

Us versus Them?

Salvini's targeting of security-based trust as a *divide-et-impera* strategy

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Abstract

Anti-immigrant propaganda, a key element of contemporary far-right populism in Europe, traditionally centres around an 'Us versus Them' dichotomy. The discursive construction of the other involves a negative portrayal of unwanted outgroups, which targets different facets of citizens' trust towards foreigners. Employing a deductive content analysis of Matteo Salvini's posts on X and using the emergent Intergroup Trust Model as a framework, we show that foreigners are cast as the untrustworthy 'Them' in Italy. Our results illustrate that immigrants are depicted as deviant in terms of morality or culture – portrayals that emphasize collective boundaries of belonging and promote the classic 'Us versus Them' divide. Yet, foreigners are more frequently portrayed as a pervasive threat to the personal safety of unprotected and isolated individuals. We interpret this as a *divide-et-impera* approach that may foster a politically profitable 'culture of fear' and fragment society along more insidious fissures than the conventional Us/Them divide.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, far-right political parties across Europe have risen to prominence by centring their campaigns on anti-immigration rhetoric (De Genova, 2018). This influence is particularly pronounced in the online sphere, where the lack of content regulation allows hate speech to flourish (Ekman, 2019). Successful parties like *Alternative for Germany* (Puschmann et al., 2020), *Freedom Party of Austria* (Fuchs, 2018) and Spain's *Vox* (Cervi & Tejedor, 2021) gain momentum by capitalizing on anti-immigrant sentiment in their online campaigns. As these discourses proliferate, concerns about rising racism and its detrimental impact on social cohesion have intensified (Nwabuzo & Schaefer, 2017). In Italy for example, the sharp increase in racial violence following Matteo Salvini's rise to power in 2018 has been attributed to divisive narratives (Castelli Gattinara & O'Connor, 2018). During the 2018 Italian elections, the successful politician was responsible for half of the flagged instances of hate speech online targeting foreigners (Amnesty International, 2018), illustrating how far-right parties thrive by dividing society. Given this pervasive online activity, this study specifically focuses on digital propaganda. The unique characteristics of online platforms—their capacity for direct communication bypassing traditional media gatekeepers, the rapid and wide dissemination of emotionally charged content, and the formation of echo chambers that amplify specific narratives (Ekman, 2019)—make

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them pivotal arenas for the spread of far-right populist messages and the mobilization of anti-immigrant sentiment to the larger public.

Far-right propaganda often relies on fearmongering to marginalize immigrants. This ‘politics of fear’ (Wodak, 2015) instrumentalizes discourses of exclusion, and reinforces societal division by drawing imaginary lines of belonging, contraposing a ‘community of values’ (Us, the White majority) to threatening foreigners (Them). Particularly, negative portrayals of immigrants aim to foster a perception of Them as a multifaceted threat (Gagliano, 2021), thereby attempting to deepen social divisions and weaken intergroup trust, the ‘social glue’ that binds communities together (Visintin et al., 2017).

Indeed, when politicians portray immigrants as ‘untrustworthy others’, citizens’ trust in foreigners is targeted along distinct dimensions. The Intergroup Trust Model (IGT-Model; Kappmeier et al., 2021a) helps capture this complexity by identifying five different dimensions of trust. Through this framework, we can analyze how politicians strategically target specific aspects of trust, whether by questioning immigrants’ moral character (integrity-based trust) or their cultural incompatibility (compatibility-based trust). Examining how populist leaders leverage these trust dimensions may expose their role in potentially fostering societal divisions and weakening cohesion.

This paper examines the case of Italy, focusing on Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League party—the movement historically recognized as “‘own[ing]’ the immigration issue” in Italy (Barisione, 2020, p. 213). Salvini is not only widely acknowledged as a “typical immigration issue entrepreneur” (Barisione, 2020, p. 216) in Europe, but he is also a major political player. He served as Italy’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior from 2018 to 2019, and as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure and Transport since 2022. Often compared to other populists like Santiago Abascal (Cervi & Tejedor, 2021) or even Donald Trump (Lorenzetti, 2020), he has driven his success through a strident anti-immigration campaign (Albertazzi et al., 2018), inspiring other right-wing leaders such as Giorgia Meloni to follow suit (Puleo & Piccolino, 2022). Notably, Salvini has a consolidated status as a ‘political influencer’, strategically exploiting social media for his political campaigns. His online presence is dominant across different platforms. He was the most followed European politician on Facebook in 2019, the first Italian leader to join Tik Tok, and some of his X hashtags have trended as top topics in the country over the years, consolidating his reputation as “one of the most effective and tech-savviest campaigners, among the most active and successful political leaders not only in Italy but throughout Europe” (Bitonti et al., 2023, p. 381). Salvini, therefore, serves as a pertinent example of how online far-right populist discourse can attempt to undermine intergroup trust, portraying foreigners as ‘untrustworthy others’.

2. Literature review

2.1. Far-right populist portrayals of immigrants in Europe: Us versus Them

At its core, populism can be conceptualized as an ideology positing a Manichaeian conflict between a pure and unified ‘people’ and a composite adversary comprising ‘elites’ and ‘dangerous others’. This adversarial coalition is depicted as “depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice”

(Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 3). Particularly, contemporary far-right populism is characterized by a reactionary nationalism that utilizes racialized narratives to define the nature of the ‘pure people’ along lines of colour while pitting them against the foreigner as the dangerous ‘other’ (De Genova, 2018). It is this anti-outgroup component of populism, specifically anti-immigrant narratives, that constitutes the focus of the present work. Anti-immigrant narratives create a stark divide by drawing imaginary boundaries of belonging rooted in shared cultural and moral values (Gagliano, 2021), thereby distinguishing the virtuous, united ‘Us’ (the White majority) from ‘Them’ (non-White foreigners; Wodak, 2008; Van Dijk, 2013). By emphasizing common culture and morality (Gagliano, 2021), populists enhance a sense of ingroup homogeneity (Tajfel, 1978), creating a ‘community of value’ (Anderson, 2013). This community is defined by “common ideals and (exemplary) patterns of behavior expressed through ethnicity, religion, culture, or language” (Anderson, 2013, p. 2). Furthermore, the discursive tightening of ingroup boundaries parallels the exclusion of the outgroup (Tajfel, 1978).

Exclusionary narratives of populist far-right movements are often shaped by the ‘politics of fear’ (Wodak, 2015), a scaremongering communication strategy that aims to manipulate public opinion and legitimize exclusionary agendas to gain the popular vote. Through the politics of fear, populists deliberately mobilize public anxieties and insecurities—whether real or manufactured—to transform complex societal issues (e.g., economic crises) into simple ones (e.g., immigrants stealing jobs and exploiting national welfare) and offer their voters readily digestible, often simplistic solutions (e.g., strict anti-immigrant policies). Thus, by employing emotionally charged language and feeding collective fears, they can sway public sentiment towards anti-immigrant positions, increasing their political legitimacy and garnering support. Through the strategic implementation of such fear-based rhetoric, far-right populists crystallize their anti-immigrant positions, depicting foreigners as a multifaceted threat (De Genova, 2018).

At a cultural level, immigrants are deemed a ‘threat’ to the “established symbolic environment of a country’s majority population, which is expressed by shared cultural practices including religion, values, clothing habits, traditions, and language” (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017, p. 609). For example, Muslims are portrayed as “inimical to the White (Christian, ‘European’) identity of ‘the West’” (De Genova, 2018, p. 1776) and frequently depicted as potential extremists who not only resist integration, but also seek to ‘Islamize’ the continent. Such rhetoric promotes the idea of an inevitable ‘clash of cultures’, framing immigrants as incompatible with European values (Pasamonik, 2017).

Morally, immigrants are often depicted as ‘deviant and perverted’ (e.g., De Genova, 2018), ‘deceptive’ (Arsenijević et al., 2018, p. 92), ‘uncivilized’ and ‘immoral’ (Durante et al., 2017). Their actions are also framed as being particularly damaging to the majority’s society. For instance, sexual offences committed by Black foreigners against White women are framed as more severe moral transgressions than similar crimes within the same ethnic group, constituting a double offence that harms both the primary victim and society’s broader moral values (Giuliani et al., 2019). Much like cultural violations, depictions of moral transgressions reinforce the exclusion of immigrants by appealing to shared societal values and collective principles of belonging.

However, the negative portrayals of immigrants extend beyond cultural and moral violations to depict them as physical threats (Bauman, 2007; Critcher, 2011).

Stereotypes that connect the ‘other’ with subhuman and violent traits (De Genova, 2018) are exploited to depict immigrants as “murderous beasts” (Giuliani et al., 2019, p. 161) and as “criminal, hypersexual, and dangerous” (Arsenijević et al., 2018, p. 92). Negative portrayals also equate the arrival of immigrants with invasions, and falsely link them to disease outbreaks (Bitonti et al., 2023) and terror attacks (De Genova, 2018), reinforcing the perception that immigrants threaten the physical safety of European citizens (Ekman, 2019).

The multifaceted portrayal of immigrants as a threat—whether cultural, moral, or physical—reinforces the stark division between ‘Us and Them’ and can serve as a powerful tool to attempt to deepen existing wounds in the social fabric, as will be illustrated in the following section.

2.2. Negative portrayals of Them as a matter of (targeted) trust

Negative characterizations of foreigners through European nationalisms can impact social trust and cohesion. Cervi and colleagues (2020) argue that when politicians adopt a racist stance, they become “the major source of the acquisition and reproduction of racist prejudices and ideologies” (p. 4). Political narratives that frame immigrants as “threatening others” (Ekman, 2019, p. 609) solidify negative perceptions among the public, turning temporary available cognitions into enduring beliefs and heightening prejudice (Schemer, 2014). Research on mass media (e.g., Schemer & Meltze, 2020) not only confirms that exposure to negative portrayals of foreigners heightens prejudicial attitudes but also proposes that this process is primarily driven through the erosion of intergroup trust (Visintin et al., 2017).

Intergroup trust, the ‘social glue’ binding communities (Schmid et al., 2014, p. 666), plays a crucial role in this process. For example, Visintin and colleagues (2017) show that negative media depictions of immigrants increase prejudice among Italians primarily by eroding their trust in foreigners (p. 189). This erosion of trust is consistent with social psychology findings, which link trust and distrust between groups to positive (Foddy et al., 2009) and negative expectations towards outgroups, respectively (Sitkin & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018).

Politicians, as primary definers of immigration in society (Cervi et al., 2020), reinforce negative expectations (i.e., distrust) through anti-immigrant discourses that exacerbate the Us/Them divide. By depicting foreigners negatively, these discourses cast them as ‘untrustworthy others’ from various perspectives (e.g., moral or cultural). This is relevant because intergroup trust is essential for social cohesion and social harmony (Kelman, 2010; Voca et al., 2023), and its erosion inevitably leads to disruptions in the social fabric, such as increased prejudice (e.g., Visintin et al., 2017). Exclusionary discourses of belonging structured around the Us/Them divide can thus target trust, in an attempt to promote negative expectations and increase prejudice.

Trust is not a monolithic concept; it is elusive and complex (Kenworthy et al., 2016). While its significant potential for social cohesion is recognized, understanding precisely how it may be undermined—for instance, through politicians’ use of social media—often remains a challenge as a consequence of its multidimensional nature.

Trust multidimensionality has been recognized and addressed across multiple fields and contexts. For example, Mayer et al. (1995) developed the integrative model of

organizational trust, identifying competence, integrity, and benevolence as key antecedents for individuals to trust each other within organizational settings. Similarly, Yamagishi (2011) proposed a model based on two components (i.e., attitudinal and behavioural trust) to explain general trust, that is the *general* disposition of individuals to trust others (Yamagishi et al., 2015). However, these foundational models do not adequately capture the nuances of particularized trust that can be targeted by digital propaganda. To account for specific intergroup and societal dynamics, a multidimensional trust framework that integrates intergroup context beyond mere general dispositions is required.

In order to explore how politicians' digital propaganda can target particularized dimensions of the trust a group (e.g., White Italians) has in a *specific* other (i.e., Black immigrants), we focus on attitudinal trust (i.e., beliefs, expectations or feelings towards a *specific* group). Attitudinal trust can broadly be broken down into two components: cognitive and affective trust. Cognitive trust captures a rationalized approach to trustworthiness (Dunn et al., 2012), frequently conceptualized through competence-based and integrity-based dimensions (Seppänen et al., 2007). Competence-based trust focuses on the evaluation of a party's capabilities, while integrity-based trust reflects expectations of adherence to principles and commitments. Complementary to cognitive trust, affective trust operates on a more relational and intuitive level, capturing whether a positive emotional connection can be established with others (Legood et al., 2023). Broadly characterized by concepts such as emotional attachment and expectations of mutual concern and support (Legood et al., 2023), affective trust is associated by some research with the dimension of compassion-based trust (e.g., Dunn et al., 2012).

Yet, with most research on attitudinal trust focusing on organizational settings, a multidimensional model that specifically addresses the intergroup context and allows us to analyze attitudinal trust towards *specific* groups is needed. The emergent Intergroup Trust Model (IGT-Model) provides such a framework by incorporating the cognitive and affective components in a comprehensive yet parsimonious model of multidimensional trust. Focusing on the intergroup context, the IGT-Model is well-suited to disentangle the facet of trust targeted by the multifaceted portrayals of foreigners disseminated by far-right politicians, as illustrated in the following section.

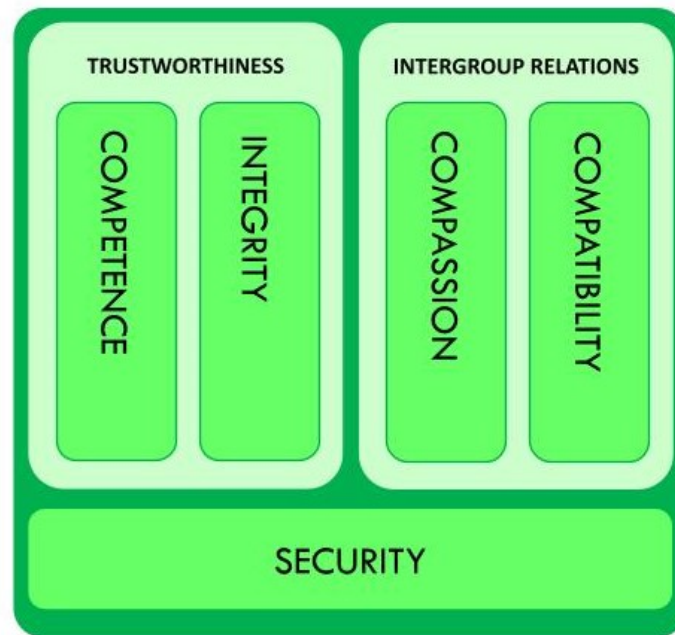
2.3. A framework for the negative portrayal of 'Them': The Intergroup Trust Model

The Intergroup Trust Model (IGT-Model) provides a robust framework for measuring intergroup trust across various contexts. Its theoretical foundation emerged from intergroup research, beginning with qualitative investigations in post-conflict Moldova-Transnistria. These initial empirical findings indicated that a comprehensive assessment of intergroup trust required seven distinct dimensions (Kappmeier, 2016). Building on this qualitative groundwork, the model continued to be applied in qualitative assessments of trust dynamics between former conflict parties (Kappmeier et al., 2021b). This foundational work was subsequently expanded through quantitative validation studies using factor analysis (Kappmeier et al., 2021a). These studies refined the model to a five-dimensional structure, consistently yielding better model fit statistics

than alternative structural configurations. Further quantitative studies, for example exploring trust between police and different ethnic communities (Kappmeier et al., 2019; Kappmeier & Fahey, 2022), confirmed the distinct predictive capacity of the five proposed trust dimensions.

The IGT-Model posits that trust between groups encompasses five distinct, non-hierarchical dimensions: competence, integrity, compatibility, compassion, and security (See Figure 1). Competence and integrity can be broadly clustered as cognitive trust, while compassion and compatibility represent affective trust. Security-based trust uniquely interconnects with all other dimensions, incorporating both cognitive and affective components and theoretically connecting to vulnerability—a core element of trust. Although security-based trust demonstrates higher cross-loadings with other dimensions, empirical evidence supports its treatment as a distinct factor with independent measurement properties.

Figure 1. The multidimensional Intergroup Trust Model



Source: Kappmeier et al., 2021a

The first two dimensions represent perceived *characteristics* that render the outgroup trustworthy to the ingroup. These are competence (i.e., perceived skill and efficiency of the outgroup) and integrity (i.e., perceived fairness and just moral values of the outgroup). Conversely, compassion- and compatibility-based trust hinge on the nature of the ingroup's perceived *relationship* between groups. Such a relationship can be perceived as compassionate (i.e., the outgroup is perceived as being concerned for the needs of the ingroup and willing to help) and based on compatibility in terms of shared values, customs, and lifestyles. Lastly, security-based trust reflects the extent of safety experienced by the ingroup. While each dimension possesses its distinct significance, security assumes a foundational role by underlying the other four components.

The multidimensional approach of the IGT-Model acknowledges the complexity of trust and can assist researchers in identifying which specific components are eroded in intergroup relations (Kappmeier, 2016; Kappmeier et al., 2021a; Kappmeier et al., 2021b). This model provides a framework for analyzing how politicians discursively construct ‘Them’ by disentangling how such portrayals target different dimensions of trust. For instance, portraying immigrants as violators of cultural values attempts to erode citizens’ compatibility-based trust, while consistently depicting foreigners as ‘immoral’ tries to negatively influence integrity-based trust. Our study explores the critical issue of how far-right online propaganda might foster societal divisions through the negative portrayal of foreigners. By examining this phenomenon, we aim to shed light on how exclusionary narratives address intergroup trust, potentially undermining social cohesion.

We focus on Matteo Salvini’s social media presence, serving as a case study. Using the IGT-Model as our guiding framework, we pose the following research question: which dimensions of trust are targeted in Salvini’s posts as he discursively constructs foreigners as the ‘untrustworthy Them’?

Through a qualitative content analysis of Salvini’s posts on X, we explore how anti-immigrant rhetoric attempts to erode trust across multiple dimensions. This research contributes to our understanding of how online far-right propaganda leverages these trust dimensions to exploit the ‘Us vs Them’ divide, in an attempt to influence public perception and potentially exacerbate prejudice and societal divides in contemporary democracies. By analyzing trust targeting through a multidimensional lens, rather than treating trust as a monolithic construct, we can better understand how political rhetoric systematically depicts intergroup dynamics.

3. Methodology

We analyzed Matteo Salvini’s official X page (@matteosalvinimi). We chose to look at X’s posts for several key reasons. Firstly, lacking traditional journalistic gatekeepers, X provides unfiltered political discourse (Richardson Jr., 2017). Secondly, X functions globally as a prominent news media platform rather than solely a social network, where posts significantly influence the agenda of traditional media (Bentivegna et al., 2022). Thirdly, the platform frequently operates as an echo chamber (Cinelli et al., 2021), prioritizing the dissemination of emotionally charged posts, and thus creating a natural ecosystem for the propagation of fear-based anti-immigrant content (Ekman, 2019). Fourthly, despite general similarities between Salvini’s posts across platforms, X’s character limit offers the advantage of condensing messages into concise, bite-sized information, making core meaning and rhetorical strategies more readily apparent for analysis. A final practical consideration was specifically linked to compatibility with our available software, NVivo, and its extension, NCapture —a tool that allowed for efficient data acquisition from X, a function not consistently available for other platforms like Facebook at the time of data collection. These factors collectively established X as an ideal and relevant platform for examining Salvini’s depictions of immigrants online.

Our data consisted of posts published between June and December 2019, downloaded via NCapture. The post collection began immediately *after* the European Parliament elections and during a period well removed from national elections,

suggesting that the posts reflect Salvini's broader communication strategy rather than campaign-driven rhetoric. Yet this timeframe notably includes the peak of Salvini's popularity (reaching 37% in July 2019; Politico, n.d.) and the subsequent beginning of his political downturn with the governmental crisis of August 2019, which led to his fall from office in September. Despite the instalment of a left-centre government, he regained power in the 2022 national elections. Such a specific timeframe for data collection was random and was determined by practical limitations, as the NCapture tool could not readily access older posts at the point of collection. Thus, data were collected contemporaneously as posts were being published and political events were unfolding. While political propaganda is inherently contingent and context-dependent, the collection of seven months' worth of posts, coupled with Salvini's historically consistent anti-immigrant stance (e.g., Bitonti et al., 2023), lends confidence to the representativeness of his rhetorical approach within this dataset.

The posts were analyzed manually using NVivo. Of 5005 total posts, using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), we identified 941 posts (18.80%) addressing immigration.¹ Within these, 267 posts (5.34% of total; 28.37% of immigration-related posts) specifically targeted foreign groups or immigration in a specific manner, while the remainder discussed immigration as more vaguely problematic (e.g., the numerosity of the outgroup was mentioned).

The IGT-Model served as a framework for deductive content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to examine how these posts target different dimensions of trust. Content analysis, historically used in analyzing political propaganda, enables systematic exploration of large textual datasets to identify meaningful patterns and summarize information into categories and frequencies (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This method allowed the comparison of category frequencies, such as contrasting posts that frame immigrants as untrustworthy along the five different trust dimensions of the IGT-Model.

To ensure validity, the coder conducted recursive data analysis through multiple overlapping waves, developing a structured codebook (see Appendix B) that outlined the five trust dimensions and detailed coding rules (Krippendorff, 2004). The use of a validated model addressed structural validity concerns (Riffe et al., 2019), while sampling validity was achieved by selecting posts targeting immigrants published over a seven-month period. Additionally, to enhance semantic validity, the post was established as the primary unit of coding, thereby preventing context-related ambiguities, and ensuring a robust analysis (Krippendorff, 2004).

For reliability assessment, a second coder was recruited and thoroughly trained. Training involved an explanation of the theoretical background and codebook, followed by joint coding of 25% of the raw data. Subsequently, the second coder analyzed an additional 25% of raw data in the presence of the first coder, with results reviewed collaboratively. Upon completion of this training, the second coder independently coded 20% of the remaining posts over the following days. All posts, for both training steps and independent coding, were randomly selected from the dataset; however, only the independently coded posts were used to establish reliability. As codes were not mutually

¹ This study was part of a larger research project, which aimed to analyze both the content of Salvini's online propaganda and its effects on Italian citizens.

exclusive (i.e., a single post could target more than one trust dimension), percent agreement was used as the reliability measure. Yet, to mitigate the potential inflation of agreement rates, agreement required the exact matching of all trust dimensions identified in each post. This approach ensured a more robust and conservative assessment of intercoder reliability and yielded a satisfactory and reliable percent agreement of 83% (Krippendorff, 2004).

The following section presents results from our theory-driven content analysis of 267 Salvini posts, demonstrating which trust dimensions were targeted in his framing of immigrants as the untrustworthy Them.

4. Results

In the first sections of the results, we present the quantitative frequency findings, before qualitatively exploring how each dimension of intergroup trust is targeted by Salvini's portrayals of immigrants.

4.1. Quantitative frequency results

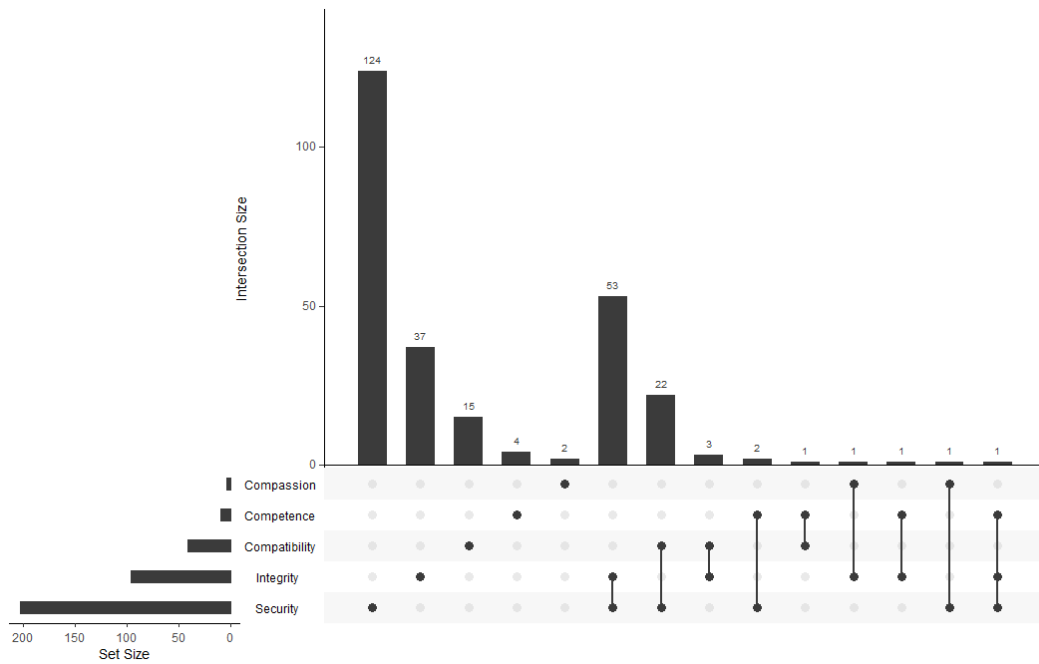
The frequency analysis offers three key insights into Salvini's portrayal of immigrants. First, it indicates whether all, some, or none of the trust dimensions are targeted by the propaganda. Second, it delivers quantifiable data on which dimensions are most addressed by the online rhetoric. Lastly, it captures patterns of co-occurrence of multiple dimensions, showing whether negative portrayals target one or multiple dimensions simultaneously. Together, these results offer an initial understanding of how Salvini's online propaganda frames immigrants as untrustworthy.

To address our first and second point, as shown in Table 1, Salvini's messages target all five trust dimensions of the Intergroup Trust Model, though not equally. Security-based trust was the most frequently coded component (76.03% of the posts), followed by integrity (35.96%) and compatibility (15.36%). Competence (3.37%) and compassion (1.50%) were only marginally addressed. Hence, Salvini's portrayals primarily frame immigrants as dangerous, dishonest, and incompatible with Italian values.

Table 1. Frequency of Salvini's portrayals of immigrants targeting different intergroup trust dimension (N posts = 267)

Security	Posts targeting the dimension	203	
	Percentage over N posts	76.03%	
		Posts targeting the dimension alone	Posts targeting the dimension alongside others (co-occurrence)
	Frequency	124	79
	Percentage	61.08%	38.92%
Integrity	Posts targeting the dimension	96	
	Percentage over N posts	35.96%	
		Posts targeting the dimension alone	Posts targeting the dimension alongside others (co-occurrence)
	Frequency	37	59
	Percentage	38.54%	61.46%
Compatibility	Posts targeting the dimension	41	
	Percentage over N posts	15.36%	
		Posts targeting the dimension alone	Posts targeting the dimension alongside others (co-occurrence)
	Frequency	15	26
	Percentage	36.59%	63.41%
Competence	Posts targeting the dimension	9	
	Percentage over N posts	3.37%	
		Posts targeting the dimension alone	Posts targeting the dimension alongside others (co-occurrence)
	Frequency	4	5
	Percentage	44.44%	55.56%
Compassion	Posts targeting the dimension	4	
	Percentage over N posts	1.50%	
		Posts targeting the dimension alone	Posts targeting the dimension alongside others (co-occurrence)
	Frequency	2	2
	Percentage	50.00%	50.00%

Figure 2. Patterns of Intergroup Trust dimensions targeted in Salvini’s posts



Note: the UpSet plot, generated using R-4.5.0, illustrates the frequency of posts that simultaneously target multiple dimensions of intergroup trust. The horizontal bars on the left display the overall frequency of posts that targeted each trust dimension, whether alone or in combination with others (Set Size). The vertical bars at the top represent the number of posts that targeted specific combinations of trust dimensions (Intersection Size). The five leftmost vertical bars illustrate posts that addressed only one trust dimension, clearly identified by the black dot below each bar; the other vertical bars show the patterns of co-occurrence of multiple dimensions, as indicated by the connected dots below the bars.

Approximately one-third of the posts targeted multiple trust dimensions (see Figure 2). More than half the posts addressing integrity- (56.25%) and compatibility-based trust (53.66%) also targeted security. Notably, integrity was co-coded in over a quarter of security-related posts (26.60%), highlighting the intertwined nature of the two dimensions. Hence, while Salvini’s posts predominantly depicted foreigners as a danger to the safety of Italians, moral transgressions were also frequently emphasized alongside the idea that immigrants posed a threat.

We noted three key results from the frequency analysis. First, Salvini’s posts predominantly targeted security-, integrity- and compatibility-based trust. Second, despite being short, about one-third of messages addressed two dimensions simultaneously, highlighting the efficiency of political communicators like Salvini. Third, security-based trust was the most consistently targeted dimension, both for overall frequency (see Set Size in Figure 2) and for posts addressing one dimension only (see Intersection size in Figure 2), and was the only dimension to appear more often on its own (61.08%) than in combination with other dimensions (38.92%; cf Table 1). This indicates that Salvini primarily portrayed immigrants as a threat to the safety of Italians rather than focusing on other aspects.

4.2. Qualitative results

While the frequency results provide a first sense of which trust dimensions were mostly targeted by Salvini, they do not provide any insight yet on how each dimension is addressed by the politician. Qualitative analyses of the posts targeting each dimension are reported below, providing a more nuanced understanding of Salvini's strategy to portray foreigners as the untrustworthy 'Them'.²

4.2.1. Security

Security-based trust was the most frequently targeted dimension (coded in 76.03% of the posts), with Salvini portraying immigrants as a significant threat. In addition to presenting foreigners as economic threats siphoning resources away from citizens (e.g., welfare money), he consistently associated immigrants with severe crimes, including homicide, rape, involvement in foreign mafias, and terrorist attacks abroad (e.g., "an illegal Gambian pusher [...] beats a policeman to a pulp because he had caught him red-handed dealing drugs", 22 June). Immigrants were depicted as relentless, ruthless, and aggressive criminals that are "bringing war to our homeland" (22 June). Videos often vividly depicted the brutality of immigrant-perpetrated violence, presented as senseless and attributed to an inherent aggressiveness ("an illegal immigrant from Togo pushes a girl down the stairs and punches a lady, for NO REASON", 12 September; "a criminal immigrant from Mali [...] punches a girl in the face. Incredible, unjustified, chilling violence", 3 October), with Salvini opposing different explanations or mitigating factors ("end the narrative of the poor madman: he is a violent [individual]!", 12 October). Thus, while not always explicitly stated, Salvini's posts framed immigrants as criminals and, perhaps more insidiously, suggested that they possess an intrinsic brutal nature.

Notably, the victims of immigrants' violent attacks were not limited to vulnerable groups, such as women and children. Salvini stressed that *any* citizen is at risk, including middle-class men (e.g., traders), and even law enforcement (e.g., "Kicks and punches to policemen, an illegal immigrant arrested in Naples. A few months ago, in the same station, the tobacconist punched by an asylum seeker lay dying", 30 July), making the threat posed by foreigners a pervasive phenomenon. This pervasive threat strategically justified and legitimized stricter anti-immigrant measures and harsher penalties for foreigners, deserving of "zero tolerance, no pity" (22 June). Beyond individuals, immigration itself (often implying *illegal* immigration) was portrayed as a national security threat. Salvini often associated immigration with insecurity by emphasizing the magnitude of the phenomenon with alarmist tones ("'White Europe is dead' [...] Open the harbours and let them invade us [...]??", 4 July) or by promoting measures such as the 'Immigration and Security Decrees'.

Importantly, an unexpected finding in posts targeting security-based trust was that the pervasively dangerous group of foreigners primarily posed a threat not to a united 'Us' (as postulated by populism literature), but to disaggregated units who were left isolated, vulnerable, and unprotected by the system. An analysis of security-targeting messages revealed a striking scarcity of references addressing Italian collectivity, with words such as "Italian/s" (26 posts), "us" (5), and "our" (25) appearing infrequently, and

² For a composite summary of the different trust components, see Appendix A.

often in posts where integrity or compatibility were also targeted. Instead, the majority of posts framed foreigners as posing a pervasive threat to individuals, with citizens depicted as abandoned by state protections. For instance, while police were shown to be “everyday risk[ing] their own safety by facing [immigrant] unscrupulous criminals” (29 July), the Italian justice system was portrayed as biased in favour of foreigners – “not [administering] the justice of a civilized country..” (31 July) – with judges acting too leniently towards them. Conversely, citizens “who dared to defend themselves or their families” were unfairly punished, leading to “so many lives [...] taken or ruined”, (28 December). This narrative conveys a prevailing sense of frustration and helplessness among the population, particularly following Salvini’s fall from office in September. Posts shared interviews where citizens voiced concerns about foreigners’ behaviour and the perceived increase in ‘urban decay’, labelling it a new ‘Middle Ages’ marked by violence attributed to immigrants (15 December). Salvini’s rhetoric consistently depicted Italians as living in fear: at the mercy of violent immigrants, citizens become “hostages of violent robbers, drug dealers, drug addicts, and illegal immigrants” (11 December), and spend years “suffering crime, degradation and violence” (12 June) at the hands of foreigners. This framing effectively reverses the traditional power dynamic, portraying Italian citizens as the segregated and vulnerable segment of society living in fear of brutal immigrants who, in such a narrative, act with impunity.

In summary, not only was security-based trust most frequently coded (i.e., targeted), but Salvini portrayed immigrants as an all-encompassing and pervasive threat to Italian citizens. Notable though, was how this threat did not seem to be constructed by opposing a group of violent foreign ‘Them’ against a group of victimized yet united ‘Us’. Instead, immigration is described as a more ominous and pervasive danger than merely a group of violent individuals. At the same time, the citizens seem to be described as scattered, unprotected victims—a multitude of isolated ‘I’ fearing a threat so great that even law enforcement is endangered. In this way, immigrants seem to become a *personal* rather than a social threat as they menace the personal safety of individual citizens rather than a cohesive ingroup. This idea, while unexpected, hints to the possibility that the anti-immigration propaganda might be more detrimental than originally hypothesized, fracturing society beyond the conventional ‘Us versus Them’ dichotomy by pitting a dangerous outgroup against isolated and unprotected citizens (‘I’). We return to this observation in our discussion.

4.2.2. Integrity

While integrity-based trust was the second most frequently coded dimension (35.96%), it was closely intertwined with security-based trust (56.25% of posts addressing integrity also targeted security). When coded alone, integrity was addressed by associating immigrants with misconduct violating Italian moral standards (e.g., “a gang of Moroccans who did business with illegal immigration involving fake marriages and prostitution was dismantled”, 25 July). Foreigners were generally characterized as disrespectful and ill-mannered (e.g., “two Senegalese men insulted and shoved local police officers”, 20 June), and associated with non-violent street crimes, encompassing a range of non-violent offences related to drugs consumption, disorderly conduct, and fraud-related crimes such as selling counterfeit products or forging documents (e.g., a video of a Black

man, probably intoxicated, changing clothes on an underground train in Milan, is titled “Milan’s continuous degradation”, 23 November).

Integrity-based trust was also targeted by challenging the legitimization of the refugee status. Posts accusing foreigners of deceptive practices, such as pretending to be entitled to refugee status, were cited as evidence to support the claim that immigrants are dishonest and taking advantage of the goodwill of Italians (“3/4 of the people who come here are not fleeing any war”, 30 October; “Fake refugees from ‘now safe’ countries (!) who, in order to stay in Italy, pretend to be gay (some have wives and children...)”, 25 October).

When intertwined with security-based trust, integrity was targeted by associating foreigners with violent street crimes (e.g., offences against vulnerable individuals) or sexual misconduct, violating Italian moral norms: (“Recently landed in Italy, an illegal immigrant [was] arrested for sexual assault on a 10-year-old girl. What a horror, disgusting!!!”, 14 September). Sexual crimes were emphasized, allowing moral misconduct to be characterized as a threat by showcasing episodes of sexual harassment, abuse, public undressing and masturbation (e.g., “in Reggio Emilia a foreigner groped a policewoman in uniform and then performed obscene acts”, 13 June). In summary, Salvini’s portrayal of immigrants targets integrity-based trust by highlighting cases of dishonest, hateful, and inappropriate behaviour, hinting that the lack of integrity is an intrinsic, unchangeable characteristic of foreigners—an attribute inherently considered unacceptable in a ‘civilized’ country.

Overall, integrity-based trust, unlike security-based trust, is targeted by highlighting the Us/Them dichotomy: immigrants are described as violators of a moral code Italian citizens share. Thus, ingroup and outgroup are here defined by lines of moral conduct. A divide is established along a moral barricade, which separates deviant foreigners from morally abiding citizens: attempting to erode integrity-based trust serves to both establish a cohesive and symbolic ‘community of values’ and at the same time exclude from it its violators. But *moral* values are not the only values that Salvini targets. The politician’s discourse of exclusion also revolves around violation of ‘the’ Italian lifestyle, thus addressing compatibility-based trust.

4.2.3. Compatibility

Compatibility-based trust, the third most frequently coded dimension (15.36%), highlighted immigrants’ perceived incompatibility with Italian society. Salvini portrayed foreigners as incapable of integrating into Italian culture (“what integration can there be without respect for our history and our culture?”, 28 December; “they preach tolerance, but only for those who think like them”, 17 December). Cultural clashes were emphasized, suggesting that immigrants not only fail to adapt to Italian customs but actively disrespect or attack them (“yet another shocking episode of hatred towards our culture and towards Christmas”, 30 December).

In addition, compatibility-based trust was also frequently interwoven with security-based trust, characterizing the portrayed incompatibility of lifestyles as a threat to the ingroup (53.66% of posts targeting compatibility also addressed security). The culture, religion, and lifestyle of immigrants are presented as threats to Italian identity, customs, and traditions. Religious differences, particularly between the predominantly Christian

Italian society and Muslim immigrants, were a significant focus (e.g., “If you want to cover your wife with the burqa GO BACK TO YOUR HOME”, 15 September). For instance, Salvini criticized welcoming initiatives (“In Bologna the bishop launches the ‘welcoming’ [porkless] tortellino... But in your opinion, if an Italian went to an Arab country to teach them how to eat, drink and pray, how would they react?”, 1 October). He also protested against the secularization of public institutions during Christmas festivities as unfair and outrageous, framing it as “an unacceptable cultural and value submission” to immigrants (21 December). The ‘culturalization of threat’ allows Salvini to construct a rhetoric of self-defence (“let’s defend Christmas, our roots, our traditions, our civilization!”, 30 November; “I defend the right of Christians to call themselves Christians and not to be afraid to call themselves Christians”, 5 December). Suggesting that immigrants threaten to destroy Italian identity and heritage, he urged Italians to protect Italy’s traditions and way of life (“Italy is and must remain profoundly Christian, proud of its roots and its history. In Europe and in the world the clash is between freedom and dictatorship: we have a mission to represent ideas that are the last lifeline for the West”, 22 December).

Through the attempted attack on compatibility-based trust, Salvini’s posts emphasize a clear in- and out-group division, which is even more explicit than in the targeting of integrity. Here, emphasis is placed on what it means to be Italian in Salvini’s eyes, often stressing Christianity, history, and cultural markers such as the national cuisine. At the same time, foreigners are clearly situated outside this ingroup, and their lifestyle is presented as not compatible with ‘the’ Italian culture (e.g., “If you arrive in Bari and you don’t like focaccia and you don’t like ‘San Nicola’, go back to your country. We are not the ones who have to change our traditions”, 17 December). Furthermore, despite White Italians being the majority group, they are portrayed as a marginalized group, and urged to protect their cultural heritage from the perceived foreign threat—a narrative encapsulated well in Salvini’s ‘Italians first’ slogan. Thus, while posts targeting security-based trust focused primarily on defining the outgroup as a violent threat to individuals, integrity- and compatibility-based trust build the Us/Them divide, portraying the foreign outgroup as undeserving of belonging to the community of both moral and cultural values of the Italian people.

4.2.4. Competence and Compassion

The last section of the results focuses on competence- and compassion-based trust, the least targeted dimensions in Salvini’s posts (respectively in 3.37% and 1.50% of the posts).

In terms of competence-based trust, immigrants were depicted as incompetent both directly (e.g., posting videos portraying immigrants speaking very poor Italian despite having resided in Italy for several years, 15 December) and indirectly (“thousands [of migrants] in Italy who then end up bivouacking in the cities”, 25 October), perpetuating stereotypes of idle foreigners, always loitering in the streets and causing trouble.

As for compassion-based trust, Salvini portrayed foreigners as unconcerned about the needs of the Italian people, and highly demanding in a country struggling with limited resources to care for its own citizens (11 December). In summary, few posts targeted competence- and compassion-based trust, suggesting a marginal importance given by Salvini to these dimensions in discursively othering foreigners.

Taken together, our findings reveal that Salvini's portrayal of foreigners online predominantly focused on three of the five trust dimensions of the Intergroup Trust Model. Posts addressing integrity- and compatibility-based trust highlighted the more classical Us/Them divide, reinforcing the notion that foreigners are a threat to the moral and cultural values of Italians. Such portrayals more explicitly established moral and cultural barricades that denote foreigners as outsiders, non-belonging to the 'community of values' of the ingroup. Yet, most posts targeted security-based trust, framing immigrants as a pervasive threat to the (individual) physical safety of Italians. In addition, citizens were not described as a cohesive ingroup under attack by an outgroup (Us vs Them), but rather as scattered and highly vulnerable individuals left unprotected to face the senseless brutality of the immigrants (I vs Them). We interpret this pattern as indicative of a *divide-et-impera* dynamic;³ by framing Italians as isolated, fearful individuals rather than as a unified collective, Salvini's discourse fosters a sense of atomized vulnerability that weakens horizontal bonds of solidarity. This fragmentation, hinging on individualized fear and insecurity, could pave the way for a vertical reconfiguration of belonging, where citizens are invited to find protection and unity only under the leader's authority, typical of the politics of fear (Robin, 2006; Wodak, 2015). In this sense, the targeting of security-based trust may serve not merely to amplify fear toward foreigners, but may also contribute to the erosion of intragroup cohesion—a process of social control that we discuss below as a *divide-et-impera* strategy.

5. Discussion

Far-right propaganda in Europe, particularly on social media platforms, employs scaremongering tactics to marginalize immigrants, using the 'politics of fear' to create divisions by framing immigrants as cultural, moral, and physical threats. This strategy can perpetuate prejudice by targeting intergroup trust, discursively constructing an exclusive 'community of values' for the White majority. This paper analyzed how populist leaders like Matteo Salvini can discursively construct the untrustworthy 'Them' to promote the Us/Them divide. Our results align with existing literature (Gagliano et al., 2021), showing that Salvini targeted integrity- and compatibility-based trust by portraying immigrants as violators of shared moral and cultural values, thereby unifying the ingroup in a 'community of values' while excluding the outgroup (Anderson, 2013).

Our findings highlight the importance of considering trust's multidimensional nature when examining how far-right leaders try to foster societal divisions. By targeting different trust dimensions—security, integrity, and compatibility—Salvini attempts to amplify fear and insecurity while reinforcing symbolic and moral boundaries between the ingroup and outgroup. These dimensions offer valuable insights into the complexity of the political strategies employed by far-right politicians, illustrating how each type of trust can play a specific role in constructing immigrants as the 'untrustworthy other', potentially fracturing social cohesion. While targeting security-based trust primarily crystallizes into portraying immigrants as violent, immediate threats to personal safety, attacks on integrity- and compatibility-based trust tap into deeper moral and cultural

³ We note that the *divide-et-impera* dynamic was not included as a separate code in the codebook, as it emerged inductively as an unanticipated insight rather than a predefined analytical category, and derived from our interpretive analysis of the overall findings.

anxieties. By painting immigrants as morally corrupt and culturally alien, these narratives perpetuate the Us/Them divide, in an attempt to undermine societal bonds. This dual strategy, targeting both personal safety and collective belonging, reveals that far-right leaders are not merely creating fear: they are leveraging the multidimensional nature of trust to try and exacerbate social divides and polarization—which, particularly on social media platforms with limited gatekeeping, can be rapidly amplified through algorithmic visibility and emotional contagion.

Additionally, our findings highlight an unexpected and more insidious tactic behind online propaganda: Salvini primarily targeted security-based trust, depicting immigrants as a pervasive threat to the physical and individual safety of Italians through a *divide-et-impera* (divide and rule) strategy. Not only did Salvini characterize foreigners as primarily dangerous and inherently violent, but he also emphasized the isolation and vulnerability of Italian citizens, including traditionally ideal victims (e.g., elders) but also law enforcement personnel. We contend that this focus on security concerns for individuals, rather than cultural or moral threats, may be a more effective and divisive strategy, fragmenting society beyond the conventional Us/Them contraposition.

The political characterization of a foreign threat may purposely focus primarily on *personal* safety (Bauman, 2007, p. 12), rather than socio-moral concerns grounded in *shared* cultural and moral values. Bauman (2007) already noted that it is not a coincidence that “personal (more to the point *bodily*) safety has become a major, perhaps the major selling point in political manifestos and electoral campaigns” (p. 12, emphasis in original). While cultural (e.g., Gatwiri & Anderson, 2021) and moral threats (Cohen, 2011) highlight societal boundaries and foster collective identity and unity, they may hamper the very goal of the ‘politics of fear’—to generate dependence on authority by amplifying insecurity (Robin, 2006). Instead, framing an inherently dangerous and violent outgroup against “a network of individuals rather than a structured whole” (Critchler, 2011, p. 267) may deepen a more pervasive fracture within society, leaving space for a ‘saviour’ figure to rise.

In this light, both the predominance of security-based portrayals over integrity- or compatibility-based ones, and the depiction of Italians as vulnerable and isolated, can be read as a deliberate strategic choice. By foregrounding personal, rather than collective, insecurity, Salvini’s discourse can detach fear from the social sphere and relocate it within the individual. Echoing Bauman’s idea of “privatization of troubles” (2007, p. 14), when political discourse centres on *individual* insecurity, it privatizes fear: citizens come to see themselves as personally endangered and responsible for their own protection in an atomized social world. For Bauman, immigration serves this purpose well (p. 15). By individualizing Italians as vulnerable and helpless—that is, positioning them within a constellation of isolated individuals (‘I’)—while presenting the outgroup primarily as an existential rather than a moral or cultural threat, political discourse might more effectively mobilize insecurity not through collective identity-based grievances but through vulnerability and isolation.

This mechanism resonates with a *divide-et-impera* logic: this fear-based discourse does not portray citizens as a cohesive ingroup (‘Us’) united against a common ‘Them’, but rather fragments them into solitary, anxious individuals whose only perceived source of safety and cohesion is the protective figure of the leader. This

mechanism can create fertile ground for populist manipulation, as fear becomes a mechanism of governance (Wodak, 2015). By constantly invoking insecurity and cultivating a diffuse sense of uncertainty and anxiety, *divide-et-impera* rhetoric seeks to reorganize thin social bonds around fear, which becomes the main organizing principle of social life. Citizens can be transformed into isolated actors trapped in a pervasive sense of insecurity, awaiting a charismatic leader (often exhibiting authoritarian tendencies) who promises unity and protection, “giving them that sense of structure and common identity they lacked but craved” (Robin, 2006, p. 101). In this way, Salvini’s discourse shifts the traditional Us/Them divide toward a more insidious ‘I/Them’ dynamic—one that temporarily suspends horizontal solidarity, portraying unity as attainable only under the leader’s guidance.

Taken together, the results point to the portrayal of insecurity as an individualized condition—a particularly potent expression of the politics of fear. It stands to reason that a multitude of isolated, unprotected individuals is more vulnerable than the cohesive in-group of ‘pure’ and united people of the populist tradition. By positioning a perilous ‘Them’ against a multitude of dispersed ‘I’, political rhetoric could amplify citizens’ sense of exposure, isolation, and helplessness, allowing a ‘culture of fear’ to take deeper root and trapping citizens in self-perpetuating cycles of soaring fear (Bauman, 2007). Within this logic, fear functions as both a social solvent and a tool of control: it fragments the sense of togetherness of the national community while consolidating its dependence on leaders who claim to restore safety, order, and a national sense of belonging. Within the economy of fear, this *divide-et-impera* strategy offers an alternative way to frame and understand how populist communication may transform insecurity into political capital, reconfiguring the relationship between (and within) nationals and immigrants beyond the classical Us/Them divide.

We acknowledge the study’s main limitation in that our focus on Salvini’s anti-immigrant discourse restricts generalizability. Future research should investigate further this *divide-et-impera* strategy, which may operate alongside or in opposition to nationalist sentiment in far-right discourse. Yet, while other political figures may employ diverse rhetorical strategies to construct the untrustworthy other, Salvini’s approach remains highly representative of broader trends within European far-right anti-immigrant discourse, positioning him as a prototype rather than an outlier within this landscape (Ströbel, 2022). Thus, despite the use of a single case study, our findings hold significant implications for understanding divisive political discourse.

Beyond the empirical insights into Salvini’s discourse, this study contributes to broader theoretical debates in political communication by illustrating how fear-based narratives can target distinct trust dimensions to generate social atomization. We extend traditional models of populist communication that hinge on ‘Us/Them’ antagonism by introducing the ‘I/Them’ dynamic as a complementary mechanism of social hyper-fragmentation. This conceptual refinement helps explain how digital populist discourse may simultaneously mobilize fear and erode horizontal solidarity—thus enriching both trust theory and research on digital era populism.

Analyzing the political discourse of influential figures like Salvini can inform future efforts to counter rhetoric that may deepen societal divisions. By examining these trust-targeting mechanisms in Salvini’s social media discourse, our study provides valuable

insights for policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors working to counter polarization and repair intergroup trust in an increasingly digitalized political landscape. Understanding how politicians attempt to hyper-fracture society is a crucial first step in countering such divisive narratives. While studies on political polarization have begun to trace the “gradual fragmentation of the whole (a society or community)’ and the ‘evolution of what ‘us versus them’ represents” (Bliuc et al., 2024, p. 3), we take this further by arguing that far-right communication may actively seek to atomize national communities by fomenting and exploiting insecurity and distrust—a relevant avenue for future research and interventions. Although further research is required on fear-based political fragmentation, scholars and stakeholders should remain vigilant in identifying and disempowering tactics that could undermine trust and social cohesion—particularly within digital environments which, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and amplifying emotionally charged narratives, allow fear-based content to reach unprecedented audiences.

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Data availability

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available on the X website, <https://x.com/matteosalvinimi>

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6. Appendix A

Table A.1 Definitions of the targeted IGT-Model dimensions and examples

Intergroup trust dimension targeted	Definition	Example
Competence	Immigrants are described and/or indirectly presented as incompetent, useless, and uneducated.	<p>One-way ticket to send him back to his country, Italy does not need these 'resources'.</p> <p>(26 October 2019)</p> <p>Against Salvini and in defence of Carola [Rackete], we were missing the precious intervention of left-wing MEP Magid Magid 😊</p> <p>(20 July 2019)</p>
Integrity	Immigrants are presented as dishonest, disrespectful, immoral, sexually deviated cheaters of the system, committing fraud and hideous crimes (often at the expense of vulnerable individuals).	<p>🔴 Six arrests in Agrigento: they [foreigners] were dealing drugs even in a welcoming centre for immigrants. In #Nuoro, instead, a gang of Moroccans who did business with illegal immigration, from fake marriages to prostitution, was dismantled. Thanks to Law Enforcement and investigators!</p> <p>(25 July 2019)</p> <p>⚠️ SHAMEFUL, LET'S SPREAD, EVERYONE MUST SEE! Fake refugees from 'now safe' countries (!) who, in order to stay in Italy, pretend to be gay (some have wives and children...), with the complicity of some lawyers.</p> <p>(25 October 2019)</p>
Compassion	Immigrants are presented as not concerned about Italians' needs, while over-demanding of rights or over-	Lampedusa and Italy need paying tourists, not illegal immigrants that we have to sustain.

	concerned about trivial issues.	<p>(27 June 2019)</p> <p>#Salvini: Imola, front page of a local newspaper. The asylum seekers' soccer tournament is cancelled due to the Security Decrees. But does it seem normal to you? With all the problems that exist in Italy. 🇮🇹 #cartabianca @Cartabiancarai3</p> <p>(11 December 2019)</p>
Compatibility	The relation between immigrants and citizens is presented as a culture clash (especially but not limited to religion). The dominant group's culture is seen as under attack (culturalization of threat).	<p>Given the cancelled school plays, the denied carols, the disassembled nativity scenes, the feared baby Jesuses, it is not trivial: let's defend Christmas, our roots, our traditions, our civilization!</p> <p>(30 November 2019)</p> <p>YOU SUCK. Baby Jesus beheaded, his head found in the cemetery. It is disconcerting that there are people capable of such disgusting similar acts, which not only offend the religious sense of Italians but trample on history, culture, civilisation.</p> <p>(28 December 2019)</p>
Security	Immigrants are presented as dangerous, often associated with crime and violent, brutal, senseless attacks; Italians are presented as terrified by them. Immigration is presented as an invasion and the beginning of a physical (rather than cultural) substitution.	<p>🔴 Kicks and punches to the policemen, an illegal immigrant arrested in Naples. A few months ago, in the same station, the tobaccoist punched by an asylum seeker lay dying.</p> <p>(30 July 2019)</p> <p>We give voice and space to the cry of pain of the merchants of Florence: 'We are hostages of illegal immigrants who are violent robbers, drug dealers, drug addicts'. And then Salvini is the bad guy...</p> <p>(11 December 2019)</p>

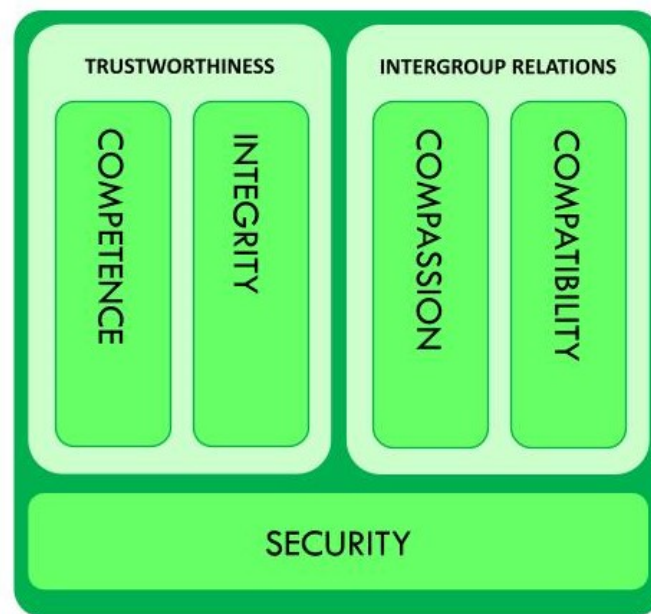
Note: The posts have been translated by the first author.

Appendix B - Codebook

6.1. Information on theoretical background

Each post⁴ is analyzed according to the Intergroup Trust model (IGT-Model), which defines five main dimensions that compose the trust of an ingroup (Italians) towards an outgroup (Black immigrants).

Figure 1. The multidimensional Intergroup Trust Model



Source: Kappmeier et al, 2021a

The trust dimensions are subdivided into two main categories:

- Trustworthiness: **competence** and **integrity** are considered characteristics of the outgroup (Black immigrants).
- Intergroup relation: **compassion** and **compatibility** are considered characteristics of the relation between the groups (White Italians and Black immigrants).
- **Security** represents a transversal dimension, that underlines all the others.

⁴ Posts are publicly available using the search tool of X and the following prompt: '(from::matteosalvini) until:2020-01-01 since:2019-06-03'.

Table B.1 Definitions of the IGT-Model dimensions

IGT dimension	Definition of the dimension according to the model	Definition for the present analysis (negatively targeted dimension)
Competence	Focuses on the perceived ability and skill-set of the outgroup	Immigrants are described and/or indirectly presented as incompetent, useless, and uneducated.
Integrity	Relates to the perception of the outgroup's honesty	Immigrants are presented as dishonest, disrespectful, immoral, sexually deviated cheaters of the system, committing fraud and hideous crimes (often at the expense of vulnerable individuals).
Compassion	Refers to the outgroup's willingness to care for the ingroup's needs and provide assistance	Immigrants are presented as not concerned about Italians' needs, while over-demanding of rights or over-concerned about trivial issues.
Compatibility	Concerns the ingroup's perception of the similarity in lifestyle, values and background between their group and the outgroup	The relation between immigrants and citizens is presented as a culture clash (especially but not limited to religion). The dominant group's culture is seen as being under attack (culturalization of threat).
Security	Focuses on the degree to which the outgroup is seen as a physical or psychological threat to the ingroup	Immigrants are presented as dangerous, often associated with crime and violent, brutal, senseless attacks; Italians are presented as terrified by them. Immigration is presented as an invasion and the beginning of a physical (rather than cultural) substitution.

6.2. Coding instructions

Unit of coding: post (comprising images, newspaper title and video, if on X)

Coding system: multi-coding allowed, that is, more than one code can be used for the same post. However, the same code cannot be utilized more than once per post.

All posts presented regard intergroup trust relations between Italians and foreigners. The original posts are displayed in black rectangles.⁵

6.3. Coding categories

7.3.1. Trust dimension: Competence

Category: Incompetence (lack of Competence) – code: COMPET 

Example for COMPET (in red):

OC7-1989: Biglietto di sola andata per rispedirlo al suo Paese, **l'Italia non ha bisogno di queste 'risorse'**.

[NEWS title linked in the post:] “Pisa, nigeriano ferisce capotreno e due agenti durante un controllo.”

Incompetence is coded when:

- Immigrants are shown as not capable of contributing to society or described as triflers

SP29-896: Che non fossi simpatico a **sfaccendati** e spacciatori non mi sorprende, è una medaglia! Festeggino adesso, ma non si illudano perché al governo ci TORNO!

- Immigrants' capabilities, words or actions are ridiculed or presented as silly or meaningless [**rule: code COMPET, when the immigrant admits he does not understand his own actions; do not code COMPET if the 'meaningless'/'unjustified' behaviour is (a) only inferred by another party, or (b) attributed to mental disorders**]

C34-914 [the video presented contains the following dialogue:]

Journalist: Cosa chiedete? Perché state protestando?

Immigrant: **Non lo so.**

- in videos, when immigrants are presented as speaking Italian poorly despite having lived in the country for a long time [**rule: do not code COMPET when the immigrant speaks poor Italian but their linguistic capability is not mocked/remarked on/underlined by another party**] or when they are shown they do not understand the meaning of their own.

DC25-697 [the video presented contains the following dialogue:]

Journalist: Ma... **Lui è qua da 13 anni. Come mai non sa parlare tanto bene l'italiano?**

⁵ To avoid undue interpretation by the first coder, posts were not translated into English in the codebook.

7.3.2. Trust dimension: Integrity

Category: Lack of Integrity – code: INTEGR

Example for INTEGR (in red):

AG9-1355: **Malati immaginari, minorenni immaginari, emergenze sanitarie immaginarie...** La ONG #OpenArms e i suoi complici stanno raggiungendo il massimo del ridicolo, gli Italiani sono buoni ma non fessi.



Lack of integrity is coded when:

- Immigrants are described as disrespectful and bad mannered (e.g., insulting or offending others)

JN18-2458: **“Vaffanculo, vai via!”** Ieri, davanti al Colosseo, due senegalesi hanno **insultato** e spintonato agenti della polizia locale impegnati a controllare e fermare i **venditori abusivi**. Questi DELINQUENTI sono stati arrestati e condannati per direttissima.

- Immigrants are accused of being cunning or of lying, especially about their status/identity, either directly (e.g., they are not real refugees, or they are not really fleeing their country because of war or persecutions) or indirectly (use of quotation marks or 'alleged' for words like 'refugee')

SP3-447: **Chiaramente tutti in fuga da guerre e devastazioni...** Con i 200 di ieri, siamo a quota 1.900 nuovi ‘profughi’ sbarcati questo mese, +100% rispetto al 2018. Complimenti al governo dei traditori e degli incapaci, gli italiani sapranno ‘ricompensarvi’.

- Immigrants commit particularly perverted crimes that offend morality (e.g., crimes involving children, rape or sexually related obscenities in public, torture)
[rule: when children or rape are involved, double code for INTEGR and SECUR]

JN26-2547: A Reggio Emilia uno straniero **ha palpeggiato** una poliziotta in divisa e poi s’è reso protagonista di **atti osceni**, ma è stato subito scarcerato perché il giudice ha ritenuto ‘tenue’ l’accaduto...

[NEWS title linked in the post:] **“Autoerotismo e molestie alla poliziotta che lo aveva arrestato, la polemica: «Il giudice lo ha rilasciato».”**

- Their behaviour is morally reprimanded or unlawful, but the crime is not violent (e.g., when they are selling drugs or exploiting prostitution, when they occupy houses illegally, or when they are selling counterfeit products, or using fake documents)

JN27-2548: A San Donà di Piave arresti ed espulsioni a raffica per un gruppo di **spacciatori** tunisini, a Roma sequestri e perquisizioni contro il **traffico illecito di rifiuti**, a Palermo quattro fermi per **favoreggiamento dell'immigrazione clandestina e sfruttamento della prostituzione**.

- When they are described as generally bad people or ungrateful [rule: do not code INTEGR, when immigrants are called criminals - code SECUR instead].

JL27-1946: Per certa **gentaglia** disprezzo e pene certe!
[NEWS title linked in the post:] “Botte e colpi di bastone **per i bimbi** che non fanno il Corano. Imam allontanato da Treviso.”

7.3.3. Trust dimension: Compassion

Category: Lack of Integrity – code: COMPASS

Example for COMPASS (in red):

JN6-2329: **Lampedusa e l'Italia hanno bisogno di turisti che pagano, non di clandestini** che dobbiamo mantenere noi.

Lack of compassion is coded when:

- Immigrants are presented as indifferent to Italians' problems and needs (e.g., they keep coming and asking Italy for help, despite many citizens being poor and in need)

OC2-1842: #Salvini: i 3/4 delle persone che vengono qua non fuggono da nessuna guerra. O faccio finta di nulla, **ricordo sottovoce i 5 milioni di italiani poveri, e do diritti e documenti a tutti**, oppure tutelo chi scappa davvero dalla guerra. #cartabianca @Cartabiancarai3

- Immigrants complain about silly problems despite the fact that the country has bigger difficulties.

DC28-772: #Salvini: Imola, prima pagina di un quotidiano locale. **Salta il torneo di calcio dei richiedenti asilo** per colpa dei Decreti sicurezza. Ma vi par normale? **Con tutti i problemi che ci sono in Italia**. #cartabianca @Cartabiancarai3

7.3.4. Trust dimension: Compatibility

Category: Incompatibility (lack of Compatibility) – code: COMPATIB

Example for COMPATIB (in red):

NV2-1104: Viste le **recite scolastiche cancellate**, i **canti negati**, i **presepi smontati**, i **Gesù Bambino temuti**, non è banale: **difendiamo il Natale, le nostre radici, le nostre tradizioni, la nostra civiltà!**

Incompatibility is coded when:

- Immigrants are presented as intolerant or incapable of/unwilling to integrate in Italian society

DC6-431: Mi sembra solo buonsenso: **che integrazione ci può essere senza rispetto della nostra storia e della nostra cultura?**

- When cohabitation is described as very difficult or impossible

DC20-624: In Italia abbiamo il presepe e il Natale, e **non siamo noi a dover cambiare il nostro modo di vivere, di pensare, di pregare e di mangiare**. Se a qualcuno non sta bene, la porta è quella. Sbaglio???

- Immigrants' religious/cultural symbol/identities/values are shown as prevailing over the Italian identity, or Italian culture is presented as 'changing'/'to be changed' because of them, or when Italy/Europe is presented as losing their cultural/religious identity [rule: when Italian culture/traditions are presented as under attack or in need of being defended, double code for SECUR and COMPATIB]

DC10-534: Vergogna, incredibile vergogna! La mia solidarietà a tutti i bimbi, agli insegnanti e ai genitori a cui **viene negato il bello del Natale**, nel nome di un **inaccettabile sottomissione culturale e valoriale**.

≡ **la Repubblica**

Agrigento, **preside annulla la messa natalizia** perché "non si rispettano le minoranze e i laici". Polemiche e proteste



- Immigrants' lifestyle/practices are presented as barbarian/inhuman for Italians

AG20-1485: Si lavava **completamente nudo in pubblico** tra lo sconcerto dei salernitani. **È questo lo 'stile di vita' che qualcuno a sinistra vorrebbe come il nostro 'futuro'?**

- Immigrants are said to be offended by Italian culture, or are presented as disrespectful towards Italian culture [rule: when they are disrespectful towards Italian culture or the country in general, code COMPATIB; when they are disrespectful towards people, code INTEGR].

NV3-1114: MA COSA CI PUÒ ESSERE DI PIÙ ASSURDO??? In una scuola elementare in provincia di Treviso le maestre avrebbero deciso di rinunciare al presepe perché offende bimbi di altre religioni. Se è vero, siamo di fronte all'ennesima idiozia!!!



7.3.5. Trust dimension: Security

Category: Danger (lack of Security) – code: SECUR

Example for SECUR (in red):

JL8-1650: **Calci e pugni ai poliziotti**, arrestato a Napoli un immigrato clandestino. Pochi mesi fa, nella stessa stazione, **moriva il tabaccaio** preso a pugni da un richiedente asilo. [NEWS title linked in the post:] “Metro Chiaiano, **calci e pugni** agli agenti di Polizia: arrestato 28enne.”

Danger is coded when:

- Immigrants are defined as criminals, or they commit a crime that is (or is presented as) serious (e.g., if being a drug dealer is presented as “selling death”), or a crime, even minor, is committed in front of minors

SP11-575: Porti aperti, droga a fiumi. Vergognosi.

[NEWS title linked in the post:] “**Spaccia** eroina **vicino scuola**, 28enne nigeriano arrestato a Potenza.”

- Immigrants are described as belonging to criminal organizations (e.g., terrorists, or accused of ‘Islamic association’, or belonging to mafia)

JN14-2404: ‘Gomorra africana’ a Milano, 11 arresti. Grazie ai Carabinieri. Altro che ‘Salvini cattivo’, contro questi delinquenti che ci portano la guerra in casa serve tolleranza zero, senza pietà! [continues below]

[NEWS title linked in the post:] “La ‘Gomorra’ nordafricana nell'ex Snia di Varedo: guerra tra pusher a fucilate, 11 arresti. La Gomorra africana a due passi da Milano: spaccio, armi e sparatorie fra le gang rivali.”

- Immigrants attack Italians, commit physical violence or bring violence to Italy, or Italians are scared by immigrants

OC45-165: Pazzesco. Clandestino nigeriano terrorizza i passanti a Fermo, nelle Marche, armato di una roncola. Ma c’è chi anche oggi nel governo invoca ‘porti e porte aperte’. Incapaci e pericolosi. Non molliamo, Amici.

- Immigrants are presented as exploiters of Italians’ generosity, or when immigrants are taking away resources from Italians (e.g., jobs or money)

JN8-2344: #Salvini su #SeaWatch: persone arrivano in Italia perché ‘la apprezzano’? In Tunisia non c’è la guerra. Vogliono venire in piazza San Marco in crociera a spese degli italiani? NO, NO, NO! Con me non funziona più così. #cartabianca @Cartabiancarai3.

- The presence of immigrants poses an indirect risk to Italians (e.g., if immigrants give money to/work for dangerous people, or if they spread diseases),

JN3-2290: #Salvini: non assecondo chi aiuta gli scafisti che con i soldi degli immigrati poi si comprano armi e droga. #radioanchio @radioanchio

- Italy's borders or Italians’ security have to be defended

NV28-1751: Onore a chi difende i nostri confini, il nostro onore, la nostra sicurezza e la nostra libertà. Disprezzo per i complici, i vigliacchi e i traditori.

- Immigration is listed as a dangerous problem (e.g., is presented as an invasion, a massive/out of control movement of people, a social problem or an emergency)

SP6-506: Grazie al governo del tradimento e dell’invasione. #ConteVergognati [NEWS title linked in the post:] “Migranti, 2mila sbarchi negli ultimi trenta giorni...”

- Crime and immigrants/immigration are related (e.g., association of ‘immigration’-‘criminality’, or ‘immigration’-‘security’ as in the ‘Immigration and Security Decree’)

JN11-2360: ‘Ndrangheta, mafia, camorra, immigrazione clandestina e criminalità in generale: tra domani e giovedì presiederò ben quattro comitati nazionali al Viminale dedicati alle regioni del Sud: obiettivi Calabria, Puglia, Campania e Sicilia.

- The risk of ethnic or physical substitution of Italians is mentioned

JL42-2113: ROBA DA MATTI “L’Europa bianca è morta, ci servono gli immigrati per insegnarci a fare i mulini che costano zero, a far crescere i bambini senza problematiche alle ossa”. Aprire i porti e **lasciarci invadere** per avere **figli con delle ossa più forti??** Questa gente non sta bene!

- The risk is presented of Italians’ physical/cultural submission to immigrants, or Italian culture/religion/traditions as being under attack or in need of being defended [rule: when Italian culture/traditions are presented as under attack or in need of being defended, double code for SECUR and COMPATIB]

DC9-517: L’Italia è e deve rimanere profondamente cristiana, orgogliosa delle proprie radici e della propria storia. In Europa e nel mondo lo scontro è tra libertà e dittatura: abbiamo la missione di **rappresentare idee** che sono l’**ultima ancora di salvezza per l’Occidente**.



- In videos, when immigrants are shown to commit violence or to be aggressive.