The televisual consumption by the Romani population and their reflexions about the reality show Los Gypsy Kings¹

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the perceptions by the Romani population from Barcelona (Spain) about the Spanish reality show "Los Gypsy Kings". We will do a short theoretical discussion about the representation of the Romani population in Spanish media. To comprehend the debate, it will be showed data about their televisual consumption, focusing on entertainment programs, with some pieces of information about preferences related to television network broadcasts and types of programs. Next, it will be presented the reflections of the sample about the reality show analyzed. The methodology consists of semi-structured interviews with 20 Romani women and men between 2017 and 2019. The results point out to the resemblance in the representation of the Romani populations in entertainment and informative contents. We also see that the consumption of reality shows and the public debate proposed by Romani associations about "Los Gypsy Kings" are reflected in the reflexions of the sample.

Keywords: Romani Population. Televisual Consumption. Representation. Los Gypsy Kings. Reality show.

Introduction

Considering the televisual programming of the last years in Spain, we propose in this paper to present part of the results of a research about media and cultural consumption by the Romani population from Barcelona. As part of a wider work, this article will focus on the televisual consumption by that social group, showing their preferences and their uses of such media, especially those related to entertainment programs. We will see that the Spanish, private, generalist channels have a high penetration in the Romani audience that has been part of this research. We will also see what position reality shows occupy in this consumption.

These pieces of information interest us insofar as they help us to comprehend how this consumption influences the perceptions of the Romani population about the reality show "Los Gypsy Kings"², which has been broadcasted since 2015 and follows the everyday life

¹ This research was realized while the author had a PhD scholarship from Capes (MEC-Brasil).

² The debate about the structure and the content of "Los Gypsy Kings" can be found in Segarra (2018).

of some Spanish Romani families. The aim is to comprehend the opinion of the sample about such program and how productions like that one affect their day to day. Moreover, we want to know if the denunciation and the mobilization from the Romani associations against the reality show are present in the discourses of our sample.

It is important to highlight that the reflections about this program should be read considering what reality shows are involved in televisual programming and also the context of invisibility of the Romani community in Spanish media. This subject is relevant due to the fact that "Los Gypsy Kings" reached its sixth season in 2020. Furthermore, we underline the reach of reality shows in televisual audiences, especially when they have success. This kind of program attracts as much or more interest than private television programs. This shows their importance to open television broadcasters in the dispute over audience (JENKINS, 2008).

According to Segarra (2018, p. 45), reality shows "make celebrities" furthering two different and apparently opposing perspectives: that idealized and empathetic or the ironic and derisive, which is "even sometimes aggressively humiliating". In this second perspective, the viewer is put in a situation of superiority in relation to those "celebrities". Besides, this kind of program "provides to the consumers a stable flow of ethical dramas" that order the discussions of the audience about moral aspects as well as reinforcing or questioning some values. The participants of the program "put themselves forward to be judged by their audience" while "the audience reaffirms their own shared values" (JENKINS, 2008, p. 123).

This exposure used to be followed by a demand for the authenticity of the participants of the reality show (CAMPANELLA, 2013; COULDRY, 2008), that play the paradox of being authentic in a performative context. Fulfilling this demand, increasingly present in the audience, the participants of reality shows guarantee their space in these programs at the same time as they reach to consolidate their roles of "celebrity". In the case of "Los Gypsy Kings", despite not being a reality show of competition, it is a fact that the charisma of the participant families with the audience can influence the decision of keeping them in the following seasons.

Reality shows are commonly defined as a genre that displays and explores the spectacular dimension of everyday life of the participants, which are exposed representing themselves in different situations. Despite this, it is important to highlight that such situations are produced by the program team, under a script, operation rules and an internal logic of televisual production and fictional formats (FRANÇA; SOUZA, 2016).

Moreover, considering the reflections of França and Souza (2016), this representation of yourself can result in performance of roles and in the use of social models which are accepted or expected by the audience, dialoguing with the stereotypes present in society. Therefore, we can "analyze the program proposal as a structuration of meanings which uses current narrative models and resonates issues that are socially felt and experienced (FRANÇA; SOUZA, 2016, p. 181).

The characteristics of reality shows take us to focus this text not only on the consumption of the program "Los Gypsy Kings", but also on the reflections in media representation of the Romani population in Spain, especially those produced by news media. We believe that entertainment contents reproduce the focus given by the press in its approach to this minority group, considering that the press "has been a key in the diffusion of socio-cultural image of the Roma" in Spain (OLEAQUE, 2014, p. 3). For this debate, we underline the contributions of Willem (2010) and Oleaque (2014).

According to Segarra (2018, p. 41), "likewise all the racialized individuals in a Spain that still perceives itself as white", the Romani population is not present on generalist television of the country. When this reality changes, it happens through programs such as "Palabra de Gitano" and "Los Gypsy Kings", which give the false sensation that such space has been given to these groups, when, in fact, it remains as a projection of a stereotyped image.

Media representation of the Romani population

The media have an important role to model social subjects since they fix meanings to that which is represented. According to Willem (2010, p. 25), "media are institutions that are specialized in the production of meaning through representations". This results not only in the creation of stereotypes and diverse kinds of discrimination, but also interferes with the way the own represented groups see themselves, making that many times they start behaving in the way they are portrayed (WILLEM, 2010), responding to what they believe is expected of them.

This is the case of entertainment programs such as "Palabra de Gitano" which, conforming to Oleaque (2014), had an important role in internalizing or reinforcing stereotypes among the Romani population in Spain. According to the author (OLEAQUE, 2014, p. 64), on the one hand, the program "triumphed amidst the more marginalized Romani - who is enthroned as the representative of the Roma" and, on the other hand, was very criticized by members of the community which felt ridiculed.

We underline that, despite an internalizing process which can happen, we should not forget that media consumption by ethnic minorities is complex (TSAGAROUSIANOU, 2001) and therefore "diverse factors contribute to the existence of different levels of resistance to the attempts of stereotyping minority groups" (GONÇALVES, 2020a, p. 171).

Research about minorities representation in different parts of the world presented two fundamental aspects about this process: "the under-representation of minority cultural groups on one hand, and their stereotypical representation on the other" (WILLEM, 2010, p. 29). According to this author, the stereotypes broadcasted by the media have more power than those that appear from every day because the messages are produced in a highly professional way and, as a consequence, are structurally more sophisticated. Furthermore, we have to take into account, evidently, their power as broadcasters.

In the case of the Romani population in Spain, many works and reports about their media representation can be mentioned, such as "¿Periodistas contra el racismo? La prensa española ante el Pueblo Gitano" (Journalists against racism? The Spanish press before the Romani people), produced annually by Unión Romani since 1995. Besides, Oleaque (2014), in his doctoral thesis, also gathers previous studies, whose analysis can be summarized in two ideas: the recurrent presence of stereotypes based on folklore and a straight relation of the collective with situations of conflict.

In his work, Oleaque (2014) highlights that the individuals portrayed in the analyzed press texts are always read as part of a group, a collectivization followed by the depersonalization. The word that appears more times related to "Romani" is "families", followed by others that refers to a group as well, such as "clan", "ethnicity" and "race". This is due to the fact that a great part of the analyzed material is related to situations of conflict and, in this context, "the Romani" are seen as a collective. However, when the material is about achievements, talents or conquests, the individual is highlighted, or as an exception or from a folkloristic perspective.

In the texts with more a folkloristic approach, the Romani have an active role of responsibility for their own success. In the materials in which they are related to "problems", instead, despite also appearing as responsible for the "problems" that affect the majority society, they usually have a passive role being presented as a pretext to challenge decisions and actions of the government, in a local, national or international ambit. When related to the Romani people, deviation behaviors are assigned to the ethnic group by the majority society. As when these behaviors are found in the non-Romani, the responsibility is of the individual, not the collective (GARRIGA *apud*. AYUNTAMIENTO, 2015).

Therefore, it is not strange that the space given to the Romani as they present their point of view about the facts is almost nonexistent or does not fully help to comprehend the complexity of the context. According to Oleaque, they are references that deride, vulgarize or reinforce marginalized experiences: "When it is used, it does not help to have a deeper and more balanced image of the Romani as a group, but transmits elementary information which embeds in stereotypes in a way of a lament and complaint, or racial residues" (OLEAQUE, 2014, p. 288).

In summary, the majority of the texts highlight the Romani collective from the perspective of a threat before the majority society, justifying, then, certain actions towards the group. Secondly, they stand out from the culture, being in texts which discuss music, being in those that relate their social conditions to certain cultural traits. Finally, the existence of racism against the Romani collective in Spain is not recognized in none of the media.

However, despite these representations being present in the traditional media, it is true that the "ethnic minority audiences" also claim "inclusion in the 'mainstream'" (ROSS; PLAIDON, 2001, p. XIV), since the cultural rules and behaviors produced or reinforced by those media influence the way the majority society interacts with minorities in its everyday (ROSS; PLAIDON, 2001).

Methodology

The methodology to the elaboration of the data presented in this paper has a qualitative character and is based on fieldwork that includes participative observation and semi-structured interviews conducted between 2017 and 2019, in the province of Barcelona, in Catalonia. We believe this methodology "contributes with the construction of a more horizontal scientific endeavor, especially in the researches with social groups historically silenced inside the structures of power within scientific knowledge" (GONÇALVES, 2020b, p. 46-47). The choice of a qualitative methodology is due to the possibilities that it provided to the development of this research: the deepened knowledge of social and historical context of this population, the interaction, dialogue, affection and network construction, and, finally, the engagement of the researcher with the methodologic process itself. (GONÇALVES, 2020b)³.

The interviews were realized with 20 people, 10 men and 10 women, between 18 and 47 years old, with different levels of studies, professions and from diverse neighborhoods and cities in the province. The interviews last about 40 minutes. The sample will be identified here with a number from 1 to 20, being the number 1 the youngest, and with the letter H for men and M for women.

In this paper, the data presented refer to the questions asked to the sample related to two points: their televisual consumption and the consumption of contents related to the Romani population. In the first case, the sample answered the question about what they usually watch on TV. The answers included television channels in general and specific programs. The data was then divided into news and entertainment, the latter being the focus of this work. The answers from the sample guided us to organize the programs mentioned in different genres: Children, Fiction, Information⁴, Reality, Humor, Info show and Sports. Apart from the mentions of preferences for determined kinds of contents, we also asked them how often they usually watch television and in what circumstance.

Besides, related to the consumption of contents about the Romani population, firstly, we asked if they knew that kind of contents and, then, if they watched it. The two kinds of contents mentioned were the news and some entertainment contents, with the majority mentioning the docu-reality "Palabra de Gitano" and the reality show "Los Gypsy Kings". The following question referred to the opinion of the sample about these programs. We will recollect here the answers referred specifically to "Los Gypsy Kings" because it had the highlight in the discourses of the sample, considering that during the fieldwork the reality show was being broadcasted, while "Palabra de Gitano" was not anymore part of the television offer.

³ To a deeper debate about the methodology see "Pesquisa participante e comunicação dialógica: a experiência com as comunidades ciganas da Espanha" (GONÇALVES, 2020b).

⁴ Apart from the news, we defined as Information programs such as documentaries, research, debates or interviews.

From the systematization and organization of the recollected discourses, we proceeded to the analysis focusing on everything referred to preferences, practices and opinions of the sample related to these two aspects mentioned previously. We were concerned with maintaining the coherence of the discourses, inasmuch as semi-structured interviews have open answers as a characteristic.

Analysis - televisual consumption

Frequent televisual consumption appears in more than a half of the sample consulted for this research, with more interest amongst the adults, but all of them affirmed to watch it at some point. The most frequent consumption is mainly linked to the news tracking, while sporadic consumption is more mentioned in relation to entertainment.

With an offer of 32 channels⁵, the national and generalist Spanish television is the most cited, being TV3 the only autonomic channel from a total of 8 channels available in Catalonia. None of the local broadcasts was mentioned, despite an offer of 51 channels of this kind, while the only global chain cited more than once (twice in total) was HBO. Telecinco and Antena 3 are the most watched by the sample, followed by Cuatro, TVE, Sexta and TV3. Amongst the most cited channels there are two that are public: TVE, from a national ambit, and TV3, an autonomic channel from Catalonia. If we see the preferences for the industrial sector, Mediat, whose public is mostly youngsters and men (SEGARRA, 2018), appears in the first place, followed by Atresmedia Televisión.

Half of the sample usually follows the televisual entertainment programming. More women than men affirmed not to watch television with much frequency with this purpose, due to the lack of time (4) or to the lack of interest (2). Two interviewees mentioned that the reason for their lack of time was motherhood, despite both having also indicated that before their children were born they did not watch television a lot either. Another interlocutor explained that when she was younger, she dedicated more time to such media, especially watching soap-operas. Now she does not do it because when she has time, it does not coincide with the time that the contents she likes are broadcasted.

Amongst the men, three affirmed not to watch it for lack of time and two because television bores them. For one of them, television is a very old media, a device that is more useful for video games or watching videos shared from their mobile phone. Another interviewee affirmed that before being married he used to watch more television, especially movies at night.

Amidst those that present less interest in television programming, many of them explained that their lifestyle is the reason, such as responsibilities, hobbies and children. Moreover, two interviewees mentioned their preference for Netflix in place of the traditional

⁵ The data about the offer of channels are from the Bulletin of Information about Audiovisual in Catalunia of 2018, produced by the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia.

linear television programming. One of them also pointed out televisual advertising⁶ as the reason to prefer online video platforms.

One of the interviewees has a very critical point of view about television programming. She explains why in her opinion people, including children, follow what she considers "trash tv":

(...) it's because it's on the agenda, in any channel you have "trash tv". Then this is what the people consume, unless for the people that are very busy, because of their lifestyle (...) the majority consumes the same, but it's what is being broadcasted at this moment. Let's say we are very topical, what is available nowadays. We are also permeable and then this also reaches us and makes us victims of consumerism of what the media offer (E17M).

Amongst the women, 8 out of the interviewees watch television when they are with a person from the family: offspring, partner or parents. This is also a strategy to share the moment with them. Sometimes, the programming followed in these moments is less related to their personal preferences then to those of their family, which shows us that the televisual consumption of the sample can be also determined by the company and not only by individual interests.

In relation to the entertainment preferences, the majority affirms to watch Fiction (14) - movies and series are the most mentioned -, followed by Reality (6), Children (5) and Information (4). If we divide by sex, Fiction is still the preference of both, while Reality is an unanimity among adult women and has a highlight amongst the young men.

The program "Los Gypsy Kings"

Considering the wide penetration television keeps among the Romani audience and that the reality show is the second most followed entertainment genre, we start discussing the case of the program "Los Gypsy Kings". The reality show has been mentioned by 16 of the interviewees when they were asked about media and cultural products created about Roma. The program is described by its producer (La Competencia) as a humorous docureality, while Segarra (2018) qualifies it as a reality show. According to the author, Mediaset, the communication group responsible for broadcasting the program in La Cuatro, is the third most watched company by the sample and distinguishes itself in this genre.

Turning back to the relation that reality shows create between participants and the public, Segarra (2018, p. 45) highlights that in the case of "Los Gypsy Kings", two

⁶ According to the Bulletin of Information about Audiovisual in Catalunia of 2018, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive of European Union published in 2018 November made flexible the regulation of advertising in the linear television, allowing broadcasts put it until 20% of the broadcasting time between 6 a.m. and 0 a.m. Earlier the broadcasts had a maximum of 12 minutes per natural hour.

perspectives are combined. On one hand, "the treatment of the characters is empathetic and horizontal since it deals with 'general' issues with which the public can identify" and, on the other hand, it is "ironic and vertical - especially when the script points out the lack of culture and, even, the ignorance of the characters, sometimes presented as abyssal". While the first perspective attracts the public's attention, being Romani or not, the second contributes to the stigmatization of the Romani population. Therefore, it is not difficult to find opposing opinions about the program among our sample.

In many cases, the interviewees argue that the families portrayed there do not represent the reality of the majority of Romani in the country. However, identifying all the characters of the program as Roma, one presupposes that "all belong to a group pretty much homogeneous" (SEGARRA, 2018, p. 45). As E11M explains: "being on TV is like representing a little everybody. And, of course, they are smearing the image a lot because the Romani are not like that at all. Are there people like that? Yes, of course there are, but not all".

Despite the characters being presented as belonging to different economic groups, "all of them suffer from a deep lack of culture" and their cultural capital is presented as under the Spanish average (SEGARRA, 2018, p. 46). This contributes to the construction or reinforcement by the majority society of a distorted image of the Romani population.

(...) I hate this program because it isn't the reality of the Romani people, then this makes the non-Romani people believe in a reality that is completely inaccurate (...) For sure these programs want folklore so that the people watch. (...) I as a Romani woman feel indignant when I watch them (E18M).

(...) when I began studying, they said: but, if the only thing the Romani girls do is be married like Rebe de Plasencia, to purr at and be married like them of "Gypsy Kings". Or they asked me how the Roma make a living because in the program there is a couple that works only with markets, but somehow has money to make birthday parties as if they were weddings and to travel and to have luxuries as if they were millionaires. And the people ask how the Roma make a living and how much they earn from the market to have a life like they show in "Los Gypsy Kings". But it's not real. A person, some Roma that work at the market barely have what to eat and nothing else (E11M).

(...) this program makes me angry and I don't watch it. (...) Because they make a negative image of the Romani (...) I don't say they are bad people or anything else, but they bring only the humor side, even a not very intelligent kind, in fact (E1H).

(...) the bad side is that society keeps this image and believes this is the life of the Romani and that the Romani live like this. Then, I don't like it because of

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this, because they are giving a wrong image which the society is picking up and it's not like this (E4H).

Moreover, to two interviewees, programs like that can contribute to a change in perception about them by the neighbors, breaking what the Romani community has been constructing in the coexistence with the majority society:

To me it has happened with my neighbor, when these programs started, she said: ah, but do you also do this? And I said to her: goddamn, you know us all an entire lifetime, since 1975 you live here, you are neighbors. I mean, now you think we are like this. When we know a lot about each other. That is to say, I ate in your house, your son ate at mine, we grew up together, we celebrated St John party together and you think what you watch on TV, like the majority of people, is true. Then, sure, this changes a lot what we reached with the coexistence and a program breaks everything (E12M).

(...) then, I go down here to get a coffee and they tell me: hey, this that they do on tv, do you do as well? I don't spend I don't know how many thousands of euros in a wedding, first of all because I don't know how I can have this money (E6H).

Conversely, at the same time there is a reflection on how this program harms the representation of the Romani population, one also recognizes that in this case the principle of authenticity in the participants of the reality show is broken, putting in evidence its fictional feature.

(...) it's a reality show and they obey orders about what to do. They are like actors that do what they are told [...] I understand they do it because it's an opportunity to earn money or something else. More than the Romani that are the principals, I'll blame the producers that manipulate and take advantage of certain families to profit from them (E4H).

(...) the people know that they play a role, that there are orders, that they earn money for what they are doing and that everything is arranged (E12M).

(...) these people do it all for money, basically they do it for money, because it is very evident, they do incredibly [...] a whole Romani family plays the fool in front of a camera because it's being given to them so money. And they are harming not only themselves, but also me, directly, not indirectly, directly (E6H). One of the interviewees places the program at the same level of other reality shows, for instance, "Mujeres y hombres y viceversa" (Women and men and vice versa) or "Granjero busca esposa"⁷ (The Spanish version of Farmer Wants a Wife). Twice, in activities related to the Romani associationism during the fieldwork, this interviewee referring to "Los Gypsy Kings" asked why the Roma cannot have their own freaks, in the same way the majority society has theirs that join in other programs.

Her opinion dialogues with what Ross and Playdon (2001, p. XIV) explain when they say that "minority audiences do not want special favors in terms of portrayal but rather would like to see their many and diverse selves and their different lives represented with more balance". This is what E1H also presses for, when he says that "there are too many Roma in the world so they portray only this kind of people. Besides the media don't make a very good image of the Roma and if they make a program like this so it adds fuel to the fire and I don't like it". Another interviewee shares this reflection: "Society sometimes ignores a lot of what is the figure of a Roma, so if this figure was well defined and they knew what it is, I wouldn't mind if there was a reality show..." (E4H).

Some of the interviewees say they watch the program, despite explaining they do not feel represented by it. To them, it is one more entertainment program that amuses them:

(...) I don't watch it, but I have to say that in my house they watch (...) they say that to them is an entertainment and comical program, they watch it as a humor program and the public knows it [...] They say it makes them laugh as if we were watching, I don't know, "Los Morancos", thus they are watching that (E12M).

It's true that I don't usually watch it, I don't like it. One thing is, if I watch it, we put at home a bit and we watch it to laugh a bit. Sometimes one watches to laugh, but I don't like it, it doesn't amuse me (E2M).

It's true that if I say I don't watch it's a lie because you know how it is and you watch it and many times I even laugh, but then you stop and think stonily and you make yourself sick (E6H).

Yes, there are some things that I don't agree with, in some comments they make, the life they have, something, but yes, I usually watch it (...) Yes, yes, I laugh. (...) Well, the life that those from TV have we don't have. But many things, yes. Many opinions they have, yes. (...) Sometimes they laugh at us. Because they start talking in a way that all of us don't talk (...) And we aren't that way, the majority of us isn't that way... (E13H).

^{7 &}quot;Mujeres y Hombres y viceversa" is a date program that was launched in 2018, while "Granjero busca esposa" was launched in 2008 and is a reality show in which 10 farmers have to choose a wife after meeting and living together with women from the city.

Other interviewees that work in associations explained they watched the program at least once in order to construct their own opinion about it. It is important to highlight that, in each new season of the program, associations from all Spain diffused repudiation notes or, even, presented denunciations about the way the Roma are portrayed in the reality show. According to those notes, the program falls upon "an image that is a stereotype and a caricature of the Romani community", moreover, "it is a vertical, distant and authoritarian image whose aim is the production of economic benefits, without more ado"⁸. This position coincides, on one hand, with the perception of part of the sample at the same time it influences their opinion, since there is a close contact with different organizations and associations of the country, especially through social media.

Conclusions

Despite the stereotyped representation of the Romani population by the Spanish media, we saw that there is a significant consumption of the televisual offer, which still has a big penetration in the Romani audience, although smaller among the most youngsters, with special attention to the private and generalist Spanish channels such as Telecinco, Antena 3 and La Cuatro. The entertainment programs attract less interest than the news, but even so reach that half of the sample that prefers fiction contents and reality shows.

Related to the program "Los Gypsy Kings", we saw that there is, amongst the interviewees, a critical position as for the way their people are reduced to the representation of some families. On the other hand, a part of the sample also admits that they have fun with the program, despite not feeling represented by it. Both of these perspectives cross-refer to other studies about racialized minority audiences, which do not recognize themselves in the only identity that is offered to them in the media and therefore reject such representations "with both humour and anger" (ROSS; PLAYDON, 2001, p. XVI-XVII). Furthermore, the fact that reality shows are among the favorite programs of the sample makes us believe that there is a familiarity with its format and language, which influences the way the interviewees evaluated the program "Los Gypsy Kings".

Referring to the relation of the representation of "Los Gypsy Kings" with the way the contents in the press represent them, there is the coincidence of the folkloric approach of Romani families and the homogeneity in which the Romani populations are portrayed since the collectivization. The sample noticed in their reflections the ridicule and vulgarization pointed out by Oleaque (2014) when they talk about humor of low intelligence, related to a lack of culture, which is assigned to the characters of the reality show. This lack of culture reinforces the stereotype created by the press in which the social conditions of the Romani population are seen as a consequence of their ethnic traits. Even if a direct relation between Roma and conflict does not appear in "Los Gypsy Kings",

⁸ Articles and communications produced by Romani organizations about the program. Available in: https://www.gitanos.org/ actualidad/dossieres/115502.html.es. Access in: 4 mar. 2019.

it is true that, according to one of the interviewees, the origin of the money of one of the families in the program was challenged.

When Romani organizations, associations and activists denounce "Los Gypsy Kings", they are questioning more than a televisual genre. They question the fact that this collective does not have the right of a representation that shows other Romani identities, which are multiple and diverse, in the media of the country. As we have already discussed, the media have more power to diffuse stereotypes due to its professionality in the production of its messages (WILLEM, 2010). Therefore, as Segarra (2018, p. 47) points out, the script followed by the characters in "Los Gypsy Kings" has a power of legitimation which is different from the news since "these broadcasts produce reality as well, especially those related to social relations between different 'races' or 'cultures'...".

In the same way we cannot speak about the Spanish history without talking about its Romani population, we cannot make a serious debate about the Spanish television without questioning its contents related to the presence or absence of representations of the oldest ethnic minority of the country and how this contributes to the "ordinary racism" (SEGARRA, 2018) experienced by such population.

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