institutional blockage vs. strategic instrumentalization)**. However, given that many references cluster within specific national contexts (especially Greece/Cyprus), **these differences should be interpreted cautiously and cannot be attributed to video format alone without stronger within-country comparisons**.

#### *Criticism of EU & their policies and support of member states*

Participants in both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups, and most prominently in the Greece/Cyprus discussions, criticized the EU’s role in immigration governance, especially the lack of

coordination and perceived unequal burden-sharing. However, SMIDGE focus groups engaged with this EU-focused critique more frequently overall than comparative groups (Figure 21), suggesting a difference in emphasis rather than a wholly different line of reasoning.

In the Greek/Cyprus SMIDGE focus group participants framed the problem as structural: *"Since we are in a wider union, the European Union, with different capacities, different population criteria for each country, there should be an overall approach to the issue."* They also positioned the EU as privileging larger member states (e.g., Germany and France) while Southern entry countries carry disproportionate consequences. This critique extended into questions of legitimacy in the Greece/Cyprus SMIDGE group: *"It's very difficult at a European level. I don't think the European Union currently expresses the average European citizen according to the decisions it makes."*

Comparative groups raised related concerns but did so less often and with less elaboration (Figure 21). For example, in the Greece/Cyprus comparative focus group, one participant foregrounded political inertia and self-interest as constraints on reform: *"It's very difficult to change the system when the system holds on and doesn't want certain conditions to change because they exploit people or exploit situations to influence politically, militarily, geopolitically the whole situation."*

Overall, the comparison suggests **that SMIDGE discussions more frequently escalated from "policy gaps" to an EU-level critique (unity, fairness, representation)**, while comparative discussions touched on similar ideas more sparsely. At the same time, because these references cluster strongly within the

Greece/Cyprus context, **this pattern is best interpreted as topic- and context-driven (immigration governance in an EU border-state setting) rather than being attributable to video format alone.**

Figure 20 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for the Needed Policy and Governance of Immigration sub-theme

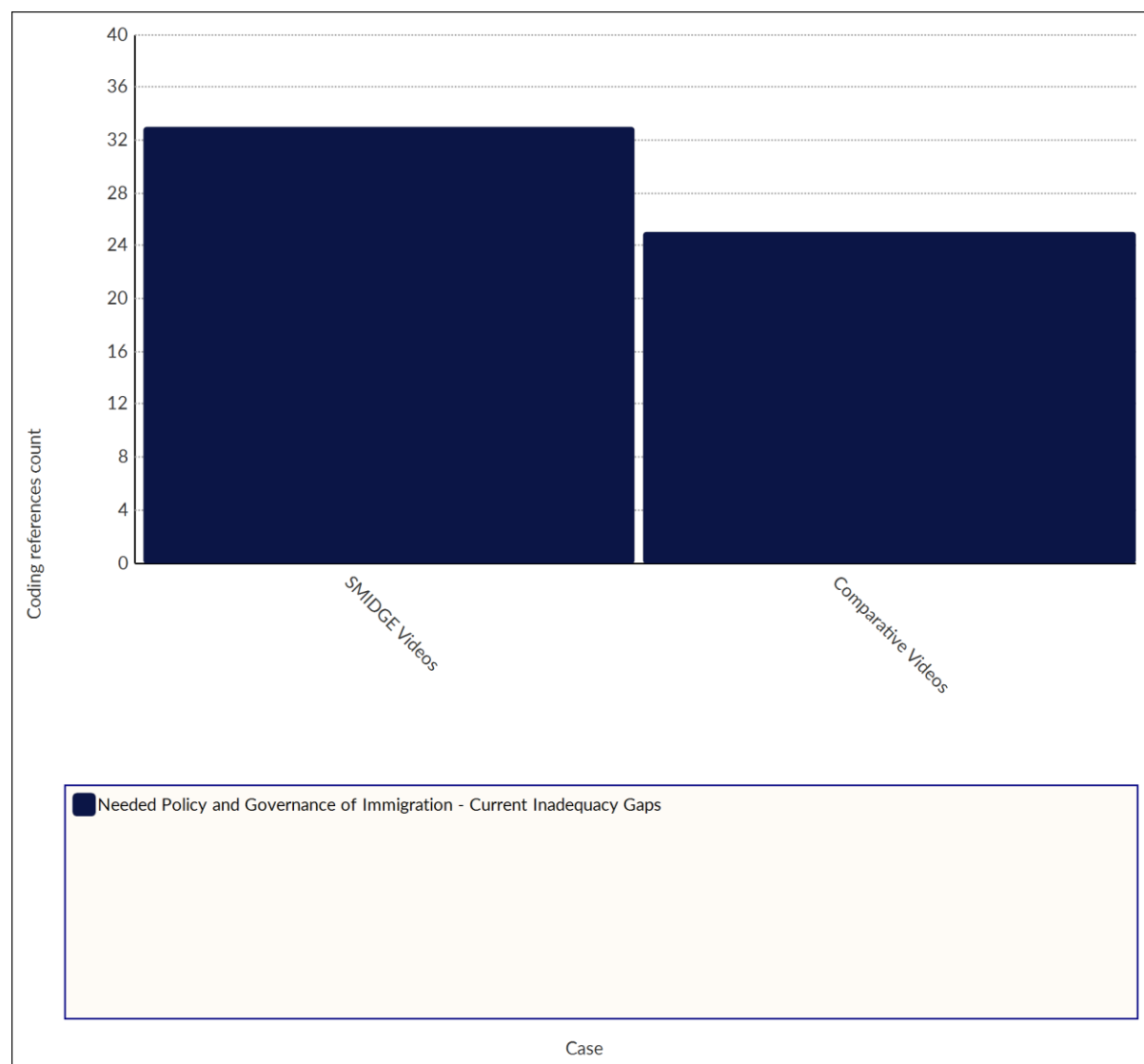
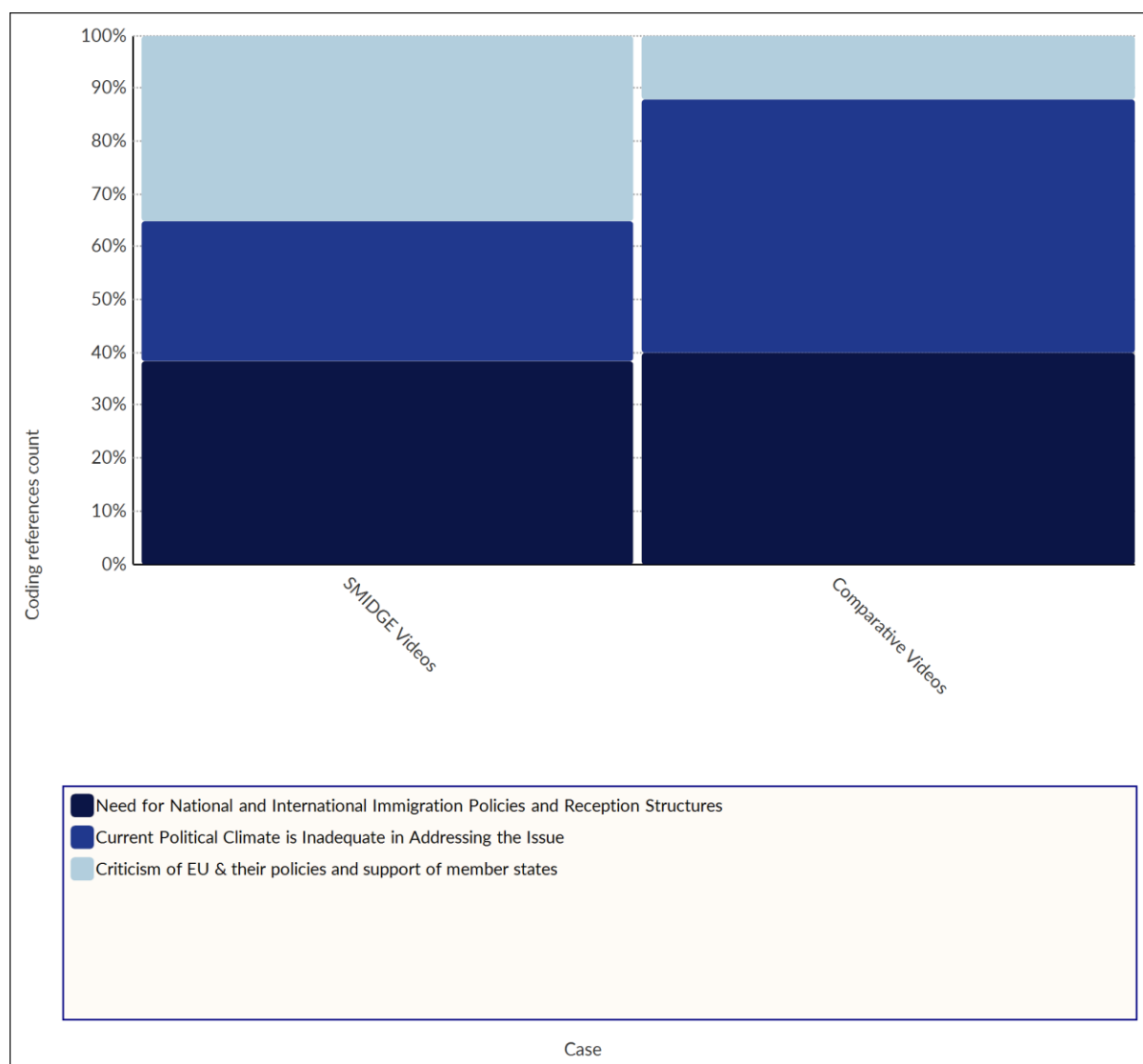


Figure 21 Breakdown of the sub-themes of the Needed Policy and Governance of Immigration



### Country-Specific Worries and Issues Around Immigration

Participants from Kosovo and Greece/Cyprus discussed concerns specific to their national contexts, with these discussions occurring predominantly in SMIDGE focus groups (see figure 22). Participants from Belgium, Denmark, the UK, and Italy did not engage in country-specific discussions. The nature of their concerns, however, differed markedly between the two countries, revealing how immigration is experienced and understood through distinct local lenses. Their discussions are **grounded in local, country-specific contexts, suggesting this sub-theme is primarily topic- and context-driven rather than video-driven.**

#### *Greek-Specific Factors of Immigration*

Across both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups, Greece/Cyprus participants raised familiar local concerns (e.g., neighborhood change, security perceptions, reception/integration capacity). SMIDGE participants sometimes voiced these in more experiential and emotive terms (e.g., fear and “ghettoization”), while comparative participants more often framed them as capacity/structure and procedural governance issues (e.g., lack of reception structures, legality and control). However, the

substantive concerns overlap strongly across conditions, **so the pattern is best treated as context-linked rather than format-linked.**

#### *Kosovo-Specific Factors*

Kosovo-specific discussion (e.g., labor shortages, diaspora perspective, and preparedness for potential future inflows) appears **only in SMIDGE focus groups**, which prevents a meaningful comparison by video group (see figure 23). These references therefore function mainly as **contextual description**, not evidence of a narrative-video effect.

Overall, for countries where both a SMIDGE and comparative focus group were conducted (most clearly Greece/Cyprus), there is some indication that SMIDGE group discussions may have more frequently moved toward applying immigration issues to local experience. However, given that Kosovo lacks a comparative counterpart and that many references cluster within particular national contexts, it remains difficult to draw strong conclusions about whether the SMIDGE video format systematically elicited more critical engagement, beyond what would be expected from the topic and country context.

Figure 22 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Country-specific worries and issues around immigration

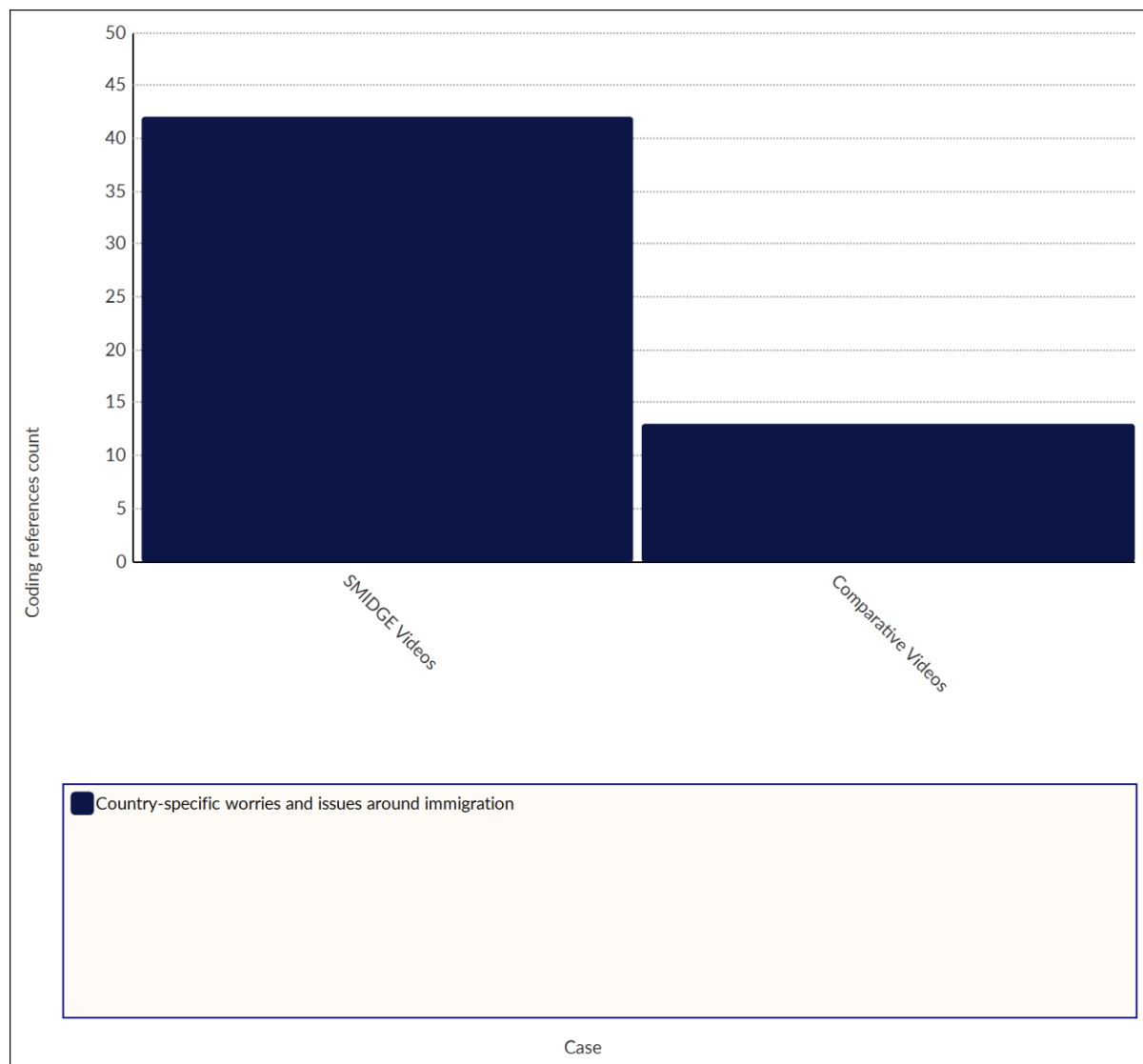
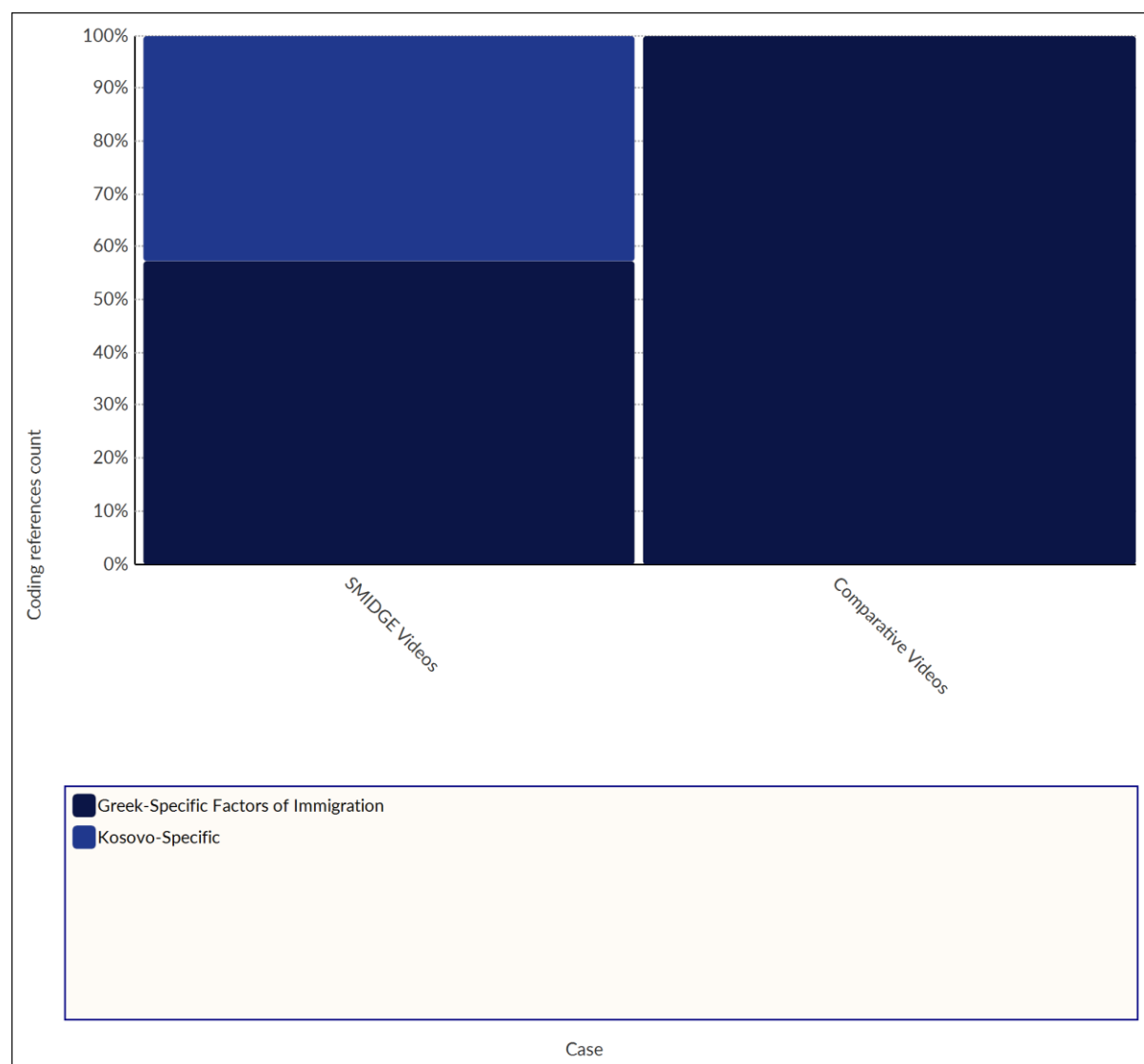




Figure 23 Breakdown of Sub-themes of Country-Specific Worries and Issues Around Immigration Across both groups



### Readiness of Countries or Communities to Receive and Integrate Immigrants

As illustrated in Figure 24, Readiness of countries/communities to receive and integrate immigrants is one of the few sub-themes where the comparative focus groups generated more discussion overall, despite there being fewer comparative groups than SMIDGE groups (i.e., unequal group distribution; 6 vs 3). However, the two groups adopted fundamentally different analytical frames (see figure 25): SMIDGE participants (particularly from Kosovo) framed integration as a responsibility and rights issue that receiving countries must fulfil, while comparative participants (predominantly from Greece) framed it as a capacity problem that constrains what countries can offer.

### Issues with Integration and Practical Implementation

This sub-theme was driven mainly by Greece/Cyprus comparative focus group discussion, where participants repeatedly framed integration as structurally difficult to implement at scale. One Greece/Cyprus comparative participant explicitly separated moral obligation from feasibility: "Societies don't have infinite capacity to host infinite people. Whether we like it or not, that exists. We

*can't host all the world's displaced people in our countries."* Another Greece/Cyprus comparative participant framed integration as a practical absorption problem: *"How will they be absorbed, if there's the capacity to absorb these people? It's very complex and unfortunately I don't see solutions."*

Compared to SMIDGE focus groups, the comparative discussions were more consistently oriented toward constraints (capacity, absorption, implementation) rather than responsibility. Some comparative participants also raised doubts about how and why migration occurs under risky conditions, which further positioned "readiness" as a problem of governance failure and system strain, rather than a question of obligations toward newcomers.

### *Need for Structured Planning and Infrastructure*

Both SMIDGE and comparative groups identified infrastructure as critical to addressing the readiness challenge, though they framed it differently. Greek SMIDGE participants tended to define the core issue as the absence of organized reception, e.g., a Greek SMIDGE participant argued that: *"What's missing is organized reception, so their adaptation here happens correctly." They emphasized that "there must be some logic" and "proper measures, regulations and structures must be in place both to protect receiving societies and to support migrants themselves."*

By contrast, Greece/Cyprus comparative group participants often discussed infrastructure in terms of how current arrangements produce marginalization and undermine integration. For example, a Greece/Cyprus comparative focus group participant described migrants "sitting all day in cheap cafés...", and another proposed that *"If people weren't kept in camps and were allowed to integrate, gradually participate... things could be better."* In short, **SMIDGE focus group discussions leaned toward what should be built, whereas comparative talk leaned toward how existing structures (e.g., camps/containment) block integration.**

### *Countries carry responsibility to acknowledge immigrants' rights*

This sub-theme appears only in SMIDGE and is driven primarily by Kosovo SMIDGE participants, making it not comparable by condition in a strict sense. Kosovo SMIDGE participants explicitly articulated a responsibility-based lens, e.g., *"We still have work to do on protecting migrant workers' rights."* More comprehensively, and more broadly: *"[We should recognize] how much responsibility we have to offer better conditions to those who choose to live in Kosovo."* This differs sharply from the comparative (Greece/Cyprus) tendency to ask whether integration is feasible at scale. However, because **this rights-based frame is contextually grounded in Kosovo's discussion** (diaspora, future labor needs), it is best treated **as context-driven, not evidence of a narrative-video effect.**

### *Capacity limits of host countries for large groups*

Capacity limits were voiced most clearly in the Greece/Cyprus comparative focus group, where participants stated that host countries have already reached or are nearing limits (e.g., *"Host countries have already reached their limits..."*). This capacity framing sits in tension with more humanitarian claims elsewhere in the discussion: when "readiness" is described primarily as a capacity problem, responsibility can implicitly shift toward questioning migrants' decisions rather than scrutinizing institutional preparedness.

Across this sub-theme, the most consistent focus group-level difference is that comparative groups foregrounded integration as a capacity/implementation constraint, while SMIDGE focus groups—especially Kosovo—foregrounded obligations and rights. But because these patterns are tightly entangled with national context and group composition, they are presented as topic- and context-specific, not confidently attributed to the video format.

Figure 24 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for Readiness of Countries or Communities to Receive and Integrate Immigrants

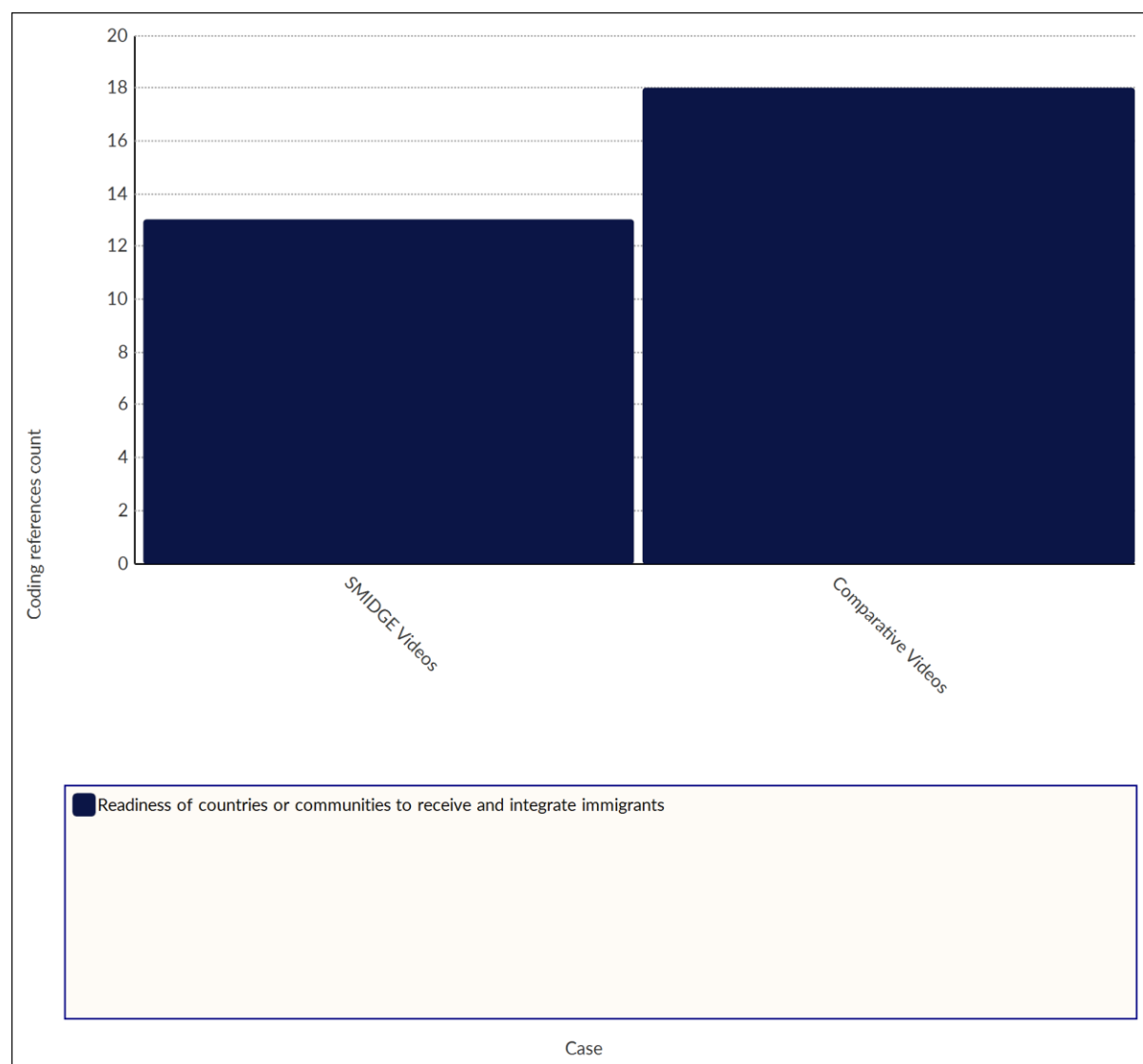
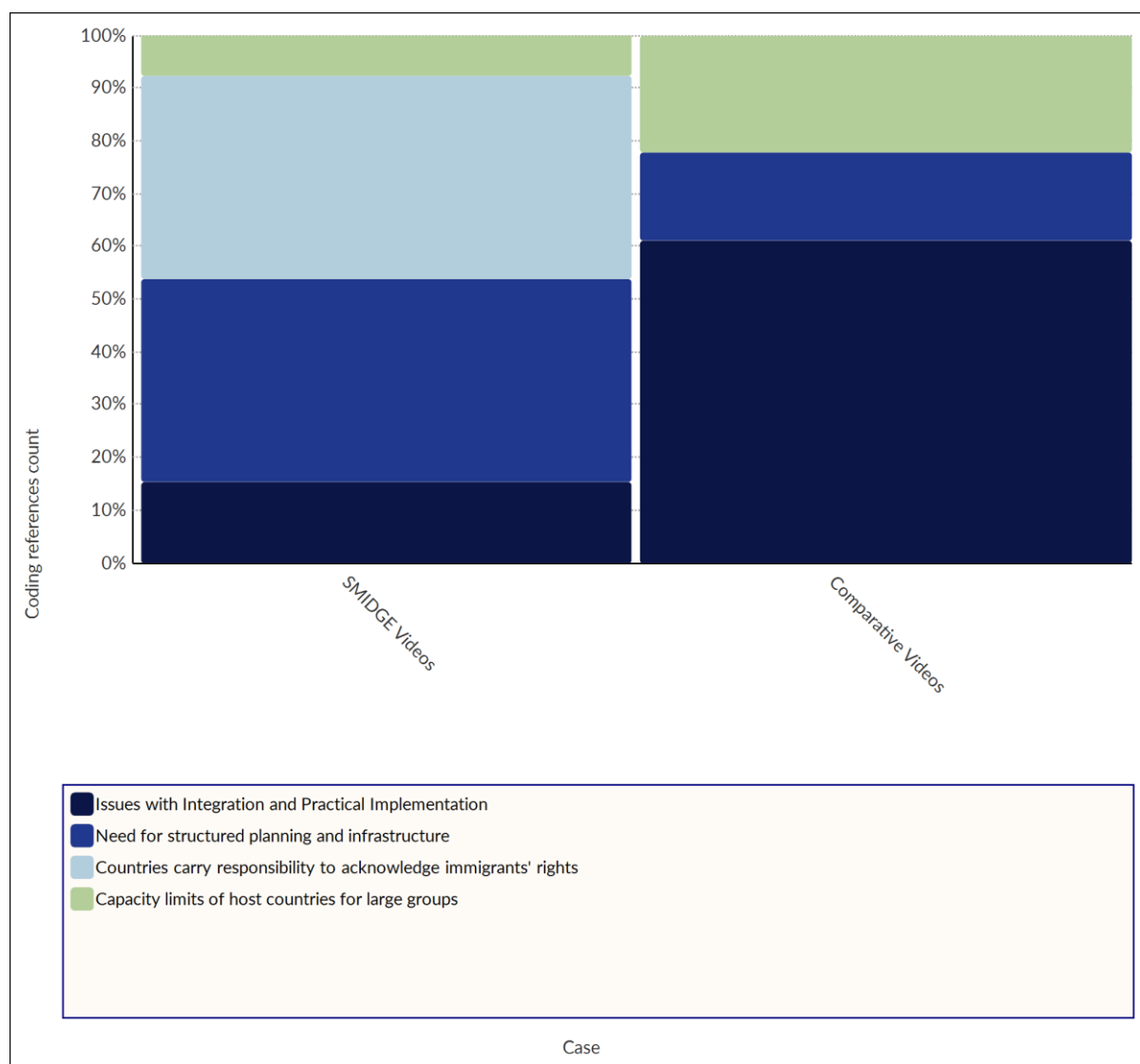


Figure 25 Breakdown of Sub-themes of Readiness of Countries or Communities to Receive and Integrate Immigrants

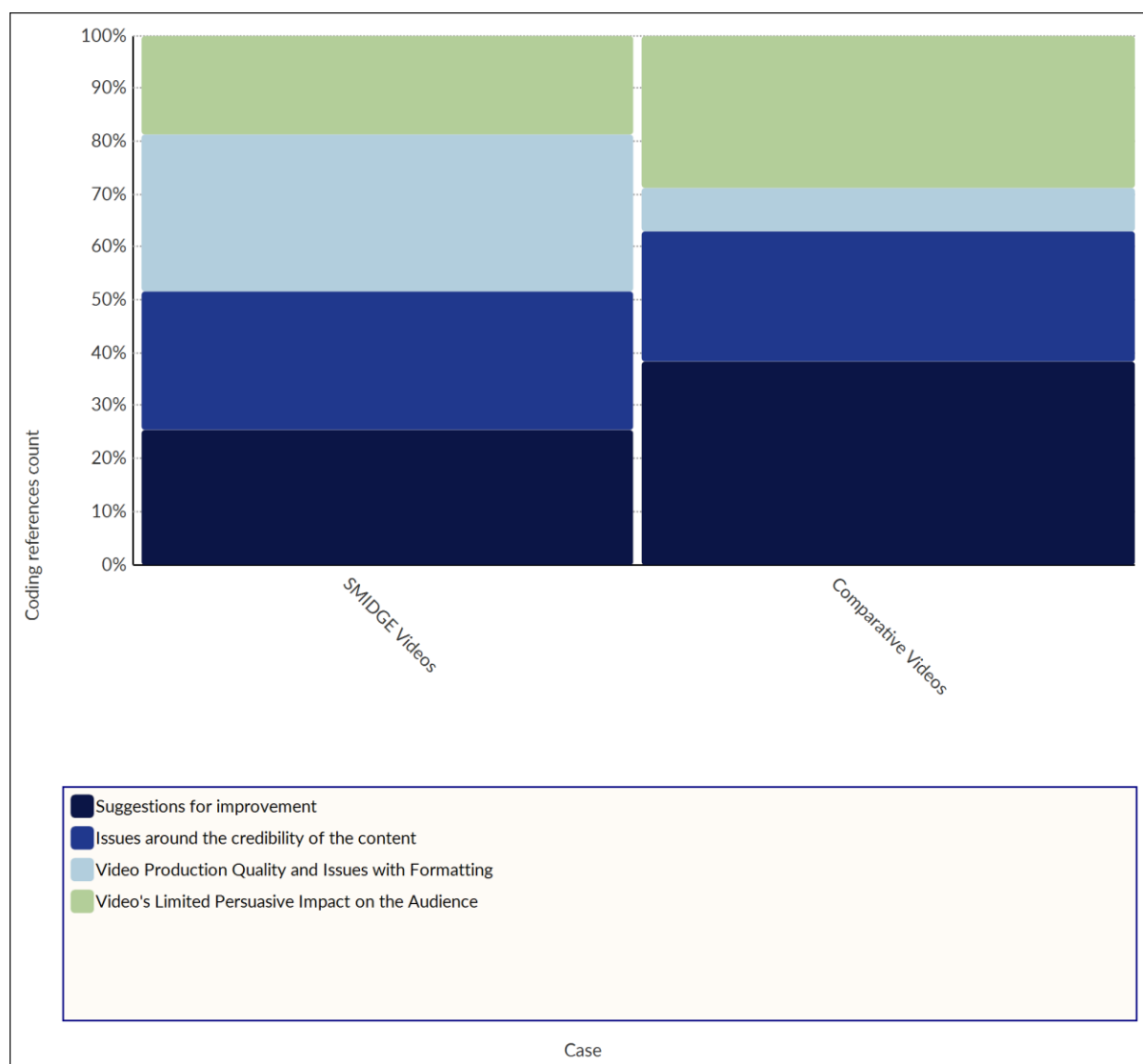


### Credibility and shareability hinged on format choices: realism, identification, and cultural transferability

This theme captures how participants evaluated the *communicative effectiveness* of the videos; less in terms of whether they agreed with the underlying message, and more in terms of whether the **format made the content credible, relatable, and worth sharing**. Across groups, participants repeatedly returned to (a) **realism and production choices** (e.g., acting quality, pacing and length, scripted feel), (b) **identification and representation** (e.g., whether the viewer could plausibly see themselves in the characters and dynamics, including gendered portrayals), and (c) **cultural transferability** (e.g., whether the context, language, and cues travelled across countries without losing meaning, and whether subtitles/localization were needed). While some strengths were noted—often framing the videos as potential *discussion prompts*—participants more frequently highlighted format features that, in their view, **undermined credibility** and reduced both persuasive potential and willingness to share.

Figure 26 summarizes the distribution of codes across the sub-themes and video conditions (SMIDGE vs UN). As shown, both conditions engaged with all sub-themes; however, participants in the **comparative** focus groups more often foregrounded the videos' limited persuasive impact and offered concrete suggestions for improvement, suggesting that direct comparison sharpened critique.

Figure 26 Sub-themes of Credibility and shareability hinged on format choices: realism, identification, and cultural transferability



### Suggestions for Improvement

The most frequent sub-theme of the *Credibility and shareability hinged on format choices: realism, identification, and cultural transferability* theme is the suggestions for improvement. As figure 27 shows, participants from both video groups (SMIDGE vs comparative) voiced suggestions on what should be highlighted and what could be improved in the videos, although with a slightly different focus. More specifically, as shown in Figure 28, suggestions for improvement can be broken down into 5 sub-themes: 1. Focus on personal stories and emotional connection, 2. Include country- or community-specific narratives, 3. Provide more information on belief formation and those who manipulate, and 4. Emphasize the distinction between fact vs. false information.

### *Focus on Personal Stories and Emotional Connection*

Across the **comparative discussions**, participants **more often** argued that counter-narrative videos should rely on **personal stories and emotional connection** than participants in the **SMIDGE-only** discussions. In both conditions, participants suggested that the videos would be stronger if they included **richer, more contextualized migrant stories**—not just headline claims or generic “immigration” framing.

This was **especially prominent in the Greek/Cyprus comparative group**, where multiple participants emphasized that videos should capture the “**micro-history**” and daily realities of migrants (i.e., what happens *after* arrival, what everyday life looks like, and how people are treated), rather than focusing mainly on where people came from. As one participant put it: *“I believe that these videos should be enriched in such a way that the so-called micro-history of each person is recorded and not just where they came from and so on.”*

Importantly, participants made this recommendation **even though the comparative (UN) video already drew on personal testimonies**—their critique was that the stories still felt **too thin or incomplete**, and would benefit from **more background, continuity, or practical detail** to create a fuller and more persuasive picture.

In the **SMIDGE focus groups**, calls for migrant “micro-stories” were **less frequent**, but they did emerge, **most notably among a few Italian participants**, who explicitly argued that the narrative would feel “truer” and more convincing if it included fuller background about migrants’ lives and motivations. One Italian participant explained:

*“what I felt was missing from the video was the truth. So, the doctor’s point of view, why he chose to become a doctor, why he chose to do it in Italy, and why he studied so hard to become one, even moving so far away from home, hoping that there would be a home. This could enrich the story a little and offer another point of view, the one we received in the past from our grandparents or from family stories.”*

### *Include Country- or Community-Specific Narrative*

A second recurring recommendation was that the videos should be **more locally meaningful** (language, setting, and recognizable social realities), rather than assuming one version will travel equally well across countries. This came through **in the Danish and Italian SMIDGE** group and also appeared in the **Greek/Cyprus SMIDGE** and **Greek/Cyprus comparative** discussions. Some participants from the listed groups raised two linked issues: Language accessibility (e.g., subtitles or local-language versions), and cultural transferability (whether a UK-based family scenario maps onto other national contexts). As one Danish participant noted:

*“what you’re looking at somehow needs a kind of cultural universality if it’s not going to be translated. But I was also thinking—without knowing the exact cultural makeup in the UK compared to Denmark—I imagine the percentage of marriages between people from different cultural backgrounds is higher in the UK than in Denmark. And I don’t know if that changes how people experience it”*

This reflects a broader concern that the SMIDGE immigration narrative - because it is anchored in a specific UK context - may not feel equally plausible or relatable in other European settings. Relatedly, a small number of Danish participants who engaged with this point reported that **the English dialogue was sometimes difficult to follow**, even when the main message was understood, reinforcing the view that **subtitles and/or localization** would improve clarity and engagement.

### *Provide more Information on Belief Formation and those who manipulate*

A critical insight emerged regarding the need to provide more information about how beliefs form and how they can be manipulated. Participants suggested that the video should illustrate how extremist beliefs initially develop, explore reasons why some people hold anti-immigration views, and shift greater attention toward the individuals or groups who manipulate vulnerable or impressionable people (such as the mother in the example). They also wanted the video to clarify where these harmful narratives originate and how they spread. Participants that discussed this theme came primarily from the UK SMIDGE focus group. For instance, one participant from the UK SMIDGE focus group explained:

*“I think in terms of like portraying the two sides, it would be useful if the like supposedly gullible people as they were portrayed there, were not both the consumers of social media we've got back a step and looked at where these messages were actually coming from. I mean, we weren't seeing the people who were propagating these ideas in the 1st place. We were just seeing the people who'd been like bamboozled.”*

Only one participant from the Italian comparative focus group mentioned a similar point. When explaining what would make the comparative video more shareable outside of their own social groups, the participant highlighted the origin of anti-immigration beliefs:

*“I'd answer by asking the videomaker what their goal is, because if the goal is to intercept a different thought, perhaps from the one we're expounding today, then perhaps a piece of advice would be to start from what I was saying before, starting with the reasons why that person is against immigration. You think that this and that are the reasons why you're against it, and starting from the perspective of the person you're relating to, you can help them see the situation comprehensively, not just as a part, but as a whole.”*

### *Emphasize the distinction between fact vs false information*

A handful of participants from the UK SMIDGE focus groups highlighted that the video could be improved by including fact-checking and verification information. As one participant put it: *“And then also possibly at the end of that, where you could incorporate some fact checking websites, and areas where people could consider what they've engaged with and then sort of seek out their own information as a consequence of that.”*

Figure 27 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for the Suggestions for improvement sub-theme

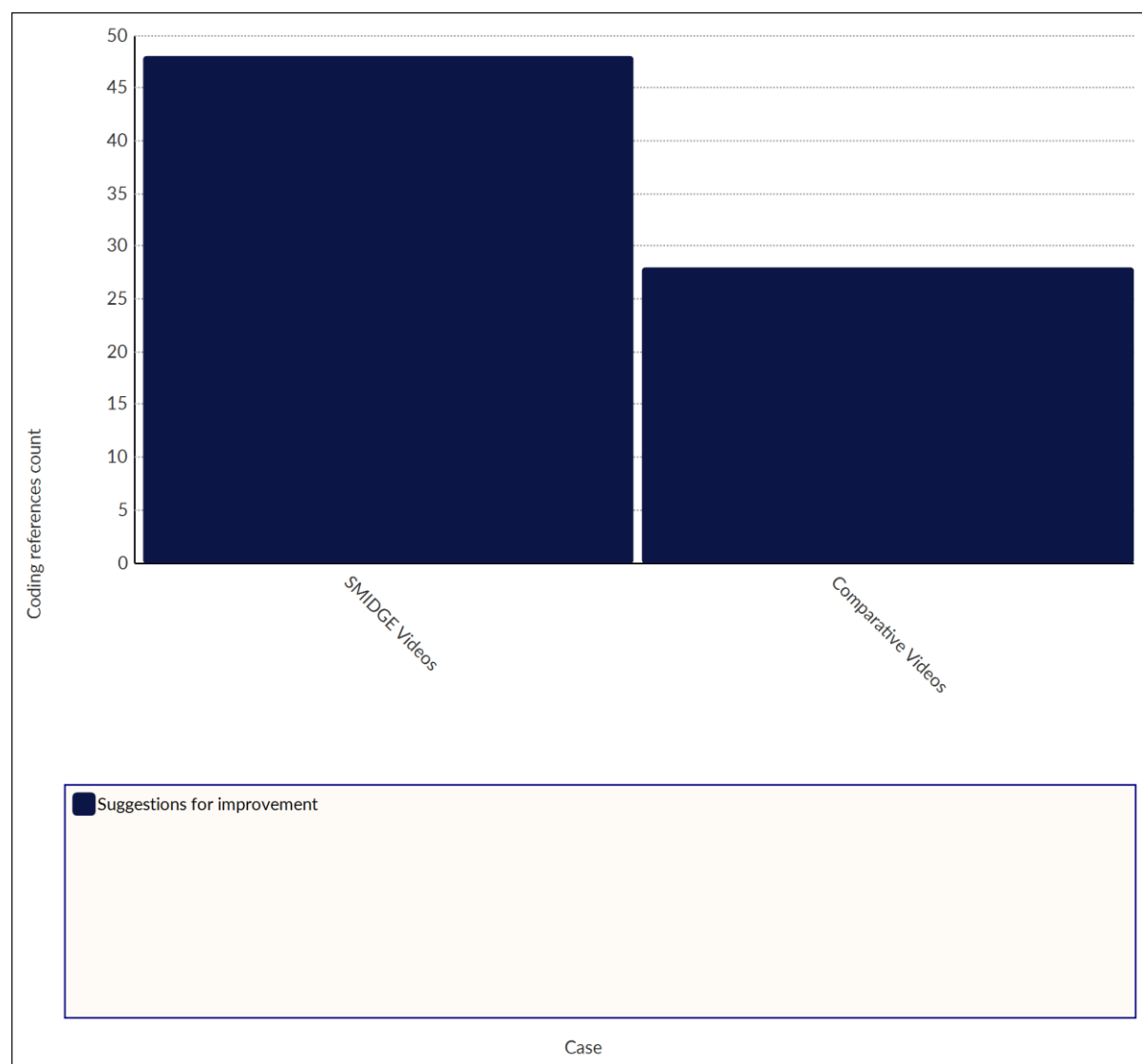
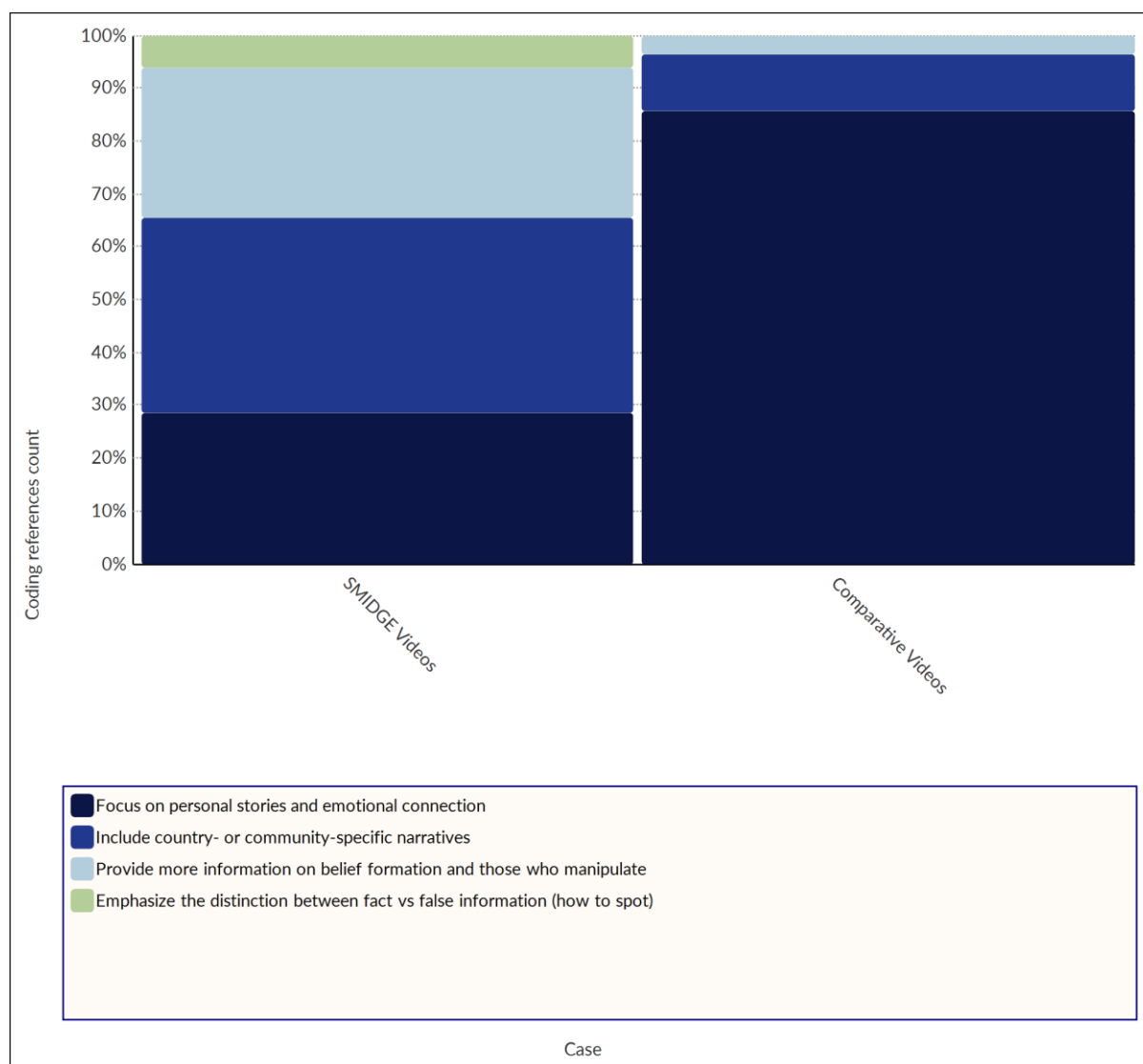




Figure 28 Breakdown of the sub-themes of Suggestions for improvement across both video groups



### Issues Around the Credibility of the Content

Similar to the previous sub-theme, the majority of participants emphasizing issues around the credibility of the content of the video belonged to the SMIDGE focus groups (see Figure 29). Although some from the comparative focus groups engaged with this sub-theme as well. Figure 30 illustrates the differences between the two groups in their distribution across the various sub-themes.

#### *The video doesn't reflect the complexity of the issue*

Concerns that the videos were **too simplistic for a complex topic like immigration** emerged in **8 of the 9 focus groups** and were discussed most extensively in the UK SMIDGE group by multiple participants. More specifically, in the SMIDGE focus group most participants highlighted that video was too simplistic, criticizing either the video itself or the arguments made within it, as oversimplifying and lacking depth. Some participants were more critical of certain elements of the video, while others mentioned very specific points. UK participants explicitly framed this as counterproductive for

audiences already embedded in conspiratorial or polarized communities: *“I found them a little bit simplistic because for the people holding the deep state beliefs, it was very much I’ve seen something on social media and that’s really surface level.”* Or *“I’m looking for something a bit deeper about the psychology of it.”*

In the Italian SMIDGE group, criticism was sometimes even sharper, with one participant describing the video as “almost offensive” because it attempted to compress complex issues into familiar clichés rather than enabling deeper understanding:

*“Well, to be honest, in my opinion, this video, and I’m using a strong word here, is almost offensive because it’s truly ridiculous [...], this is really a discussion that should be had among friends, [...] it’s really a collection of macro-viewpoints from the street, where even the most informed tend to remain silent because they don’t even see the point in delving deeper when a series of clichés are thrown around, which are obviously defended by various leaders, because in the end it’s not so much the source as the leaders who refer to these phrases and these commercials, which, in my opinion, are not effective in such broad topics.”*

Many others generally highlighted that the video was too simplistic for the complex topics of immigration and extremist beliefs; many found this to be counterproductive.

Importantly, this **“complexity” critique was not limited to SMIDGE**. In the **comparative discussions**, participants often evaluated the UN video as *more realistic* or *more impactful* but still argued that it presented a **narrow slice** of immigration and would need enrichment to support deeper reflection or real attitude change. For example, an Italian participant in the UN-only group positioned the video as a useful starting point, but insufficient on its own: *“The video can be the beginning... [but] then needs to delve deeper into stories... that aren’t so trivial.”*

Similarly, Kosovo participants described the UN video as emotionally powerful and accurate in portraying migrants’ journeys, yet the implicit comparison still placed the focus on **representation** rather than comprehensive explanation: *“The second video is more accurate – it shows the long journey, the exhaustion, the struggle...”*

However, a few participants, mainly from the SMIDGE groups (one participant from a comparative one), disconfirmed this notion, emphasizing that the video showed different perspectives and the reality of these scenarios.

Figure 29 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for the Issues around the credibility of the content of the video sub-theme

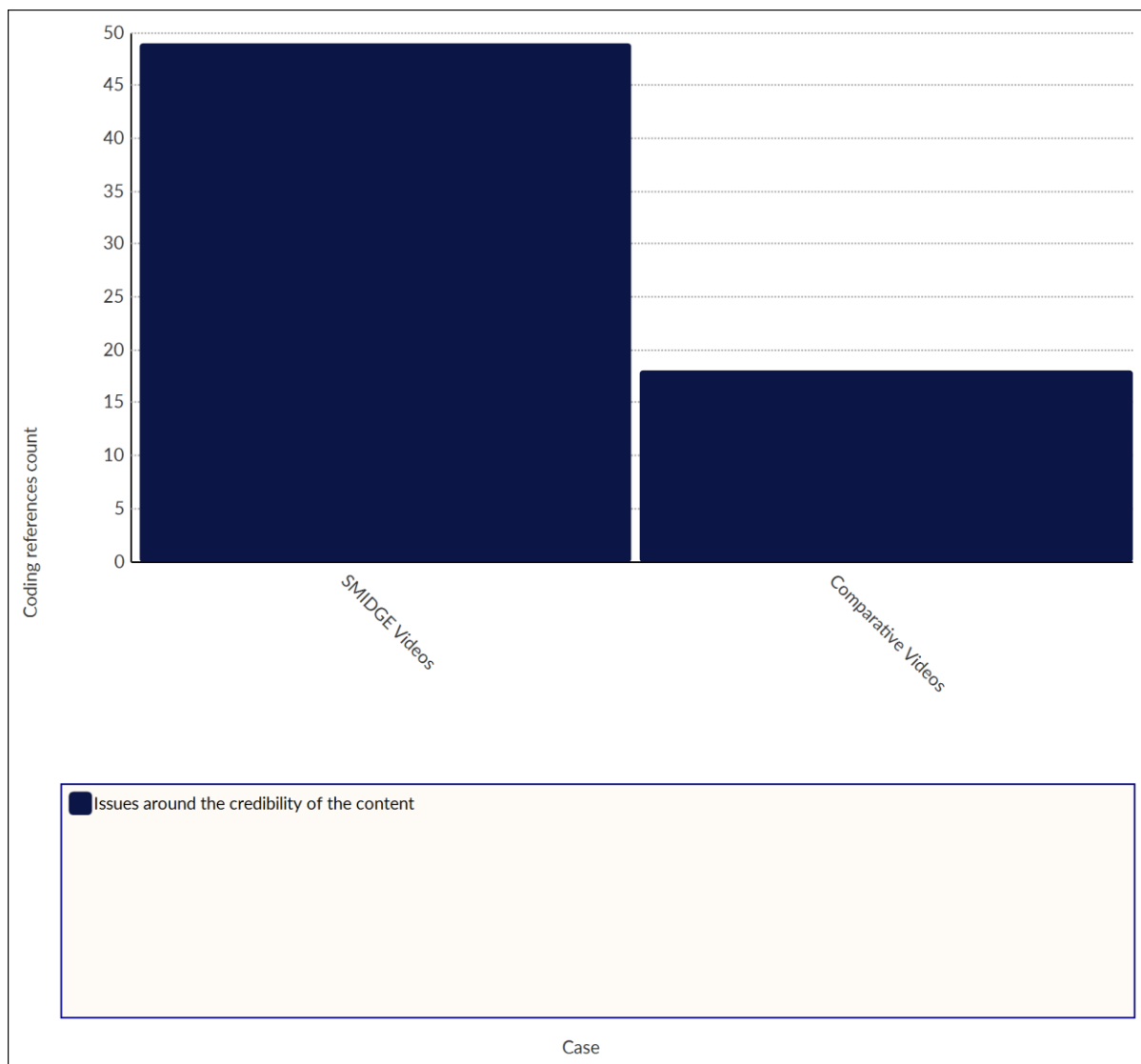
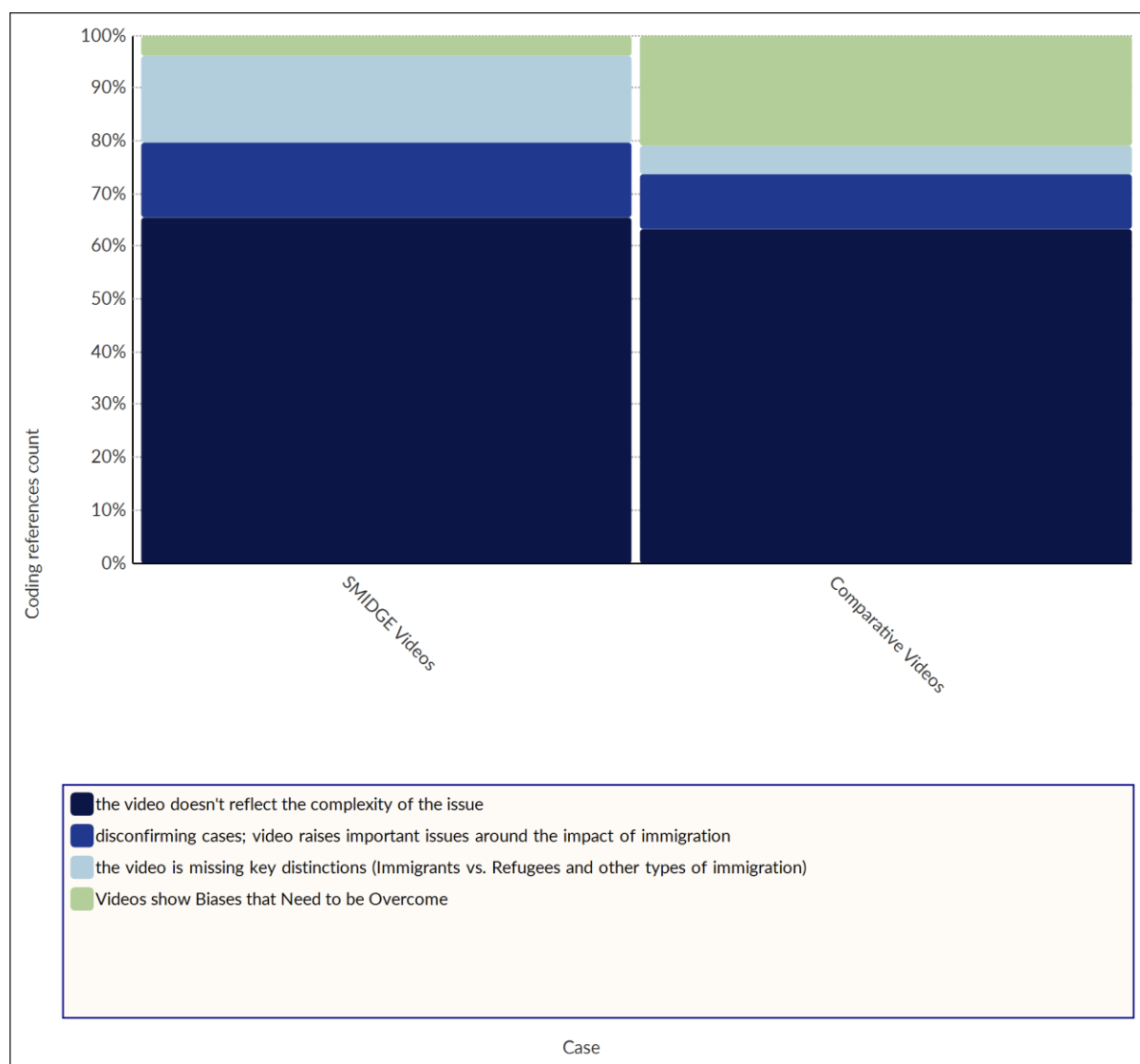


Figure 30 Breakdown of the sub-themes of Issues around the credibility of the content of the video across both video groups



### Video Production Quality and Issues with Formatting

Another sub-theme of the *Credibility and shareability hinged on format choices: realism, identification, and cultural transferability* theme that emerged concerns the video production quality and issues with formatting. As illustrated by Figure 31, this sub-theme mainly presented itself in the SMIDGE focus groups, although some of the criticism was also found in the comparative groups. Under this sub-theme participants expressed critical assessments of character portrayals, especially of the SMIDGE video, acting, length, and styles of the videos (see figure 32).

#### *Video should be more natural and realistic, showing higher quality*

This sub-theme emerged only in the SMIDGE focus groups and was especially salient in the UK and Danish discussions, with additional comments in the Italian and Kosovar SMIDGE groups. The most common criticism found was the **problematic portrayal of the middle-aged mother**. Most participants from the listed groups felt that her portrayal was **patronizing and gendered**, in need of help from a

male character (her husband) to make decisions and understand information. In the UK group, this was explicitly linked to concerns that the video could trigger **defensiveness** rather than reflection, particularly among viewers who might already feel targeted or stereotyped:

*"I think people would see, [...], and think this woman is being made to look like a silly fool who's like being sucked into nonsense because she's a dizzy, presumably menopausal, foolish woman and this is not going to make someone who's...who's sympathetic with those sorts of ideas take a step back and think, oh, I wonder if I'm going that way too. They're going to think, how dare you, like, caricature me in this manner. It's offensive. It's not...not going to help at all."*

Relatedly, a few Danish participants also highlighted that the character portrayal was either confusing or forced a defensive reaction to the video: *"And in the end, I'm just left with, 'Good thing I'm not her,' and 'Poor, poor Liam.' Those are the two main impressions I'm left with."* Beyond gender, some UK participants extended this criticism to the broader representation of people vulnerable to conspiratorial or extremist narratives, describing the overall tone as **condescending** and therefore likely to undermine persuasion and willingness to share: *"I think it will be something that will be seen as condescending and something that had been produced by the sort of state to just be dismissive of people and any sort of conspiracy theories that they may have."*

Finally, across SMIDGE groups, participants also questioned the **naturalism of the acting and dialogue**, describing interactions as scripted or forced rather than reflecting believable family dynamics. This was articulated directly in the Kosovar SMIDGE discussions: *"The dialogue in the first video – between the woman, her husband, and son – felt stiff. It could be improved to reflect more realistic family tension."*

Overall, most participants' responses suggest that **realism and identification were treated as prerequisites for credibility**: when the scenario or characters felt exaggerated, preachy, or socially stereotyped, participants anticipated the video would be less persuasive, and less likely to be shared.

#### *Level of context and information provided*

Another sub-theme of the video production quality and issues with formatting sub-theme describes participants' critique of the level of context and information provided by the videos. Some participants showed varying opinions here; some argued that the video was too long and should be kept shorter, while others argued that the video provided depth and context or should include more information and different viewpoints on the topic. More specifically, a few participants that directly compared the SMIDGE and comparative videos found the SMIDGE video provided more detail and background information. As one of the Italian participants explained: *"I think that the first one [SMIDGE video] was sort of had slightly more detail. So, you had a better understanding of the sort of factors that sort of led the lady to, you know, be...be frustrated."* In contrast, Danish participants that only viewed the SMIDGE video commented that they thought *"it was a bit long."*

#### *Suitability of animation/cartoon style*

This issue was raised only in the Italian comparative focus group and was framed as a question of audience-fit. Participants suggested that the animated/cartoon style risked creating **emotional distance** for middle-aged audiences and therefore reducing engagement and impact: *"I wouldn't have chosen a cartoon, especially if the audience... I don't think so, for an audience my age."*

In this sense, animation was not criticized as inherently ineffective, but as potentially misaligned with what these participants expected would feel credible and relatable for their age group.

Figure 31 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for the Video Production Quality and Issues with Formatting sub-theme

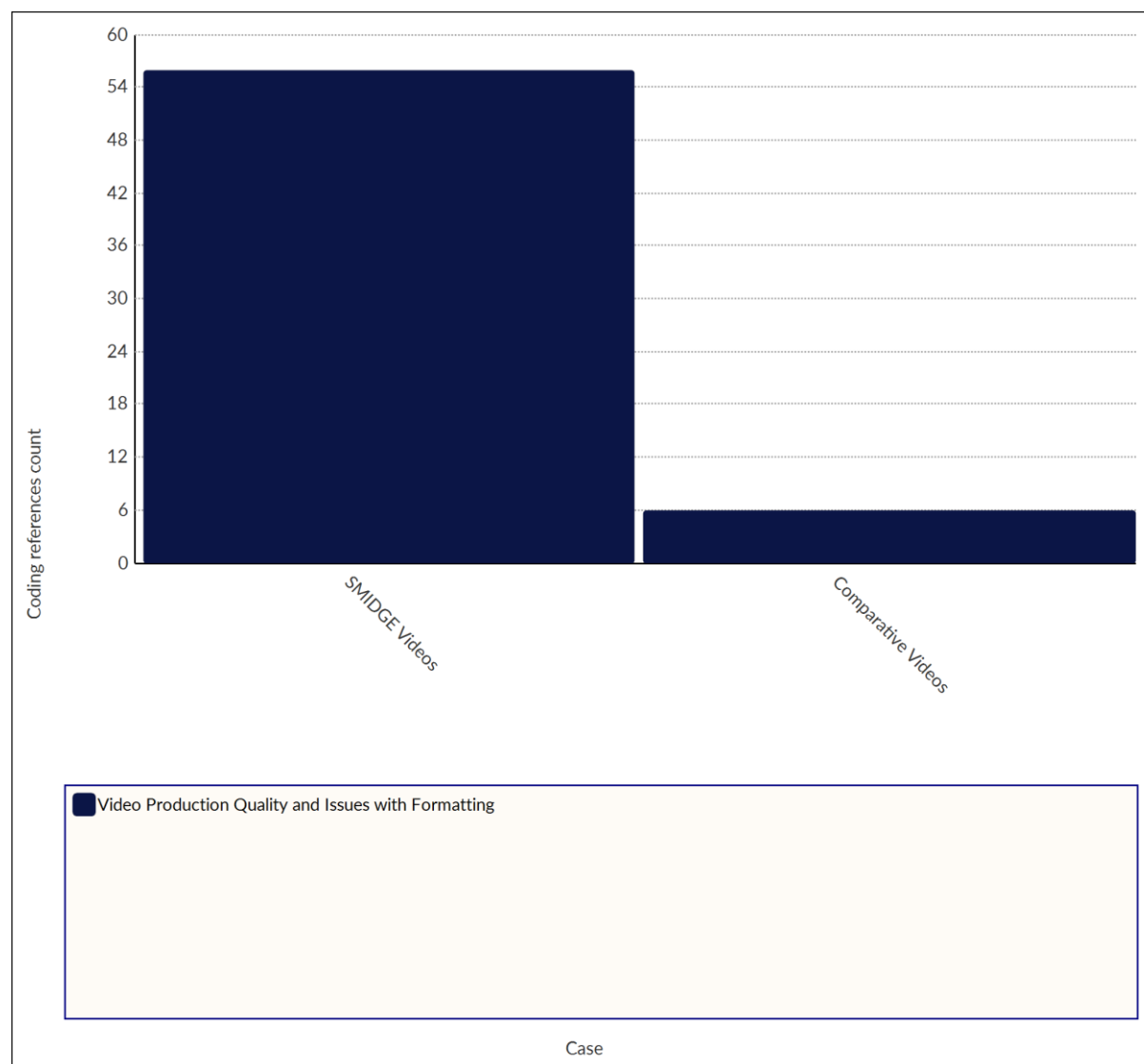
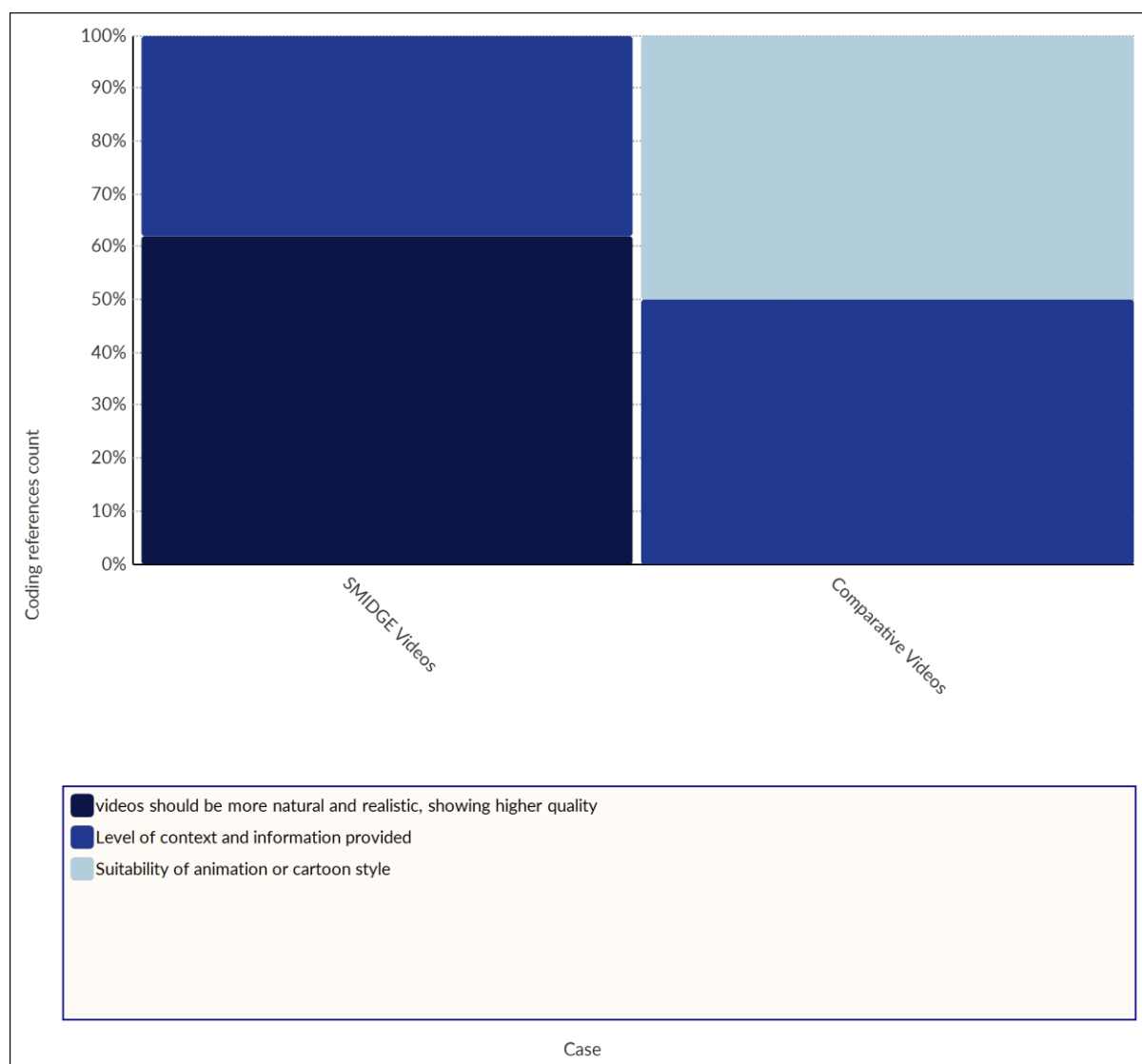


Figure 32 Breakdown of the sub-themes of Video Production Quality and Issues with Formatting between both video groups



### Video's Limited Persuasive Impact on the Audience

Within the broader theme **Credibility and shareability hinged on format choices: realism, identification, and cultural transferability**, participants repeatedly questioned whether either format could *actually* shift attitudes—especially among people with entrenched anti-immigration views or conspiratorial worldviews. As Figure 33 illustrates, both SMIDGE and comparative focus groups engaged with this sub-theme, though participants discussing SMIDGE videos raised these concerns more frequently. These concerns appeared **most prominently in the UK SMIDGE focus group and the Italian UN-only (comparative) group** and were also raised **regularly** in Belgium and Greece/Cyprus transcripts (both SMIDGE and UN conditions). Figure 34 reveals that while comparative group participants emphasized the videos' limited ability to reach target audiences, SMIDGE group participants focused more on the videos' failure to generate new knowledge or perspectives among viewers. Additionally, SMIDGE participants articulated which factors the videos successfully highlighted, suggesting a more nuanced evaluation of the content's specific strengths and limitations.

### *Limitations of Reaching the target audience*

Many Italian and UK SMIDGE video participants raised this issue, with a few participants from other groups engaging with it, the core challenge extended beyond technical reach; it centred on the epistemological problem that those holding opposing views to immigration would likely dismiss or ignore the videos entirely. In the UK SMIDGE group, this was framed as a *reactance* problem: if viewers feel caricatured, they disengage and retreat to identity-affirming communities: *"I do know a couple of people that have gone down these rabbit holes. If I showed them that, they just would like and because they just think they were stupid as well."* Some participants articulated multiple structural barriers reinforcing this isolation. Social media algorithms actively work against such content, continuously directing users toward material aligned with their existing beliefs rather than challenging perspectives. An Italian comparative participant reflected extensively on this mechanism:

*"the problem is that those who have a certain opinion (I'm thinking of the algorithm with which social media circulates things) then focus on certain things, maybe this video could come to me, it could reach me in some way. The hardest thing, in my opinion, is getting this video to those who have a different opinion than mine—that is, how to instill doubt, to allow those who think differently, those who have a vision of people with a migrant background, how to get this point across to them."*

Beyond algorithmic gatekeeping, participants identified a psychological barrier rooted in selective exposure and ideological entrenchment. Those actively engaged in conspiratorial thinking or holding strong anti-immigration views lack intrinsic motivation to seek out counter-narrative content. Combined with platform algorithms that reinforce existing viewpoints, this creates a self-reinforcing cycle: the videos reach those already sympathetic to their message, while remaining invisible to those whose perspectives might be shifted. As participants across countries noted, the videos would resonate with audiences like themselves but fail to penetrate the digital spaces of those holding opposing or conspiratorial views and therefore, the actual target population these videos seek to influence.

### *Limitations of gaining new knowledge or perspectives*

Another critique that emerged predominantly during SMIDGE focus groups, but also across comparative ones, is that participants did not gain novel information or perspectives from the videos. Participants frequently stated the videos did not shift their existing views or introduce genuinely new angles on immigration. Rather than dismissing the videos entirely, however, several participants reframed their potential utility. They suggested the content functioned more effectively as a **conversation catalyst** than as a standalone persuasive intervention. An Italian comparative group participant articulated this issue starkly: *"I believe there's no popular means to change a deeply rooted point of view. We can work on it, but it's a very long process; a video isn't enough."* This observation points to a fundamental challenge regarding counter-narrative videos, since a single viewing experience may be insufficient to shift entrenched beliefs. Some participants explicitly reconceptualized the videos' function. As one UK SMIDGE participant explained: *"I think it's a discussion aid. It's not a watch this and you're cured... I think it's like watch this. Some of the things feel a bit like the conversations we've been having, how do we talk about that? It feels more like a jumping off point."*



However, very few participants reported gaining specific insights from the videos. One participant encountered the great replacement theory explicitly articulated for the first time, while another identified concrete strategies for managing conversations cordially and the importance of verifying information online. These instances suggest that while the videos largely failed to generate novel perspectives among the current participants, they might still offer value in different groups.

### *Successful highlighting of different important factors*

Despite acknowledging significant limitations in the videos' design and reach, participants across both focus group types identified specific elements the videos effectively highlighted. Many SMIDGE focus group participants particularly emphasized how the videos illuminated interpersonal dynamics often overlooked in discussions of immigration. Multiple participants noted the videos' strength in foregrounding trust and communication within family relationships. As one Belgium SMIDGE group participant put it, the video: *"shows the importance of trust, support and follow through when someone raises a concern."*

Beyond this relational emphasis, participants across both video types described how specific scenes provoked meaningful reflection. An Italian comparative group participant reflected extensively on a key moment in the SMIDGE video:

*"When the lady says, 'I'm here, can you see me? I don't exist [on paper], yet you see me, right?' Well, part of the immigration problem, in my opinion, is linked to excessive self-absorption. We think we're the only living beings on Earth, the only ones who feel emotions, pain, love. And everyone else around us is just a feelingless face. If we stopped for a moment to think that everyone we meet, whether an immigrant, a drug addict, a rich person, a poor person, is feeling something in that moment, probably certain fears or hatreds could vanish in a brief moment, because in the end, we're not the only ones who feel pain, fear, or loneliness, and this, in my opinion, is a problem that goes beyond immigration; it's a problem of contemporary society itself: that is, there's only me, only me, and I think only of myself."*

For this particular participant, the video evoked an empathetic response to the overall topic of immigration, immigrant struggles, and societal values. Greek SMIDGE focus group participants similarly described how the videos prompted reflection on the interconnected nature of societal challenges, particularly how issues affecting migrant communities simultaneously affect broader society and individual viewers themselves. Comparative group participants, while offering other critiques, acknowledged that the United Nations video effectively communicated the causes and lived realities of immigration. Even where participants **questioned overall persuasive impact or video design, they identified specific conceptual insights the videos had successfully conveyed.**

Figure 33 Comparison between coding count of SMIDGE and comparative video groups for the Video's Limited Persuasive Impact on the Audience sub-theme

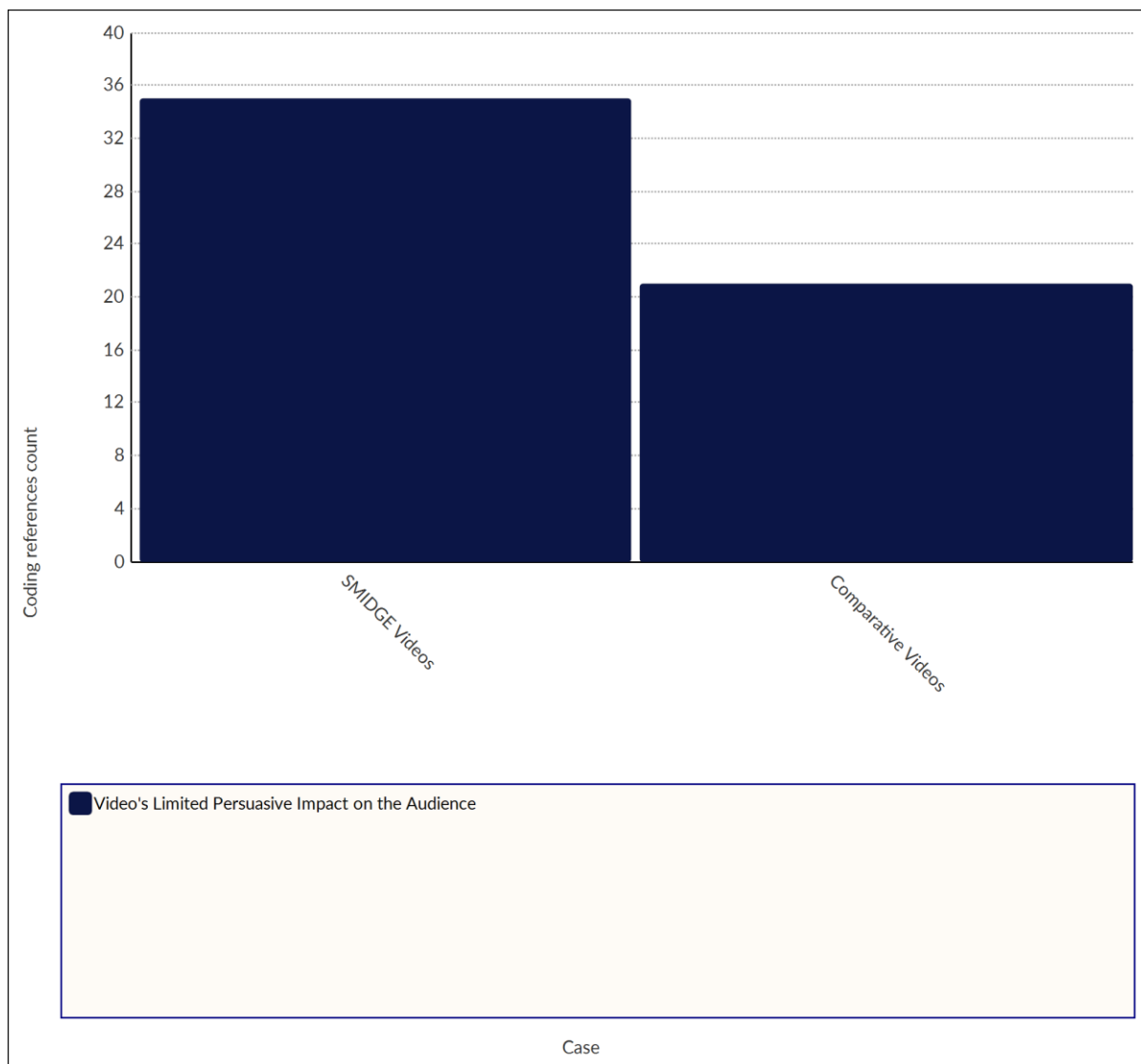
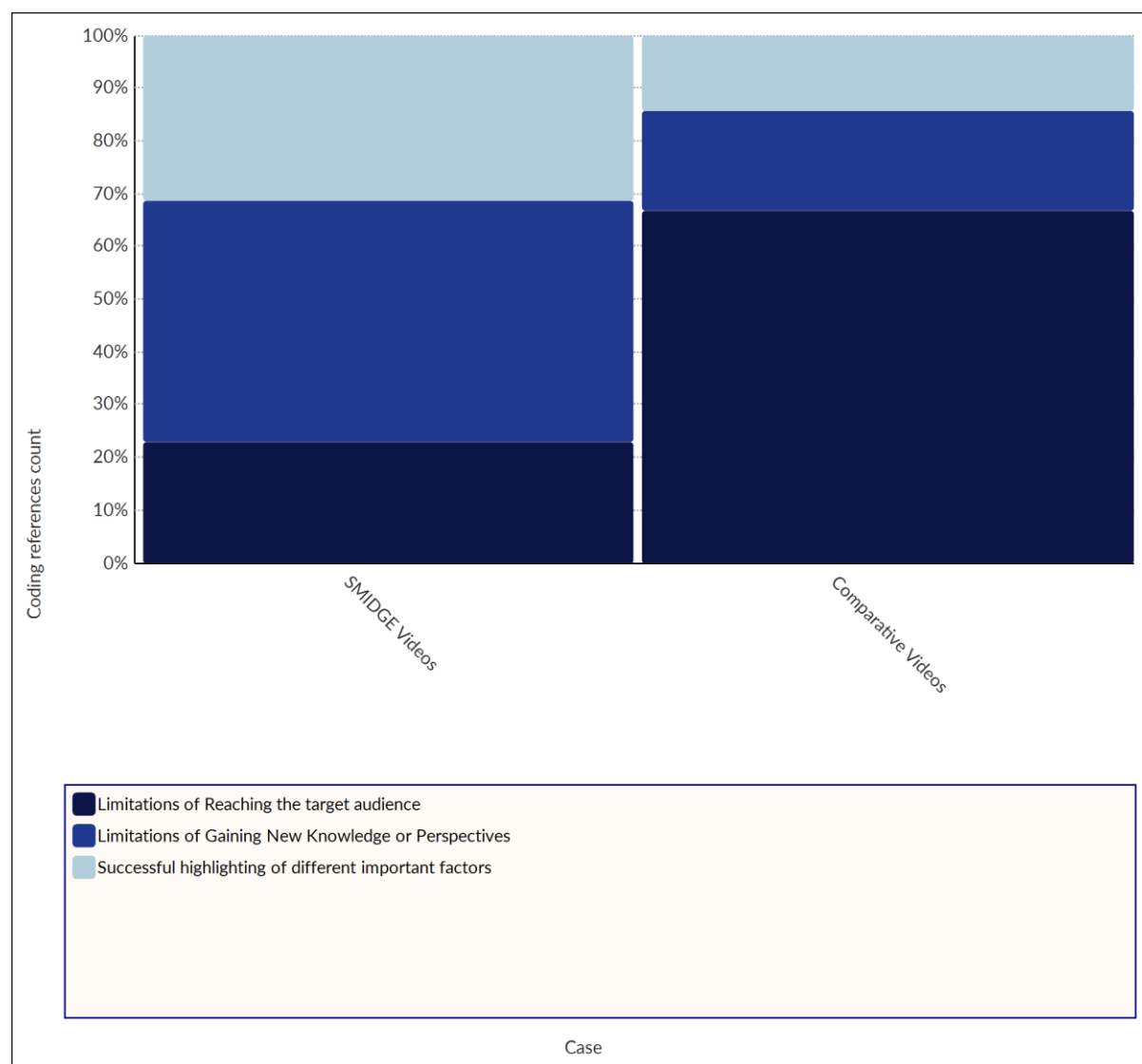


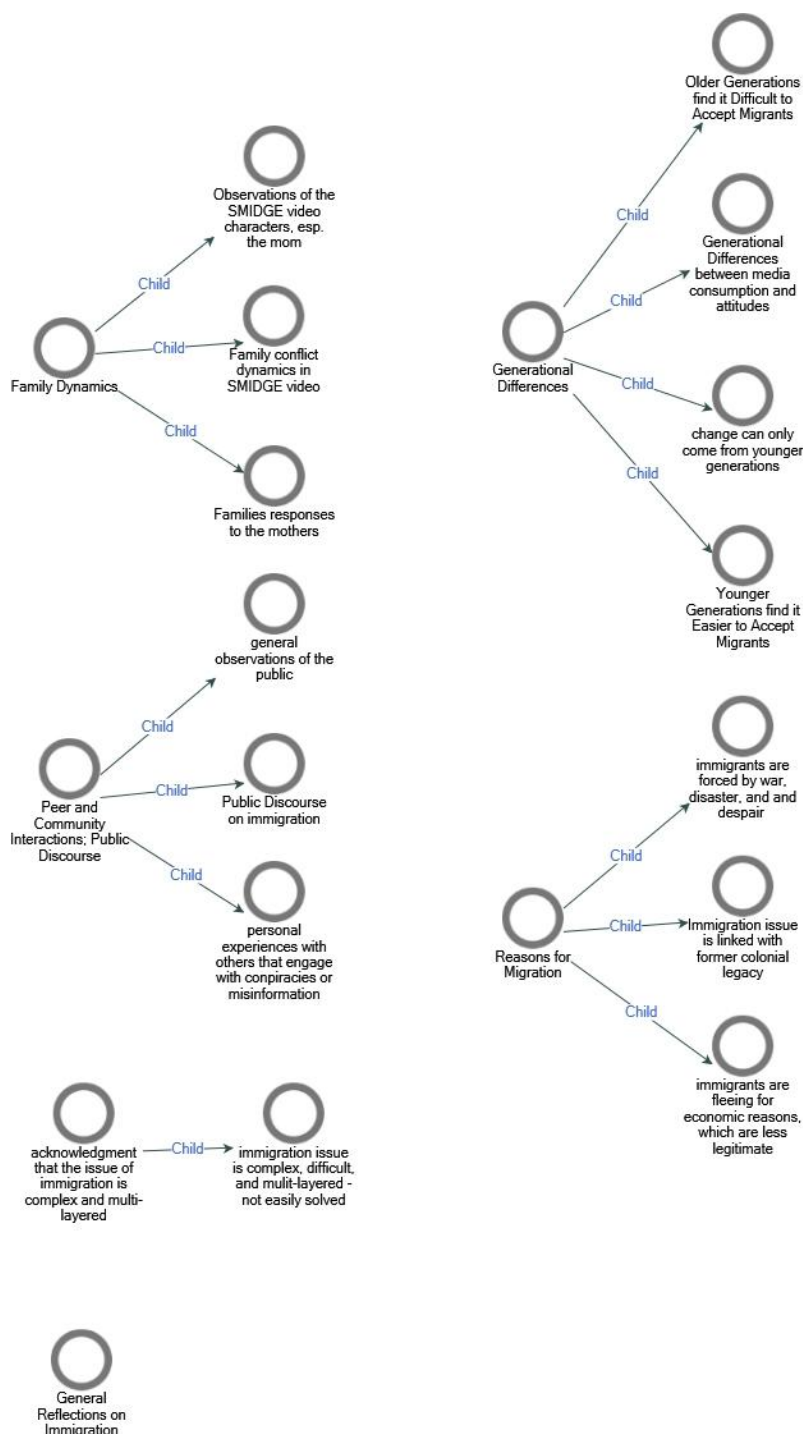
Figure 34 Breakdown of the sub-themes of Video's Limited Persuasive Impact on the Audience sub-theme



### Additional Themes

Beyond the major thematic areas discussed above, participants also engaged with several secondary themes that emerged from the data, see graph 1. These included reflections on family dynamics as sites of both conflict and reconciliation around immigration beliefs, peer and community interactions that shape public discourse, structural reasons underlying migration, generational differences in attitudes toward immigration, and general observations about immigration's complexity. While these themes provided important context and nuance to participants' understanding of immigration and counter-narratives, they did not centrally address the research questions regarding counter-narrative effectiveness, media literacy, or vulnerability to extremism. They are noted here for completeness but represent secondary rather than primary analytical findings.

Graph 1. Additional Themes and Sub-Themes that Emerged out of the Data (Not included in main analysis)



### Climate Change (Brain Box)

Some overlapping themes emerged also from the focus groups showing the SMIDGE climate change video to participants. Unlike the immigration video evaluation, these responses were not part of a direct comparison with a traditional control video, so findings are reported descriptively rather than comparatively.

A recurring theme concerned with the **need for credible and knowledgeable information sources**, especially when communicating complex issues such as climate change. Participants highlighted that

climate change content online can be confusing because of competing claims and varying “evidence” circulating across platforms, increasing the importance of trustworthy communicators and responsible journalism. As one Belgium participant noted: *“So it's important for news agencies or broadcasting corporations, journalists, individuals, people that are out there giving out vital information to be very knowledgeable on the information that it passes out to people. Information, even online, it's very important that we have credible information.”*

Participants also discussed the **emotional impact** of the video and the broader topic. Several described feelings of **concern, worry, fear, and urgency**, often framed around future consequences and responsibility for others (e.g., children and communities). One Belgium participant described a mix of concern and motivation, stating they felt *“worried about how fast things are changing”* but also *“motivated to do something.”* Others emphasized that the video made the issue feel immediate and personally relevant, reinforcing that climate change is not only an environmental or political topic but a **human issue** affecting health, safety, and everyday life.

Relatedly, multiple participants reported that the video increased their **interest in learning more** about causes, impacts, and prevention, and some indicated they would recommend it to others because it provides *“vital and detailed information.”* Participants also connected climate change to broader societal consequences, including **climate-induced migration**, describing how environmental change and disasters can make regions unlivable and force people to relocate to safer areas.

A consistent point across the focus group discussions was the perceived value of **emotional storytelling** for engagement and shareability. In the **climate-change discussion**, participants explicitly noted that emotionally moving content and relatable human stories would make the video more likely to be shared online and more impactful for wider audiences (e.g., “people share content that moves them emotionally” and recommendations to use real-life stories of affected individuals and communities). This emphasis aligns with the **immigration focus group discussions**, where participants repeatedly engaged with the **human consequences** portrayed in the videos and discussed emotional resonance as a key driver of attention and reflection.

### Vaccination Safety (*Phone In*)

Participants’ feedback on the SMIDGE *Phone In* video focused on the video’s realism, character portrayal, and perceived balance between viewpoints. Across the UK focus group, participants **commonly described the scenario as unrealistic and contrived**. They critiqued the portrayal of the guest advancing vaccine-skeptical claims, arguing that **the character appeared insufficiently credible and overly one-dimensional when positioned opposite the professor**. Several participants noted that, in real-world settings, vaccine-skeptical narratives are often voiced through messengers who appear more persuasive and credible than those depicted in the video (e.g., minority-position professionals or “expert gone rogue” figures). Some participants also felt that the video’s framing sometimes guided viewers too strongly toward a preferred interpretation, which they perceived as manipulative:

*“So it felt like you were being controlled by a puppeteer, to understand that that social media side of things was just the rubbish and the scientists were right. Surely if you're going to get people to take the scientists seriously, you need to portray the other side as seriously as they portray themselves.”*

UK participants generally evaluated the immigration family narrative (*Family Tea*) as more plausible and engaging than the vaccine talk-show spoof (*Phone In*). The family narrative was described as more

character-driven and offering greater contextual grounding for how someone might be drawn toward extremist claims. By contrast, the vaccine talk-show style was criticized as contrived, overly scripted, and caricatured, which participants felt could reduce credibility and provoke defensiveness among skeptical audiences. One participant explains his impressions of the two videos clearly:

*“So, I think the first [Family Tea, i.e. SMIDGE immigration video] had more context, you have more depth to it. The second one just came across like it was just too. contrived and too obvious er and didn't really give us enough detail that the first one had more information and was more engaging as it was more character driven.”*

### Comparative Summary of Findings Across the Focus Groups (SMIDGE vs comparative)

Across the nine focus groups, the most consistent difference between the SMIDGE and comparative focus groups was that **SMIDGE groups engaged more frequently and deeply with mechanisms of misinformation and radicalization**, whereas comparative (UN) groups more often responded through humanitarian witnessing and policy-level reflection, and were more likely to treat the videos as emotionally moving but limited as standalone persuasion. Importantly, many apparent differences are entangled **with country clustering and unequal group distribution**, meaning the findings should be read as **format-sensitive patterns rather than definitive causal effects of video type**.

1) Media literacy and misinformation: SMIDGE “Family Tea” video prompts “how belief works,” comparative UN animated video prompts “what’s wrong with media”

SMIDGE participants overwhelmingly **anchored discussion in verification, online misinformation, and algorithmic amplification, often using the family narrative to explain how unverified content can escalate prejudice and mistrust**. They also frequently surfaced practical barriers (time/cognitive load) and system-level drivers (platform incentives). By contrast, comparative groups engaged less with verification and misinformation mechanisms; where media bias was discussed, comparative participants were more likely to propose mainstream-media reform and strategic use of powerful platforms (e.g., “use TV to reach people”), rather than expressing wholesale rejection. In short: **SMIDGE elicited more “epistemic process” talk, comparative more “media as institution” talk**.

2) Pathways into conspiratorial/extremist frames: largely concentrated in SMIDGE

Both conditions occasionally referenced cognitive bias and emotional vulnerability, but step-by-step **accounts of radicalization pathways and strategies to counter extremism were mainly a SMIDGE focus group feature**. SMIDGE groups more often identified belonging, fear, loneliness, scapegoating, selective exposure, and “confidence tricks” by manipulators. Comparative groups touched on similar ideas more sparsely and with less mechanism detail. This suggests the SMIDGE narrative format more readily supported psychological explanation, while the comparative format supported moral/political appraisal.

3) Emotion: both evoke emotion, but with different targets

Both video types generated emotional engagement, but the emotional object differed. Comparative (UN) discussions tended to produce outward-directed emotions; strong empathy for migrants and anger at systemic injustice, positioning viewers as witnesses to suffering. **SMIDGE focus group discussions more often produced mixed, inward-directed emotions**; sympathy/ambivalence toward

a flawed character (the mother), identification with interpersonal tensions, and reflection on how misinformation reshapes fear, positioning viewers as interpreters of ambiguity. This difference matters because it aligns with later critiques of persuasiveness and shareability.

4) Immigration as governance/system: overlaps dominate; some frame differences exist but are context-heavy

Both conditions readily moved beyond the videos into policy and governance reasoning, indicating this theme is topic-driven rather than uniquely format-driven. Where differences appeared, they were mainly differences in justification: comparative groups (especially Greece/Cyprus) more often framed governance failure as institutional blockage and capacity constraints; **SMIDGE groups more often emphasized instrumentalization/geopolitical manipulation**. EU criticism (unity, fairness, representation) appeared in both conditions but was more elaborated in SMIDGE group discussions, though this is tightly clustered in the Greece/Cyprus context and should not be attributed to format without stronger within-country balance.

5) Credibility, shareability, and persuasiveness: comparative groups sharpen critique; SMIDGE groups diagnose identity/representation risks

Both groups **questioned whether a single video can shift entrenched views**, but the shape of the critique differed. Comparative groups more often foregrounded the videos' limited persuasive impact on target audiences (reach, algorithms, "how do you get this to those who disagree?") and gave concrete format recommendations (richer migrant micro-histories; localization; more detail). **SMIDGE groups**, while also skeptical, more often **emphasized misalignment risks**: caricatured portrayals (especially of the mother), condescension/reactance, and insufficient complexity for polarized audiences. Across both conditions, a shared conclusion emerged: the **videos function better as discussion prompts than as standalone interventions**.

Taken together, the comparison suggests a division of labor by format rather than a clean superiority of one condition: SMIDGE videos more reliably triggered discussion of misinformation mechanisms, psychological pathways, and interpersonal dynamics, while comparative/UN videos more reliably triggered humanitarian witnessing, systemic injustice framing, and actionable critique of video communication choices. However, because many differences concentrate in particular national contexts and the group distribution is uneven, the most defensible claim is that format shapes the kind of reasoning participants bring (mechanism-focused vs witness/policy-focused), while the presence of governance and immigration concerns is largely topic- and context-driven.

## 4 Discussion

The current report summarizes the results of 9 focus groups across 7 partner institutions to examine how middle-aged adults (45–65 years) engage with and evaluate two distinct videos addressing immigration-related extremist beliefs: The SMIDGE video, created by consortium partners, compared to a UN video. Both videos were distinct in their approach; the SMIDGE video showed a middle-aged mother struggling with her frustrations about immigrants during "*Family Tea*" (i.e., dinner) with her son and husband. The UN video is animated, recreating real journeys of migrants and their attempts to flee their home countries. Across the nine focus groups, we analyzed participants' emotional



responses, critical evaluations, and perceived persuasiveness of each format. Our findings reveal important differences between the two approaches and challenge assumptions about what makes counter-messaging effective for this demographic. Overall, the comparison shows that format shapes the type of reasoning participants bring to immigration discussions.

The comparative thematic analysis revealed five major themes: Evaluation of information, media, and bias; prevalence of misinformation, Pathways Into Conspiratorial and Extremist Frames, Emotion as a persuasion tactic, Immigration as a Governance and Systems Problem, and Credibility and Shareability Hinged on Format Choices (Realism, identification, and cultural transferability). Across the analysis a consistent distinction emerged: Discussions in the SMIDGE focus groups more reliably and frequently involved misinformation mechanisms and pathways into extremist or conspiratorial beliefs and narratives while the comparative (UN) focus groups more consistently elicited humanitarian witnessing; empathy for migrants, anger at injustice, and reflections on systemic suffering. At the same time, many governance-related reflections (e.g., policy gaps, EU burden-sharing, national capacity concerns) appeared to be topic- and context-driven, showing strong connections within particular national settings (especially Greece/Cyprus), and should therefore not be treated as video effects.

### SMIDGE video's strengths for eliciting discussion and its limits

The comparative analysis highlighted several elements that worked well in the SMIDGE video and appeared to stimulate richer focus group **discussion about information practices and belief formation** more reliably than the UN comparison. Across SMIDGE focus groups, participants more frequently raised **the need for source verification and fact-checking, particularly in social media environments, and connected these practices to everyday constraints** (e.g., time, cognitive load, and the practical difficulty of verifying high volumes of content). SMIDGE discussions also more often expanded beyond individual-level advice into structural accounts of misinformation, including the role of platform dynamics and algorithmic reinforcement, as well as economic incentives that sustain disinformation ecosystems. These discussions are directly relevant to the project's goals insofar as they reveal how participants conceptualize the informational conditions under which polarized and conspiratorial narratives can take hold.

Beyond media literacy, the SMIDGE video also more consistently prompted participants to articulate **pathways into conspiratorial and extremist frames**. Participants discussed cognitive mechanisms (e.g., biased information selection and motivated reasoning), emotional and social vulnerabilities (e.g., isolation and belonging needs), and the role of actors who exploit vulnerability through manipulative online content. In addition, only SMIDGE discussions (in this dataset) developed into more concrete reflections on **what combating extremist beliefs might require**, including the view that change is incremental and may depend on guided reflection or community-level support, rather than one-off exposure. These observations should be interpreted narrowly: the evidence supports the claim that the SMIDGE format elicited more *mechanism-relevant talk* in focus group settings, but it does not establish that the video changed beliefs or would do so in naturalistic settings.

At the same time, the results show that this “**mechanism advantage**” is **fragile** and depends heavily on credibility and identification. Participants often criticized execution features (e.g., dialogue naturalism, characterization, and plausibility), and these critiques matter because mechanism-oriented reflection is most consequential when viewers recognize the scenario as sufficiently realistic to serve as a plausible analogue for real-world vulnerability. In other words, the SMIDGE video appears to have created openings for deeper discussion, but the same design choices that intensified engagement also risked undermining identification for parts of the intended audience.



### Emotion and Salience: format effects are entangled with national context

The comparative analysis also suggests that the two formats foregrounded different emotional orientations. The UN video tended to elicit outward-directed emotional responses consistent with humanitarian witnessing (empathy toward migrants; moral evaluations of injustice). Which reflects the illustration of the video: animations of personal stories of migrants and their journeys. The SMIDGE video, by centering a family member whose views are shaped by online information and personal grievance, more often elicited **discussion of emotional and interpersonal dynamics that can accompany polarization** (e.g., fear, frustration, defensiveness, and relational conflict). However, emotional content was not evenly distributed across countries. More critical attitudes toward migrants, including fear-related concerns about societal cohesion and job security, appeared predominantly in Greece/Cyprus discussions (across both conditions), indicating that **national context and local salience strongly shaped what participants emphasized and how they evaluated the videos**. Research cited by Brashier and Schacter (2020) emphasizes that older adults may be particularly susceptible to emotionally valenced content because emotional salience often overrides source evaluation in decision-making. Yet the present data suggest emotion is not uniformly problematic or helpful—its direction matters.

This has two implications for interpretation. First, claims about the SMIDGE video's efficacy must be tempered by the recognition that country context can amplify or constrain particular kinds of discussions, especially around threat perceptions and governance. Second, the fact that some frames emerged most strongly in specific settings suggests that cross-national counter-narratives should not assume a uniform baseline of concerns or a uniform repertoire of arguments; the same stimulus can be read through different local lenses.

### Cross-video learning within SMIDGE: cautious convergence on credibility and realism

Although the immigration comparison is the analytical core of this section, the additional SMIDGE video discussions (vaccination safety and climate change) provide cautious, supportive evidence for a broader design conclusion: participants' engagement with "critical themes" is strongly moderated by perceived realism, messenger credibility, and character plausibility.

Across the climate change discussion (reported descriptively), participants emphasized credible information sources and the value of emotionally resonant narratives for attention and shareability, echoing the broader observation that affect can drive engagement. In the vaccination video discussion (UK), participants criticized the delivery and portrayal of viewpoints, particularly where the skeptical position was perceived as under-argued or the scenario as contrived; this was treated as a credibility problem with implications for reaching skeptical audiences without provoking reactance. Across these non-immigration videos, **participants also questioned character choices that appeared exaggerated or institutionally "scripted."** For instance, the host of the *Brain Box* show seemed implausible in her role for some of the participants. Similarly, the opposing guest in *Phone In* made an impression of strong unequal credibility compared to the professor. This converges with the immigration findings: participants may recognize and discuss mechanisms (verification, information seeking, vulnerability), but they also treat **representational credibility as a prerequisite for taking the intervention seriously**.

A further inference is possible but should be stated as a hypothesis rather than a finding: the "over-the-top" features that participants criticized may, in some instances, have made underlying mechanisms more visible and therefore easier to discuss. The present dataset cannot adjudicate whether exaggeration helps or harms mechanism learning overall; it can only show that **exaggeration attracted critique and that critique co-occurred with (and may have shaped) deeper discussion**. Testing this would require systematic variation of realism and characterization across conditions.

## Content Evaluation and Design Vulnerabilities

A major design vulnerability for the SMIDGE immigration video concerns identification with the central character. Participants frequently interpreted **the mother as portrayed through negative gendered and age-related stereotypes** (e.g., gullibility, dependency, or diminished agency), and this perception was associated with **defensive or distancing reactions** among some viewers (especially among female participants). In a demographic-targeted intervention, such reactions are not incidental: they could indicate a mismatch between intended identification and experienced portrayal, which can reduce receptivity and limit shareability, particularly when audiences feel “spoken about” rather than addressed (i.e., “spoken to”).

Beyond character representation, participants criticized the dialogue as unnatural and stiff, failing to reflect realistic family dynamics. The video's **UK-specific setting and English language did not translate effectively across different European contexts**, limiting its relevance and cultural resonance for participants in Greece/Cyprus, Kosovo, Italy, Denmark, and Belgium. These localization challenges reveal that narrative-based interventions cannot assume universal applicability across diverse European settings; they require culturally specific adaptation addressing local immigration contexts, linguistic preferences, and familial communication patterns.

In contrast, the UN video was more uniformly evaluated as emotionally compelling and as effectively depicting migrant hardship. It also avoided the specific identification problems generated by a target-demographic character portrayal. Yet, the comparative discussions following the UN video less frequently expanded into mechanism-focused talk about misinformation ecosystems, belief formation, or pathways into conspiratorial/extremist frames, suggesting that the UN format, while strong for humanization and moral attention, may be less likely (in this dataset) to spontaneously elicit media-literacy and pathway reasoning without facilitation.

## Persuasive Impact and Barriers

Participants often expressed skepticism that a single video could change entrenched attitudes, and many noted barriers consistent with **selective exposure and platform filtering**: counter-narratives may disproportionately reach viewers already sympathetic to humanitarian framings or open to alternative perspectives, while being less likely to reach, or be accepted by, those most invested in anti-immigration or conspiratorial narratives. These points are important for situating impact claims. The present focus group evidence supports a conservative conclusion: the videos reliably generate discussion and evaluation, but according to the participants' discussions, do not provide evidence of attitude change or persuasive efficacy in a generalizable sense. In this respect, the comparative analysis suggests that format influences discussion content more than it determines persuasive outcomes.

Participants themselves reframed the videos' utility as “conversation catalysts” rather than standalone interventions, which aligns with research on counter-narratives in community contexts (Davies et al., 2016; Helmus, York, & Chalk, 2013). This suggests that counter-narrative efficacy might depend less on content design and more on deployment architecture; how videos are distributed, discussed, and institutionally embedded. Single exposures in research settings may be particularly unrepresentative of real-world conditions where repeated exposure, trusted-messenger endorsement, and facilitated dialogue operate together.

## Country differences and sampling considerations

The analysis revealed meaningful **country-level variation in how immigration was framed** (most clearly between Greece/Cyprus and Kosovo discussions) linked to different geopolitical positions, migration histories, and perceived national capacities. These differences likely shaped both the

salience of fears and the prominence of governance-oriented talk. Accordingly, interpretation must remain cautious: cross-country comparisons here describe patterns within the dataset, not stable national profiles, and the uneven distribution of topics across settings limits strong causal attribution to video format.

A further limitation concerns sample composition. Many participants were highly educated and several described personal contact with migrants or pro-immigration orientations. This likely influenced both the nature of empathy expressed and the plausibility of persuasion. At the same time, the sample still demonstrated considerable skepticism about media and information environments, suggesting that “skepticism” is not uniformly protective and may extend to mainstream sources as well as online content. The participants demonstrated the “greater skepticism” toward online content that Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2022) and Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez (2019) identify as characteristic of middle-aged users. However, our findings suggest this skepticism may not be selectively applied to politically polarizing topics as predicted by Vedejová & Čavojská (2022). The present data do not allow strong conclusions about whether such skepticism is selectively applied to polarizing content; they do, however, illustrate that **information distrust can be incorporated into both anti- and pro-migrant framings**, depending on context and prior commitments.

### SMIDGE findings within counter-narrative research

The present findings contribute to an emerging body of work on counter-narrative interventions by providing empirical evaluations of narrative-based counter-narratives with middle-aged (45-65) European participants, a demographic significantly underrepresented in prior counter-extremism research. Most existing studies on counter-messaging focus either on younger online audiences (Livingstone et al., 2017; Kops et al., 2025) or on individuals already embedded in violent extremism. Our findings extend the evidence base by showing that format and narrative structure matter substantially for how middle-aged adults engage with misinformation mechanisms, even if direct attitude change remains elusive.

The participants in this report demonstrated media skepticism (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2019) but showed this skepticism is not uniformly protective. Several participants acknowledged that their own skepticism of mainstream media mirrors the information-seeking behavior of the mother character they were critiquing, suggesting that media criticism alone is insufficient to prevent polarization and alternative-source reliance. This complicates the assumption that middle-aged adults simply need “more media literacy.” Rather, the data suggest they need discernment frameworks that evaluate sources multidimensionally (expertise, evidence quality, potential bias) rather than categorical trust/distrust positions.

### Implications and Conclusion

Taken together, the comparative analysis supports a bounded, design-relevant conclusion. The SMIDGE narrative format appears particularly promising for eliciting mechanism-relevant discussion about misinformation, belief formation, and vulnerability pathways – topics that were less elaborated in the UN comparison discussions. However, this advantage is constrained by execution and transferability: credibility, realistic dialogue, and non-stereotyped characterization are not optional features but conditions for identification and shareability in the target demographic. The UN format, by contrast, appears well-suited for humanitarian witnessing and humanization, but may require more explicit scaffolding if the goal is to elicit spontaneous discussion of misinformation mechanisms and pathway dynamics.

Future iterations should therefore prioritize: (a) credible, non-caricatured representation that supports recognition without triggering defensiveness; (b) naturalistic dialogue and relational plausibility; (c) localization to linguistic and cultural contexts; and (d) deliberate design of how emotional engagement connects to mechanism-focused reflection (e.g., verification practices, platform dynamics, and vulnerability pathways), ideally within facilitated use-cases. Within these limits, SMIDGE videos may be best positioned as resources for structured dialogue and guided reflection, rather than as stand-alone persuasive tools expected to shift entrenched attitudes in polarized media environments.

## 1. Part 2 – Introduction

Evaluating citizens' reactions to counter-narrative video content is a critical yet methodologically challenging task, particularly in the context of polarizing social issues such as immigration. Counter-narratives are widely promoted as tools for disrupting misinformation, extremist framing, and simplistic online discourse; however, their development and reception are known to be highly complex, with effectiveness varying substantially across audience characteristics such as age, prior beliefs, and media literacy (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Tuck & Silverman, 2016). In line with the motivations of the SMIDGE project, earlier video evaluative work relied on focus group discussions across consortium countries to assess responses to newly developed media content (e.g., on immigration, vaccination, climate change topics). While focus groups offer valuable insight into shared meanings and collective reasoning, they are also subject to well-documented limitations, including risks of groupthink, social desirability, and group polarization, which may suppress dissenting views or amplify dominant perspectives (Janis, 1982; Sim, 1998). To address these limitations and to triangulate earlier findings, the present study examines individual-level responses to the SMIDGE immigration-themed video ("Family Tea"), which was developed iteratively based on participant feedback (Task T5.1) and explicitly designed to stimulate reflective thinking about misinformation and erroneous online content. Prior focus group analyses presented in **Part 1** of this deliverable indicated that, despite mixed evaluations of the video's narrative elements, participants exposed to the SMIDGE immigration video engaged in more in-depth evaluative discussion about misinformation compared to those viewing a more traditional United Nations-animation style video. The current individual-based analysis aims to explore whether this pattern of deeper evaluative engagement is also evident when participants encounter the video outside a group setting, thereby strengthening the evidential basis for claims regarding the video's reflective and counter-narrative potential.

The think-aloud method is a qualitative research technique that is used to study capture participants' cognitive processes as it occurs while they are engaging with an activity or source material. Participants are asked to verbalize their thoughts aloud, including interpretations, and any emotional reactions in real time. This process allows researchers to access ongoing sense-making rather than relying on retrospective accounts which may be affected by memory or be influenced by social desirability bias. The method has been applied to study reasoning, decision-making, comprehension, and evaluation processes (van Someren et al., 1994). By using just-on-time responses, think-aloud methods offer greater ecological validity when examining complex cognitive activities.

In the context of online media engagement and evaluation, the think-aloud method is appropriate for examining how individuals react, consider, and engage with complex audiovisual content. Previous studies have suggested that think aloud methods can capture emotional shifts, confusion as well as interpretative processes (e.g., changing one's view or perspective) in the moment (Charters, 2003; Fonteyn et al., 1993). This method is therefore appropriate for studying participants' engagement with content that has social implications such as the immigration narrative presented in the newly

developed SMIDGE video (“family tea”). Indeed, the method may allow the unfolding of how meaning-making through engagement with the video interacts with prior beliefs, shifting perspectives and emotional reactions. When combining think aloud methods with retrospective reflection, the approach further allows an in-depth understanding of how citizens may attend to and interpret newly developed online counternarrative media (Abed & Barzilai, 2023; Barzilai & Zohar, 2012).

Building on the earlier evaluative focus group findings within the SMIDGE project, this section addresses the question of how individuals engage cognitively and affectively with the newly developed counter-narrative immigration video individually and dynamically in-the-moment. Specifically, this analysis asks whether the SMIDGE “Family Tea” video elicits reflective evaluation of topics related to misinformation and erroneous online content at the individual level on the topic of immigration, and whether such engagement mirrors or extends the deeper evaluative discussion previously observed in focus group settings. By examining participants’ moment-to-moment verbalizations and subsequent reflections, this section aims to clarify how individuals process counter-narrative cues, assess credibility, and articulate uncertainty or perspective-taking when viewing immigration-related media independently.

## Method

### Design and Aim

This study was conducted within Work Package 5 as part of the evaluation of SMIDGE new media which aimed to promote reflective thinking on immigration-related topics. It aimed to examine how new media content facilitates reflective engagement and counter-narrative processing. A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design was employed, combining a think-aloud protocol with a brief retrospective discussion to capture participants’ real-time cognitive and emotional responses to immigration-related video content.

### Participants

Participants were 15 citizens aged between 45 and 65 years, with average age of 53. Recruitment aimed to ensure gender balance and diversity in educational level and occupational background, in order to capture a broad range of perspectives relevant to public discourse on immigration. The sample consisted of nine participants who held University/College degree, three had master's degree and three had completed Secondary school. In terms of occupation, the sample included two of the participants were Secondary School Teachers, two were Private Sector employees, Information Technology manager, Kindergarten teacher, Administrative officer, Media officer, farmer, Cleaner, Metal engineer, Civil engineer, System’s Architect, Financial manager and a Chef. Inclusion criteria required participants to be fluent in the language of the interview (Greek or English) and able to provide informed consent.

### Recruitment

Participants were recruited through an invitation letter disseminated by UCLan Cyprus. The invitation provided general information about the SMIDGE project and detailed the purpose, format, and voluntary nature of the interviews. Invitations were sent via email to eligible candidates. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams by a group of 4 trained interparticipants.

### Materials

The primary stimulus was a 6-minute video developed for the SMIDGE project, portraying an immigration-related narrative (“A family tea”). Data were collected using a dual recording setup

consisting of a dictaphone and screen-recording software to capture both verbalizations and interaction with the video.

To familiarize participants with the think-aloud technique, a short neutral practice video was used prior to the main task. Additional materials included a demographic questionnaire and a set of post-task retrospective questions designed to clarify participants' thought processes and evaluative criteria.

## Procedure

Each interview followed a standardized protocol and lasted approximately 40 minutes.

### Introduction and Consent (5 minutes).

The researcher explained the study purpose, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and recording procedures. Participants were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that they could withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained before proceeding.

### Think-Aloud Training (5 minutes; Guss, 2018; McIntyre et al., 2022; Noushada et al., 2024; Peute et al., 2015).

Participants were introduced to the think-aloud method and instructed to verbalize all thoughts and feelings as they occurred. They practiced using a short neutral video to ensure comfort with continuous verbalization.

### Main Think-Aloud Task (approximately 15 minutes; Hu & Gao, 2017; McIntyre et al., 2022; Noushad et al., 2024; Peute et al., 2015).

Participants viewed the immigration video twice. The first viewing was uninterrupted to allow familiarization. During the second viewing, participants conducted the think-aloud task, verbalizing thoughts and emotions in real time. Participants were instructed to pause the video whenever they wished to comment, in order to avoid speaking over the audio and to minimize data loss. When extended silences occurred (more than 30 seconds), the interviewer prompted participants with neutral reminders (e.g., "Please keep talking").

### Retrospective Discussion (15 minutes; Giang et al. 2021; Peute et al., 2015; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2012;).

Following the think-aloud task, participants engaged in a short semi-structured discussion to elaborate on or clarify moments from the video. Questions focused on interpretation, information-seeking, confusion or uncertainty, criteria for judging video credibility, and perceived impact on understanding multiple perspectives. The interview schedule is presented in Table 1. Participants were also asked to rate the video's effectiveness in helping participants understand immigration and to describe features of a "good" social-topic video on YouTube.

### Debrief (1 minute).

Participants were thanked for their participation and given an opportunity to ask questions.

## Data Collection and Analysis

All sessions were audio- and screen-recorded, enabling precise alignment between participants' verbalizations and specific moments in the video. The qualitative data were analyzed using a time-anchored thematic analysis, adapting Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic approach to the temporal structure of the think-aloud procedure. We did not code transcripts as undifferentiated texts, but participants' comments were coded in relation to the video time points at which they paused observing common pausing locations. This allowed for themes to be examined within and



across specific narrative moments. In this way we identified how patterns of cognitive, emotional, and evaluative responses emerged, shifted, and converged as the video unfolded. Quantitative summaries were used only to map the most frequently occurring pause points, indicating moments that elicited increased reflection across participants.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained through the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee. All procedures complied with ethical standards for informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection.

**Table 1. Reflective interview questions**

| Focus                                            | Interview questions                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Clarification of in-the-moment cognition</b>  | Can you walk me through what you were thinking at specific moments in the video?                                                                               |
| <b>Information-seeking processes</b>             | What information were you trying to understand or look for while watching?                                                                                     |
| <b>Uncertainty and confusion</b>                 | Were there parts of the video that confused you or made you unsure about what was happening?                                                                   |
| <b>Salience and attention</b>                    | What made certain parts of the video stand out to you?                                                                                                         |
| <b>Ongoing reflection</b>                        | Did the video raise any questions for you that you're still thinking about? What are these?                                                                    |
| <b>Credibility evaluation</b>                    | How do you verify if a video on social media is accurate?                                                                                                      |
| <b>Perceived effectiveness</b>                   | Rate the video on a scale from 10 ("best") to 0 ("worst") for how well it helps an individual understand the issue of immigration. Please justify your rating. |
| <b>Quality criteria for social media content</b> | What is a good YouTube video on a social topic (e.g., immigration) in your opinion? Describe at least six features.                                            |
| <b>Peer-directed evaluation strategies</b>       | Please explain to someone your age what they can do to determine whether a YouTube video on a social topic is good. Describe all the steps you would suggest.  |
| <b>Perspective-taking</b>                        | How has the video affected your understanding of different perspectives on this issue?                                                                         |

**Note.** The retrospective discussion followed the think-aloud task. The interview was semi-structured; all core questions were asked, while order and probing were adapted to participants' responses.

## Results

Table 2 presents the video time frames in which the majority of participants paused for reflection during the think-aloud procedure. In line with the study's research aims, these pauses cluster around a series of thematic moments that reflect a gradual emotional and conceptual engagement with the video content. In the opening sequence of the video, where the main female character's frustration is first portrayed, participants appear to engage in emotional disturbance and tension, attempting to affectively interpret the narrative and to make sense of the emerging interpersonal strain.

When the character later expresses her frustration about losing a promotion to an immigrant candidate, participants shift toward threatened status and injustice, interpreting the underlying causes and motivations of her grievance and recognising the emotional impact of perceived loss, humiliation, and unfairness.

As the video progresses, participants begin to engage with loss-to-scapegoating narratives, reflecting on how the character's personal disappointment is reframed as a broader explanation that blames

immigrants as a group. At this point, participants consider both the main character's perspective and her family's responses, recognising a tendency to generalise individual loss into collective blame.

Around the middle of the video, when the characters discuss online information and news sources, participants increasingly focus on misinformation and algorithmic influence, reflecting on how social media, online communities, and digital platforms shape beliefs, amplify fear, and distort information.

This then develops into a theme of critical media literacy, as participants reflect more explicitly on credibility, truth, and verification, questioning the reliability of mainstream and online media and highlighting vulnerabilities in how people interpret and trust digital information.

Towards the end of the video, the revelation that immigration is present within the family itself (through the daughter-in-law) prompts participants to engage with moral inconsistency and in-group bias, recognising the tension between abstract anti-immigrant beliefs and the personal reality of loved ones who are themselves migrants.

Finally, in the closing moments, participants demonstrate emotional softening and reflection, shifting away from judgement toward empathy and consideration of the relational and emotional consequences of the character's attitudes, particularly for her son and family relationships.

### Emotional disturbance and tension

Participants' first engagement with the video is strongly affective. They describe the character as **"confused"** and **"upset"** (Participant 3), **"irritated"** (Participant 11), and as someone who **"doesn't want to talk but wants attention"** (Participant 3). Others frame the scene relationally as **"a family that is fighting"** (Participant 14) and as one marked by **"tension"** (Participant 14). Overall, participants' emotional reading of the opening scenes is negative in tone. One participant says, **"I identify with her irritation"** (Participant 11), while another observes, **"she is not okay"** (Participant 3).

These excerpts show that participants do not begin by evaluating any claims but instead, much like the family members in the video, they first try to understand the main female character's emotional state. This suggests that early storyline cues are processed through emotional attunement, with participants seeking to make sense of distress, frustration, and relational strain before engaging with the ideological content of her statements.

### Threatened status and injustice

When the promotion issue appears, participants shift from emotional reading to causal interpretation of the female character's motivation. They repeatedly describe her as **"invisible," "insignificant,"** and **"a nobody,"** and explicitly note that **"she lost the promotion."** One participant explains that **"she did everything she was supposed to do, but nobody saw it and they chose someone else"** (Participant 8), while another says that she **"worked so hard for it, and now someone else took her place"** (Participant 15). Another participant describes her as having gone from being important to becoming **"an insignificant pawn"** (Participant 15), capturing the experience of sudden loss of status and recognition.

Several participants emphasised that this loss was not only professional but also emotional and identity-related. One stated that **"she feels invisible... I did what I had to do, but nobody saw it"** (Participant 8), while another added that **"she was important in that job for so long, and suddenly she became nothing"** (Participant 15). Others connected this directly to her emotional volatility, noting that **"because she didn't get the promotion, she is in a vulnerable phase"** and therefore **"cannot look at what she reads online with a critical eye"** (Participant 11).



Together, these quotations show that participants are not merely describing what happens in the story but are actively constructing a psychological justification of her grievance. They interpret her anger and resentment not as simple prejudice against migrants but as rooted in a threatened sense of worth, competence, and belonging. In doing so, participants appear to engage in a critical reflection process which is considering how experiences of humiliation and loss can make individuals more receptive to exclusionary and blame-based narratives about immigration.

### Loss-to-immigrant bias narratives

Participants consistently identified a narrative shift from personal grievance to group blame, closely mirroring the turning point of the video. As one participant observed, the character moves from **“the loss of the promotion”** to **“a more general statement where everything becomes the immigrants’ fault”** (Participant 13). The same participant explicitly described this movement as **“a shift from losing the promotion to blaming immigrants for everything.”** Others similarly tracked how an individual setback is reframed as a collective threat. One participant explained that the character feels **“someone else came and took her place”** and that **“she did everything she was told to do, but nobody saw it and they chose someone else”** (Participant 8). Another described how the character believes migrants are **“part of a plan... to become the majority and replace people in their jobs”** (Participant 11).

Importantly, many participants did not simply repeat the video content and logic but actively reflected on how this type of reasoning develops within people. One noted that **“because she is in a vulnerable phase, because she was upset that she didn’t get the promotion, she cannot look critically at what she reads online”** (Participant 11), while another commented that **“she is trying to justify why she didn’t get the promotion by finding other causes”** (Participant 13). Together, these statements show that participants were not only identifying the bias but also articulating the mechanism through which personal loss is transformed into an ideological explanation. This might be conceived as an indicator of counter-narrative reflective processing. That is, participants recognised how emotional injury is converted into a story of collective threat linked to immigration.

### Misinformation and algorithmic influence

Participants devote substantial attention to **where the character’s ideas come from** during the sections of the video that reference social media, podcasts, and online networks. When these scenes appear, viewers pause and explicitly question the credibility and origin of the information she is consuming. One participant remarks that **“websites have their own agenda”** (Participant 13), while another describes her sources as **“café talk from online friends”** (Participant 3), suggesting informal, unverified, and socially circulated knowledge. Others emphasise that she relies on **“YouTube and podcasts”** (Participant 11; Participant 12) while **“not checking if it’s real”** (Participant 12).

Several participants go further by reflecting on how digital systems may actively shape and reinforce her beliefs. One notes that **“it might be AI chatbots that she’s talking to... feeding into those prejudices and making it a negative spiral”** (Participant 10), while another says that **“they can cook up whatever they want on the internet”** (Participant 13). Participant 12 highlights the character’s own admission of epistemic neglect, stating that **“she says she doesn’t have time to check if what she hears is true.”**

These excerpts illustrate that participants in this study are not merely judging the content of the character’s beliefs but are critically analysing the information sources in which those beliefs appear to be produced. Participants demonstrate awareness of algorithmic bias, misinformation dissemination, and the role of echo-chambers reflecting a form of independent critical reasoning about how exclusionary narratives on immigration are generated and sustained online rather than passively accepting the storyline presented in the video.

### Critical media literacy

The video repeatedly prompts participants to evaluate credibility, evidence, and truth when the family begins debating information from news media, podcasts, and online platforms. These moments produce some of the clearest expressions of critical reflection in the think-aloud data. One participant states: **“the media is politically biased”** (Participant 9), while another warns that **“you can’t trust everything you read online”** (Participant 11). Others explicitly question epistemic reliability, noting that **“what you see on the internet is not necessarily real”** (Participant 13) and that **“things you see now, you can’t even trust your eyes anymore”** (Participant 13).

Participants also identify vulnerability to digital misinformation, especially among older users. One explains that **“people of this age... who didn’t grow up with computers and the internet may really believe everything that appears in front of them”** (Participant 3), while another remarks that the character has been **“brainwashed”** by what she hears online (Participant 12). A particularly explicit metacognitive observation is offered by Participant 13, who states: **“truth is subjective... facts are objective... what matters is how people interpret them.”**

These excerpts show that participants are not simply taking sides in the family conflict (although sometimes they do side with her son) but are actively considering the epistemic foundations of the character’s beliefs. They demonstrate awareness that information is shaped by political agendas, algorithmic systems, and individual biases, and they articulate the need for verification, multiple sources, and critical evaluation.

### Moral inconsistency and in-group bias

The strongest counter-narrative cue in the dataset occurs when the immigration issue becomes personal in the storyline, namely when the video reveals that the son’s wife is an immigrant. At this moment, many participants immediately detect a contradiction between the character’s abstract hostility toward migrants and her treatment of loved ones. One participant asks directly, **“Why is it different for her family? If they can find work, anyone can”** (Participant 5). Another states, **“She separates her daughter-in-law and her friend from ‘the immigrants’... she separates her own people for some reason”** (Participant 8). Similarly, Participant 3 observes that **“she thinks that her daughter-in-law and her grandson are not part of the problem... even though in reality it is the same thing.”**

Several participants explicitly name this double standard. Participant 13 explains, **“Those we love, those we know, suddenly we exclude them from the problem. They are not the problem, it is all the others.”** Participant 12 frames this as a social-psychological inconsistency: **“She accepted her son’s partner who is from another country... she accepted colleagues who are foreign... but she cannot accept some people because YouTube and social media put ideas in her head.”** Participant 11 similarly notes that **“she cannot think that the one who got promoted or anyone else is also someone’s family,”** highlighting how moral concern is unevenly distributed across groups.

These responses show that participants are not simply following the video plot but are engaging in perspective-taking, considering the various characters points of view, and moral evaluation. Participants appear to compare and draw parallels across claims about immigrants with the lived reality of family relationships. By noticing that the character draws a boundary between “us” and “them” that excludes her own loved ones, participants are able to recognise a counter-narrative that exposes how prejudice becomes fragile when confronted with concrete human ties. This moment therefore directly activates reflection on in-group bias, moral inconsistency, and the tension between ideological beliefs and personal relationships.

## Emotional softening and perspective-taking

In the closing section of the video, many participants move away from evaluating claims about immigration and instead focus on the emotional and relational consequences unfolding within the family. Rather than taking an ideological position, they begin to articulate uncertainty, vulnerability, and the human cost of the conflict. Participant 13 notes that **“she is put into thinking about how real these things are”** and that she **“starts to see the consequences of what she said with her family.”** Participant 15 similarly frames the moment in emotional terms, saying, **“she has fears inside her... she is afraid,”** and explains that **“the father is in the middle and doesn’t know who to defend, and he sees his son getting up to leave.”**

Several participants highlight the relational pain rather than the ideological topics. Participant 14 observes that the scene shows **“how families are destroyed,”** while Participant 5 comments that **“it’s sad for the son”** because he is being forced to choose between his wife and his mother. Participant 12, although highly critical earlier, also acknowledges a softer dimension, noting that **“she has been influenced and confused... she is not thinking clearly.”**

These remarks indicate a shift from judgment and critical reflection to empathy as the video comes to a conclusion. Participants in this latter section, do not focus on whether the character’s beliefs are correct or their source, but on how those beliefs are hurting the people around her. This also reflects a form of perspective-taking where participants acknowledge the mother’s fears, the son’s pain, and the father’s dilemma simultaneously. This is a moment where participants express uncertainty for the conclusion of such family conflicts. Participants appear to be engaging with the counter-narrative not through facts or ideology, at this stage, but through recognition of emotional complexity and the consequences of polarized beliefs within families.

Table 2. Video cluster time points of participant reflection.

| Video cluster                           | time | Participants who stopped                             | Illustrative translated quotations (verbatim, shortened)                                                                                                                      | Theme                                             |
|-----------------------------------------|------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>0:00–0:40 Opening unease</b>         |      | P1, P2, P3, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15             | “She is confused and upset.” (P3) · “I identify with her irritation.” (P11) · “Families are fighting about migrants.” (P15)                                                   | <b>Emotional disturbance &amp; tension</b>        |
| <b>1:15–1:40 Promotion revealed</b>     |      | P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15 | “She feels insignificant.” (P3) · “She became invisible.” (P8) · “She lost the promotion.” (P12) · “She became a nobody.” (P15)                                               | <b>Threatened status &amp; injustice</b>          |
| <b>2:10–2:40 Replacement frame</b>      |      | P1, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11, P12, P13, P15           | “Someone else is taking her place.” (P3) · “They are replacing us.” (P11) · “Immigrants are blamed for everything.” (P13)                                                     | <b>Loss to immigrant bias</b>                     |
| <b>2:50–3:40 Internet &amp; sources</b> |      | P1, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14  | “Websites have their own agenda.” (P1) · “Café talk from online friends.” (P3) · “YouTube and podcasts without checking.” (P12) · “AI chatbots feeding her prejudices.” (P10) | <b>Misinformation &amp; algorithmic influence</b> |
| <b>4:10–4:40 What is truth?</b>         |      | P1, P3, P4, P6, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14          | “Older people believe whatever appears online.” (P3) · “The media is politically biased.” (P9) · “Truth is subjective, facts are objective.” (P13)                            | <b>Critical media literacy</b>                    |

|                                                 |                                                  |                                                                                                                                                     |                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <b>4:50–5:30</b><br><b>Family contradiction</b> | P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15 | “My daughter-in-law is an immigrant too.” (P3) · “We exclude our loved ones from the problem.” (P13) · “Why is it different when it’s family?” (P5) | <b>Moral inconsistency &amp; in-group bias</b> |
| <b>5:40–6:00</b><br><b>Ending</b>               | P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P11, P13, P15                | “She starts to think.” (P13) · “It’s sad for the son.” (P4) · “She is afraid.” (P15)                                                                | <b>Emotional softening &amp; reflection</b>    |

## Retrospective questions results

In the retrospective questions section, the interview data show a shared emphasis across participants on how people decide what to trust, rather than on the video’s storyline itself. The discussion repeatedly shifts from the narrative to the problem of misinformation and credibility online. Participants stress that online material cannot be taken at face value and that verification is necessary. One participant explicitly states, *“You can’t trust everything you read online,”* while another explains that *“on YouTube I don’t know if what you see is the truth.”* Several participants emphasise the need to cross-check information: *“I would do a search on the topic and see what else exists,”* and *“I look for proper news headlines and reputable sources, because Facebook has a lot of fake news and AI-generated content.”* Others underline that relying on a single source is risky: *“You shouldn’t look at just one source... somewhere in the middle is the truth.”* There is also awareness that people are not always able to tell what is real: *“I don’t think you can really know anymore... the quality is so good that you can’t tell if it’s real or fake.”* Participants repeatedly link misinformation to online environments and social networks: *“She thinks these people online are her friends, but you don’t even know who they are,”* and *“they could even be chatbots feeding her prejudice.”* Vulnerability is also acknowledged: *“Older people believe whatever appears online,”* and *“my age group is out of touch with technology, it’s hard to know what is real.”* Across these participant comments, credibility of information is viewed as dependent on source quality, cross-checking, and balance, for example: *“You have to check where it comes from,”* *“look at reliable links,”* and *“watch more than one video so you get a more complete picture.”* These retrospective comments show that the video prompted sustained awareness of the need for fact-checking and epistemic caution when consuming online content.

At the same time, in this reflective section participants also thought deeply about the emotional and relational dynamics presented in the video. Many returned to the woman’s work-related distress and sense of injustice or the family dynamics. In considering the counternarrative value of the video, even when participants said their views on immigration did not change as a result of the video viewing, the video was still described as emotionally engaging: *“It made me think,”* *“it touched me when the son left,”* and *“it was sad for the family.”* Many participants also used the reflective section to articulate what a better social-issue video should include: *“You need all sides,”* *“the immigrant’s view, the locals’ view, and what the state does,”* and *“you need the reasons why people migrate, not just the conflict.”* Together, these comments drawn from the interview reflection section, show that the video not only activated beliefs about the topic of migration, but also prompted perspective-taking, moral comparison, and critical reflection about information quality and credibility.

## Discussion

Across the think-aloud data, participants’ engagement with the video unfolds as a gradual deepening of sense-making and reflection, moving from affective attunement to causal reasoning and then to considering epistemic and moral evaluation criteria. This finding is in alignment with the evaluative focus group findings presented in **Part 1** of this deliverable. Earlier video pauses illustrate how video viewers initially will try to understand the emotional state of the main female character. This suggests

that participants do not initially read the video as a counter-narrative video on immigration but as a story about family distress, loss, and strained relationships, allowing the narrative to draw them into the character's subjective experience.

As the promotion loss issue emerges, participants begin to construct causal explanations for the woman's hostility toward migrants. They repeatedly link her anger to a threatened sense of status and personal injustice. Importantly, participants do not treat her emerging prejudice as random or as purely ideological but they describe a psychological mechanism in which personal disappointment becomes a motive leading her to group-based grievance. One participant describes this shift directly as moving "from losing the promotion to blaming immigrants" (P13). This demonstrates that video participants were actively reflecting on how personal grievance may affect personal biases and engagement with misinformation, a core counter-narrative dimension revealed in the video.

Midway through the video, when online information sources become central to the family argument, participants show some of the strongest evidence of independent critical thinking by recognising the limitations of online sources and not fact-based information. Participants also articulate vulnerability to misinformation, noting that "people of this age... who didn't grow up with computers may really believe everything that appears" (P3), while the character herself admits that "I don't have time to check if it's real" (P12). These reflections show that viewers are not simply absorbing the narrative but are engaging in meta-cognitive evaluation of how beliefs are formed through engagement with types of sources (e.g. online misinformation), reinforced (e.g., through engagement with echo-chambers) and misled by digital information environments. This type of participant reflection illustrates that video viewers are encouraged to think deeply about the role of online and social media and how it shapes citizens' beliefs thus likely contributing to the video's counter-narrative motivations.

### Conclusion: Family Tea video as a counter-narrative

Despite limitations inherent in the qualitative methodology, the think-aloud data indicate that the video does function as a counter-narrative scaffold rather than a purely didactic message as it is usually the case in other types of more traditional counter-narrative videos. Instead of telling viewers what to think about immigration or correcting their presumed misconceptions, it structures family moments that invite emotional attunement, elicits causal reasoning, questions epistemic scrutiny, and encourages perspective-taking among various actors in the narrative. Participants independently reflect on how personal loss turns into ideological blame, how online misinformation and algorithmic systems sustain and perpetuate these types of beliefs, and how prejudice might be open to questioning when it involves families. When viewers point out that "those we love are excluded from the problem" (P13) and ask "why is it different when it's family?" (P5), they are actively performing the very perspective-shifting the video aims to evoke. By the end, participants are no longer debating who is right or wrong but reflecting on fear, vulnerability, and relational damage, those dimensions that viewers may come to recognise as risk factors for engagement in extreme narratives: "she has fears inside her" (P15), "it's sad for the son" (P5). This pattern suggests that the video succeeds in stimulating independent, reflective processing of counter-narrative cues, enabling viewers to critically assess credibility and recognise bias formation.

### General Discussion

Taken together, the focus group comparison (Part 1) and the think-aloud analysis (Part 2) converge on a central finding: the SMIDGE "Family Tea" video operates less as a persuasive message and more as a **reflective scaffold** that shapes *how* viewers think rather than *what* they should think about immigration. Across the two methods (focus group and interview), participants did not primarily engage with the video as an argument about immigration policy or migrant legitimacy. Instead, they



were drawn into a narrative of family conflict, emotional distress, and personal grievance, which created space for affective attunement, causal reasoning, and epistemic reflection. This convergence across datasets strengthens confidence that the observed processes are not artefacts of a single method, but reflect a consistent pattern of engagement elicited by the SMIDGE format.

Both parts of the report show that the SMIDGE video is particularly effective at eliciting **mechanism-relevant reasoning**—including reflections on how personal loss becomes ideological blame, how misinformation ecosystems and algorithmic reinforcement sustain beliefs, and how vulnerability, fear, and relational strain can shape polarization. The think-aloud data demonstrate these processes unfolding dynamically within individual viewers, while the focus groups show how the same format supports collective discussion of verification practices, platform dynamics, and pathways into conspiratorial or extremist frames. Importantly, this mechanism advantage does not translate into evidence of attitude change. Instead, participants consistently described the video as a tool for reflection and discussion, aligning with their broader skepticism toward single-exposure persuasive interventions and reinforcing the view that counter-narratives function best when embedded in facilitated or community-based contexts.

Moreover, the integrated findings highlight clear **design vulnerabilities** that constrain the video's reach and impact. Identification with the central character was uneven, with critiques of stereotyped portrayal, dialogue naturalism, and cultural transferability limiting engagement for some viewers. National context further shaped emotional salience and interpretive frames, underscoring that narrative counter-messaging cannot assume a uniform European audience. In contrast, the UN video reliably elicited humanitarian empathy but less frequently prompted spontaneous reflection on misinformation mechanisms or belief formation. Together, these findings suggest a bounded conclusion: narrative counter-narratives like SMIDGE are most valuable not as stand-alone persuasive tools, but as **resources for guided reflection**, where emotional engagement is carefully linked to credibility, realism, and structured discussion of how beliefs form and harden in contemporary information environments.

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## APPENDIX A: Demographics Questionnaire and template

(A separate letterheaded word document can be found in the project's Teams shared space)

**Please complete the following demographic questionnaire.**

1. Gender: .....
2. Nationality: .....
3. Age: .....
4. Occupation: .....
5. Highest level of education:
  - a. None
  - b. Primary school
  - c. Secondary school

- d. University/College degree
- e. Master's degree
- f. Doctoral degree

## SMIDGE – Focus Group demographics template

**Please complete the following information based on the demographic's questionnaires from your focus groups. Please refer to the accompanying excel sheet for demographic information.**

**Organizer:**

**FG category:** General public

**Date of FG session:**

**Number of participants:**

**Gender:**

- Male participants:
- Female participants:
- Intersex:
- Not provided:

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Highest level of education:**

- None:
- Primary school:
- Secondary school:
- University/College degree:
- Master's degree:
- Doctoral degree:
- Not provided:

**Occupation listed:**

## APPENDIX B: SMIDGE – Focus Group checklist

### Before:

- ☐ Identify potential participants for evaluative focus groups (citizens 45-65 years old)
- ☐ Send list of potential participants for professionals to UCLan before organizing focus groups.
- ☐ For FG with general public, inform UCLan about your recruitment plans before organizing focus groups.

- ☐ Decide and fix an initial date for the FGs you are organizing
- ☐ Invite participants
- ☐ Provide connection instructions to participants
- ☐ Finalize the date, inform all confirmed participants. Send event links to the participants at least two days before the session
- ☐ Send by email consent form and link to demographics questionnaire to participants to complete.

### During:

- ☐ Introduce yourselves and remind the participants that the sessions will be video and audio recorded
- ☐ Provide a short and simple summary of the project, its objectives, and explain why the focus groups are important
- ☐ Facilitate the FGs as outlined in the protocol by asking the relevant questions to the participants

### After:

- ☐ Transcribe the conversations held in each FG (if you are using a transcription software, double check the validity of the results and make the necessary corrections)
- ☐ Pseudonymize all transcriptions
- ☐ Summarize each question, provide a summary of the session, and highlight key points in the transcribed documents according to the protocol instructions
- ☐ Send the transcribed documents with your summary to UCLan Cyprus by June 30<sup>th</sup> 2025
- ☐ Complete the SMIDGE Demographics Template (available in Appendix A)

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What are your immediate thoughts after watching the video?
2. What are your immediate feelings after watching the video?
3. Did the video raise any questions for you that you're still thinking about? What are these?
4. Did you find yourself reflecting on your own experiences or beliefs on the topic of the video while watching? Please elaborate.
5. How has the video affected your understanding of different perspectives on this issue?
6. How, if so, has the video changed how you might approach conversations about this topic?
7. What, if anything, might you do differently after watching this video?
8. If you were to share one insight from this video with others, what would it be?

#### Evaluating the video:

9. Would you share this video? How?
10. How effectively did the video present alternative viewpoints to extremist positions?
11. Did the video help you better understand the factors that might lead someone toward extremist thinking?
12. How could the video be more effective in promoting reflection without seeming judgmental?
13. What would make this video more shareable online or impactful for different audiences?

#### Other questions:

14. Are there any characteristics of the video that make it less or more appropriate for different age groups?
15. Are there any characteristics of the video that make it less or more appropriate for your culture?
16. If you were to explain this video and its message to a friend, what would you say about it?

**ONLY DMU, UCPH, and INEU:** Video comparison questions

17. Which video type do you think might be more effective in tackling misinformation in your age group? Why?
18. If you were to make changes in either video, what would you recommend?