

Stigmatization and perceptions of Venezuelan migrants in Peru in the context of Venezuela's political and economic crisis

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Abstract: This study analyzes the social and individual stigmatization toward Venezuelan immigrants in Peru within the context of the largest migratory movement in Latin America, driven by the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. The study employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 24 participants from major Peruvian cities, including Lima, Arequipa, Cusco, and Trujillo. These in-depth interviews provide insights into the complexity of perceptions toward Venezuelan migrants, ranging from stigmatizing views driven by associations with economic threats and criminality to more positive perceptions that acknowledge the migrants' adaptability and economic contributions. The findings reveal that while negative stereotypes perpetuate social exclusion and pressures for cultural assimilation threaten the preservation of migrant identities, there are also narratives highlighting resilience and successful integration. The study emphasizes the importance of implementing intercultural education programs, promoting labor integration policies, and collaborating with the media to combat stigma. It concludes that addressing these challenges through a multidimensional, human-rights-based approach can foster greater social cohesion and better integration of migrants, benefiting both the migrant population and Peruvian society.

Keywords: xenophobia; stigmatization; Venezuelan migrants; integration; prejudice

1. Introduction

Venezuelan migration has been one of the most significant migratory phenomena in Latin America in recent decades. Millions of Venezuelans have left their country due to a combination of economic, political, and social crises, seeking better opportunities in neighboring countries like Peru. This massive movement of people has generated various reactions and challenges in the host societies, including issues of integration and social perception. According to data from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), more than 6 million Venezuelans have left their country in search of better living conditions, with Peru being one of the main destinations, after Colombia (Amaya López and Elguera Quispe, 2023; Defensoría del Pueblo, 2020).

Peru has received over 1.3 million Venezuelan migrants as of January 2022, making it the second country in Latin America with the largest number of Venezuelan immigrants (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2020). This massive flow has created significant challenges for both the migrants and the host societies. In the case of Peru, the arrival of such a large population has strained public services and generated mixed perceptions among the local population. According to research by

the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP), 94% of respondents perceive that Venezuelan migration has contributed to an increase in insecurity, and 83% believe that Venezuelans pose a threat to the local job market (Amaya López and Elguera Quispe, 2023).

Furthermore, stigmatization against Venezuelan migrants has been a key factor influencing their experience in Peru. Despite sharing cultural elements like language, the media and social networks have played a crucial role in constructing negative narratives toward this population. The criminalization of migrants and the portrayal of Venezuelans as “dangerous criminals” are recurring themes in the Peruvian media, which has exacerbated xenophobic attitudes and hindered the integration of migrants into society (Amaya López and Elguera Quispe, 2023; Willer et al., 2021).

On the other hand, migration policies implemented by the Peruvian government have fluctuated between welcoming and control. In mid-2019, stricter entry requirements for Venezuelans were introduced, such as the need for a passport and a humanitarian visa. However, these measures have also led to an increase in irregular migration, as many Venezuelans are unable to meet these requirements, which limits their access to fundamental rights such as health, employment, and education (Amaya López and Elguera Quispe, 2023; Defensoría del Pueblo, 2020).

The stigmatization of migrants is a well-documented phenomenon in academic literature. Acién González (2024) studied how Nigerian migrant women in Europe are perceived as victims of trafficking, which justifies strict immigration policies and the denial of labor rights. Parra and Leibe (2024) analyzed the academic trajectory of migrant women in the Southern Cone, highlighting the intersection of sexism, racism, and xenophobia. Cabieses et al. (2024) discussed how stigma and discrimination-based narratives affect the health of migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean. Douglass et al. (2023) examined how stigma associated with alcohol and drug use affects migrant and ethnic minority groups, revealing the need for multiscale interventions. Esparza et al. (2023) investigated stigmatizing hoaxes towards immigrants on Twitter and digital media in Spain, Greece, and Italy, showing how misinformation perpetuates negative stereotypes. Pouille et al. (2023) explored the impact of stigma on substance use recovery among migrants and ethnic minorities in Belgium, highlighting how accumulated stigma negatively affects well-being and recovery.

Wahyudi et al. (2023) analyzed state-sponsored stigmatization and discrimination towards Indonesian migrant women in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the negative impact on their social and mental well-being. Drouhot (2023) studied the negotiation of national belonging among the new immigrant elite in France, showing how racial and religious stigmas affect their sense of inclusion. Alibudbud (2023) addressed the stigma related to substance use and addiction among Filipino immigrants and in the Philippines, highlighting how stigma affects help-seeking behavior. These studies underscore the importance of understanding stigmatizing narratives and their impact on migrant integration and well-being.

The specific problem addressed by this study is the stigmatization of Venezuelan migrants in Peru, from the social and individual perspectives of the Peruvian population. Negative perceptions and stereotypes associated with migrants

can hinder their integration and lead to discrimination, affecting their quality of life and employment opportunities.

Researching this problem is crucial due to its scientific and social relevance. Understanding how negative perceptions towards migrants are formed and perpetuated can help design policies and programs that promote inclusion and reduce discrimination. Moreover, this research has practical implications by providing recommendations to improve coexistence and social cohesion in host communities.

From a theoretical perspective, this study is justified by the need to better understand the dynamics of stigmatization and discrimination towards migrants. Additionally, it seeks to delve deeper into the mechanisms that perpetuate these negative perceptions and their impacts on the lives of migrants.

The general objective of this study is to analyze the stigmatization of Venezuelan immigrants in Peru, considering the social and individual dimensions of the Peruvian population.

The results of this study may contribute to improving integration policies and reducing discrimination. Evidence from previous research, such as Douglass et al. (2023), suggests that interventions based on understanding social narratives can be effective in addressing stigmatization issues. Therefore, this study will not only contribute to academic knowledge but also offer practical solutions to promote a more inclusive and equitable society.

2. Materials and methods

The present study is qualitative in nature and focuses on the description and analysis of the social perceptions of the Peruvian population regarding social stigma towards Venezuelan immigrants residing in the country. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method.

The sample was selected based on specific inclusion criteria: men and women over 18 years old who had close experiences with Venezuelan citizens (co-workers, classmates, neighbors, or those with whom they had daily contact within their social environment). Individuals without any type of social connection or relationship with Venezuelan immigrants were excluded. Convenience sampling was employed using a snowball strategy, selecting a total of 24 participants residing in the main cities of Peru where the highest percentage of the Venezuelan population is located: Arequipa, Cusco, Lima, and Trujillo (**Table 1**). Participation was voluntary, and efforts were made to ensure a diversity of perspectives within the sample.

For qualitative data collection, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting an average of 20 min to 30 min. These interviews were carried out by the researchers in different locations, selecting spaces that ensured the participant's privacy and comfort. Measures were taken to minimize factors that could affect the quality of the responses, such as noise and the environment. If necessary, interviews were rescheduled to ensure optimal conditions.

The interview guide included questions designed to explore various dimensions of social stigma. These dimensions covered the causes of Venezuelan migration, the profile of Venezuelan migrants, social integration strategies, the reception of Venezuelans by the Peruvian population, and forms of discrimination and

stigmatization between Peruvians and Venezuelans. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Table 1. List of Interviewees*.

<i>N</i>	Gender	Profession	Age	City
1	Female	Psychologist	37	Arequipa
2	Female	Social worker	34	Arequipa
3	Female	Employee	34	Arequipa
4	Female	Student	22	Arequipa
5	Female	Nurse	35	Arequipa
6	Female	Teacher	33	Arequipa
7	Female	Doctor	40	Cusco
8	Male	Architec	50	Cusco
9	Male	Chef	36	Cusco
10	Male	Merchant	38	Cusco
11	Male	Engineer	45	Cusco
12	Male	Farmer	42	Cusco
13	Male	Engineer	36	Lima
14	Female	Designer	28	Lima
15	Female	Doctor	29	Lima
16	Female	Journalist	31	Lima
17	Female	Student	26	Lima
18	Female	Teacher	45	Lima
19	Male	Civil engineer	48	Trujillo
20	Male	Lawyer	31	Trujillo
21	Male	Lawyer	47	Trujillo
22	Male	Merchant	40	Trujillo
23	Male	Student	22	Trujillo
24	Male	Mechanic	41	Trujillo

* The table provides information about the interviewees, who are permanent residents in Peru from birth until the date the interview was conducted. The data include each interviewee's profession, age, and city of residence, offering relevant demographic and professional context for the analysis.

Data analysis was carried out using interrogative and associative approaches. Participants' responses were decoded by identifying common words or phrases, which allowed the construction of categories that reflect how stigma manifests. These categories were identified through an iterative process in which researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to become familiar with the content and extract significant patterns.

The coding process was conducted in several phases: initially, an open coding was performed to identify recurring words and phrases; subsequently, these were grouped into preliminary categories that reflect how social stigma manifests. The categories of analysis included: multidimensional and economic factors driving Venezuelan migration; causes and facilitators of Venezuelan migration to Peru, including perceptions of migration control, economic opportunities, and government

policies; the profile of Venezuelan migrants in Peru, encompassing perceptions, stigmatization, and adaptation strategies; perceptions and survival strategies of Venezuelan migrants, focusing on stigmatization, adaptability, and acculturation; conflicting perceptions of Venezuelan migration, highlighting xenophobia, stigmatization, and paths to integration; prejudice and stigmatization of Venezuelan migrants, emphasizing socioeconomic impacts and the need for inclusive policies; and perceptions and attitudes toward Venezuelan migrants, including defensiveness, cultural and racial discrimination, and prejudice.

Consensus among the researchers was reached through meetings where discrepancies in the coding were discussed, and categories were adjusted according to the agreements made. This method ensured the validity and reliability of the thematic analysis, providing a solid foundation for the study's conclusions and allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and experiences related to the stigma toward Venezuelan migrants.

Finally, a comprehensive analysis was conducted for the discussion and conclusions, based on the results obtained from the qualitative analysis. This analysis provided a deep understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the Peruvian population regarding stigma towards Venezuelan immigrants, offering a basis for developing policies and support strategies that promote coexistence, integration, and respect for human rights, contributing to regional stability and development.

3. Results and discussion

The testimonies collected in this study highlight that the main cause of Venezuelan migration is the economic and social deterioration in Venezuela. The reference to the “economic and social situation” encompasses a wide range of factors, from inflation to social instability, with interviewees mentioning how middle- and lower-class individuals have seen their ability to maintain a decent lifestyle reduced, resulting in a significant decline in quality of life. Additionally, other critical factors such as hunger, malnutrition, political crisis, violence, and economic imbalance further exacerbate the situation, making life in Venezuela unsustainable. Other testimonies emphasize economic reasons, such as the loss of monetary value and the inability to meet basic needs, which drive many people to seek job opportunities abroad and financially support their families. Despite the variety of factors mentioned, all point to the economic and social crisis as the main driver of Venezuelan migration.

3.1. Multidimensional and economic factors driving Venezuelan migration

The testimonies indicate that the main cause of migration is the economic and social deterioration in Venezuela. The reference to the “economic and social situation” encompasses a wide range of factors, from inflation to social instability. Interviewees specifically mentioned how middle- and lower-class individuals have seen their ability to maintain a decent lifestyle reduced, implying a significant loss of quality of life. The following testimony highlights the drop in purchasing power and the impact on lifestyle as crucial motivations for migration:

“The rise in poverty and lack of food are the main problems, in addition to the ongoing political crisis in the country. There is also constant insecurity and economic imbalance, critical factors that lead to mass migration, as living conditions are becoming increasingly difficult to bear.” (Testimony, male, engineer, 36 years old, Lima)

Additionally, multiple critical factors driving migration were identified: hunger, malnutrition, political crisis, violence, and economic imbalance. This multidimensional approach highlights how these interrelated issues exacerbate the situation, making life in Venezuela unsustainable. The mention of “increasingly difficult living conditions” reinforces the idea of a progressive decline that pushes the population to seek better opportunities in other countries.

Other testimonies emphasize economic reasons as the primary cause of migration, highlighting the “loss of the value of money and income.” The interviews detail how the economic situation prevents the fulfillment of basic needs and maintaining a dignified life, motivating people to seek job opportunities abroad. Additionally, the need to provide financial support to family members is mentioned, reflecting an altruistic motive that also drives migration. The following testimony provides a clear view of how the shattered economy directly affects Venezuelan families and their ability to survive:

“The main cause of Venezuelan migration is the constant devaluation of money and the loss of income. The economic situation in Venezuela prevents meeting basic needs and maintaining a dignified life. Therefore, the economic reasons for migration include seeking new and better job opportunities, providing financial help to family, the lack of a promising future in Venezuela, the inability to pay rent, and maintaining a good quality of life. As a result, people migrate to different countries to settle and find employment that allows them to move forward.” (Testimony, female, doctor, 40 years old, Cusco)

The testimonies highlight a variety of factors driving Venezuelan migration, but all point to the profound economic and social crisis as the main catalyst. The loss of purchasing power, inability to meet basic needs, violence, political crisis, and the search for better job opportunities are recurring themes. These elements underscore how the interconnection of economic, social, and political problems creates an unsustainable situation that drives millions of Venezuelans to seek a better life outside their country.

3.2. Causes and facilitators of venezuelan migration to peru: Perceptions of migration control, economic opportunities, and government policies

The analyzed testimonies reveal various perspectives on the causes and facilitators of Venezuelan migration to Peru. These opinions reflect perceptions about migration control, the flexibility of laws, economic opportunities, and government policies:

“I believe this happens for several reasons, among which is the lack of serious control by the authorities in charge. It is well known that in Peru, there isn’t much control regarding migrations.” (Testimony, male, merchant, 38 years old, Cusco)

“Migration laws are too flexible and are not adequately enforced. You could say they are very ‘flexible.’ Any foreign citizen can enter and exit through our borders, whether with Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, or Brazil, without paperwork or documents, which also facilitates smuggling.” (Testimony, female, teacher, 45 years old, Lima)

Testimonies like those presented above emphasize the lack of strict migration control in Peru. It is suggested that the permissiveness of authorities facilitates the entry of migrants. This could be related to governance theory, which postulates that the effectiveness of migration control is fundamental for managing migration flows. However, this view may be simplistic, as it does not consider the push factors from Venezuela, such as the economic and humanitarian crisis, that force Venezuelans to seek refuge. The perception of a lack of control may also be influenced by prejudice and misinformation about current migration policies.

Interviewees emphasize the flexibility of migration laws in Peru and their inadequate enforcement. This viewpoint criticizes the supposed leniency that allows both irregular migration and illegal activities like smuggling. This can be analyzed through the framework of migration policies and their implementation. The perception of flexible migration laws may lead to increased irregular migration but may also be intended to facilitate humanitarian protection and family reunification. This criticism may reflect a tension between the need for control and the obligation to protect migrants’ human rights.

On the other hand, the testimonies highlight economic opportunities as one of the main reasons Venezuelans choose Peru. Informal work is mentioned as a means of livelihood for migrants. This can be related to dual labor market theory, which suggests that migrants often occupy jobs in the informal sector due to barriers to accessing formal employment. This perspective is important because it reflects the ability of migrants to adapt and survive in adverse economic contexts, but it also highlights their vulnerability to exploitation and poor working conditions in the informal economy:

“Peru is a country they choose because of the numerous informal work opportunities, which allow them to earn money in any field. The country’s socioeconomic conditions also contribute, as well as the possibility of family reunification.” (Testimony, female, student, 22 years old, Arequipa)

The interviewees’ perception of an “open border” policy implemented by former President Kuczynski during his administration (2016–2018) stands out, which allegedly facilitated the migration of Venezuelan refugees. The testimonies emphasize the influence of specific political decisions on migration flows. This can be analyzed from the perspective of public policy and its impact on migration. Open border policies may be seen as a humanitarian response to migration crises but may also generate criticism about migration management and control. This view suggests that government policies play a crucial role in shaping migration patterns and public perceptions of migration:

“I understand that a few years ago, our former president approved an ‘open border’ policy for refugees, which facilitated their migration.” (Testimony, male, lawyer, 31 years old, Trujillo)

Overall, the testimonies reflect a diversity of opinions on the causes of Venezuelan migration to Peru, highlighting the lack of migration control, the flexibility of laws, economic opportunities, and government policies. These testimonies reveal the complexity of migration, where structural factors, political decisions, and social perceptions interact to shape migration dynamics. It is essential to consider both the push factors in Venezuela and the pull factors in Peru to fully understand the migration phenomenon and develop policies that address its multiple dimensions.

3.3. Profile of venezuelan migrants in Peru: perceptions, stigmatization, and adaptation strategies

The collected testimonies offer a variety of perceptions about Venezuelan migrants in Peru, highlighting physical, emotional, professional, and behavioral aspects:

“From my point of view, Venezuelans tend to be slightly taller than Peruvians, and many have lighter skin.” (Testimony, female, student, 22 years old, Lima)

“In some cases, you can see dark-skinned people, tall, and with an unkempt appearance, willing to do very hard work.” (Testimony, male, engineer, 45 years old, Cusco)

These testimonies emphasize the physical characteristics of Venezuelans as perceived by the interviewees, noting that they are often taller and have lighter skin compared to Peruvians. This type of observation can be an indicator of how visible differences become markers of identity and, potentially, bases for discrimination. The perception of physical difference, although seemingly neutral, can reinforce stereotypes and justify exclusionary behavior based on appearance.

Interviewees also addressed the feelings of humiliation and inferiority experienced by Venezuelan migrants who cannot find work and are forced to beg, despite holding professional degrees. This feeling can be analyzed through human capital theory and the phenomenon of “skills mismatch,” where migrants are unable to fully utilize their skills and qualifications in the new country due to barriers such as recognition of degrees and xenophobia. Additionally, humiliation and feelings of inferiority are exacerbated by existing prejudices, which label migrants as criminals:

“I think many of them feel ashamed of the way they arrive in our country, as they can’t find work and are forced to beg. They feel humiliated because some of them have professional degrees and are not accepted here due to the prejudices some of us have, like considering them criminals.” (Testimony, female, teacher, 33 years old, Arequipa)

However, there is also a duality in the interviewees’ perceptions of Venezuelan migrants: as creative entrepreneurs who seek to overcome adversity, and as individuals who turn to crime. This duality can be explained through resilience theory, which describes how some individuals are able to adapt and thrive in difficult situations, while others may resort to negative behaviors due to a lack of opportunities and support. Additionally, the perception of some migrants as criminals contributes to the perpetuation of stigma and distrust:

“Venezuelans see an opportunity in every challenge; they don’t dwell on the problem and lament, they always seek another option to move forward. They

are entrepreneurial and creative people who find something positive in every adverse situation. However, there are also those who turn to crime, which harms their reputation and generates distrust among Peruvian citizens.” (Testimony, male, merchant, 40 years old, Trujillo)

The previous testimony describes some Venezuelan migrants as dark-skinned and looking like indigents, willing to perform very hard labor. This testimony reflects labor exploitation and the precarious conditions to which migrants may be subjected. The physical description of migrants as “indigents” also indicates stigmatization based on appearance and poverty, which can lead to discrimination and social marginalization.

The analyzed testimonies reveal a complex interaction of perceptions and realities faced by Venezuelan migrants in Peru. These perceptions are influenced by physical, emotional, professional, and behavioral factors. To adequately address these issues, it is essential to develop inclusive policies that recognize and value the human capital of migrants, combat prejudice and discrimination, and offer equitable opportunities for socioeconomic integration. This approach will not only improve the living conditions of migrants but also strengthen social cohesion and development in host communities.

3.4. Perceptions and survival strategies of venezuelan migrants in Peru: stigmatization, adaptability, and acculturation

The following testimonies reveal various perceptions and attitudes towards Venezuelan migrants in Peru, addressing economic, labor, criminal, and cultural aspects. Firstly, a set of testimonies mentions that Venezuelan migrants often share rent with several others to reduce costs. This cohabitation strategy is common among migrants as a way to mitigate housing expenses in adverse economic contexts. Moreover, this practice can be seen as a rational and efficient strategy for managing limited resources, although it may lead to stigmatization if perceived as an excessive occupation of residential spaces:

“It is common for migrants to share rent to cope with high housing costs. This allows them to save money and better manage their finances.” (Testimony, female, doctor, 29 years old, Lima)

“Some work long hours for low wages to survive, while others, unfortunately, resort to criminal activities like theft and extortion to get by.” (Testimony, male, architect, 50 years old, Cusco)

These testimonies, from the interviewees’ perspective, show how some migrants work for low wages to survive, while others turn to criminal activities. This duality in survival strategies can be analyzed through the tendency of migrants to take up informal sector jobs due to barriers to accessing formal employment. The mention of criminal activities such as theft, extortion, and prostitution indicates a stigmatization that associates migrants with criminality. This stigma can exacerbate social exclusion and hinder migrants’ integration into the formal economy:

“They do all kinds of jobs, whether formal or informal. You could say they ‘survive’ and adapt to the environment they find themselves in, in any way possible, whether positively or negatively. It’s important to note that many

Venezuelans are highly skilled and have expertise in areas such as mechanics, electronics, or manufacturing and industrial companies.” (Testimony, female, nurse, 35 years old, Arequipa)

Additionally, other testimonies mention that some migrants try to adapt to Peruvian culture due to social pressure, abandoning their own customs. The pressure to conform to the host country’s cultural norms can lead to a loss of cultural identity and internal conflicts, while also reflecting the host society’s expectations and prejudices towards migrants:

“Some try to familiarize themselves, and due to social pressure, they leave their customs and culture behind to integrate better with Peruvians.” (Testimony, male, lawyer, 47 years old, Trujillo)

Another testimony acknowledges that Venezuelan migrants take on a wide variety of jobs, both formal and informal, and highlights their adaptability and professionalism. This testimony offers a more balanced and positive view, suggesting that migrants not only survive but also contribute with their skills and professional experiences. It underscores how the migrants’ skills and knowledge can be valuable assets in the host country’s labor market. However, participation in the informal sector may limit the potential of these migrants and perpetuate conditions of vulnerability:

“Venezuelans are known for their adaptability and ability to work in a wide range of jobs, from technical positions to roles in the service sector, demonstrating their professionalism and desire to contribute.” (Testimony, female, journalist, 31 years old, Lima)

The presented testimonies provide a multifaceted view of the experiences and perceptions of Venezuelan migrants in Peru, revealing how the host population has identified economic survival strategies, labor adaptability, and cultural integration challenges faced by the Venezuelan population. These narratives align with the complexities of migration and social integration, offering a framework to better understand these phenomena.

3.5. Conflicting perceptions of venezuelan migration in Peru: xenophobia, stigmatization, and paths to integration

The testimonies illustrate the growing xenophobia and stigmatization towards Venezuelan migrants in Peru, exacerbated by media coverage of criminal activities committed by a minority of migrants. This phenomenon can lead to systematic discrimination and social marginalization, making it difficult for migrants to integrate and exacerbating social tensions:

“In my environment and from what I see, there is a lot of indifference and rejection towards Venezuelans. The news highlights the criminal actions of a few, which leads to generalizations and prejudice that they are all the same. In addition, there are other myths that reinforce the exclusion of this nationality.” (Testimony, male, farmer, 42 years old, Cusco)

These testimonies reflect how fear and prejudice towards the unknown and the different can lead to generalization and discrimination. In the absence of direct interaction, fear and prejudice can lead to social exclusion and denial of job

opportunities, reinforcing the perception of threat and competition for limited resources:

“Some people are afraid to live alongside individuals who have different ways of interacting, sometimes even more violently, or with more open-minded thinking. This leads to judging all Venezuelans and taking away job opportunities from them. While it is true that some react negatively, not all behave this way.” (Testimony, female, psychologist, 37 years old, Arequipa)

Other interviewees have expressed a more positive and hopeful view, where contact and interaction can lead to greater understanding and the reduction of prejudice:

“Some respect the fact that they are not in their own territory and take steps or hold back. Those who are given the opportunity to get to know them or work with them, whether in companies or jobs, stop generalizing or treating them poorly.” (Testimony, male, civil engineer, 48 years old, Trujillo)

This perspective highlights the importance of providing opportunities for positive and collaborative interaction to challenge and overcome negative stereotypes. Building networks and relationships of trust can improve social cohesion and reduce exclusionary attitudes:

“By getting to know them and working together, prejudice decreases, and Venezuelans begin to be seen as people seeking a better life, not as a threat.” (Testimony, female, designer, 28 years old, Lima)

Overall, the analyzed testimonies reveal a complex interaction of perceptions and attitudes towards Venezuelan migrants in Peru. Xenophobia and stigmatization are exacerbated by media coverage and fear of the unknown, leading to negative generalizations and discrimination. However, it is also observed that positive interaction and direct contact can reduce these prejudices and foster mutual acceptance and adaptation.

3.6. Prejudice and stigmatization of venezuelan migrants in Peru: socioeconomic impacts and the need for inclusive policies

Some testimonies reveal deeply negative and stigmatizing perceptions towards Venezuelan migrants in Peru. These perceptions are based on prejudices related to work, criminality, and the physical and behavioral characteristics of the migrants:

“In my family, I have seen how Venezuelans are stigmatized, showing disdain towards them both in the streets and in the media. It is often assumed that these migrants take our jobs by offering cheap labor, that they are given unfair access to services like SIS, and that they have increased criminality.” (Testimony, male, chef, 36 years old, Cusco)

This testimony illustrates how Venezuelan migrants are stigmatized by being perceived as an economic and social threat. The belief that Venezuelan migrants “take jobs” and receive undue benefits reinforces these negative attitudes, exacerbating xenophobia and social exclusion:

“There is a strong association between Venezuelans and crime. It’s easy to blame those who come from outside for problems we’ve had for a long time,

like insecurity and informality.” (Testimony, female, social worker, 34 years old, Arequipa)

The previous testimony reflects a tendency to blame Venezuelan migrants for pre-existing problems like crime and informality. The media and public discourse play a crucial role in shaping these associations. This stigmatization can lead to systematic discrimination and the exclusion of Venezuelan migrants, making social and economic integration difficult.

Other interviewees express how stereotypes and prejudices based on appearance and behavior contribute to the stigmatization of Venezuelan migrants:

“In the case of men, they are stigmatized for the way they dress, associating them with thieves or drug users. Their way of speaking can be misinterpreted as harassment, and we feel offended by their public behavior or use of slang. As for women, they are stigmatized for how they dress, being called prostitutes, without considering cultural differences. There is also discrimination based on physical characteristics like tattoos, piercings, or skin color.” (Testimony, male, mechanic, 41 years old, Trujillo)

These testimonies show a complex interaction of stigmatization and prejudice towards Venezuelan migrants in Peru. The perception of an economic threat, the association with criminality, and stereotypes based on appearance and behavior contribute to the discrimination and social exclusion of migrants. These testimonies highlight the need to develop inclusive policies and programs that promote intercultural understanding, combat prejudice and stigmatization, and facilitate the socioeconomic integration of Venezuelan migrants in Peru.

3.7. Perceptions and attitudes of venezuelan migrants in Peru: Defensiveness, cultural and racial discrimination, and prejudice

The interviewees provide a detailed view of perceptions and attitudes towards Venezuelan migrants in Peru, covering topics such as defensiveness, cultural discrimination, racial discrimination, and prejudice based on ignorance:

“Since some Peruvians have a negative perception of Venezuelans, the latter become defensive and assume that Peruvians think they are criminals and that they only came to take advantage of the country. This creates tension between both groups, but not all Venezuelans are criminals, just as not all Peruvians think negatively of them.” (Testimony, female, student, 26 years old, Lima)

This testimony reveals how negative perceptions and stereotypes can create defensiveness among Venezuelan migrants, which in turn exacerbates tensions between groups. When they perceive threats to their identity, they may respond defensively, potentially leading to greater social fragmentation.

Another theme present in the interviews is cultural discrimination, highlighting how differences in speech, dress, and food can become grounds for exclusion and cultural imposition. Cultural differences may be used to justify one group’s superiority over another, reinforcing social hierarchies and discrimination:

“There is also discrimination against our culture, which includes our way of speaking, dressing, or eating. They see us as people with lower or inferior economic resources, so sometimes they try to impose their culture on us. Our

way of thinking can be seen as more reserved, and they mock it.” (Testimony, male, merchant, 38 years old, Cusco)

Additionally, racial discrimination based on physical traits is highlighted, emphasizing how this increases the vulnerability of migrants to violence and exploitation. People labeled by negatively perceived characteristics may be marginalized and subjected to unjust and violent treatment:

“It is mostly racial discrimination due to our different physical traits. As a result, the situation of defenselessness is worsened, and people are exposed to discriminatory acts that can escalate to violence or various forms of exploitation.” (Testimony, female, employee, 34 years old, Arequipa)

Ignorance and prejudice based on a lack of understanding of cultural and ethnic diversity are also highlighted. Ignorance about migrants’ customs and physical characteristics can lead to harmful stereotypes and perpetuate discrimination. Intercultural education and dialogue are essential to combat these prejudices and promote greater understanding and acceptance:

“I think it is largely based on our Andean ethnicity, since we are a multicultural country. They don’t understand our customs or our phenotypic characteristics, and this leads to judgment and the creation of prejudices, which simply reflects their ignorance.” (Testimony, male, student, 22 years old, Trujillo)

The analyzed testimonies reveal a complex interaction of perceptions and attitudes towards Venezuelan migrants in Peru. Distorted perceptions, cultural and racial discrimination, and ignorance contribute to the stigmatization and social exclusion of migrants. It is essential to develop inclusive policies and educational programs that promote intercultural understanding, combat prejudice, and facilitate the socioeconomic integration of Venezuelan migrants.

4. Discussion

The analyzed testimonies indicate that the primary cause of Venezuelan migration is the economic and social deterioration in Venezuela, encompassing factors such as inflation, social instability, hunger, malnutrition, political crisis, and violence. This deterioration has pushed millions of Venezuelans to seek better opportunities in other countries, including Peru. The push-pull factor theory is relevant in this context, as it explains how adverse conditions in the country of origin (push factors) and opportunities in the destination country (pull factors) influence the decision to migrate.

In this analysis, the push-pull factor theory stands out as a fundamental tool for understanding Venezuelan migration. The push factors, such as the economic and political crisis, parallel the conditions described in Ación González’s (2024) study on Nigerian migrant women, who are also driven to migrate due to adverse conditions in their country of origin. In both cases, unfavorable conditions in the country of origin are a crucial driving force behind migration, illustrating a similarity in migration patterns driven by internal crises.

The perception of a lack of migration control in Peru and the flexibility of migration laws is often highlighted as key facilitators of Venezuelan migration. According to migration governance theory, the effectiveness of migration control is

crucial for managing migration flows. However, this perception can be overly simplistic, as it fails to account for the powerful push factors from Venezuela, such as the economic and political crisis that drive individuals to migrate. A more nuanced approach is required, one that balances migration control with humanitarian considerations. For instance, while the “open border” policy implemented by former President Kuczynski initially aimed to address the humanitarian needs of Venezuelan migrants, it also underscores how specific political decisions can directly shape migration patterns.

In the short term, the Peruvian government could benefit from refining its migration control mechanisms without reverting to overly restrictive measures that would exacerbate the vulnerabilities of migrants. One recommendation would be to streamline regularization processes for Venezuelans, improving access to documentation and legal status. This would reduce the risks associated with irregular migration and allow migrants to contribute more effectively to the formal economy. At the same time, enhancing support for local governments, which are often overwhelmed by the influx of migrants, could help in managing resources and providing necessary services.

In the long term, it is essential for Peru to develop a comprehensive migration policy that not only addresses immediate migration flows but also considers integration strategies for migrants. This includes strengthening access to education, healthcare, and the labor market for migrants, ensuring they are not left in precarious situations. A focus on intercultural education and anti-xenophobia campaigns could help alleviate some of the social tensions between migrants and host communities. As shown in the work of Parra et al. (2024), political decisions—whether in Peru or in Southern Cone countries—play a significant role in shaping the opportunities and experiences of migrants. Therefore, policies should aim to foster inclusion rather than marginalization, ensuring long-term social and economic benefits for both migrants and the host society.

The analysis of the conducted interviews reveals a wide range of perceptions toward Venezuelan migrants in Peru, focusing on physical, emotional, professional, and behavioral aspects. References to physical characteristics, such as being taller or having lighter skin, can reinforce stereotypes and justify exclusionary behaviors based on appearance. These perceptions are linked to human capital theory, highlighting feelings of humiliation and inferiority among migrants due to their inability to fully utilize their professional skills, a phenomenon known as the “skills mismatch.” This finding aligns with the studies by Cabieses et al. (2024) and Douglass et al. (2023), who also point out how stigma and barriers to utilizing skills impact the well-being of migrants in Latin America and other regions, emphasizing that perceived differences can lead to discrimination and marginalization.

The dual perception of Venezuelan migrants as either creative entrepreneurs or, conversely, as criminals reflects both resilience theory and deviance theory. This ambiguity in perceptions is consistent with Cavagnoud (2024), who highlights resilience as a central element in the migratory experiences of Venezuelan adolescents, and Espinoza, Gavidia-Payne, and Okumura (2023), who emphasize the importance of emotional regulation strategies and social support in the adaptation processes of migrants.

The economic survival strategies employed by Venezuelan migrants, such as cohabitation to reduce costs and informal work, underscore the importance of social support networks for adaptation, as suggested by social network theory in migration. However, participation in the informal sector perpetuates vulnerability conditions, consistent with dual labor market theory. This aspect is also addressed in the study by Vacca et al. (2022), which emphasizes how social networks and community strategies are essential for adaptation in adverse contexts. However, while Venezuelans face specific challenges in the informal sector in Peru, Vacca et al. highlight that Roma migrants in France maintain diversified support networks, illustrating differences in how various migrant groups use their networks to cope with marginalization and social exclusion.

Additionally, there is evidence of growing xenophobia and stigmatization toward Venezuelan migrants, exacerbated by media coverage of criminal activities. Social stigma theory and the social construction of reality theory are relevant in this context, given the crucial role of the media in shaping and perpetuating stereotypes. This finding is consistent with Palomino and Lovón (2022) and Freier and Pérez (2021), who document how the media represents migrants negatively. Similarly, Esparza et al. (2023) and Díaz et al. (2021) note how misinformation and hoaxes on social media perpetuate stigmatization in Europe and Latin America, highlighting the media's influence in reinforcing xenophobia. However, while these studies focus on social media analysis and misinformation, Venezuelan testimonies also suggest that positive interaction and direct contact can reduce prejudice, presenting a potential strategy for mitigating xenophobia.

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of Venezuelan migrants in Peru. Through news coverage, the media can influence attitudes and reinforce stereotypes, leading to both fair and stigmatizing portrayals. In particular, the media in Peru has tended to focus on negative aspects of Venezuelan migration, often emphasizing crime and criminalizing the migrants. This narrative aligns with realistic conflict theory, where perceived economic and security threats fuel social exclusion and xenophobia. By highlighting isolated criminal incidents involving Venezuelans, the media has contributed to a public perception of all Venezuelan migrants as dangerous.

However, there are also examples of more balanced media portrayals that highlight the challenges Venezuelan migrants face and their efforts to integrate into Peruvian society. Some media outlets have covered success stories of migrants who have started businesses or found honest work, showcasing their resilience and adaptability. These more positive narratives reflect the media's potential to counteract stigma and promote a fairer and more humane image of migrants.

The perception of economic threat and the association with criminality contribute to social exclusion. Realistic conflict theory and intersectionality theory are relevant for understanding how perceived competition for resources and multiple identity factors interact to produce experiences of oppression and vulnerability. Intercultural education and dialogue are essential for promoting greater understanding and acceptance, according to multiculturalism theory.

The social exclusion of Venezuelan migrants due to the perception of economic threat and criminality is comparable to the stigmatization experiences documented

by Aliaga Sáez et al. (2022) in Colombia and by Willnat et al. (2023) in the United States. In both cases, migrants are seen as competitors for limited resources and are associated with criminality, reinforcing exclusion and discrimination. These situations reflect a similarity in how economic and security factors can fuel xenophobia and social exclusion. Furthermore, the need for intercultural education and dialogue to combat these prejudices, as suggested by Venezuelan testimonies, is also a strategy highlighted in the studies by Lim et al. (2021) and Regmi et al. (2022), who advocate for inclusive and educational approaches to improve integration and reduce discrimination.

The cultural integration of Venezuelan migrants in Peru faces significant challenges, such as xenophobia, job insecurity, gender vulnerability, and the perception of criminality. These issues are exacerbated by stereotypes spread by the media and the lack of adequate labor protection, contributing to social exclusion and exploitation (Amata and Elguera, 2023; Pariahuamán Aronés et al., 2020). Migrant women are especially vulnerable to violence and harassment, which are worsened by gender-based stigmas, while family separation and uprooting emotionally impact the social structure of migrants (Loayza, 2020).

To address these challenges, both top-down and grassroots strategies are proposed. At the governmental level, it is crucial to implement educational campaigns to combat xenophobia, strengthen labor laws to prevent exploitation, and ensure access to health and education services (Loayza, 2020; Pariahuamán Aronés et al., 2020). Additionally, it is recommended to create accessible reporting mechanisms and anti-discrimination laws to protect the rights of migrants. Furthermore, educational programs that promote empathy and highlight migrants' contributions can help reduce prejudice and foster inclusion (Amata and Elguera, 2023).

Community strategies emphasize the importance of organization and local support. This includes creating support networks that promote coexistence and cultural exchange, facilitating integration through community activities and mentorship programs (Loayza, 2020; Amata and Elguera, 2023). It is also essential to support economic entrepreneurship initiatives so that migrants can establish businesses and contribute to the local economy, helping to reduce the perception of job competition (Loayza, 2020; Pariahuamán Aronés et al., 2020). The organization of cultural events fosters dialogue and strengthens social cohesion, highlighting diversity as an enriching resource for Peruvian society (Amata and Elguera, 2023; Pariahuamán Aronés et al., 2020).

The economic opportunities available to Venezuelan migrants in Peru are shaped by various factors, including the pressing need for survival in a context of social and economic instability. The primary economic opportunities currently lie within the informal sector, where migrants often work in low-wage and unregulated jobs to support themselves and their families. However, these informal roles leave migrants vulnerable to exploitation and prevent them from fully contributing to the economy in a sustainable manner. According to dual labor market theory, addressing this issue requires interventions that facilitate the transition from informal to formal employment, ensuring that migrants have equal access to job protections and benefits.

To enhance economic opportunities, the Peruvian government can play a pivotal role by streamlining regularization processes, simplifying access to legal documentation, and implementing employment integration programs tailored to the skills and experiences of migrants (Loayza, 2020). Moreover, NGOs can contribute by offering job training and language courses that prepare migrants for the labor market, and by facilitating access to microloans and entrepreneurial support for those looking to start small businesses. The private sector, meanwhile, can actively participate by promoting inclusive hiring practices and recognizing the potential of migrants as skilled workers. Policies that incentivize companies to hire migrants or support business initiatives can create long-term benefits for both the migrant and local populations.

Grassroots initiatives are equally vital in expanding economic opportunities. Community-led projects, such as cooperatives or mentorship programs, can empower migrants and foster entrepreneurship, as highlighted in social network theory (Amata and Elguera, 2023). Collaborations between local communities and migrant networks can also create platforms for sharing resources and knowledge, leading to the establishment of sustainable businesses. Additionally, intercultural exchange initiatives can promote social cohesion and reduce barriers to employment, ensuring that economic integration goes hand in hand with cultural acceptance (Pariahuamán Aronés et al., 2020). This holistic approach leverages the strengths of governmental policies, NGO programs, and grassroots efforts to facilitate the economic integration of Venezuelan migrants in Peru.

The use of convenience sampling in this study, although it was practical for collecting data from individuals with close experiences with Venezuelan immigrants, involved limitations that may have introduced biases and affected the results. An important implication was the potential lack of representativeness of the broader Peruvian population, as participants were selected based on their accessibility and willingness, which may have overrepresented people with stronger opinions or more frequent interactions with immigrants. Additionally, the snowball strategy may have resulted in a homogeneous sample, as participants within the same social networks may have shared similar views, limiting the diversity of perspectives and affecting the generalization of the findings. To address these limitations, future research could have employed probabilistic sampling methods, such as stratified random sampling, which would have ensured a more equitable representation of the Peruvian population, considering variables such as geographical location or socioeconomic status, and also combined qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve a more comprehensive and valid understanding of social stigma.

During the interview process, several challenges were encountered that could have affected the quality of the data collected. One of the main obstacles was overcoming language barriers. Even though the interviewers and participants shared the Spanish language, differences in terminology and expressions sometimes led to misunderstandings. To address these issues, the interviewers made an effort to clarify the meaning of key terms and used simple and accessible language to facilitate mutual understanding.

Cultural misunderstandings also arose due to different perspectives on migration and social interactions between Peruvians and Venezuelans. The

interviewers were trained to be culturally sensitive, using a respectful and empathetic approach to handle these differences tactfully and understandingly. Another challenge was the reluctance of some participants to engage, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as stigma and discrimination. To mitigate this, private and comfortable locations were chosen for the interviews to create a safe environment where participants could feel secure and open to sharing their opinions. Emphasizing the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses helped foster trust. When necessary, interviews were rescheduled to ensure optimal conditions, thereby enhancing participant willingness and ensuring the quality of the data collected.

5. Conclusion

This study provides critical insights into the varied perceptions and attitudes toward Venezuelan migrants in Peru, revealing a spectrum from stigmatization and xenophobia to recognition of their adaptability and economic contributions. The persistence of economic threat perceptions and associations with criminality perpetuates social exclusion, while pressures for cultural assimilation risk eroding migrant identities. The significance of these findings lies in their implications for crafting informed policies and practices that address these challenges comprehensively.

To promote the socioeconomic integration of Venezuelan migrants and combat stigmatization, it is imperative to implement robust intercultural educational programs that foster empathy and respect for cultural diversity. Such programs should underscore the historical and cultural contributions of migrants, framing interculturality as a cornerstone for an inclusive society. This aligns with findings from Palomino and Lovón (2022), who document how targeted educational initiatives can reduce xenophobia. Furthermore, labor integration policies are essential; these should facilitate the formal economic participation of migrants through degree recognition, professional skill validation, and targeted training initiatives, as emphasized by Freier and Pérez (2021) in their work on economic integration.

Community-driven strategies, including fostering direct contact and dialogue between Peruvians and migrants, can mitigate prejudice and dismantle stereotypes, fostering mutual understanding and acceptance. Espinoza, Gavidia-Payne, and Okumura (2023) highlight the importance of emotional regulation and social support, which can be fostered through such interactions. Working collaboratively with media outlets to ensure balanced and accurate portrayals of migrants, alongside anti-discrimination awareness campaigns, is crucial in shifting public perceptions and reducing xenophobia, as suggested by Esparza et al. (2023).

Additionally, developing migration policies rooted in human rights—focusing on family reunification, providing comprehensive social support, and ensuring legal protection—will strengthen the well-being and integration of migrants. Cavagnoud (2024) emphasizes the role of human rights-based approaches in enhancing resilience among migrants. Regular monitoring and evaluation of these initiatives will ensure they remain effective and adaptable to emerging needs. Importantly, fostering the active civic participation of migrants, as suggested by Cabieses et al.

(2024), will enhance social cohesion and empower them to contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes that impact their communities.

Future research should explore longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of integration policies and investigate the role of media representations in shaping public opinion over time. Ending with this statement, the study underscores the urgent need for a multidimensional and human-centered approach to migration that not only addresses immediate challenges but also envisions a more inclusive and cohesive society.

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