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# Well Yes, but Actually No! Perceptions of Colombian Informal Workers About Venezuelan Immigration

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## Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of Colombian sex workers, street vendors, and taxi drivers regarding Venezuelan immigration, its media coverage, and relevant NGO initiatives. Drawing on threat–benefit theory and mediated intergroup contact, short semi-structured and informal interviews were employed as the primary methodology. Findings showcase nuanced attitudes toward immigration, encompassing pros and cons. Informal workers faced downsides in job market, security, public services, housing, and conjugal relationships, yet acknowledged positive attitudes thanks to arrival of educated and cost-effective workforce, contribution to lifestyle, and perspective-taking. Views on media discourse and NGOs were mixed. Implications of results are discussed.

**Keywords** Colombia · Venezuelan immigration · Informal workers · Threat–benefit theory · Mediated contact

## Introduction

The Venezuelan migration crisis significantly impacts Latin American nations, particularly Colombia, a primary destination for Venezuelan migrants seeking refuge and opportunities. Venezuelan immigration to Colombia is among top 20 international migration country-to-country corridors (IOM, 2021). This migration wave brings social, economic, and cultural changes, especially affecting Colombia's lower class (Bonilla-Mejía et al., 2020; Peñaloza-Pacheco, 2022; Santamaria, 2020). It has also fueled prejudice and xenophobia in Colombia (DANE, 2019; Haerpfer et al.,

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2021; Lebow et al., 2020). Negative media portrayal reinforces these attitudes, straining local-migrant relations. Amidst these challenges, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work to bridge this gap, fostering integration and compassion.

Previous research discussed diverse aspects of Venezuelan immigration to Colombia. Some studies explored general opinions regarding immigrants (Cabrera Nossa et al., 2021; Namen et al., 2021; Oxfam, 2019), integration (Riaño, 2023; Sáez et al., 2020), and media depiction of Venezuelans (Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2020; Perilla, 2020; Rocha & Sinisterra, 2019). Ample research (e.g., Arcarazo et al., 2019; Gandini et al., 2019; León Rojas, 2020) also covered governmental migration strategies, but no research has focused on the perceptions among affected groups.

This study examines opinions of vulnerable Colombian groups, particularly informal workers, on Venezuelan immigration, its media portrayal, and pro-Venezuelan humanitarian initiatives. As this research taps onto different aspects, two approaches are selected for theoretical framework: threat–benefit theoretical model and mediated contact theory. The first theory explains local attitudes toward immigrants, while the latter guides analysis of media exposure. This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring the opinions of vulnerable sectors. It also makes an important contribution to our understanding of intergroup relations within migration studies in the Global South.

## Venezuelan Immigration, Humanitarian Assistance, and Colombian Media

Intergroup relations between immigrants and the host community involve cultural, social, and economic factors that shape integration. Existing literature (Lebow et al., 2020; Tapia Bravo, 2020) notes vulnerability to racism, xenophobia, and bias among Venezuelan migrants in Colombia. Despite Colombia's official stance of solidarity, local rejection and xenophobia have emerged in certain areas (Tapia Bravo, 2020; World Bank, 2018). Governmental institutions must exercise vigilant oversight to ensure immigrant rights and integration (Ribas, 2018).

Latin American governments collaborate regionally for Venezuelan migrant integration via initiatives like the Lima Group and Quito Process (Batallas Lara, 2021; Freier & Parent, 2019). Strategies prioritize legal status, education, and healthcare, benefiting both newcomers and local citizens (Arcarazo et al., 2019; Freier & Parent, 2019; Gandini et al., 2019). Additionally, movement monitoring, job market inclusion, and public services accessibility are recognized as fundamental (R4V, 2019).

The support extended to Venezuelan immigrants is bolstered through the collaboration of humanitarian organizations. The NGOs hold a pivotal role in aiding and championing the cause of migrants. They engage in various migration-related aspects, including providing humanitarian relief, promoting assimilation and skills enhancement, advocating for rights, and driving policy changes to address migrant challenges (Loescher, 2021). In the context of Colombia, the humanitarian aid encompasses a range of interventions such as furnishing shelters and accommodations, extending access to healthcare services, distributing sustenance to combat malnutrition, ensuring educational opportunities, extending legal support and

protective measures, and facilitating avenues for employment and sustenance (DRC, 2020).

In today's connected world, media shapes fears and negative attitudes against migration (Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2020; Perilla, 2020; Sáez et al., 2020). Several research endeavors (Castellanos Díaz & Prada-Penagos, 2020; Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2020; Rocha & Sinisterra, 2019) have scrutinized Colombian media's portrayal of Venezuelan immigration. Leading newspapers' analysis reveals 71.7% negative text content and 58.7% negative visual content about Venezuelan immigration (Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2020). Border region newspapers perpetuate negative stereotypes (Castellanos Díaz & Prada-Penagos, 2020). As Perilla (2020) explains, Colombian media fuels xenophobia and hatred, presenting Venezuelans as chaotic and violent. This narrative reinforces immigration as problematic. In Colombian media, there is to a large extent "a discussion of Venezuelans than of migrants and even the word 'Venezuelan' is presented as a substitute for immigrant, as if it were not possible to find Venezuelans in another situation" (Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2020, p. 14).

Despite the predominant academic focus on migration from the Global South to the Global North, South–South migration has been a significant part of global population movements (Crawley & Teye, 2024; De Lombaerde et al., 2014). Migration scholarship is significantly skewed toward the Global North, with research themes often aligning with Northern priorities and social or economic frameworks for managing migration (Crawley & Teye, 2024). Analyzing the dynamics of intergroup relations in South–South migration contexts is essential and can reveal distinct differences from the South–North migration experience. This focus provides an opportunity to test, affirm, or modify existing migration theories, thereby enhancing our understanding of the motivations, choices, and integration experiences of migrants. Furthermore, studying South–South migration enables a critical reassessment of social concepts and variables traditionally developed in Northern contexts, ensuring their relevance and applicability in diverse global settings.

## Threat–Benefit Theory and Mediated Intergroup Contact

The threat–benefit theory (TBT) (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016) provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals perceive immigrants in their society by considering both perceived threats and benefits associated with these immigrant groups. This theory expands on the integrated threat theory (ITT) (Stephan & Stephan, 1996) by acknowledging that individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward immigrants are shaped not only by threats, but also by potential benefits that these immigrants bring to the receiving society. The TBT model outlines four types of threats (economic, physical, societal cohesion, and modernity) and four types of benefits (economic, cultural diversity, humanitarian, and physical), each contributing to individuals' perceptions of immigrants (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016).

Economic threats involve concerns that immigrants might compete for jobs, welfare, and other resources, potentially undermining the economic well-being of the local population. Physical threats refer to fears that immigrants might pose physical harm,

including damage to property and threats to personal safety and security. Threats to societal cohesion center around the possibility that immigrants will introduce new norms, customs, and values that could disrupt the existing social order and cultural identity. Threats to modernity pertain to concerns that immigrants might bring non-modern or conservative values or practices. Economic benefits relate to the potential contributions of immigrants to the economic development of the receiving country, including taking on jobs that locals may not want or are not skilled for, as well as bringing skills, languages, and international connections. Cultural diversity benefits stem from the enrichment of the local culture through new elements such as food, clothing, music, and other cultural practices brought by immigrants. Humanitarian benefits reflect the humanitarian desire and satisfaction resulting from accepting and assisting immigrants who escape danger in their home countries. Physical benefits involve perceiving immigrants as pleasant and clean companions, physically attractive, and good mannered. These attributes fulfill emotional aspirations associated with enjoying life, obtaining sensual gratification, excitement, and engaging in self-directed thinking and behaviors. Economic and physical threats correspond to realistic threats, while threats to societal cohesion and modernity correspond to symbolic threats. On the other hand, economic and physical benefits align with realistic benefits, while humanitarian and cultural diversity benefits are referred to symbolic benefits.

Expanding on Allport's contact hypothesis (1954), mediated intergroup contact pertains to interactions between different social, cultural, or identity groups through media and communication channels, rather than through direct face-to-face interactions (Harwood, 2017; Joyce, 2017). This concept recognizes media's potent sway, such as television, movies, social media, news, and other digital platforms, in shaping attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors toward different groups (Park, 2012; Schiappa et al., 2005). Observing media representations offers insights into outgroup interactions. Portrayals affect how groups are viewed and related (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa et al., 2005).

Mediated contact can be negative or positive (Harwood, 2017; Park, 2012). Negative mediated contact occurs when media reinforces group stereotypes, biases, and negativity, potentially depicting one group as harmful or inferior. This can strengthen existing prejudices, create divisions, and heighten hostility between groups (Banas et al., 2020). Conversely, positive mediated contact showcases media content that presents outgroup members positively and highlights empathetic interactions among different groups. This could involve depicting cooperation, friendship, understanding, and shared goals among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Research (e.g., Graf et al., 2020; Schemer & Meltzer, 2020; Wojcieszak et al., 2020) shows that such portrayal reduces prejudice and cultivates more favorable attitudes toward other groups.

## Method

### Participants

This study examines Colombian informal workers: street vendors, sex workers, and Uber drivers, all impacted by Venezuelan immigration (Lebow et al., 2020;

Peñaloza-Pacheco, 2022; Santamaria, 2020). Through 65 short semi-structured and informal interviews in Colombian cities with high Venezuelan migrant concentrations (Franco-López & Suaza-Argáez, 2019), 25 interviews were conducted with Bogotá's street vendors, 20 with Medellín's sex workers, and 20 with Uber drivers in Bogotá, Medellín, and Cartagena. Participants, aged 18 to 55, represented different genders based on the target group: mixed for vendors, females for sex workers, males for Uber drivers. Snowball sampling, suitable for sensitive topics and outsiders (Parker et al., 2020), was used for participant selection.

### Data Collection and Analysis

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the perspectives of Colombian informal workers. Given the sensitive nature of the subjects involved and the constraints on interview time,[1] comprehensive insights were extracted using succinct semi-structured and informal interview techniques. Informal interviews, alternatively labeled as "casual conversations" or "unstructured interviews" (Bernard, 2011, p. 156), resemble dialogues rather than conventional interviews and are acknowledged as controlled exchanges tilted toward the interviewer's interests (Gray, 2009).

Except for the relatively straightforward interviews with Uber taxi drivers, interactions with sex workers and street vendors were facilitated by assistants. For street vendors, interviews were conducted on-site with predefined questions open for longer or shorter answers. Collaborating with a local street vendor allowed the author to integrate within the community, aiding in selecting interviewees and expanding the sample. Similarly, interviews with sex workers, considering their sensitive status, involved a medical doctor's support. To enhance security while engaging with Colombian sex workers, the assistant, dressed in medical uniform, guided the exploration of downtown and red-light districts in Medellín.

The advantages of employing a fellow street vendor and a female medical doctor as assistants were manifold. They swiftly established a trust-based rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. Their deep comprehension of the intricate subject matter was invaluable. They conversed in the local Colombian Spanish accent and understood the slang used by street vendors and sex workers. Moreover, they contributed significantly to designing the interview schedule and critically assessed potential biases that a male researcher might introduce, especially during interviews with sex workers.

Interviews consisted of 10 open-ended questions,[2] divided into three sections of reflection on Venezuelan immigration, media consumption, and opinions about NGOs. The questionnaire was prepared according to the scope and validity of the research, and it was finalized after being reviewed by two seasoned field study

[1] Numerous respondents displayed reluctance to engage in extended interviews due to their daily vending commitments. In certain instances, such as during interviews with sex workers, extended stays in a single location posed security risks to the author as an outsider.

[2] The interview questionnaire and the codebook are available at *Open Science Framework* repository: https://osf.io/8n479/?view_only=2c9f740f93884ef9803414225b8767da

**Table 1** Main themes and their subordinate themes

| Main themes | Subordinate themes |
|---|---|
| Theme 1: Venezuelan immigration | Negative attitudes<br>Positive attitudes |
| Theme 2: Negative mediated contact | |
| Theme 3: Viewpoints regarding NGOs | |

experts. The interviews lasted between 20 and 45 min (averaged 35 min) and were conducted in Spanish. All participants, guided by assistants, received consent form and understood confidential data handling. The author transcribed all interviews and conducted an inductive thematic analysis using Atlas.ti software. Themes that aligned with specific categories were identified during the coding process. Data was coded according to research questions, resulting in three main themes with underlying sub-themes (Table 1). Exemplar quotations are integrated in the following section to validate the discerned themes and enhance the conveyance of their probable interpretations. To ensure confidentiality, the author employs the interviewees' job titles and locations for identification.

## Results and Discussion

Overall, three main themes were identified during the interviews with Colombian informal workers. Table 1 shows the main themes and their subordinate themes.

### Venezuelan Immigration

Within the first theme the author identified general perceptions of the Colombian informal workers regarding Venezuelan immigration. The results of the interviews show that attitudes toward Venezuelan immigrants among informal workers are evolving, displaying ambivalence and contradictions, with opinions divided into negative and positive perspectives. Among a total of 65 interviewees, 35 participants exclusively pointed out the negative aspects of Venezuelan immigration, while 30 interviewees discussed both benefits and drawbacks for Colombia, with a greater emphasis on the downsides. When asked about positive and negative aspects of Venezuelan immigration, a taxi driver in Bogotá responded that it "has both (sides), it has a negative impact because it is (…) a very hard social burden at the level of health resources, education and governmental entities or NGOs that support the less favored people (…). But it also has a positive impact, because it is an opportunity as a society to nourish (…) from their customs and education." These mixed attitudes align with the TBT and findings from prior research (e.g., Oxfam, 2019; Rueda Gómez, 2020), underscoring how Colombian society fluctuates between showing compassion and harboring bias against Venezuelan immigrants. After a decade from the initiation of the massive immigration, the persistent ambivalent attitudes could be associated with several factors, including ongoing economic impact, strain

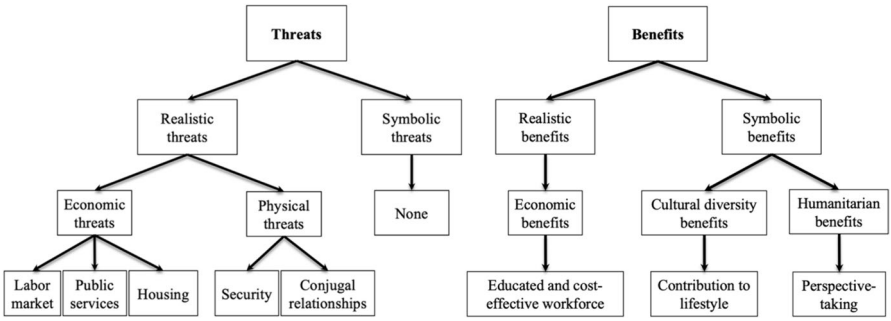



**Fig. 1** Threats and benefits of Venezuelan immigration according to Colombian informal workers. Source: Elaboration of the author

on public services, evolving migration policies, humanitarian interventions, social adaptation and cultural integration which are long-term processes, media influence which constantly shapes public opinion, and individual experiences with immigrants over time. These factors combine to sustain both positive and negative opinions about Venezuelan immigration over many years, reflecting the complex and evolving nature of migration and its impacts on host societies, in this case, intergroup relations in a South–South migration context. Drawing on the TBT, Fig. 1 provides an overview of threats and benefits associated with Venezuelan immigration, as outlined by Colombian informal workers. "Positive and negative perceptions of the effects of immigration coexist naturally in the imaginaries of Colombians" (Oxfam, 2019, p. 8). To put it differently, some individuals feel both empathy and apprehension, causing them to be cautious and skeptical about Venezuelan immigration (Rueda Gómez, 2020). Due to predominance of the negative perceptions, the author addresses the negative attitudes first.

### Negative Attitudes

The results of the interviews show that all informal workers hold predominantly negative viewpoints regarding Venezuelan immigrants. In general, Colombian informal workers have been affected negatively by Venezuelan immigration in at least five main areas: labor market, security, public services, housing, and conjugal relationships. These factors increase intergroup anxiety between Colombians and Venezuelan immigrants.

**Labor Market** First, all interviewees acknowledged a substantial decline in their daily sales, job prospects, and services with the influx of Venezuelan immigrants. In response to a question about impacts of Venezuelan immigration, a street vendor in Bogotá said that "the arrival of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia was like a bucket of cold water for us, because the people who have their jobs, have lost jobs because of them, we as street vendors have been harmed." In South–South migration, the labor market plays a crucial role, particularly as migrants move toward developing rather than economically developed countries. In this context, Colombia, grappling

with its own economic challenges (World Data, 2023), faces significant strain in accommodating large-scale immigration flows from Venezuela. This finding echoes previous research; Namen et al. (2021) underline the pressure the Venezuelan workforce puts on the Colombian labor market, while Tapia Bravo (2020) highlights the complex employability challenges posed by their arrival, contributing to poverty in local households.

These perceptions of the informal workers can be elucidated through the economic threat proposed by the TBT. In this context, immigrants are seen as threatening local control over employment resources. Colombians view Venezuelans as rivals occupying their space and potentially posing dangers (Sáez et al., 2020). The belief that migration takes away jobs and lowers wages is deeply rooted in Colombia (Oxfam, 2019; Sáez et al., 2020). A Medellín sex worker stated: "the truth is that work has been very complicated for all of us, because there are some Venezuelans who are giving away their work as gift, for example, we can charge a price and then they will charge them much less, so we have to work harder". This is consistent with literature's emphasis on the correlation between increased Venezuelan immigration and growth in informal jobs, such as street sales and prostitution. Evidence (Bonilla-Mejía et al., 2020; Delgado-Prieto, 2020; Lebow et al., 2020; Peñaloza-Pacheco, 2022; Santamaria, 2020) indicates negative effects of Venezuelan immigration on Colombia's informal sector, particularly in areas heavily populated by Venezuelans, impacting sales, services, construction, and manufacturing. Similar adverse effects are observed in other migration settings worldwide. In South Africa, immigrants from other Southern African countries, such as Zimbabwe, also enter the informal labor market and compete with their South African counterparts for scarce temporary employment opportunities (Smith et al., 2021). In this South–South migration context, native day laborers have reported vulnerability due to prolonged periods of chronic unemployment, infrequent job opportunities, and the consequent instability and low income. Regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey, the influx of migrants has also adversely affected native workers in the informal sector, particularly temporary wage workers, and less-educated and part-time workers, as well as workers in agriculture and construction (Aksu et al., 2022).

**Security** The second realm in which informal workers have encountered an impact is security. Among 65 interviewed informal workers, 50 indicated that the arrival of Venezuelan immigrants has increased insecurity, leading to higher crime rates including delinquency, vandalism, robbery, and violence. Although Venezuela and Colombia share comparable levels of security (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024), on-site observations suggest a perception of heightened intensity in existing criminal activities following the influx of Venezuelan immigrants. This phenomenon underscores broader societal concerns regarding the integration of Venezuelan immigrants, as the perceived increase in the severity of criminal behavior fuels anxiety, distrust, and resistance within local communities. Responding to a question on threats posed by Venezuelan immigration, a Bogotá street vendor expressed: "they have taken over some areas, you can't get in, they create gangs". Additionally, in reaction to the increase in thefts, a sex worker asserted: "who is going to like it when someone from a foreign country comes to do things that damage one's own

country? Nobody would like it." Drawing on the TBT, these perceptions of insecurity are regarded as physical threats. This corresponds with previous research showing Colombians associating Venezuelan migration with increased insecurity (Namen et al., 2021; Rodríguez Caro et al., 2019). Cabrera Nossa et al. (2021) explain that while empathy exists, fear and insecurity shape Colombians' perceptions of refugees. During interviews, Venezuelan immigrants were characterized also as "aggressive," "lazy," and "arrogant." For instance, when asked about personal contact with Venezuelan immigrants, a Bogotá street vendor mentioned: "I don't like to socialize with them, it is much better from far away, they are very thieves or very lazy, they are aggressive; from no angle do I see it as beneficial for our country, that's the truth."

**Public Services** Interview results reveal the third prevalent perspective regarding Venezuelan immigration: the damage to public services like education, healthcare, etc. Reflecting on the impacts of Venezuelan immigration, 26 interviewees associated their unfavorable attitudes to the perception of a threat stemming from competition over limited public resources. Colombian informal workers commonly believe that the government favors immigrants and neglects citizens. Through daily interactions, these workers perceive that Venezuelan immigrants receive preferential treatment in access to public services and government assistance programs compared to Colombian citizens. This perception is also bolstered by their daily experiences of witnessing overcrowded hospitals and schools, where they believe immigrants are prioritized. This scenario highlights the challenges of resource allocation and social integration within a South–South migration context, where the host country already faces significant infrastructural pressures. In response to questions about disadvantages of Venezuelan immigration, a sex worker in Medellin stated that the arrival of Venezuelans "affects everything, because if you go to a hospital, it is already full of them, if you go to a school, it is full of them, so they (Colombian government) really give these aids more to them than to the Colombians themselves (…), there is priority with them, I don't understand why." Interviewees proposed either prioritizing Colombians or equitable treatment for both groups. "Here there are also hungry children, here there are also people who have to go out to work every day and kill themselves in the sun and water, and they only help the Venezuelans", said a Bogotá street vendor. The TBT links immigrant-induced strain on public services to economic threats and loss of control over limited resources. Earlier research (e.g., Castro Franco, 2019; Lebow, 2020; Oxfam, 2019) support these findings. Eight out of ten Colombians openly express that the influx of Venezuelan immigrants exacerbates Colombia's public services (Oxfam, 2019). In an economically unequal country like Colombia, with a Gini index of 0.53,[3] voices advocate for native solidarity over foreign aid (Castro Franco, 2019). As emphasized by Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016), perceptions of immigrants as threatening or beneficial shape viewpoints regarding immigration policy.

[3] See report at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=CO

**Housing** The resource allocation challenge is expanded also to housing, with reports of difficulty in finding affordable accommodation. A few informal workers (7 respondents) reported being affected in housing costs and rents following the Venezuelan immigration. This strain on housing resources exacerbates tensions and fuels negative perceptions toward the immigrant population, further complicating efforts to foster social cohesion and equitable distribution of services. In response to questions on impacts of Venezuelan immigration, a street vendor in Bogotá emphasized that "one goes to look for a lease and if they see you with one or two children, they don't rent, because Venezuelans arrive with one or two people and then they group up to ten or fifteen people (to pay high rents), the rent has gone up, because Venezuelans earn a hundred or two hundred (pesos) daily; this helps them to afford high rents". This finding clearly extends previous literature concerning the underlying causes of biased attitudes toward Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia. While existing research (e.g., Namen et al., 2021; Sierra de Rodríguez et al., 2022) has explored migrant housing challenges, less focus has been on these challenges driving prejudiced host community attitudes. Venezuelan immigration notably affects Colombia's formal housing market, particularly in low-income neighborhoods (Ávila Martínez, 2022). The Colombian Federation of Real Estate Market (Fedelonjas, 2021) reported rising monthly rents due to ongoing Venezuelan migration and demand for affordable housing, prompting Colombian families to seek alternatives. Following the premise of the TBT, this factor could also be associated with economic threats, specifically concerning competition for resources and welfare. Competition over housing, among other reasons, is the source of much of the tensions between Venezuelans and Colombians (Namen et al., 2021). Empirical findings from the Syrian migration to Turkey also indicate that the refugee influx led to increased housing rents and higher living costs for lower-income native residents (Tumen, 2016).

**Conjugal Relationships** Finally, informal workers highlighted conjugal relationships as another area affected by Venezuelan immigration. By describing Venezuelan women as "husband stealers,"[4] 3 informal workers, all street vendors, noted that they destabilize conjugal relationships. Drawing on the TBT, this factor is evidently linked to physical threat, as Venezuelan women pose a threat to their Colombian peers. The presence of Venezuelan women is seen as an intrusion into a personal and sensitive domain, fueling animosity and protective behavior among local women. These perceptions are further complicated by the economic dynamics at play. On-site observations suggest a perception regarding Venezuelan women, who, due to desperate circumstances, might be more willing to engage in relationships or offer companionship at lower costs, which undermines the economic stability of local women relying on similar means of income. "(Venezuelan) women are taking husbands away from Colombian women, they are leaving people here without husbands; so they are destroying homes, (…) and the men are watching to see how they are being robbed", said a street vendor in Bogotá. While this aspect has been briefly addressed in previous studies (Pineda G. & Ávila, 2019), similar to housing,

[4] The original reads: "RobaMaridos".

the current literature has not extensively examined the deterioration of marital relationships due to Venezuelan immigration as a potential factor contributing to intergroup tensions between Colombians and Venezuelans. According to Oxfam (2019), Venezuelan migration has served in societies, such as Colombia, "as an excuse to exacerbate pre-existing machismo, fed by the stereotypes constructed around Venezuelan women."

### Positive Attitudes

Informal workers also hold positive opinions about Venezuelan immigrants, although to a lesser extent compared to their negative attitudes. This could be due to the greater psychological and emotional weight of perceived threats compared to perceived benefits, particularly in the context of Colombia, which was unprepared for such a massive immigration (Castro Franco, 2019). Individuals are more likely to notice, remember, and react to potential threats because these are seen as immediate dangers to their well-being, security, and resources (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Out of 65 informal workers interviewed, 30 highlighted potential benefits of Venezuelan immigration, in line with the balanced perspective presented by the TBT. These benefits include access to educated and cost-effective workforce, contributing to Colombian lifestyle, and promoting perspective-taking.

**Educated and Cost-Effective Workforce** Addressing inquiries about the benefits of Venezuelan immigration, 10 interviewees highlighted the arrival of certain immigrants with higher academic qualifications (compared to Colombians) and the availability of cheap labor potential. The TBT categorizes these benefits as economic. These perceptions are rooted in the earlier waves of Venezuelan immigrants, including professionals and entrepreneurs who entered Colombia in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and improved investment conditions. The initial arrivals of Venezuelans in Colombia went unnoticed and were even positively reported in the press, with these migrants being absorbed by Colombian society without major disruptions (Castro Franco, 2019). Additionally, these well-educated immigrants are sometimes more likely to accept lower wages compared to local workers, making them attractive to employers looking to minimize labor costs. Venezuelan workers also sometimes fill roles in sectors where there is a high demand for labor but insufficient local supply. A taxi driver in Bogotá said that "(some Venezuelans) are intelligent and well-educated (…), so of course they can contribute." Talking about the positive aspects, a sex worker in Medellín stated that Venezuelans "can bring more education, more development, more things and they can help you as a Colombian, (…) they bring a lot of intelligence." This finding supports previous evidence (e.g., Mutis O. et al., 2021) indicating that highly educated Venezuelan migrants have a positive impact on productivity in Colombia. Additionally, Bahar and colleagues (2021) believe that the youth and education levels of Venezuelan migrants represent a significant growth opportunity for Colombia if their integration is successful.

In addition, a taxi driver in Bogotá stated that "my mom has a pizzeria, (…) and she has two Venezuelans as employees, because in one way or another they are cheaper workforce." Referring to the undesirable jobs and characterizing

Venezuelans as "hardworking" and "respectful," another taxi driver in Bogotá mentioned that "Venezuelans do things that we Colombians do not want to do." Considering Venezuelans as a cost-effective workforce aligns with the existing literature (e.g., Namen et al., 2021); however, it has not been discussed as a positive perception from the perspective of the Colombians. Migrants are an important source of low-cost labor (Massey et al., 1993). Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016, p. 77) explain that "immigrants do low-paying work that locals do not want to do and can be highly motivated to work, enabling society to achieve higher wealth." Such positive perceptions are also reported in other South–South migration settings, such as Indonesian migration to Malaysia, where Indonesian immigrants are perceived as labor replacements or seasonal workers and are regarded positively for their hardworking and obedient nature (Suziana et al., 2017).

**Contribution to Lifestyle** Some informal workers (15 respondents) believe that Venezuelan immigration has a positive impact on Colombian lifestyle. Venezuelan migrants enrich Colombian culture, gastronomy, music, dance, traditions, and customs. This cultural enrichment is classified under the cultural diversity benefit of immigration within the TBT framework. This cultural exchange not only celebrates diversity but also promotes understanding and appreciation between Venezuelans and Colombians, fostering bonds of solidarity and shared identity amidst the challenges posed by migration. "But it has also a positive impact, because it is an opportunity as societies to be nourished, (…) looking for the things that they have in their customs, in their education, (…) we have to look for the positive side," said a taxi driver in Medellín. Another taxi driver in Bogotá mentioned that Venezuelan immigrants "will interact with Colombians, so there will be Colombian-Venezuelan couples, and there will be a new nationality there, it is something interesting, a cultural mix of knowledge, of customs. We must accept them and try to take advantage of the best of them." This result contradicts previous findings (Ayala et al., 2020) regarding cultural identification between Colombians and Venezuelan immigrants. However, it is in line with other studies (e.g., Oxfam, 2019) which verify that Venezuelan immigrants have diversified popular flavors in terms of gastronomy in Colombia or contributed in some musical areas, such as salsa.

**Perspective-Taking** The interviews with informal workers revealed that adopting a perspective of empathy and understanding toward Venezuelan immigrants generates positive comments and fosters sympathy and solidarity. The perspective was shared by 5 interviewees. Talking about relationships between Colombians and Venezuelans, a street vendor in Bogotá affirmed that "they (Venezuelans) do not have the guarantees to live with dignity in their country, so they seek refuge in another country, I think they are discriminated a lot. One must put his/herself in their shoes". Drawing parallels to past Colombian emigration to Venezuela, an Uber taxi driver in Bogotá expressed that "I feel a bit of solidarity. We also went to Venezuela, and they received us well." Venezuelan migration to Colombia has been on the rise in the last decade, marking a shift from historical patterns during the mid to late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries when Colombian migration to Venezuela prevailed due

to internal conflicts. Historically, Colombia was known as a "nation of emigrants," with Venezuela being a primary destination (Calderón-Canola, 2012). This outcome of perspective-taking was partially substantiated in earlier studies (e.g., Namen et al., 2021; Oxfam, 2019). It corresponds to the humanitarian benefit proposed by the TBT. Accepting immigrants and helping them to integrate in the receiving society builds the humanitarian benefit of immigration (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016).

In general, the results regarding the perceptions of Colombian informal workers toward Venezuelan immigrants indicate that negative attitudes are primarily driven by perceived realistic threats rather than symbolic ones. This is possibly because Venezuelan immigrants are not seen as posing a substantial risk to Colombian societal norms, customs, cultural values, or identity. Both countries share a common cultural cluster (Hofstede, 2001) and are "brothers" in terms of culture (Sáez et al., 2020, p. 54), although few findings (e.g., Ayala et al., 2020) contradict this notion. The shared cultural attributes between Colombia and Venezuela can serve as a significant buffer against symbolic threats. This cultural affinity creates a foundation for mutual understanding and empathy, making it easier for Venezuelan immigrants to assimilate and integrate into the host community. The notion of shared cultural roots also fosters the sense of belongingness among immigrants. The commonalities in language (Spanish), religion (Catholic), gastronomy (e.g., arepa), music (e.g., salsa), and other cultural practices allow Venezuelan immigrants to feel more connected to the local population, reducing feelings of alienation and promoting a smoother transition into their new environment. This sense of cultural kinship not only strengthens social bonds but also contributes to the perception that Venezuelan immigrants can be an extension of the existing cultural fabric rather than a disruptive force. Additionally, informal workers do not seem to anticipate the introduction of conservative values or practices by Venezuelan immigrants. This lack of concern could be influenced by the shared status of both Colombia and Venezuela as developing nations within the Latin American region (World Data, 2023). Alternatively, it might reflect the lower expectations of a modern lifestyle held by the interviewed demographic compared to individuals from higher socioeconomic strata. The salience of the realistic threats could be also attributed to the massive scale and high speed of Venezuelan migration. Large and sudden influxes of migrants can exacerbate realist threats due to immediate pressures on jobs, housing, and infrastructure. However, gradual and smaller-scale migrations might not pose as severe realist threats, allowing symbolic concerns to come to the forefront. Another reason could be how Colombian media covers Venezuelan immigration. The way migration is portrayed in media can influence whether realist or symbolic threats are emphasized. In terms of Venezuelan immigration, Colombian media has been focusing on economic burdens and public safety, rather than discussions about cultural integration and identity (Perilla, 2020).

On the other hand, positive attitudes toward Venezuelan immigrants are rooted in a combination of realistic and symbolic benefits, with an emphasis on the latter. Physical benefits are not predominantly perceived as advantageous, likely due to the negligible impact of physical characteristics of Venezuelan immigrants on Colombian informal workers. A significant commonality between these two nations lies in their racial composition, with similar phenotypes and genetic profiles. Autosomal

DNA data reveals that in Colombia, 45.9% is of European descent, 33.8% is of Native American ancestry, and 20.3% is of African descent, while in Venezuela, the proportions are 60.6% European, 23% Native American, and 16.3% African (Godinho, 2008).

### Negative Mediated Contact

The second theme explores how informal workers perceive media discourses about Venezuelan immigration. During interviews, informal workers reported daily exposure to various forms of news and events related to Venezuelan immigrants through TV, radio, newspapers, social media, and on the streets. Drawing on mediated contact approach, the informal workers are overwhelmingly exposed to negative mediated contact about Venezuelans, as compared to a positive one. All interviewees agreed on this point. "Most of the time, we receive negative news," asserted several informal workers. This imbalance in media coverage shapes negative attitudes and interactions, hence reinforcing stereotypes against Venezuelans and fueling social tensions. Venezuelans' acculturation efforts are also undermined by discriminatory discourses. The fact that affected groups of the Colombian society are exposed to predominantly negative mediated contact adds to the existing extensive literature (Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2020; Ordóñez & Ramírez Arcos, 2019; Perilla, 2020; Rocha & Sinisterra, 2019) which highlights the prevalence of negative representations of Venezuelan immigrants in Colombian media.

Based on the interviews, these negative mediated contacts include news of robberies, theft, crime, and vandalism, which build imaginaries about Venezuelans. "Almost every time something bad happens here in Colombia, one says it is not due to a Colombian but a Venezuelan, so we are predisposed to believe that the bad things that happen come from a Venezuelan," said a taxi driver in Cartagena. This phenomenon reflects the tendency in Colombian media to focus more on "Venezuelans" than on migrants in general, as if the two terms were synonymous (Lotero-Echeverri et al., 2020). Consistent with mediated contact theory, repeated exposure to negative portrayals of a particular group can influence individuals' perceptions, leading to the development of negative attitudes and prejudice based on these depictions (Harwood, 2017; Park, 2012).

The interview results demonstrate that informal workers have diverse responses to negative mediated contact about Venezuelan immigrants. Forty-five informal workers' viewpoints were influenced by negative news framing, while 20 others reported not being affected. The latter group often displayed empathy, attributing crimes to the limited opportunities available to Venezuelan immigrants. In response to a question about reactions to negative mediated contact, a street vendor in Bogotá said that as "I listen to negative news, I think that they should be sent back and punished in their own country." Another interviewee, as a taxi driver in Bogotá, asserted that the negative actions of Venezuelans are consequences of mistreatment against them; "they are human beings just like you and they don't deserve the treatment they are being given, because from one moment to the next, we might be worse

or the same as them, and we might need them, too." These findings contribute to the relatively scarce literature (e.g., Cabrera Nossa et al., 2021; Instituto de Opinión Pública, 2020) on how the Colombian host community perceives media discussions about Venezuelan immigration. Prior research (Cabrera Nossa et al., 2021) indicated that 63.1% of Colombians consider that their perception of Venezuelan migrant population is influenced by the media, social networks, or opinion leaders, while 36.9% report not being affected. Building upon mediated intergroup contact, negative mediated contact amplifies negative attitudes and prejudice (Banas et al., 2020; Harwood, 2017). Nevertheless, mediating factors like empathy can exert influence on this dynamic process (Park, 2012).

### Viewpoints Regarding NGOs

The third theme captures opinions of informal workers about humanitarian agencies working on Venezuelan immigration in Colombia. A noteworthy finding under this theme is that informal workers had very little or no knowledge about Colombian NGOs dedicated to assisting and promoting the integration of Venezuelan immigrants. When questioned about these humanitarian agencies, only two interviewees demonstrated a restricted awareness of their activities. On-site observations indicate a possible disconnect between pro-Venezuelan NGOs and public perception, as well as a significant gap in information dissemination regarding NGO activities and their real impact on local communities. The literature is devoid of evidence on this matter, with only a handful of studies (e.g., Cabrera Nossa et al., 2021) attesting to the absence of public acknowledgment of pro-migrant initiatives. For instance, despite the emergence of campaigns combating xenophobia in Colombia, their visibility or recognition within society has remained limited (Cabrera Nossa et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding this lack of awareness, most informal workers (48 respondents) expressed agreement with the humanitarian efforts of Colombian NGOs, particularly in assisting Venezuelan immigrants. This suggests that enhancing awareness and providing clear, relatable information could shift public opinion toward more positive views of NGOs and their work with immigrants. Once informed about the pro-Venezuelan activities, a taxi driver in Medellín said that "I agree. Regardless of their nationality, they are human beings. All human beings deserve respect, we have the right to live and to live in acceptable conditions." Referring to the informative role of the NGOs, a taxi driver in Cartagena stated that "I think it's great, because many times the bad decisions that can be made are due to ignorance, it's a lack of being documented and seeing exactly the situation that these people are going through." In addition, regarding the communicational strategies of the NGOs, a street vendor in Bogotá expressed that these strategies "may not be able to change attitudes all at once, but they can generate seeds for one to change that attitude later on, they can generate a seed so that, yes, it kind of makes one think about something." As the mediated contact theory posits, contact with the outgroup member depicted in the media leads to enhanced knowledge about the outgroup and fosters a sense of augmented trust or admiration for them (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa et al., 2005).

Conversely, 17 interviewees expressed disagreement with NGOs' activities, arguing that aiding Venezuelan immigrants might not provide a lasting solution and could potentially worsen Colombia's socio-economic situation. Addressing reasons of disagreement, a street vendor in Bogotá affirmed that "I think all this is just a lie, that they only do it to steal the money, (…) my question is, why do they help people from other countries and not help people from here?". Informal workers holding this perspective also characterized the communication strategies of pro-migrant NGOs as ineffective, citing concerns that such approaches could lead Colombians to feel manipulated. "It has no effect as the content is not from the heart, it is not true. Many people have been in fact maltreated by them (Venezuelans)," said a street vendor in Bogotá. All interviewees stressed that the Colombian government should instead give priority to citizens inside the country. "They talk about Venezuela, poor Venezuela, but they don't look at the internal problems in the country," stated a street vendor in Bogotá. As noted by Castro Franco (2019), there are voices in Colombia advocating for prioritizing support for citizens over foreigners. According to the TBT, these opinions regarding immigration policy arise from the perception that immigrants pose a threat to the economy and can compete for scarce resources. Perilla (2020) adds that when Colombian citizens, who already experience social inequality, labor disparities, and an uncertain education system, face government's assistance to Venezuelan immigrants, they start to panic and ideate that Venezuelans are coming to occupy the limited employment opportunities or educational slots available for their own children.

## Conclusion

This study explored how highly affected and vulnerable informal workers in Colombia perceive Venezuelan immigration. The results revealed ambivalent opinions among these workers. Using the TBT model, this research advanced our understanding of attitudes toward Venezuelan immigrants, uncovering and reframing the reasons for this mixed sentiment and highlighting both benefits and threats associated with the issue. Unlike previous studies that often focused on negative aspects, this work shed light also on the less-explored positive aspects of Venezuelan immigration.

Negative attitudes stem mainly from perceived realistic threats (economic and physical) rather than symbolic ones (threat to societal cohesion and modernity). Conversely, positive attitudes toward Venezuelan immigrants are rooted in a combination of realistic and symbolic benefits, though no physical benefits are observed. While some outcomes, such as threats to labor market, security, and public services, or benefits in terms of educated and cost-effective workforce reinforced earlier discoveries, this study added fresh insights to literature by pointing to threats affecting housing and conjugal relationships, alongside contributions to lifestyle and humanitarian benefits.

Furthermore, this research enriched our understanding of the opinions held by affected Colombians not only about news related to Venezuelan immigration but also pro-Venezuelan activities of humanitarian agencies. Similar ambivalent

opinions were also noted in this context. For instance, workers appreciated the humanitarian efforts but simultaneously expressed concerns about the adequacy and fairness of resource allocation. Methodologically, this study's strength lies in conducting informal and short semi-structured interviews with informal workers, yielding innovative perspectives on the matter.

These empirical findings are a valuable resource for policymakers and humanitarian agencies aiming to promote social inclusion and integration of Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia. They underscore the need for targeted policies that mitigate economic and physical threats while enhancing the perceived realistic and symbolic benefits of immigration. For example, strategies could include improving labor market regulations to protect local workers, enhancing security measures, and ensuring equitable access to public services. Additionally, promoting the positive contributions of Venezuelan immigrants, such as their role in the workforce and their cultural contributions, can help balance the public discourse and foster a more inclusive society.

This study also highlights the need for a multifaceted approach that addresses economic, social, and cultural dimensions of immigration. Effective policy measures should consider the complex and nuanced views of informal workers, who are often at the frontline of experiencing the impacts of immigration. This paper contributes significantly to our understanding of intergroup relations in South–South migration, particularly within the context of economic hardships and social vulnerabilities faced by informal workers.

By implementing inclusive policies, promoting balanced media narratives, and enhancing NGO outreach, Colombia can better navigate the complexities of Venezuelan immigration and foster a more cohesive and resilient society. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of Venezuelan immigration on Colombian society, focusing on the evolving nature of public attitudes and the effectiveness of integration policies. Additionally, comparative studies across different regions in Colombia could provide deeper insights into the regional variations in perceptions and challenges related to immigration.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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