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Emotions as Elements of Manipulative Messaging in Online Anti-Migrant Networks: Evidence from Telegram

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Abstract

This study explores how negative emotions are deliberately triggered and employed as instruments of manipulation within online anti-migrant discourse. Based on the analysis of 3,194,663 Telegram messages collected from multiple countries, it examines which emotional manipulation strategies emerge in the discursive and structural patterns. Combining manual annotation for maliciousness, emotional manipulation, and vulnerability with a multi-label transformer-based emotion classification, the research identifies how particular emotional configurations are mobilized. Rather than measuring the social impact of these messages or the intentions of their authors, the study focuses on uncovering the presence, structure, and possible functions of these emotional strategies. By situating these findings within Telegram's affordances-low moderation, anonymity, and ideological insulation-it reveals how the platform nurtures emotionally polarized echo chambers. The study thus offers a conceptual foundation for future research seeking to connect emotional mechanisms with broader social and political effects.

Keywords: Social media, anti-migrant discourse, emotions, Telegram, online networks

Introduction

Unlike conventional media, social media and online networks allow knowledge to be shared worldwide at hitherto unheard-of rates by transcending personal social networks. In terms of migration and refugees, the function of migration on social media platforms for the pertinent discussions becomes even more apparent in the recent decade in particular following the 2015

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"refugee crisis,"⁶. Sometimes, social media has helped migrant networks to be created and aided migration campaigns (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012). By allowing migrants to create online environments that support them and so promote participatory culture (Jenkins, 2007), it has also helped social integration and inclusion to flourish inside migrant communities (Le-Phuong et al., 2022).

Conversely, social media and online networks have also facilitated propagation and discourse regarding anti-migrant views (Menshikova & Van Tubergen, 2022; Ekman, 2019). Social media platforms have amplified anti-migrant sentiments through xenophobic language and by polarizing audiences within their own echo chambers (Van Dijck, 2013; Sunstein, 2007; Flaxman et al., 2013; Kopacheva & Yantseva, 2022).

Online networks allow the dissemination and production of varied material, including comments, reviews, and knowledge, therefore producing enormous volumes of data from different people. This data reflects opinions that, through the platform's inherent power dynamics, can influence societal perceptions or contribute to the recognition of modern societal attributes (Inuwa-Dutse et al., 2020). However, the prevalence of hate speech and anti-migrant rhetoric on these platforms exacerbates public opinion divisions and negatively impacts social cohesion (Schäfer et al., 2021). In this context, these networks hold a critical sense in the way of influencing public opinion regarding refugees, migration, and immigrants, and provide space for citizens to express their emotions of insecurity and allow anti-migrant attitudes, which are spread by far-right, nationalist, and populist players on the internet. Importantly, because of these groups' broad reach, they influenced the popular discourses regarding refugees and immigration and promoted the standardization of formerly marginalized attitudes, views, or discourses (Ekman, 2019).

The main purpose of this study is to explore *which emotions are intentionally used and in what ways they serve manipulative purposes within anti-migrant rhetoric on online networks*. Instead of viewing emotional reactions as automatic or random, this research treats them as consciously directed elements of online communication that help to shape the mood of digital interaction. Focusing on Telegram as a case, it examines how emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust are invoked and circulated to keep hostility alive and to draw lines between groups. By looking closely at these emotional patterns, the study aims to understand how manipulation is built into the everyday online discussions and how specific platform features may sustain these polarized environments.

To explore this, we examined more than three million messages gathered from 180 Telegram groups active in different countries. The analysis combines close reading with computational methods, aiming to see not just which emotions dominate, but also how they travel through digital spaces and help build an atmosphere of division.

Existing research has often focused on identifying hate speech or mapping far-right communication networks, but few studies have systematically connected manipulative message types with the emotional reactions they seek to provoke. The unique contribution of this study lies precisely in that connection. Building on our broader research project, the

⁶ In this study, the term migrant is used in a broader and more inclusive conceptual sense to encompass various mobility-related groups, including refugees and asylum seekers. This choice reflects the interdisciplinary and transnational focus of the research, as online discourses often do not distinguish between these categories. Nevertheless, we fully acknowledge the legal and definitional distinctions between migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers as established in international law and scholarly literature.



analysis first categorizes manipulative anti-migrant messages and then examines the specific negative emotions that are triggered within those messages. This two-layered approach allows the study to move beyond surface-level sentiment detection and to uncover the emotional mechanisms that give manipulative rhetoric its persuasive power. In doing so, it offers an empirical and conceptual bridge between computational emotion analysis and the study of affect in political communication.

While much of the existing research has analyzed emotional communication on mainstream platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, this study focuses specifically on Telegram due to its distinctive affordances, public and semi-public channels, minimal moderation, and the absence of algorithmic filtering. These features create a communicative environment that differs substantially from mainstream social media and offers a unique setting to observe how emotional manipulation unfolds within more insulated and ideologically homogeneous spaces.

One of the major strengths of this study lies in its combination of large-scale multilingual data and a mixed-method approach, which integrates computational emotion analysis with qualitative interpretation. This design enables both statistical robustness and contextual depth, offering a more comprehensive view of emotional manipulation in digital environments.

In this sense, this study begins with a thorough assessment of the literature to investigate how migration is covered on social media and the part emotions play in forming public opinion. It will then review the body of current studies on emotion. Examining studies on anti-migrant rhetoric, its underlying causes, and its effects on society in the framework of migration on social media helps one to better understand. After the assessment of the literature, the approach for data collecting and processing will be thoroughly described. The processed data will then be shown and examined in the paper before its conclusions are discussed.

Emotions in Online Networks as the Instruments of Fear

Wodak's (2015) idea of the *politics of fear* treats emotions like fear and disgust as tools for persuasion rather than just personal feelings. Here, emotion acts as a way to create and share political meaning. When fear and disgust are repeated, they help draw moral lines between groups, shaping ideas about who belongs. These emotions often show up with anger, creating a pattern that makes exclusion seem justified. In anti-migrant rhetoric, such feelings are usually not accidental; they are created and spread to unite people around a shared sense of threat. Over time, this emotional framing makes hostility feel normal and strengthens group unity. In this way, emotion becomes a quiet form of power, shaping how people see social issues and respond to those seen as outsiders.

Particularly during the "refugee crisis" of 2015, anti-immigration attitudes and discourse have become central concerns in public debate in several countries during the past decade (Krzyżanowski, 2017). Especially in Europe, this incident has coincided with a clear global surge in populist and far-right beliefs. These sentiments have subsequently found representation in political parties, which have advanced policies characterized by anti-migrant rhetoric and discriminatory discourse, thereby gaining increasing influence within legislative bodies (Ruzza, 2009). Consequently, anti-migrant discourse and attitudes have been subjects of extensive debate within academia for an extended period.

In this setting, investigating how anti-migration beliefs are expressed on social media and the part emotions play in these debates becomes ever more crucial. While cognitive processes help us to think logically when we examine our situation and create answers, our emotions give us emotional awareness as Jasper (2011) points out. Moreover, emotions and feelings entwine with logical ideas and cognitive processes to always impact and interact with one another (p.286). Aldamen (2023, pp. 3–5) claims that historically, conventional media has been quite important in drawing attention to society problems. But as internet technology develops, people have found online and social media channels to be more suited to tackling these subjects increasingly. Social media also gives viewers choices outside of conventional media discourse. Ahmed et al. (2021) claim that social media provides a platform where individuals may build fresh contacts with others, therefore extending their social networks and impact.

Social media and online networks not only provide a safe forum for networking and communication but also help anti-migration debate and attitude to be promoted via xenophobic rhetoric, therefore polarizing audiences (Van Dijck, 2013; Bognár & Szakács, 2021). Moreover, these platforms have made it possible for material to be quickly shared, first at the national level, and later at the global level. As a result, anti-migrant ideas can now reach a larger geographic audience than conventional media channels might allow (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). In line with the simplicity of obtaining such material on social media, hate speech has become more noticeable and dangerous than in past forms (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2021). Furthermore, the internet has let people construct phony or pseudonymous profiles, allowing them to stay anonymous while participating in social media conversations marked by bigotry and hate (Banks, 2010).

Such material can also affect viewers' emotions, which nationalist and far-right populist political players would take advantage of to profit from voters' worries and concerns. Therefore, especially in view of the continuous spread of this knowledge, these internet networks can become a place to support anti-migrant, hostile, and degrading speech and attitudes. Szakács and Bognár (2021) and Hawdon et al. (2016) claim that social media helps users spread stories loaded with emotional resonance, thereby sparking increased emotional reactions that can result in unfriendly behavior toward migrants. Building on this premise, Ahmed et al. (2024, p. 3) establish a direct link between social media usage and biased emotions concerning immigrant communities. Their findings suggest that individuals who engage more extensively with social media and perceive both realistic and symbolic threats are more likely to harbor anti-migrant sentiments (Ahmed et al., 2024, pp. 12-13).

Due to the proliferation of hate speech on social media, public opinion becomes increasingly fragmented, undermining social cohesion (Schäfer et al., 2021). The sentiment surrounding migration, as a social issue, plays a crucial role; a positive stance may foster social cohesion, integration, and the protection of human rights, whereas a negative sentiment may perpetuate prejudice and inequality (Callens et al., 2015). Social media and online networks are also criticized for fostering divisions through the formation of echo chambers, ultimately contributing to social polarization. This phenomenon enables social media users to reinforce their prejudices by insulating themselves from differing opinions. Consequently, social media can create echo chambers for groups that utilize and promote anti-migrant discourse (Kopacheva and Yantseva, 2022).

There are several organizations, forums, websites, and social media pages mostly support anti-migrant rhetoric. Ekman (2019) contends, for example, that since these groups have grown



rapidly, they have shaped traditional narratives about migration and refugees, so standardizing once radical comments and sentiments. Examining user interactions that support unfavorable sentiments and discrimination against refugees, Ekman (2019) did a case study on the biggest public Swedish Facebook community, "Stand up for Sweden" (SufS). and pointed out that remarks inside this group sometimes showed mistrust and hostility toward political leaders, bureaucrats, traditional media, and the politically correct left. This speech reinforces a "us vs. them" mindset by depicting people as victims of the acts and attitudes of immigrants and refugees, who are often dehumanized in these debates (Ekman, 2019, pp. 612–614). Bloch (2016) similarly looked at the Americans for Legal Immigration Political Action Committees (ALIPAC) website and venue of communication. By aligning themselves against refugees, immigrants, civil liberties institutions, and political leaders, this extreme user group creates identities and removes discriminatory prejudices.

Certain incidents can also trigger anti-migrant or hate discourse on online networks and social media platforms by transforming public attitudes toward marginalized groups (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2021). For instance, Williams and Burnap (2015) analyzed cyber hate and anti-migrant sentiment on social media in the aftermath of the Woolwich terrorist attack in London in 2013. They found that after the initial impact phase (the aftermath of the attack), cyber hate began to decrease during the inventory phase and subsequently subsided during the reaction phase (Williams & Burnap, 2015, pp. 214-215). In a similar vein, Miro-Llinares and Rodríguez-Sala (2016) studied Twitter discourses following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in 2015. This event triggered significant public reactions on social media, highlighting violent communication and hate messages. They reported that violent discourse targeted individuals' honor and dignity, comprising 4.96% of all Twitter messages during that period (Miro-Llinares & Rodríguez-Sala, 2016, pp. 408-410). As another interesting case, Menshikova and Van Tubergen (2022) employed automated text analysis to assess anti-migrant sentiments in 500,000 tweets over one year in the UK. They discovered that anti-migrant emotions and discourse fluctuate over time. Notably, after significant media coverage of immigration issues, users were more likely to express negative sentiments regarding immigration and immigrants.

All these cases highlight the importance of online social networks to shift public sentiment from empathy to animosity toward migrants, leading host country citizens to perceive them as threats to their financial resources and social order. Moreover, the emotional aspect of these social media posts was significant in influencing public attitudes. Besides, their persistent display of negative and humiliating content about migrants may have impacted social media users' emotions (Utych, 2018). These social media comments also displayed the victimization of citizens at the hands of migrants, and dehumanizing statements about migrants (Ekman, 2019). Even in some cases, they are referred to as illegals, terrorists (Gualda & Rebollo, 2016), or as sexually deviant, brutal, aggressive, violent, and scheming perpetrators (Horsti, 2017).

Although earlier studies have covered anti-migrant rhetoric on popular platforms, little is known about the emotional dimension of these exchanges, particularly on Telegram. Among other studies, this one quantifies and contrasts a wide spectrum of emotions in anti-migrant messaging across several national settings.

Methodology

While the detection of unique aspects in anti-migrant discourse on social media is not a novel concept, this research distinguishes itself by primarily focusing on the relationship between

emotions and anti-migrant discourse, specifically within the context of Telegram channels. By concentrating exclusively on the emotions present in these channels, we aim to address a gap in the existing literature. In this context, the paper aims to fill this academic void by leveraging large-scale social media data, coupled with its extensive emotional output, to provide a deeper understanding of how emotions are intertwined with anti-migrant discourse.

Why Telegram?

Our platform choice was not incidental; Telegram was selected due to its increasing role in hosting fringe and far-right political discourse, especially after many such groups faced deplatforming on mainstream social networks. Its technical affordances, public and semi-public channels, minimal moderation, anonymity, and global reach, make it a potent space for examining the emotional logic of online hate narratives. While many studies have been mostly focused on the most used and popular social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter (currently known as X), this study collected its data from Telegram since it has specific and important qualities such as channels, bots, supergroups, advanced sharing tools, both public and private messaging mechanisms, having broadcast or micro-blogging platforms while also acting as ordinary Instant Messaging applications.

On the other hand, Telegram is also mainly at the center of different debates, especially after the censorship against Iran and Russia (Hashemi & Chahooki, 2019; Nobari et al., 2020). Most importantly, especially for this research's main topic, Telegram hosted private and public channels where like-minded individuals gathered, for instance, anti-migrant sentiments. Group members in this environment are not only expressing indignation but also deliberately creating collective emotional climates; often with coordinated messaging that uses current events and controls emotions toward certain targets.⁷

Telegram is different from Twitter or Facebook because it uses closed or semi-public channels and has very little content moderation. As a result, people often speak more openly and with stronger emotions. This environment can affect how manipulation occurs. The emotional tone is often more direct and sometimes more personal, even though users are not interacting in person. In this way, the platform influences how emotions are shown and how certain stories spread.

Data Collection and Processing

This work used a three-stage approach for data collecting and processing: Telegram Group Selection, Labeling, and Analysis. The data was obtained from 3.194.663 messages of identified Telegram channels possibly carrying hostile messages and anti-migrant attitudes. Our choice of Telegram channels came from intentional sampling. For the purpose of this study, anti-migrant rhetoric was defined as messages containing explicit or coded hostility, fear appeals, or dehumanizing generalizations about refugees, identified through manual and model-assisted annotation⁸. We identified public groups and platforms that routinely cited words including "refugee crisis", "illegal migrants", "deportation", and country-specific derogatory rhetoric targeting migrants. Although Telegram groups discuss a variety of political

⁷ This research process was carried out within the scope of the international project titled "Malicious Actors Profiling and Detection in Online Social Networks through Artificial Intelligence (MARTINI-222N310)" supported by The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) 1071 under the CHIST-ERA program of the European Union.



and social topics, only the messages directly related to migration, refugees, or national identity were retained for analysis to maintain thematic coherence and avoid scope dilution. Should they meet the following, channels were included: Over 500 members; public access; continuous anti-migrant rhetoric in at least 30% of recent postings. Channels dormant for more than three months or with mixed messages were off-limits. From every chosen channel, we gathered public messages between January and March 2024. The selection of these channels was based on their relevance, group size, language, and thematic focus, representing a range of countries including Türkiye, the United States and several other European nations.

Upon completion of the data collection process, the dataset was annotated using the Label Studio program, focusing on identifying malicious content. Manual annotation was performed using Label Studio by three trained coders. Each message was labeled for (i) Maliciousness (intent to harm or incite hatred toward refugee group), (ii) Discourse Emotion (presence of emotionally manipulative language e.g., exaggeration, fearmongering) and the Vulnerability (reference to crisis events e.g., crime, conflict) to exploit emotions.

To handle the multilingual dataset, messages in Turkish, German, and French were first translated into English using the DeepL automatic translation API. This step ensured that all texts could be processed within a unified modeling framework while minimizing semantic loss. The translated texts were then analyzed using the RoBERTa-based emotion classification model implemented through the Hugging Face Transformers library. Unicode normalization and basic cleaning were applied before tokenization to maintain encoding consistency. Although translation may slightly alter idiomatic nuances, pilot tests showed that the overall emotional polarity and intensity were preserved across languages. This approach allowed the study to perform consistent emotion scoring at scale while still reflecting the original affective tone of the multilingual data.

The choice of statistical tests and measures was guided by the structure of the dataset and the mixed-method design of the study. Since the analysis combined large-scale emotion scoring with categorical labeling, descriptive statistics were first used to identify overall emotion distributions and co-occurrence patterns. Correlation coefficients were then calculated to explore the relationships between emotional categories and manipulation types. Where comparisons between groups were required, non-parametric tests were preferred due to the uneven distribution of message frequencies across channels. Confidence intervals were added alongside percentage values and correlation coefficients to provide a clearer sense of statistical precision and the reliability of observed effects. This approach allowed the results to be presented in a way that reflects both numerical robustness and the interpretive depth of the qualitative findings.

The gathered remarks were first emotionally classified during the data processing stage. Using an open emotion classification model from the Hugging Face, the emotions noted in the messages; anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, love, optimism, pessimism, sadness, surprise, and trust; were measured. Every comment received points depending on the frequency of these feelings. Using Hugging Face, a multi-label classifier trained on the GoEmotions dataset, the pre-trained model "cardiffnlp/twitter-roberta-base-emotion" generated emotion scores. For 11 emotions, each message, this model generates scores (0–1). Emotions like "optimism" and "pessimism" stayed with us because they fit political debate. We admit that some emotions—such as pessimism and sadness—may coincide but keeping them helps to enable a

sophisticated examination of emotional tone. As the next step, the degrees of maliciousness, discourse emotion, and vulnerability within the messages were calculated, based on the manual annotations performed on the Label Studio platform.

Following this labeling and analysis process, the comments were analyzed across several dimensions concerning emotion distribution such as understanding the emotions and their correlation, and the main targets of anti-migrant emotions. Apart from quantitative emotional classification, we performed a qualitative thematic scan of the dataset to find recurrent story patterns and actual event references acting as emotional stimuli. This hybrid technique helped us to place emotional spikes inside more general sociopolitical debates. Having this methodological basis set, we now focus on the results; first looking at the general emotional terrain of the gathered messages, then investigating how these feelings are distributed among several message kinds and target groups.

We should also note that this paper is part of a larger international research project, and the dimensions of maliciousness and manipulateness are examined in detail in other phases of the broader study. In the present paper, we specifically focus on exploring the emotional dynamics underlying the messages identified as fitting these categories. In this study, a message was coded as manipulative when it displayed emotion contagion, exaggeration, or fearmongering designed to evoke collective emotional responses in line with the large scale taxonomy which was created specifically for this project by the research consortium.⁹ Finally, it is important to also note that this study does not attempt to identify the authors of the analyzed messages or infer their intentions. The focus remains solely on observable textual and emotional patterns, rather than on actor-level motivations or coordinated political behavior.

Concept Clarification

In this study, three interrelated analytical concepts; *manipulativeness*, *maliciousness*, and *vulnerability*; were operationalized to capture different layers of emotionally charged anti-migrant communication. In the previous phases of our project, a message was coded as manipulative when it exhibited *emotion-contagion*, *exaggeration*, or *fearmongering* aimed at evoking collective emotional responses. Manipulative content does not necessarily imply intent or coordinated action but refers to messages that *strategically amplify emotional tone* to reinforce in-group solidarity or hostility toward refugees. Maliciousness represents explicit attempts to harm, insult, or dehumanize refugees or other target groups through derogatory or violent expressions. It captures the degree of openly hostile speech rather than the underlying emotional strategy. Vulnerability refers to the exploitation of crisis-related contexts, such as crime, conflict, or economic strain; to invoke fear or disgust. It highlights how narratives of threat and insecurity are used as emotional triggers to legitimize exclusionary discourse.

These concepts were translated into concrete annotation categories within the Label Studio interface, as summarized in Table 1 below.

⁹ For further information about the research project, related taxonomy and for the other research outputs: <https://martini.etsisi.upm.es>



| CATEGORY | OPERATIONAL DEFINITION | INDICATIVE LINGUISTIC DISCURSIVE FEATURES | EXAMPLE (FROM DATASET) | CODING RANGE |
|----------------------|---|--|---|--|
| MANIPULATIVE | Message displays emotional exaggeration or affective contagion techniques designed to provoke group-level emotional reactions (fear, anger, disgust). Focuses on rhetorical amplification, not verified intent. | - Repetition of emotionally charged adjectives (e.g., “horrific”, “barbaric”) - Fear appeals (“they are invading”, “our children are unsafe”) - Generalization or dramatization of isolated incidents - Visual or linguistic hyperbole | “They come in thousands every day - destroying everything we built!” | Binary (0 = Non-manipulative, 1 = Manipulative) |
| MALICIOUSNESS | Explicit hate or hostility toward refugees or specific groups, aiming to degrade, insult, or exclude them. Includes direct slurs or calls for harm. | - Hate speech or dehumanization (“animals,” “invaders”) - Use of violent verbs (“eliminate,” “cleanse”) - Personal insults or threats | “Send them back or shoot them at the border.” | 3-point scale (0 = None, 1 = Mild, 2 = Explicit) |
| VULNERABILITY | Use of crisis- or threat-based narratives (crime, economy, culture) to evoke negative emotions such as fear and disgust. The focus is on the thematic exploitation of insecurity. | - References to crime, terrorism, disease, or moral decay - Linking individual acts to entire groups - Pseudo-factual claims to justify anxiety (“Refugees cause 80% of crimes”) | “After refugees arrived, robberies doubled - nobody is safe anymore.” | Binary (0 = Absent, 1 = Present) |

Table 1: Annotation Categories and Operational Definitions Used for the Analysis of Manipulative and Emotionally Charged Migration-Related Messages

The annotation process was performed by three trained coders following the above operational definitions. Coding reliability was verified using Cohen’s Kappa, yielding $\kappa = 0.78$ for *maliciousness*, $\kappa = 0.74$ for *manipulative discourse emotion*, and $\kappa = 0.70$ for *vulnerability*. These thresholds indicate substantial inter-annotator agreement. Disagreements were discussed and resolved through consensus sessions using the shared codebook.

What the Data Tells Us: Understanding the Emotions Behind Online Anti-Migrant Rhetoric

Understanding the emotional texture of the anti-migrant speech examined in this paper requires considering Telegram's particular platform design and culture. Unlike popular sites like Facebook or Twitter, Telegram provides semi-private, low-moderation settings where

users may gather in ideologically homogeneous channels free from much outside observation. Content flows unvarnished under the anonymity, asymmetric broadcasting structure (where admins post, while members largely consume), and a lack of algorithmic filtering. Especially in relation to anger, fear, and disgust, these affordances most certainly help to explain the intensity of emotional expression.

| Emotion | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|----------------|
| Disgust | 33.4 |
| Anticipation | 33.2 |
| Anger | 32.4 |
| Fear | 21.1 |
| Optimism | 21.1 |
| Joy | 21.0 |
| Sadness | 17.2 |
| Pessimism | 7.5 |
| Surprise | 6.6 |
| Trust | 5.7 |
| Love | 2.9 |

Table 2: The emotional weights of the analyzed messages

Examining the relationship between manipulative messages and emotions, disgust, anger, and anticipation turned out to be the most often employed ones (Because messages can contain multiple emotions, the total percentage exceeds 100%). Manipulative communications clearly showed 10.4% more frequency of anger than more generic ones. Analogous to this, disgust showed up 9.5% greater in manipulative messaging. Our study shows generally that manipulative messages concentrate mostly on negative emotions as expected, including anger and disgust. Though they seem odd, emotions like optimism and anticipation (which can be both positive and threat-oriented in political discourse) are usually used in manipulative communications, presenting themselves as pleasant feelings meant for particular political objectives or misleading ends. The inverse relationships between emotion scores show an inverse relationship between groups or particular emotions or between emotions themselves. A negative association between "trust" and "anger," for instance, suggests that trust often declines as anger rises.

Indicating a strong trend of emotionally charged negative messaging, the prevalent emotions were disgust (33.4%), anticipation (33.2%), and anger (32.4%), as seen in the Figure 1 emphasizing the emotional asymmetry of the conversation, trust (5.4%) and love (2.9%) were hardly apparent.

Our research also explored the split of emotions in manipulative and non-manipulative messages: anger is 10.4% more often in manipulative material while fear occurs 7.2% more often. These variations imply that high-intensity negative emotions are rather correlated with emotional manipulation. Among all the messages examined, Disgust appeared in approximately one-third of emotion labels across messages (33.4%), closely followed by



anticipation (33.2%) and anger (32.4%). These results imply a dominant emotional profile combining animosity with a prediction of future conflict or disaster. On the other hand, emotions are usually connected with empathy or reconciliation; like love (2.9%) and trust (5.7%). were negligible.

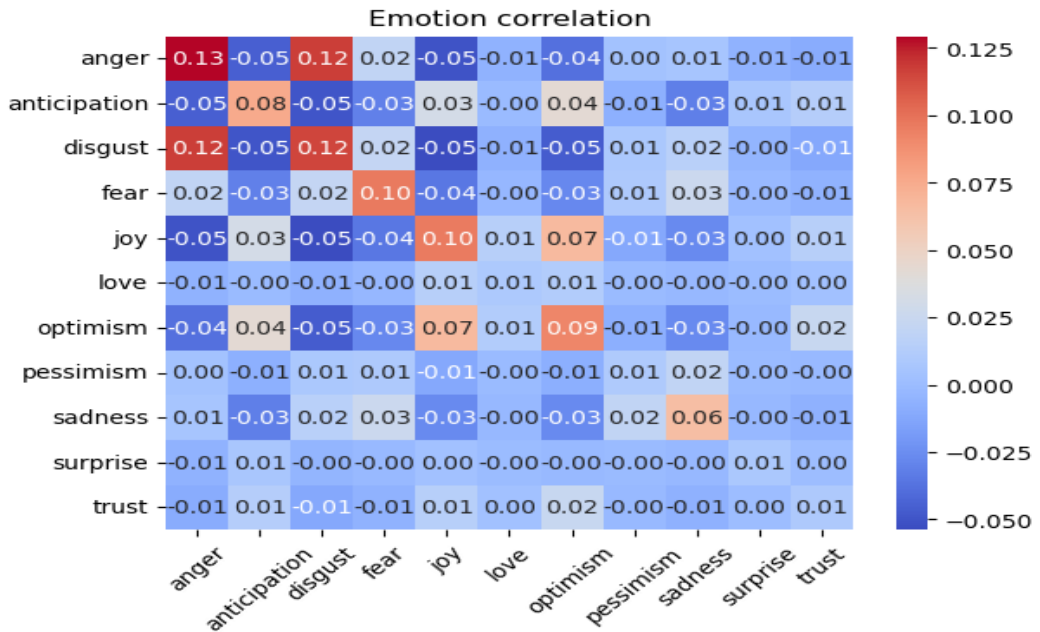


Figure 1: Emotion correlation

Visualized in the heatmap in Figure 1, emotional co-occurrence patterns demonstrate a strong correlation between anger and disgust ($r = 0.62$) and a modest link between disgust and fear ($r = 0.41$). These tendencies fit emotional techniques meant to support negative narratives of a dehumanizing nature. These messages' emotional tone suggests a patterned tendency to incite mistrust, fear, and hate toward immigrants. By intensifying these negative feelings, the debate helps to unite the people of a community and supports anti-migrant policies. The noted strong association between some negative emotions - particularly between anger and disgust (0.62) - showcases how often these feelings are used together to support negativity. Such messages, meant to intensify these emotions even more, can contain manipulative information.

One remarkable note was the independent predominance of fear as a single feeling. This emphasizes how much "fear politics" contributes to producing anti-migrant discourse. One finds that the main and most powerful emotional tool shaping such discourses is fear. Beyond the emotional range, a qualitative study of the message content exposes many recurrent theme "triggers" that seem to intensify particular emotional reactions in anti-migrant rhetoric. Especially public security and crime-related stories dominated the triggers for emotions like fear, disgust, and anger. Messages naming sites within host nations help to localize the threat typically referencing claimed crimes linked to migrants-including violent attacks, sexual assaults, or robberies. Whether confirmed or anecdotal, these tales-which were often

presented with emotionally charged language-served to portray migrants as essentially hazardous.

For instance, one Telegram post claimed that “knife-wielding Arab men” were terrorizing a specific neighborhood, tying the discourse to fears of community breakdown. This type of framing aligns with classic fear-mongering strategies and was often used to stir panic and moral outrage.

“We don't want Arab knife men in our city! With the state-organized mass immigration into our social systems, we have been experiencing a decline in public security and order for years. Especially in Aue, this is getting worse and worse: acts of violence against foreigners in the post office, the murder of a church employee, robbery on senior citizens, exhibitionist acts and theft... The list of problems is already long – but now the repression of the German majority population in Aue is taking on new dimensions!” Telegram post – no: 4256

Emotional language surged in direct response to real-world events, including political decisions about migration, terrorist attacks, or well-reported crimes involving migrants multiple times. Telegram channels grabbed these occurrences quickly and reinterpreted them to support current storylines. Posts following a high-profile violent incident, for instance, usually center the country or religion of the culprit, therefore extending responsibility across whole groups. In these situations, the apparent existential threat emphasized by terror sometimes showed up as a single dominant feeling.

These increases mirror how anti-migrant networks actively use crises to heighten group emotions and foster in-group solidarity through shared outrage or fear, therefore using a kind of emotional opportunism. Though less noticeable, positive emotions including love and optimism were also found; their correlation values were 0.09. Interestingly, these feelings have nothing against immigrants or refugees. Rather, as the message content indicated, they represented support for anti-migrant policies or advocated for tougher measures.

Even when positive emotions like love or optimism emerged, they were often linked to misleading messages that presented nationalist or exclusive policies in an optimism light. One film, *“What if millions of refugees had not been allowed into our country,”* for instance, was set up to inspire optimism about a fictitious “restored past.”

Positive emotions thus served as tools to support harsh governmental demands and justify exclusion, not as a means of expression of empathy. Whether calling for fear, disgust, or selective optimism, this deliberate exploitation of emotional triggers emphasizes a larger trend of emotionally manufactured speech meant to influence public opinion against refugees.

“We shared a 45-second video titled ‘What if millions of refugees had not been allowed into our country?’ on our YouTube channel. Please take 45 seconds to watch it.” Telegram post-no:3542

The emotion of trust did not emerge as a prominent factor nor exhibited high correlations with other emotions. This aligns with the anti-establishment tendencies observed in these groups, marked by distrust towards institutions and policies. The absence of trust in these discussions is, therefore, a predictable outcome.

“I promise, I will personally send (the Syrians) back as the Minister of Interior.” “Wait until 11:00 a.m.” (a repost of the message of a Turkish anti-refugee politician) -Telegram post-no:1846



Lastly, sadness and other emotions exhibited very low correlation values. Considering the harsh tone of anti-migrant discourse and the softer nature of sadness as an emotion, this disparity can be attributed to the contrasting emotions at play. While these patterns reveal the dominant emotional tones across the dataset, a more nuanced picture emerges when we consider how specific emotions are directed toward particular groups or entities within the discourse.

Conclusion

In essence, this research aims to provide evidence on how recurring emotional tones—most notably anger, fear, and disgust; emerge within anti-migrant narratives on Telegram, as observed across multiple linguistic and national contexts. This study does not try to judge motives but follows the patterns through which such emotions appear and spread. What becomes clear is that these emotional reactions are not random; they help keep divisions alive and make harsh or dehumanizing language seem acceptable. Using both computational tools and close reading, the study shows how emotion can work as part of the structure of digital hate. Telegram, with its weak moderation and channel-based design, makes this process even stronger by allowing closed spaces where feelings can circulate with little challenge. Later research might look more closely at how these emotional cues move between users and what social effects they leave behind.

These feelings are deliberately mobilized the dehumanization and emotionally control viewers rather than being stated randomly. The research shows that Telegram's special platform affordances, such as anonymity, low moderation, and ideological homogeneity; help to magnify emotionally charged, exclusive discourse. The study presents a complex picture of how emotions function in digital hate tales by combining qualitative and computational approaches, therefore augmenting current research on online polarization, migration discourse, and emotional manipulation in social media environments.

Particularly in anger, disgust, and fear, with pleasant emotions either conspicuously lacking or conversely used, the examined dataset reveals. Often mixed with fear, emotions like anger and disgust; along with disgust; are purposefully used in debates of immigration as well as in other more general subjects. Manipulative messages use these unpleasant emotions to elicit strong reactions and responses from members of groups. One could understand this approach as an attempt to create a strong "us against them" dichotomy, therefore encouraging group hatred against immigrants. Often connected with manipulative content meant to support the view of immigrants as challenges to social norms is disgust. Although fear usually runs alone, it becomes a crucial element in communications meant to convey a higher sense of threat, such as false allegations about crime, sickness, or economic instability linked to immigration.

Our results empirically support Ahmed et al. (2024)'s observation of a high correlation between social media use and biased emotional views against immigrants. Although their research concentrated on the more general emotional effects of online anti-immigrant information, our data offers a detailed, emotion-by-emotion description of that prejudice in use. Specifically, on Telegram the clustering of anger, fear, and disgust around migrant-related topics shows how emotional polarization is not incidental but rather deliberately instrumentalized in these networks. Likewise, fear was exploited to create migrants as existential dangers, hence strengthening the impression of an irreconcilable out-group. These feelings help and justify exclusionary rhetoric, not alone accompany it.

Still another important trigger pattern focused on resource constraints and financial stress. Posts routinely attacked migrants for overloading social systems, draining state coffers, or displacing local workers. Often appealing to nationalist or populist feelings, these stories set off disgust, pessimism, and expectation. Refugees and migrants were presented as onerous or parasitic, inspiring not only fear but also a feeling of social inequity or deterioration. Relatedly, cultural threat discourses; that of migrants as incompatible with Western or national values; also emerged often. Particularly in respect to religion (e.g., Islamophobia) or gender roles, claiming that migrants' presence compromised women's safety or public morality, these messages tended to inspire anger and disgust. Under the cover of preserving cultural identity, these triggers helped to legitimize exclusive language.

Positive emotions identified in the messages like love and optimism do not indicate empathy for immigrants. Rather, these feelings are deliberately used to support stronger anti-migrant laws or to defend their escalation. This reveals a calculated approach whereby positive emotions serve as manipulative tools to legitimize anti-migrant discourse while negative emotions; anger, disgust, and fear; function as emotional triggers. By means of the efficient use of emotionally charged material, these outrage optimism to increase the validity of anti-migrant policies and viewpoints. Consistent with Wodak's (2015) notion of the "politics of fear," our results reveal how emotionally charged narratives are used by Telegram groups not just to discredit the enemy but also to emotionally connect the in-group. Together with the deliberate employment of "optimism" and "optimism" only in pro-exclusion situations, the near absence of trust, joy, or empathy testifies to a well-chosen emotional ecology. This fits past research on digital echo chambers (Cinelli et al., 2021), in which selective emotional amplification sustains ideological reinforcement.

Another common strategy that we have identified in our study is selective emphasizing of anecdotal evidence. For example, isolated incidents involving immigrants are sometimes used as evidence of a structural issue, therefore supporting generalizations and fears. The study shows generally negative emotional tone of anti-migrant speech, driven by fear, disgust, and anger. These feelings help to confirm prejudice and hatred, hence dividing opinions of immigration. Developing plans that encourage good emotions, and constructive communication can help to overcome negative narratives and support social cohesiveness. This emotional profiling emphasizes how social media channels help to magnify and spread negative opinions about populations, especially immigrants, therefore sustaining them. The predominance of negative emotions like disgust and anger highlights their relevance in preserving a skewed perspective and promoting group unity inside anti-migrant campaigns. The lack of positive feelings points to an echo chamber effect whereby particular kinds of material are selectively disseminated and magnified, hence strengthening negative emotions.

We should also note that this study has a few important limitations that should be acknowledged. The dataset covers only publicly accessible Telegram channels, which means that private or invitation-only spaces; where different or more explicit forms of anti-migrant rhetoric may circulate; remain outside the scope of analysis. In addition, the emotion classification model used here was originally trained on Twitter data, so some differences in tone and expression between platforms may not have been fully captured. Another limitation concerns authorship: because the identity of message creators cannot be verified, no direct claims can be made about individual intent or motivation. Future research could expand this work by examining user networks, cross-platform interactions, and longitudinal dynamics to



explore how emotionally manipulative narratives evolve and spread over time. Additionally, cultural and linguistic nuances may have influenced the expression and detection of emotions across languages, even after translation, which is an inherent limitation of cross-lingual computational analysis.

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