



Crime and Its Repercussions in Business and Social Environment: A Narrative Analysis

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how crime affects social cohesion, business performance, and economic stability by analyzing how media narratives construct and interconnect these dimensions. The research seeks to explain how criminality generates structural consequences that undermine community trust, influence organizational decision-making, and contribute to macroeconomic fragility. A qualitative design integrating narrative configuration and semantic content analysis was applied to thirteen journalistic narratives using ATLAS.ti. A mixed coding procedure combined deductive theoretical categories—crime, society, business, and economy—with inductive emergent codes. Findings reveal a sequential pattern: in the social sphere, crime is associated with insecurity and the erosion of community trust; in the business sphere, it relates to increased operational costs, extortion, and constrained investment; and in the economic sphere, it connects to illicit capital flows and GDP contraction. Co-occurrence matrices and a Sankey diagram visualize how discourse flows evolve from criminal events to social distrust and economic vulnerability. The study provides a comprehensive narrative-semantic model explaining the progression from social vulnerability to business disruption and economic consequences. It offers theoretical and policy insights to strengthen community resilience and business sustainability and concludes with practical implications, methodological limitations, and directions for future research on the societal and economic repercussions of crime.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Crimen
Negocios
Sociedad
Economía
Narrativas mediáticas

RESUMEN

Este estudio explora cómo el crimen afecta la cohesión social, el desempeño empresarial y la estabilidad económica mediante el análisis de cómo las narrativas mediáticas construyen e interconectan estas dimensiones. La investigación busca explicar cómo la criminalidad genera consecuencias estructurales que socavan la confianza comunitaria, influyen en la toma de decisiones organizacionales y contribuyen a la fragilidad macroeconómica. Se aplicó un diseño cualitativo que integra configuración narrativa y análisis de contenido semántico a trece narrativas periodísticas procesadas con ATLAS.ti. La codificación combinó categorías teóricas deductivas —crimen, sociedad, negocios y economía— con códigos emergentes inductivos obtenidos de los datos. Los hallazgos muestran un patrón secuencial: en el ámbito social, el crimen se asocia con inseguridad y erosión de la confianza comunitaria; en el ámbito empresarial, con mayores costos operativos, extorsión y restricciones de inversión; y en el ámbito económico, con flujos ilícitos de capital y contracción del PIB. Las matrices de coocurrencia y un diagrama de Sankey visualizan cómo los flujos discursivos evolucionan desde los eventos criminales hacia la desconfianza social y la vulnerabilidad económica. El estudio aporta un modelo narrativo-semántico integral que explica la progresión desde la vulnerabilidad social hasta la disruptión empresarial y las consecuencias económicas. Asimismo, ofrece implicaciones teóricas y de política pública para fortalecer la resiliencia comunitaria y la sostenibilidad empresarial, y concluye con consideraciones prácticas, limitaciones metodológicas y futuras líneas de investigación sobre las repercusiones sociales y económicas del crimen.

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1. Introduction

Crime encompasses a comprehensive legal (Coyle, 2018; Canter & Youngs, 2016), social (Zembroski, 2011; Innes, 2004), cultural (Presdee, 2004; Karstedt, 2001), economic (Fadaei-Tehrani & Green, 2002; McCollister et al., 2010), and psychological framework (Wickramasekera et al., 2015; Pain, 2000). Analyzing crime within business and social environments enables a deeper understanding of the complex interactions that shape their impact. Research indicates persistent limitations in analyzing the specific dynamics between crime and business structures, particularly in local and sectoral contexts (Krasniqi et al., 2022), identifying gaps in the exploration of tailored preventive measures based on location and social characteristics (Ojo et al., 2021). Systematic research must examine the relationship between crime, economy, and social well-being (Almeida & Montes, 2020; Cincimino et al., 2024).

Crime and violence pose significant obstacles to development in Latin America and the Caribbean (Stubbert et al., 2015), affecting individuals, businesses, and governments, with direct costs reaching 3.4% of the region's GDP (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2024). This issue forms a vicious cycle with low economic growth, hindering investment, reducing tourism, and accelerating emigration (International Monetary Fund, 2024). Ecuador serves as a case study for analyzing the impact of crime on business and society due to its unique context of rising insecurity and economic transformations (Banco Mundial, 2024). The country has been identified as an epicenter of violence linked to criminal groups controlling ports, leading to a significant deterioration in urban governance (Natarajan et al., 2015) and state-community relations (Naciones Unidas Ecuador, 2023). The failure of "iron-fist" strategies has exacerbated perceptions of state weakness and worsening insecurity in strategic areas (Mantilla et al., 2023), aggravated by the lack of government strategies for economic recovery, in consequence, has limited business growth and increased the vulnerability of SMEs to organized crime (Ontaneda Jiménez et al., 2024).

Media narratives about crime inform and shape moral frameworks that influence risk perception and community dynamics, ultimately affecting businesses within these social structures (Van Krieken, 2022). Interpreting crime through subjective perceptions amplified by the media allows for an understanding of how social values shape organizational and societal responses to insecurity (Manning & Fleming, 2017). From a criminological perspective, narratives link crime to broader cultural and social patterns. Crime-related accounts function as discursive tools influencing risk perception and organizational strategies in response to insecurity (Dutta-Flanders, 2023).

Analyzing crime as a cultural and social phenomenon enables a deeper understanding of its impact on business vulnerability and community resilience. Narrative analysis helps identify patterns in how communities and businesses experience crime, aiding in the design of more effective intervention strategies (Sandberg, 2022). Subjectivity becomes an analytical tool for exploring the complex interactions between value systems, community resilience, and business vulnerability (Van Krieken, 2022).

This research aims to answer the following question: what impacts on social, business, and economic environments are identified in media reports of crime in Ecuador? Its objective is to explore these repercussions through the analysis of media narratives that reveal how the community perceives insecurity, how businesses adapt their risk management strategies in response to those perceptions, and how such accounts suggest potential adverse effects at the macroeconomic level.

Theoretical Framework

In the economic sphere, crime has been conceptualized as a rational action based on a cost-benefit analysis, where criminal decisions are grounded in an evaluation of the available legal and illegal opportunities, associating variables such as poverty and gross domestic product with crime rates (Fadaei-Tehrani & Green, 2002). Crime costs include tangible losses, such as property damage, and intangible costs, including reduced productivity and quality of life (McCollister et al., 2010). Violent crimes generate significantly higher costs due to their prolonged psychological and social impacts, such as violence against individuals, homicide, and robbery (Wickramasekera et al.,

2015), causing fear of crime to alter social dynamics, fostering isolation (Xie et al., 2024), and weakening community networks (Pain, 2000), introducing the dichotomy between coercion and support. While coercion acts as a factor that perpetuates criminality, social support emerges as a central element for its prevention (Colvin et al., 2002).

Crime negatively impacts entrepreneurship by generating direct costs, such as additional security expenses, and indirect costs, such as higher insurance premiums and the loss of human capital due to migration to safer areas, thereby affecting talent availability (Schulte & Hallstedt, 2018). Crime reduces trust, hampers community cooperation, decreases the likelihood of self-employment and new business creation, and hinders the success of existing ventures (Awaworyi Churchill et al., 2023). A study in Rio de Janeiro showed that crimes such as cargo theft and extortion negatively impact business confidence, discouraging investment, expansion, and overall competitiveness in the economic environment (Almeida & Montes, 2020).

Social capital mitigates the effects of crime on community participation, but its impact varies depending on the specific dimensions within each community (Roh & Lee, 2013). Trust and reciprocity reduce victimization and strengthen social cohesion (Takagi et al., 2012). However, crime erodes these elements, affecting entrepreneurship by fostering distrust and limiting cooperation (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003), ultimately restricting business sustainability by making collaboration and resource access more difficult (Kwon et al., 2013). Organized crime diverts public resources into corrupt networks, reducing efficiency in subsidy allocation (Barone & Narciso, 2015), where only the legal prosecution of businesses linked to criminal networks could enhance competitiveness and strengthen economic resilience (Calamunci & Drago, 2020).

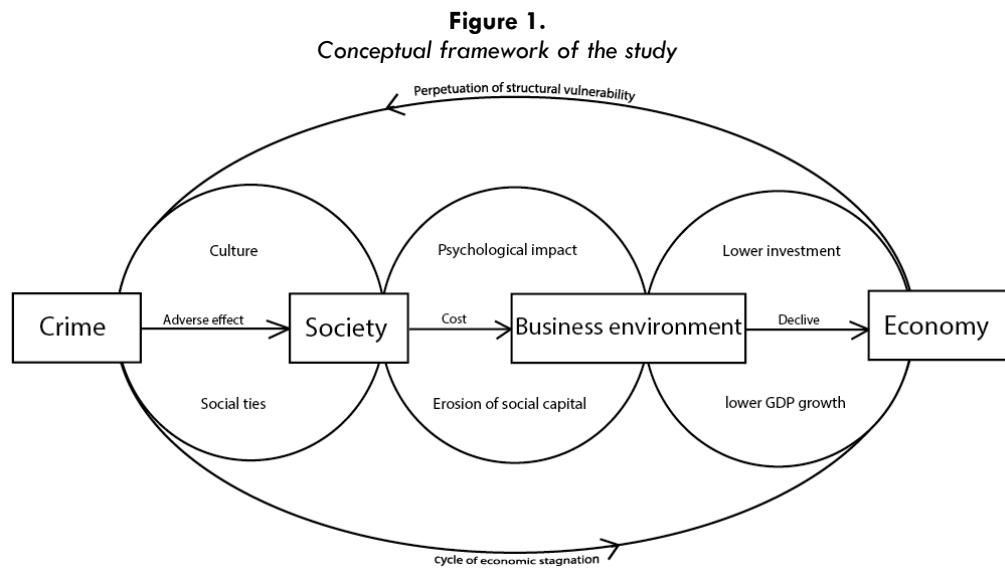
Social insecurity harms community relationships and foreign investment, affecting organizational sustainability (Manning & Fleming, 2017; Tur-Porcar & otros, 2018). The lack of social capital increases business vulnerability, hindering access to information and market opportunities (Stam et al., 2014; Matsukawa & Tatsuki, 2018). In environments lacking collective strategies against insecurity, crime deepens social isolation and limits economic development (Sargeant et al., 2017). Additionally, insecurity reduces community participation, affecting access to support networks and weakening the local economy (Lee & Cho, 2018), thereby hindering entrepreneurship (Nungsari et al., 2023).

Economic insecurity discourages innovation and investment, both key factors for long-term development (Schneider & Clauss, 2020). Risk management practices that integrate sustainability can partially mitigate the adverse effects of crime (Durst & Zięba, 2020). However, its uncertainty complicates strategic planning and limits innovation, ultimately affecting long-term sustainability (Rossignoli & Lionzo, 2018). Resilience strategies, such as security training and collaborative networks, can be effective but require multisectoral coordination (Colvin et al., 2002). Without such coordination, fear of crime produces profound psychological effects on entrepreneurs and employees, impacting their quality of life and decision-making (Pain, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study begins with an understanding of crime as a multidimensional phenomenon that, beyond the mere transgression of legal norms (Coyle, 2018; Canter & Youngs, 2016), incorporates elements of legitimacy and social harm (Anrango Narváez et al., 2023; Bučar Ručman, 2019) as well as cultural practices that shape its definition and regulation (Presdee, 2004; Karstedt, 2001). Such crime directly impacts the social fabric, generating increased fear and community isolation, which translate into significant psychological effects (Wickramasekera et al., 2015; Pain, 2000; Schulte & Hallstedt, 2018; Awaworyi Churchill et al., 2023; Almeida & Montes, 2020) and a progressive erosion of social capital, manifested in the loss of trust and reciprocity among individuals (Colvin et al., 2002; Roh & Lee, 2013). In turn, these social and business obstacles result in declines in both domestic and foreign investment and in lower GDP growth, consolidating a cycle of economic stagnation and the perpetuation of

structural vulnerability (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2024; Fondo Monetario Internacional, 2024), illustrated in Figure 1.



2. Metodología

Data Collection

This study examined the repercussions of crime on Ecuador's business and social environments through a qualitative analysis of thirteen narratives extracted from news articles published by national digital newspapers. The narratives were selected according to strict inclusion criteria that ensured their thematic relevance, narrative richness, and direct alignment with the study variables. To compile the corpus, a systematic search was conducted across digital media using key terms such as "crime," "business," "society," and "economy," in both search engines and news portals. News published in 2024 was prioritized for its topicality and relevance, with some news from 2023 also included to offer thematic depth.

Although qualitative research often relies on the criterion of theoretical saturation to justify sample size (Saunders et al., 2017), it was recognized that the units of analysis in this case were journalistic reports. Therefore, the study adopted as its methodological framework media content analysis approaches such as those by Riffe, Lacy, and Drager (1996) and Tamul and Martínez-Carrillo (2018), which demonstrated that a strategically chosen sample of ten to fourteen units could representatively capture the most salient themes and patterns in press narratives. This strategy rested on the principles of code saturation and meaning saturation, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of the qualitative analysis (Hennink et al., 2017). Furthermore, in line with Boddy's (2016) position, the use of small samples was justified when they enabled an intensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Based on these principles, a limit of 13 narratives was set to ensure comprehensive coverage of the phenomenon's unique patterns and dimensions. The narratives were drawn from sources legally constituted according to the Superintendencia de Compañías, Valores y Seguros of Ecuador (2025) —active in the mercantile registry—and recognized in the Public Media Registry (RPM) of CORDICOM (Consejo de Regulación y Desarrollo de la Información y Comunicación, 2025). Sources without a clear connection to the dynamics between crime and the business and social environment were excluded (Boddy, 2016). Since the sources were publicly available digital records, anonymizing the data was deemed unnecessary, ensuring transparency and proper contextualization of the study. The list of the 13 analyzed narratives was presented in Table 1, where they were coded to indicate which narrative was referenced in the argumentation of the study.

Table 1.
Narratives of the Study on Crime, Business Environment, and Society in Ecuador.

#	Source Type	Code	News Title / Narrative
1	Online Newspaper	H3	<i>La Hora.</i> (2024c). Losses due to crime and companies' security expenses are estimated at around 7% of annual sales.
2	Online Newspaper	E1	<i>Expreso.</i> (2024). IMF: Organized crime costs Ecuador dearly due to its direct economic impact.
3	Online Newspaper	H2	<i>La Hora.</i> (2024b) Rising insecurity mainly affects the economy and the business environment.
4	Online Newspaper	C1	<i>El Comercio.</i> (2020). Insecurity and its cost for businesses.
5	Online Newspaper	H4	<i>La Hora.</i> (2022). An increase in the creation of shell companies is detected in Ecuador.
6	Online Newspaper	EP2	<i>El País.</i> (2024b). Guayaquil plunges into darkness, suffocating commerce.
7	Online Newspaper	H1	<i>La Hora.</i> (2024a). The Prosecutor's Office reveals the companies Ecuadorian drug traffickers use for money laundering, ranging from construction firms to beauty salons.
8	Online Newspaper	C2	<i>El Comercio.</i> (2024a). IDB approves a loan to Ecuador to combat crime.
9	Online Newspaper	C3	<i>El Comercio.</i> (2024b). The crime of extortion, a plague affecting Ecuadorians—what happened in 2024?
10	Online Newspaper	G1	<i>Revista Gestión.</i> (2024a). How criminal economies operate and impact Ecuador.
11	Online Newspaper	G2	<i>Revista Gestión.</i> (2024b). The security crisis has not gone away and is already hitting the economy.
12	Online Newspaper	EP1	<i>El País.</i> (2024a). Organized crime takes root in Quito.
13	Online Newspaper	P1	<i>Primicias.</i> (2024). Economic challenges in the face of the security crisis.

Data Processing

This study employed a qualitative approach to analyze the narratives. The computer-assisted data analysis tool ATLAS.ti was used to maximize the visualization of relevant terms and their context within the data (Gibbs, 2007), enhancing efficiency, systematization, and depth in data processing and analysis. This approach enabled a more rigorous and organized handling of information (Woods et al., 2016), optimizing the analysis and expanding interpretative depth, making it possible to identify complex patterns in the narrative data (Hwang, 2008).

A mixed coding strategy was applied, combining a deductive approach based on preexisting theoretical frameworks with an inductive approach. This strategy allowed for identifying emerging codes directly from the data in a way that was both structured and adaptable to new dimensions of meaning that arose during the coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process proved particularly relevant in narrative studies, where discourse complexities required capturing predefined categories alongside emerging dynamics (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Hennink, Kaiser & Marconi, 2017).

Narrative Analysis

The data were analyzed through narrative configuration, which explored how the stories contained in the news were discursively structured to represent the impact of crime. This analysis allowed for the examination of how actors, events, and consequences were sequenced and framed within each narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995). The study adopted a pragmatic-constructivist approach, in which the narratives were integrated into an interpretive framework that considered socially constructed

realities and their practical implications for the business environment. According to Seal and Mattimoe (2016), this approach emphasized the evaluation of the practical validity of the narratives and their usefulness in business contexts. The analysis was conducted in an iterative and reflexive manner, acknowledging the researcher's role in interpretation, in line with the importance of reflexivity and methodological rigor in software-assisted qualitative research (Woods et al., 2016).

Semantic Analysis

The semantic analysis followed the approach proposed by Barton and Lazarsfeld (1961), which focused on identifying patterns of meaning within the textual content. In the first phase, relevant semantic relationships were identified to understand how media discourses represented the impact of crime in business and social contexts (Paulus et al., 2015; Miles et al., 2019).

In the second phase, a mixed coding strategy (deductive and inductive) was applied. Deductive coding was based on previously established theoretical frameworks, selected for their relevance in analyzing the impact of crime on society, the business environment, and the economy. These included: the multidimensional approach to crime as a structural and socially harmful phenomenon (Coyle, 2018; Bučar Ručman, 2019), the theory of social capital and its erosion in contexts of insecurity (Colvin et al., 2002; Roh & Lee, 2013), and economic models that analyze crime as an obstacle to entrepreneurship and investment (McCollister et al., 2010; Almeida & Montes, 2020; Awaworyi Churchill et al., 2023). These frameworks allowed for the definition of the initial coding categories: (1) crime and social environment, (2) perception of insecurity and psychological impact, (3) effects on trust and social cohesion, and (4) economic and business impact. This structure made it possible to organize the semantic content around key analytical dimensions. Subsequently, inductive coding was carried out to capture emerging themes from the narratives, allowing interpretive flexibility in identifying patterns not anticipated in the theoretical framework (Friese, 2020). The combination of both approaches strengthened the analytical coherence of the study and supported a comprehensive interpretation of media discourses on crime.

In the third phase, a comparative analysis was conducted in ATLAS.ti using cross-coding and co-occurrence matrices, which enabled the establishment of connections between recurrent themes and emerging subthemes (Kalpokaitė & Radivojević, 2020). To facilitate the visualization of these connections, a Sankey diagram was produced that consolidated all co-occurrences into a single graphic: the thickness of each flow reflected the strength of the association (without implying causality or statistical significance) and highlighted the densest nodes, guiding the qualitative analysis toward the core thematic axes that depicted the transition from manifestations of crime to their social, business, and economic repercussions; this strategy was grounded in the prioritization of key elements in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fàbregues et al., 2021). Finally, the identified semantic patterns were linked to theoretical frameworks (Taylor et al., 2015) on the impact of crime on the economy and society, providing valuable insights for the design of public policies and business strategies.

Narrative and semantic analysis were shown to be complementary, as they combined the structural and contextual exploration of narratives with the analysis of emerging meaning patterns. While narrative analysis focused on how stories were constructed and presented, allowing for examination of the connections between social, business, and criminal experiences within a pragmatic constructivist framework, semantic analysis delved into the explicit and implicit meanings of the narratives, identifying key themes such as perceptions of insecurity and community resilience.

This integration constituted a coherent and systematic methodological framework that combined narrative configuration and semantic mapping, thereby linking qualitative meaning structures with theoretical and empirical interpretation.

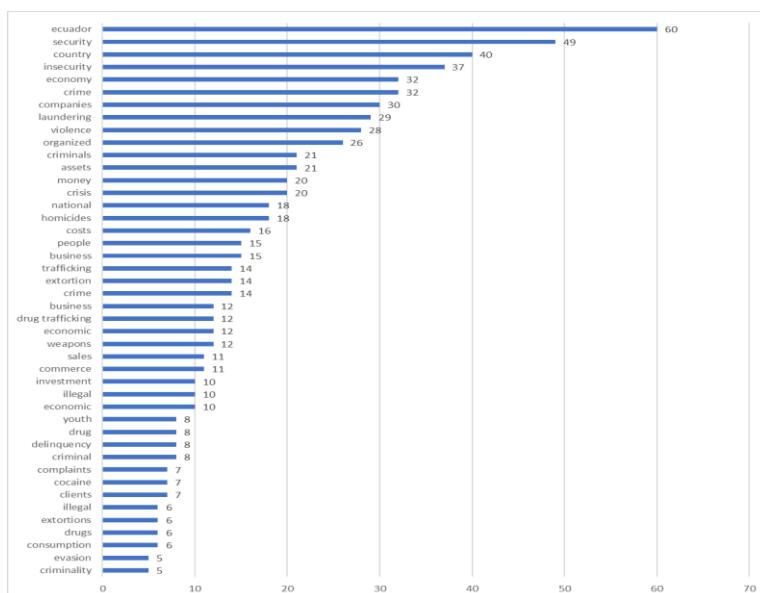
3. Resultados

Exploratory Analysis

The exploration analysis, corresponding to the initial stage of the semantic procedure, aimed to identify salient terms and narrative patterns before the integration of codes and categories. Conducted in ATLAS.ti through frequency counts and word cloud visualizations (Figures 2), identified key patterns linking the impact of crime to Ecuador's business environment. The visualization highlighted recurrent terms such as "Ecuador," "enterprises," "security," "crime," and "economy," reflecting their persistence in the narrative. Figure 2 displays the frequencies of the most mentioned terms: "Ecuador" (60), "security" (49), "country" (40), "insecurity" (37), "economy" (32), "crime" (32), "enterprises" (30), and "violence" (28).

La sección de resultados organiza y presenta los datos obtenidos de manera sistemática, utilizando tablas, figuras y análisis estadísticos para ilustrar los hallazgos principales. Se enfoca en mostrar los resultados objetivamente, evitando interpretaciones o conclusiones prematuras. Además, resalta cómo estos hallazgos se alinean o difieren de las expectativas basadas en los objetivos o hipótesis planteadas.

Figure 2.
Word frequency of the study



Analysis of Emerging Codes

The study employed ATLAS.ti to organize and systematize the narrative data through a three-stage coding process. First, open coding was conducted based on detailed readings of the 13 reports, yielding an initial set of 1,457 descriptive codes. These codes were then grouped and refined using ATLAS.ti code-management tool, applying semantic similarity and frequency criteria. Finally, axial coding integrated a deductive approach, grounded in the conceptual framework's categories—"Crime" (norm violation and social harm), "Society" (fear, isolation, and erosion of social capital), "Business Environment" (security costs and investment barriers), and "Economy" (investment decline and GDP growth)—and an inductive approach, which incorporated emergent codes directly arising from the narratives. This procedure defined four delineated analytical categories: "Crime" (Table 2), "Society" (Table 3), "Business Environment" (Table 4), and "Economy" (Table 5). Code convergence within each category was verified using ATLAS.ti co-occurrence function, ensuring that each group represented a coherent thematic core. Thanks to this

methodology, the resulting categories faithfully reflect both the predefined theoretical frameworks, and the specific discursive patterns identified in the analysis.

Table 2.
Narratives of the Study on Crime, Business Environment, and Society in Ecuador.

Category	Codes	Rooting
Crime	Expansion and diversification of the corruption network	12
	Increase in crime	26
	Corruption	3
	Delinquency	8
	Extortion	10
	Homicides	12
	Drug trafficking and money laundering through companies	13
	Robbery	4
Violence		15

Table 3.
Emerging Narrative Codes in the Business Environment Category.

Code Group	Codes	Rooting
	Direct Costs of Crime	10
Increase in operating costs	Increase in costs of logistical operations	5
	Investment in technological security	2
	Lower purchasing power of people	7
	Reduction in customer consumption	5
Consumer behavior	Changes in customer service hours	3
	Deficient customer service	3
	Investment in private insurance	6
	Expenses on private security	2
Contingencies for sustainability	Security as a sustainability strategy	2
	Business migration to safe areas	1
	Threats of drug trafficking and negative impact on businesses	17
	Increase in businesses linked to organized crime	13
Business disincentive	Distrust in specific economic sectors	12
	Loss of sales	12
	Difficulty in doing business	9
	Decrease in productivity	4
Labor market	Lack of employment	6
	Job loss	5
	Migration of human capital due to insecurity	4
	Difficulties in keeping businesses open	11
Entrepreneurial intention and self-employment	Risk of owning a business	7
	Lack of motivation in young entrepreneurs	4
	Reduction in entrepreneurial intention	4
	Negative impact on micro and small businesses	16
Insecurity for investment	Decline of commercial activity	14
	Insecurity discourages investment	10
	Decrease in national investment	7

Limitation in business strategy	Decrease in foreign investment	3
	Limited strategic planning	4
	Restricted business expansion	1

Table 4.
Economy Category and Its Emerging Narrative Codes.

Category	Codes	Rooting
Economy	Lack of resources in the fight against money laundering	19
	Lower revenues for businesses	13
	Illicit money	12
	Reduction in economic activity	12
	Economic losses and impact on GDP	11
	Lower revenue for the state	7
	Negative economic outlook	6
	Increase in public spending	4
	Growth of shell companies	3

Table 5.
Social Environment Category and Its Emerging Narrative Codes.

Category	Codes	Rooting
Social Environment	Increase in insecurity and its effect on the community	34
	Erosion of community trust	16
	Reduction in quality of life	16
	Organized crime	15
	Increase in reports of crime and extortion	12
	Fragmentation of support networks	8
	Regional inequalities	6
	The vulnerability of children and youth without education	5
	Social inequalities	3
	Poverty	2
	Silence about extortions	1

Analysis of Narrative Co-occurrences

Co-occurrence coefficients (Jaccard) were calculated in ATLAS.ti for the seven principal codes across the “Crime,” “Society,” “Business Environment,” and “Economy” categories, with minor associations defined as ≥ 0.10 and more pronounced associations highlighted at ≥ 0.20 . In the Crime–Society domain (Table 6), “Increase in crime” co-occurred with “Increase in community insecurity” 19 times (coef. 0.46) and with “Extortion” 10 times (coef. 0.28), whereas “Organized crime” co-occurred 10 times with “Increase in crime” (coef. 0.32) and 5 times with “Violence” (coef. 0.20). In the Crime–Business Environment domain (Table 6), “Drug trafficking threats” showed moderate co-occurrences with “Expansion of corruption networks” (coef. 0.32) and “Increase in crime” (coef. 0.26), and “Firms linked to organized crime” co-occurred eight times with “Expansion of corruption” (coef. 0.47). In the Crime–Economy domain (Table 6), “Illicit money” co-occurred six times with “Drug trafficking and money laundering” (coef. 0.32), and “Lack of resources to combat money laundering” co-occurred five times with “Drug trafficking” (coef. 0.19), while “Economic losses and impact on GDP” was associated with “Increase in crime” (coef. 0.09) and “Homicides” (coef. 0.11).

The integrated Sankey diagram (Figure 3) displays these links as flows whose thickness is proportional to the Jaccard coefficient, without implying causality. Figure 3 provides an integrative visualization of the narrative co-occurrences among the social, business, and economic domains. Each node represents a thematic code, while the thickness of the connecting flows reflects the strength of their association. At the social level, the most intense flows originate from "Increase in crime," "Extortion," and "Violence," converging in "Increase in insecurity and its effect on the community." This concentration shows that public narratives frequently associate criminal acts with a broader perception of social vulnerability and fear. From this point, the flows toward "Erosion of community trust" and "Fragmentation of support networks" reveal that insecurity is also connected to weakened social cohesion. In the business sphere, the most significant links connect "Businesses linked to organized crime" with "Expansion of the corruption network," and subsequently with "Difficulties in keeping businesses open," highlighting how criminal infiltration is perceived as a constraint on entrepreneurial stability. In the economic dimension, the dominant association between "Illicit money" and "Drug trafficking and money laundering" underscores how financial crime narratives revolve around asset legalization and macroeconomic repercussions. Overall, Figure 3 synthesizes these interconnections, illustrating how insecurity discourses interweave social erosion, corruption, and economic fragility within the Ecuadorian context.

Figure 3.
Sankey diagram showing principal narrative associations among study codes

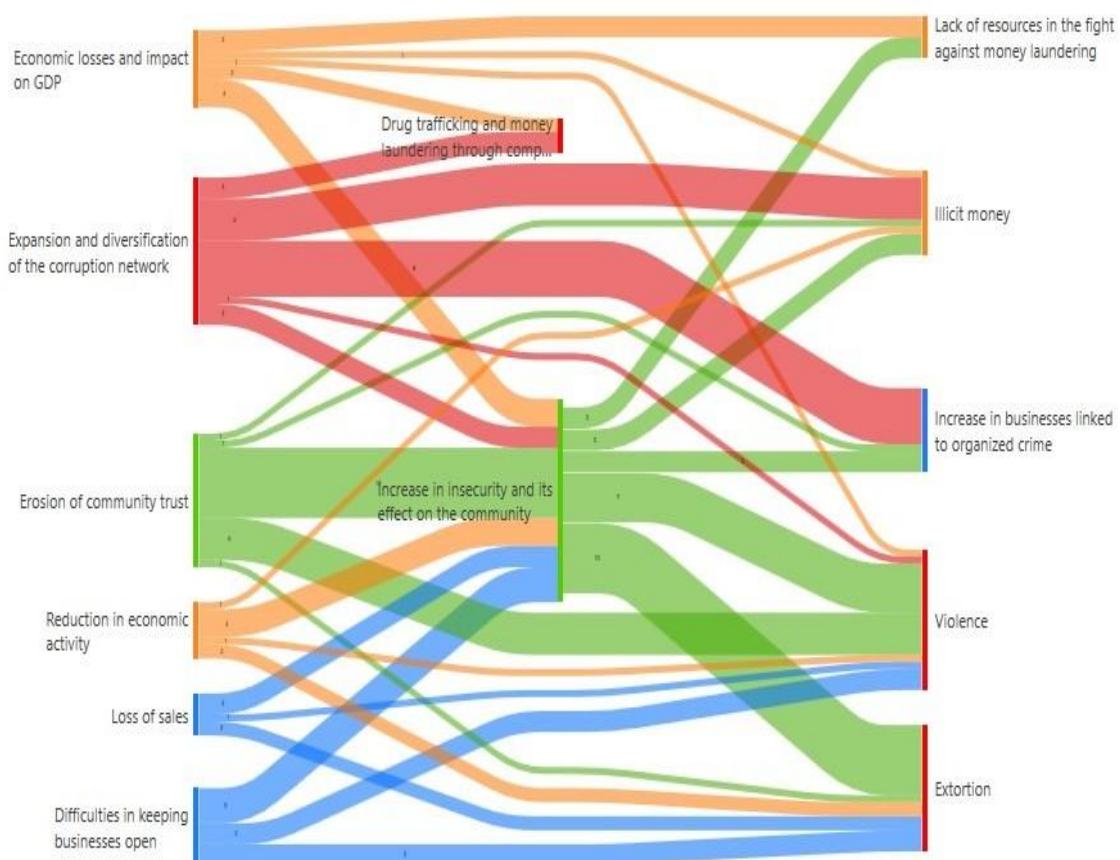


Table 6.
Summary of Main Narrative Co-occurrences

Domain	Code 1 (Source)	Code 2 (Associated)	Frequency (n)	Jaccard Coefficient	Interpretive meaning
Social (Crime → Society)	Increase in crime	Increase in community insecurity	19	0.46	Core linkage between rising crime and perceived insecurity
	Extortion	Increase in community insecurity	10	0.28	Extortion reinforces community fear and vulnerability
	Violence	Erosion of community trust	6	0.24	Violence narratives linked to weakened social cohesion
	Homicides	Fragmentation of support networks	3	0.20	Social disintegration through violent crime
Business (Society → Business)	Businesses linked to organized crime	Expansion of the corruption network	8	0.47	Illicit infiltration in private-sector governance
	Increase in crime	Difficulties in keeping businesses open	3	0.26	Crime perceived as barrier to entrepreneurship
	Drug trafficking and money laundering	Direct crime costs	6	0.32	Illicit activities associated with higher operational costs
	Increase in operating costs	Loss of sales	4	0.15–0.17	Economic adaptation to insecurity through reduced activity
Economic (Business → Economy)	Illicit money	Drug trafficking and money laundering	6	0.32	Financial crime and asset legalization
	Illicit money	Economic losses and GDP impact	3	0.33	Crime-related finances linked to macroeconomic contraction
	Drug trafficking and money laundering	Economic losses and GDP impact	2	0.32	Reinforcement of economic fragility through organized crime

Narrative Analysis

The narrative analysis constituted the first interpretive stage, focusing on the structural organization and meaning of events within each story. This was followed by semantic analysis, which systematically identified co-occurrences and patterns of meaning across narratives. Together, these sequential stages formed an integrated analytical framework, allowing the structural representation of discourse (narrative level) to relate to the underlying conceptual relationships (semantic level).

Social perception effect

Media narratives depicted crime as linked to the breakdown of community cohesion and increased vulnerability. Several reports noted that the homicide rate—estimated at 40–42 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2023—was associated with the entrenchment of criminal economies in both urban and rural areas (Revista Gestión, 2024b). They also indicated that 61.2% of households were unable to afford the basic basket, and 24.1% of youths neither studying nor working appeared to be related to rising insecurity and social isolation, especially in provinces such as Esmeraldas

(Primicias, 2024). These accounts identified recurring “signal crimes” connected to symbolic violence among gangs and criminal groups, suggesting erosion of social capital (La Hora, 2024c).

Business perception effect

Journalistic reports described how the infiltration of organized crime correlated with adjustments in business practices. Extortion and narcotics-related theft were reported to co-occur with increased private security contracting, higher insurance premiums, and operational adaptations (shortened hours, relocations to safer areas) (La Hora, 2024b, 2024c). One narrative noted that, even before the January 2024 attacks, “insecurity” had already been cited as the predominant risk for new business ventures (La Hora, 2024b). These stories constructed a narrative trajectory in which perceived threats appeared to be related to more conservative investment decisions and the fragmentation of business networks.

Macroeconomic perception effect

Economic articles estimated that losses from crime and security measures accounted for approximately 7 % of annual sales, according to an IMF report cited in La Hora (2024c). Likewise, press studies suggested that a one-point increase in the homicide rate might correspond to a decline of up to 0.5% in economic activity (Expreso, 2024). Business testimonials and press data linked reduced investment and consumer/investor caution to an economic climate of uncertainty, in which capital flows appeared to withdraw, and demand recovery was described as slower (El Comercio, 2020).

Semantic Co-occurrence Network

Figure 4 presents the resulting semantic network of narrative co-occurrences, grouping connections as follows: the “Crime” node links to “Social Environment,” which in turn connects to “Business Environment” and finally to “Economy.” This sequence of links suggests a sequential negative influence.

The network maps the narrative progression from criminal manifestations to their social, business, and economic repercussions. First, “Crime” connects most strongly with “Increased Insecurity and Its Community Effect,” which itself co-occurs with “Erosion of Community Trust,” “Fragmentation of Support Networks,” and “Social Inequalities” (e.g., “Violence”—“Erosion of Community Trust,” Jaccard = 0.24; “Extortion”—“Increased Insecurity,” Jaccard = 0.50). These qualitative associations suggest that narratives addressing criminality tend to emphasize its link to weakened social capital.

Next, “Increased Insecurity and Its Community Effect” flows into the “Business Environment” node, where codes such as “Difficulties in Maintaining Open Businesses,” “Increased Operating Costs,” and “Loss of Sales” show moderate co-occurrence (Jaccard coefficients between 0.13 and 0.26). For example, “Increased Criminality”—“Difficulties in Maintaining Open Businesses” (0.26) and “Narcotics and Money Laundering”—“Direct Crime Costs” (0.32) indicate that narratives associating insecurity with illicit activities also reference operational adaptations and higher security expenditures.

Finally, the “Business Environment” node projects to “Economy,” aggregating flows from “Increased Operating Costs” and “Direct Crime Costs” toward “Economic Losses and GDP Impact” and “Negative Economic Outlook” (Jaccard = 0.32–0.33). Likewise, “Illicit Money” emerges as a recurring factor in discussions of “Economic Losses and GDP Impact” (0.32). This set of connections suggests that reports describing business effects attributed to crime often extend into macroeconomic considerations of asset legitimization and economic contraction.

Overall, Figure 4 outlines a discursive pathway in which criminal representations—from crime and violence to corruption and narcotics—suggest linkages to declining social trust and business adaptations, pointing toward perceived negative economic repercussions.

Figure 4.
Semantic network “crime and its repercussions in business, social and economic environment”



4. Discussion

This research identified three interrelated discursive phases in the analyzed press reports. In the first phase, concerning the social perception of insecurity: (a) open coding and word clouds (Figure 2) placed terms such as insecurity ($n = 37$), violence ($n = 28$), and crime ($n = 32$) among the most recurrent, suggesting sustained media concern about citizen vulnerability; (b) within the “Social Environment” category (Table 5), “Increase in insecurity and its effect on the community” showed the highest frequency ($n = 34$) and strong co-occurrences with “Increase in crime” (coef. 0.46) and “Extortion” (coef. 0.28) (Table 6), indicating that narratives of rising crime coalesce around a collective threat perception that aligns with Innes’s (2004) concept of certain criminal events’ symbolic power to mobilize collective responses and shape risk perceptions; and (c) moderate co-occurrences (coef. ≈ 0.24 – 0.20) between “Violence”—“Erosion of community trust” (coef. 0.24) and “Homicides”—“Fragmentation of support networks” (coef. 0.20) emphasize the breakdown of social capital as a core component of the insecurity discourse, supporting Colvin et al. (2002) and Kubrin and Weitzer’s (2003) assertions regarding how distrust and isolation undermine social cohesion and impede capital formation.

The second phase suggests that the antecedents of phase 1 carry over into organizational adjustments in the business environment: (a) within the “Business Environment” category (Table 3), the codes “Drug trafficking threats” ($n = 17$) and “Businesses linked to organized crime” ($n = 13$) were most recurrent; (b) the most notable co-occurrence was between “Businesses linked to organized crime” and “Expansion of the corruption network” (coef. 0.47) (Table 6), followed by “Increase in crime”—“Difficulties in keeping businesses open” (coef. 0.26), indicating a media narrative that associates illicit infiltration with operational barriers and rising security costs; and (c) the codes “Increase in operating costs” and “Loss of sales” recorded moderate co-occurrences (coef. 0.15–0.17), suggesting that business adaptations (shortened hours, relocations, higher private-security premiums) form a consistent theme in business reporting, in line with Fadaei-Tehrani and Green’s (2002) view that economic actors adjust strategies based on a risk analysis that includes both tangible losses and intangible costs.

The third phase indicates that the antecedents of phases 1 and 2 culminate in macroeconomic challenges: (a) the code “Illicit money” ($n = 12$)—linked to “Drug trafficking and money laundering” with a coefficient 0.32—was most recurrent in the “Economy” category (Table 4); (b) the co-occurrence “Illicit money”—“Economic losses and GDP impact” (coef. 0.33) and “Drug trafficking and money laundering”—“Economic losses and GDP impact” (coef. 0.32) (Table 6) reflects a narrative linking asset legitimization to economic contraction (Almeida & Montes, 2020); and (c) references to up to a 0.5 % drop-in economic activity per one-point increase in the homicide rate (Expreso, 2024) appear as journalistic indications of a potential link between violence and macroeconomic performance, without making definitive causal claims (Inter-American Development Bank, 2024).

The combined narrative and semantic analysis revealed a sequential discursive pattern in press coverage: representations of criminality—including extortion, homicide, and drug trafficking—relate first to perceptions of community insecurity, then to corporate operational adjustments, and finally to allusions to macroeconomic effects (Figure 4). This sequence, articulated through co-occurrence coefficients and code frequencies, offers a qualitative view of Ecuadorian media narratives in which criminality is portrayed not merely as an isolated phenomenon but as a factor that permeates social cohesion (Zembroski, 2011; Innes, 2004), conditions organizational decisions (Fadaei-Tehrani & Green, 2002), and suggests possible repercussions in economic indicators (McCollister et al., 2010).

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that, at the community level, strengthening social capital through neighborhood cohesion programs and solidarity networks could help mitigate perceptions of collective vulnerability (Roh & Lee, 2013). At the organizational level, it is recommended that companies adopt more comprehensive risk-management protocols that combine physical security measures with internal communication strategies aimed at alleviating negative impacts on employee morale and productivity (Manning & Fleming, 2017). Finally, in the design of economic policy, it would be appropriate for policymakers to incorporate insecurity-perception metrics into their forecasting models, so that investment programs and SME support schemes in high-violence areas align with the risk realities identified in media discourse (McCollister et al., 2010).

Research Limitations

The methodology applied in this study presents several limitations that merit reconsideration: (a) although the selection of thirteen narratives was based on code and meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017) and on established media-content analysis studies (Riffe, Lacy, & Drager, 1996; Tamul & Martínez-Carrillo, 2018), the heterogeneous nature of the reports and their temporal distribution may have omitted relevant nuances from other periods or geographic contexts within Ecuador; (b) the exclusively qualitative approach, grounded in narrative configuration (Polkinghorne, 1995) and semantic analysis (Barton & Lazarsfeld, 1961), captured emergent meanings in detail but does not allow for quantification of population representativeness or causal relationships. Additionally, reliance on digital-press sources excludes perspectives from other channels—radio, television, and social media—that could provide divergent or complementary viewpoints (Riffe et al., 1996); and (c) the interpretation of co-occurrences and flows in the Sankey diagram, while highlighting principal thematic axes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fàbregues et al., 2021), depends on the researcher's criteria for setting relevance thresholds (coefficient ≥ 0.10), introducing subjectivity that may influence the identification of key nodes and connections. Considering these limitations, the generalizability of the findings is tempered, suggesting that they be complemented with quantitative approaches and expanded sampling in future studies.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could employ a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative analysis of media narratives with citizen-perception surveys to validate and quantify the identified discursive patterns and explore the relationship between press-reported perceptions and individual experiences of insecurity. Research could integrate multimodal sources such as radio, television, digital platforms, and social media to offer a more comprehensive view of public narratives and their evolution across different channels. Longitudinal studies might examine how discursive trajectories, and their semantic co-occurrences change over time and in response to security policies or critical events, thereby identifying temporal effects and potential coverage biases. Expanding the present study with larger, stratified samples by geographic region and media type would enhance representativeness and enable comparison between urban and rural contexts within Ecuador. Building on these findings, experimental or quasi-experimental research could assess the impact of community-based social capital strengthening interventions—such as neighborhood cohesion programs or early warning systems—on perceptions of insecurity and local economic indicators, thereby informing evidence-based policy design. Future research avenues would broaden both the scope and depth of the current findings, thereby enhancing their applicability in developing comprehensive crime prevention and mitigation strategies.

5. Conclusion

The study revealed a three-stage discursive pattern in Ecuadorian media narratives about crime: initially, crime is associated with heightened perceptions of insecurity and erosion of social capital; subsequently, these perceptions extend into the business sphere, where organizations implement operational adjustments and increase security expenditures; finally, these adaptations are linked to potential macroeconomic repercussions. The gradual progression from community-level

vulnerability to implications for investment and economic performance demonstrates that journalistic discourse frames crime as an interdependent element of social cohesion, corporate management, and macrostructural dynamics.

The qualitative approach—based on open and axial coding, as well as semantic co-occurrence analysis—enabled the in-depth capture of narrative nuances present in thirteen selected reports. Although the sample size limited the generalizability of the findings, the rigorous application of code and meaning saturation criteria ensured the coherence and relevance of the emergent categories. The semantic flow diagram visually integrates the relationships among criminal attributes, social perception, business barriers, and economic impact signals, providing a qualitative map of the discursive trajectories.

These findings contribute to the academic literature by combining narrative and semantic approaches to systematically map media connections between crime, society, business, and the economy in a Latin American context. In doing so, the study extends existing theoretical frameworks on structural crime and social capital while offering a replicable methodological model for analyzing media narratives in environments of high violence and socioeconomic transformation.

Practically, the results suggest that strengthening social capital can mitigate collective feelings of vulnerability, that adopting comprehensive risk protocols enhances organizational resilience, and that integrating perceptions of insecurity into economic planning helps support policies that are better aligned with high-violence contexts. These recommendations provide a starting point for community, business, and government initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between everyday experiences of crime and effective prevention and mitigation strategies.

Finally, the study presents opportunities to deepen the analysis of crime narratives across multiple communication channels, to overcome representativeness limitations through mixed-methods designs, and to empirically assess the impact of social-capital-focused interventions on reducing perceived insecurity and its economic consequences. A holistic understanding of interactions among media discourse, social cohesion, and economic performance is key to formulating comprehensive policies in contexts of rising violence.

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