

Article

From Crime to Crisis: Media Narratives of Extortion and Economic Decline in Ecuador

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Abstract

This article examines how Ecuadorian digital media have portrayed the phenomenon of *vacunas*—an extortion practice targeting small businesses—between January and July 2025. Through qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis, this study reviews news items, reports, interviews, editorials and chronicles published in eight major national outlets (Expreso, El Universo, El Comercio, El Mercurio, La Hora, GK, Primicias and Extra). Findings reveal that the media frame *vacunas* not only as a criminal act but also as a structural threat that deepens unemployment, territorial disputes, economic decline, business closures and migration. Symbolic representations of fear, power and vulnerability permeate both textual and visual narratives, reinforcing imaginaries of crisis and uncertainty. The article concludes that media coverage does more than inform; it constructs interpretative frameworks that shape how citizens, institutions and policymakers perceive insecurity, linking everyday extortion with broader debates on governance, economic fragility and social cohesion in Ecuador.

Keywords: extortion dynamics; *vacunas* practices; media representation; economic decline; small businesses; Ecuadorian journalism

1. Introduction

In recent years, Ecuador has witnessed the intensification of *vacunas*, criminal extortion practices affecting mainly small businesses, colloquially referred to as *vaccines* [1]. This phenomenon is defined by the imposition of repeated payments by criminal groups ostensibly in exchange for protection but, in reality, constituting coercive extraction of resources. The shift from traditional drug-related territorial disputes to monetary demands underscores a transformation in the criminal economy, with profound implications for commerce and social stability [2].

The Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime reported that among 458 enterprises surveyed, more than half (53%) experienced extortion three to four times in a year, while 23% were targeted once and 10% were subjected to between five and ten episodes of extortion [3]. Such prevalence illustrates the normalization of extortion within business operations and the growing entrenchment of this predatory practice across sectors [4].

In Guayaquil city, a major economic hub, *vacunas* have had immense economic repercussions. Within the first quarter of 2025 alone, an estimated 50,000 formal and informal



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jobs were lost, a decline attributed directly to criminal violence and extortion dynamics [5]. Such staggering employment losses reflect how extortion destabilizes livelihoods and erodes the structural fabric of local economies [6]. This study is socially significant as it illuminates the interplay between media discourse and public understanding of a critical socioeconomic crisis [7]. Media representations shape perceptions of insecurity and influence policy responses.

By critically analyzing how *vacunas* are reported, the research contributes to understanding the symbolic construction of extortion, its normalization in daily life and its broader sociocultural ramifications. In fact, small businesses in Ecuador form the economic backbone of informal and micro-entrepreneurial activity. Their vulnerability to extortion renders them prime indicators of crime's penetration into civil society. Thus, investigating media narratives surrounding these entities is relevant both for social science research and for informing interventions aimed at crime prevention and economic resilience.

In the Ecuadorian context, declining institutional capacity, porous law enforcement and growing criminal opportunism have combined to create fertile ground for *vacunas* proliferation. Political authorities, such as the Minister of the Interior, have acknowledged the trend and its increasing threat; however, public confidence remains fragile [1]. This context frames the media's role as both chronicler and interpreter of criminal-economic dynamics.

The term *vacunas* itself carries potent semiotic weight: borrowing from health discourse, it ironically denotes forced financial burdens rather than protection. This metaphorical inversion is replete with cultural resonance, underscoring how criminal enterprises co-opt language to mask coercion as a normalized transaction, rendering the phenomenon doubly insidious. Media reportage, digital articles across national outlets such as *Expreso*, *El Universo*, *El Comercio*, *El Mercurio*, *La Hora*, *GK*, *Primicias* and *Extra*, amplifies this metaphor and its implications. Stories detailing business closures, early closing hours and deserted streets testify to an economic environment overshadowed by fear and economic suffocation [8].

The primary objective of this research is to critically examine how Ecuadorian digital media represent the phenomenon of *vacunas* targeting small businesses during the period January–July 2025. Through qualitative content and semiotic analysis of journalistic genres, including news reports, editorials, features, interviews and chronicles, this study seeks to uncover dominant discursive frames and narrative strategies.

The first specific objective is to identify the framing devices, metaphors, lexical choices, imagery and narrative placement that media outlets deploy when discussing extortion practices. Such framing shapes audience interpretation of crime, threat and business vulnerability. A second specific objective is to analyze the portrayal of socio-economic consequences, unemployment, business closures, migration and territorial disputes, highlighted across media texts. This addresses how media articulate extortion's societal impacts and valorize certain victim–perpetrator dynamics. A third objective is to explore how visual semiotics, photography, graphic elements and page artifacts complement written narratives, contributing to the symbolic construction of extortion as both personal threat and societal affliction.

This research advances theoretical understanding within media studies, cultural criminology and communication scholarship. By applying semiotic and content analysis to real-time news coverage, it bridges social theory with empirical media practice. This study contributes to journalistic discourse studies by revealing how public crises are constructed through language and imagery.

Additionally, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers, crime prevention practitioners and civil society. Understanding media framing can inform strategic

communication, public awareness campaigns and interventions tailored to support small businesses under extortion pressure.

Literature Review

In Ecuador, *vacunas*—coercive “protection” payments imposed on merchants and service providers—have become a salient public issue that connects organized crime to everyday economic life. Rather than functioning as isolated criminal episodes, extortion practices are increasingly framed as systemic pressures that reshape routines of work, mobility and local commerce, particularly in urban areas where criminal governance and market activity overlap [9].

Contemporary analyses of organized crime in the region emphasize the diversification of illicit economies, in which extortion and protection racketeering operate alongside trafficking markets as adaptable revenue streams. In the Ecuadorian case, extortion is frequently associated with territorial control, the regulation of local economic flows and the strategic use of intimidation to extract regular income from legal activities [10]. This transformation signals a shift from episodic criminal predation toward more sustained forms of coercive accumulation, with implications for state legitimacy and social order [11].

Extortion also produces measurable economic risks at the level of firms and livelihoods. Regional policy research conceptualizes extortion as a form of “double taxation” that undermines productivity, discourages investment and incentivizes defensive business decisions, particularly among small enterprises with limited capital reserves [12]. Qualitative studies further show that coping strategies—such as reducing visibility, changing operating hours, relocating or exiting the market—are shaped by perceived enforcement gaps and by the predictability of extortion demands, thereby linking economic vulnerability to governance conditions [13].

Communication research provides a necessary lens for examining how such threats become publicly intelligible. Media texts do not merely report crime; they participate in the social construction of problems by selecting events, naming actors, attributing responsibility and proposing interpretive schemas through which audiences recognize “what is happening” and “what should be done” [14]. In contexts of insecurity, journalistic storytelling can stabilize categories such as “victim,” “perpetrator” and “state failure,” thereby shaping public expectations of authority, protection and accountability [15].

Framing theory is especially relevant for understanding these processes. Frames organize meaning by highlighting certain aspects of reality and suppressing others, thereby guiding causal interpretations, moral evaluations and preferred remedies [16]. Recent scholarship has expanded framing research across manual, qualitative approaches and computational traditions, underscoring both the interpretive depth of close reading and the growing interest in scalable detection of media frames in large corpora [17]. For issues such as extortion, where metaphor, affect and moral judgment are central, qualitative framing remains crucial for capturing nuance in narrative emphasis and symbolic representation [18].

The study of crime and insecurity in media has likewise evolved toward integrative approaches that connect representation to cultural meanings and institutional contexts. Research on crime communication foregrounds how reporting practices can amplify perceptions of threat, normalize particular understandings of violence and reinforce “common-sense” narratives about disorder and control [19]. Such work is increasingly attentive to how discourse circulates across genres (news, editorials, features) and to how journalistic authority is assembled through quotations, statistics and recurring interpretive repertoires [20].

A complementary line of inquiry addresses the mediated production of risk and fear. In “risk society” perspectives, public anxiety is shaped not only by material dangers but also by communicative processes that render threats visible, imaginable and urgent [11]. Recent empirical studies in Latin American digital environments show that crime news characteristics can influence online engagement and intensify affective responses, suggesting that platform metrics and audience interaction can amplify fear-laden narratives and routinize exposure to insecurity [21]. This aligns with broader evidence that digital circulation can increase the reach and emotional resonance of crime reporting, thereby affecting how insecurity is experienced as a collective condition [22].

Semiotic and multimodal approaches further illuminate how meaning is produced beyond propositional content. Social semiotics demonstrates that images, layout and visual grammar contribute to interpretation by distributing salience, assigning agency and shaping credibility through recognizable visual codes [13]. Visual framing research shows that photographic selection and composition can guide moral readings and policy imaginaries, including in crisis contexts where institutions, victims and perpetrators are visually positioned in relation to each other [14]. For crime-related topics, the combination of lexical choices, metaphors and visual cues is therefore central to the symbolic construction of threat [23].

The digital news ecology introduces additional pressures that matter for crime reporting in Latin America. Studies document how journalists navigate online harassment, intimidation and platform-mediated hostility, which can influence sourcing practices, narrative caution and the very conditions under which crime is reported [9]. In high-risk environments, these constraints intersect with platform incentives for attention and rapid circulation, potentially encouraging episodic, emotion-driven storytelling while complicating sustained explanatory reporting [10].

Against this background, the present study examines how Ecuadorian digital media represent *vacunas* targeting small businesses during January–July 2025. Using qualitative content analysis combined with semiotic and multimodal interpretation, it identifies dominant frames, metaphors and narrative strategies across journalistic genres, while also attending to the visual-discursive resources through which extortion is rendered as a structural threat. By integrating framing, risk communication and social semiotics, this study contributes evidence on how extortion is publicly narrated as an economic crisis and governance problem, offering insights relevant to communication scholarship and to policy debates on security and economic resilience [24].

2. Materials and Methods

The present study employs a qualitative methodological approach combining content analysis and semiotic analysis. This dual framework allows for an in-depth examination of how Ecuadorian digital newspapers represent the extortion practice known as *vacunas* against small businesses. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring meanings, frames and symbolic constructions embedded in media discourses [25] (see Table 1).

Qualitative content analysis was chosen because it facilitates the systematic interpretation of journalistic texts, enabling the identification of recurring themes, narrative patterns and frames. According to [26], content analysis involves drawing replicable and valid inferences from texts to their context of use. In this case, news items and opinion pieces constitute both the data source and the vehicle through which extortion is made socially intelligible (see Table 2).

Table 1. Methodological framework.

Dimension	Description
Research approach	Qualitative methodology combining content analysis and semiotic analysis.
Purpose	To explore meanings, frames and symbolic constructions embedded in media discourse on <i>vacunas</i> .
Data source	News texts and opinion pieces published in Ecuadorian national digital media (January–July 2025).
Corpus	180 texts selected purposively from eight newspapers: Expreso, El Universo, El Comercio, El Mercurio, La Hora, GK, Primicias, Extra.
Analytical strategies	Systematic coding, thematic categorization, triangulation of methods.
Validity and reliability	Intercoder agreement, triangulation, iterative revision of categories.

Table 2. Study variables.

Variables	Description
Informational content	Factual description of extortion events, incidents, statistics and actors.
Underlying message	Ideological framing and cultural connotations (fear, epidemic, governance).
Characters	Victims (small business owners), perpetrators (gangs), state officials, communities.
Language employed	Lexical choices, metaphors, descriptors, narrative style.
Images and symbolism	Visual elements (photographs, graphics, video stills) and their cultural meanings.
Positioning of the news	Placement, prominence, headline framing, genre (news, report, editorial).

Complementing this, semiotic analysis was applied to decode the symbolic dimensions of media discourse. As [27] has argued, media texts function on both denotative and connotative levels, transmitting not only literal information but also cultural meanings. Analyzing linguistic and visual signs related to *vacunas* reveals how extortion is framed as epidemic, plague or governance mechanism, shaping collective perceptions of insecurity.

The corpus comprised news items published between January and July 2025 across eight major national digital outlets: Expreso, El Universo, El Comercio, El Mercurio, La Hora, GK, Primicias and Extra. These outlets were selected because of their wide readership, national circulation and ability to set agendas within Ecuadorian public debate. Together, they represent a balance of traditional, mainstream and independent journalism.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to include pieces explicitly addressing *vacunas* and extortion against small businesses. The search incorporated keywords such as vaccines, extortion, traders, small enterprises and threats, which resulted in the retrieval of 180 texts covering genres including news stories, informative notes, chronicles, reports, interviews, analytical articles and editorials.

The analysis was guided by six central units: (1) the informational content (factual description of events) in 180 texts; (2) the underlying message (ideological or cultural framing); (3) the characters (victims, perpetrators, officials, communities); (4) the language

employed (lexical choices, metaphors, descriptors); (5) the images and their symbolism (photographs, graphics, video stills); and (6) the positioning of the news (placement, prominence, headline framing). These variables enable both textual and symbolic interpretation (see Table 3).

Table 3. Units of analysis.

Unit of Analysis	Application in Study
Textual content	Analysis of factual recounting and narrative framing.
Symbolic connotations	Interpretation of metaphors and cultural meanings.
Characters	Examination of the social roles depicted (victims, perpetrators, officials).
Language	Study of discursive strategies and rhetorical devices.
Visual representation	Semiotic analysis of images, symbols and associated meanings.
News positioning	Evaluation of genre, prominence and agenda-setting role.

Following [28] model of qualitative coding, a coding frame was developed combining deductive categories (derived from the theoretical framework, such as fear, epidemic and economic collapse) and inductive categories (emerging from the data). Coding was performed manually by two trained coders to ensure consistency, with discrepancies resolved through discussion.

To enhance validity, triangulation was applied by combining content and semiotic analysis. Reliability was addressed through intercoder agreement, revising ambiguous categories and conducting iterative checks. Although qualitative research prioritizes depth over generalizability, systematic coding increases transparency and analytical rigor [29].

Intercoder reliability was established through a staged procedure designed to maximize analytical consistency while acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative coding.

- First, both coders jointly pilot-coded a purposive subsample of the corpus using the initial codebook (deductive and emergent categories), documenting decision rules and recurrent ambiguities. The codebook was then refined through iterative consolidation (merging overlapping codes, clarifying definitions and adding inclusion/exclusion criteria and anchor examples).
- Second, the coders independently coded the full dataset using the revised frame and subsequently compared coding outputs to identify points of convergence and divergence at the category level. Discrepancies were resolved via adjudication meetings, in which disagreements were traced back to the operational definitions and resolved by consensus; when consensus could not be reached immediately, the relevant category was further specified, and the affected items were re-coded accordingly.

This process prioritized transparency and interpretive validity over purely statistical reproducibility; accordingly, a limitation of this validation approach is that agreement is partly dependent on coder training and reflexive discussion rather than on a single coefficient.

Semiotic interpretation was carried out on two levels. The denotative level examined literal textual and visual elements: the presence of armed gangs, shop closures or protest statements. The connotative level analyzed cultural meanings: for instance, the metaphor of *epidemic* aligns extortion with disease, evoking uncontrollable contagion that threatens the social body. Such symbolic constructions reveal how crime is narrativized beyond factual reporting [30].

Given that journalistic genres differ in purpose and form; attention was paid to how the phenomenon is portrayed across genres. News and informative notes prioritized factual recounting, whereas chronicles and reports provided in-depth testimonies and contextualization. Editorials and opinion pieces, meanwhile, articulated normative stances, framing extortion as either a symptom of state weakness or evidence of systemic crisis.

The temporal limitation to January–July 2025 was deliberate to capture a period of heightened public debate and intensified violence, as indicated in contemporaneous media coverage. This timeframe provides a snapshot of the crisis and allows for the identification of emergent frames without diluting the analysis across longer periods. As the research draws on publicly available media content, no direct interaction with human participants was required. Nevertheless, sensitivity was exercised when analyzing testimonies of victims published in the press, recognizing the ethical responsibility to avoid re-victimization or sensationalism in scholarly interpretation [28].

The methodological design thus sought to achieve three key analytical objectives: (1) to map how extortion against small businesses is narratively and visually constructed; (2) to examine the symbolic repertoires that amplify fear and normalize criminal governance; and (3) to assess how media framing connects extortion to broader socioeconomic consequences such as unemployment, migration and business closures.

The combination of qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis provides a robust framework for capturing both the manifest and latent dimensions of media coverage. By attending simultaneously to informational content and symbolic meaning, the methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of how *vacunas* are constructed as a national crisis in Ecuadorian journalism.

3. Results

3.1. Framing of Extortion as an Epidemic

Media coverage consistently frames the practice of *vacunas* as an epidemic affecting Ecuadorian small businesses. Headlines often employ metaphors that liken extortion to a contagion, signaling both urgency and pervasive threat [31]. This framing constructs a narrative in which criminal groups are not isolated actors but systemic actors capable of destabilizing entire urban economies.

Analysis of news content reveals recurrent use of terms such as “plague,” “infection,” and “spreading” when describing extortion [32]. These linguistic choices emphasize the uncontrollable nature of the phenomenon, reinforcing public perception of insecurity and amplifying fear. Opinion pieces and editorials extend this framing by portraying *vacunas* as a societal disease requiring structural intervention [33]. The semiotic construction here merges literal criminal activity with metaphorical contagion, creating symbolic urgency for policy action and civic awareness. Chronicles and feature reports provide narrative depth by detailing individual victim experiences. Through storytelling techniques, journalists humanize the abstract notion of an “epidemic,” showing how families and communities are affected. This contributes to a multidimensional framing that blends statistics with lived experience [34].

Images accompanying news articles reinforce the epidemic frame. Photographs of shuttered stores, deserted streets and distressed proprietors visually represent the spread and social cost of *vacunas*, complementing textual narratives and intensifying public concern [35].

Media narratives frequently employ epidemiological terminology to describe the proliferation of *vacunas*, constructing extortion as a phenomenon that spreads uncontrollably across cities and provinces [36]. Terms such as “contagion,” “outbreak,” and “wave” appear repeatedly, establishing a mental model in which criminal activity is not localized but systemic, capable of affecting multiple social and economic sectors simultaneously [18].

Editorial analyses accentuate the epidemic framing by linking extortion to broader societal dysfunction. In these texts, criminal activity is depicted as a virus undermining trust in institutions, destabilizing commerce and infiltrating communities, reinforcing public perception that Ecuador is experiencing a crisis of social governance [37]. News chronicles provide narrative depth to this epidemic framing through case-based storytelling. Individual victim experiences are contextualized within patterns of escalating extortion, demonstrating how *vacunas* “spread” from neighborhoods to entire urban areas. This technique creates a layered representation, blending empirical reporting with symbolic interpretation of social contagion [38].

Semiotic analysis of visual materials complements textual framing. Photographs of armed individuals, checkpoints and shuttered businesses serve as visual indicators of contagion, suggesting that the “infection” permeates public spaces and compromises civic life. Such imagery works synergistically with language to produce heightened emotional and cognitive resonance among audiences [39].

The epidemic metaphor extends beyond immediate reportage to public discourse through interviews and opinion pieces. Political actors, community leaders and journalists frequently describe extortion as an “unseen epidemic” or “social virus,” integrating epidemiological rhetoric into moral and political arguments [40]. This framing amplifies the perceived urgency of intervention and situates criminal activity within a narrative of collective vulnerability, highlighting the need for comprehensive policy responses [2].

3.2. Economic Decline and Business Closures

Coverage demonstrates a clear link between extortion and economic decline. Reports indicate that entire sectors, particularly micro and small businesses, face closures as owners are unable to meet extortion demands while sustaining operational costs [41]. Journalistic accounts quantify the impact: approximately 20% of small enterprises in Guayas Province reportedly pay extortion fees, while many others close due to unsustainable financial pressure [42].

This data foregrounds the scale of economic disruption. Editorials emphasize systemic consequences, arguing that business closures reduce local economic circulation, disrupt employment and diminish consumer confidence. The media thus constructs a narrative linking crime to macroeconomic decline, framing extortion as a driver of urban decay [43].

The positioning of news—front-page coverage or lead stories—signals media prioritization of the economic dimension of *vacunas*. By allocating prominent space to closure narratives, newspapers amplify public awareness of the severity of extortion’s economic toll [3]. Further analysis of reportage reveals that extortion directly impacts the resilience of local economies. Media sources highlight that even well-established small businesses struggle to absorb recurring payments demanded by criminal groups, forcing closures and bankruptcies [44].

Chronicles and feature stories emphasize the psychological toll on proprietors, depicting fear-induced decision-making that accelerates business shutdowns. Such narratives illustrate the interplay between economic pressure and social anxiety, reinforcing the symbolic perception of economic collapse [45]. Editorials argue that extortion-induced closures disrupt urban economic ecosystems.

The loss of small businesses reduces neighborhood commerce, diminishes market competition and restricts access to goods and services, which intensifies the perception of pervasive economic decline [46]. Thematic analysis identifies recurring lexical choices, such as “collapse,” “devastation” and “financial suffocation,” which contribute to constructing extortion as a systemic economic threat. By embedding these descriptors in daily reportage, newspapers cultivate a sense of ongoing economic emergency [47]. Semiotic evaluation

of images and visual elements indicates a deliberate framing strategy. Photographs of shuttered storefronts, abandoned markets and “For Sale” signs visually encode the socioeconomic consequences of *vacunas*, complementing textual narratives and reinforcing public perception of economic fragility [48].

3.3. Unemployment and Informal Labor Dynamics

Media narratives highlight the effect of *vacunas* on employment, noting that widespread extortion forces proprietors to lay off staff, shift toward informal arrangements or suspend operations [49]. Such coverage emphasizes labor precarity as a social consequence of criminal activity. Reports further illustrate that informal laborers—street vendors, small shop assistants and independent service providers—are disproportionately affected, lacking social protection mechanisms [50]. The media frames this as a humanitarian concern, linking crime to social vulnerability [51].

Analysis shows that journalistic language underscores both fear and economic necessity. Terms such as “desperate,” “forced unemployment,” and “precarious livelihoods” appear repeatedly, constructing a semiotic field that conveys emotional and economic stress [52]. Visual semiotics support these textual narratives. Images of idle workers, closed storefronts and abandoned commercial spaces create powerful cues about the human cost of extortion, reinforcing audience understanding of the social dimension of economic decline [53].

Media coverage consistently highlights that unemployment spikes as extortion pressures force business closures. Reports document layoffs in both formal and informal sectors, demonstrating the cascading effect of criminal activity on labor markets [54]. Semiotic content reveals that journalists utilize imagery of idle workers and empty workplaces to reinforce the human dimension of economic disruption. This dual textual-visual strategy constructs extortion as a social problem with tangible consequences for employment and livelihoods [55].

Articles frequently contextualize layoffs within broader structural conditions, linking them to deficiencies in labor protections and social safety nets. By doing so, media frame *vacunas* not only as criminal acts but as catalysts exposing systemic vulnerabilities [56]. Editorials and opinion pieces underscore the moral and social dimensions of unemployment, portraying displaced workers as victims of both crime and governance failure.

This framing appeals to civic sensibilities, encouraging public discourse on policy reform and labor protection [57]. Interviews with business owners and employees provide qualitative depth. Victims recount emotional strain, uncertainty and forced adaptation strategies, which enrich narrative accounts and create a compelling social portrait of labor instability caused by extortion [58].

3.4. Migration Narratives and Displacement

Some media coverage extends the consequences of *vacunas* to internal and external migration. Reports suggest that business owners, employees and families relocate to escape extortion, signaling the social mobility costs of crime [34]. Articles and interviews convey migration as both a coping mechanism and a failure of local governance. By emphasizing displacement, newspapers frame extortion as a driver of demographic shifts, affecting urban planning and community cohesion [36]. Editorials frequently connect migration to broader structural issues, such as the weakness of state institutions and the absence of effective law enforcement, reinforcing public discourse on governance deficits [32].

Migration coverage underscores the broader demographic implications of *vacunas*. Reports suggest internal displacement and emigration occur as families seek safety and economic stability, illustrating how criminal activity reshapes social geography [9]. News chronicles often narrate individual migration trajectories, highlighting personal and economic costs. These narratives construct extortion as a factor driving community fragmentation, family disruption and loss of human capital [10]. Editorials and feature reports contextualize migration within governance narratives, framing displacement as evidence of institutional failure and insufficient security measures. Such framing positions crime as both cause and symptom of structural societal weaknesses [37].

Semiotic analysis of accompanying visuals—empty streets, moving vehicles and closed residential areas—enhances the textual narrative of displacement, symbolizing societal migration and urban abandonment due to criminal pressure [32]. Interviews and opinion pieces extend the symbolic meaning of migration by linking it to resilience and adaptation. While extortion drives relocation, narratives simultaneously highlight social coping strategies, community networks and informal protective mechanisms in affected areas [38].

3.5. Political Responsibility and Governance Discourses

Media coverage recurrently links the prevalence of *vacunas* to gaps in political and institutional control. Reports point to shortcomings in policing, judicial responses and municipal oversight, positioning extortion as an indicator of state incapacity [9]. Journalists frequently incorporate statements from local authorities, business associations and civil society representatives; these quotations operate as legitimizing voices that substantiate claims and help construct narratives of political accountability [36]. Editorials further criticize governmental inaction and underscore public demands for comprehensive security strategies. Overall, this discourse highlights both the symbolic and practical need for governance reforms to curb criminal extortion [32].

Across outlets, *vacunas* is also associated with weak political oversight, limited enforcement capacity and slow or ineffective judicial responsiveness [10]. Journalistic framing presents extortion as a governance failure that calls attention to systemic responsibility [35]. Editorial pieces commonly deploy rhetorical strategies to challenge political authorities, portraying *vacunas* as symptomatic of state fragility and corruption.

Such discursive constructions amplify public demand for structural reforms in security and governance [37]. Interviews with local officials, business associations and community leaders serve to legitimize public discourse, providing authoritative commentary on the scope of extortion and its societal consequences [36].

News framing also emphasizes policy gaps, depicting extortion as an opportunity to discuss regulatory reform, policing strategies and community engagement. Semiotic cues, such as visual contrast between law enforcement and criminal actors, reinforce the narrative of institutional contestation [33]. The symbolic construction of governance narratives merges textual critique with visual representation, portraying extortion as a societal challenge that intersects with political, moral and economic dimensions. This multi-layered representation encourages public debate on accountability, transparency and security policy [31].

3.6. Symbolic Representations in Language and Images

Media coverage systematically employs metaphors and symbolic language to construct *vacunas* as an existential threat to society. Terms such as “plague,” “epidemic” and “infection” recur not only in headlines but also within article bodies, linking extortion to uncontrollable forces and naturalizing the sense of fear [34]. Semiotic analysis reveals that

this metaphorical framing positions criminal organizations as agents of systemic disruption, creating a symbolic narrative where crime functions analogously to a social pathogen.

Images and visual semiotics reinforce these textual metaphors. Photographs depicting abandoned streets, closed shops and armed groups serve as denotative markers of extortion's reality, while simultaneously conveying connotative meanings of societal decay, insecurity and helplessness [33].

These visual cues operate in tandem with textual narratives, constructing a multi-layered perception of threat that extends beyond individual victimization to a collective societal crisis [9]. The semiotic interplay between language and imagery further amplifies the perception of inevitability. Headlines such as "The vaccines destroy Ecuador" [32] combine action verbs with national-level referents, suggesting that extortion transcends localized incidents and threatens the economic and social fabric of the country. This framing conveys both urgency and scale, reinforcing public awareness and anxiety [10].

Interviews and personal narratives included in news articles often employ symbolic language to communicate emotional and ethical dimensions of extortion. Victims describe *vacunas* using terms associated with oppression, *coercion* and moral collapse, creating a semiotic field where extortion is not merely economic but a moral and cultural crisis [32].

Such representations influence public perception by linking criminal practices with broader societal values, suggesting a need for normative restoration and institutional accountability [37]. Editorials and opinion pieces extend the symbolic construction of *vacunas* through normative framing. By portraying extortion as a symptom of institutional weakness and social vulnerability, journalists and commentators embed the phenomenon within larger discourses of governance, civic responsibility and structural reform [38]. This multi-modal representation—combining text, image and ideology—produces a layered semiotic landscape in which *vacunas* function simultaneously as an empirical reality and a symbolic marker of social instability.

4. Discussion

4.1. Media Framing and Symbolic Construction of Crime

The present study confirms that Ecuadorian digital media frequently frame *vacunas* as an epidemic, deploying linguistic and visual metaphors that portray extortion as uncontrollable and pervasive. This aligns with [41] framing theory, which posits that media actively construct reality through selective emphasis and interpretative schemas.

Similar to findings in Latin American contexts [42], Ecuadorian coverage emphasizes the symbolic dimension of criminality, conveying both factual information and societal meanings. Contrary to some prior studies where crime reporting focuses predominantly on statistics and law enforcement responses [43], this research shows that Ecuadorian outlets integrate narrative depth, chronicling individual victim experiences. This represents a notable difference in framing practices, highlighting the human and emotional consequences of extortion, which may enhance audience empathy and engagement.

The epidemic metaphor used in Ecuadorian media resonates with findings in European studies, where organized crime is often likened to systemic infection to dramatize social threats [44]. However, the Ecuadorian case adds a contextual specificity: linking extortion to economic survival and daily commerce, emphasizing the intersection between crime, livelihood and urban economy, a nuance less discussed in prior literature.

Semiotic analysis of imagery corroborates prior research on visual framing in crime reporting [45]. Images of closed shops, armed groups and empty streets operate as denotative indicators while simultaneously producing connotative meanings of societal decay and fear. This study extends previous work by systematically analyzing the synergy between textual and visual codes in Ecuadorian digital journalism.

Editorials and opinion pieces in Ecuador emphasize normative evaluations of extortion, a phenomenon also observed in comparative studies of media discourse on crime in Mexico and Colombia [46]. The Ecuadorian framing notably integrates moral judgment with social commentary, framing criminal extortion as both an economic and ethical crisis, which enriches the interpretative repertoire of audiences.

A key finding diverging from prior research is the temporal focus of media coverage. This study highlights intense reporting between January and July 2025, corresponding to spikes in criminal activity and public debate. While previous studies tend to analyze annualized media coverage [47], this research demonstrates the dynamic, event-driven nature of crime framing, revealing how media intensity fluctuates in response to real-time developments.

The interplay between denotative and connotative semiotics confirms [48] the encoding/decoding model. Media texts encode extortion events with specific ideological and symbolic cues, which audiences may decode differently depending on social position and experience. Ecuadorian coverage illustrates that framing is not neutral; symbolic constructions of *vacunas* guide public understanding of crime severity and its societal implications.

This study's findings align with international evidence that media framing shapes perceptions of crime severity and moral panic [49]. However, the novelty lies in documenting how national digital newspapers construct *vacunas* as an existential threat to the economy and public order, emphasizing both symbolic and economic dimensions, thus contributing an original perspective to the literature on crime, media and societal perception.

4.2. Economic Impacts of Extortion on Small Businesses

The analysis indicates that *vacunas* impose a direct and substantial burden on the financial sustainability of small businesses in Ecuador by introducing recurrent, non-productive outflows that erode cash flow, constrain day-to-day operations and heighten vulnerability to economic shocks. Within the media corpus examined, these payments are portrayed as a coercive cost structure that compresses profit margins, weakens firms' capacity to replenish inventory and maintain payroll and accelerates commercial discontinuity. In this sense, reports document the closure of retail outlets, restaurants and service providers, underscoring how repeated transfers to criminal groups disrupt market continuity and destabilize local commercial ecosystems [50].

Prior scholarship on extortion and "protection" practices in Latin America has established that such payments frequently operate as a shadow tax: an informal, coercive levy that systematically extracts resources from microenterprises, amplifies uncertainty and exacerbates business fragility, particularly in low-capital ventures and informal economies [51]. Building on these established findings, the present study relates its results to this literature by showing that in the Ecuadorian case, the economic harms are not limited to informality.

The journalistic discourse analyzed here presents evidence that formally registered businesses in major urban centers (Guayaquil and Quito) likewise experience revenue losses and risk escalation severe enough to precipitate permanent closure [52]. Consequently, this study extends existing accounts by foregrounding the penetration of extortion dynamics into formal urban commerce and by specifying how this spillover broadens the socio-economic consequences of extortion beyond the informal sector.

The qualitative content analysis reveals that media narratives employ strong evaluative language, terms like “devastation,” “collapse” and “suffocation” recur across outlets. Such lexical choices amplify perceptions of systemic economic threat, a phenomenon consistent with the work of [53] on crime’s indirect impact on economic behaviors. In Ecuador, the language choice constructs a symbolic link between criminal extortion and national economic decline.

Visual semiotic analysis reinforces these textual claims. Photographs of shuttered shops, abandoned markets and closed signage visually encode economic vulnerability [54]. This dual coding strategy mirrors findings by [55] who argue that imagery in news reporting functions as a symbolic amplifier of economic narratives, transforming isolated incidents into perceived structural crises.

Interviews and first-person accounts in news features highlight the psychological dimension of economic distress. Business owners report reduced consumer confidence, fear of operational continuity and constrained access to capital. These qualitative insights align with prior research suggesting that crime-induced financial uncertainty alters investment behaviors and business planning [56]. In Ecuador, *vacunas* act as both an immediate and anticipatory economic stressor.

Media also contextualize extortion within broader socioeconomic frameworks. Editorials connect *vacunas* to employment loss, urban decay and reduced tax collection, framing the phenomenon as a macroeconomic concern rather than isolated criminal acts [57]. This mirrors findings from global studies that highlight the systemic effects of organized crime on local and national economies [58].

A novel insight from this study is the spatial dimension of economic impact. News coverage shows that certain neighborhoods and commercial sectors experience disproportionate pressure, suggesting that extortion not only reduces overall economic activity but also contributes to uneven economic geography. This finding adds granularity to the literature, demonstrating how crime can reinforce spatial economic inequalities [59].

Ecuadorian media portray extortion as both a microeconomic burden on individual businesses and a macroeconomic threat to urban economies. This study corroborates established research on the financial consequences of organized crime while providing nuanced evidence of symbolic, spatial and psychological dimensions, highlighting the multi-layered effects of *vacunas* on economic resilience and social stability.

4.3. Labor Vulnerability, Informal Economy and Migration

This study highlights that *vacunas* have generated significant labor vulnerability in Ecuador, particularly affecting employees in small businesses. Media reports document layoffs, temporary suspensions and reductions in working hours, reflecting the broader consequences of criminal extortion on employment [60].

This aligns with literature showing that crime directly influences workforce stability, labor market participation and income security [61]. In comparison with prior research on Latin American urban labor markets, the Ecuadorian case demonstrates that both formal and informal sectors are affected. While extortion traditionally targets informal microenterprises [34], Ecuadorian media reveal that registered businesses also experience financial strain severe enough to reduce payrolls and displace workers [62]. This extends understanding of labor vulnerability to encompass a broader spectrum of employment arrangements.

Informal labor responses to extortion include adaptive strategies such as reduced operational hours, self-employment diversification and relocation of business activities. These practices are consistent with prior studies on the informal economy as a coping mechanism in high-crime contexts [63]. Ecuadorian news narratives provide qualitative

insights into how workers and proprietors navigate systemic insecurity while maintaining livelihoods [64].

Migration emerges as both a coping and survival strategy. Media coverage details internal displacement and international emigration driven by fear of extortion and economic collapse [65]. This pattern aligns with theoretical models linking criminal violence to forced migration and demographic shifts in urban areas [41]. In Ecuador, *vacunas* are explicitly framed as a driver of population movement, illustrating the social ramifications of criminal governance.

Visual representations reinforce migration narratives. Photographs of empty streets, moving vehicles and closed neighborhoods symbolize depopulation and the erosion of community cohesion [43]. Semiotic analysis demonstrates that media combine imagery and textual narratives to convey both the scale and emotional weight of displacement, amplifying public understanding of labor and migratory vulnerabilities.

Labor vulnerability is further exacerbated by psychological and social stressors. Interviews published in digital outlets indicate heightened fear, anxiety and uncertainty among employees and proprietors, reflecting findings in criminology and occupational sociology [45]. These affective dimensions are rarely captured in quantitative data but are salient in media narratives, providing nuanced perspectives on social consequences.

Editorial discourse situates labor and migration issues within governance debates, portraying institutional failure as a contributing factor to both employment insecurity and population mobility [42]. This echoes international research emphasizing the role of state capacity and policy interventions in mitigating crime-induced social and labor vulnerabilities [46].

The Ecuadorian media construct a complex narrative linking *vacunas* to labor precarity, informal economic adaptation and migration. These findings corroborate prior studies on the social costs of crime while providing original insights into the interaction between extortion, employment dynamics and population movements. By integrating content and semiotic analysis, this study elucidates how crime is represented as a multidimensional social crisis affecting economic, psychological and demographic structures.

4.4. Governance, Institutional Weakness and Public Discourse

This study demonstrates that Ecuadorian media consistently frame *vacunas* as symptomatic of institutional weakness and governance deficits. Editorials and opinion pieces portray extortion as both a failure of law enforcement and a challenge to political legitimacy [47]. This aligns with theoretical perspectives in political sociology, which suggest that criminal activity often highlights structural vulnerabilities in state institutions [48].

Comparative research indicates that organized crime in Latin America thrives in contexts of limited institutional capacity, where enforcement is inconsistent and judicial systems are under-resourced [49]. Ecuadorian media narratives corroborate these findings, emphasizing delayed police responses, inadequate protection for small business owners and underreporting of extortion cases [50].

Media coverage also constructs public discourse around moral and civic responsibility, highlighting the societal consequences of inaction. Editorials argue that *vacunas* not only threaten economic stability but also erode public trust in governance, echoing previous studies on the social costs of perceived state incapacity [51].

In Ecuador, this framing links criminal extortion to broader debates on democratic accountability and institutional efficacy. Interviews with local authorities and business associations further reinforce governance discourses. Official statements provide credibility and context, illustrating how municipal, provincial and national actors respond to extortion.

This strategy mirrors global findings in media studies that suggest interviews with authority figures legitimize public discourse and shape perceptions of institutional competence [52].

Semiotic analysis reveals that visual framing in Ecuadorian media underscores institutional contrast: images of police presence juxtaposed with scenes of armed extortionists symbolize a contested governance space [53]. Such imagery communicates both vulnerability and the potential for intervention, adding layers of meaning beyond textual description.

Notably, this research identifies temporal intensification of governance discourse. Media coverage peaks during periods of high criminal activity, aligning with findings from comparative studies on event-driven news cycles [54]. This suggests that public perception of institutional weakness is dynamically shaped by both the frequency and prominence of extortion-related reporting. Editorials and analytical articles extend discourse by proposing policy responses, including increased policing, anti-corruption measures and community engagement. These normative interventions reflect the media's dual role as informant and agenda-setter, consistent with prior research on media influence in public policy formation [55].

The media actively shapes both perception and potential solutions regarding governance failures. Ecuadorian media portray *vacunas* as a multifaceted governance challenge, linking institutional weakness to social, economic and moral consequences. These findings corroborate international research on crime and state capacity while offering novel insights into the semiotic and narrative construction of governance deficits. By combining content and semiotic analysis, this study elucidates how media not only reflect but actively shape public understanding of institutional effectiveness and societal risk.

5. Conclusions

The present study confirms that the extortion practice known as *vacunas* constitutes a critical socioeconomic problem in Ecuador, significantly affecting small businesses, labor markets and urban livelihoods. Media coverage has revealed not only the immediacy of the threat but also its systemic implications, demonstrating the centrality of journalism in documenting and interpreting societal crises [56].

Through content and semiotic analysis, it has been observed that Ecuadorian digital newspapers present extortion as both a factual and symbolic phenomenon. News items, chronicles and reports construct narratives that communicate economic, social and psychological consequences, making the audience aware of the pervasive impact of criminal practices on everyday life [57].

The research underscores the essential role of media in educating and informing the public. By framing *vacunas* in accessible yet analytically rich ways, journalism provides audiences with the tools to interpret complex criminal, economic and social dynamics, thus fostering civic literacy and critical awareness [58]. Results indicate that media coverage has successfully positioned *vacunas* within prime-time informational agendas, reflecting editorial recognition of the topic's national relevance. This prominence enables the issue to reach diverse audiences and stimulates public discourse, reinforcing the media's role as a societal watchdog and interpreter of risk [59].

This study further reveals that the use of visual and linguistic metaphors—such as depicting extortion as an “epidemic” or “plague”—enhances public comprehension of the scope and severity of the problem. Semiotic strategies amplify the cognitive and emotional resonance of news, contributing to a broader societal understanding of crime beyond mere reporting of isolated incidents [60].

Ecuadorian media coverage illustrates that small businesses are not only economically impacted but also socially and psychologically affected. The narratives emphasize labor vulnerability, displacement and migration, highlighting the intersection between criminal activity and public welfare. This comprehensive approach demonstrates journalism's capacity to foster holistic social awareness [61]. Editorials, opinion pieces and analytical articles are particularly effective in contextualizing extortion within governance and institutional frameworks. They provide normative evaluations, policy recommendations and ethical reflections, contributing to the civic education of the audience and encouraging informed public debate [62].

A critical finding is the need for sustained media attention. While coverage during January–July 2025 was intense, the episodic nature of news reporting risks reducing *vacunas* to a temporary concern. Long-term editorial strategies and continuous investigative reporting are essential to maintain public awareness and to monitor trends, policy responses and social consequences over time [63].

This study advocates for diversified journalistic genres. Incorporating columns, expert analyses, editorials and in-depth articles can enrich public understanding, allowing audiences to interpret extortion within economic, sociological and criminological frameworks. Multi-genre coverage also fosters critical thinking, enabling citizens to distinguish between factual reporting, interpretative analysis and normative judgment [64].

The semiotic and content analyses reveal that media shape not only public perception but also social attitudes toward crime. By emphasizing systemic causes, societal impacts and institutional responses, journalism performs an educational function, cultivating informed and responsible citizenry capable of engaging with policy debates [65]. Comparative insights suggest that Ecuadorian media are aligning with international best practices in crime reporting, integrating narrative depth, symbolic framing and expert commentary. However, the challenge remains to maintain editorial consistency, avoid sensationalism and ensure that coverage contributes to social learning rather than fear amplification [41].

This study demonstrates that media can act as a bridge between specialized knowledge and public comprehension. By translating complex phenomena—such as organized crime's economic and social consequences—into accessible narratives, journalism facilitates both societal education and public engagement with policy solutions [42].

Another key conclusion is that extortion coverage must incorporate follow-up reporting and longitudinal analysis. The social, economic and migratory consequences of *vacunas* evolve over time, necessitating persistent investigative and analytical journalism that tracks trends, evaluates interventions and maintains public accountability [43].

The Ecuadorian case demonstrates the transformative potential of media as an educational institution. Beyond documenting crime, outlets can foster literacy, civic responsibility and collective understanding. Sustained, multi-genre and contextually informed reporting ensures that critical societal issues occupy a permanent place in public consciousness [9,10].

This research underscores a normative imperative: media companies should institutionalize comprehensive coverage of extortion and related social problems, combining investigative rigor, semiotic richness and analytical depth. By doing so, journalism not only informs but also educates and empowers society, ensuring that issues like *vacunas* are not transient headlines but enduring subjects of public debate and societal action. Future research should extend the present inquiry by combining longitudinal and comparative designs to test whether the frames identified here persist, mutate or regionalize as extortion dynamics evolve across Ecuador and neighboring Andean contexts. Mixed-method approaches integrating qualitative framing and semiotic analysis with computational text-

as-data techniques could map frame prevalence at scale and detect temporal shifts linked to key security and economic events.

Further work should also incorporate audience-centered methods to assess how specific metaphors and visual cues shape perceived risk, trust in institutions, support for punitive versus preventive policies and stigma toward affected neighborhoods and occupations. Research that triangulates media discourse with institutional records and with ethnographic or interview-based evidence from small business owners, journalists and local officials would strengthen causal inference regarding the relationship between mediated narratives, everyday coping strategies, and governance responses, while also clarifying how newsroom constraints and safety conditions influence the production of extortion coverage.

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