

Discriminatory discourse in news about Venezuelan migrants in Peruvian newspapers

Discurso discriminatorio en noticias sobre migrantes venezolanos en los diarios peruanos

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Abstract

In the last decade, the Venezuelan migration phenomenon has generated significant challenges for receiving countries, which face the complex task of integrating migrants into their economies and societies. In this context, discriminatory discourse toward Venezuelan migrants has become a recurring phenomenon in Peruvian news media. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the discriminatory discourse strategies present in news about Venezuelan migrants published in the Peruvian newspapers Trome.com, Latina Pe, TV PE Noticias, and El Comercio, during the period between 2021 and 2023, years in which the conflict toward this foreign group intensified. The theoretical and methodological foundations of this study are based on the discourse analysis approach and the discursive construction of discrimination, as proposed by Van Dijk (1990, 1997, 2000, and 2010), as well as on McCombs's (2014) agenda setting theory. The analysis of discriminatory discourse, its strategies, lexical referentiality, and discursive cues revealed how the image of the Venezuelan migrant is discursively constructed as a threat. This construction legitimizes social exclusion and reinforces prejudices that perpetuate discrimination. From a communications perspective that studies the phenomenon of agenda setting, the research reflects on how the marked selection of negative topics and approaches in news coverage about Venezuelans in Peru reveals the constructed and discriminatory nature of journalism. This, in turn, fosters interpretations influenced by the dominant ideology in that social environment.

Key words: agenda setting, discriminatory discourse, lexical referentiality.

Resumen

En la última década, el fenómeno migratorio venezolano ha generado importantes desafíos para los países receptores, los cuales enfrentan la compleja tarea de integrar a los migrantes en sus economías y sociedades. En este contexto, el discurso discriminatorio hacia los migrantes venezolanos se ha convertido en un fenómeno recurrente en los medios noticiosos de Perú. De allí que, esta investigación se propone analizar las estrategias del discurso discriminatorio presentes en las noticias sobre migrantes venezolanos publicadas en los diarios Trome.com, Latina Pe, Tv PE Noticias y El Comercio de Perú, durante el período comprendido entre 2021 y 2023, años en los que se acentuó el conflicto hacia este grupo extranjero. Los fundamentos teóricos y metodológicos de este estudio se basan en el enfoque del análisis del discurso y en la construcción discursiva de la discriminación, tal como lo propone Van Dijk (1990, 1997, 2000 y 2010), así como en la teoría de la *agenda setting* de McCombs

(2014). El análisis del discurso discriminatorio, sus estrategias, la referencialidad léxica y las claves discursivas permitieron evidenciar cómo se construye discursivamente la imagen del migrante venezolano como una amenaza. Esta construcción legitima la exclusión social y refuerza prejuicios que perpetúan la discriminación. Desde una perspectiva comunicacional, que estudia el fenómeno de la *agenda setting*, la investigación reflexiona sobre cómo la marcada selección de temas y enfoques negativos en la cobertura informativa sobre los venezolanos en Perú revela el carácter construido y discriminatorio del periodismo. Esto, a su vez, fomenta interpretaciones influenciadas por la ideología dominante en ese entorno social.

Palabras clave: *agenda setting*, discurso discriminatorio, referencialidad léxica.

Introduction

According to data from the United Nations (UN, 2019), approximately 7.2 million Venezuelans have left Venezuela in search of refuge and employment opportunities, of which 6 million have been welcomed by countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Behind this migration phenomenon lies a complex reality: in addition to pursuing a better life in territories foreign to them, migrants face social rejection in their host countries. Reports of xenophobia and discrimination against the Venezuelan community in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and other territories have generated regional concern, highlighting the urgency of addressing this issue from a human rights and international solidarity perspective (Bermúdez et al., 2018).

Germaná (2005) identified a prevailing perception that associates migrants with the cause of social problems, attributing responsibility for crimes such as theft, drug trafficking, and prostitution. This social construction of the "migrant threat" is addressed from multiple disciplines —sociology, anthropology, communication sciences, and linguistics— which analyze its multidimensional nature (Checa & Arjona, 2013; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2019; Palomino & Lovón, 2022; Aliaga et al., 2022). This threat is based on negative narratives, stigmatization, discrimination, and exploitation of social inequalities, dimensions that feed off each other to generate a climate of hostility that limits rights and opportunities.

Adding to this phenomenon is media coverage by local print and digital media. In Peru, news coverage of Venezuelan migration has increased, but it has also revealed discriminatory discourse. During 2023, Peruvian media reported on protests against Venezuelan citizens that led to violent episodes, highlighting a significant role in the construction of narratives about their activities. Tomás (2016) points out that the complexity of the migration process generates constant flows of news and opinions, many of them problematic. Newspapers such as Trome.com, Latina Pe, Tv PE Noticias, and El Comercio have reported on these demonstrations, using xenophobic expressions that could constitute hate speech.

Prejudice toward Venezuelan migrants materializes in what the UN (2019) defines as "hate speech": communications that use pejorative language to refer to a person or group of people based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, ancestry, gender, or other forms of identity (Cortés, 2019; López, 2021; Espinoza, 2023). For Van Dijk (2007), hate speech has ideological features, and in the case of the media, this can be seen in a discursive construction between two axes: "us" and "others." From this perspective, the general characteristic of discriminatory discourse is the generation of a negative image of "others," usually combined with a positive image of "us," that is, minimizing the positive traits of "others" and minimizing the negative traits of "us." This discursive strategy enables the construction of symbolic barriers by establishing who is part of a country and who is excluded. From a discursive perspective, it is understood that there is a dominant "us" in the discourse that antagonizes the "others," which implies the representation of both axes.

Martín (2006), when analyzing the media and political representation of immigrants, identifies three categories in their characterization: as agents of negative processes who carry out violent and reprehensible actions, as passive agents who expect to receive benefits from the State, and as agents who experience situations for which they are neither responsible nor able to influence. This approach is linked to the theory of agenda setting (McCombs, 2014), where the media operate as non-neutral filters that prioritize certain topics, influencing public opinion on which issues are considered relevant. In this way, the media do not impose a single line of thought, but they do influence the issues on which we form opinions.

In this context, the study of discriminatory discourse in Peruvian media acquires social and political relevance, as it influences public perceptions and migration policies. Therefore, analyzing how this discourse fuels xenophobia toward Venezuelan migrants is essential to understanding its effects on social cohesion and respect for fundamental rights.

Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative methodology with a descriptive-interpretative scope, as its main objective was to analyze the strategies through which discriminatory discourse is constructed in news stories about Venezuelan migrants published in Peruvian newspapers (Reguera, 1998). To this end, the authors identified the discursive strategies that emphasized the positive aspects of the "us" group (Peruvian citizens) and the negative aspects of "them" (Venezuelan migrants); characterized the lexical references used to refer to this community in the selected news stories; and described the constituent elements of the discriminatory discourse present in these journalistic texts.

The study corpus consisted of four journalistic texts from the Peruvian newspapers and digital platforms Trome.com, Latina Pe, Tv PE Noticias, and El Comercio. The sample was selected based on intentional inclusion criteria, which considered: 1) news stories linked to events in which Venezuelans were protagonists or involved, 2) explicit use of expressions alluding to the demonym "Venezuelan", 3) publication in Peruvian digital media, and 4) limited time between 2021 and 2023.

The analysis was based on the model of ideological and discriminatory discourse proposed by Van Dijk (1990, 1997, 2000, 2007), which allowed for the examination of three key dimensions: a) discursive strategies to highlight positive attributes of the ingroup ("us") and negative attributes of the outgroup ("them"), considering elements such as goals, actions, attributes, predications, and agency; b) the lexemes associated with the semantic field constructed around Venezuelans in the analyzed news stories; and c) the description of the fundamental discursive elements: sender, audience, message, and context. This methodological triangulation sought to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon studied.

Results and discussion

The discursive strategies of "us" and "them"

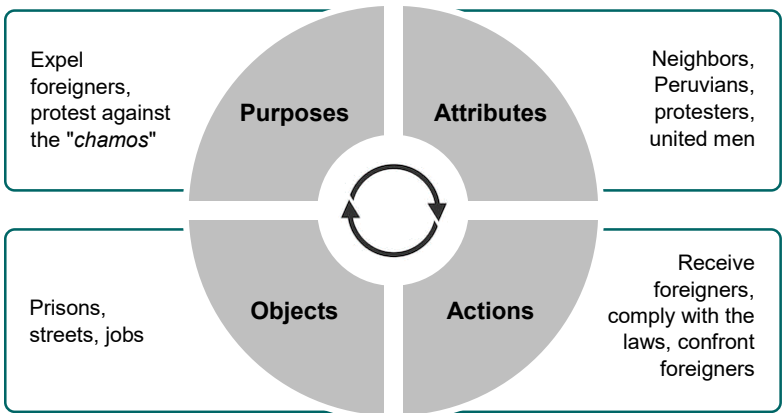
Corpus analysis reveals a marked polarization between the positive characteristics attributed to the "us" group and the negative ones assigned to "them" in news stories about Venezuelan migrants published in the newspapers Latina Pe, TV PE Noticias, and El Comercio Perú. Positive traits are repeatedly attributed to the identity axis of Peruvian nationals ("us"), while negative traits are systematically projected onto the referential group of Venezuelan foreigners ("them"). This dynamic reinforces a symbolic dichotomy that legitimizes exclusion through the stigmatization of migrants.

Discursive strategies of "us"

The "us" in the discourse constitutes the dominant perspective from which news stories about events involving Venezuelans are reported. To understand this construction, it is essential to identify the attributes, actions, objects, and purposes that shape the representation of Peruvian citizens. Of the four elements analyzed, the news stories prioritize attributes (moral or social qualities), actions (collective behaviors), and purposes (implicit or explicit objectives), while objects (resources or assets associated with the group) appear poorly developed in the texts examined.

Figure 1

Representation of "we" in the news corpus



The "we" axis constitutes the place from which the producer of the discourse identifies himself, establishing a significant contrast with the "others". In the news discourse analyzed, the speaker systematically emphasizes the positive aspects of the "we", which demonstrates his social power, especially when inserted within the framework of mass media. Among the mechanisms used to highlight this positivity are predication and agency, key strategies in the construction of ideological representations.

Predication refers to the process by which characteristics, actions, or states are assigned to a subject within a sentence. This mechanism articulates the roles of the participants through verbs and their complements, forming the core of the enunciative structure. In discriminatory discourse, as Van Dijk (2010) points out, "others" are often represented as agents of semantically adverse actions, while "we" are attributed positive qualities.

For its part, agency describes the active role of the subject in performing an action in a sentence. This concept not only determines who performs the action, but also how responsibilities are distributed in the discourse. Van Dijk (op. cit.) argues that this procedure complements predication, as it allows negative actions to be attributed to "others" and positive actions to "us", thus reinforcing the identity dichotomy.

These mechanisms are evident in the following statements from the media analyzed:

- "Our prisons continue to receive foreigners, especially Venezuelans" (N2LP).
- "The clashes arose due to 'workplace jealousy' between Peruvians and foreigners" (N3 TVP).
- "Neighbors expelled alleged foreign criminals who were collecting prison time" (N4 ECP).
- "The protesters, chanting "Not one more *chamo*" began their march on Avenida Octubre" (N4 ECP).

As can be seen, the "we" is characterized by emphatically positive actions from the speaker's perspective. For example, the use of the verb "receive" instead of "imprison" or "lock up" projects a hospitable connotation, even when the context refers to penitentiary centers. This semantic neutralization is also observed in expressions such as "Peruvians do comply", where the direct object is omitted to generalize a positive quality.

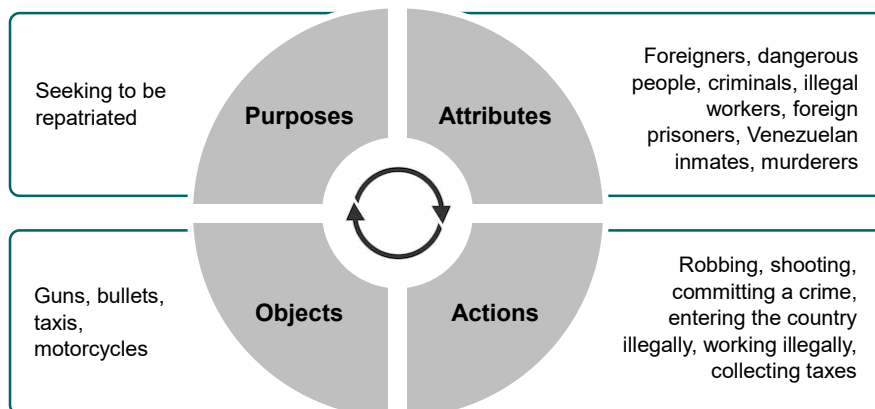
Likewise, we observe a predication of actions that acquire full positive significance when analyzed in relation to the agency of those who carry them out and the implicit purposes. This phenomenon is exemplified in the use of the verb "expel", whose literal definition—to make someone leave an organization or place—could carry a negative connotation. However, this is strategically neutralized when the action is attributed to "neighbors", agents presented as close and legitimized by their belonging to the same social space ("from your same place"), in contrast to outsiders or strangers.

A similar mechanism operates in the statement "The protesters, under the slogan "Not one more *chamo*", began their movement on Avenida Octubre". Here, the choice of the verb "to begin movement"—broad and neutral—dilutes the conflictual burden of the action. However, the agency assigned to the protesters and the complementation under the slogan "Not one more *chamo*" recontextualize the meaning: by identifying the subjects as "protesters" and specifying the discriminatory slogan, the exclusive objective of the protest is revealed, explicitly directed against Venezuelans ("*chamos*"). This structure shifts the focus from the action itself to the ideological justification that underpins it, reinforcing the dichotomy between the Peruvian "us" and the migrant "them".

Discursive strategies of the "them"

According to Van Dijk (2010), the discourse of discrimination focuses on highlighting the difference that "others" present with respect to "us", and this difference is brought to light by those who possess social control over them.

Figure 2
Representation of the “them” in the news corpus



In discriminatory discourse, negative or stereotypical predicates are commonly used to construct the identities of "them", that is, of marginalized or discriminated groups, as well as to identify them as agents of such actions. In the case of the ideological axis of "them", both predication and agency as linguistic procedures are evident in the following statements:

- “This is how the ferocious “*Caraqueño*” fell, a criminal who left a young musician paralyzed” (NIT).
- “Venezuelan Manuel Guzmán “*Caraqueño*” was a dedicated armed robber. Last year, he shot the musician as he arrived home after a performance, but the prosecutor released him” (NIT).
- “The most dangerous foreigners in Ancón, from murderers to kidnappers, are seeking repatriation” (N2LP).
- “Here in this prison, there are fewer Venezuelan inmates; however, the crimes they have committed are very serious, such as kidnapping and murder by organized gangs” (N2LP).
- “The foreign inmates, many of whom entered our country illegally, became protagonists of the most brutal crimes in recent times” (N2LP).
- “The clashes arose due to “workplace jealousy” between Peruvians and foreigners who were providing taxi services without any formalities, when Peruvians are required to do so” (N3TVP).
- “Foreigners who collect taxes and assault the population” (N3TVP).

Through the examples analyzed, it is evident that the preaching associated with the "they" axis constructs a set of statements that create a negative, homogeneous, and dehumanized image of foreigners. This strategic use of language not only distorts public perception but also legitimizes discriminatory policies and practices of social exclusion.

Within the preaching framework, actions linked to danger predominate, which could be understandable in news stories about crime. However, it extends to non-criminal acts, such as protests by Peruvians against Venezuelan migrants or clashes between residents and foreigners, generalizing a narrative of threat. Added to these actions are the attributed purposes, which reinforce the idea that Venezuelans' actions entail destruction, death, danger, or illegal work (e.g., "to rob, murder, defraud, or work without a permit").

In this way, the representation of the "other" and their actions —constructed as acts threatening the security of "us"— find their full discursive development through the mechanism of agency. In the discriminatory discourse identified in the news analyzed, two forms of agency can be distinguished: in the first case, corresponding to news about criminal events, the agency assigned to criminal acts establishes a direct correspondence between the subjects ("them") and intrinsically negative attributes, presenting their actions as coherent manifestations of their status as a group. For example:

- “This is how the ferocious “*Caraqueño*” fell, the criminal who left a young musician paralyzed”.
- “Venezuelan Manuel Guzmán “*Caraqueño*” was a dedicated armed robber”.
- “The most dangerous foreigners in Ancón, from murderers to kidnappers, are seeking repatriation”.

The attributes assigned to these agents (criminal, ferocious, from Caracas, foreigners, more dangerous) function as semantic substitutes for the referent "Venezuelan". According to Van Dijk (2010), this strategy dehumanizes the other by portraying the migrant as a one-dimensional agent of violence, depriving them of human nuances and attributing intrinsically negative qualities to them. Through language that artificially emphasizes their difference —such as the use of terms like "murderer" or "ferocious"— they are stripped of their individual identity and reduced to a stigmatizing collective category. This discourse not only distorts public perception but also normalizes exclusionary policies and hostile attitudes toward them.

Regarding the second form of agency, it manifests itself in news stories that transcend the police sphere, such as coverage of protests against Venezuelan migrants. In this context, the strategy of generalization operates, which consists of selecting specific cases —such as an isolated criminal incident— and projecting them as representative patterns for the entire migrant group. A clear example of this mechanism is evidenced by highlighting a crime committed by a Venezuelan, which leads to the erroneous inference that all migrants share this dangerousness, which contributes to forging a homogeneous and negative image of this population.

Regarding the manipulation of agency, this is used to make invisible the agency of "them," portraying them either as solely responsible for their circumstances or as passive actors in their own story. As a result, a narrative is constructed in which migrants, for example, are portrayed as directly responsible for their irregular employment status, without incorporating into the analysis structural contexts such as violence, poverty, or persecution that drive them to work in the informal sector. An emblematic case is the statement: "The clashes arose due to 'workplace jealousy' between Peruvians and foreigners [Venezuelans] who were informally providing taxi services, while the Peruvians were complying." By denying them political and social agency, not only is their voice delegitimized, but they are also stigmatized as a social burden, reinforcing stereotypes of threat to their community.

Another identified strategy is excessive information completeness, that is, the inclusion of irrelevant details that do not contribute to an objective understanding of the news. In the previous case, the specification "foreigners [...] informally, while the Peruvians are complying" does not explain the structural causes of informal migrant labor, but it does emphasize a moral comparison favorable to "us". According to Van Dijk (2010), this mechanism denies victimization by omitting the context of violence, poverty, and persecution that gives rise to migration, privileging a narrative of individual responsibility.

Additional examples of strategic completeness:

- "Here in this prison, there are Venezuelan inmates in smaller numbers; however, the crimes they have committed are very serious, such as kidnapping and murder by organized gangs".

In this case, the news report reports that the Ancón prison (a penitentiary in Lima, Peru) has a numerically smaller Venezuelan population compared to other foreign groups. However, the producer of the story adds complementary information that, while acknowledging this proportion, emphasizes that Venezuelans have committed "more serious acts," such as murder, kidnapping, and organized crimes. This intentional selection of data suggests that such crimes are inherent to the Venezuelan identity, constructing a symbolic association between nationality and criminal danger.

Excessive completeness is also evident in this news report:

- "Last year, he shot a musician who was arriving home after a performance, but the prosecutor let him go".

This statement, in addition to describing the crime committed by the Venezuelan, includes superfluous details that do not contribute to the core of the story, but do serve a rhetorical function:

1. **Humanization of the victim:** By specifying that he was a "musician arriving home after a performance", an everyday, peaceful image is constructed that contrasts with the aggressor's violence.
2. **Institutional blame:** The mention that "the prosecutor set him free" shifts the focus to supposed impunity, reinforcing the narrative of threat associated with the migrant.
3. **Narrative asymmetry:** While the victim is individualized (a musician with an artistic routine), the perpetrator is reduced to his nationality ("Venezuelan"), erasing his socioeconomic context or motivations.

This information overload, according to Van Dijk's framework, operates as a legitimization strategy: by detailing irrelevant aspects of the crime (such as the victim's profession), the association between migration and crime is naturalized, while deliberately omitting structural factors that could explain —not justify— the events.

Lexical referentiality regarding Venezuelan migrants

Lexical selection constitutes a discursive strategy that operates in close connection with the mechanisms of agency and predication, as it determines the intentional choice of specific terms that these procedures employ to construct contrasting representations: a positive image of "us" and a negative one of "them". Below are the words used in the analyzed news stories to refer to Venezuelans, which reveal systematic patterns of stigmatization.

Table 1
Lexical referentiality regarding Venezuelans

SEMANTIC FIELD	ASSOCIATED LEXEMES
"THEY"	Venezuelans, fierce, <i>caraqueños</i> , foreigners, <i>chamos</i> , dangerous, murderers, kidnappers, Venezuelan inmates, protagonists, criminals, illegal

According to the RAE (2020), the adjective is defined as a grammatical category that modifies a noun, agreeing in gender and number, and whose position (preposition or postposition) alters its expressive value. Furthermore, it allows for gradation through quantifiers or intensifiers, which amplifies its semantic meaning. For example, the recurrent use of terms such as "foreigners", "Venezuelans", "criminals", "murderers" and "kidnappers" contributes to a discursive context where these groups are represented as homogeneous threats. This stereotyping is predominant in crime news, but also extends to non-crime coverage, where nouns such as "murderers" or "criminals" replace the referent "Venezuelan". reinforcing prejudices and perpetuating discriminatory dynamics.

The use of qualifying and discriminatory adjectives establishes a social hierarchy between Peruvians and Venezuelans. By repeatedly classifying migrants as foreigners, their status as not belonging to the national territory is emphasized. This categorization with negative terms places them at a lower stratum within the social structure. According to Dixon's (1982) classification, the following adjectival uses are identified in the news:

- "Thus fell the [ferocious] '*Caraqueño*' (...)"
- "They became [protagonists] of the most brutal crimes in recent times".

The first example, "ferocious", shows the use of a qualifying adjective of valorization, which constitutes a qualifying adjective par excellence and, in this case, refers to an aspect of reality susceptible to valuation. In the second example cited, the adjective "protagonists" uses a qualifying adjective of aptitude to whom the aptitude or predisposition is transferred; in this case, the main character of a work to whom the events happen and who carries out the actions of the "most brutal crimes in recent times".

As for the term "Venezuelans", as an adjective, it initially appeals to a cognitive reality (geographic origin). However, as a noun, it deploys performative force by becoming an offensive act through metonymic generalization: nationality (part) is taken as a totalizing representation of the subject. This dynamic is consistent with Colin (2023), who points out that nationality is used as a marker of danger, reducing Venezuelans to threatening subjects.

The study of these lexical choices allows us to deconstruct how, through specific words, processes of identification and classification are activated that naturalize social exclusions. Unraveling these mechanisms reveals the discursive bases that legitimize systematic discrimination.

Discursive elements of the analyzed texts

The purpose of this phase of the analysis is to describe the discursive elements that shape discriminatory discourse, starting with the identification of the news as a communicative act situated in a specific socio-communicative context. To this end, the newspapers Trome.com, Latina Pe, Tv PE Noticias, and El Comercio Perú were selected. These outlets stand out for their extensive coverage of Venezuelan migration in genres such as chronicles, journalistic articles, and interviews (Palomino & Lovón, 2022).

While media messages construct social meanings, in the case of Venezuelan migrants in Peru, a common pattern is observed: the media analyzed systematically present their presence in terms of social conflict, linking them to violence, illegality, and disruption of public order. According to Van Dijk (2010), the role of the press in the reproduction of racism transcends news writing and includes the strategic selection of the news menu, which shapes the public's everyday perception. This dynamic is evident not only in crime stories, but in news coverage in general, where a negative perspective aligned with agenda setting prevails. This mechanism not only defines the topics covered but also the approach under which they are disseminated, promoting a critical and negative interpretation of Venezuelan migrant culture.

Based on agenda setting theory (McCombs, 2014), we can analyze how these media outlets influence Peruvian audiences by selecting priority topics related to migrants. By focusing on crime and irregular immigration, they channel public discussion toward these topics, omitting other relevant aspects. This practice not only simplifies reality but also normalizes associations between migration and crime, limiting the debate to pre-established stereotypes. However, as Olmo (2022) points out in his report for the BBC, Peruvian media coverage has distorted the magnitude of crime attributed to Venezuelans, establishing a simplistic causality between migration and crime. The same report highlights hidden economic and social contributions:

- **Contribution to GDP:** In 2018, Venezuelan migrants contributed 0.33% of Peru's Gross Domestic Product (Central Bank of Peru).
- **Qualified human capital:** 40% have a university education, according to the Center for Economic Development of the Equilibrium Group, making them a beneficial human capital for the country.

In short, the dissemination of discriminatory discourse toward Venezuelan migrants in Peruvian newspapers has far-reaching social and cultural implications. By reproducing stigmatizing narratives directed at this population, the media actively contribute to the formation of prejudices and negative stereotypes, which perpetuate dynamics of exclusion and rejection toward migrants. These media representations frequently associate Venezuelans with crime, overburdened public services, or unfair labor competition, which generates a climate of distrust and hostility in public opinion. This discourse not only reinforces xenophobic attitudes but also serves as a basis for justifying restrictive policies and unequal treatment, deepening social divisions in the country.

Conclusions

Discourse studies have determined that racist and discriminatory arguments are consolidated through difference—rather than hierarchy—. Along these lines, various studies (Wagman, 2006; Massey, 2008; Quecha & Masferrer, 2020; García Sandoval, 2024) demonstrate the existence of a social construction that represents migrants as a multidimensional threat, whose dimensions encompass economic, cultural, and security aspects.

Within this framework, discursive analysis allows us to conclude that the news dynamics about Venezuelan migrants in Peru are embedded within the theoretical framework of agenda setting. Specifically, the systematic selection of negative topics and perspectives demonstrates the constructed and discriminatory nature of journalistic information, which fosters interpretations aligned with the dominant ideology in that context.

Considering the magnitude of the Venezuelan migratory movement, it is a priority to study the features of discriminatory discourse in news stories about this population in Latin America. This approach is key to understanding the mechanisms through which the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization are constructed and perpetuated in the region. Furthermore, it is crucial to promote academic research on the communicative dynamics of migration, since analyzing the role of agenda setting can contribute to strengthening public policies that guarantee the protection of migrants' human rights, combating xenophobia and discrimination through awareness-raising and educational campaigns.

Finally, the analysis of news discourse highlights the need to reflect on the role of the media in constructing more just and equitable narratives. This entails preventing the dissemination of hate speech and actively promoting the appreciation of cultural diversity, as recommended in journalistic guidelines with a human rights approach.

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