

YOUNG ADULTS' FEELINGS ABOUT
REFUGEES AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
THE CASE OF GERMANY

Arzu Karakulak



Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased mortality rates, severe restrictions on mobility, economic losses, and feelings of losing control, there are many perceptions of the nature of the threats stemming from COVID-19. There is a vast literature on how the perception of threat and uncertainty may trigger shifts in how people view, define, and identify themselves. Generally, two competing scenarios are proposed on how large-scale threats, including the COVID-19 outbreak, affect societies and the relations between different subgroups that exist within these societies. One position argues that the exposure to common threats may be helpful to appease once conflicting groups, as global threats may bring about a sense of unity by reinforcing broader and more inclusive group identities (i.e., identification with all humanity).¹ Another position, however, posits that the perception of threat exacerbates existing intergroup conflicts by promoting an orientation toward a narrowly defined in-group (i.e., national group) that goes along with the perception of out-group members as competitors for limited resources.² The present analysis series will explore how feelings about refugees are associated with the perception of the COVID-19 threat, national identification, identification with all humanity, contact with refugees, trust in the government, political orientation, and socio-economic status and gender across different countries. The analysis series will present descriptive results from survey data that has been collected from university-educated young adults (between 18 and 30 years old) through the convenience sampling method.³ This analysis will present data from Germany.

Germany Report

Hosting more than 1.4 million refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons, Germany hosts the largest number of refugees within Europe.⁴ In terms of socio-political infrastructure, Germany is classified as a country with halfway favorable migration policies, reaching 58 points (out of 100) on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX).⁵ The MIPEX score reflects the range and quality of policies in the domains of the labor market, education, political participation, access to nationality, family reunion, health, permanent residence, and anti-discrimination. Germany's migrant integration policies are the most developed in the domain of labor market policies and least developed in the domains of family reunion and access to nationality. Although Germany's economy was affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, it remained less affected than many other European countries, having contracted less than 5% in 2020.⁶ Accordingly, Germany's GDP per capita decreased from approximately USD 46,700 in 2019 to USD 46,200 in 2020, after having constantly increased since 2015.⁷ The German population's unemployment rate for 2020 was 3.8%, while the unemployment rate among youth was 7.2%.⁸ When examining what people living in Germany think about refugees and immigrants, data from representative surveys suggest that 28% of Germans considered refugees as a major threat in 2017⁹ and that 3.9% of Germany's total population and 2.4% of Germany's population under the age of 29 are unwilling to have immigrants as their neighbors.¹⁰



Total population by 2021: 83 million ¹¹
1.4 million refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons
MIPEX score 58: Halfway Favorable Migration Policies
GDP per capita 2020: USD 46,200
Youth unemployment rate in 2020: 7.2%
General unemployment rate in 2020: 3.8%
28% consider refugees as a major threat
2.4% of Germany's population under the age of 29 are unwilling to have immigrants as their neighbors

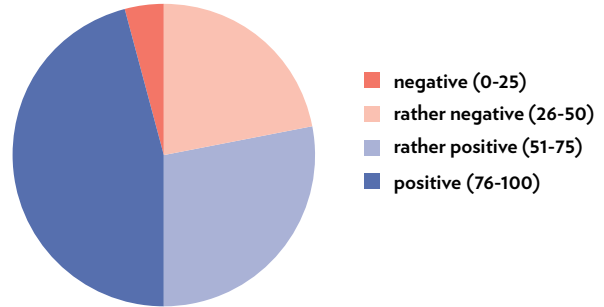
The German Sample

In Germany, data were collected from 275 young adults that were on average 24 years old. In this sample 82% of the respondents self-identified as women and 18% as men; 83% indicated that they are university students. As data were mainly collected using the subject pool of a distance-learning university, respondents' place of residence were distributed all over Germany. Data collection took place in November 2021.

How Do University-Educated Young Adults Living in Germany Feel about Refugees?

When participants were asked how they feel about the refugees that live in Germany, ranging from 0 (negative) to 100 (positive), the average score was 69.5, indicating that participants' overall feelings about refugees were rather positive. The figure below illustrates the distribution of scores, showing that 74% of participants have a positive or rather positive feeling toward refugees, while 26% reported a negative or rather negative feelings.

How do you feel about the refugees that live in Germany?

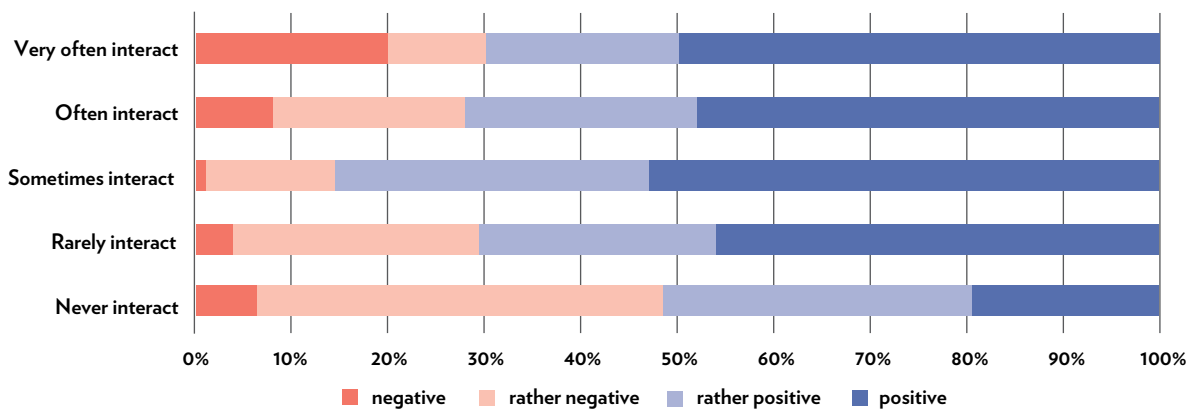


74% of participants hold positive or rather positive feelings toward refugees.

Frequency of Contact with Refugees

We asked respondents to report their frequency of contact with refugees. Our analysis shows that the majority of respondents reported to interact rarely with refugees; only about 13% reported to interact with refugees often or very often. When examining how contact is associated with feelings about refugees, our analysis found that positive feelings about refugees were reported least by individuals who indicated to never interact with refugees. However, positive feelings were *not* most frequently reported by those who interacted often with refugees but by those who indicated to interact with refugees sometimes.

Feelings about refugees by interaction with refugees



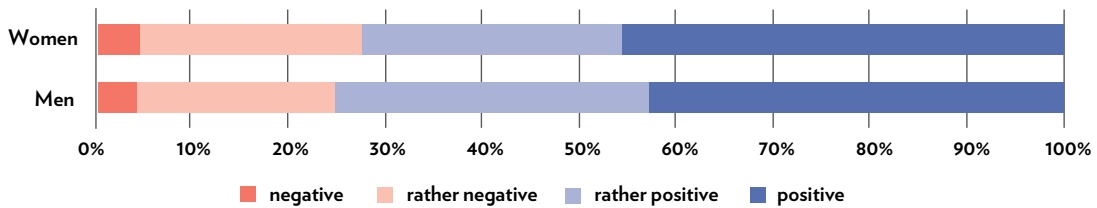
Feelings about refugees were most negative among those who reported to never interact with refugees.

Associations with Demographic Factors: Gender and SES

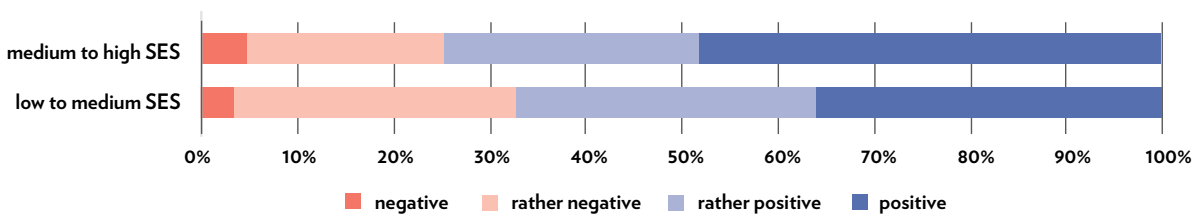
When examining the associations of feelings about refugees with respondents' self-reported gender and their subjectively assessed socio-economic

status (SES) relative to others living in Germany, the present analysis found that the pattern of feelings did not change substantially between men and women, and that those who reported higher SES also reported slightly more positive feelings about refugees.

Feelings about refugees by gender



Feelings about refugees by subjective SES



The pattern of feelings about refugees did not change substantially between men and women; respondents with higher subjective SES more frequently reported positive feelings.

Associations with Trust in the Government and Political Orientation

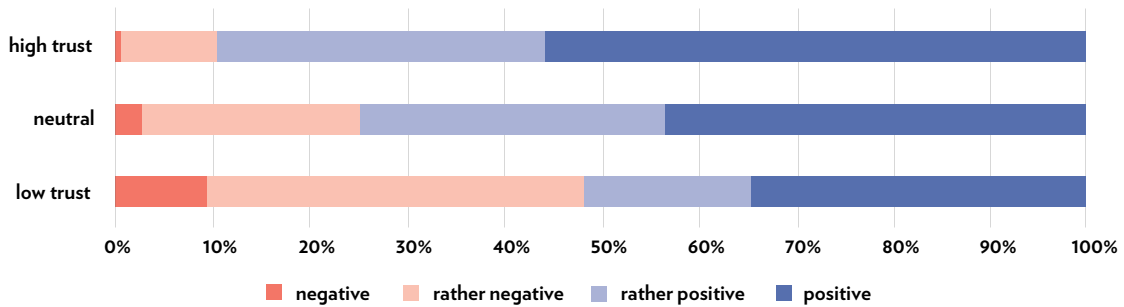
Participants were further asked to position themselves in terms of political orientation and to indicate how much they trust in their government. In the present analysis, both variables were found to be associated with feelings about refugees.

Respondents who reported high trust in Germany's government reported positive feelings toward

refugees most frequently, while negative feelings were reported most often by those who expressed low trust in the German government.

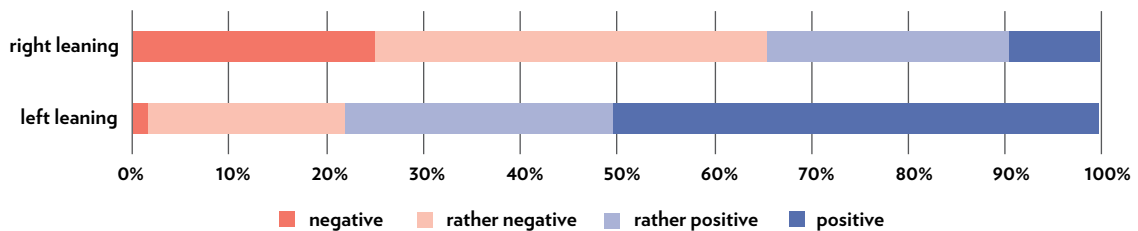
In line with the general notion that left-wing political orientation is associated with more favorable attitudes toward refugees (Cowling et al., 2019), the present data shows that young adults who support left-leaning political views reported rather positive feelings about refugees, while young adults who support right-leaning political views reported rather negative feelings about refugees.

Feelings about refugees by trust in the government



Higher trust in the government was associated with more positive feelings toward refugees.

Feelings about refugees by political orientation



Supporting right-leaning political views was associated with more positive feelings about refugees.

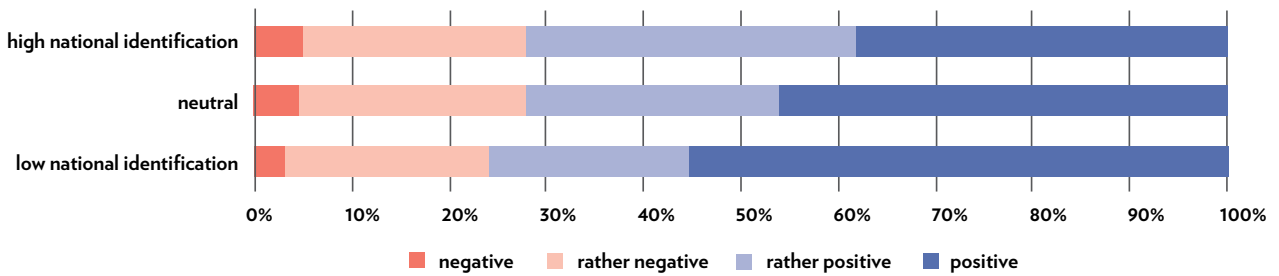
Associations with Respondents' Way of Identification

We asked respondents to report their level of national identification by indicating how proud they are to be a citizen of Germany. Those who reported to be proud are referred to as individuals with high national identification and those who reported little or no pride were referred to as individuals with low national identification. The results of the analysis show that feelings about refugees did not differ much between individuals who reported high, medium, or low national identification.

To assess identification with all humanity (IWAH), we asked respondents to report how much they believe in being loyal to all humanity. Those who reported low loyalty are referred to as individuals with low IWAH, and those who reported high loyalty were referred to as individuals with high IWAH.

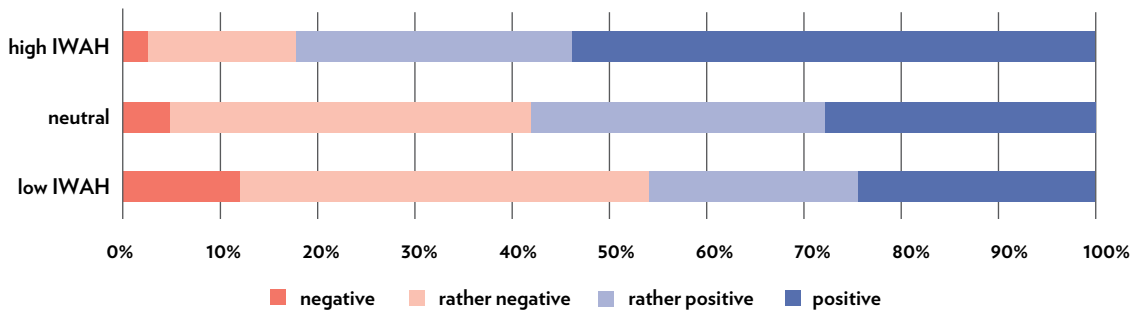
Respondents with high IWAH reported the most positive feelings about refugees, while conversely those with low IWAH reported the most negative feelings about refugees, which is in line with previous research that has found high IWAH to be associated with increased prosocial behavior directed at out-group individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²

Feelings about refugees by national identification



Feelings about refugees did not change according to respondents' national identification.

Feelings about refugees by IWAH



Feelings about refugees were most positive among individuals with high IWAH.

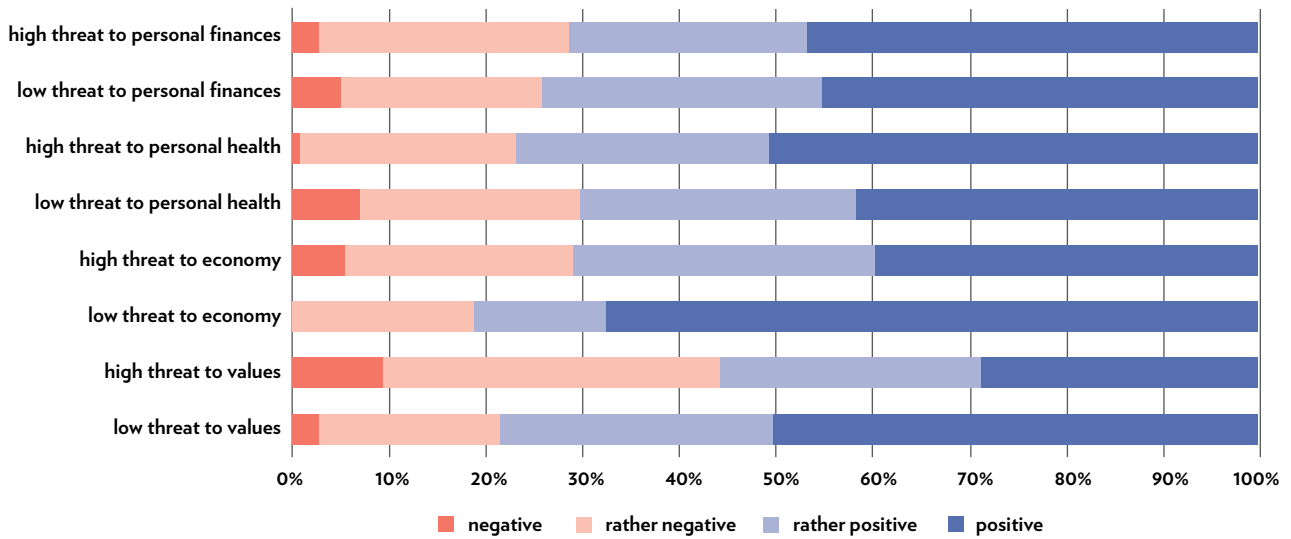
Associations with COVID-19-related Perceptions of Threat

We also asked respondents to report their perceptions of several threats related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we asked them to indicate how much of a threat, if any, the coronavirus outbreak is to, a) their personal financial safety; b) their personal health; c) Germany's economy; and d) Germany's values and traditions.

The results show that young adults' feelings about refugees are associated with respondents' perceptions of COVID-19 as a collective threat, while they

were not affected by the perception of COVID-19 as a personal threat. Specifically, the results show that perceiving the COVID-19 pandemic as a threat to one's personal health and personal financial situation was not associated with feelings about refugees who live in Germany but strongly associated with perceiving the COVID-19 outbreak as a threat to Germany's economy and values. In line with the predictions of the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) and with previous research,¹³ enhanced perceptions of both realistic (e.g., economic) and symbolic (e.g., values) threats on the collective level often coincide with more negative feelings about refugees.

Feelings about refugees by perception of COVID-19-related threats



More negative feelings toward refugees were reported when the COVID-19 outbreak was perceived as a high threat to Germany’s economy and values.

Germany in the Spotlight

Overall, the results obtained from the German sample suggest that the majority of university-educated young adults in Germany have rather positive feelings about refugees. In line with the contact hypothesis,¹⁴ our analysis found that the most negative feelings about refugees were reported by individuals who actually never interact with refugees. Moreover, supporting the predictions of the common in-group identity model,¹⁵ a more inclusive in-group, as expressed through higher IWAH, was found to be associated with more positive attitudes about refugees; and higher perceptions of both symbolic and realistic threats on the collective level were found to go along with more negative feelings about refugees, which is in line with the premises of the ITT. Finally, more left-leaning political views and higher trust in the government were found to be associated with more positive feelings about refugees, which mirrors findings obtained in previous research.¹⁶ As such, the results obtained from Germany replicate most of the previous literature in the field. This is not surprising as most of these works are based on research from so-called WEIRD (Western, Educated, Individualis-

tic, Rich, Democratic) countries,¹⁷ which are similar to the German context in general and to the sample in this research in particular.

Based on the results obtained from the present analysis, it may be tentatively concluded that the relatively weak perceptions of threats related to COVID-19 and the relatively more favorable contextual and socio-political conditions that prevail in Germany may have prevented university-educated, young adults in Germany from developing hostile feelings toward refugees. It may therefore be recommended that—in the current stage of transition to a new government in Berlin—German policymakers should try to retain a high level of trust in the government and to keep the economic impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak at bay. Moreover, media organs, educational institutions, and NGOs should work on conveying messages that promote a more inclusive way of social identification such as IWAH and create platforms that allow for experiencing positive contact with refugees.

Certainly, due to unrepresentative sampling methods and the small sample size, the findings obtained from this research cannot be generalized to reflect the general population of university-educated Ger-

man young adults. Likewise, it can be questioned to what extent the self-reported positive feelings about refugees would translate into real behavioral outcomes and how participants' responses may be affected by social desirability bias and concerns about political correctness. Especially due to Germany's historical background, the expression of anti-minority attitudes seems to be extremely socially undesirable and tainted with very negative National Socialist connotations. It would therefore be useful to conduct further research that assesses university-educated young adults' behavioral responses to refugees in Germany.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all participants for completing this survey and Dr. Maria-Therese Friebs, Christine Kraus and Tuğçe Aral for their help with preparing and carrying out the data collection in Germany. I would also like to thank the project assistants Melis Yetkin, Sena Eraslan, Homam Hawari, Beyza Oktay, and Perihan Aytekin for their assistance in carrying out this research, Megan Gisclon for her editing work, and Gülcihan Ciğdem Okan, Pelin Oğuz, and Mirkan Mutlu for their guidance and support throughout this research project.

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11 p.; 30 cm. - (Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative)

Cover Design and Page Layout: MYRA

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