

Social representations in the Chilean online press written media about migrants in Chile

Representaciones sociales en los medios de prensa online chilena respecto a inmigrantes en Chile



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Abstract:

The objective of the study was to analyze the social representations of Haitian, Colombian, and Venezuelan immigrants in the most widely circulated media outlets in Chile. A total of 230 news articles were collected between March 2022 and February 2024. The thematic analysis revealed seven main topics: (1) Migration policies, (2) Danger and insecurity, (3) Illegal immigration as a crisis, (4) Violation of rights, (5) Poverty and costs to the State, (6) Legal or regularized immigrant and (7) Coping with cultural uprooting. The findings highlight that Chilean print media negatively represent immigrants, relying on political discourse that associates immigration with crime and security issues, thereby impacting Chilean citizens' perceptions. These results could guide public policies regarding the integration of immigrants and alert the media to the potential effects of an editorial stance that criminalizes immigrants.

Keywords:

Crimimigration; migration; written media; online newspaper; discourses.

Resumen:

El estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar las representaciones sociales construidas en torno a los inmigrantes haitianos, colombianos y venezolanos en los medios de prensa online de mayor difusión en Chile. Se recolectaron 230 noticias entre marzo de 2022 y febrero de 2024. Del análisis temático surgieron siete temas principales: 1) Políticas migratorias, 2) Peligro e inseguridad, 3) La inmigración ilegal como crisis, 4) Vulneración de derechos, 5) Pobreza y costos hacia el Estado, 6) Inmigrante legal o regularizado y 7) Afrontamiento frente al desarraigo cultural. Destaca en los resultados que la prensa escrita chilena representa negativamente a los inmigrantes, basándose en discursos políticos que asocian la inmigración con delincuencia y problemas de seguridad, lo que afecta la percepción de los ciudadanos chilenos. Estos resultados podrían orientar las políticas públicas sobre la inserción de inmigrantes y alertar a los medios sobre los posibles efectos de una línea editorial que criminaliza a los inmigrantes.

Palabras clave:

Crimimigración; migración; medios de comunicación escritos; diario online; discursos.

1. Introduction

Currently, there has been an increase in migratory movements in Chile, especially from countries such as Colombia, Venezuela, and Haiti (Bógus *et al.*, 2018), in contrast to previous migratory flows coming from neighboring nations such as Peru, Argentina, and Bolivia (Universidad Diego Portales, 2022). According to the National Institute of Statistics of Chile (INE, 2024), the foreign resident population in Chile is currently estimated at 1,918,583 people, representing approximately 9.84% of the country's population, with a notable increase in irregular immigration, that is, those who cross the border through unauthorized routes (Universidad Diego Portales, 2022). This transformation has generated both social and political challenges, such as the need to recognize that Chile is transitioning into a multicultural society, leaving behind its previously "homogeneous" character (Sirlopú *et al.*, 2015).

The previous Chilean migration legislation was in force from 1975 until 2021. In response to the current migratory phenomenon, on April 11, 2021, Law 21.325 on migration and foreign status was enacted in Chile, establishing the duties and obligations of migrants. This law has facilitated expulsions to discourage the use of unauthorized border crossings (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile [BCN], 2021). It includes two expulsion mechanisms: administrative, carried out by the National Migration Service, and judicial, instructed by the courts of justice toward individuals who have committed crimes (BCN, 2021).

Given the relevance of migration in the country and its growing social impact, the media play a key role in constructing social representations about immigration. The way they portray this phenomenon can influence public perceptions and migration policies. In this regard, it is essential to analyze how Chilean written press media represent Haitian, Colombian, and Venezuelan immigrants in their discourse.

2. Perceptions of Immigration and Its Social Impact

The underlying ideas behind migration policies suggest that immigration processes have economic, political, and social effects within a country. Studies show that the native population associates immigrants with irregularity, criminality, and insecurity in a country (e.g., Rodríguez, 2019). It has been noted that immigrants are used as a way to explain various contemporary sociopolitical problems, such as unemployment, job instability, the deterioration of public services, insecurity, and the increase in crime (Pistolessi, 2019).

A study conducted in Chile analyzed perceptions regarding the arrival of foreigners between 2017 and 2021. The findings show a mostly negative perception, primarily driven by fear of labor competition and concern about crime. These perceptions intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (despite mobility restrictions), heightening the fear of unemployment and the sense of insecurity (Castañeda & Brebi, 2022).

In a study conducted by Navarro-Conticello (2024), 1,796 reader comments on digital news articles from the Chilean press related to Venezuelan immigration were analyzed. Thirty-three social imaginaries were identified, mostly negative, depicting Venezuelan immigrants as criminals, invaders, political operatives (linked to Chavismo), or unfair beneficiaries of the system. In particular, women were hypersexualized and reduced to stereotypes associated with physical beauty, opportunism, and prostitution. Moreover, performative discourses were observed that not only describe but also incite action, including explicit calls for expulsion. These results reflect the reproduction of racist, colonialist, and dehumanizing discourses among Chilean digital audiences.

2.1. Social Representation Theory and the Media

Social representations are systems of socially shared knowledge that allow individuals and groups to interpret and communicate about reality (Moscovici, 2012). These representations emerge from processes of anchoring and objectification, where scientific or abstract concepts are re-signified to make them understandable in everyday life. From this perspective, social representations fulfill an epistemological and practical function, as they guide behaviors and interactions within a given sociocultural context (Moscovici, 2012).

Jodelet (1989) expanded Moscovici's notion by emphasizing the dynamic and contextual nature of social representations, highlighting that they not only reflect collective thought but also transform it. Jodelet points out that social representations are symbolic constructions that organize experience and the perception of the world, influencing how individuals act and relate to their environment. In this sense, social representations are transmitted and evolve through communication, social practices, and collective memory, consolidating themselves as essential interpretive frameworks in everyday life (Jodelet, 1989).

The theory of social representations helps explain how the media portray social problems, incorporating "processes of collective meaning-making that result in common cognitions that produce social ties that bind societies, organizations, and groups" (Höijer, 2011, p. 3). From this perspective, the media not only inform about social reality but also shape the way people perceive and understand social phenomena.

Moscovici (2012) describes three systems of communication that influence the construction of social representations: diffusion, propagation, and propaganda. Diffusion refers to the transmission of information in a neutral and objective manner, without necessarily seeking to influence the opinion or attitude of the audience. Propagation aims to orient and consolidate a representation within a specific group. Information is not only transmitted but also reinforced and adapted to the values and beliefs of the receiving group. Finally, propaganda actively seeks to influence the perception and attitude of the public toward certain topics. Propaganda aims to persuade and mobilize people according to certain political, ideological, or commercial interests.

An example of propaganda can be found in a report on news coverage during the arrival of unaccompanied minors from Central America and Mexico to the United States in 2014, which showed that the symbolic protection status normally attributed to childhood was not extended to them. Specifically, immigrant children were depicted as threats to the economy, carriers of diseases, criminals, terrorists, and invaders (Romero, 2022).

In short, the theory of social representations allows us to understand how collective perceptions about different social groups and phenomena are constructed, transmitted, and transformed through the media (Moscovici, 2012; Jodelet, 1989). As has been observed, the media do not merely reflect pre-existing social discourses, but also play an active role in consolidating or modifying these representations according to the political, economic, and cultural dynamics of the moment.

2.2. Social Representation of Immigration in the Media

Exposure to the content of mass media can shape viewpoints, emotional responses, and social judgments, and consequently generate negative behaviors toward so-called ethnic and minority groups (Olier & Spadavecchia, 2022). This reinforces stereotypes and even influences political agendas at local, national, and international levels –for example, affecting voting intentions (Mastro, 2019; Wenzel & Yerkowska-Balas, 2019). In fact, the representation of migrants varies greatly depending on the political orientation of the media that portray them. Left-leaning media tend to adopt a more humanitarian perspective, portraying migrants as victims, in contrast to right-leaning media that portray them as a public threat (Valente *et al.*, 2021; Wirz *et al.*, 2018).

In Costa Rica, migration from Venezuela, Colombia, and Haiti has increased –similar to what has occurred in Chile. In Costa Rica, news coverage has been shown to rely on generalized ideas about race, class, national identity, and regional stereotypes. For instance, Haitians are seen as dangerous and Colombians are linked to drug trafficking. Crossing through unauthorized border points, without immigration control, is associated with organized crime, positioning migrants as undeserving of Costa Rica’s public resources. In contrast, Venezuelan asylum seekers –many of whom are middle-class professionals– are portrayed as relatively unproblematic and receive less media coverage (Fouratt & Castillo-Monterrosa, 2021).

Media coverage of migration tends to be negative and conflict-centered (Olier & Spadavecchia, 2022). In online media, migrants arriving by boat to countries like Spain and Australia were portrayed as illegal, a threat, in need of assistance, unhygienic, and culturally different from the local population (Martinez *et al.*, 2017). Migrants are generally overrepresented and portrayed as criminals in European media discourse (Eberl *et al.*, 2018). They are also depicted as undocumented and as targets of immigration control agencies. When represented as legal migrants, they are associated with low-skilled jobs (Ash *et al.*, 2021).

In Chile, studies of the press during periods of socio-health crises observe a media trend to treat migration as a problem –portraying it either as a threat, a burden on society, or representing migrants as victims. This perspective primarily stems from hegemonic or political voices, aligned with shifting political agendas (Figuereido *et al.*, 2023).

In conclusion, the media play a significant role in constructing social representations of groups of people and shaping the collective imaginary, acting as intermediaries in the construction of subjectivities between readers and reality (Carvalho *et al.*, 2014).

3. Method

The objective of this study is to analyze the social representations constructed around Haitian, Colombian, and Venezuelan immigrants in the most influential online press outlets in Chile. A qualitative methodology was used, specifically thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). From a transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010), the aim is to visualize mechanisms of oppression that have been structured and reproduced through the written press.

The data collection was conducted using news articles published in four nationally circulated digital newspapers in Chile: Emol, Radio Biobío, El Mostrador, and La Tercera, selected due to their wide readership among the population (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2022).

Google News was used as the search engine to identify and collect the news articles. The defined search period was from March 2022 to February 2024, considering that 2022 was the first year the new migration law was in force.

News articles were selected if their titles included any of the following keywords: immigration, migration, immigrant, migrant, Venezuelan, Colombian, Haitian, foreigner(s). This resulted in 230 news articles published between 2022 and 2023. Opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and articles about immigration in other countries were excluded. Peruvian, Bolivian, and Argentine migration was also excluded when the news focused on the movement of people who constantly cross the

border in both directions, as neighboring countries have different characteristics, such as transitory border crossings (Tapia Landino, 2015).

Two researchers conducted the coding process. An initial inter-rater reliability analysis was carried out based on a codebook developed from 25 randomly selected articles, which yielded a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.79, indicating substantial agreement. The coding process was conducted using NVivo software, version 14.

4. Results

The thematic analysis identified seven key themes: (1) Migration policies, (2) Danger and insecurity, (3) Illegal immigration as a crisis, (4) Violation of rights, (5) Poverty and costs to the State, (6) Legal or regularized immigrants, and (7) Coping with cultural uprooting.

Table 1. Percentage of codes associated with themes in Chilean online press media

Theme	No. of Codes (947)	Percentage
Migration policies	284	29,98%
Danger and insecurity	199	21,01%
Illegal immigration as a crisis	196	20,69%
Violation of rights	130	13,72%
Poverty and costs to the State	70	7,39%
Legal or regularized immigrant	42	4,43%
Coping with cultural uprooting	26	2,74%

Source: Own elaboration

Most news articles focused on shaping opinions regarding the country's migration policy (29.98%), presenting it as a matter of national security based on the perception of danger associated with immigration. However, only 13.72% of the articles addressed discourses related to migrant rights, and just 2.74% focused on the experiences of immigrants themselves in Chile.

4.1. Migration Policies

The main response to migratory flows in Chile is reflected in discourses around Law 21325 which is presented as a national security law aimed at protecting the country from illegal immigration and its negative consequences.

Descriptions of migration policy focus on border control and security through militarization. Political discourses in the press highlight how the Critical Infrastructure Law strengthens the border by allocating greater resources to territorial surveillance, creating the image of a protected nation, even using mechanisms previously criticized by left-wing political sectors, such as “reinforced trenches.”

The law allows for the immediate return (“reconducción”) of individuals who enter illegally. The press describes the reconducción process and issues encountered with other countries, such as Bolivia, which does not accept the return of immigrants who are not Bolivian nationals:

“Boric takes a ‘hardline’ and blames Bolivia for hindering the expulsion of irregular migrants” (BioBio, March 2023, para. 1).

Given the complexity of the phenomenon, a need for greater international cooperation has been recognized to effectively implement public policy, with Chile currently identified as one of the Latin American countries facing the greatest challenges in managing immigration.

Descriptions of expulsion processes detail the mechanisms through which the law is enforced: administrative and judicial. For example, administrative cases are described as more complex due to the two notifications that irregular migrants must receive to be deported. Meanwhile, the judicial mechanism appears easier to apply when courts rule on crimes committed by immigrants:

“1,070 foreigners were expelled from the country in 2022. Compared to 2021, this represents a 15% increase, with judicial expulsions predominating, while administrative ones have decreased from 246 to 31” (BioBio, February 2023, para. 1).

To justify these expulsions, the press often highlights the extensive criminal records of immigrants:

“The Undersecretary of the Interior reported the expulsion of 49 foreign nationals convicted of crimes related to drug trafficking, violent robbery, and illegal possession of firearms and ammunition. Of these, 45 were Colombian and 4 Ecuadorian” (La Tercera, October 2022, para. 29).

The portrayal of the migration law as a security measure is supported by a “hardline” discourse, which seeks to further strengthen the law, linking expulsion mechanisms to drug-related crimes and associating immigration with such offenses:

“The goal is for foreigners convicted under the Drug Law, and whose sentences do not exceed five years, to be allowed to substitute this sentence with deportation, a measure aimed at reducing prison overcrowding” (La Tercera, October 2022, para. 6).

The law establishes that illegal entry is, in itself, grounds for expulsion. However, the press tends to overrepresent criminal acts:

“We want to carry out the expulsion of drug traffickers as soon as possible, but the opposition has a different opinion” (El Mostrador, March 2023, para. 6).

The media extensively cover discourses that criminalize undocumented immigration, including statements by right-wing political figures:

“A person who enters through our border, or knows that it is a crime, will think twice. Because no one wants to go before a judge or be detained” (BioBio, April 2023, para. 8).

The law only becomes flexible in granting temporary visas to those who work for a limited number of months in productive activities or humanitarian aid, arguing that they contribute to national development:

“The Migration Policy aims to promote orderly, regular, and safe migration (...) oriented toward the productive and economic development of the country” (BioBio, March 2023, paras. 8-9).

According to the discourses presented, policy is moving toward facilitating the expulsion and control of immigrants. Strategies such as the registration (empadronamiento) of foreigners who entered Chile irregularly –especially via unauthorized routes– have been implemented. Authorities repeatedly state that the purpose of registration is to strengthen national security and allow the State to identify those residing in the country:

The president stated that the goal is to know “who they are, where they live, their identity, and thus move toward safe, orderly, and regular migration” (BioBio, October 2022, para. 7).

It is reported that around 105,000 people, mostly Venezuelans, have been identified through biometric registration and self-reporting processes, which carry connotations of criminality and control. Authorities stress that this process does not constitute a migration regularization, but rather an identity record, in order to avoid political and social tensions amid growing dissatisfaction with mass regularization.

As evidenced, policy is governed by discourses of public and national security, allowing for the identification and possible sanction of individuals linked to crimes, creating a direct relationship between illegal immigration and delinquency under the migration law. This perspective is also replicated by the judiciary, where “penal populism” discourses have emerged – such as the “Valencia criteria” promoted by the national prosecutor– which allow prosecutors to request pretrial detention for detained undocumented migrants.

Preventive detention is also supported by various right-wing political parties that advocate for the creation of temporary detention centers to address irregular immigration in Chile, increasingly toughening immigration policies through national securitization discourses and emulating strategies from countries like the United States:

“Renovación Nacional and Republican Party members delivered letters to President Boric, urging him to address irregular migration in our country with an anti-immigrant offensive, highlighting the proposal to establish provisional detention centers to hold foreigners pending expulsion” (BioBio, April 2023, para. 2).

4.2. *Danger and Insecurity*

The press links the issue of immigration to the country's security problems. The nationality or migrant status of individuals involved in criminal acts is frequently mentioned, ranging from common crimes to organized crime. For common crimes, the offense is described along with the method of execution, often highlighting the nationality or irregular status of those involved:

“Four Venezuelans were formally charged with robbery with intimidation, the prosecutor stated” (BioBio, February 2023, para. 6).

Organized crime is described not only in terms of gangs such as the “Tren de Aragua” but also as networks of professionals committing economic crimes that affect the public treasury, such as fraud against the National Health Fund:

“The Director of the PDI reported that it is a criminal organization –perhaps not a violent one– but one that has caused more than 25 billion pesos in economic harm to the public treasury. The group includes 29 individuals, primarily foreigners” (La Tercera, December 2022, para. 7).

However, beginning in 2023, what has drawn the most attention are kidnapping crimes linked to organized crime. These are described as new types of crimes in the country, associated with the irregular increase in foreign nationals in Chile:

“Chile is experiencing a security crisis, exacerbated by a type of crime that until recently was uncommon: extortion kidnappings. The number of such cases is rising, and authorities link them to international gangs whose members entered irregularly” (Emol, November 2023, para. 1).

The written press highlights the statements of prominent political and academic figures who focus on the criminalization of immigrants. They associate migration with “border crimes,” including smuggling, vehicle theft, arms trafficking, human trafficking, drug trafficking, and more violent crimes such as homicide, armed robbery, and new criminal methods like “motochorros” (motorbike-mounted robbers):

“Although there hasn't been a rampant increase in crime, there is a presence of organized crime and more violent offenses due to Venezuelan immigration, the academic stated” (BioBio, December 2022, para. 10).

The media also publish news stories associating migration with drug trafficking, mentioning the nationality of those involved or presenting statistics that link the increase in these crimes to the participation of foreigners:

“The chief prosecutor of criminal analysis systems referred to the growing involvement of foreign nationals in drug trafficking, stating: ‘If we look at the statistics for 2021 and 2022, their involvement in drug trafficking offenses approaches 60%’” (BioBio, March 2023, para. 1).

With less frequency, news stories appear about sexual offenses and public disorder involving migrants:

“Venezuelan man sentenced to 7 years in prison for sexually abusing a teenager with autism” (BioBio, February 2023, para. 1).

Nevertheless, the insecurity associated with immigration-related crimes is connected to public order and is used as political discourse by both right- and left-wing sectors:

“Security and public order are not right-wing issues. From a progressive standpoint, we must be able to embrace the banner of security, the right to live in peace, and the reclaiming of public spaces” (BioBio, January 2023, para. 9).

4.3. *Illegal Immigration as a Crisis*

Migration in Chile is associated with irregular flows and a lack of regulation at the border, which is portrayed as overwhelmed. The data is generally provided by law enforcement agencies, such as the increase in reports of irregular entries, as informed by the Chilean Investigative Police (PDI), which stated that in the last:

“5 years, [irregular entries] reached 128,921” (Emol, July 2022, p. 1).

This issue is considered one of Chileans’ main concerns, along with public security.

In media discourse, the population repeatedly associates the number of migrants with the country’s security. To support this, hard data from surveys is presented, showing a negative and conflict-laden perception of immigrant groups entering the country:

“82% of citizens perceive the presence of immigrants in the country as excessive. Nevertheless, only 7% report having always or almost always had a bad experience with them” (Emol, April 2023, para. 1).

The press highlights the opinions of political figures, such as the current President of the Republic, who stated that “we have a very serious problem with illegal immigration” and called on immigrants to either “regularize their status or leave” (Emol, October 2022, p. 1).

The media tends to publish statements from parliamentarians opposing illegal immigration, often related to legislative initiatives aimed at toughening the government’s response. These discourses emphasize the need to expel illegal immigrants from the country and support legislative proposals to control this phenomenon, including proposals to classify illegal immigration as a criminal offense. This sociopolitical stance is based on a negative view of the illegal immigrant as someone who deceives the system –a view that has been echoed by high-level political leaders:

“Piñera indicated that there was a time when immigrants came to Chile deceiving the system with fake work contracts and other tricks” (Emol, March 2023, para. 3).

From this profiling of the illegal immigrant, they are blamed for a variety of problems and social crises:

“The figures show that the country is having serious difficulties in controlling its borders, which is causing a series of social and public order disturbances that are severely affecting the quality of life in these areas, leading to widespread citizen unrest” (La Tercera, October 2022, para. 3).

This problematic view of immigration has led to widespread criticism of the governments in power, and this has been used for political purposes, including calls for the resignation of the Director of Immigration and threats of a constitutional accusation against ministers:

“Following opposition threats of a constitutional accusation against the Minister of the Interior, the government announced its willingness to increase deportations when necessary” (Emol, April 2023, para. 2).

It is noteworthy that, since 2023, the irregular Venezuelan population has been overrepresented in the media, unlike other analyzed nationalities, such as Colombians or Haitians:

“PDI reported that a total of 10,135 foreigners have entered the country illegally in just over three months in 2023. Of them, nearly 75% are Venezuelans” (Emol, February 2023, para. 1).

4.4. *Violation of Rights*

The discourse related to the violation of rights is based on the voices of migrant advocacy organizations in Chile and the political positions of neighboring countries such as Bolivia and Venezuela. These perspectives highlight the stigmatization process experienced by immigrants in Chile and how it leads to violations of fundamental rights for these groups:

“A former spokesperson for the National Migrant Coordinator believes we are on the verge of a sad policy of mass expulsions, succumbing to xenophobic discourse. ‘People want blood, they want a show’” (El Mostrador, October 2022, para. 9).

“Morales called for ‘respect for the human rights’ of migrants” (La Tercera, March 2023, p. 1).

This stigmatization is based on the racialized criminalization of migrants, particularly those from Afro-descendant countries:

“There is a racial bias. If you are a migrant and undocumented, then you are a criminal. And that is not true, and the President knows it” (Emol, October 2022, para. 13).

Studies cited in the media show that both political figures and the general population discriminate based on race:

“Migrants do not increase crime: Canadian study exposes Chileans as classist and xenophobic” (BioBio, April 2023, p. 1).

The discourse of migrants themselves –mainly Venezuelans– shared on social platforms and echoed in the media also shows that they feel discriminated against:

“A Venezuelan visiting the capital reported being the victim of a xenophobic attack by a woman who questioned his presence in the country” (BioBio, November 2023, para. 1).

This discrimination has also extended to refugee policy, with reports of illegal practices by the state, such as requiring pre-admission exams for asylum applications –particularly affecting Venezuelans who seek to safeguard their lives and fundamental rights:

“According to the UN Refugee Agency, nearly half a million Venezuelans reside in Chile, among them 9,372 people who applied for asylum between 2016 and 2022 –only 30 of whom were granted it” (Emol, September 2023, para. 5).

This racial bias is made more evident when comparing the treatment of Venezuelan asylum seekers to that of Chilean-Ukrainian families who sought refuge in 2022:

“Currently, the 45 people recognized as refugees have permanent residency. After meeting with authorities, they received commitments such as a one-time 500,000 CLP gift card for use in a supermarket and rental subsidies” (La Tercera, March 2023, paras. 5-6).

The lack of clear rights has contributed to a lack of protection for immigrants, particularly in cases of abuse committed by public officials, such as police officers who have demanded bribes in exchange for allowing migrants to remain in the country. Legislative restrictions imposed by the Senate have limited the ability of undocumented immigrants to regularize their status, resulting in difficulties accessing formal employment and improving their quality of life:

“The inability to regularize their papers and the rising cost of living are pushing migrants to return to the dangerous northern route. They report that mafias, and even the Peruvian police, are taking advantage of them” (El Mostrador, January 2024, para. 1).

Authorities have called for the opening of humanitarian corridors between countries, especially to help the Venezuelan population return to their country.

In response to the tougher laws and political discourse, there has been a rise in migrant deaths at unauthorized border crossings:

“Colchane accounts for 60% of migrant deaths at the northern border. The most common cause in these cases is the adverse environmental conditions migrants face” (Emol, December 2022, para. 1).

When immigrants fall victim to crimes within Chilean territory, they are often described as being victimized by their fellow countrymen or other migrants:

“This is the third murder in our town this year, apparently due to a turf war among criminal gangs for control of the border” (Emol, February 2024, para. 1).

They are also depicted as insignificant victims –often, no one even claims their bodies:

“At the Southern Prosecutor’s Office, we still have some homicide victims who are foreigners. Their bodies are at the Legal Medical Service, and no one has claimed them. We don’t know who they are or to whom we should return the body” (La Tercera, February 2024, para. 4).

Only children are portrayed as real and important victims; however, their protection remains symbolic, limited to calls from organizations advocating for children’s rights, without any concrete state action:

“Following tragic incidents in camps in Coronel and Valparaíso, an NGO called for guarantees of migrant children’s rights and urged immediate action to ensure comprehensive protection for this vulnerable population” (El Mostrador, November 2023, para. 1).

Undocumented individuals are portrayed as people with no basic rights within the country—including minors. As a result, there are reports of 104 children registered as offspring of “transient persons” between 2018 and 2022—a status allowed by the national constitution but not endorsed by international children’s rights law.

4.5. Poverty and Cost to the State

Linked to the previous themes, media discourses quantify the costs associated with the implementation of the migration law and expulsion processes, portraying immigrants as a problem due to their impoverished conditions upon arrival:

“The Director of Migration says that deporting a migrant from the country costs the State up to 2.7 million pesos” (El Mostrador, March 2023, para. 2).

The discourse also emphasizes how these costs are increasing, even impacting the national budget allocated for deporting undocumented immigrants:

“The Senate will add 3.5 billion pesos to the budget line for the National Migration Service. This will increase administrative expulsions by 1,000” (Emol, November 2023, para. 1).

Cost is also associated with crimes committed by immigrants and their economic impact on the State, portraying them as an economic and labor threat:

“The investigation by the Public Prosecutor’s Office revealed that 24 Colombian doctors were involved in the case and had allegedly defrauded the public treasury of 27 billion pesos” (El Mostrador, December 2022, para. 1).

Regarding economic and labor threats, the media reports that immigration –especially undocumented and Venezuelan migration– causes economic and labor instability. This is based on the high unemployment rate among foreigners (around 7.8%) and the high percentage of immigrants working informally, with figures ranging from 20% to 30% across various media sources. Informal employment is most often associated with app-based delivery services and transportation.

In relation to the use of public services such as health and education, the media quantifies the costs incurred, especially by the Venezuelan population, to the Chilean economy:

“Regarding the costs of Venezuelan migration to the Chilean economy, it was found that in 2022, healthcare expenses reached USD 93 million and education expenses USD 154 million” (Emol, November 2023, para. 10).

Migrants are also associated with poverty, especially those with irregular status, which places them in vulnerable conditions such as living on the streets or in makeshift shelters known as rucos. They are also described as living in camps and land occupations, often in overcrowded conditions due to the circumstances of their arrival:

“Among those who arrived between 2015 and 2019, the poverty rate reached 21.7%, and 35.5% for those who arrived from 2020 onward. These conditions are associated with multidimensional poverty rates of around 62%” (La Tercera, February 2024, para. 6).

The lack of resources is even mentioned in cases involving immigrant victims of crimes. For instance, in the case of a Venezuelan woman murdered by her Chilean partner, the article focuses on her family’s inability to afford the repatriation of her body:

“Her family is hoping to bury her, but due to a lack of resources, her remains have not been repatriated and remain at the Legal Medical Service” (BioBio, March 2023, para. 2).

Finally, a link has been found between migrants’ impoverished conditions upon arrival and their vulnerability—not only economic, but also to being recruited by criminal organizations. The press often relates poverty directly to criminality:

“Due to economic need, irregular status, lack of networks in Chile, and other factors, [migrant women] leave their countries of origin to seek new job opportunities to meet the basic needs of their children and others under their care. It is precisely in this context that they fall into the hands of criminal organizations” (BioBio, March 2023, para. 8).

This association between poverty and crime is also evident in reports detailing the number of immigrants in Chilean prisons:

“More than 7,300 foreigners are currently incarcerated in Chilean prisons” (Emol, January 2024, para. 1).

This is presented in reference to prison overcrowding and the increasing proportion of foreign inmates, which is portrayed as contributing to the collapse of the prison system, while consuming national resources deemed undeserved due to their status as criminals.

4.6. *Legal or Regularized Immigration*

Legal immigration is also linked to the migration crisis, particularly due to the volume of people arriving in the country. The media highlights figures showing the number of migrants per region, and describes the negative effects of this volume. The analysis reveals that legal immigration in Chile is portrayed as a challenge. The large number of migrants tests the country's capacity to provide adequate basic services:

“Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia are countries that have been strongly impacted by the migratory crisis in Venezuela. Their numbers are even higher than ours, and for all of them it has been a gigantic challenge to process this migration volume” (Emol, February 2023, para. 12).

Regarding the positive impacts of migration processes in Chile, the news emphasizes migrants' contributions to public finances and the labor force –mainly referring to the Venezuelan population with higher education levels:

“According to CEPAL, between 2009 and 2017, the Latin American migrant population contributed 11.5% to Chile's GDP. At the same time, migrants contribute more resources to the treasury than the State spends on them” (El Mostrador, October 2023, para. 6).

This contribution is also discussed in relation to civic participation, particularly in historically significant processes like the constitutional vote. Media outlets emphasize discourses that quantify and characterize the participation of immigrant voters as an important support for the new constitutional text:

“676,028 immigrants will be eligible to vote. I believe it is likely that immigrants will tend to vote in favor of the new constitutional draft” (El Mostrador, December 2023, para. 1).

Regarding immigrant minors, the media tends to depict them as documented and in small numbers (13% of the total immigrant population). In the few cases where minors are reported to have entered through unauthorized crossings, they are portrayed as victims:

“The Border Prosecutor's Office has handled four cases of foreign children and adolescents who were brought into the country clandestinely by adults, thereby violating their rights” (El Mostrador, January 2024, paras. 1-2).

As evidenced, topics such as refugees and immigrant children receive limited media coverage, despite documented cases of rights violations involving minors who entered the country illegally, or Venezuelan immigrants seeking political asylum.

4.7. *Coping with Cultural Uprooting*

News articles often replicate content from social media, showcasing the main reactions of the Chilean public. The replicated content generally highlights the discourse of Venezuelan individuals expressing their opinions –either positive or negative–about Chile. This reveals strategies aimed at reinforcing their own culture, often related to the perception of negative aspects:

“It's the most boring country with the most boring people on the planet. They don't celebrate, they're bothered by music (...) we're Venezuelans, we're joyful. The video of the Venezuelan citizen went viral and sparked many reactions from other users, most of whom harshly criticized him” (La Tercera, December 2023, paras. 6-8).

On the other hand, there are also representations of efforts to adopt Chilean culture in response to positive opinions or experiences. These include appreciation for the country's resources, transportation, and quality of life. Some even express a preference for Chilean over Venezuelan nationality:

“I chose to be Chilean, and that's even more meaningful –I could have chosen any country” (El Mostrador, June 2023, para. 6).

5. Conclusion and Discussion

From the theoretical framework of social representations, it is understood that shared meanings about migration in Chile emerge from the interaction between official, media, and everyday discourses, with the media playing a fundamental role in shaping these representations. In this context, the Chilean written press has played a central role in constructing an image of migration anchored in discursive axes that reinforce perceptions of threat and loss of control.

The results show that social representations of migration are primarily structured around three axes: the securitization of migration, the association between migration and crisis, and the differentiation between legal and illegal migrants. These axes align closely with what Pistolesi (2019) describes, noting that immigrants are often associated in media and political discourses with sociopolitical problems such as insecurity and crime. Indeed, the analyzed data reflect a predominance of categories such as “Migration Policies” (29.98%), “Danger and Insecurity” (21.01%), and “Illegal Immigration as Crisis” (20.69%), revealing that the press has framed the migration phenomenon within a national security logic. Although these articles may not explicitly engage in propaganda, the way immigrants are presented clearly reflects a negative stance on this phenomenon.

This discursive anchoring translates into the objectification of the migrant as an ambiguous but predominantly negative figure: a subject who represents a risk to public order, a “potential criminal,” or a “factor of social destabilization.” This construction is reinforced by institutional discourses that emphasize crime statistics in areas with high migrant populations, despite data from the INE (2022) showing a decrease in victimization in Chile, and international research (Light & Miller, 2018) contradicting the notion that migration increases crime.

In general, the press links migration with illegality and public security issues, emphasizing the use of the Migration and Foreigners Law as a tool to control both. This law includes administrative and judicial deportation mechanisms, the latter being more frequently reported in the press and often illustrated with cases involving foreign nationals who committed crimes and were expelled.

This link between migration, law, and crime relates to the concept of crimmigration (Stumpf, 2006), where civil immigration laws are merged with punitive logic, thus criminalizing migrants for their legal status. The recent proposal for pretrial detention of undocumented foreigners (BioBio, April 2023) –though later moderated– exemplifies this process. Along these lines, the media reinforce the idea that illegal migration must be combated through judicial tools, with administrative and criminal deportations presented as examples of state control over the migrant “threat.”

Aligned with this perspective, the media also emphasize the economic cost of implementing immigration control strategies. Migrants are portrayed as entering the country under conditions of poverty and vulnerability –not only economically, but

also socially, as they are seen as more likely to be recruited by criminal organizations, reinforcing the idea that poverty is intrinsically linked to crime.

This negative representation is also supported by the statements of government officials who constantly highlight migration statistics. In doing so, the media legitimize a view of migrants as threats, portraying migration as an uncontrollable phenomenon. Thus, a central nucleus of social representation is established that reinforces the idea of a migration crisis –one that is reproduced and reinforced by the emphasis on the number of undocumented migrants, institutional collapse, and the perceived inability of the state to respond to both the needs of migrants and the general population. According to Opazo (2021), this alarmist representation is often reinforced by charts and population statistics at the national and regional level to lend credibility to the narrative. Furthermore, expressions such as “considerably” or “explosive growth” are used to induce a negative perception of demographic changes.

In parallel, a dualist axis is evident in the discourse –one that distinguishes between “legal” and “illegal” migrants. The former are valued for their potential societal contributions, while the latter are constructed as intruders who must be removed. This dichotomy shapes a “moralizing regulation” where immigrants are categorized as “good” or “bad” based on their adaptation and contributions to society (Andrews, 2018). As examples of “good” migrants, the press highlights narratives recognizing the role of immigrants in specific labor sectors and, in some cases, their active participation during national emergencies, such as helping in the 2023 wildfires in Chile. However, these are minority narratives: only 4.34% of the analyzed articles portrayed migrants positively, typically in connection with legality and productivity.

In terms of nationality, Haitian migrants receive little media attention –an invisibility attributed to their lower public presence due to linguistic and cultural barriers (Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, 2020). By contrast, Venezuelan and Colombian migrants are more prominently covered in the media. Previous studies indicate that Venezuelans, initially viewed as “desirable migrants,” have increasingly been associated with irregular migration and unauthorized border crossings, solidifying their link to criminality in Chilean media narratives (Reyes, 2023). Unlike the findings of Fouratt and Castillo-Monterrosa (2021) in Costa Rica –where Venezuelan migrants were less frequently associated with crime –in Chile the opposite is true.

Colombian migrants, while less frequently mentioned, have also been stigmatized and linked to crime. Studies in northern Chile have portrayed them as a “social problem” associated with violence (Echeverri, 2016).

Regarding terms like “refugee,” this designation arises mainly in the context of Venezuelans, who must undergo a review process to be considered under this category and often do not receive adequate support. This contrasts with the media portrayal of Chilean-Ukrainian families, who are depicted positively as dignified individuals deserving of state assistance. The racialization of migration is key to understanding this distinction. As White (2002) points out, migrants –especially those of Afro-descendant origin– are subject to stereotypes and prejudices that reinforce negative migration narratives, while “Western-white” migrants are not perceived as problematic by the majority due to their high social status and more “acceptable” migration motives (Leinonen, 2012).

Applying this framework to press discourse analysis not only reveals dominant content but also exposes the ways in which specific interpretive frameworks are legitimized, influencing public perception of migrants. It also provides tools to examine how binary oppositions –such as legal/illegal or desirable/undesirable– shape symbolic boundaries that justify exclusionary

practices. Therefore, this article contributes an approach that highlights how migration is naturalized as a threat while also opening space to recognize alternative discourses that, from the margins, challenge hegemonic representations.

This study did not include data from external sources such as TV newscasts or printed press, and was limited to a specific time frame, which may be considered a limitation. Moreover, it focused specifically on Colombian, Venezuelan, and Haitian immigrants, excluding other significant groups in Chile such as Peruvians and Argentinians, despite their relevance to the broader migratory process. Future research could explore critical discourses underlying media representations of immigrants at the national level.

These findings help illuminate the social representations of migration circulating in the media, making visible the symbolic mechanisms that sustain exclusionary practices while opening pathways to challenge hegemonic meanings through more inclusive narratives. In doing so, these results can guide public policy toward fairer social integration, while encouraging the media to reflect on the effects that criminalizing editorial lines may have on migrants' mental health and adaptation processes within the national context.

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8. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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