

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

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 Italy.

Italy Report

Being located in the Mediterranean region, Italy is the main point of arrival for many displaced persons who aim to reach Europe.⁴ Currently, Italy is hosting more than 280,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons.⁵ When looking at Italy's socio-political infrastructure, the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) suggests that Italy qualifies as a country with halfway favorable migration policies with an overall score of 58 (out of 100).⁶ Italy's migrant integration policies are most developed in the domains of anti-discrimination laws and health and least developed in the domains of political participation and access to nationality. Italy constitutes an interesting site for this research series not only because it is a major arrival site for many displaced persons, but also because it played a central role in the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2020, Northern Italy was the European epicenter of the pandemic.⁷ Along with the Chinese, Italians became the target of COVID-19-associated stigma. The research by Sorokowski et al. found that consumption of news and information about the COVID-19 pandemic increased negative perceptions of foreigners, including Italians, both in the UK and Poland.⁸ Italy's economy has also suffered from the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; its GDP per capita decreased from USD 33,600 in 2019 to USD 31,700 in 2020,⁹ and the general unemployment rate for Italians reached 9.2% in 2020. Italy's rate of youth unemployment reflects a precarious situation: with a youth unemployment rate of 29.4%, Italy has the third highest youth unemployment rate within the European Union after Spain and Greece.¹⁰ Data from representative surveys further suggest that foreigners, and especially refugees, within Italy are often viewed critically by Italian nationals. In 2017, 17.4% of Italy's general population and 10.1% of its population under the age of 29 reported to be unwilling to have immigrants as their neighbors,¹¹ and the percentage of Italians who view refugees as a major threat was 65%.¹²

	Total population by 2021: 59 million ¹³
	284,000 refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons
	MIPEX score 58: Halfway Favorable Migration Policies
	GDP per capita 2020: USD 31,700
	General unemployment rate in 2020: 9.2%
	Youth unemployment rate in 2020: 29.4%
	65% consider refugees as a major threat
	10.1% of Italy's population under the age of 29 are unwilling to have immigrants as their neighbors

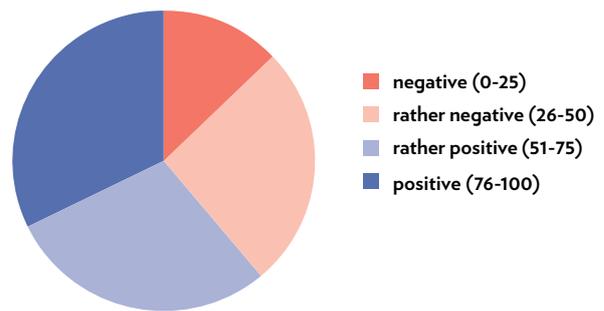
The Italian Sample

In Italy, data were collected from 403 young adults that were on average 21 years old. In this sample 74% of the respondents self-identified as women and 24% as men; 79% indicated that they are university students. Data were mainly collected through participants belonging to two universities located in the south of Italy. Data collection was realized from November to December 2021.

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

When participants were asked how they feel about the refugees that live in Italy, ranging from 0 (negative) to 100 (positive), the average score was 59.6, indicating that the sample's overall feelings about refugees were slightly positive. The figure below illustrates the distribution of scores, showing that 61% of the sample endorse a positive or rather positive feeling toward refugees, while 39% reported a negative or rather negative feeling.

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

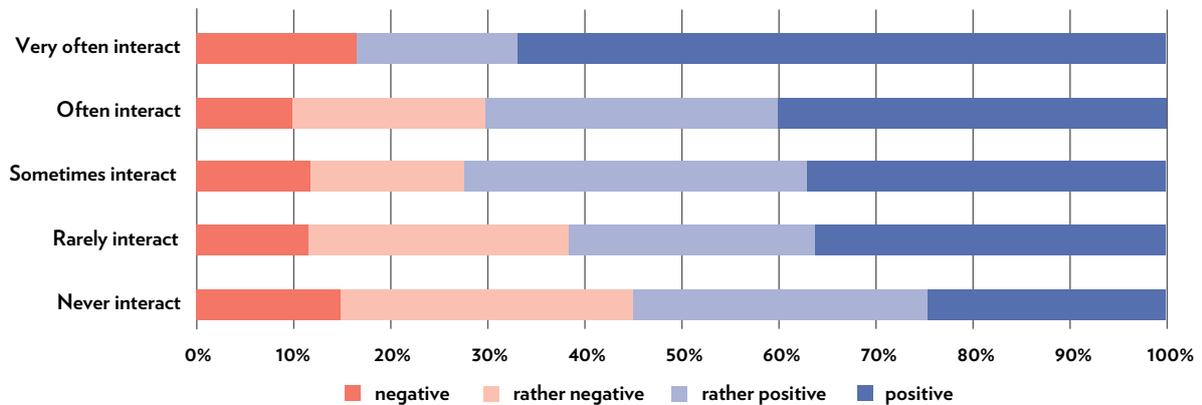


61% of the sample have positive or rather positive feelings toward refugees.

Frequency of Contact with Refugees

We asked respondents to report their frequency of contact with refugees. Our analyses show that the majority of respondents reported to never interact with refugees; only 4% of our sample reported to interact with refugees often or very often. When examining how contact is associated with feelings about refugees, our analysis found that respondents who reported to never and rarely interact with refugees also reported negative feelings about refugees most frequently.

Feelings about refugees by interaction with refugees



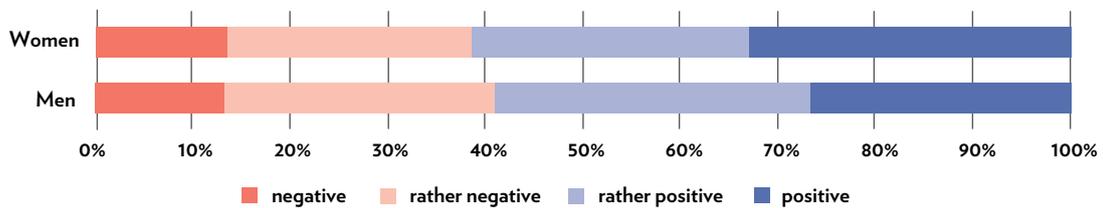
Feelings about refugees were most negative among those who reported to never interact with refugees.

Associations with Demographic Factors: Gender and SES

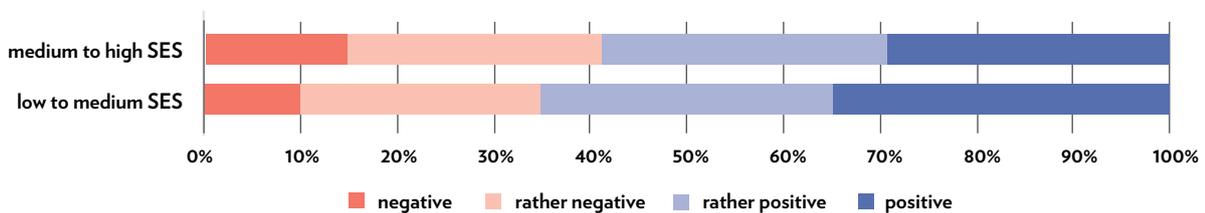
When examining how feelings about refugees are associated with respondents' self-reported gender

and their subjectively assessed socio-economic status (SES) relative to others living in Italy, the present analysis found that the pattern of feelings did not change; neither between men and women nor between those with lower versus higher subjective SES.

Feelings about refugees by gender



Feelings about refugees by subjective SES



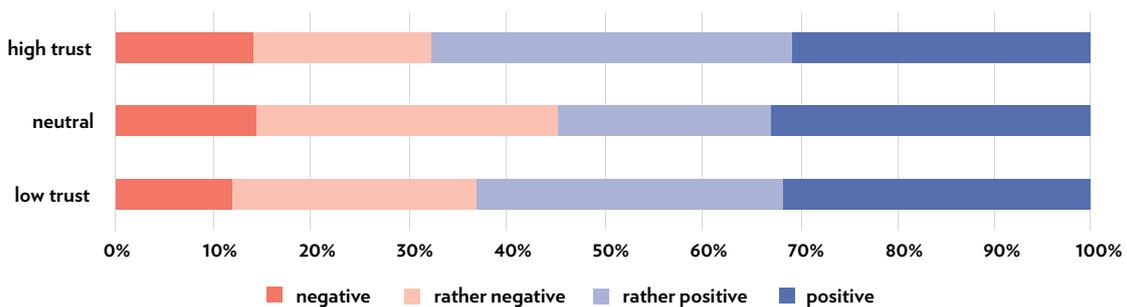
The pattern of feelings about refugees did not change substantially according to respondents' gender and their subjective SES.

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.

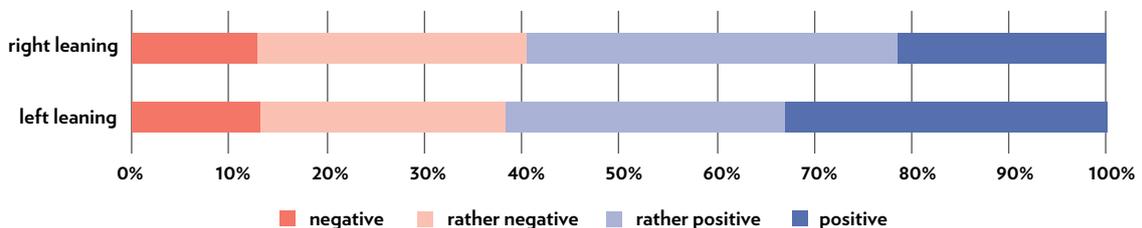
No changes were observed regarding participants' feelings about refugees in Italy related to respondents' level of governmental trust and their political leaning. Across different levels of governmental trust and the political spectrum, university-educated Italian young adults predominantly reported rather positive feelings about refugees.

Feelings about refugees by trust in the government



Across different levels of governmental trust, the majority of respondents indicated having rather positive feelings about refugees.

Feelings about refugees by political orientation



Respondents' political orientation was not associated with their feelings about refugees.

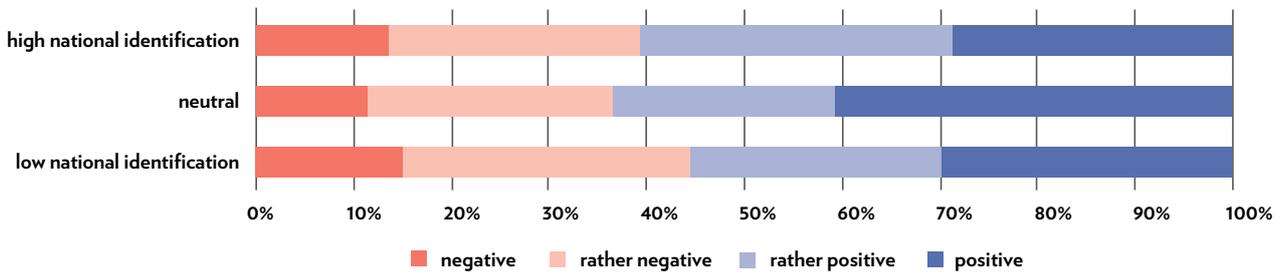
Associations with Respondents' Way of Identification

We asked respondents to report their level of national identification by indicating how proud they are to be a citizen of Italy. 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. Additionally, we asked respondents to report how much they believe in being loyal to all humanity to assess their level of identification with all humanity (IWAH). 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. The results of the analysis show that feelings about refugees did not differ much between individuals who reported high, medium, or low national identification.

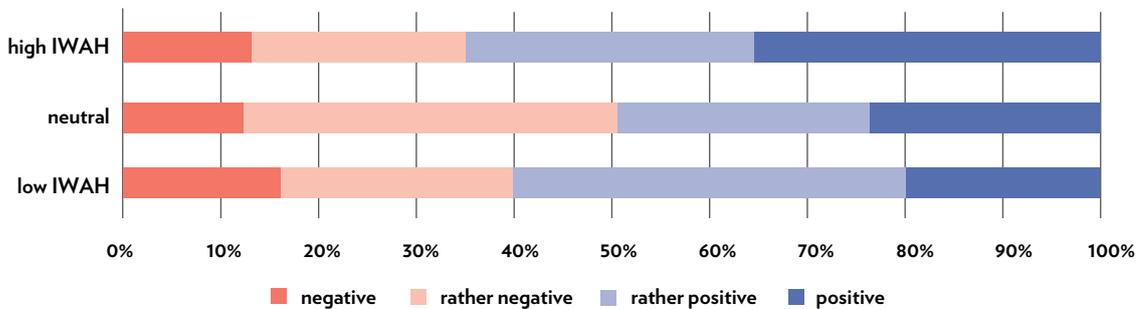
In terms of respondents' IWAH, our analyses showed that the most positive feelings about refugees were reported by those individuals that have a higher IWAH. Interestingly, the least positive feelings were not reported by those with low IWAH, but by individuals who reported to have moderate levels of IWAH.

Feelings about refugees by national identification



Feelings about refugees did not change as a function of respondents' national identification.

Feelings about refugees by IWAH



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

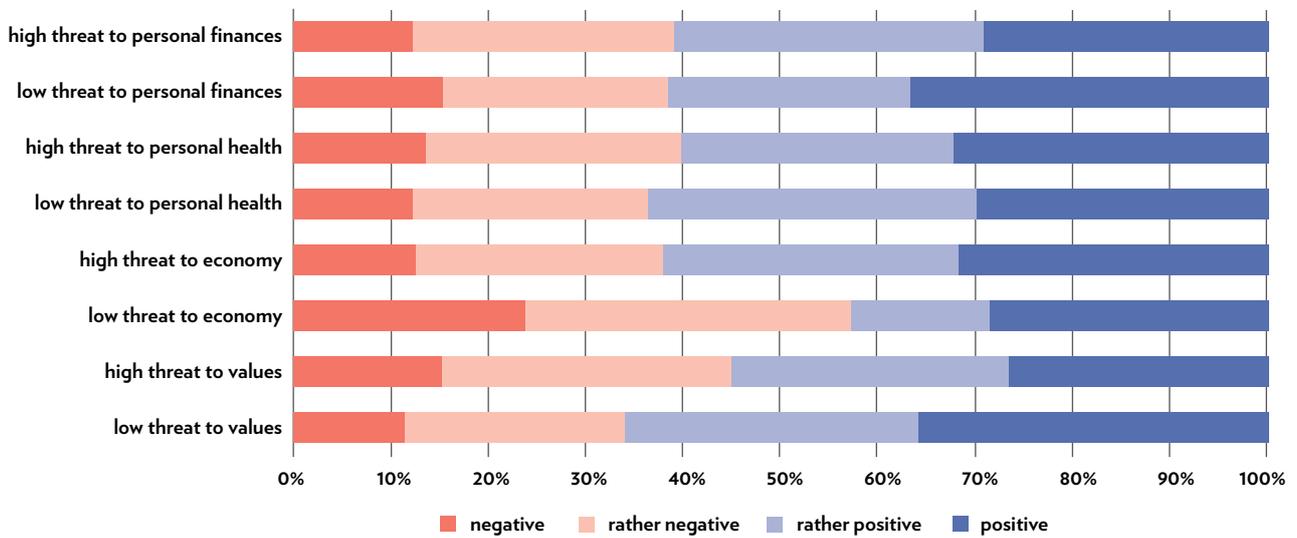
Associations with COVID-19 Related Perceptions of Threat

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) Italy's economy; and d) Italy's values and traditions.

In terms of threat to personal health and personal finances, hardly any variation was found related to participants' feelings about refugees. When it comes to the perception of threat to the country's values and economy, slight variations were found between university-educated young adults who reported perceptions of low versus high threat. In line with the predictions of the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)¹⁴ and with previous research,¹⁵ enhanced

perceptions of symbolic (i.e., values) threats on the collective level were found to be associated with more negative feelings about refugees. For threat perceptions regarding the country's economy, however, the pattern of results implied an inverse relationship: respondents who reported that they perceive low economic threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic also reported more negative feelings about refugees. However, it should be noted that the distribution of the present sample in terms of perceived economic threat was very skewed. Only 5% of the sample reported that the COVID-19 pandemic would not constitute a threat to Italy's economy, which substantially limits the generalizability of this pattern.

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



Negative feelings about refugees were reported mostly among those who perceived the COVID-19 outbreak as a high threat to Italy's values and a low threat to Italy's economy.

Italy in the Spotlight

Our results demonstrate that despite economic struggles and a very high youth unemployment rate within the country, the general notion toward refugees living in Italy seems to be rather positive among our sample of university-educated young adults that live in Italy. This is interesting, as the findings of the representative Pew Research Survey indicate that 65% of Italians in 2017 considered refugees as a major threat to their country.¹⁶ While it may well be that the present pattern of results is strongly affected by social desirability bias and by issues of political correctness considering the academic nature of the current survey and the mainly academic background of the sample, it may also be that the high threat of the COVID-19 pandemic has promoted a broader sense of unity within this sample and has eliminated the view that refugees are a major threat. Such interpretation would support the predictions of the common in-group identity model¹⁷ and confirm findings from previous research¹⁸ by showing that a more inclusive in-group, as expressed through higher IWAH, was associated with more positive feelings about refugees. Yet, interestingly and contrary to the premises of

the ITT,¹⁹ we also found that higher perceptions of economic threat were associated with more positive feelings about refugees. However, it should be noted that across these analyses the distribution of our sample regarding IWAH and the perceived economic threat of COVID-19 was very skewed, which complicates the interpretation of these results. Likewise, even though our analyses imply that higher contact with refugees is associated with more positive feelings about them, which is in line with the premises of the contact hypothesis,²⁰ the percentage of those who reported to interact with refugees often or very often was only 4% in our sample. For all other variables such as gender, SES, political orientation, national identification, trust in the government, and perceptions of COVID-19 as a threat to personal health and finances, no significant variations toward feelings about refugees were found.

Overall, the preliminary analyses obtained from our data seem to reflect prior research conducted with Italians amid the COVID-19 outbreak. The study by Valtorta et al.,²¹ for instance, found that enhanced perceptions of emergency in times where Italy was particularly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic promoted feelings of emotional closeness toward

the Chinese and, therefore, decreased the level of prejudice against them. Likewise, research by Fuochi et al.²² documented that perceptions of a common belonging and increased sense of unity are positively associated with contact and openness to outgroups. Even though our research does not allow us to make generalizations about all university-educated young adults that live in Italy due to the unrepresentative sampling methods and the relatively small sample size, the findings obtained from this research underline that the perception of COVID-19-related threats do not inevitably lead to more hostile attitudes toward vulnerable outgroups. The self-reported feelings toward refugees were generally positive in our sample, despite the economic and COVID-19-related threats that Italy has been facing. These results together highlight the relevance of enhancing the notion of a more inclusive, cohesive, and apolitical way of social identification in times of the COVID-19 pandemic²³ and of creating platforms that allow for experiencing positive contact with refugees.

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