

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

**Arzu Karakulak**



## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created serious challenges both for individuals' and societies' resilience, demanding constant mental and behavioral adaptation.<sup>1</sup> Generally, there are two competing views on how large-scale threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic may 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).<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> This analysis will present data from the Netherlands.

## The Netherlands Report

One of the major destinations of displaced persons within Northern Europe is the Netherlands, which hosts almost 108,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons.<sup>5</sup> The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) for the Netherlands suggests that the country has halfway favorable migration policies, with an overall score of 57 (out of 100).<sup>6</sup> The Netherlands' migrant integration policies are most developed in the domain of anti-discrimination laws and least developed in the domain of family reunion. The Dutch economy was also severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, having contracted in the second quarter of 2020 by 8.4% compared to the previous quarter.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the country's GDP rebounded in the following quarters, which is visible when comparing GDP per capita in 2020 (USD 52,400) with that of 2019 (USD 52,470).<sup>8</sup>

The general unemployment rate for the Dutch population was 3.8% in 2020, while the youth unemployment rate was 9.1%. When examining what people living in the Netherlands think about refugees and immigrants, data from representative surveys suggest that 31% of the Dutch population considered refugees as a major threat in 2017<sup>10</sup> and that 15.6% of the Netherlands' total population and 15.0% of its population under the age of 29 are unwilling to have immigrants as their neighbors.<sup>11</sup>



Total population in 2021: 17.6 million <sup>9</sup>
108,000 refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons
MIPEX score 57: Halfway Favorable Migration Policies
GDP per capita 2020: USD 52,400
General unemployment rate in 2020: 3.8%
Youth unemployment rate in 2020: 9.1%
31% consider refugees as a major threat
15% of the Dutch population under the age of 29 are unwilling to have immigrants as their neighbors

## The Dutch Sample

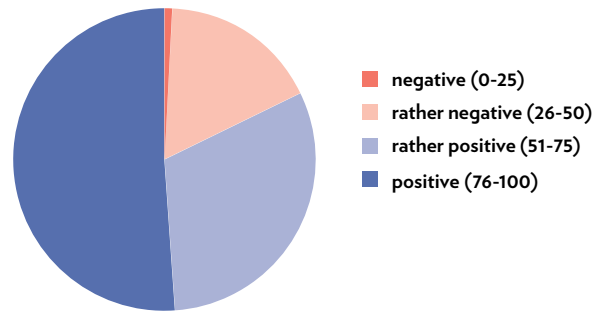
Data were collected from 266 young adults that were on average 20 years old. In this sample, 88% of the respondents self-identified as women, 10% as men, and 2% as non-binary. Approximately 91% identified as university students. Data were mainly collected through the participant pool of a university located in the south of the Netherlands. Data collection was realized from November to December 2021. It is worth noting that 41% of our sample identified as having a migration history: namely, as an immigrant, refugee, or international student, or as having parents with a migration history. Hence, only 59% of the sample self-identified as ethnically Dutch. This report will present the results of the total sample and provide additional information about the results of the ethnically Dutch sample when substantial differences occurred compared to the total sample.

## How Do University-Educated Young Adults Living in the Netherlands Feel about Refugees?

When participants were asked how they feel about the refugees that live in the Netherlands, ranging from 0 (negative) to 100 (positive), the average score was 73.1, indicating that the sample's overall feelings about refugees were positive. The figure below illustrates the distribution of scores, showing that 82% of the total sample endorse a positive or rather positive feeling toward refugees, while only 18% reported a negative or rather negative feeling.

This pattern was not different when only ethnically Dutch respondents were examined. Among the ethnically Dutch, 85% reported positive or rather positive feelings toward refugees.

### How do you feel about the refugees that live in the Netherlands?

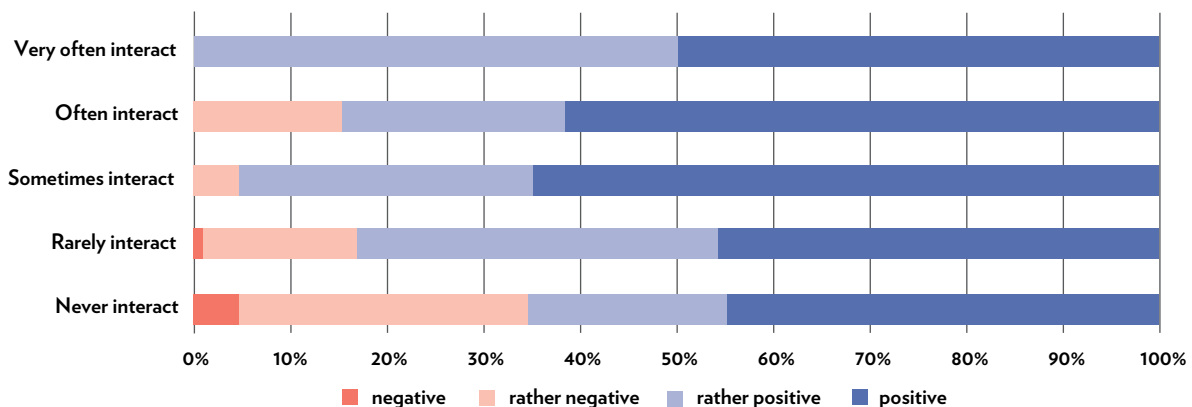


82% of the sample hold a positive or rather positive feeling toward refugees.

## 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 6% of our sample reported interacting 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.

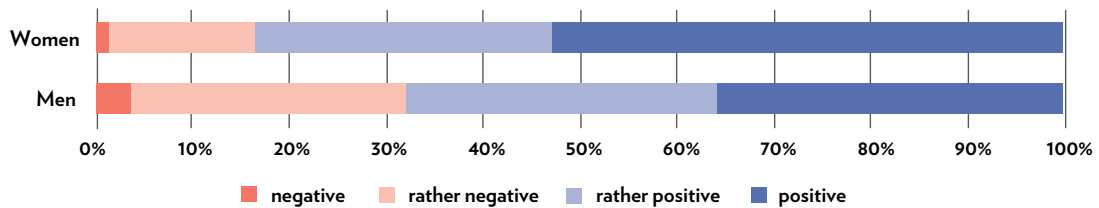
## Associations with Demographic Factors: Gender and SES

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 the Nether-

lands, the present analysis found that men reported negative feelings more frequently than women.

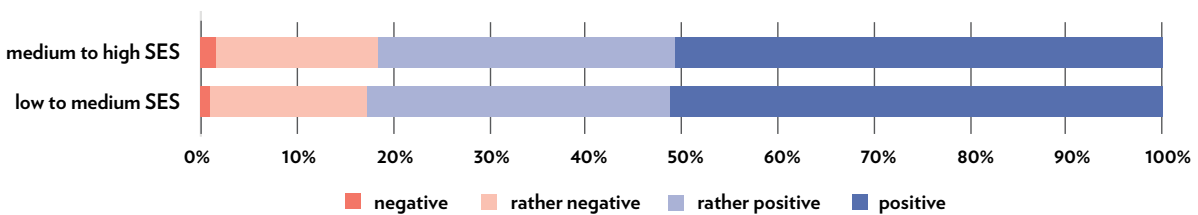
The level of respondents' self-reported SES, however, was not associated with negative feelings about refugees, showing that both high and low SES groups report rather positive feelings toward refugees.

### Feelings about refugees by gender



*Women reported positive feelings toward refugees more frequently than men.*

### Feelings about refugees by subjective SES



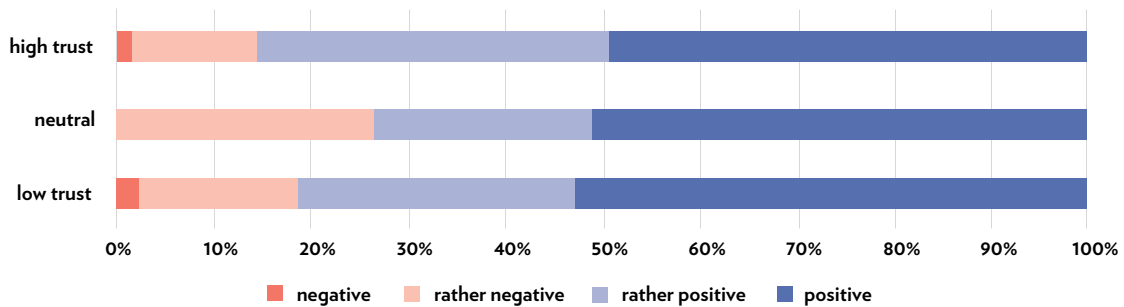
*The pattern of feelings about refugees did not change by respondents' subjective SES.*

## 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 substantial differences regarding feelings about refugees were found between those with low and high trust; in both cases the feelings were positive. For those who were neutral, feelings about refugees were slightly less positive.

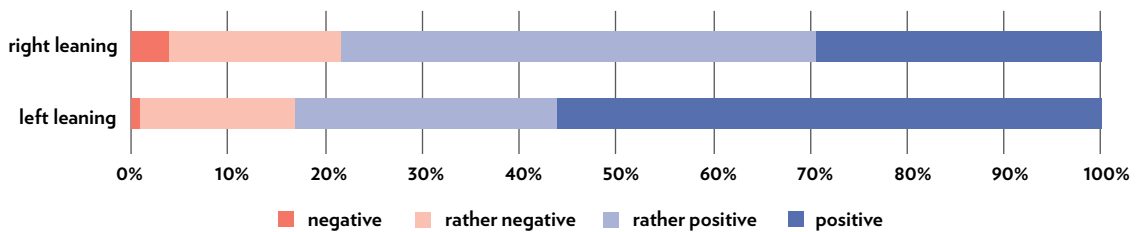
In terms of political orientation, the results from our analysis suggest that university-educated respondents who reported to support politically left-leaning views more frequently reported positive feelings about refugees, while those who self-identified as politically right-leaning more frequently reported rather positive feelings about refugees. This effect was particularly pronounced in the sample of ethnically Dutch respondents, while it was less visible in the sample that indicated to have some sort of migration background.

### Feelings about refugees by trust in the government



*Across different levels of trust in the government, the majority of respondents reported positive feelings about refugees.*

### Feelings about refugees by political orientation



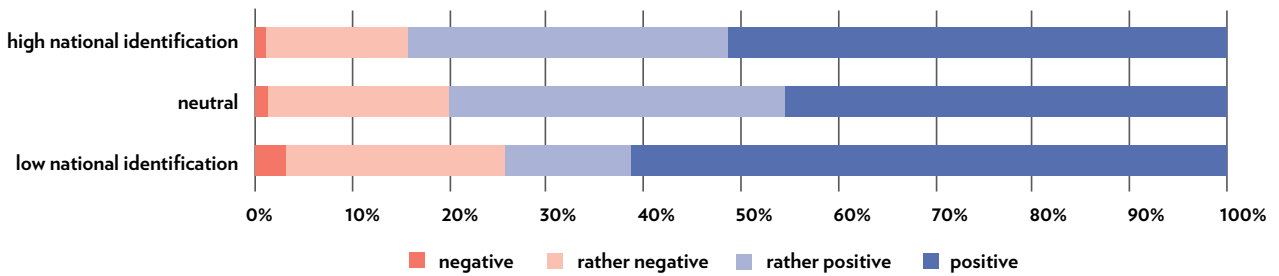
*Politically left-leaning respondents more frequently reported positive feelings; politically right-leaning respondents more frequently reported rather positive feelings.*

### 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 Dutch citizen. Those who are not Dutch citizens were asked to indicate their pride for their own nationality. Those who reported to be proud of their nationality 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 show that feelings about refugees did not differ much between individuals who reported high, medium, or low national identification, neither in the total sample nor in the ethnically Dutch and non-Dutch samples. In all samples, respondents most frequently reported positive feelings about refugees across different levels of national identification.

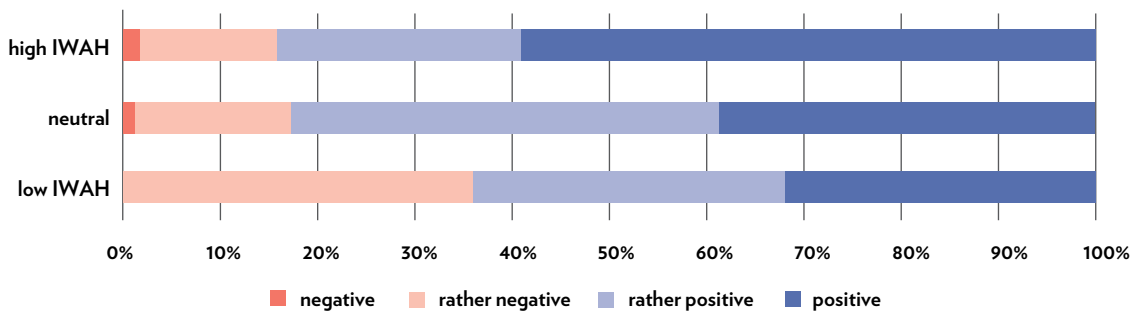
Additionally, we asked respondents to report how much they believe in being loyal to all humanity to assess their level of identification with all humanity (IWAH). Those who reported low loyalty are referred to as individuals with low IWAH, and those who reported high loyalty were referred to as individuals with high IWAH. Our analyses showed that the most positive feelings about refugees were reported by individuals with high IWAH and the least positive feelings by individuals with low IWAH. This pattern was more pronounced among the ethnically Dutch respondents.

**Feelings about refugees by national identification**



*Feelings about refugees were largely positive across different levels 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**

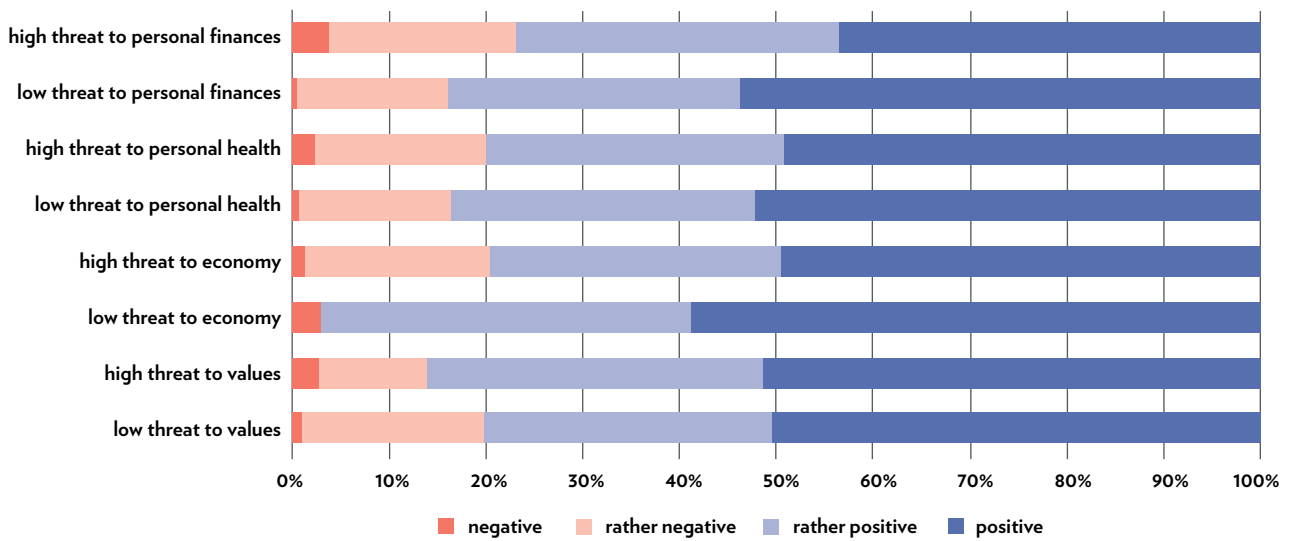
We also asked respondents to report their perceptions of several threats related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we asked them to indicate how much of a threat, if any, the coronavirus outbreak is to, a) their personal financial safety; b) their personal health; c) the Netherlands' economy; and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

The results from our analysis show that there is hardly any variation in feelings toward refugees between individuals who reported low versus high perceptions of COVID-19-related threats to personal health and personal finances. Likewise, there was no difference in feelings about refugees be-

tween respondents who reported low versus high perceptions of COVID-19-related threats to the Netherlands' values. However, for COVID-19-related threats related to the Netherlands' economy, our results confirmed the predictions of the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)<sup>12</sup> and that of previous research,<sup>13</sup> showing that enhanced perceptions of realistic (i.e., economic), collective threats were found to be associated with more negative feelings about refugees. Interestingly, when the two groups (i.e., ethnically Dutch vs. non-Dutch) were examined separately, enhanced perceptions of collective economic threats were associated with more negative feelings about refugees among the sample of non-Dutch, while this pattern was less pronounced among the Dutch.



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



*Positive feelings about refugees were reported most frequently among individuals who perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as a low threat to the Netherlands' economy.*

**The Netherlands in the Spotlight**

The results from our analysis for the Netherlands show that the majority of university-educated young adults in our sample reported positive feelings toward refugees. It is noteworthy that we found more positive feelings about refugees in the Netherlands despite the comparably less favorable picture that can be drawn from representative survey data: in a Pew Research survey, a considerably higher percentage of Dutch citizens reported that they consider refugees as a major threat to their country (31%),<sup>14</sup> and in the World Values Survey a relatively high percentage of young adults (15%) indicated that they would not want to be neighbors with immigrants, which is almost three times higher compared to the percentage of other Northern European countries such as Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.<sup>15</sup> Such divergence may probably be explained by the fact that our sample consisted of mainly liberal and university-educated young adults. More than 90% of our sample consisted of university students and more than 80% self-identified as politically left-leaning. Both higher education and left-wing political orientation were found to be key factors associated

with more positive attitudes toward refugees in meta-analytic research.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the high level of inclusiveness expressed in respondents' perceptions of their in-group may explain the mainly positive feelings that were reported. Only about 10% of our sample self-identified as a person with low IWAH (Identification With All Humanity). A more inclusive in-group, on the other hand, as expressed through higher IWAH, was found to be associated with more positive attitudes about refugees, which supports the predictions of the common in-group identity model,<sup>17</sup> which claims that the perception of common group belonging, identities, and goals may counteract prejudice.

Another relevant factor may also be the high level of cultural diversity in our data source: as already stated, more than 40% of our sample consisted of respondents who identified as individuals with a migration history to the Netherlands. In line with the contact hypothesis,<sup>18</sup> such enhanced diversity within our sample may also have promoted more favorable views toward minority groups. Further support for the contact hypothesis also comes from our data showing that more contact with refugees was associated with more positive feelings about refugees. Yet, it is striking that being a member of

an ethnic minority itself did not promote more favorable views toward refugees. Instead, the ethnically Dutch respondents actually reported positive feelings toward refugees more frequently than the university-educated young adults with migration histories. Likewise, the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic as an economic threat to the Netherlands was associated with more negative feelings about refugees only in the sample of respondents with a migration background, which confirms the premises of the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)<sup>19</sup> for this sample. For the ethnically Dutch respondents, however, the perception of enhanced COVID-19-related threats was not associated with their feelings about refugees. One interpretation may be that the group of university-educated young adults with a migration history is more prone to view refugees as potential competitors for limited resources than the group of university-educated, ethnically Dutch respondents.

Overall, our results suggest that higher education, more contact with refugees, liberal political views, and the notion of a common and inclusive social identity seem to operate as factors that prevent negative feelings about refugees arising among university-educated young adults that live in the Netherlands. Perceptions of COVID-19-related economic threats, and likely the perception of refugees as competitors for scarce resources, on the other hand, seem to promote more negative views toward refugees. Yet, it should be noted that unrepresentative sampling methods, the small sample size, and the extreme overrepresentation of female respondents (who reported more positive feelings than male respondents) in our sample limit the generalization of our findings to the whole population of university-educated young adults in the Netherlands. What may still be recommended, however, is that policy makers, media organs, educational institutions, and NGOs convey messages that promote a more inclusive way of social identification and create more platforms that allow for experiencing positive contact with refugees.

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## Notes

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