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Social and Economic Disparities Between Immigrants and Natives in the UK

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Abstract

This paper examines social and economic disparities between immigrants and natives in the UK using the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study. The analysis compares foreign-born and UK-born respondents across multiple indicators of integration rather than relying on a single labour market or social measure. Social integration is captured through social networks within the UK, community involvement and a composite measure of neighbourhood embeddedness based on respondents' sense of belonging, trust, reciprocity and local attachment. Economic integration is examined through unemployment, homeownership, job security and work autonomy. Using correlated random-effect models, the paper shows that immigrants report lower neighbourhood embeddedness, weaker UK-based social networks and lower levels of community involvement than natives. Immigrants also have a higher likelihood of unemployment and lower homeownership, job security and work autonomy. Additional subgroup analysis indicates that several disparities are larger for non-white immigrants, although non-white immigrants appear more similar to natives in neighbourhood embeddedness. The findings underline the importance of treating integration as a multidimensional process in which relative advantage in one domain may coexist with disadvantage in another.

Keywords: social integration; economic integration; neighbourhood embeddedness; quality of work; community involvement

1. Introduction

The integration of immigrants is essential for a socially cohesive and economically progressive society [1,2]. It is also a central concern in UK government policy on immigration and inclusive communities [3]. This study examines the social and economic integration of immigrants in the UK. Integration is defined as the extent to which immigrants achieve social and economic outcomes comparable to those of natives [4–6]. The central contribution of this study is to examine social and economic integration jointly across multiple indicators, including neighbourhood embeddedness, wider social networks, community involvement, unemployment, homeownership and job quality. This multidimensional approach provides a broader account of immigrant–native disparities than analyses based on a single social or labour market outcome.

The literature to date focuses on either social integration or economic integration [7–9] and is often limited to measuring these domains through only one aspect of immigrants' experience in the host country. Earlier studies examined immigrants' social networks

Check for updates

Academic Editor: Mansha Parven Mirza

Received: 29 May 2026
Revised: 3 August 2026
Accepted: 5 August 2026
Published: 13 August 2026

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beyond the immediate neighbourhood, including relationships with co-ethnic communities and members of the wider host society. Remennick [10], for example, considered social integration through immigrants' engagement with both co-ethnic and host society networks. This approach provides valuable evidence on immigrants' wider social connections but does not directly capture their experiences of belonging, trust, reciprocity and interaction within the neighbourhoods in which they live. More recent studies have therefore placed greater emphasis on neighbourhood attachment, recognising that much of everyday social life takes place close to where people live [11–15]. Some studies depart from conventionally used social network measures and consider community involvement because it reflects immigrants' exposure to, and ability to engage with, the host country's culture, societal norms and values [16,17]. Commonly used measures of community involvement include volunteering and charitable behaviour [18–20].

To examine economic integration, most researchers focus on the degree of unemployment/employment [8,21–23], whereas some use homeownership because it represents long-term economic stability and a financial commitment to a relatively fixed asset [24–26]. A much less studied aspect of economic integration is the quality of work, such as job security and work autonomy, which may influence immigrants' economic situation. Low-quality jobs, as characterised by a high risk of job loss and lack of control over various decisions within the job, are linked to lower levels of income and productivity [27,28]. Such low-quality work is more prevalent amongst immigrants because they are likely to take on jobs that natives might not be willing to do [29–31]. Quality of work is an important dimension of immigrants' quality of life as a high risk of job loss and low work autonomy can reduce the bargaining power of workers, often resulting in a reduction in wages, lower worker productivity and eventually lower economic integration besides being employed [32,33]. However, empirical evidence on the differences in measures of job quality among immigrants and natives is limited. Given that the average worker spends a substantial proportion of weekdays at work, this limitation is too significant to ignore in the context of the economic integration of immigrants. Research shows that the degree of social and economic integration can vary significantly across white and non-white ethnic groups, where non-white immigrants tend to fare worse than natives due to language, education and discrimination due to ethnic prejudices [15,21,34–36].

Integration is a multidimensional process [37,38] and the use of a single measure can provide a narrow, and potentially misleading, account of immigrants' incorporation into the host society. A clear gap therefore remains for a study that simultaneously examines several dimensions of social and economic integration. This paper addresses that gap.

The paper makes four contributions. First, it develops a multidimensional account of integration by examining social and economic outcomes together, with natives used as the benchmark group. This approach avoids reducing integration to employment status alone and allows the analysis to capture differences across local belonging, wider social networks, civic participation, homeownership and job quality.

Second, the paper introduces a composite measure of neighbourhood embeddedness that captures not only local interaction but also belonging, perceived similarity, trust, reciprocity and attachment to place. This extends existing work that often relies on broader friendship networks or single indicators of social contact.

Third, the paper examines ethnic heterogeneity within the immigrant population by distinguishing between white and non-white immigrants. This is important because aggregate immigrant–native comparisons can conceal substantial variation in the experience of integration.

Fourth, the paper uses panel data and a correlated random-effect specification to account more carefully for time-invariant unobserved individual heterogeneity than would

be possible in a single cross-section. The estimates are interpreted as adjusted associations rather than causal effects.

The findings show that immigrants report lower neighbourhood embeddedness and are less likely than natives to have UK-based social networks, volunteer or engage in charitable behaviour. Significant differences are also observed across the indicators of economic integration: immigrants are more likely to be unemployed and less likely to be homeowners than natives. Among employed respondents, immigrants are less likely to report secure jobs and have lower work autonomy. In most cases, immigrant–native disparities are larger for non-white immigrants than for white immigrants. Overall, the paper provides new evidence on the nature and extent of immigrants' social and economic integration in the UK.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the data source, analytical sample, measures of social and economic integration, and data harmonisation. Section 3 explains the correlated random-effect framework used to estimate adjusted differences between immigrants and natives. Section 4 presents the descriptive statistics and regression results for social and economic integration, including separate estimates for white and non-white immigrants. Section 5 interprets the findings in relation to the existing literature, considers their implications and discusses the limitations of the analysis. Section 6 summarises the principal findings and their implications for research and policy.

2. Materials and Methods

This section describes the data, analytical sample, construction of the immigrant and ethnic group categories, and the measures used to capture the social and economic dimensions of integration.

2.1. Data Source and Sample

The analysis uses the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), a nationally representative household and individual-level panel survey. The survey began in 2009 and follows approximately 40,000 households across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The dataset is organised into waves, with each wave covering two to three overlapping years. The UKHLS is particularly suitable for this study because it combines a large general population sample with ethnic minority and immigrant ethnic minority boost samples, and it includes detailed information on respondents' social relationships, neighbourhood experiences, labour market status, housing tenure and job characteristics. The analysis uses waves 2 (2010–2012) and 6 (2014–2016), with limited harmonisation from wave 3 for variables that are not observed in wave 2, as described below. Immigrant status is defined using country of birth, with respondents born outside the UK classified as immigrants and those born in the UK classified as natives. Ethnicity is identified separately using the UKHLS-derived ethnic group variable, which records respondents' self-reported ethnic group. Immigrant status is defined by country of birth and is therefore conceptually distinct from ethnic identity. Consequently, respondents born outside the UK may identify as White British, English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish. Within the immigrant sample, the white category includes these respondents, together with those identifying as White Irish, White Gypsy or Irish Traveller, or any other White background. The non-white category includes respondents identifying with mixed, Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British, Arab, or other ethnic groups. All UK-born respondents remain within the native benchmark regardless of ethnicity. Thus, UK-born ethnic minority respondents are not excluded from the native group. White immigrants and non-white immigrants are compared separately with this same UK-born benchmark. This allows the analysis to examine whether the magnitude of immigrant–native differences varies between the two

immigrant ethnic groups across the selected social and economic outcomes. It does not assume that either group is consistently more similar to natives, as the pattern may differ across domains.

This binary distinction provides a parsimonious assessment of broad ethnic heterogeneity within the immigrant population. However, the classification does not itself capture differences in language, educational background, legal status, migration route or specific country of origin. Educational attainment is included separately among the control variables, but the remaining dimensions cannot be examined comprehensively within the present analytical design. The subgroup estimates are therefore interpreted cautiously and are not intended to represent the full diversity of immigrant experiences.

2.2. Measures of Social Integration

This section describes the indicators used to examine social integration. These measures are selected in line with the literature discussed in Section 1.

2.2.1. Neighbourhood Embeddedness and Factor Analysis

To study social integration, the analysis uses data on individuals' experiences within their neighbourhoods. Social relationships at the neighbourhood level are important because many everyday interactions take place around one's place of residence [11,12,38]. The first measure of social integration is neighbourhood embeddedness, based on six items from the UKHLS neighbourhood module. Respondents were asked to report their level of agreement or disagreement, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with statements designed to capture their integration into different aspects of neighbourhood life. These include regular interaction with neighbours, the perceived importance of neighbourhood friendships, ease of borrowing items and exchanging favours, willingness to seek advice from neighbours, sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and perceived similarity to others in the neighbourhood. Exploratory factor analysis is used to reduce the six items to a single latent construct reflecting a psychological sense of embeddedness within the neighbourhood. This construct is then used as a proxy for neighbourhood-level social integration.

We begin the factor analysis with several tests to determine whether respondents' answers to the six question items are suitable for this approach. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is 0.88, indicating a high degree of common variance and supporting the use of factor analysis [39]. Bartlett's test of sphericity is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming adequate intercorrelations between the question items. We then conduct exploratory factor analysis on the six question items using a polychoric correlation matrix, which accounts for the ordinal nature of the observed variables. The result is a single factor with an eigenvalue greater than one, which is retained for further analysis.

The question statements and associated factor loadings are presented in Table 1. The two statements that attracted the highest factor loadings are 'I feel like I belong to the neighbourhood' and 'I think of myself as similar to others in the neighbourhood'. The higher a respondent's score on the factor variable, the higher their overall level of agreement with the statements that make up that factor labelled as neighbourhood embeddedness. We tested scale reliability and found a high degree of consistency in responses to the question items used to derive the measure of the neighbourhood embeddedness as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 (this is a measure of how closely related the six question items are as a group).

Table 1. Question statements that constitute our measure of neighbourhood embeddedness.

Question Statements	Loadings
I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood	0.70
I think of myself as similar to the people that live in this neighbourhood	0.64
The friends and associations in my neighbourhood mean a lot to me	0.62
I regularly stop and talk with people in my neighbourhood	0.60
If I needed advice about something, I could go to someone in my neighbourhood	0.58
I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours	0.47

We maintain that our analysis at the neighbourhood level is unique as, in addition to social interactions at the neighbourhood level, we also take into account factors such as immigrants' feelings of belongingness (feel similar and belong to the neighbourhood) and the sense of reciprocity and trust (as reflected by the questions related to advice available from neighbours and the ability to borrow and exchange favours with others). Hewstone [40] suggests this approach, arguing for the inclusion of 'meaningful social contacts' rather than mere superficial interactions when studying social integration. He maintains that, in meaningful social relationships, people get to know each other well enough to move beyond superficial interactions and develop feelings of trust and reciprocity.

A limitation of the approach to studying social integration at the neighbourhood level is that ethnic minorities and immigrants are usually drawn to co-ethnic neighbourhoods [41,42], which can sometimes introduce bias in the results. Given the absence of appropriate data to control for neighbourhood composition, we supplement our analysis for social integration with alternative measures, including social network size, volunteering and charitable behaviour.

2.2.2. Social Networks Within the UK

The variables used to capture social networks within the UK are based on questions asking respondents to select how far their first, second and third friend lives given the following options: (1) less than one mile, (2) less than five miles, (3) between five and fifty miles, (4) over fifty miles but still within the UK and (5) this friend lives in another country. For interpretation and use, we generated a binary indicator equal to 1 for respondents whose first, second or third friend falls within categories 1 to 4, and 0 for respondents who report no friends or whose reported friends fall only within category 5. We interchangeably use the words social networks and social networks within the UK.

2.2.3. Community Involvement

We capture the community involvement of individuals through volunteering and charitable behaviour. In relation to volunteering, respondents are asked the following: "In the last 12 months, have you given any unpaid help or worked as a volunteer for any type of local, national or international organisation or charity?". To capture charitable behaviour, respondents are asked the following: "In the last 12 months, have you donated any money to charities or other organisations?" For interpretation and use, we construct dummy variables, which are equal to '1' for 'Yes' for volunteering and charitable behaviour and '0' for 'No'.

2.3. Measures of Economic Integration

This section describes the indicators used to examine economic integration, in line with the literature discussed in Section 1.

2.3.1. Employment Status

The variable for employment status is available in all waves of the dataset. It is based on the following question: "Which of these best describes your current economic situation: unemployed, self-employed, paid employment (full time/part time), retired, on maternity leave, family care or home, full-time student, long-term sick or disabled, Govt training scheme, unpaid, family business, on apprenticeship and doing something else?"

We generate a variable with three categories for ease of interpretation and use. The first category, labelled 'employed', includes paid employment, self-employment, or maternity leave. The second category is labelled 'unemployed' and consists of unemployed individuals. The third category is labelled 'outside the labour market' and includes the retired, full-time students and the long-term sick or disabled. While we can compare immigrants and natives across all the economic categories, strictly from an economic integration perspective, we are more interested in unemployed individuals. Therefore, we use a dummy that takes the value '1' for the unemployed and '0' for the remaining categories.

2.3.2. Homeownership

Our measure of homeownership is based on the following question: "Does your household own this accommodation, or is it rented?" (select from the following options: owned outright, owned on mortgage/shared ownership, rented, rent-free). This variable is available in all waves. We generate a dummy variable for ease of interpretation and use, which takes the value of 1 for categories 'owned outright' or 'owned on mortgage/shared ownership' and 0 otherwise.

2.3.3. Job Quality

We consider the quality of work in terms of job security and work autonomy. The question pertaining to job security asks the respondents the following question: "Think about your employment prospects over the next 12 months: thinking about losing your job by being sacked, laid off, made redundant, or not having your contract renewed, how likely do you think it is that you will lose your job during the next 12 months?" (options: 1 = very likely, 2 = likely, 3 = unlikely and 4= very unlikely). We generate a dummy variable for job security for ease of interpretation and use, which equals '1' for 'unlikely and very unlikely to lose job' and '0' otherwise.

To capture work autonomy, respondents are asked five questions: "In your current job, how much influence do you have over: what tasks you do in your job, the pace at which you work, how you do your work, the order in which you carry out tasks, and the time you start or finish your working day?" (options: 1 = none, 2 = a little, 3 = some, 4 = a lot). We generate a composite variable labelled "work autonomy" by summing the responses to each of the five questions. The resultant outcome variable ranges from 5 to 20, where 5 implies low work autonomy, and 20 implies high work autonomy. The five items demonstrate good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83.

2.4. Control Variables

Socio-demographic controls include a female dummy variable, coded as 1 for women and 0 for men; marital status, coded as unmarried, married or divorced; educational qualifications, coded as degree or higher degree, no qualifications, GCSE/lower qualifications and A-levels; and a good health indicator, coded as 1 for respondents with no long-term illness or disability and 0 otherwise. The models also include household size, number of children, age and logged net monthly household income. Household income is logged to facilitate interpretation in approximate percentage terms and to reduce the influence of skewness in the income distribution. An additional control for occupational class is included in the

regressions for job quality outcomes, which are estimated only for employed respondents. Occupational class is measured using the three-class National Statistics Socio-economic Classification provided in Understanding Society. This occupation-based classification groups respondents into managerial and professional occupations, intermediate occupations, and routine occupations. Managerial and professional occupations form the reference category in the regression analysis[1].

2.5. Data Harmonisation

Most dependent and independent variables are available in waves 2 and 6. However, neighbourhood embeddedness and social networks within the UK are observed in waves 3 and 6 rather than waves 2 and 6. Using only directly observed values for these measures would restrict the analysis to wave 6 and would prevent the use of a consistent two-wave panel sample across all outcomes. To retain a common analytical structure, the wave 3 values for neighbourhood embeddedness and UK-based social networks are carried back to wave 2 for the same respondent. This harmonisation is applied only to these two measures and only where the corresponding wave 2 values are unavailable.

The approach is pragmatic and transparent. The two measures capture relatively stable aspects of respondents' local and wider social relationships over a short interval, and the adjustment allows the paper to estimate comparable models across the social and economic integration indicators. Nevertheless, the procedure is a limitation because it assumes stability between waves 2 and 3. The findings should therefore be interpreted as adjusted associations rather than causal estimates.

To assess whether this harmonisation decision affects the findings, two robustness checks were conducted. First, the analysis was repeated using only directly observed wave 6 measures. Second, the stability and consistency of the relevant measures were examined across observed waves where comparable information was available. Across these checks, the direction and substantive interpretation of the main findings remained consistent. This supports the robustness of the empirical approach and suggests that the central conclusions are not driven by the harmonisation strategy. Detailed results from these robustness checks are reported in Appendix A, Table A1.

3. Methods of Analysis

This section explains the empirical strategy used to estimate adjusted differences between immigrants and natives across the social and economic integration outcomes.

Following previous studies that examine immigrants' social and economic integration relative to natives [4,5], the analysis uses an immigrant dummy as the main variable of interest. A statistically significant coefficient for the immigrant dummy is interpreted as evidence of a difference between immigrants and natives in the relevant social or economic integration indicator. To examine these gaps, the analysis estimates the following multivariate regression model:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 immigrant_i + \boldsymbol{X_{it}\alpha_2} + \delta_t + \mu_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} represents the dependent variables, including neighbourhood embeddedness, social networks within the UK, volunteering, charitable behaviour, unemployment, job security, work autonomy and homeownership for individual i in wave t; $immigrant_i$ is a dummy variable which enables us to study the differences in social and economic integration between immigrants and natives; $\boldsymbol{X_{it}}$ is a vector of demographic controls. Wave dummies are included to account for unobserved heterogeneity arising from macroeconomic influences that may affect people similarly in each year. The composite error term

consists of unobserved individual effects and the idiosyncratic error term. Robust standard errors are estimated.

The panel structure of the UKHLS is useful because it provides repeated observations for the same individuals. This allows the analysis to move beyond a single cross-sectional comparison and to account more carefully for stable unobserved individual characteristics. Such characteristics may include reporting style, personality, cultural orientation or other time-invariant factors that could influence how respondents assess their neighbourhood relationships, social networks, labour market position or job quality.

The analysis uses a correlated random-effect specification following Mundlak [43]. This approach is appropriate because immigrant status is time-invariant in the analysis. A standard fixed-effect model would remove all time-invariant individual characteristics, but it would also absorb the immigrant dummy and therefore prevent direct estimation of immigrant–native differences. A standard random-effect model would retain the immigrant coefficient but would require the stronger assumption that unobserved individual effects are uncorrelated with the explanatory variables. This assumption is unlikely to be fully plausible in this context, since stable individual characteristics may be associated both with immigrant status and with social or economic integration outcomes. The correlated random-effect approach offers a suitable compromise. It retains the immigrant status coefficient while allowing unobserved individual effects to be correlated with observed time-varying covariates. This is implemented by including the person-specific means of time-varying explanatory variables in the regression model. In this way, the model adjusts for part of the time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity that may otherwise bias the estimated immigrant–native differences.

Equation (1) is estimated using correlated random-effect models for continuous outcomes and correlated random-effect logit models for binary outcomes. For binary dependent variables, the results are reported as marginal effects to facilitate interpretation in percentage point terms. Robust standard errors are estimated to account for heteroskedasticity. The estimates should be interpreted as adjusted associations rather than causal effects, since the models cannot rule out reverse causality, omitted time-varying factors or measurement errors. All statistical analyses were conducted using Stata 18 (StataCorp LLC, College Station, TX, USA).

4. Results

This section presents empirical findings in a staged manner. It begins with descriptive statistics for natives and immigrants to show the unadjusted profile of the analytical sample. It then reports regression-adjusted immigrant–native differences across the social integration indicators, followed by the corresponding results for economic integration. The results are presented first for immigrants as a whole and then separately for white and non-white immigrants, with natives as the reference group. Interpretation of the wider mechanisms and implications is reserved for the Section 5.

4.1. Summary Statistics

The descriptive analysis provides an initial account of how immigrants and natives differ across demographic characteristics and the selected indicators of social and economic integration. Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics for natives and immigrants. The analytical sample comprises 12 per cent immigrants and 88 per cent natives. The gender composition is very similar across the two groups, with women accounting for 56 per cent of natives and 57 per cent of immigrants. Immigrants are more likely to be married than natives, at 69 per cent compared with 64 per cent, and are, on average, four years younger. They also live in larger households, with an average household size of 3.32 compared

with 2.77 among natives. The mean number of children is also higher among immigrants, at 0.79 compared with 0.45 among natives. Average net monthly household income is broadly similar across the two groups, at £3816 for immigrants and £3781 for natives. Educational attainment differs more clearly between the two groups. Forty-nine per cent of immigrants have degree-level or higher qualifications, compared with 35 per cent of natives. Immigrants are also more likely to report being in good health, with 73 per cent reporting no long-term illness or disability compared with 64 per cent of natives. Among employed respondents, immigrants are slightly more likely to be in the routine occupational class, at 42 per cent compared with 39 per cent among natives. The share in the management and professional occupational class is broadly similar, at 44 per cent for immigrants and 45 per cent for natives.

The social integration indicators show that immigrants report lower levels of neighbourhood embeddedness, with a mean score of 3.30 compared with 3.36 among natives. They are also less likely to report having social networks within the UK, at 0.88 compared with 0.96 among natives. Community involvement is lower among immigrants, with 19 per cent reporting volunteering compared with 21 per cent of natives, and 65 per cent reporting charitable behaviour compared with 73 per cent of natives. These differences are statistically significant.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

		Natives	Immigrants	Native Minus Immigrant Difference
Female		56%	57%	
Relationship status				
	Unmarried	29%	25%	
	Married	64%	69%	
	Divorced	7%	6%	
Household size (1–16)		2.77	3.32	
Number of children (0–8)		0.45	0.79	
Mean age		49	45	
Education				
	No qualifications	12%	12%	
	GCSE/lower	31%	22%	
	A-level	22%	17%	
	High degree	35%	49%	
Healthy		64%	73%	
Net monthly household income		3781	3816	
Social integration				
	Neighbourhood embeddedness	3.36	3.30	0.06 ***
	Social networks within the UK	0.96	0.88	0.08 ***
Community involvement				
	Volunteering	0.21	0.19	0.02 ***
	Charitable behaviour	0.73	0.65	0.08 ***
Economic integration				
	Homeownership	0.75	0.60	0.15 ***
Employment status				
	Employed	57%	59%	
	Unemployed	4%	6%	
	Outside labour market	39%	35%	

Table 2. *Cont.*

		Natives	Immigrants	Native Minus Immigrant Difference
Observations (waves 2, 6)		61,059	7990	
Number of individuals		39,408	5536	
Quality of work				
	Job security	0.91	0.88	0.03 ***
	Work autonomy (5–20)	14.89	14.48	0.41 ***
Occupational class				
	Routine	39%	42%	
	Intermediate	16%	14%	
	Management and professional	45%	44%	
Observations (wave 2, 6)		29,843	3842	
Number of individuals		21,025	2822	

*** denotes statistical significance at the 1 per cent level.

The economic integration indicators also show several unadjusted differences between immigrants and natives. Immigrants have a lower rate of homeownership, at 60 per cent compared with 75 per cent among natives. They are slightly more likely to be employed, at 59 per cent compared with 57 per cent, but also have a higher unemployment rate, at 6 per cent compared with 4 per cent. A smaller proportion of immigrants are outside the labour market, at 35 per cent compared with 39 per cent among natives. Among employed respondents, immigrants report slightly lower job security, at 0.88 compared with 0.91 among natives, and lower work autonomy, with a mean score of 14.48 compared with 14.89. Overall, the descriptive statistics suggest that immigrants have relatively strong educational attainment and similar average household income but experience lower levels of several social and economic integration outcomes, particularly UK-based social networks, charitable behaviour, homeownership, job security and work autonomy.

The regression analysis estimates Equation (1) for each indicator of social and economic integration. The main independent variable is the immigrant dummy, with natives serving as the reference group. To examine heterogeneity within the immigrant population, additional models distinguish between white and non-white immigrants, again using natives as the reference group. For binary outcomes, the reported estimates are marginal effects. For continuous outcomes, standardised coefficients are also reported to facilitate comparison across indicators.

4.2. Comparing Social Integration of Immigrants and Natives

This section reports regression-adjusted differences in social integration between immigrants and natives. Social integration is measured using neighbourhood embeddedness, social networks within the UK, and community involvement, captured through volunteering and charitable behaviour.

4.2.1. Neighbourhood Embeddedness

Table 3 reports the regression results for the social integration indicators. Column 1 shows that immigrants have, on average, 0.03 points lower neighbourhood embeddedness than natives. This corresponds to approximately 4% of the standard deviation of the variable.

Table 3. Differences in social integration between immigrants and natives (correlated random-effect model).

	Neighbourhood Embeddedness	Social Networks in the UK	Volunteering	Charitable Behaviour
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
A. Immigrants–Natives (ref.)				
Immigrants	−0.034 ***	−0.032 ***	−0.024 ***	−0.079 ***
	(0.010)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.007)
Standardised coefficient	−0.043 ***			
	(0.012)			
B. Immigrants by Ethnic Group—Natives (ref.)				
Non-white immigrants	−0.010	−0.033 ***	−0.037 ***	−0.087 ***
	(0.012)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.009)
Standardised coefficient	−0.013			
	(0.015)			
White immigrants	−0.078 ***	−0.029 ***	0.002	−0.066 ***
	(0.016)	(0.004)	(0.008)	(0.011)
Standardised coefficient	−0.099 ***			
	(0.020)			
Socio-demographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Means of time-varying variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	69,049	69,049	69,049	69,049
Number of persons	44,944	44,944	44,944	44,944

Notes: The table presents marginal effects obtained from correlated random-effect logit models in columns 2, 3 and 4. Panels A and B provide results from separate regressions. Full estimates are available from the corresponding author upon request. The socio-demographic variables include gender, age, marital status, health, education, household income, household size and number of children. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** denotes statistical significance at the 1 per cent level.

Panel B shows that this average difference is not uniform across immigrant groups. Non-white immigrants do not differ significantly from natives in neighbourhood embeddedness. By contrast, white immigrants have 0.08 points lower neighbourhood embeddedness than natives, equivalent to around 10% of a standard deviation.

4.2.2. Social Networks Within the UK

Column 2 reports the results for social networks within the UK. Immigrants are, on average, 3 percentage points less likely than natives to report having social networks within the UK. The estimates by ethnic group show a similar pattern: both non-white and white immigrants are 3 percentage points less likely than natives to have social networks within the UK.

4.2.3. Community Involvement

Columns 3 and 4 report the results for community involvement. Immigrants have a 2-percentage-point lower probability of volunteering and an 8-percentage-point lower probability of charitable behaviour than natives. Relative to the sample averages for volunteering and charitable behaviour, these estimates correspond to immigrants being approximately 10% less likely to volunteer and having an 11% lower probability of giving to charity.

Panel B shows that non-white immigrants have a 4-percentage-point lower probability of volunteering and a 9-percentage-point lower probability of charitable behaviour

compared with natives. White immigrants do not differ significantly from natives in volunteering, but they are 7 percentage points less likely to engage in charitable behaviour.

In summary, Table 3 shows statistically significant immigrant–native differences across several social integration indicators. The estimates differ by ethnic group, with non-white immigrants showing larger adjusted differences for volunteering and charitable behaviour, while white immigrants show the larger adjusted difference in neighbourhood embeddedness.

4.3. Comparing Economic Integration of Immigrants and Natives

This section reports regression-adjusted differences in economic integration between immigrants and natives. Economic integration is measured using unemployment, homeownership and job quality, with job quality captured through job security and work autonomy.

4.3.1. Employment Status

Table 4 presents the results for economic integration. Column 1 shows that immigrants have a 0.5-percentage-point higher probability of being unemployed than natives. Relative to the average unemployment rate of 4% in the full sample, this corresponds to an approximately 12.5% higher probability of unemployment. Panel B shows that this difference is concentrated among non-white immigrants, who have a 0.7-percentage-point higher probability of unemployment than natives. The estimate for white immigrants is not statistically significant.

Table 4. Differences in economic integration between immigrants and natives.

	Unemployment	**Homeownership**	**Job Security**	**Work Autonomy**
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
	A. Immigrants–Natives (ref.)			
Immigrants	0.005 **	−0.179 **	−0.021 ***	−0.373 ***
	(0.002)	(0.071)	(0.005)	(0.075)
Standardised coefficient				−0.091 ***
				(0.018)
	B. Immigrants by Ethnic Group—Natives (ref.)			
Non-white immigrants	0.007 ***	−0.203 **	−0.025 ***	−0.538 ***
	(0.002)	(0.094)	(0.006)	(0.096)
Standardised coefficient				−0.132 ***
				(0.024)
White immigrants	0.001	−0.140 ***	−0.016 **	−0.115
	(0.003)	(0.027)	(0.007)	(0.109)
Standardised coefficient				−0.028
				(0.027)
Socio-demographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Means of time-varying variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	69,049	69,049	33,489	33,489
Number of individuals	44,944	44,944	23,715	23,715

Notes: The table presents marginal effects obtained from correlated random-effect logit models in columns 1, 2 and 3. Work autonomy is a continuous variable, and column 4 reports coefficients from a correlated random-effect model. Panels A and B provide results from separate regressions. Full estimates are available from the corresponding author upon request. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** and ** denote statistical significance at the 1 and 5 per cent levels, respectively.

4.3.2. Homeownership

Column 2 shows that immigrants have an 18-percentage-point lower likelihood of homeownership than natives. This difference corresponds to approximately 25% of the average homeownership rate in the sample.

Panel B shows that both non-white and white immigrants have lower homeownership than natives. Non-white immigrants are 20 percentage points less likely to be homeowners, while white immigrants are 14 percentage points less likely to be homeowners.

4.3.3. Job Quality

Columns 3 and 4 report the results for job quality among employed respondents. Immigrants have a 2-percentage-point lower probability of reporting job security and 0.37 points lower work autonomy than natives, equivalent to approximately 9% of a standard deviation for work autonomy. Panel B shows that white immigrants have 2 percentage points lower job security than natives but do not differ significantly from natives in work autonomy. Non-white immigrants have 3 percentage points lower job security and 0.54 points lower work autonomy than natives, corresponding to 13% of a standard deviation for work autonomy.

In summary, Table 4 shows statistically significant immigrant–native differences in unemployment, homeownership, job security and work autonomy. The subgroup estimates indicate larger adjusted disadvantages for non-white immigrants across unemployment, homeownership, job security and work autonomy, while white immigrants differ significantly from natives in homeownership and job security.

5. Discussion

This study examined social and economic disparities between immigrants and natives in the UK and assessed whether these differences vary by immigrant ethnicity. Its central contribution is to conceptualise integration as a multidimensional process rather than as a single labour market, housing or social outcome. The findings show that immigrant–native differences are not uniform across domains: relative similarity on one indicator can coexist with substantial disadvantage on another. This is important because empirical and policy assessments based only on employment, or only on social contact, may understate the uneven nature of immigrant integration.

The social integration results demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between neighbourhood embeddedness, wider social networks and community involvement. Immigrants report lower neighbourhood embeddedness overall, although this average difference is primarily driven by white immigrants. Non-white immigrants do not differ significantly from natives on this measure. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that immigrants and ethnic minority groups may develop close local networks in neighbourhoods with a greater presence of co-ethnic residents, where residential proximity can facilitate regular interaction, mutual support and a stronger sense of belonging [11–13,15]. However, the present data do not identify the ethnic composition of respondents' neighbourhoods or local relationships. It is therefore not possible to determine whether neighbourhood embeddedness reflects relationships with co-ethnic residents, natives, or both. The finding should consequently be interpreted as evidence of local belonging, trust, reciprocity and interaction rather than as direct evidence of integration into wider host society networks.

The findings for UK-based social networks capture a different aspect of social integration. Immigrants are less likely than natives to report that at least one of their three closest friends lives within the UK. The measure records the geographical location of close friends rather than their ethnicity and therefore cannot identify co-ethnic friendships or co-ethnic neighbourhoods. A value of zero indicates either that the reported close friends live outside the UK or that no friends were reported across the three friendship measures. The result should therefore be interpreted only as evidence that immigrants are less likely than natives to report close friendship connections located within the UK. This differs

from the broader social network approach illustrated by Remennick [10], which considers immigrants' engagement with co-ethnic and host society networks.

Immigrants are also less likely than natives to volunteer or donate to charity. These activities are commonly used as indicators of community involvement and engagement with the host country's culture, societal norms and values [16–20]. The results therefore indicate lower participation by immigrants in the particular forms of formal community involvement captured by the survey. They should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that immigrants have lower community engagement in every respect, since informal participation and activities not measured by the survey are outside the scope of the analysis.

Taken together, the findings show that neighbourhood embeddedness, UK-based friendship networks and community involvement capture related but distinct aspects of social integration. This supports the broader argument that integration is multidimensional and cannot be adequately represented by a single social indicator [37,38].

The economic findings show that immigrant–native disparities extend beyond access to employment. Immigrants have a higher likelihood of unemployment than natives, consistent with previous research identifying persistent differences in labour market outcomes between immigrant and native populations [8,21–23]. The subgroup results indicate that this difference is concentrated among non-white immigrants, reinforcing the importance of examining ethnic heterogeneity rather than relying solely on an aggregate immigrant category.

Immigrants are also substantially less likely than natives to own their homes. Previous studies have treated homeownership as an important indicator of economic integration because it reflects longer term financial stability and commitment to a relatively fixed asset [24–26]. The lower likelihood of homeownership among both white and non-white immigrants therefore suggests that economic disparities persist beyond current employment and income. However, the present analysis does not identify the specific mechanisms underlying this difference, such as duration of residence, access to credit, housing preferences or local housing market conditions.

The job quality findings further demonstrate that employment status alone provides an incomplete account of economic integration. Employed immigrants report lower job security and lower work autonomy than natives. Previous research links job insecurity and limited autonomy to weaker bargaining power, poorer health and wellbeing, and less favourable economic outcomes, while also showing that immigrants may be disproportionately represented in lower quality or more precarious forms of work [27–29,31–33,44]. The subgroup estimates show that disadvantages in work autonomy are concentrated among non-white immigrants, whereas both white and non-white immigrants report lower job security than natives. This pattern suggests that ethnic differences in economic integration concern not only whether individuals are employed, but also the quality and degree of control associated with their employment.

Overall, the economic results indicate that integration should be assessed through multiple dimensions, including labour market access, homeownership and job quality. The larger disadvantages observed among non-white immigrants across several outcomes are consistent with earlier evidence that language barriers, unequal educational returns and ethnic discrimination may contribute to differences in immigrant economic outcomes [21,34–36]. These mechanisms are not tested directly in the present analysis, and the findings should therefore be interpreted as adjusted associations rather than evidence of specific causal processes.

The findings have several policy implications. Policies aimed at integration should not be limited to employment entry alone. Labour market inclusion also requires attention to the quality and security of work, progression opportunities, recognition of overseas

qualifications and the conditions under which immigrants are able to exercise autonomy at work. Similarly, social integration policy should recognise that local belonging, friendship networks and civic participation are related but distinct dimensions. Programmes that support neighbourhood interaction, volunteering, language development, anti-discrimination practice and inclusive local institutions may therefore play complementary roles. The results also suggest that interventions should be sensitive to ethnic heterogeneity rather than assuming that a single policy approach will address the experiences of all immigrant groups equally.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the analysis is associational and should not be interpreted as causal evidence. Although the correlated random-effect specification accounts for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity through the inclusion of individual means of time-varying covariates, unobserved time-varying factors may still influence the estimates. Second, the harmonisation of wave 3 values to wave 2 for neighbourhood embeddedness and UK-based social networks is a practical response to data availability, but it assumes relative stability in these measures over a short period. Third, the analysis cannot observe neighbourhood ethnic composition or identify whether social ties are with natives, co-ethnic immigrants or other groups. Fourth, the white and non-white immigrant categories remain broad and may conceal important differences by country of origin, migration route, legal status, generation, religion, language and length of residence.

Future research could extend this analysis in several ways. More detailed neighbourhood data would make it possible to distinguish between bonding and bridging social ties and to assess whether neighbourhood embeddedness facilitates wider social and economic integration. Further work could also examine differences by country of origin, migration cohort, duration of residence and generation. In addition, future studies could use longer panels or stronger identification strategies where suitable data permit, particularly to examine whether improvements in social integration precede improvements in economic outcomes, or whether economic security enables greater social participation.

6. Conclusions

This paper shows that immigrant integration in the UK is uneven across social and economic domains and differs between white and non-white immigrant groups. Immigrants are less likely than natives to report UK-based friendship networks, volunteering, charitable behaviour, homeownership, job security and work autonomy, and they have a higher likelihood of unemployment. However, these disparities are not uniform. White immigrants show the larger disadvantage in neighbourhood embeddedness, while non-white immigrants are more similar to natives on this measure. By contrast, non-white immigrants experience larger disadvantages across volunteering, unemployment, homeownership, job security and work autonomy. White immigrants are more similar to natives in volunteering, unemployment and work autonomy, although they remain less likely to own their homes and report secure employment.

These findings reinforce the value of examining integration as a multidimensional process. Neighbourhood belonging, wider friendship networks, community participation, labour market access, homeownership and job quality capture related but distinct aspects of immigrant incorporation. Relative similarity to natives in one domain may therefore coexist with substantial disadvantage in another.

The results also highlight the importance of recognising heterogeneity within the immigrant population. Policies concerned with integration should not treat immigrants as a single group or rely on employment status alone as evidence of successful economic integration. Greater attention needs to be given to the quality and security of work,

access to housing and the distinct forms of social participation available to different immigrant groups.

Author Contributions: F.A.: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Software, Empirical Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing—Original draft (main author). J.S.: Supervision, Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing—review and editing. D.S.: Supervision, Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing—review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not required for this study because it involved secondary analysis of anonymised Understanding Society data and no new data were collected from human participants. The University of Essex Ethics Committee approved all data collection for the Understanding Society main study.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The Understanding Society End User Licence dataset is available to registered users through the UK Data Service.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Data Harmonisation and Robustness Checks for the Harmonised Social Integration Measures

Table A1. Robustness of estimated differences in social integration using directly observed wave 3 and wave 6 data.

	Neighbourhood Embeddedness		**Social Networks in the UK**	
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
	Wave 6 Only	**Wave 3 and 6**	**Wave 6 Only**	**Wave 3 and 6**
	A. Immigrants–Natives (ref.)			
Immigrants (robust)	−0.035 ***	−0.036 ***	−0.039 ***	−0.035 ***
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.003)	(0.003)
	B. Immigrants by Ethnic Group—Natives (ref.)			
Non-white immigrants	−0.008	−0.007	−0.034 ***	−0.033 ***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.003)	(0.003)
White immigrants	−0.080 ***	−0.088 ***	−0.029 ***	−0.030 ***
	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Socio-demographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Means of time-varying variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave dummies	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	33,522	35,357	33,522	35,357
Number of persons	33,522	34,267	33,522	34,267

Notes: The table presents estimates using directly observed measures. Columns 1 and 3 use wave 6 data, while columns 2 and 4 use waves 3 and 6. Columns 1 and 2 report ordinary least squares estimates. Columns 3 and 4 report average marginal effects from logit models. Panels A and B are estimated separately, with natives as the reference category. All models include socio-demographic controls and individual means of time-varying covariates. A common estimation sample is imposed across the two outcomes within each specification to ensure comparability. Columns 1 and 3 use respondents in the common wave 6 sample, while columns 2 and 4 use observations from the common waves 3 and 6 sample. Standard errors clustered by individual are reported in parentheses. *** denotes statistical significance at the 1 per cent level.

Note

[1] Full details of the variable, including its derivation, coding and category labels, are available in the Understanding Society variable documentation: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/variables/jbnssec3_dv/ (accessed on 31 July 2026).

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