

New frontiers of otherness: impact of the pandemic on the media discourse on immigration in Spain

Nuevas fronteras de la otredad: impacto de la pandemia en el discurso mediático sobre inmigración en España

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Abstract

This text presents a study on the representation of immigration in the Spanish press from March 2020 to March 2022, the peak period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. Based on the critical analysis of the discourse of a sample of 347 news items published in the four written press media with the largest audience in Spain, different emerging and recurrent discursive frameworks around immigration and migrants are identified and analyzed. The results of the study point to a worsening of the stigmatization of migration as an essentially problematic phenomenon and explicitly associated with the spread of the virus on a global scale. The identified discourses reinforce, in a new way, old rhetoric that speaks of migrants as potentially dangerous, under imaginaries of a certain primitivism: they are vulnerable, violent, uncivil, incomprehensible, in contrast to the positive self-representation of a native, white and civilized Europe.

Keywords: migration, media, COVID-19, critical discourse analysis, racism.

Resumen

El texto presenta un estudio sobre las representaciones de la inmigración en la prensa española de marzo de 2020 a marzo 2022, periodo de auge de la pandemia del COVID-19 en Europa. A partir del análisis crítico del discurso de una muestra de 347 noticias publicadas en los cuatro medios de la prensa escrita de mayor audiencia en España se identifican y analizan diferentes marcos discursivos, emergentes y recurrentes en torno a la inmigración y las personas migrantes. Los resultados del estudio apuntan a una agudización de la estigmatización de las migraciones como un fenómeno esencialmente problemático y explícitamente asociado a la propagación del virus a escala global. Se identifican discursos que refuerzan, de una manera nueva, viejas retóricas que hablan de las personas migrantes como potencialmente peligrosas, bajo imaginarios de un

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cierto primitivismo: son vulnerables, violentas, incívicas, incomprensibles, en contraste con la autorrepresentación positiva de una Europa autóctona, blanca y civilizada.

Palabras clave: migraciones, medios, COVID-19, análisis crítico del discurso, racismo.

Introduction

Migration of people between countries and continents is not inherent to contemporary societies. As has been extensively documented in the specialized literature, migration movements are a constituent phenomenon of the history of humankind itself and an indiscernible component of its evolution and progress. From this perspective, Spain's entry into the international migration circuit as a receiving country more than three decades ago is part of the context of globalization and the consequent intensification of transnational movements of people. Nevertheless, despite not representing a new phenomenon—due to a series of circumstances explored in this article—international migration to Spain continues to be a problematic and controversial issue, whose controversy has grown in parallel to the number and diversity of racialized migrants arriving in this Mediterranean country.

Racialized migrants refer to people who suffer inequality, segregation or different modes of exclusion rooted in historical and contemporary cultural and racial prejudices in society linked to phenomena such as colonialism, racism and white privilege (Creus, 2023). As Campos García (2012) points out, racialization is a process through which bodies, social groups, cultures and ethnicities are produced as if they belonged to different fixed categories of subjects, charged with an ontological nature that conditions and stabilizes them. From this perspective, it is of particular interest to understand how these racial categories are composed as changing social constructions that reflect power relations in specific historical and cultural contexts, and that permeate every sphere of the social existence of migrants in Europe, constituting a profound and effective form of social, material and intersubjective domination (Quijano, 2000).

One of the mechanisms through which dynamics of racialization and stigmatization of migrants are generated and reproduced intensely and continuously can be found in their representation in the media. If the focus is exclusively on the Spanish context, it can be seen that migration movements have remained on the media agenda during the last decades as a recurrent, controversial and highly politicized current issue. The impact of this media prominence has been the subject of numerous studies (among others: Casero Ripollés, 2004; Checa & Arjona, 2011; Fernández Fernández et al., 2020; Heidenreich et al., 2020; Nash, 2005; Navarro-López, 2021; Santamaría, 2002; Van Dijk, 1997, 2009) that have shed light on how the media decisively influence the construction of the social experience of migration, not only of migrants, but of society as a whole. These and other studies have helped to reflect on how the media and the press play a central role in disseminating discourses that tend to portray migration as a fundamentally problematic phenomenon for host societies and a simplified, stereotyped and negative image of migrants.

The role played by social networks in the propagation of hate crimes and xenophobic discourses is also widely evidenced. For example, studies that explore how social networks can act as a mechanism for the dispersion of extreme points of view (Müller & Schwarz, 2021) or through the simplification of stories and misinformation show how they reinforce the processes of stereotyping migrants to the extent that they disseminate opinions and emotional judgments not based on contrasted information (Fernández Fernández et al., 2020). Thus, it could be said that much of the information circulating in the media and social networks on immigration tends to present too often a preventive image, focused on suspicion or associated with criminality, discourses that lead to the blaming of the racialized migrant population within different social conflicts (Álvarez Gálvez, 2013; Martínez, 2008; Muñoz & Igartua, 2012; Rodríguez Borges, 2010).

Nonetheless, although there is an extensive and relevant body of scientific production dedicated to understanding how immigration has been represented in the media, a singular and much less explored question is how these discourses and representations are configured or reconfigured in contexts of social crisis such as the one experienced during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to emphasize that studying crises is especially relevant for understanding social inequalities. This is so because crises tend to disproportionately affect vulnerable groups and collectives, highlighting the underlying structural inequalities in various spheres of social life. Recent reports (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; World Bank Group, 2020a, 2020b) have also drawn attention to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on migrants, who are particularly vulnerable to its direct and indirect consequences for many reasons. Among others are the barriers that limit their access to living and working conditions, the lack of consideration of their cultural and linguistic diversity in the provision of services, xenophobia, their limited support networks, or the lack of local knowledge and access to rights in host communities.

It should be noted that the emergence of COVID-19 occurs in the context of the expansion of the far right in Europe, whose most visible face, as Ferreira (2019) points out, in the case of Spain, is the entry into the institutional political scene of VOX, a political party founded in 2013 as a split from the most conservative right wing of the Spanish Popular Party. This new presence on the Spanish political scene accompanies the expansion of the far right internationally. This phenomenon has been extensively explored by authors such as Mudde (2007) and Rydgren (2018), who unpack the ideology of these xenophobic and authoritarian formations increasingly present in European parliaments.

Similarly, different studies have already highlighted the growing “toxicity” surrounding the migration debate that has accompanied the pandemic period, and which has had, among other consequences, the intensification of restrictive policies based on discourses that foster fear regarding foreigners (Banulescu-Bogdan et al., 2020; De Gruchy et al., 2022; Guadagno, 2020; Méndez Fierros & Reyes Piñuelas, 2021; Shomron,

2021), the criminalization of migration (Van Der Woude & Van Iersel, 2021), the increase in racism (Muyor Rodríguez & Segura Sánchez, 2020), and recurrent violations of migrants' rights (Fotopoulos et al., 2022; Vincze & Balaban, 2022). An example is found in the study by Vega Macías (2021) on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on anti-migrant and xenophobic discourse in Europe and the United States. Vega Macías' work emphasizes the perverse porosity between necessary or advisable restrictions and instrumental use of the pandemic as an archetypal argument, often forced and poorly structured, which attributes to international migration all sorts of health threats, the economy and the security of States, and which finds a deep echo in xenophobic and anti-immigrant policies and practices.

The study presented in this article is part of the research project "Crossing borders to connect routes. Researching with educational communities to promote equity and fight racism towards immigrants in a post-pandemic world", whose main purpose is to understand structural and emerging forms of inequity that affect migrants. This is an international study funded by the Spencer Foundation (reference # 202200180) that integrates six case studies in five countries (Spain, United States, Malta, Brazil and Uruguay) and seeks to understand from a multidimensional perspective how immigration, educational inequity and racism are related, with special attention to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the dimensions comprising the "Crossing borders to connect routes" project is the analysis of the discursive frameworks from which immigration is represented in each country participating in the study. From a transnational perspective, the project seeks to provide a comprehensive and comparative analysis of how migration and migrants have been represented in the media in different parts of the world within a critical context of global health and social crisis. This paper takes a first step toward achieving that aim by presenting the results of the Spanish case, based on the analysis of the four national print media with the highest readership. Specifically, the questions that have guided this study are: How has migration and migrants been portrayed in the Spanish press between March 2020 and March 2022, the period of the pandemic's peak? Are changes identified concerning the pre-existing discursive frameworks on migration? What new themes and ways of representing migrants have emerged during the pandemic? And finally, How are immigration, pandemic and racism related in the analyzed media?

This paper is structured in five main sections. The introduction frames the general context of the study, explains the objectives and justifies its relevance. Still, as part of the introduction, the background is presented, mentioning the main theoretical references on which the study is based and referencing previous studies that interact with the same problem. The following section describes the methodology, detailing the instruments used to collect information, the data selection and interpretation process, and the adopted analysis perspective. The following section summarizes the study's main results, discussing and developing them in the light of the theoretical framework of reference. Finally, the conclusions synthesize the study's main findings and indicate its limitations and projections.

Streams, torrents and avalanches: background to media discourses on immigration in Spain

A fundamental notion in cultural studies is representation. Stuart Hall (1997) conceptualizes it as a discursive system through which interpretations of the social world circulate. Thus, according to this author, contemporary social and cultural relations are articulated by a dense discursive set that encompasses social practices and symbolic systems that produce meanings. Based on these meanings—produced by systems of representations—individuals give meaning to their experiences and interpret the world within the framework of the different social groups to which they belong (Creus, 2012a).

Kathryn Woodward (1997), taking as a starting point Hall's contributions, develops this same idea by pointing out that representational systems include signifying and symbolic practices through which meaning is given to experience and identity. According to Woodward (1997), they are symbolic systems that create the possibilities of what one is and what one can become, to the extent that they provide possible answers to the questions: Who am I? What can I be? Who do I want to be? (Woodward, 1997, p. 14).

As proposed by Hall and Woodward, the emphasis on representation as a central element in the production and reproduction of meanings is useful for investigating how discourses and social practices operate concerning migration. According to these authors, cultural representations are a fundamental component of sociocultural dynamics and play a decisive role in articulating identities and evoking collective imaginaries. From this perspective, it is interesting to note the role historically played by the media in the reproduction of different modes of exclusion and stigmatization of some groups, such as ethnic minorities, migrants or women (Creus, 2012a). Along these lines, Angulo-Giraldo and Bolo-Varela (2021) recall that the construction of reality by the media not only affects the placement of an issue on the public agenda (agenda setting) but also the definition of a perspective or approach (frame) from which the interpretation of that same reality is delimited.

Then, how do these representations operate in the specific case of racialized migrants? Focusing on the Spanish context, it can be said that there is a relevant body of research that shows how social representations of immigration have been approached in recent decades. For example, there is research that addresses the representation of migrants in the media (Casero Ripollés, 2004; Nash, 2005), in legislation (Calavita, 2005; Rius-Sant, 2007; Suárez-Navaz, 2004), in public policy (Mezzadra, 2005) or in scientific discourse (Delgado, 1997; Fernández-Rufete Gómez, 2004). All these studies, in general terms, point to a close connection between how migrations are understood and the dense set of rhetorics that speak of them as a disturbing and worrying phenomenon, which places migrants in a position of cultural, economic and social deficit (Creus, 2012b).

The work of Enrique Santamaría (2002) is an outstanding example of a study that addresses how immigration in Spain has been constructed from a stigmatizing and problematizing discourse. In *La incógnita del extraño*, a book published based on his doctoral thesis, Santamaría draws attention to the proliferation of information, debates and public policies that constantly place international migration at the forefront of social significance. This author suggests reflecting on the production of metaphors that narrate the arrival of racialized migrants from countries of the global south; phytomorphic metaphors, such as the tree with its roots and uprooting; zoomorphic metaphors, such as birds, which imply images of nomadism and permanent movement; metaphors that refer to water (streams, torrents, avalanches); or war metaphors that evoke invasion, conquest, hostility (Creus, 2012a).

Following the same line but with a different approach, Mary Nash (2005) analyzes how migrants are represented in the media during the first years of international migration to Spain. In the book *Inmigrantes en nuestro espejo. Inmigración y discurso periodístico en la prensa española*, Nash (2005) examines how “immigrant otherness” is articulated in the journalistic discourse. Based on the compilation of a wide selection of news items published in the Spanish press at the end of the 1990s, this author identifies an “explicit predisposition toward discourses of the otherness of a negative sign” where the designations “small boats”, “illegals”, “undocumented”, “clandestine”, and “wet-backs” constitute the most representative typification in the news stories on immigration published in that period (Creus, 2012a).

It is also relevant to mention more recent studies focusing on the internet’s and social networks’ impact on immigration discourses. For example, works that draw attention to how social media and networks have enabled the spread of a greater diversity of discourses make possible the emergence of voices that were not represented in traditional media (Costanza-Chock, 2014; Nerghes & Lee, 2019), such as movements driven on social networks by migrant rights activists. In contrast, many works focus on exploring how social digital platforms have facilitated the propagation of racist discourses and hate speech (Ekman, 2019; Farkas et al., 2018). For example, works such as Ekman’s (2019) on the discursive construction of immigration in users’ interactions on Facebook show how these commercial platforms provide spaces for xenophobic, racist and nationalist discourse toward immigrants.

The metaphors pointed out by Enrique Santamaría, the attributes identified by Mary Nash in the press, or the hate speeches propagated in the networks constitute rhetorical figures that not only implicitly carry a certain understanding of immigration but also mediate the attitudes of host societies toward migrants. In this context, Manuel Delgado (1997) urges reflection on the assignment of the immigrant qualifier. A qualifier that, as this author states, is attributed as a stigma that relates migrations to the irruption of the anomalous, of the intruder who defies the norm. “Immigrant”, ‘illegal’ or ‘undocumented’ are, for Delgado, new ways of naming people who today embody that controversial—and to some extent subversive—social figure that Georg Simmel (1977) called the ‘foreigner’. The “other”, the “stranger”, is a figure that is by definition ambiguous and mobile in which attachment and non-attachment to a given space converge. In Simmel’s words, the foreigner is the “potential emigrant”, someone whose departure and permanence are not assured and whose distinctive character is that of being an intrusive presence, a close and therefore disturbing difference (Creus, 2012a).

Discourse, racism and immigration

Analyzing the experience of colonization, Franz Fanon (2010) defines racism as a structure of domination based on racial relations of superiority and inferiority, politically produced and reproduced for centuries. This structure of domination, inherited from the European colonial project, is structured, according to Fanon, as a line or frontier that divides individuals and peoples between those whose humanity is recognized and those whose humanity is denied. With this conceptualization, Fanon proposes to visualize a material and symbolic frontier that separates two distinct universes: the *zone of being* and the *zone of non-being*. Persons situated in the *zone of being* are socially recognized in their humanity. In contrast, persons assigned to the *zone of non-being*—the colonized and racialized as inferior—are systematically despoiled of this condition, confined to a social role of dehumanization and objectification maintained by permanent violence and silencing.

This Fanonian definition is interesting because it conceives racism from a broad perspective, recognizing hierarchies that can be constructed in multiple ways, where race becomes an instrument of domination that operates through the normalization of bodies and seeks to justify and legitimize the control of some bodies over others. Consider, for example, Irish colonial history, where the British constructed their racial superiority over the Irish based on religion and culture and not based on skin color. The same can be said of Islamophobia in Europe, which today articulates Muslim religious identity as a veritable marker of superiority-inferiority relations based on religious stigma and prejudice. Thus, from a simple but forceful hierarchy based on the superiority-inferiority binomial about the recognition of the human condition, Fanon contributes to the understanding of racism within the framework of a broader phenomenon: that of the systematic oppression of one person over another. It is an oppression that, according to Fanon, is not limited to excluding the oppressed from access to material or symbolic resources but, above all, is sustained by the permanent denial of their cultural values, forms of subjectivity, identities, spiritualities, epistemologies and political practices (Fanon, 2010). It should also be noted that, for Fanon, the *zones of being* and *zones of non-being* do not constitute homogeneous spaces, but each one contains numerous contradictions and different conflicts linked to the relationship between oppressors and oppressed. In this sense, the intersectionality of the relations of domination of race, class, sexuality and gender—a concept developed by black feminists (Crenshaw, 1991)—exists and operates systematically in each of the two zones described by Fanon.

Fanon's thought constitutes a highly relevant conceptual basis that this paper wishes to relate to the contributions of Teun A. Van Dijk, a reference in the field of discourse analysis and one of the authors who has most prolifically studied the role of the media in the reproduction of structural racism and anti-immigration discourses in the European context. In an extensive and relevant oeuvre on this issue (among others: Van Dijk, 1997, 2002, 2005, 2009), this author delves into the mechanisms of discursive racism, which he defines as a pervasive and influential social practice that gives rise to concrete forms of ethnic inequality and domination in the daily lives of minorities, and specifically of racialized migrants.

In line with Fanon's view, Van Dijk (2009) understands racism as a system of domination and social inequality that, in the specific case of Europe, leads to the domination of non-European minorities by a "white" majority (and sometimes a minority). Domination is defined, according to Van Dijk, as the abuse of power by one group over another and is sustained by the interplay of everyday social and socio-cognitive practices that materialize in different forms of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion, as well as prejudicial and stereotypical beliefs, attitudes and ideologies. In this context, Van Dijk claims the centrality of discourse as a social practice from which the system of racist domination is articulated. He points out that the processes of production and reproduction of knowledge and the generation of opinions and ideologies should be understood in terms of discursive practices promoted by the dominant institutions and their elites, which also applies to the reproduction of racist practices and ideologies.

Indirectly referencing the relation between immigration and racism, this author establishes some key points. On the one hand, he draws attention to the fact that racism directed at migrants cannot be understood as an emerging phenomenon, necessarily associated with the most recent contemporary migration processes, but stems from a continuous and long tradition of negative representations of difference and "the different". In this framework, racist discourse is characterized by a general strategy of positive self-representation of white European people (*us*), in contrast to negative representations of "the others", the racialized migrants. This polarization between "us" and "them" can be observed in different properties of media discourses, such as the choice of themes, lexical items, metaphors, hyperbole, euphemisms, narrative tone, argumentation, photos and headlines, among others. Thus, discursive representations of *the others*—be it in the media, in parliamentary debates, in textbooks or in other narrative contexts—tend to be limited to a few stereotypical themes: illegal immigration, reception problems, cultural integration, crime, drugs and deviance. In contrast, a general strategy of positive self-representation tends to be the systematic denial or mitigation of racism, especially among elites.

Another relevant aspect from Van Dijk's perspective is that ethnic minorities have virtually no access to or control over the discourses that represent them, which are generally spoken and written by "white" elites. Likewise, discourses about them or ethnic issues, in general, are explicitly not directed at racialized migrants, who tend to be ignored as potential recipients. He also adds that the perpetuation of racism by the media is not only found in their content but is imbued in the daily routines of news production. From this perspective, he points out that racialized minorities do not control and do not have access to the sources on which the daily production of news is based (press conferences and press releases, meetings and information leaflets, documentation or interviews), that their opinions are less asked, that they are considered less credible or less newsworthy, not to mention that most journalists and editors are white (Van Dijk, 2005).

The different elements pointed out by Van Dijk find a particularly fertile breeding ground in the context of the health and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pan-

demic. As different studies are pointing out (Banulescu-Bogdan et al., 2020; Esses & Hamilton, 2021; De Gruchy et al., 2022; Guadagno, 2020; Méndez Fierros & Reyes Piñuelas, 2021; Van Der Woude & Van Iersel, 2021; Vega Macías, 2021), the global health emergency was used by different powers instituted to implement restrictive measures directed toward refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, thus infecting societies with a sense of insecurity, fear and fragmentation. In this context, the increase in xenophobic policies, the social rejection of immigration and the empowerment of racist ideologies are a reality in the context of the pandemic, as evidenced by research and reports from international bodies.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and interpretative approach to explore the meanings of social representations of immigration present in the Spanish press during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a qualitative study that aims to understand in depth how the architecture of journalistic messages operates in reproducing stigmatizing mechanisms and racist ideologies. According to Van Dijk (2005), the starting point is that these mechanisms and ideologies currently adopt a predominantly discursive form, often of a subtle and symbolic nature, expressed in different text and speech modes. It is precisely by considering the discursive dimension of racism and other forms of discrimination affecting migrants that the article focuses on the role of journalistic discourse in their reproduction. To this end, the discursive strategies of the most widely read newspapers in Spain are analyzed in terms of the relevance that the mainstream press continues to have in the representation of established policies and the status quo and therefore also in the reproduction of institutional and structural racism.

The sample analyzed is composed of articles published between March 1, 2020, and March 31, 2022—the period of the highest incidence of the pandemic in Spain—in four national Spanish newspapers: *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC*, and *El Mundo* (see Table 1). These newspapers were selected based on a combination of three main criteria: they had to be newspapers with national circulation, they had to be among the print media with the largest readership, and the selection had to include media of different ideological orientations or political biases.¹

Table 1. Sample selection

Source	Current audience	Ideological bias	Articles
<i>El País</i>	85 500 000	Moderate or balanced bias	127
<i>La Vanguardia</i>	81 600 000	Moderate or balanced bias	47
<i>ABC</i>	143 740 000	Slanted to the right	137
<i>El Mundo</i>	118 740 000	Slanted to the right	36

Source: created by the authors

¹ For the definition of ideological orientation and audience levels, the Media Bias Chart published by Political Watch was used, with the analysis of 30 media outlets in Spain. <https://political-watch-0a.d11fzwp-rjpx3u.amplifyapp.com/>

The search tool used was MyNews, a national database that allows retrieval of complete articles in the graphic format in which they were published, including images. Different text typologies were covered (news articles, reports, editorials, opinion articles and readers' letters) and retrieved through a Boolean search with different combinations of specific terms (immigration, immigrant, migrants, migration, undocumented, illegal, racism, xenophobia, COVID-19, pandemic, education, discrimination) and with a minimum match of 70% for the established search criteria. The search terms were chosen considering the need to limit the sample to the study's specific objectives. Therefore, priority was given to terms that would allow linking the discourses on immigration to the context of the pandemic and racism, leaving out other information units that, although relevant to the research, could blur the main focus of the study. Considering this limitation, the study's projections point to the possibility of broadening the selection of search terms in future research. As a result, 443 articles were obtained, from which those that did not directly affect the subject of the study were discarded to establish a final sample of 347 articles that addressed immigration or racism as a prominent or central topic.

As a method of analysis, the perspective of critical discourse analysis was adopted, which makes it possible to address various forms of social inequality by exploring discursive dimensions and their linkage to relations of power, domination and inequality (Van Dijk, 1997). Although discourse analysis is traditionally associated with literary criticism, language analysis and linguistics, critical discourse analysis takes the linguistic and psychosocial approaches a step further, as it focuses on the relation between language and society by understanding discourse as a social narrative and examining its inherent hierarchies and ideologies (Gee, 2004; Van Dijk, 1997, 2005).

The unit of analysis was each of the 347 selected articles, which were analyzed through a process of thematic interpretation. The definition of thematic categories was carried out through a process of continuous triangulation that began with a list of emerging thematic categories identified individually for each of the researchers who participated in this study, which were then crossed to construct a joint thematic matrix. During the process of thematization, all the information collected was worked on systematically, following the guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): *a*) the greatest possible number of patterns in the information was coded; *b*) a description of each thematic code was incorporated with context information; *c*) it was considered that the same article could be linked to different thematic codes; and, *d*) inductive—themes emerging from the data themselves—and deductive coding perspectives were combined, derived from the specific theoretical interests of the research. As a final stage of the information systematization process, a thematic matrix was designed, consisting of main themes and sub-themes, which resulted from the global and cross-sectional analysis of the sample. The thematic matrix resulting from the cross-sectional analysis of the 347 selected articles comprises five themes and 13 sub-themes, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic matrix

Main topic	Subtopic
1. <i>Immigration and transmission</i> : news items that address the impact of migration on the spread of COVID-19, focusing on the fear of immigrants as possible agents of transmission	1.1. The migrant as a potential transmitter of COVID-19
	1.2. Migrants as a risk group due to their economic and social vulnerability
	1.3. The migrant as a breacher of health safety standards
2. <i>Immigration and political discourse</i> : news stories that address immigration as a field of political confrontation, used to censure the opposition without fully addressing racism and xenophobia as social problems	2.1. Electoral campaign and xenophobic policies
	2.2. Field of political dispute
3. <i>Immigration and rhetorics of invasion</i> : news stories depicting migration movements highlighting the massive flow of people as a problem. Immigrants are portrayed as invaders, and authorities implement measures to control and repatriate them	3.1. Migration crises, massive arrivals of migrants and deaths on migration routes
	3.2. Border control, expulsions and forced returns
	3.3. Health control in detention centers for migrants
4. <i>Immigration and demographics</i> : news items exploring the decline of immigration in Spain during the pandemic, highlighting its economic and demographic importance in Europe	4.1. Impact of the reduction of migration flows due to COVID-19 on population growth
	4.2. Impact of the reduction of migration flows due to COVID-19 on the labor market
5. <i>Immigration and racism</i> : news stories that explicitly address racism, either from a structural perspective or focused on racist practices and xenophobic policies	5.1. Structural racism
	5.2. Hate crimes and racist crimes
	5.3. Authorized voices of anti-racism

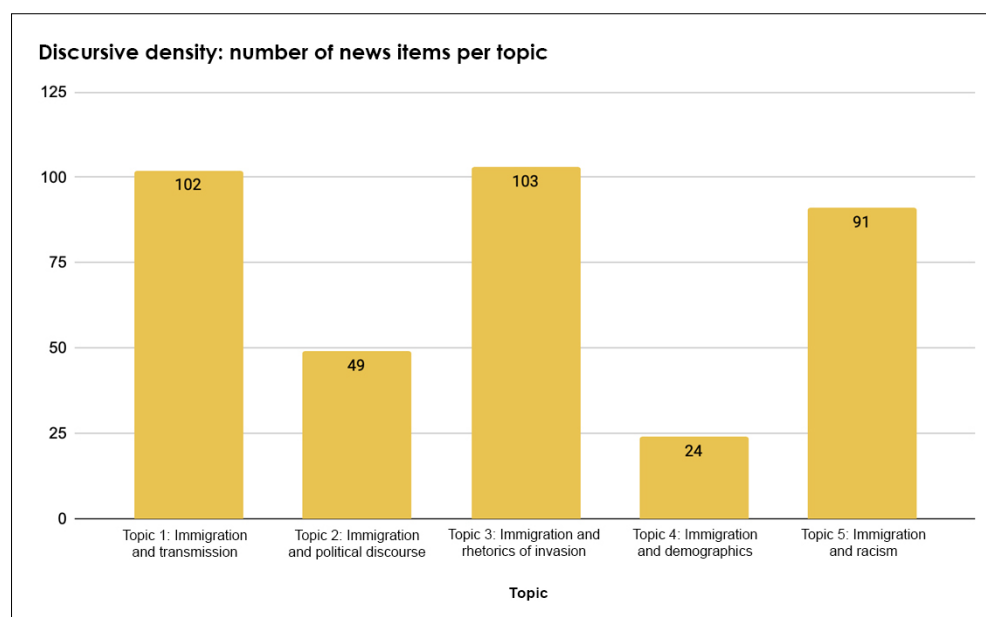
Source: created by the authors

Once the thematic categories and sub-themes were defined, the information was analyzed from the critical discourse analysis perspective. For this purpose, the analysis was based on aspects that, according to Van Dijk (2002), make it possible to identify the relations of power, domination and inequality reflected, implicitly or explicitly, in the discourse, such as: who are the actors in the news (protagonists, secondary, active or passive); which actions are described or ignored (what is said or omitted, how it is said, metaphors, allusions, associations); and how the discourse is legitimized (sources cited, referents, use of figures). Likewise, the number of articles labeled in each thematic category was counted to determine the discursive density of the main topics and subtopics identified. Consistently with the qualitative perspective adopted, no value hierarchy was established between high and low density, considering that both low- or high-density results provide relevant information on the discursive frameworks produced and reproduced in the discourses analyzed.

Results

The resulting data on the discursive density of the five main topics identified (see Figure 1) show a clear preeminence of news items that associate immigration with transmission (topic 1) and position migrants as transmitters or potential transmitters of the virus. Also numerically prominent are articles that emphasize the mass movement of people and portray immigration as a problematic and out-of-control phenomenon (theme 3). This rhetoric of invasion, which is also found across the board in the analyzed media, regardless of their ideological positioning, reproduces a recurrent discursive framework widely developed by the Spanish media since the 1990s, combined in the current context with the increase in social tension caused by the pandemic.

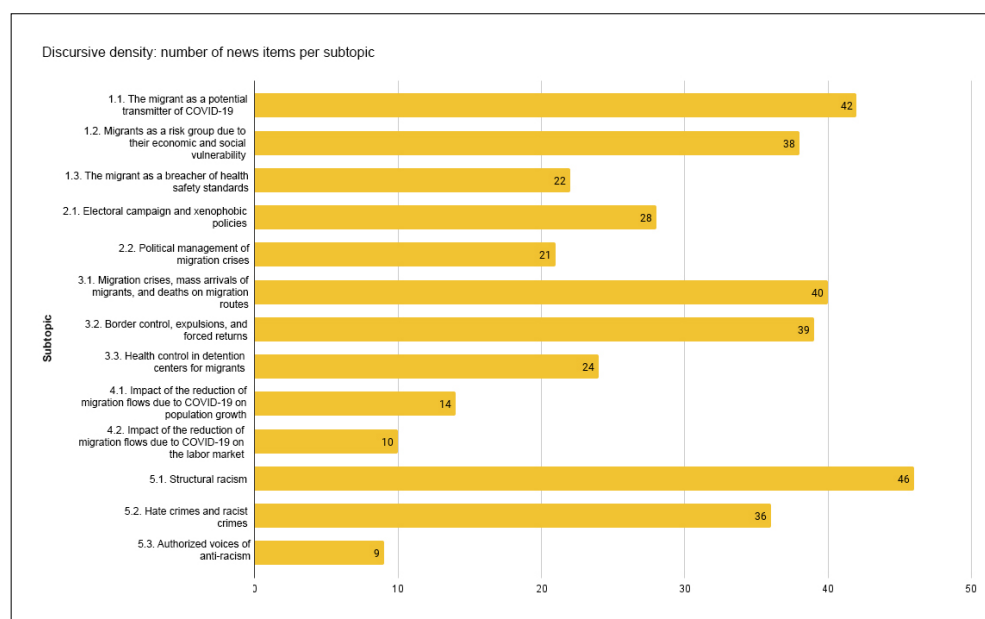
Figure 1. Discursive density of main topics



Source: created by the authors

On the other hand, the relationship between immigration and racism (topic 5) also stands out as a prominent topic, although, as will be seen in the discussion, it is almost always addressed in the international news section, referring to events and problems occurring outside Spain. In the same way, the news concerning immigration as a necessary resource for the demographic and economic growth of the country—which is affected by the reduction of migration flows and the return of migrant families to their countries of origin—constitutes another focus of interest in the analyzed media (topic 4), although with fewer media presence.

Finally, the political impact of immigration, the analysis of migration policies, or the ideological positions of different political parties concerning migration (topic 2) is another recurrent focus of news, normally addressed in the pages dedicated to national politics, with a high impact on the monitoring of electoral campaigns.

Figure 2. Discursive density of the subtopics

Source: created by the authors

If the discursive density of the 13 subtopics identified is focused on (see Figure 2), some relevant nuances can be highlighted. For example, it can be seen that the articles that associate the presence of migrants with the transmission of COVID-19 are distributed in a discursive spectrum that ranges from assigning the role of passive transmitters (carriers of the virus) to active transmitters (accentuating disruptive behaviors by migrants that put public health at risk) to news that focuses on the situation of social and health vulnerability experienced by migrants in the context of the pandemic. The latter approach is, in any case, a minority one.

It is also interesting to note that the news items under the umbrella of the rhetoric of invasion, focused on mass movements of migrants, are almost exclusively from the perspective of border management, international agreements and migration policies, and approaches from the perspective of human rights are almost nonexistent. Likewise, regarding the news that deals with the problem of racism, despite the outstanding discursive density identified (as will be seen in the discussion section), its majority treatment in the news of an international nature—structural racism as something that occurs in other countries—is noteworthy, linked in the period analyzed to the high media coverage of the murder of George Floyd, in May 2020.

Finally, it should be noted that no significant differences were found in terms of the topics identified concerning the ideological bias of the newspaper, although differences can be seen in the tone and the visual and textual language adopted in each case. In this regard, it is relevant to mention that the detailed analysis of this aspect has not been contemplated in the present phase of the research, in which the thematic analysis has been prioritized from a cross-sectional perspective. The need to deepen this analysis in future research developments is recognized.

Discussion

Among the topics that emerged from the analysis, the contents that explicitly relate immigration to the spread of the pandemic (topic 1) were of particular interest. Within this framework, relevant news items were identified in all the analyzed media describing migrants as potential transmitters of COVID-19 (subtopic 1.1). This is a recurrent story that is presented with different nuances. On the one hand, there are news items that portray migrants as a risk group for the native population, with a significant presence of articles that focus on irregular border crossings during the period of restrictions on international mobility. This type of news is usually based on quantitative data on volumes of displacement (number of people arriving in the country, number of boats, percentage of migrant populations) and is frequently related to risk factors for the spread of the pandemic, which favors the interpretation of a causal link between immigration and transmission.

Along the same lines, content whose main topic is the transgression of health protocols and regulations by migrants (subtopic 1.3) was another important focus of analysis. For example, news items describing escapes from migrant detention centers during the isolation period, and in which the constant use of expressions loaded with negative connotations, such as rebellions, revolts and aggressors, riots and escape alerts, stand out. The criminalization of migrants is, in this type of news, the background tone, which is reiterated in images loaded with elements that refer to the presence of police forces, confrontations and violence. In contrast, with expressions such as “we are going to establish order”, “an aggression against our borders”, and “the tragedy of immigration”, the action of the State as guarantor of security and public order through different control agencies (regional or national police, health authorities, Ministry of Interior and Justice) is emphasized.

The drama of illegal immigration has become a new danger for the spread of the pandemic. In the last week alone, there have been up to four mass escapes of confined “undocumented immigrants” (...) who are kept under surveillance for the possibility of being infected with COVID-19. Most of the fugitives are people arriving by boat to the coasts of the southeastern Mediterranean; more than half a thousand this week. (Fernandez, 2020, para. 1)

These are news items where a highly stigmatizing perspective stands out, either through a dehumanizing and criminalizing vocabulary (“undocumented”, “fugitives” or “small boats”) or through images of desperation and uprooting that reinforce the imaginary of migrants as non-citizens, people in permanent transit, as those who “are here”, but who “do not belong”.

Also noteworthy are media discourses that speak of migrants from a victimization perspective (subtopic 1.2) as a particularly vulnerable group without adequate resources to protect themselves and others from the processes of transmission of the disease. These are texts and images that describe this group as passive transmitters of the virus, victims of their vulnerability, and representatives of a potential threat to the health security of the general population, such as: “The situation is worrying because ‘the virus has already begun to attack them and they have hygienic difficulties’” (Pérez, 2020).

(...) The transmission curve in Segrià has set off all the alarms. The very expensive bill is paid by seven municipalities of this region, with the strictest lockdown of Catalonia. The seasonal workers—involuntary and innocent victims of this health crisis—are again in the spotlight, with hasty, not to say desperate, actions to ensure that the situation, now that it seems to have stabilized in Lleida, does not get out of control again. (Ricou Lleida, 2020, para. 1)

The presence of statistical data that reinforce and sustain the discourse (number of transmissions among migrants, different factors and levels of precariousness) is also a constant in this type of news, as is the presence of the State as an agent of control, or of non-governmental organizations in the work of assistance.

The political debates concerning immigration are another prominent topic (topic 2). In this regard, it is important to mention the context of extreme political and social polarization experienced in the Spanish political arena during the period under analysis. The recent economic and social crises, aggravated by the pandemic, have led to an increase in the electoral expectations of the European neo-populist radical right wing, which has made xenophobia the central core of its political discourse. Indeed, many authors have devoted themselves to unpacking how anti-immigration discourses are increasingly echoed in many European countries under the lens of xenophobic ideologies that constantly portray migrants as a burden on the economy and social security systems while advocating the implementation of increasingly restrictive migration policies (Calavita, 2005; Kaya, 2017). As Ayhan Kaya (2017) points out, although there are differences in each country, these parties and movements are assimilated in aspects such as their anti-immigration stances, their concern for the protection of national (or European) culture, their opposition to globalization and to representative democracy, as well as their populist use of what is “culturally different” from their own, whether ethnic, religious or national.

Within the framework of this topic, news items were also identified that address immigration as a field of political dispute (subtopic 2.1) or as a rhetorical resource to attack or criticize the opposition. These are news items that focus their attention on the positions of the different political currents and parties on immigration but without entering into a direct approach to the issue of immigration and its concrete reality or an in-depth problematization of racism or xenophobia as a social issue. Instead, the focus of these news items remains on the very discourses and political positions of different political parties that, in different ways, use the notion of migration crisis as rhetorical ammunition (subtopic 2.2). Expressions such as “the worst diplomatic crisis”, “the crossfire”, “bringing down the government” (Martín et al., 2021, paras. 1 and 3) and “government of lies” (Calleja, 2020, para. 1) are frequent in this typology of news, which usually has prominent figures of the political scene as protagonists. Migrants appear, meanwhile, in an extremely dehumanized way, as a disruptive phenomenon, a “problem” to be solved by the authorities.

Similarly, news items were found that relate migratory movements to the key of invasion (topic 3). These media contents emphasize the massive movement of people, which is usually described as an out-of-control dynamic, with expressions such as: “the situation got out of control”, “explosive situation” (Aldekoa, 2021, paras. 1 and 4) and “(...) continent upside down” (Kadner, 2022, para. 1). In contrast, expressions such as “we will establish order”, “an aggression against our borders” and “immediate return” (Merino, 2021, paras. 2, 3 and 6) emphasize the action of the State (government and police) as an actor that promotes control, whether through

border guards, management of migrant detention centers, or repatriation policies (subtopic 3.2). These scenarios are largely represented by fluvial metaphors which, as Santamaría (2002) had already pointed out, refer to an idea of migration out of control—“surge in the Canary Islands archipelago” (S. E. & Caro, 2020, para. 1) and “flood of small boats” (Barba, 2020, para. 1)—and serve as a breeding ground for arguments justifying xenophobic policies: “Now, the Minister of the Interior, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, will travel again today to Morocco to try to reach agreements to stop this avalanche and resume the policy of returns” (Lázaro, 2020, para. 1); “The EU promotes a migration pact based on the shielding of borders and the deportation of irregular migrants” (De Miguel, 2020).

This view of the immigrant as an invader coexists at the same time with discourses that speak of migrants as a “necessary resource” in a context of demographic slow-down, in which immigration constitutes a key element for the maintenance of the economic and social welfare system (topic 4): “Immigration was the lifeline of an increasingly aging country” (Vega, 2021, para. 9). Although in this case these are articles where immigration is approached from a positive perspective, as a phenomenon that can reverse the aging of the population, the informative approach adopted usually follows a utilitarian logic. Thus, in this type of news, the statistical perspective prevails, referring to people as figures or resources, using depersonalized and decontextualized language that does not consider the complexity and diversity of migration experiences, trajectories and profiles.

In their reflection on this same issue, different authors (Calavita, 2005; Kaya, 2017; Suárez-Navaz, 2004) have highlighted that, in Spain, migration policies are sustained in a system that privileges economic management where immigrants coming from countries outside the European Union are considered as labor destined to cover critical sectors of the national economy. This distinction can be recognized not only between the lines of the different immigration laws and policies but also in hiring practices and labor relations, which, as Calavita (2005) points out, help to reproduce historical hierarchies or create new forms of marginality.

On the other hand, given that one of the main factors of inequality addressed in this study is racism, this was one of the key terms of the search. As a result, a considerable number of articles directly addressing this issue were obtained, many of them framed in the context of the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the media coverage of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020.

What is especially striking in this coverage is that more than 90% of the news items analyzed that speak directly about the problem of racism do so from an international perspective, referring to the reality of other countries, mainly the United States, France and the United Kingdom. These are news items that link racism with xenophobic policies under a critical gaze, although almost exclusively from an external point of view, as a reality experienced outside the national context, such as, “Although the government has continued with its heavy-handed policy against immigrants during all these months, Trump is not talking about the topic as obsessively as in 2016” (Cohen & Stanley, 2020, para. 4). Thus, despite the clear persistence of racism and racial “otherness” in Spanish society, it can be said that there is a patent lack of engagement of the Spanish mainstream media in the discussion of racism as a structural and institutional problem in the national context.

In contrast, articles addressing hate crimes during the pandemic as an emerging issue are identified in the sample. Although the number of articles addressing this issue is limited, it is an aspect of special interest in the study. Different aspects emerge from these articles: on the one hand, the drop in the number of reports of racist crimes or aggressions during the pandemic and, on the other hand, the increase in racist attacks in the private sphere. News stories are also identified that address the stigmatization of people of Asian origin, mainly in the initial phase of the pandemic, including cases of bullying of Asian students. It is interesting to note that, unlike what happens in the news about the management of migratory movements, in the media treatment of specific cases of racism, State institutions are not usually mentioned as active agents of control (which could be the actions of the police, preventive policies, or anti-racist regulatory agencies). Related to the above, it can be said that in most cases, racist situations in a national context are addressed as a “conflict” to be managed or “deviant behavior” to be avoided, linked to specific situations and individuals. Nevertheless, immigration is rarely related to racism, just as the historical and social roots of white privilege and racial discrimination are almost always rendered invisible in political and media discourses.

Finally, although to a lesser extent, news items were also found with racialized people as protagonists of an anti-racist discourse. In most cases, they refer to the experience of unique individuals who occupy a differentiated social position, and precisely because they are not in a situation of greater social vulnerability, they have sufficient projection to denounce racist treatment. The exceptional dimension of their experience—racialized people occupying a position normally occupied by whites (actors, journalists, successful professionals)—is perceived as “out of place” with the imaginary reality of racialized people. Those are also stories that focus on trajectories of achievement: “Yes, I am one of those individuals who, being black, has managed to do things and win awards that I would not have been eligible for a century ago” (Aguilar, 2021, para. 8).

Conclusions

From a general perspective, it can be considered that migration movements were portrayed in the media during the pandemic as a phenomenon explicitly associated with the spread of the virus on a global scale, a fact that contributes to increasing the stigmatization of migration and migrants as inherently troublesome, whether from a passive perspective (they are vulnerable, in need of assistance and social resources) or from an active perspective (they invade “our countries”, are disruptive, violent, break rules, transmit diseases). Accordingly, it is possible to observe how, in the context of the pandemic, discursive strategies previously identified (Van Dijk, 2005) re-emerge with renewed force, in which ethnic minorities are represented under imaginaries of a certain primitivism: they are vulnerable, violent, uncivilized, incomprehensible, in contrast to the positive self-representation of an autochthonous, white and civilized Europe (despite centuries of slavery and colonialism).

In the same context, it is interesting to note the role that the media coverage during the pandemic gives to State institutions as guarantors of the security and welfare of the native population, from which the implementation of policies aimed at “controlling”

the “problems” caused by migrants is expected. A State that is also portrayed as the “executor” of control mechanisms used forcefully against specific groups: migrants and ethnic minorities, often represented in terms of barbarism (they are the ones who violate health regulations, escape from internment centers or rebel against quarantines, among others).

Likewise, news stories dealing with immigration from a rhetoric of invasion continue to be widely reported in the press. Although this is a recurrent and long-standing rhetoric in a context marked by mobility restrictions, migrations are portrayed in the press as an extremely disruptive phenomenon. It is noteworthy that during the pandemic, the rhetorical use of figures and quantitative data to narrate immigration has increased. These figures tend to be used by newspapers without adequate contextualization or without providing greater precision. Rather, they tend to operate as rhetorical devices that reinforce the supposed credibility and objectivity of the discourse, justify anti-immigration policies, and at the same time make nuances, specificities and contextual differences invisible.

Finally, despite the clear persistence of racism and racial “otherness” in Spanish society, there is a significant lack of commitment to address structural racism and racialization issues in the national press. Immigration rarely appears linked to racism in the media, while the historical and social roots of racism are equally invisible in political and media discourse.

This paper contributes to expanding the existing knowledge of the role of the media in the reproduction of structural racism and xenophobia in the European context. The results are significant as they provide a deeper understanding of how the media discourses on immigration and migrants in Spain were constructed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings presented here are expected to guide or inspire future research, as well as policies and practices that contribute to combat representations that stigmatize migrants.

Some limitations of the study and its possible projections are also noted. On the one hand, the sample size was limited to the four newspapers with the largest national readership. Although this decision is based on the relevance of the conventional press in the representation of established policies and the status quo, it is suggested that future studies should include the analysis of media with smaller audiences, including independent digital media, to obtain a more diverse and complete understanding of the issues addressed.

On the other hand, as indicated in the methodology section, broadening the search terms and a more detailed analysis of the thematic and discursive differences between newspapers of different ideological tendencies constitute possible focuses of continuity, which would provide greater diversity and granularity to the results. Finally, it is considered pertinent to continue analyzing how the media generate social representations and images of racialized migrants while exploring how individuals and society codify and reelaborate these discourses. Audience studies and the analysis of reactions and interactions around the news constitute another possible focus of research development.

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