

Episodic versus thematic media framing of violence against social leaders and human rights defenders in Colombia

Andrea Correa-Chica¹, Angélica Caicedo-Moreno²,
Camilo Rincón-Unigarro³, Pablo Castro-Abril², and Wilson López-López⁴

¹Department of Social Psychology, Basic Psychology and Methodology, Faculty of Psychology, University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

²Department of Social Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), San Sebastián, Spain

³Facultad de Psicología y Ciencias del Comportamiento, Universidad de la Sabana, Chía, Colombia

⁴Departamento de Psicología, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia

Social leaders and human rights defenders (SLHRD) in Colombia have been under increasing attack for defending the rights of communities affected by violence. From 2016 to 2022, over 600 SLHRD were assassinated, resulting in a serious violation of both individual and community human rights. The media's portrayal of these attacks can shape public perceptions and influence efforts towards peacebuilding and promoting human rights. This study examines the media's framing of violence against SLHRD in Colombia between 2016 and 2020, a period marked by an escalation of violence after the signing of the 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). We analysed 1506 textual publications from seven media outlets using a lexicometric approach and identified two frames of news articles: episodic and thematic. Our findings suggest that the episodic media framing may present a simplistic and non-political perspective of the issue, which can impede peacebuilding efforts, while the thematic frame can raise awareness of violence against SLHRD and promote human rights defence. Our study highlights the media's significant role in shaping public opinion on violence against SLHRD, offering practical implications for advocacy and activism.

Keywords: Human rights; Armed conflict; Social leaders; Media framing; Colombia.

“I am convinced that we are more those who want peace than those who want war.” The last words of Cristina Bautista indigenous leader murdered in Cauca (El Tiempo, 2019)

The violence against social leaders and human rights defenders (SLHRD) in Colombia is a grave social issue, particularly after the signing of the 2016 peace accord between the government and the Revolutionary Armed

Correspondence should be addressed to Wilson López-López, Departamento de Psicología, Carrera 5 No. 39-00 Piso 2 - Edificio Manuel Briceño, 110231, Bogotá, Colombia. (E-mail: lopezw@javeriana.edu.co).

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Forces of Colombia (FARC), which led to escalating violence (Cárdenas, 2022; González-Monguí et al., 2022; Herrera, 2021). This study utilises the framing approach from a psychosocial perspective to analyse media coverage of violence against SLHRD between 2016 and 2020. By examining how the media frame this issue, we aim to reveal the underlying discourses and narratives that shape public perception and discourse about violence against SLHRD in Colombia.

The media was fundamental to the development of the Colombian conflict and now needs to reinforce its role as a promoter of a culture of peace, denouncing human rights violations (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). By framing the phenomenon of violence against social leaders, it is possible to increase awareness and social pressure regarding the need to protect and support the work of SLHRD or to keep this tragedy as an individualised and decontextualized form of violence (Barreto et al., 2009).

Media framing

Framing involves selecting and emphasising specific aspects of a perceived reality while downplaying or ignoring others, which can shape how people perceive and respond to the issue at hand. As Entman (1993) argued, selection and salience are at the core of framing, in other words, “to select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, (...) to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). Media framing is the way a story is written or produced (Cacciatore et al., 2015) and refers to distinctive and identifiable patterns of news coverage that emphasise specific aspects of an issue and omit others (Bos et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 1997).

Extensive research has shown that media framing can have a significant impact on public attitudes, social action and intergroup relations, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the framing effect (e.g., Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022; Bos et al., 2016; Entman, 1993; Nelson et al., 1997). For example, Iyengar’s (1990) research, which employed both experimental and survey methods, revealed that media framing of poverty can significantly influence people’s beliefs about who or what is responsible for it. Similarly, Lecheler and De Vreese (2011) found that news framing has a persistent effect on citizens’ understanding of politics, especially among those with moderate political knowledge. A recent meta-analysis by Amsalem and Zoizner (2022), which analysed 138 experiments, found that framing has a statistically significant impact on citizens’ attitudes, but it is less pronounced on behaviour.

Related to human rights violations, the media’s framing can influence the public’s perception of causality

and responsibility and the resulting political decisions, as demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., Gies, 2014; Peksen et al., 2014). The media may focus on situational or individual aspects of human rights issues, such as graphic descriptions of violent events or images of victims, rather than providing a more nuanced and thematic analysis that considers underlying systemic factors contributing to human rights violations.

These two types of media coverage are called episodic and thematic news frames. Episodic framing involves presenting issues through individual instances or specific events. In contrast, thematic framing positions an issue within a broader context, offering in-depth analysis and background information (Iyengar, 2005).

The inclination of individuals to ascribe societal or individual causality to issues is influenced, in part, by the framing employed by the media (Cacciatore et al., 2015; Iyengar, 2005). The tendency towards episodic framing can lead to a simplistic and distorted understanding of complex issues and prevent the public from recognising broader social, economic and political factors (Iyengar, 1987; Le Billon & Lujala, 2020). Psychological research has shown that providing people with explanatory knowledge, as offered within the thematic frame, can significantly affect their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (Barry et al., 2011; Iyengar, 1987). However, the “particular-victim” scenario, which individualises issues, can decrease their importance (Iyengar, 1987).

Furthermore, it is relevant to consider that the media landscape is diverse and complex, consisting of various institutions with different agendas and values. Factors like the media reach across regions, the audio-visual or text format and their political stance can influence how they frame stories and the quality of the information shared. For example, a news outlet that has a particular political bias may choose to present news in a way that supports that bias, which can result in a skewed or incomplete representation of the fact. These differences impact significantly on public perceptions and actions (Afrin et al., 2022; Bleich et al., 2015; Cárdenas, 2022; Herrera, 2021; Peksen et al., 2014).

Considering the outlet’s characteristics and structure facilitates understanding how diverse segments of society perceive a specific event and its underlying causes. Analysing the type of outlet and other contextual characteristics of the issue at hand—violence against SLHRD—with the media focus on either episodic or thematic framing can illustrate the discourse in the social sphere regarding human rights and violence in a conflicted country. Media can be a critical ally in promoting awareness and mobilising civic engagement to protect human rights defenders and safeguard their right to advocate for human rights. The SLHRD rely on the media to craft a comprehensive narrative that accurately demonstrates their work’s importance, intricacy and perils.

Context of study

The peace accord in 2016 between the FARC and the Colombian government brought an initial decline in violence. Efforts to end a 60-year conflict have transformed the forms of violence in the country and created new dynamics among the armed groups involved (Truth Commission, 2022). Regrettably, from 2016 to 2022, there was a rise in selective killings, massacres and forced displacement, especially in rural areas of the country and among the most vulnerable socioeconomic and ethnic groups (Cárdenas, 2022; López-López et al., 2022; United Nations, 2022). Furthermore, Colombia ranks among the world's most economically unequal nations, according to the Gini index (World Bank, 2020) and corruption and impunity remain significant challenges for the country. The inefficiency of the judicial system and corruption in both public and private institutions hamper the protection of human rights (Universidad de las Américas Puebla, 2020).

In Colombia, armed groups attack SLHRD because they defend the rights of marginalised communities, challenge armed group interests and promote peace and justice (Cárdenas, 2022; González-Monguí et al., 2022). Their role in any society has relevant implications, such as claiming accountability, giving voice to underrepresented groups, empowering groups in search of social change, and promoting community development and cohesion. Moreover, in contexts with inequalities, impunity, corruption and violence, the SLHRD play a critical role in achieving peace-promoting structures such as the safety and justice of marginalised groups (González-Monguí et al., 2022).

However, the work of SLHRD needs a social and structural support network that promotes its demands, shields it from potential threats, actively denounces the attacks endured, and demands adequate protection from the state for carrying out its work. Colombian media have been a powerful tool for legitimising and protecting different groups and mobilising the civilian population. As highlighted by the Truth Commission (2022), the media are and will continue to be essential agents in the narrative of armed conflict and peacebuilding, and how they deal with attacks on this population can have profound social implications.

The SLHRD's systematic killings represent a blatant violation of individual and community human rights (O'Byrne, 2014). At the individual level, these killings undermine the right to life and security, which are essential for the enjoyment of all other rights. Regarding the community level, these murders have a significant impact on the right to self-determination, participation in decision-making processes, and a healthy environment. By targeting those who advocate for marginalised communities' rights and interests, these murders limit the

community's ability to exercise their human rights and promote their well-being (Alzate & Dono, 2017).

Collective and state action is critical in stopping the violence against SLHRD to ensure their safety and protection as they defend human rights and promote social justice. However, generating such action requires the support of public opinion, which can be influenced by the media's framing of social issues, such as the murders of SLHRD. The media's portrayal of violence against SLHRD in Colombia can significantly impact public opinion, collective action and the pressure on the state to prioritise their safety and protection.

This study

The sharp increase in the number of SLHRD murders in Colombia since 2016 underscores the importance of studying how the media portrays this issue. The main aim of this study is to analyse media coverage of violence against SLHRD in Colombia during the period of escalating violence that occurred after the signing of the 2016 peace accord between the government and the FARC. To accomplish this goal, we address the following research questions:

- R1: What is the media's framing of violence against SLHRD during this period?
- R2: How does the framing of this violence differ among different types of media (i.e., press, radio, television and magazine) and coverage of the murder?
- R3: How does the media's framing of violence against SLHRD vary based on the type of leadership of the victims?

METHOD

Data collection

To understand the media framing of the violence against SLHRD, we carried out a lexical analysis of 1506 textual publications from seven media outlets between November 2016 (signature of the peace agreement) and August 2020. Specifically, publications from the two principal national newspapers: *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*, two main national radio stations: *Caracol Radio* and *RCN Radio*, two leading news TV channels: *CANAL 1* and *Canal RCN*, and lastly, the national magazine *Semana*. The selection criteria to gather articles for our sample were articles mentioning the words *social leader(s)*, *social leader(s) murders/homicide/massacre* over that period, published in text format on the media outlet's website.

Besides the article's text, we collected variables describing media format and social context. On one side, media variables are the *type of media*: press (58.03%), radio (33.87%) or television (8.1%), and the *coverage of the murder* in terms of how many victims the news piece

featured: individual (72.58%) or collective (27.42%). On the other side, the social context variable is the *type of leadership*, according to their belonging population group and the type of rights they defended: community (44.22%), indigenous (17.6%), peasant (14.08%), various (11.82%), Afro-descendent (8.03%), environmental (3.85%) or LGBTQ+ (0.4%).

Data analysis

The software Alceste performed a lexical analysis on the news sample, which reduces validity and reliability problems in text analysis (Klein & Licata, 2003; Reinert, 1996). This method analyses language or discourse rather than the semantic meaning of the text, as it examines associations or co-occurrence of words in the text. It allows the identification of the most frequent lexical universes in the discourse, making it suitable for analysing collective thinking (Allum, 1998).

First, Alceste segments the corpus in Elementary Contextual Units (ECUs) of 30–50 words to cross them in a contingency table. The corpus is analysed by the presence of whole words in ECUs, showing the vocabulary distribution per ECU. Second, it generates a square-distance matrix from the contingency table where if two ECUs are close, they share some of the words analysed (Reinert, 1996). Then, it performs a descending hierarchical cluster analysis, producing classes of ECUs with the best differentiation of vocabulary. Ultimately, Alceste aids the text interpretation by extracting classes of co-occurring words that best differ from each other. Moreover, this software calculates the relation between the lexical classes and levels of independent variables through independence tests. We analysed this relation regarding the media format, *type of media* (TV, radio, or press), *coverage of the murder* (individual or collective) and the social context through the *type of leadership* (community, indigenous, peasant, Afro-descendent, environmental or LGBTQ+).

Finally, the most significant vocabulary in each class was selected by three criteria as per previous research using Alceste (Camargo & Bousfield, 2009): (a) an expected value of the word higher than 4, (b) proof of association of the chi-square tested against the class ($\chi^2 \geq 3.84$ [$p = .05$]; $df = 1$), and (c) the word occurs in a class with a frequency of 50% or more. Original data were analysed in Spanish, and trained researchers translated the results for publishing purposes.

RESULTS

The entire corpus had 628,130 words, with 9042 unique words. The descending hierarchical analysis divided the corpus into 8809 ECUs 86% of them were analysed, resulting in four classes with different weights extracted from the most significant vocabulary. Figure 1 displays these results.

Media's framing of violence against SLHRD

The dendrogram illustrates two main clusters that reveal the most salient issues published by the media regarding systematic violence against SLHRD between 2016 and 2020. Each cluster contains different classes, each with its set of characteristic words and segments (see Figure 1). These clusters indicate two frameworks for this topic. The first portrays a thematic analysis with sociopolitical and economic variables (Class 2 “Collective claim” and 1 “Land control”). Meanwhile, the second has an episodic perspective of the SLHRD murders with descriptive accounts of the events (Class 3 “Individual depiction” and 4 “Homicide investigation”).

The first cluster, “Thematic,” covers key risk factors for leaders of vulnerable communities regarding sociopolitical and economic dynamics related to the armed conflict. The largest class of this cluster, “Collective claim,” deals with the social and political demands towards the government for the security and protection of SLHRD. It highlights the collective pattern of the violent phenomenon, with active use of the social leader category as human rights defenders. The concern of the citizens and human rights organisations for the safety of SLHRD results in collective claims warning is an obstacle to the peace agreement.

These claims expose the high number of murders and threats against this group and portray the government and former president Ivan Duque as key parties in adopting measures and public policies that guarantee the safety of SLHRD. The characteristic segment illustrates the above: “The International Commission on Human Rights was concerned about the increase in violations of the candidates’ human rights. The state must adopt measures necessary to guarantee the security of the political actors at all levels of political participation” ($\chi^2 = 44$, press, collective coverage, community leadership).

The following class of this cluster, “Land control,” highlights the land restitution process to eradicate illicit crops, the drug-trafficking routes and the presence of illegal armed groups as risk factors for leaders of vulnerable communities. This lexical universe displays the transformation of armed groups and violence against communities after the peace agreement. The demobilisation of FARC guerrillas led to an increase in land disputes between remaining illegal armed groups due to the failure of the State to secure them militarily or institutionally.

Hence, SLHRD protecting fair access to land and members of Afro-descendent communities in the Pacific region are at higher risk of threats for opposing the armed groups’ interests. This class contextualises this systematic phenomenon within a structure of territorial and economic violence, as described in the following segment: “FARC were in these regions for decades, but after the agreement, other illegal armed groups occupied them and disputed the control of land and illegal economies. In the

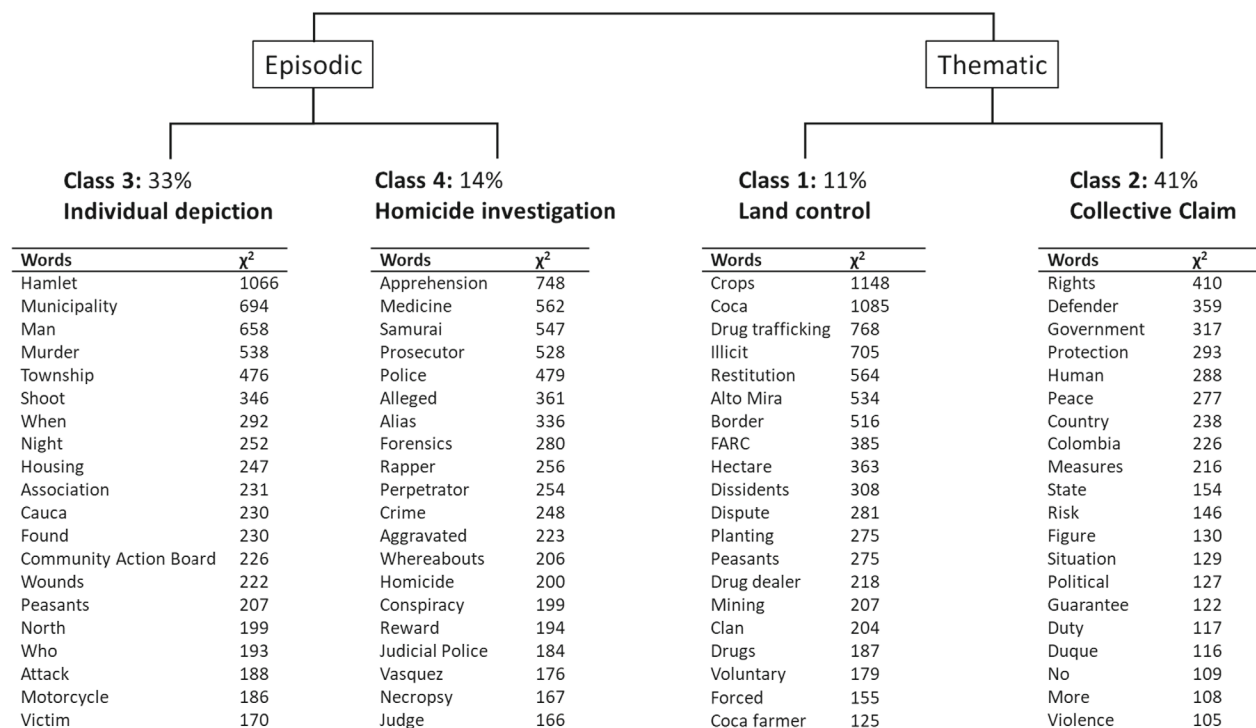


Figure 1. Episodic and thematic media framing of news articles regarding violence against SLHRD.

Note: The figure presents a hierarchical clustering dendrogram with the most frequent and associated words per class, $\chi^2 (1)$, $p < .001$.

middle of this war, the most vulnerable are communities and their leaders” ($\chi^2 = 76$, press, individual coverage, Afro-descendent leadership).

The second cluster, “Episodic,” gathers narrations of the facts focusing on the violent event, in other words, describing the circumstances surrounding each murder and its further investigation. Therefore, the largest class of this cluster, “Individual depiction,” emphasises the place, time and manner of the homicides in a descriptive and isolated form, without adding sociopolitical context other than the type of leadership. As shown by one of the characteristic segments: “Unidentified suspects murdered a community leader in Cordoba. The president of the Community Action Board was taken by armed men in a vehicle, who then tortured him and shot him on four occasions” ($\chi^2 = 40$, radio, individual coverage, community leadership). Indeed, the descriptive accounts illustrate the reported statistics regarding violence against SLHRD, given that the risk factors are being peasant or community leaders and living in rural areas of the Pacific and Caribbean departments.

Lastly, the fourth class, “Homicide investigation,” deals with the legal and administrative procedures done by police, prosecutors and forensics in the aftermath of the event, including apprehensions, identification and search of the perpetrators, offering of rewards for information, confirmation of the crime typology, among others. The following segment exemplifies the above: “To

jail second person implicated in the murder of a headmaster in Medellin. A judge ordered the detention of Alias ‘El Indio’ as allegedly responsible for the death of Manuel” ($\chi^2 = 81$, radio, individual coverage, community leadership). This lexical universe follows the descriptive tone of the previous class and the singularity of the homicides, avoiding the patterns in these violent phenomena and the structures at play.

Differences in media framing based on media format and type of leadership

After identifying the lexical classes, the software Alceste calculates the relation between them and the levels of independent variables through independence tests. That is, classes are associated with one level of the independent variables if there is a significantly higher proportion of ECU’s belonging to that level than all others combined (Klein & Licata, 2003). Table 1 shows the variables regarding media format and social context and their significant association with the classes described above.

Regarding the thematic cluster, both classes associate with press media (magazines and newspapers), collective coverage of the murder and Afro-descendent leaders. In other words, news articles that covered several homicides at a time were more likely to discuss the multiple causes and factors of this systematic violence. Conversely, classes from the second cluster are associated with radio

TABLE 1
Distribution of media format and type of leadership variables according to lexical classes

Variables	Episodic cluster				Thematic cluster			
	Class 3: Individual depiction		Class 4: Homicide investigation		Class 2: Collective claim		Class 1: Land control	
Media format		χ^2		χ^2		χ^2		χ^2
Type of media	RCN Radio	62	Caracol Radio	78	Magazine Semana	45	Magazine Semana	34
			RCN Radio	23	El Espectador	41		
Coverage of the murder	Individual	194	Individual	192	Collective	281	Collective	94
Type of leadership	Community	133	Community	147	Various	445	Afro-descendent	78
	Peasant	47			Afro-descendent	75	Community	49

Note: All values have statistical significance $\chi^2(1), p < .0001$.

stations, individual coverage of the murder and community leaders. This singular emphasis supports the descriptions and investigations of homicides found in the content of classes.

The type of leadership varies according to each cluster. The thematic cluster deals with structural violence, such as racism. Unfortunately, these results highlight the augmented risk and vulnerability of defending human rights in historically marginalised communities in Colombia as the Afro-descendent community. Even though this harmful pattern is evident in the type of leadership, news outlets don't explicitly discuss racism. This framing might be replicating covert violence in conflict dynamics.

Furthermore, the two classes within the episodic cluster underscore the risk of fostering collective processes and organised actions within contested territories through community leadership. This also alludes to the potential stigmatisation of local political involvement, as it predominantly focuses on violent incidents and association with community action councils. These findings align with Cárdenas' (2022) study, which revealed that media coverage of violence against SLHRD often fixates on their fatalities while overlooking their social contributions and community engagement.

In conclusion, the lexical analysis, and the association of classes with independent variables showed the media covers the systematic violence against SLHRD from two different perspectives regarding the news content, the type of media, the coverage of the murder and the type of leadership. On one side, news articles from press media consider the sociopolitical and economic structures affecting SLHRD efforts in their territories, leading to a thematic perspective. On the other side, an individual and descriptive discourse published on radio stations focused on the homicide per se and the aftermath of legal and administrative proceedings.

DISCUSSION

Our study aimed to analyse how the media framed the systematic violence against SLHRD in Colombia between

2016 and 2020. We analysed 1506 news articles from seven media outlets and identified two distinct frames: an episodic frame that provided descriptive accounts of individual murders and investigations, and a thematic frame that explored key risk factors for SLHRD, including socio-political and economic dynamics related to the armed conflict and land control.

Furthermore, our findings showed that the type of media and leadership of the victims were significantly associated with the different frames. The episodic frame was more salient in radio news that covered individual murders and was related to community leaders, while the thematic frame was more common in news from press media that covered collective murders and was related to Afro-descendant leaders.

The episodic framing used by some media outlets provided limited insight into the complex interplay between violence and care of SLHRD and their communities. As previous studies have noted, such framing can promote an oversimplified and distorted view of the issue, thereby hindering the public's ability to recognise the broader social, economic and political factors at play (Barry et al., 2011; Iyengar, 1987; Le Billon & Lujala, 2020).

In contrast, the thematic framing provides the public with a comprehensive explanation of the violence against SLHRD. This framing presents violence as a fairness issue, highlighting the violation of rights and the government's responsibility to protect its citizens. Media outlets that employ this framing explicitly call for implementing measures such as the voluntary restitution of illicit crops. Such framing can significantly impact people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (Barry et al., 2011; Iyengar, 1987), such as motivating collective action and increasing pressure on the state to prioritise the safety and protection of SLHRD. In turn, this can contribute to long-term solutions to the issue of violence against this vulnerable group.

The differences in media framing based on media type are relevant findings in Colombia since marginalised communities in rural areas rely heavily on radio as their

primary news source. Our results show that radio tends to employ a more episodic frame, which aligns with Afrin et al.'s (2022) findings that local media often focus on reporting the specific details of news events, while national media take a more explanatory approach by looking at the bigger picture. This is a crucial issue to consider given that rural areas in Colombia are often hotspots for violence against SLHRD.

The results of this study shed light on the contrasting realities in Colombia after the peace agreement (Cárdenas, 2022; González-Monguí et al., 2022; Herrera, 2021). On the one hand, there is a growing public awareness of human rights violations related to the labour of SLHRDs and an increasing recognition of human rights as a crucial issue (as shown by the “thematic” cluster of our results). On the other hand, there is a tendency to oversimplify the problem by not reporting on the political violence, the diverse leadership roles and struggles of SLHRDs, and the underlying causes and potential solutions to human rights violations (as can be exemplified in the “Episodic” cluster and in the “Individual depiction” class). While there is a growing concern for human rights in historically conflicted territories and their social issues, the episodic frame leads to an individualistic and one-dimensional understanding of the violence against SLHRD.

These results underscore the need to strengthen the media's role as promoters of a culture of peace and as an axis in studying human rights violations, where the right to truth permeates information (Truth Commission, 2022). In this sense, news outlets must avoid episodic framing of the violence against SLHRD that simplifies the systematic tragedy or justifies the escalation of the conflict. This may contribute to heightened societal polarisation and the saturation of decontextualized violence, thereby impeding social mobilisation.

Given the significant role that mass media plays in shaping public attitudes towards human rights, media outlets in Colombia must provide comprehensive coverage of the systematic violence against SLHRD. By explicitly addressing the political nature of this violence, as well as the diverse struggles and root causes behind it, the media can contribute to the country's peacebuilding agenda by legitimising human rights discourse and promoting a culture of peace (López-López et al., 2022). Our study suggests that media coverage can not only help to identify patterns and structures underlying the violence against SLHRD but also underscore the heightened vulnerability of historically marginalised communities in Colombia.

In addition to our main findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our research. One limitation is that our sample did not include news in audio or video format, which may affect the generalizability

of our results to all Colombian media outlets. However, we collected a diverse corpus of written text articles from TV and radio news channels to mitigate this limitation. Additionally, our study focused only on traditional media and did not consider social media content or audience interactions with the articles. While we recognise that online content is increasingly important, we still believe that traditional media is a primary source of information and is often considered a reliable channel for hard news. Nonetheless, future research could incorporate social media and audience interactions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of media framing on violence against SLHRD in Colombia.

In conclusion, our study sheds light on how the media framed the systematic violence against SLHRD in Colombia between 2016 and 2020. We identified two distinct frames: an episodic frame that provided descriptive accounts of individual murders and investigations and a thematic frame that explored key risk factors for SLHRD. Our study underscores the role of the media in shaping public opinion on violence against SLHRD, which can have implications for advocacy and activism. It is essential to recognise that the media's framing of this issue can impact the protection of SLHRD in Colombia and peacebuilding efforts.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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