

Article

Urban Fear, Criminality and the Erosion of Intangible Cultural Access in Machala: A Critical Qualitative Content Analysis of Ecuadorian National Digital Press

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Abstract

This article examines how the Ecuadorian national digital press has represented the relationship between criminal violence, declining mobility, tourism contraction, and the erosion of intangible cultural access in Machala, Puerto Bolívar, and the route to Jambelí during 2025. This study aims to explain how mediated representations of insecurity can contribute to the symbolic narrowing of culturally meaningful urban–coastal spaces, even when those spaces remain materially present and formally open. The article responds to a gap in the literature at the intersection of critical heritage studies, media framing, urban fear, and Latin American security studies. The existing research has examined heritage as social practice, media representation of crime, and urban securitization, but has rarely connected these fields to explain how criminal violence erodes lived access to intangible cultural environments in secondary port cities of the Global South. Methodologically, this study applies qualitative content analysis to a purposive corpus of eight focal journalistic texts published in Ecuadorian digital outlets, such as *El Universo*, *El Comercio*, *Expreso*, *El Mercurio*, *Extra*, *Primicias*, *GK*, and *La Hora*. Deductive–inductive coding was complemented by descriptive article-level indicators of themes, keyword clusters, and temporal distribution. The findings show that the press did not merely report violent events; it progressively reorganized the symbolic meaning of Machala by re-signifying Puerto Bolívar, the marine environment, the cabotage pier, and the maritime route to Jambelí as spaces of risk, interruption, and conditional access. This study contributes conceptually by defining intangible cultural access and symbolic enclosure, empirically by documenting the mediated erosion of coastal public–cultural life, and practically by proposing integrated policy actions for security governance, cultural reactivation, local commerce, maritime mobility, and responsible public communication.



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1. Introduction

Machala, the capital of the province of El Oro in southern Ecuador, has historically occupied a distinctive place in the country's economic and symbolic geography. Its identity

has been articulated through export agriculture, commercial dynamism, port activity, and coastal circulation, but also through shared representations of urban productivity, regional pride, and everyday maritime sociability. Official tourism discourse has framed the city as a productive and touristic destination, while critical heritage scholarship reminds us that urban significance cannot be reduced to infrastructure or market performance alone, since places acquire value through memory, use, and collective recognition [1–3].

Within that broader territorial configuration, Puerto Bolívar has functioned as one of the principal spaces through which Machala performs its local identity. Municipal and provincial planning documents have presented the waterfront promenade and the cabotage pier as tourist–cultural assets linked to public recreation, maritime mobility, and the route to Jambelí. The Faro Convention does not mention Machala, Puerto Bolívar, or Jambelí; rather, it is used here as a conceptual and rights-based framework for interpreting heritage as a social resource that communities should be able to access, use, and recognize as meaningful [4]. From that perspective, the cultural significance of these local spaces lies not only in the built form, but in the social practices they sustain, such as walking, gathering, embarking, eating, remembering, and recognizing the city through a lived coastal environment [5].

From a critical heritage perspective, this distinction is essential because heritage does not reside exclusively in monumental form, or official designation. Rather, it emerges through processes of social attachment, symbolic use, and intersubjective recognition that allow communities to identify certain places as meaningful to their past, present, and future [6,7]. Puerto Bolívar and the maritime–social circuit connecting Machala to Jambelí should therefore be understood not simply as utilitarian spaces, but as part of a living urban heritage ecology in which mobility, leisure, memory, and belonging are continuously reproduced.

This article argues that criminal insecurity can damage such cultural ecologies without necessarily destroying them materially. When fear, coercion, or territorial disputes begin to regulate who may circulate, when, and under what emotional conditions, public space does not merely become unsafe; it becomes symbolically transformed. Such a transformation became increasingly visible in 2025, when the Ecuadorian national digital press began to narrate Machala and Puerto Bolívar through recurring references to armed attacks, extortion, territorial disputes, maritime insecurity, and generalized fear. From the perspective of media studies, such repetition matters because journalism does not only describe events, it frames problems, prioritizes meanings, and stabilizes the symbolic vocabulary through which places become publicly intelligible [8–10].

The heritage implications of this shift become clearer when one considers the relationship between mobility and cultural access. Mobility is never merely movement from one point to another; it is also a social condition through which places become available for encounter, attachment, and meaning [11–14]. Thus, when national press reports framed travel from Puerto Bolívar to Jambelí as low, fearful, or dependent on police protection, the significance exceeded an immediate security concern. It indicated that access to a socially meaningful coastal route had ceased to be ordinary and had become mediated by exceptional security logic [15].

A similar pattern emerges when fear is narrated not as an episodic emotion but as an organizing structure of everyday life. Resident-centered reports have described Puerto Bolívar as marked by shootings, extortion, silence, and collective fear, while explanatory and long-form accounts have portrayed the area as increasingly subordinated to organized criminal pressure and maritime insecurity [15–18]. These accounts are analytically significant because they reveal a shift from event-centered violence to territorialized fear, a

condition in which the lived meaning of a place is reorganized through caution, retreat, and anticipatory risk.

Literature Gap, Research Aim, and Objectives

This study is positioned within three partially connected but insufficiently integrated bodies of literature:

- First, critical heritage studies have convincingly shown that heritage is not a passive object inherited from the past, but a socially produced process of recognition, use, negotiation, and transmission [3–6]. However, this literature has paid comparatively less attention to situations in which cultural access is eroded not by demolition, climate risk, or neglect, but by criminal coercion, territorial fear, and the weakening of everyday public confidence.
- Second, media and communication scholarship has demonstrated that news frames shape the public intelligibility of violence and place [8,10,19], but it has rarely examined crime coverage as a mechanism through which heritage-linked spaces become symbolically narrowed.
- Third, recent urban–security research has analyzed securitization, fear of crime, and criminal governance in Latin America [20–22], but its dialogue with heritage studies remains limited.

The resulting gap is both conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, the literature lacks a precise vocabulary for describing how culturally meaningful spaces may remain materially intact and legally open while becoming affectively, socially, and symbolically difficult to use. Empirically, less is known about how this process unfolds in secondary port cities of the Global South, where public–cultural life is often sustained through maritime mobility, coastal sociability, gastronomy, informal commerce, and everyday practices rather than through officially monumentalized heritage alone. Machala, Puerto Bolívar, and the route to Jambelí offer a revealing case because they combine port identity, tourism vulnerability, criminal pressure, and intense media visibility within a provincial urban context that has received little attention in international heritage research.

The aim of this study is to analyze how the Ecuadorian national digital press has represented the relationship between criminal violence, public fear, tourism decline, and the erosion of intangible cultural access in Machala, Puerto Bolívar, and the route to Jambelí during 2025. The specific objectives are as follows:

- Identify the dominant media frames used to represent criminal insecurity in Machala and Puerto Bolívar.
- Examine how fear, silence, mobility restriction, and public space vulnerability were discursively constructed.
- Analyze how tourism, commerce, and maritime everyday life were connected to the weakening of cultural access.
- Operationalize the concept of the symbolic enclosure through observable indicators in journalistic discourse.
- Derive practical implications for cultural policy, local security governance, public communication, and coastal heritage recovery.

The general research question guiding this study is as follows: How did the Ecuadorian national digital press represent the relationship between criminal violence, public fear, tourism decline, and the erosion of intangible cultural access in Machala, Puerto Bolívar, and the route to Jambelí during 2025? To operationalize this question more clearly, this study is structured around the following four sub-questions:

- RQ1. Which dominant media frames were used to represent criminal insecurity in Machala and Puerto Bolívar?
- RQ2. How did the corpus discursively construct fear, mobility restriction, and public space vulnerability?
- RQ3. How were tourism, commerce, and maritime everyday life connected to the weakening of cultural access?
- RQ4. What forms of symbolic enclosure can be identified in the press representations of Puerto Bolívar and the route to Jambelí?

This investigation contributes to the fields of critical heritage studies, communication research, urban sociology, and public policy in four interrelated ways. Rather than treating insecurity as an exclusively criminological phenomenon, the article demonstrates that criminal violence also produces cultural, symbolic, spatial, and communicational consequences. In this sense, this study argues that the deterioration of safety in Machala and Puerto Bolívar should not be understood only as a problem of policing or crime control, but as a process that affects how territories are represented, inhabited, remembered, and culturally accessed.

This study advances critical heritage studies by conceptualizing intangible cultural access as a condition of lived cultural continuity rather than as the mere formal availability of cultural spaces, routes, or practices. In heritage debates, access is often associated with preservation, institutional recognition, or physical availability. However, this study shows that cultural access also depends on whether people can inhabit, use, remember, and reproduce cultural practices without fear. Puerto Bolívar's maritime routes, gastronomic traditions, fishing labor, public gatherings, and coastal leisure practices may remain physically present, but their cultural function is weakened when fear, extortion, and guarded mobility restrict everyday participation. This contribution aligns with critical heritage scholarship that understands heritage not as a static object from the past, but as a living social process produced through memory, performance, place-making, and collective recognition [3,6]. From this perspective, insecurity does not merely threaten people's safety; it interrupts the social conditions through which heritage remains alive.

The research contributes to communication scholarship by showing how news discourse reorders place identity under conditions of prolonged criminal threat. The analysis demonstrates that media narratives do not simply report insecurity in Machala and Puerto Bolívar, they actively participate in constructing the symbolic meaning of these territories. Through frames of siege, decline, fear, silence, guarded mobility, and economic-cultural erosion, the press contributes to redefining how the city and the parish are publicly imagined. This finding is relevant to framing theory because it shows that media frames operate not only at the level of issue interpretation, but at the level of territorial identity formation [8,23]. In this case, the press does not merely identify crime as a public problem, it reorganizes the meaning of place by associating specific territories with vulnerability, abandonment, or danger. This study therefore expands communication research by connecting media representation with the symbolic production of urban and maritime space.

The paper strengthens urban sociology by conceptualizing fear not only as an individual emotion, but as a spatial and cultural regulator of public life. Fear appears in the corpus as a force that reorganizes mobility, silence, commercial activity, tourism, labor, and public gathering. Residents, visitors, fishers, transport operators, and local businesses are represented as modifying their routines according to perceived risk. In this sense, fear becomes a practical grammar of territorial behavior: it determines when

people move, where they go, what they avoid, how they speak, and how they relate to public space.

This contribution resonates with the urban scholarship that understands space as socially produced and affectively organized, rather than as a neutral physical container [24–26]. The article therefore argues that insecurity produces not only material damage but symbolic enclosure: public spaces remain physically open, yet their democratic, cultural, and affective availability become restricted.

The analysis reframes public policy by arguing that the recovery of safety in Machala and Puerto Bolívar must be understood not only as law enforcement, but as the restoration of democratic access, collective dignity, local commerce, and the right to inhabit heritage without fear. Security policy cannot be reduced to surveillance, policing, or emergency response, although these may be necessary in contexts of acute violence.

The findings suggest that territorial recovery also requires cultural reactivation, responsible communication, community participation, economic protection, and evidence-based governance. This means that the restoration of Puerto Bolívar must include its maritime memory, gastronomic identity, fisher communities, family-oriented public spaces, tourism corridors, and local commercial networks. Such an approach is consistent with urban and cultural policy perspectives that emphasize the right to the city, social participation, and the ethical obligation to protect public spaces as sites of democratic life [27,28]. In this sense, safety is not only the absence of violence, it is the presence of trust, mobility, dignity, cultural continuity, and collective belonging.

This study's main contribution lies in showing that media representations of insecurity have consequences beyond public opinion. They shape how territories are imagined, how people move through them, how cultural practices are sustained or interrupted, and how policy responses are conceived. By bringing together heritage studies, media analysis, urban sociology, and public policy, this article offers an interdisciplinary framework for understanding Puerto Bolívar not only as a territory affected by violence, but as a cultural space whose recovery requires symbolic, social, economic, and institutional repair.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Critical Heritage, Living Practice, and Intangible Cultural Access

Critical heritage studies provide the first theoretical foundation because they challenge the assumption that heritage is reducible to monuments, preserved objects, or officially listed sites. Heritage is instead understood as a dynamic cultural process through which communities attribute value, construct meaning, and negotiate identities across time [3,6]. This perspective is especially appropriate for Machala because the cultural relevance of Puerto Bolívar and the route to Jambelí is not primarily monumental. It is enacted through repeated practices of mobility, port work, gastronomy, family leisure, coastal memory, and everyday sociability.

In this article, intangible cultural access refers to the socially effective possibility of entering, using, inhabiting, remembering, narrating, and transmitting meaningful cultural spaces and practices. The concept does not refer only to legal access or physical openness. A place may be legally open and materially intact but culturally inaccessible if people no longer feel able to use it as part of ordinary social life. Access is therefore understood as a practical, affective, and symbolic condition of heritage continuity.

This definition draws on UNESCO's understanding of intangible cultural heritage as living practice recognized by communities as part of cultural continuity [7], while also incorporating the Faro Convention's rights-based emphasis on the social value of heritage and community engagement with cultural resources [4].

Recent scholarship on cultural resilience has further supported this approach by stressing that heritage sites retain social value when communities can adapt, restore, learn, and continue using them under conditions of stress [29]. The theoretical value of this axis for the present study is that it allows the analysis to identify heritage erosion even when no physical destruction of a site has occurred.

2.2. *Symbolic Enclosure, Urban Fear, and the Regulation of Presence*

The second theoretical axis is symbolic enclosure. In this article, symbolic enclosure is defined as the process through which a space remains materially visible and formally open, yet becomes functionally narrowed by fear, territorial stigma, anticipation of harm, securitized mobility, media repetition, and routine avoidance. Unlike physical enclosure, symbolic enclosure does not depend on walls, gates, or explicit legal prohibition. Its effect is produced through the social perception that a place can no longer be inhabited with ordinary confidence.

The concept is grounded in urban fear research, but it also extends that literature. Classic studies of fear and urban fragmentation have shown that fear reorganizes routes, temporalities, social encounters, and expectations of safety [16,30]. More recent work has argued that the broad label, ‘fear of crime’, can obscure different emotional responses to threat, ranging from immediate fear to unease, anticipation, and embodied caution [22]. This distinction matters for the Machala case because the erosion of public–cultural access is not produced only by acute fear after specific events; it also emerges through routine caution, silence, anticipation, and avoidance.

The analytical boundaries of symbolic enclosure are therefore clearly delimited. It is not identical to urban fear, because fear refers primarily to an affective condition, while symbolic enclosure refers to the spatial and cultural consequences of that affect. It is not simply territorial stigma, because stigma emphasizes reputational damage, whereas symbolic enclosure emphasizes reduced lived access.

It is also not equivalent to securitization, because securitization concerns exceptional security logics, while symbolic enclosure examines how those logics reshape the cultural usability of place. Empirically, symbolic enclosure was coded when the following four indicators appeared together: repeated association of a meaningful place with danger; representation of ordinary practices as interrupted, guarded, or abandoned; language of retreat, emptiness, silence, or survival; displacement of prior meanings, such as tourism, sociability, commerce, or civic belonging.

2.3. *Media Framing, Representation, and the Production of Place Meaning*

The third theoretical axis links media framing to the production of place meaning. Entman’s framing theory explains how news discourse selects certain aspects of reality, amplifies their salience, defines problems, identifies causes, and implies responses [8]. Hall’s theory of representation further suggests that places are made culturally intelligible through repeated signifying practices [9,10]. These theories justify the methodological decision to treat journalistic texts not as neutral containers of information, but as discursive artifacts that construct visibility, hierarchy, emotional climate, and public meaning.

This does not imply that journalism causes the violence affecting Machala. Rather, it means that news discourse participates in stabilizing the symbolic vocabulary through which places are publicly understood. When Puerto Bolívar is persistently described as empty, fearful, extorted, or criminally dominated, those descriptions compete with older meanings associated with tourism, port life, gastronomy, and coastal identity. Recent research on crime news and digital engagement has also confirmed that crime narratives

circulate through media ecosystems in ways that shape attention, emotion, and public concern [31]. For the present study, the framing theory informed the coding of dominant frames, evaluative tone, lexical markers, narrative sequencing, and the difference between event-centered and place-centered coverage.

2.4. Latin American Securitization, Criminal Governance, and Heritage Vulnerability

The fourth axis brings the article into dialogue with current debates on urban securitization and organized crime in Latin America. Recent scholarship has shown that urban threats in the region are framed through socio-spatial logic that connects security, territory, governance, and inequality [20]. At the same time, recent policy-oriented research has stressed that organized crime in Latin America operates not only through spectacular violence, but through extortion, territorial control, weak state presence, and everyday forms of coercive governance [21–32].

This literature is necessary because the Machala case cannot be interpreted only as a heritage or media problem. It is part of a broader regional context in which criminal actors affect mobility, commerce, local governance, and trust. However, this article identifies a specific gap within that debate: studies of urban security rarely ask what happens to the cultural life of meaningful places when criminal pressure makes them difficult to inhabit, visit, or narrate as part of a shared civic environment. By connecting securitization research with heritage studies, the article shows that insecurity can become a heritage problem when it restricts the social practices through which communities sustain place-based meaning.

Together, these four theoretical axes informed the research design: critical heritage theory justified the focus on intangible cultural access; urban fear research supported the analysis of silence, retreat, and anticipation; framing and representation theory guided the interpretation of media texts; and Latin American securitization scholarship contextualized criminal pressure as a territorial and governance problem. This synthesis underpins the deductive–inductive coding strategy and explains why the article reads the press corpus as evidence of mediated place re-signification rather than as a simple inventory of crime events (see Tables 1–3).

Table 1. Methodological architecture of this study.

Methodological Dimension	Specification	Analytical Relevance
Research design	Qualitative research design.	Enabled an interpretive and critical examination of how insecurity, fear, and territorial decline were represented in the national digital press discourse.
Method	Qualitative content analysis.	Allowed the interpretation of both manifest content and latent meanings associated with symbolic decline, restricted access, and the weakening of public-cultural life.
Epistemological orientation	Interpretive–critical approach.	Treated journalistic texts as discursive artifacts that organize visibility, hierarchy, emotional climate, and public meaning.
Object of study	Media representations of criminal violence, public fear, territorial deterioration, and erosion of intangible cultural access in Machala, Puerto Bolívar, and Jambelí.	Framed insecurity as a socio-symbolic and heritage-related process rather than as a purely criminological phenomenon.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Methodological Dimension	Specification	Analytical Relevance
Corpus universe	Ecuadorian National digital outlets: El Universo, El Comercio, Expreso, El Mercurio, Extra, Primicias, GK, and La Hora.	Ensured a heterogeneous yet complementary media field combining hard news, explanatory journalism, editorials, and long-form interpretive reporting.
Temporal scope	1 January–31 December 2025.	Captured the intensification of media attention during 2025 and the consolidation of the crisis narrative.
Search protocol	Keywords: Machala, criminalidad, El Oro, delincuencia, sicariato, and narcotráfico.	Structured corpus retrieval around the central semantic field of violence, territorial crisis, and public insecurity.
Retrieval logic	Internal archive searches plus domain-restricted search engine searches.	Increased corpus precision and reduced archive bias, incomplete indexing, and omission of relevant texts.
Admissible genres	Note, feature report, article, editorial, interview, and news.	Preserved comparability while incorporating genre-sensitive differences in discursive function and narrative depth.
Sampling strategy	Purposive qualitative sampling.	Privileged conceptual relevance and analytical adequacy over numerical representativeness.
Corpus construction	Three phases: mapping, Retrieval, and screening.	Ensured methodological transparency and systematic refinement of the final corpus.
Analytical purpose	To identify how the press narratively re-signified Machala and Puerto Bolívar as spaces marked by insecurity, fear, and disrupted public–cultural access.	Connected media discourse with heritage studies, public space, and territorial meaning.

Table 2. Analytical variables, categories, and coding dimensions.

Analytical Variable	Operational Focus	Core Categories
Criminal insecurity	Representation of violence and criminal threat.	Type of violent event; criminal actors; territorial dispute; extortion; homicide; attack.
Public fear	Discursive construction of fear as social condition.	Lexical markers of fear; silence; caution; retreat; anticipatory risk.
Territorial deterioration	Representation of spatial decline and damaged urban life.	Abandonment; weakened commerce; emptied public space; interrupted normality.
Mobility disruption	Restriction or securitization of movement.	Guarded tourism; mobility under protection; maritime corridor under threat.
Tourism decline	Discursive weakening of destination attractiveness.	Reduced visitors; discouraged tourism; declining confidence; weakened hospitality.
Public space transformation	Re-signification of symbolic urban places.	Waterfront promenade vulnerability; civic interruption; restricted co-presence.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Analytical Variable	Operational Focus	Core Categories
Heritage-related erosion	Weakening of intangible cultural access and belonging.	Symbolic decline; restricted access; disrupted social continuity; heritage-related meaning.
State presence/absence	Representation of governance capacity.	Security deployment; reactive intervention; institutional fragility; policy demand.
Economic deterioration	Link between insecurity and local economic weakening.	Reduced commerce; gastronomy decline; weakened circulation; damaged sustainability.
Media framing	Narrative organization of the territorial crisis.	Dominant frame; evaluative tone; narrative sequencing; place-centered narration.

Table 3. Units of analysis, coding procedure, and interpretive outputs.

Analytical Component	Definition	Application in the Study
Unit of analysis.	Full journalistic text.	Each eligible news item, report, article, editorial, interview, or note was read as a complete discursive artifact.
Unit of coding.	Thematic–discursive segment.	Headline, subheading, lead, contextual block, quoted testimony, descriptive passage, and evaluative conclusion.
Inclusion criteria.	Multi-criterion eligibility protocol.	Outlet selection; time frame; territorial reference; keyword relevance; admissible genre; thematic pertinence.
Exclusion criteria.	Removal of analytically irrelevant material.	Excluded duplicates; audiovisual-only pieces; entertainment content; photo galleries; incidental mentions; out-of-genre materials.
Coding logic.	Deductive–inductive strategy.	Deductive matrix derived from theory; inductive subcategories emerging from repeated corpus reading.
Deductive coding categories.	Predefined categories informed by theory.	Dominant frame; territorial referent; violent event; actors; fear; mobility; tourism; commerce; public space transformation; symbolic decline; heritage-related meaning; policy demand.
Inductive subcategories.	Emergent categories generated during analysis.	Guarded tourism; public retreat; normality interrupted; maritime corridor under threat; commerce emptied by fear; ritual interruption; symbolic enclosure.
Genre-sensitive reading.	Recognition of genre-specific discursive functions.	Editorials as normative condensation; reports as contextual layering; news as cumulative event narration; interviews as voice-positioning sites.
Interpretive emphasis.	Attention to discourse texture.	Lexical density; evaluative tone; narrative sequencing; event-centered vs. place-centered narration.
Trustworthiness procedures.	Measures to strengthen rigor.	Iterative reading; analytic memoing; category refinement; cross-outlet comparison; examination of atypical cases.

Table 3. Cont.

Analytical Component	Definition	Application in the Study
Ethical orientation.	Responsible treatment of violent content.	Structural interpretation over sensational reproduction.
Final analytical output.	Discursive reconstruction of territorial meaning.	The press was interpreted as producing Machala and Puerto Bolívar not only as violent settings, but as socially burdened spaces marked by fear, restricted access, and weakened public–cultural life.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Corpus

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in qualitative content analysis [33–35]. The method was selected because it allows for an interpretation of manifest content, such as references to attacks, extortion, insecurity, or tourism decline, while also identifying latent meanings related to symbolic decline, restricted access, territorial stigma, and weakening of public–cultural life. The corpus universe was delimited through a purposive media mapping of eight Ecuadorian digital outlets with national reach and significant presence in public debate: El Universo, El Comercio [36], Expreso, El Mercurio, Extra, Primicias, GK, and La Hora.

The final analytic corpus for the revised manuscript consisted of eight focal journalistic texts, one from each outlet or media source represented in this study. These texts were selected because each contained explicit and analytically relevant references to Machala, Puerto Bolívar, El Oro, Jambelí, violence, extortion, insecurity, tourism decline, maritime disruption, or public space transformation.

The corpus is qualitative and purposive rather than statistically representative. Its purpose is not to measure the total volume of crime coverage on Machala, but to examine how selected high-relevance texts produced meaning about place, fear, and access. The temporal window was restricted to 1 January–31 December 2025, with one contextual security item from early 2026 retained only when it illuminated the intensification of public discourse around El Oro and Machala. In addition to interpretive coding, article-level descriptive counts were calculated to show how often the main themes, keyword clusters, and temporal concentrations appeared within the focal corpus (see Table 4).

Table 4. Final analytic corpus used in the revised qualitative content analysis.

No.	Outlet/Source	Genre	Dominant Analytical Relevance
1	El Mercurio	Editorial	Urban siege; criminal pressure; symbolic deterioration.
2	El Comercio	News	Attack near religious–public setting and public space vulnerability.
3	El Universo	News/report	Resident fear; tourism decline; silence; retreat
4	Expreso	News	Interrupted ritual; guarded publicness; civic disruption.
5	Extra	News	Escalation frame; territorial violence; crisis narrative.
6	GK	Long-form report	Extortion; fishing labor; maritime insecurity.
7	La Hora	News	Extortion as generalized coercive logic.
8	Primicias	Explanatory report	Tourism contraction; empty streets; commercial decline.

3.2. Search Strategy, Inclusion Criteria, and Screening

The search protocol was designed around six core keywords, listed here in Spanish with English translations for international readers: Machala; criminalidad (criminality); El Oro (the Ecuadorian province where Machala is the capital city); delincuencia (crime/delinquency); sicariato (targeted killings or contract killings); narcotráfico (drug trafficking).

These descriptors were used individually and in Boolean combinations in outlet archives and domain-restricted search engine retrieval. To increase precision, the combinations included expressions such as “Machala AND sicariato”, “Machala AND delincuencia”, “El Oro AND narcotráfico”, “Machala AND criminalidad”, and “Puerto Bolívar AND Machala AND violence”. Contextual terms, such as Puerto Bolívar, Jambelí, extortion, tourism, and malecón, were used when necessary to disambiguate the results and to capture texts dealing with maritime mobility, port communities, and public space transformation.

Texts were included when they met the following six criteria: publication in one of the selected outlets; publication within the temporal frame; explicit reference to Machala, Puerto Bolívar, Jambelí, or El Oro; substantive relation to the semantic field of insecurity; classification as news, report, article, editorial, or interview; relevance to at least one analytical dimension, such as public fear, mobility disruption, tourism decline, economic deterioration, public space vulnerability, or symbolic decline. The corpus excluded photo galleries, audiovisual-only items without substantial text, duplicated wire-style reproductions, entertainment pieces, and incidental mentions without analytical relevance.

3.3. Coding Procedure and Number of Coders

Coding was conducted by one primary researcher with expertise in communication, media discourse, and heritage studies. To strengthen trustworthiness, the coding matrix, emergent categories, and interpretive results were reviewed through analytic auditing with the co-authors. The process therefore combined single-coder interpretive responsibility with peer debriefing and category validation.

The unit of analysis was the full journalistic text. The unit of coding was the thematic-discursive segment, including headline, subheading, lead, contextual paragraph, quoted testimony, descriptive passage, and evaluative statement. Each text was read in three rounds. The first round identified manifest references to violence, insecurity, extortion, mobility, tourism, commerce, and public space. The second round applied deductive categories derived from the theoretical framework. The third round generated inductive subcategories emerging from repeated contact with the corpus.

The deductive categories included dominant frame, territorial referent, type of violent event, actors identified, lexical markers of fear, mobility restriction, tourism decline, economic deterioration, public space transformation, state presence/absence, symbolic decline, heritage-related meaning, and policy demand. The inductive subcategories included urban siege, guarded tourism, public retreat, maritime corridor under threat, commerce emptied by fear, interrupted ritual, and symbolic enclosure.

The data analysis process was practical and text-based. For example, the headline “Machala bajo asedio criminal” was coded as urban siege and symbolic deterioration; the phrase “Aquí sobrevive el que ve, oye y calla” was coded as fear, silence, and public retreat; and the description of Puerto Bolívar as a place whose streets “hoy están desiertas” was coded as economic thinning, abandonment, and symbolic enclosure. This coding logic connected specific textual evidence with conceptual interpretation rather than remaining only theoretical (see Table 5).

Table 5. Practical application of the coding process.

Textual Evidence	Initial Code	Analytical Category	Interpretive Meaning
“Machala bajo asedio criminal”	Siege language	Urban siege	The city is framed as territorially overwhelmed rather than episodically affected.
“Aquí sobrevive el que ve, oye y calla”	Silence survival	Public fear	Fear is represented as a rule of everyday conduct.
“Las calles hoy están desiertas”	Emptiness	Territorial deterioration	Commercial and social thinning are used to narrate decline.
“un ataque armado. . . interrumpió una misa”	Interrupted ritual	Public space vulnerability	A communal–religious setting is represented as no longer protected from violence.
“Más del 70% de los pescadores. . . paga vacunas”	Extortion burden	Maritime coercion	Labor and maritime mobility become conditioned by coercive payment.

Although this study remains primarily qualitative, descriptive quantitative indicators were added to meet the reviewer’s request for greater empirical visibility and to align the reporting of the analysis with [34] emphasis on systematic content analysis. These indicators were calculated at the article level, not as inferential statistics. Each focal text was coded for the presence or absence of the main analytical themes, keyword clusters, and symbolic enclosure indicators. The resulting counts and percentages are presented in Section 4 to show the distribution of themes across the corpus, the recurrence of key topics, and the temporal concentration of coverage during 2025.

3.4. Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was addressed as a central methodological and ethical requirement throughout the research process, rather than as a procedural step applied only at the end of the analysis. Given that this study examines media representations of violence, fear, territorial stigma, and cultural vulnerability, the credibility of the findings depended on a systematic, transparent, and reflexive engagement with the corpus.

Following established principles for qualitative rigor, the analysis sought to strengthen credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability through repeated immersion in the data, iterative reading, analytic memoing, progressive category refinement, cross-outlet comparison, and the examination of atypical, contradictory, or deviant cases [37–39]. This approach allowed the study to avoid treating media texts as isolated journalistic artefacts and instead examined them as discursive sites where public meanings about insecurity, mobility, economic life, and cultural access are constructed, stabilized, or contested.

The coding process was therefore conceived as interpretive, recursive, and theoretically informed, but not mechanically predetermined. Although the initial analytical categories were guided by the theoretical framework and by prior scholarship on framing, territorial stigma, cultural access, and media representations of violence, the coding matrix was not treated as fixed from the beginning. Rather, it was progressively refined as the corpus revealed patterns that were not fully anticipated by the initial conceptual design. For instance, categories such as “guarded tourism”, “maritime corridor under threat”, “cultural access under constraint”, and “port territory as a symbolic site of fear” emerged through close engagement with the material. This procedure is consistent with qualitative approaches that understand coding as an interpretive practice in which concepts are developed, tested, revised, and sharpened through sustained interaction with the data [40–42]. In this sense, this study did not merely impose theory onto the corpus,

it allowed empirical regularities, tensions, and silences within the media coverage to reshape the analytical framework.

Analytic credibility was also strengthened through comparisons across different types of sources and outlets. A cross-outlet comparison made it possible to identify whether specific narratives were confined to particular journalistic platforms or whether they circulated more broadly across the media ecosystem. This was important because media representations of insecurity may acquire greater symbolic power when similar frames are repeated across outlets, genres, and institutional sources.

At the same time, the analysis paid attention to divergences, omissions, and contradictory evidence, since trustworthiness in qualitative research does not depend on forcing coherence, but on recognizing complexity, ambiguity, and variation within the data [43,44]. Therefore, this study sought not only to identify dominant frames, but to examine how these frames coexisted with counter-narratives of resilience, cultural identity, community agency, and economic recovery.

Reflexivity was another key component of this study's trustworthiness. The analysis recognized that media texts do not speak for themselves; they are interpreted through conceptual, methodological, and ethical decisions made by the researcher. For this reason, analytic memoing was used to document emerging interpretations, category adjustments, doubts, tensions, and decisions made during the coding process. This helped reduce the risk of selective interpretation and allowed the researchers to maintain an explicit record of how meanings were constructed from the corpus. Reflexive practice is especially important in studies dealing with violence and stigmatized territories, because researchers may unintentionally reproduce dominant narratives of fear, marginality, or institutional failure if they do not critically examine their own interpretive assumptions [45,46]. In this study, reflexivity was used to ensure that the analysis remained attentive to structural conditions, public discourse, and cultural consequences, rather than reducing Puerto Bolívar to a passive object of violence or crisis.

Dependability and confirmability were reinforced through the construction of a transparent analytical route. This study maintained consistency between the research questions, corpus selection, coding strategy, analytical categories, and interpretation of findings. Rather than presenting isolated examples as self-evident proof, the analysis examined recurring patterns across the corpus and related them to broader theoretical debates. This procedure is consistent with qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, which requires systematic documentation of coding decisions, category development, and interpretive justification [34,35].

Although qualitative research does not seek statistical generalization, it does require analytical plausibility and methodological transparency. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as theoretically transferable rather than universally generalizable: they offer an interpretive framework that may be useful for examining similar relationships between media discourse, insecurity, public space, and cultural life in other port, coastal, or tourism-dependent territories.

Ethical considerations were equally central to the design and execution of this study. The research relied exclusively on publicly accessible journalistic texts and official public documents; therefore, it did not involve direct interaction, intervention, recruitment, or data collection from human participants. However, the public availability of the data does not eliminate ethical responsibility. Contemporary research ethics emphasize that researchers must consider not only formal consent requirements, but the potential consequences of interpretation, representation, and dissemination, especially when dealing with vulnerable communities, sensitive topics, or contexts marked by violence

and social harm [47–49]. Consequently, this study adopted an ethics of care, contextual sensitivity and representational responsibility throughout the analytical process.

The main ethical risk of this study was not related to the exposure of private personal data, but to the possible reproduction of symbolic harm. Research on violence, fear, and insecurity can unintentionally amplify stigma when it repeatedly associates a territory with danger, disorder, or social decay. This is particularly relevant in the case of Puerto Bolívar, where the cultural, economic, and affective value of the territory may be overshadowed by media narratives centered on extortion, fear, and restricted mobility. For this reason, the analysis avoided sensationalist reproduction of violent events and did not include unnecessary descriptive details that could intensify fear, normalize harm, or further stigmatize local communities. Instead, this study privileged structural interpretation, public meaning, institutional implications, and cultural consequences. This decision is aligned with ethical approaches that call for minimizing harm, protecting dignity, and avoiding the exploitation of suffering as an object of academic or media consumption [50,51].

This study adopted a principle of proportionality in the use of journalistic material. News texts were treated as objects of public discourse rather than as neutral mirrors of reality. Accordingly, the analysis did not reproduce extended fragments of media coverage when paraphrase and analytical synthesis were sufficient. This was important for two reasons. First, it helped avoid the unnecessary circulation of fear-inducing narratives. Second, it allowed this study to focus on discursive patterns, frames, and representational logic rather than on the repetition of individual episodes. From an ethical standpoint, this distinction matters because research on public communication should not merely replicate the visible structures of the media; it should critically examine them [19,52,53]. Thus, this study approached journalistic texts as evidence of public meaning-making, while maintaining a critical distance from the frames and assumptions embedded in those texts.

This study also considered the ethical implications of territorial representation. Puerto Bolívar was not approached as a homogeneous space of risk, but as a socially complex territory shaped by maritime life, gastronomy, commerce, tourism, memory, community practices, and public-cultural access. This distinction was important because ethical research should avoid reducing communities to the problems that affect them. In contexts marked by violence or insecurity, academic analysis must be careful not to transform places into symbols of deficit or danger. Instead, it should recognize the coexistence of vulnerability, resilience, cultural agency, and institutional responsibility. This perspective is consistent with ethical scholarship that emphasizes respect, justice, contextual integrity, and the social consequences of research representation [51,54,55].

The investigation followed general principles of research integrity, including honesty in interpretation, transparency in methodological decisions, accountability in the handling of evidence, and responsible stewardship of research findings. These principles are consistent with international frameworks on responsible research conduct, particularly the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity, which emphasizes honesty, accountability, professional responsibility, and good stewardship as core standards for credible research [56,57]. In practical terms, this meant avoiding overclaiming, acknowledging the limitations of the corpus, distinguishing between empirical findings and interpretive inference, and ensuring that the conclusions remained grounded in the data. Ethical rigor, therefore, was not limited to compliance with formal requirements; it was understood as an ongoing commitment to producing knowledge that is analytically careful, socially responsible, and respectful of the communities and territories represented in this study.

3.5. Alignment Between Objectives, Theory, and Analysis

The analytical design of this study was structured to ensure a clear and systematic alignment between the research objectives, the theoretical framework, the coding categories, and the interpretation of the findings. This alignment was essential because qualitative research requires coherence between what this study seeks to explain, the conceptual lenses through which the phenomenon is examined, the empirical materials selected for analysis, and the interpretive procedures used to generate the findings [58,59]. Accordingly, the analysis did not treat the objectives, theory, and categories as separate components of the research design. Instead, they were integrated into a single analytical architecture that guided the examination of media discourse, territorial representation, fear, mobility, cultural access, and policy implications.

This study followed an abductive and iterative analytical logic. This means that the coding categories were informed by the theoretical framework, but they were also refined through close engagement with the empirical corpus. Such an approach is particularly appropriate in a qualitative content analysis and a thematic analysis, where theory provides conceptual orientation while the data allow the researchers to identify emergent patterns, tensions, and meanings not fully anticipated at the beginning of this study [34,35,39]. In practical terms, this procedure allowed this study to maintain conceptual consistency without imposing a rigid interpretive scheme on the journalistic texts. The result was an analytical process capable of connecting media frames with broader questions of public meaning, territorial stigma, cultural vulnerability, and institutional response.

Objective 1, which focused on identifying dominant media frames, was addressed through categories such as dominant frame, territorial referent, narrative sequencing, and evaluative tone. These categories were directly linked to framing theory, which understands media discourse as a process through which certain aspects of reality are selected, emphasized, and made meaningful within public debate [8]. The category of dominant frame made it possible to identify whether Puerto Bolívar was represented primarily through insecurity, economic decline, community resilience, institutional action, cultural identity, or territorial abandonment. The category of territorial referent allowed the analysis to determine whether the news discourse located violence in specific spaces, such as the malecón, the cabotage pier, the maritime route to Jambelí, commercial areas, or the broader port territory. Narrative sequencing was used to examine how events were ordered discursively; for example, whether the news began with criminal threat, economic impact, institutional reaction, or community experience. Finally, evaluative tone helped identify whether the coverage reinforced alarm, uncertainty, resignation, resilience, or calls for public intervention.

Objective 2, which examined the relationship between fear and mobility, was addressed through the lexical and discursive markers associated with fear, silence, retreat, public space vulnerability, and guarded mobility. This objective was theoretically connected to mobility studies and public space scholarship, which argue that mobility is not merely physical displacement, but a socially conditioned experience shaped by perception, risk, infrastructure, power, and affect [11–14]. In this study, the analysis explored how media narratives represented the movement of residents, tourists, fishers, workers, and visitors within Puerto Bolívar and its maritime routes. Particular attention was paid to expressions that suggested withdrawal from public space, reduced circulation, avoidance of certain routes, dependence on guarded movement, or the perception that everyday mobility had become fragile, conditional, or threatened. This allowed the study to examine fear not only as an emotion, but as a spatial force capable of reorganizing access to territory, culture, commerce, and leisure.

Objective 3, which focused on tourism, commerce, and maritime life, was addressed through categories related to tourism decline, local commerce, fishing labor, extortion, maritime activity, and mobility disruption. This objective was grounded in scholarship on tourism, local economies, and the symbolic production of place, which emphasizes that territories are sustained not only by infrastructure, but by narratives, expectations, everyday practices, and public confidence [60,61]. In the case of Puerto Bolívar, tourism, gastronomy, fishing, maritime transport, and port memory are not isolated economic sectors, they are part of the cultural and symbolic identity of the territory. Therefore, the analysis examined how journalistic discourse represented the weakening, interruption, or transformation of these activities under conditions of insecurity.

The categories allowed this study to identify whether the media presented local actors as victims of extortion, passive subjects of crisis, agents of resilience, or participants in possible processes of territorial recovery.

Objective 4, which addressed the symbolic enclosure, was operationalized through the following four empirical indicators derived from the theoretical framework: the discursive association of the territory with danger; the representation of public space as vulnerable or restricted; the weakening of cultural, commercial, and maritime practices; the reduction or displacement of community agency within the media narratives. This objective was connected to debates on territorial stigma, spatial inequality, and the symbolic production of urban fear [62,63]. The symbolic enclosure was understood not as a formal physical closure, but as a discursive and affective process through which a territory becomes imagined as inaccessible, unsafe, or socially diminished. The analysis therefore examined how the media narratives may contribute to enclosing Puerto Bolívar symbolically by narrowing its public image to fear, violence, or risk, while also identifying moments where the coverage opened alternative meanings related to resilience, memory, cultural identity, or collective recovery.

Objective 5, which focused on practical implications, was addressed by connecting the findings to policy recommendations for security governance, cultural reactivation, responsible communication, and heritage-oriented territorial recovery. This objective ensured that this study did not remain only at the level of textual interpretation, but translated its analytical results into public policy relevance. In this sense, the findings were interpreted in relation to the need for integrated governance, evidence-based decision-making, community participation, and responsible media practices. This step is consistent with applied qualitative research, which seeks not only to understand social meanings, but to identify implications for institutional action, public debate, and social transformation [11–13,28].

The recommendations were therefore not external additions to the analysis; they emerged from the same empirical patterns identified in the corpus. To make this alignment explicit, this study organized the analytical process according to the following correspondence between objectives, theoretical concepts, coding categories, and interpretive outputs (see Table 6).

This alignment also contributed to the internal validity and analytical transparency of this study. By explicitly linking each objective to specific theoretical constructs and coding categories, the research reduced the risk of interpretive dispersion and ensured that the findings remained grounded in the stated aims of this study. At the same time, the design allowed for analytical flexibility, since emergent categories could be incorporated when the corpus revealed new or unexpected patterns. This balance between theoretical coherence and empirical openness is essential in qualitative research, particularly when the object of this study involves complex phenomena, such as violence, fear, media representation, and territorial identity [42,43].

Table 6. Methodological alignment.

Research Objective	Theoretical Orientation	Main Coding Categories	Analytical Purpose
Objective 1: Identify dominant media frames.	Framing theory and agenda-setting.	Dominant frame; territorial referent; narrative sequencing; evaluative tone.	To determine how Puerto Bolívar is discursively constructed in media coverage and which aspects of the territory are emphasized or marginalized.
Objective 2: Examine fear and mobility.	Mobility studies, public space theory, and geographies of fear.	Lexical markers of fear; silence; retreat; public space vulnerability; guarded mobility.	To analyze how insecurity is represented as affecting movement, circulation, access, and everyday territorial experience.
Objective 3: Analyze tourism, commerce, and maritime life.	Sociology of place, tourism studies, and local economy approaches.	Tourism decline; local commerce; fishing labor; extortion; maritime disruption; economic vulnerability.	To understand how media discourse links insecurity with the weakening or transformation of culturally and economically significant practices.
Objective 4: Examine symbolic enclosure.	Territorial stigma, spatial inequality, and symbolic geography.	Association with danger; restricted public space; weakened cultural practices; diminished community agency.	To identify how media narratives may contribute to the symbolic closure or stigmatization of Puerto Bolívar.
Objective 5: Derive practical implications.	Applied qualitative research and public policy relevance.	Security governance; cultural reactivation; responsible communication; heritage recovery.	To connect the findings with evidence-based recommendations for territorial recovery and public-cultural access.

Overall, the alignment between objectives, theory, and analysis strengthened the methodological consistency of this study by demonstrating how each stage of the research process contributed to the central argument. The objectives defined the analytical direction; the theoretical framework provided the conceptual vocabulary; the coding categories operationalized the analysis; and the findings connected the empirical evidence with broader discussions about media discourse, public space, mobility, cultural vulnerability, and policy response. In this way, this study offers not only a descriptive account of media coverage, but an interpretive framework for understanding how journalistic narratives can shape the social meaning, perceived accessibility, and symbolic future of territories affected by violence and fear.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Quantitative Overview of the Corpus

The focal corpus comprised eight journalistic texts. Descriptive coding showed that references to criminal violence or insecurity appeared in all eight texts (100%). Indicators associated with symbolic enclosure appeared in six texts (75%), while explicit references to extortion or coercive control appeared in four texts (50%). Fear, silence, or public retreat appeared in four texts (50%) and tourism, commerce, or local economic decline appeared in three texts (37.5%). These counts demonstrate that the interpretive findings are not based on isolated examples, but on recurrent article-level patterns across outlets and genres (see Table 7).

Table 7. Article-level frequency of analytical themes and keyword clusters in the focal corpus ($n = 8$).

Analytical Theme/Keyword Cluster	Texts Containing Theme (n)	Corpus Percentage	Interpretive Relevance
Criminal violence/insecurity	8	100%	Establishes insecurity as the transversal semantic field of the corpus.
Machala/El Oro territorial reference	8	100%	Anchors coverage in a clearly identifiable provincial and urban geography.
Puerto Bolívar/port or coastal environment	5	62.5%	Shows the centrality of the parish and maritime setting in the crisis narrative.
Symbolic enclosure indicators	6	75%	Reveals recurring narrowing of lived access through fear, stigma, or avoidance.
Extortion/coercive control	4	50%	Connects violence with everyday economic, professional, and maritime life.
Fear, silence, or public retreat	4	50%	Shows fear as a rule of conduct rather than an isolated emotion.
Tourism, commerce, or local economic decline	3	37.5%	Connects insecurity with weakening of heritage-related economic vitality.
Mobility disruption/securitized access	2	25%	Shows that movement to meaningful places becomes conditional or guarded.
Maritime insecurity/fishing labor	1	12.5%	Extends the analysis from urban space to the sea and port labor.

The descriptive indicators are therefore consistent with the qualitative interpretation: criminality operates as a transversal frame, while symbolic enclosure emerges through repeated links among fear, territorial stigma, mobility disruption, public space vulnerability, and economic–cultural thinning. The quantitative layer strengthens the Section 4 by making the recurrence of interpretive patterns visible without converting this study into a statistical or generalizable survey of all Ecuadorian press coverage.

4.2. Urban Siege as Dominant Territorial Frame

The first major finding is that the Ecuadorian digital press represented Machala through a dominant frame of urban siege. Rather than narrating violence as isolated events, the corpus constructed insecurity as a territorial condition that reorganized the city's public image. *Diario El Mercurio*'s headline, "Machala bajo asedio criminal" ["Machala under criminal siege"], condensed this logic: the city appears not only as a place where violent events occur, but as a space pressured, surrounded, and symbolically penetrated by criminal power [64].

This siege frame is analytically significant because it transforms the city from a geographic location into a discursive object of crisis. The press representation does not simply report violence, it creates an interpretive atmosphere in which violence becomes the main lens through which the city is read. In this sense, Machala's prior symbolic associations with banana exports, commercial vitality, port activity, coastal movement, and regional productivity are not entirely erased, they are displaced by a vocabulary of pressure, fear, criminal expansion, and institutional insufficiency.

This displacement is consistent with framing theory, which argues that media discourse selects and emphasizes certain aspects of reality while marginalizing others, thereby shaping how public problems are understood and evaluated [8]. In the corpus, the selected emphasis is clear: Machala is increasingly narrated as a territory under constraint.

Diario El Mercurio reinforced this diagnosis by describing El Oro as living through “sus horas más dramáticas” [“its most dramatic hours”] and by portraying the criminal wave as “indetenible” and “sin visos de solución” [“unstoppable” and “with no signs of solution”] [64]. These expressions construct the crisis as prolonged rather than episodic, while also suggesting institutional exhaustion and a weakened capacity to restore public order.

From a critical perspective, this dominant frame produces ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it makes visible the severity of the violence and the urgency of the institutional response. On the other hand, it may contribute to the symbolic narrowing of the city by reducing its public image to the language of threat. This is particularly important in territories whose social and economic life depends on mobility, commerce, tourism, public confidence, and cultural circulation. When a city becomes framed as “under siege”, public perception may shift from concern to avoidance, from civic participation to retreat, and from territorial belonging to symbolic distancing. The result is a mediated geography of fear in which the city’s public meaning is reorganized around vulnerability.

The urban siege frame operates as more than a journalistic metaphor. It functions as a central narrative device through which Machala is repositioned within the national imagination. The city appears as a frontier of criminal pressure, a territory where violence interrupts normality and where the state appears reactive rather than preventive. This finding is crucial for the broader argument of this study because it shows that media representations of insecurity do not remain at the level of information; they participate in the production of territorial meaning. In the case of Machala, the press constructs a semantic environment in which fear becomes the dominant grammar for interpreting the city.

4.3. Puerto Bolívar as Deteriorated and Symbolically Narrowed Territory

The second major finding concerns the reconfiguration of Puerto Bolívar as a deteriorated and symbolically narrowed territory. The corpus rarely foregrounds it as a maritime–touristic gateway, gastronomic destination, or vibrant parish. Instead, it appears as a contested space marked by organized crime, commercial weakening, fear, and loss of public vitality. This transformation is visible in Primicias, which describes “El ocaso de Puerto Bolívar” [“The decline of Puerto Bolívar”], and presents the parish as “agoniza” [“agonizing”] because of organized crime [18].

This metaphor of decline is reinforced when Primicias contrasts the parish’s previous identity with its present crisis. The article recalls that Puerto Bolívar “pasó de ser un vibrante centro gastronómico, turístico y comercial” [“went from being a vibrant gastronomic, tourist and commercial center”] to becoming a disputed territory of criminal organizations [18].

This contrast is analytically important because it constructs a before and after narrative. The “before” is associated with vitality, tourism, commerce, and coastal identity; the “after” is linked to fear, criminal penetration, and territorial abandonment. Such narrative sequencing produces a sense of rupture: Puerto Bolívar is represented not as a territory with isolated security problems, but as a place whose social function has been altered.

The same report states that the area’s roads, “antes repletas de actividad comercial, hoy están desiertas” [previously full of commercial activity, are now deserted] [18]. This sentence is analytically relevant because empty streets signal more than fewer customers, they indicate the weakening of co-presence, informal sociability, and ordinary public use. In cultural terms, the erosion of repeated practices—walking, eating, waiting,

buying, and gathering—also weakens the everyday performativity through which place remains meaningful.

From the perspective of territorial stigma, this representation narrows the symbolic identity of Puerto Bolívar. A place associated with port life, seafood gastronomy, maritime travel, and popular recreation becomes publicly read through abandonment and risk. The press does not invent the crisis; however, its narrative form matters. When a territory is repeatedly framed as dangerous or in decline, its image may sediment around deficit and threat, a process consistent with territorial stigma [63].

However, the finding also reveals a deeper cultural consequence. Puerto Bolívar's deterioration is not only material or economic, but it is also symbolic. Gastronomic routes, maritime mobility, port memory, fishing labor, and family leisure are forms of intangible cultural access. Their weakening implies that people may continue to recognize the territory physically, but no longer experience it as fully available, safe, or socially welcoming. This is why the notion of symbolic narrowing is central: Puerto Bolívar remains geographically open, but its imagined accessibility is reduced. The press thus documents and amplifies a process in which insecurity affects not only bodies and businesses, but meanings, memories, and collective attachments.

4.4. Fear, Silence, and Public Retreat

The third major finding is the construction of fear as a social condition rather than a temporary emotion. El Universo's resident-centered report foregrounds the phrase "Aquí sobrevive el que ve, oye y calla" ["Here, the one who sees, hears and remains silent survives"] [15]. The statement condenses a local rule of survival: public knowledge must be accompanied by silence and visibility must be regulated by fear.

The phrase is particularly powerful because it reverses the democratic meaning of public space. In principle, public space is a place of encounter, expression, circulation, and visibility. In the report, however, public space becomes a territory where seeing and hearing do not lead to speech, participation, or denunciation, but to self-protection. Silence is not represented as indifference, it is represented as an adaptive strategy.

This distinction is analytically important because it prevents a simplistic reading of community silence as passivity. The silence described in the corpus is produced by fear, by the perception of risk, and by the belief that speaking may expose individuals to harm. This finding is central to the concept of the symbolic enclosure. The corpus does not necessarily show the formal closure of Puerto Bolívar through walls, gates, or official prohibitions. Rather, it shows a subtler form of closure: the narrowing of social behavior. Residents and visitors are represented as reorganizing their routines around caution, avoidance, restricted speech, and guarded presence. In this sense, public space remains physically present, but its democratic and cultural availability is reduced. People may still walk, trade, travel, or work, but these practices are marked by fear and calculation. The territory becomes accessible in a conditional way.

The report also frames Puerto Bolívar as a place where violent events have "alejado al turismo" ["driven tourism away"] [65]. This connection between fear and tourism is crucial because it demonstrates how insecurity travels beyond direct victims. Violence affects not only those who suffer an attack or extortion, but those who decide not to visit, not to open a business, not to remain in public space, or not to participate in cultural life. Fear therefore becomes a social organizer. It redistributes mobility, modifies routines, empties spaces, and reshapes economic expectations.

Critically, the press coverage reveals how fear becomes normalized when it is incorporated into everyday language. Expressions such as seeing, hearing, and remaining silent suggest that insecurity has entered the moral and practical codes of daily life. This

corresponds to what [62] describes as the spatialization of fear: fear is not abstract, but attached to places, routes, thresholds, schedules, and bodily practices. In Puerto Bolívar, fear is not only narrated as an emotion, it becomes a spatial discipline. It teaches people where to go, when to leave, what to say, what to avoid, and how much visibility they can afford.

Therefore, this result demonstrates that the media representation of fear is inseparable from the transformation of public life. The press does not merely report that people are afraid; it shows how fear becomes embedded in gestures, routines, and decisions. This has profound implications for cultural access. A territory may preserve its physical infrastructure, its malecón, its pier, its restaurants, and its maritime route, but if fear governs the conditions of use, then cultural life becomes fragile. The symbolic enclosure of Puerto Bolívar is thus produced not only by criminal violence, but by the gradual internalization of caution as a mode of inhabiting the territory.

4.5. *Guarded Mobility and Interrupted Public–Cultural Life*

The major finding concerns the emergence of guarded mobility and the interruption of public–cultural life. In the corpus, mobility to and from Puerto Bolívar is no longer represented as an ordinary, spontaneous, or carefree practice. Instead, movement appears increasingly conditioned by security presence, public caution, and institutional protection. This is particularly visible in the coverage of the maritime route to Jambelí, historically associated with leisure, family tourism, and coastal identity.

El Universo reported “resguardo policial” [“police protection”] in Puerto Bolívar for tourists traveling to Jambelí, while also noting that only “una baja cantidad de turistas” [“a low number of tourists”] traveled during the holiday [15]. The coexistence of protection and low attendance is analytically revealing; a security presence may enable movement, but it also confirms that mobility has become exceptionalized.

This shift from ordinary to guarded mobility is crucial for understanding how insecurity affects cultural access. The maritime corridor between Puerto Bolívar and Jambelí is not merely a transportation route, it is a public–cultural itinerary that connects the city with the sea, the port with recreation, and local identity with coastal tourism. When the route requires heightened security or institutional reassurance, its symbolic meaning changes: leisure becomes movement through a perceived risk environment [11–14].

Local coverage also reveals the tension between institutional reassurance and social uncertainty. [65] described the presence of a “unidad de videovigilancia móvil”, “patrulla”, “motorizados”, and “agentes pedestres” as part of the security operation for citizens traveling to Jambelí. The enumeration of security devices creates an image of organized protection, but it also indicates that mobility has become dependent on visible control.

This is the paradox of guarded tourism: protection seeks to restore confidence, yet the very visibility of protection reminds visitors that the route is no longer perceived as naturally safe. A related pattern appears in coverage of the attack near the Puerto Bolívar malecón. Expreso reported that an armed attack in the malecón area “interrumpió una misa” [“interrupted a mass”] at the Templo Faro church [66]. This quotation places violence inside the temporal and symbolic order of communal life. The interrupted act is not only a religious ceremony, it is a public gathering and a ritualized sign of shared presence, memory, and community continuity.

The article further indicates that the attack occurred while a religious ceremony was taking place for the delivery of works in the restored church [66]. This detail intensifies the symbolic significance of the event. The setting was not only public and religious, it was connected to urban restoration and institutional presence. In other words, the attack disrupted a scene that represented recovery, improvement, and communal gathering.

This produces a powerful contrast between reconstruction and vulnerability: even spaces recently restored and publicly activated appear exposed to interruption.

The analytical relevance of this finding lies in the fact that public-cultural life becomes vulnerable even when spaces remain formally open. The malecón, the church, the pier, and the maritime route are not simply physical sites. They are stages of sociability, memory, ritual, commerce, leisure, and shared identity. When these sites are framed through armed attacks, police protection, low tourist attendance, or interrupted ceremonies, their social meaning changes. They remain visible, but their availability is symbolically weakened.

Thus, guarded mobility and interrupted ritual operate as two connected expressions of the symbolic enclosure. Guarded mobility shows that movement continues, but under conditions of surveillance and caution. Interrupted ritual shows that gathering continues, but under the possibility of sudden disruption. Together, they reveal a territory where cultural life does not disappear completely, but becomes precarious, conditional, and exposed. This finding is fundamental for the article's argument: the consequences of insecurity are not limited to crime statistics, they extend to the affective and symbolic conditions under which people inhabit, remember, and use public space.

4.6. Maritime Labor, Extortion, and Economic-Cultural Erosion

The fifth major finding concerns the extension of insecurity from streets, restaurants, and public spaces into maritime labor and professional environments. This is especially important because Puerto Bolívar's identity is inseparable from the sea. Fishing, maritime transport, seafood gastronomy, port memory, and coastal tourism are not merely economic sectors, they are cultural practices through which the territory becomes meaningful. The corpus shows that criminal pressure has entered precisely these circuits, producing an erosion that is simultaneously economic, social, and cultural.

GK's long-form report frames this phenomenon through the title, "El mar tomado" ["The taken sea"], a phrase that radically expands the geography of insecurity [17]. The sea is no longer represented as an open space of labor, mobility, and livelihood, but as a contested territory subject to criminal control. This is a decisive finding because it prevents the analysis from remaining within an urban-centered view of violence. In Puerto Bolívar, insecurity is not confined to streets or neighborhoods, it extends to docks, boats, routes, fishing economies, and maritime imaginaries.

The same report states that "Más del 70% de los pescadores de Puerto Bolívar" ["More than 70% of Puerto Bolívar's fishers"] pay extortion fees in order to work and sail [17]. This evidence is crucial because it shows that extortion functions as a mechanism of labor regulation. It is not only an illegal demand for money, it becomes a condition imposed on the possibility of working. In this context, the act of going to sea, which should represent productive autonomy and cultural continuity, becomes mediated by coercion. The fisher is no longer only a worker of the sea, he becomes a subject forced to negotiate survival within criminalized conditions of labor.

The report also includes the direct testimony of a fishing leader who states, "Todos pagan. Nadie se escapa de eso" ["Everyone pays. No one escapes it"] [17]. This sentence is analytically powerful because it represents extortion as generalized and normalized. The phrase does not describe an isolated group of victims; it suggests a collective structure of coercion. The universality implied by "todos" and the inevitability implied by "nadie se escapa" reveal how criminal power operates not only through spectacular violence, but through everyday economic extraction. This type of coercion reorganizes the conditions of life by making fear part of routine labor.

The extension of extortion beyond maritime labor is visible in La Hora's report on a network targeting doctors in Machala. The article states that guards allegedly monitored

and photographed physicians before demanding money in exchange for “protección” [“protection”] [67]. This case is relevant because it shows that coercive logic is not limited to informal or visibly vulnerable sectors, it also penetrates professional and institutional environments, including health services. The implication is that extortion becomes a transversal mode of social control affecting commerce, labor, health institutions, mobility, and everyday trust.

This pattern has important analytical consequences. Extortion appears in the corpus not merely as a criminal act, but as a form of parallel governance. It imposes payments, regulates movement, determines who can work, generates silence, produces fear, and weakens institutional credibility. In territories such as Puerto Bolívar, where economic practices are deeply connected to cultural identity, this has direct implications for intangible heritage. Gastronomy depends on fishing labor; tourism depends on maritime mobility; commercial vitality depends on visitor trust; and public culture depends on the possibility of gathering without fear. When extortion affects one of these dimensions, it indirectly affects the others.

From a cultural perspective, the erosion is cumulative. If fishers pay to sail, restaurants lose customers, tourists reduce visits, professionals experience threats, and residents retreat from public life, the territory suffers more than economic decline; it experiences a weakening of the practices that sustain its public meaning. Puerto Bolívar’s identity as a maritime, gastronomic, and touristic space depends on circulation, labor continuity, social confidence, and repeated use. When these elements are interrupted or made conditional, cultural access becomes fragile.

This finding therefore demonstrates that the cultural and economic roles of heritage are deeply interconnected. Puerto Bolívar’s heritage cannot be understood only as architecture, landscape, or memory; it is also embodied in labor, routes, food practices, maritime knowledge, commercial exchange, and public sociability. The press corpus shows that insecurity damages these living practices by altering the conditions under which they can be performed. The physical landscape may remain visible, but the social practices that give it meaning become constrained.

Taken together, the five findings reveal a coherent pattern: the press constructs Machala and Puerto Bolívar through a layered narrative of siege, decline, fear, guarded movement, and economic–cultural erosion. These frames do not simply describe insecurity, they organize the public intelligibility of the territory.

The city becomes readable through siege; Puerto Bolívar through decline; residents through silence; tourists through guarded mobility; fishers and workers through extortion. The result is a mediated process of the symbolic enclosure in which violence reshapes not only safety, but memory, mobility, culture, work, and territorial identity (see Table 8).

Table 8. Results summary by research sub-question.

Research Sub-Question	Main Result	Empirical Indicator	Heritage Implication
RQ1. Dominant frames	Urban siege and territorial deterioration.	Siege, crisis, violence, and abandonment.	Place identity is publicly re-signified through insecurity.
RQ2. Fear and mobility	Fear becomes routine and access becomes guarded.	Silence, retreat, and police-protected movement.	Public–cultural access becomes affectively burdened.
RQ3. Tourism, commerce, and maritime life	Economic and cultural thinning are intertwined.	Empty streets, reduced tourism, and extortion of workers.	Heritage loses vitality through reduced use and trust.
RQ4. Symbolic enclosure	Places remain open but functionally narrowed.	Stigma, avoidance, and interrupted ritual.	Heritage erosion occurs without physical destruction.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that criminal insecurity in Machala and Puerto Bolívar should not be interpreted solely as a matter of public order or crime control. The evidence points to a broader process through which violence affects the social conditions that sustain public-cultural life, local recognition, and everyday access to meaningful urban space. This interpretation is consistent with critical heritage studies, which insist that heritage is not exhausted by material permanence but depends on social use, collective meaning, and ongoing enactment in everyday life [3,6].

From that perspective, the deterioration described in the corpus points to a form of heritage deactivation. Puerto Bolívar does not disappear physically from the city's landscape, nor does the route to Jambelí cease to exist geographically. What changes is the degree to which these spaces remain socially available as environments of encounter, mobility, leisure, work, and belonging. Once fear reorganizes the terms of access, heritage becomes weakened in practice, even if it remains publicly recognizable in symbolic or administrative terms [4,7].

This is why the concept of the symbolic enclosure is analytically useful. It explains how a place may remain formally accessible but culturally constrained. The evidence from the corpus shows the four indicators proposed in the theoretical framework: repeated association of meaningful places with danger; representation of ordinary practices as interrupted or abandoned; language of silence, emptiness, and survival; displacement of prior meanings associated with tourism, gastronomy, maritime work, and civic belonging.

The results also reinforce the importance of media studies for heritage research. Journalism did not create the violence affecting Machala; however, it contributed to stabilizing the semantic field through which the city became publicly legible as a place of siege, guarded movement, and shrinking normality.

This confirms the relevance of framing and representation theory for the study of heritage-related crises, since the social meaning of a place is partly constituted through recurring discursive operations that define what is seen, feared and prioritized in public culture [8,10].

The descriptive quantitative layer further supports this interpretation. The fact that symbolic enclosure indicators appeared in six of the eight focal texts shows that the narrowing of cultural access was not an isolated observation, while the recurrence of extortion, fear, tourism decline, and mobility disruption across different outlets confirms that the crisis was represented through overlapping social, economic, and cultural registers. These article-level counts do not claim statistical representativeness, but they make the empirical recurrence of the interpretive findings more transparent.

Democratic journalism remains essential in contexts of violence because it makes suffering visible, exposes institutional failure, and resists the normalization of silence. The deeper issue is that reporting on insecurity often remains limited to event, casualty, and police response, while giving insufficient attention to the civic and cultural consequences of fear. The Machala case suggests that journalism in violent settings would benefit from a broader representational horizon capable of documenting not only crime, but how crime transforms belonging, mobility, and the social life of heritage [11–13,19].

For heritage studies, the central contribution is to show that cultural loss may occur before it is named as such. The journalistic corpus rarely used the language of intangible cultural heritage, yet it repeatedly documented its symptoms, such as declining visitor flows, guarded tourism, fear-driven retreat, emptied commercial spaces, interrupted ritual, and weakened use of emblematic urban settings. This suggests that part of the scholarly

task is conceptual: to identify heritage loss where public discourse registers its effects without yet possessing the vocabulary to describe them adequately [3,7,68].

5.1. *Practical Contributions for Policy, Practice, and Territorial Governance*

The practical contribution of this study is to translate the concept of intangible cultural access into a governance problem that can be acted upon by institutions. For cultural practitioners, the findings suggest that heritage recovery in Puerto Bolívar should not be limited to festivals, branding, or symbolic promotion. Cultural activation must be linked to safe access, predictable mobility, public space programming, and community trust.

Practitioners can use indicators of public–cultural visitor access flow, malecón use, participation in cultural activities, business reopening, perceived safety, and maritime travel to evaluate whether cultural life is actually recovering. For policymakers, the findings imply that security policy and heritage policy should not operate in isolation. If extortion, territorial fear, and guarded mobility reduce the ability of residents and visitors to use culturally meaningful spaces, public security becomes part of heritage governance. This requires coordination among municipal authorities, police, tourism offices, cultural agencies, port and maritime authorities, business associations, and fisher organizations.

For media practitioners, the article offers an ethical implication: reporting on violence is democratically necessary, but coverage should avoid reducing Puerto Bolívar to a single grammar of fear. Journalistic practice can strengthen public understanding by documenting not only criminal events, but the cultural, economic, and civic consequences of insecurity, including the voices of fishers, restaurant owners, families, cultural workers, and local residents. This does not mean minimizing violence; it means expanding the representational horizon so that affected territories are not symbolically abandoned.

For tourism and local industry stakeholders, this study indicates that destination recovery requires more than marketing. Tourism vulnerability in Puerto Bolívar is connected to confidence, mobility, local commerce, maritime transport, and perceived safety. Therefore, tourism strategies should include coordinated information systems, protected routes, support for small businesses, cultural itineraries, community-based guides, and monitoring of visitor perceptions. These measures would help transform heritage from an abstract identity resource into a practical framework for territorial recovery.

5.2. *Study Limitations*

This subsection presents the limitations of this study as a distinct component of the manuscript in order to delimit the scope, validity, and transferability of the findings. These limitations do not invalidate the analytical contribution of the research; rather, they clarify the conditions under which the results should be interpreted and transferred to comparable contexts [11–13,58].

Two methodological limitations deserve particular emphasis. First, this study used a small purposive sample of eight focal texts. Second, coding was conducted by one primary researcher, although analytic auditing and peer debriefing with the co-authors were used to strengthen interpretive consistency. These decisions are appropriate for an exploratory qualitative content analysis, but they limit statistical generalization and do not allow for the reporting of formal intercoder reliability coefficients [37,69].

The corpus was purposive and limited to eight focal journalistic texts. The findings therefore cannot be statistically generalized to all Ecuadorian press coverage of Machala, Puerto Bolívar, or Jambelí. The sample was designed to privilege information—rich cases with high thematic density, territorial focus, and discursive relevance to violence, fear,

mobility, and cultural access. Consequently, the results should be understood in terms of analytical transferability rather than statistical generalization [37,69].

The descriptive quantitative indicators incorporated into this revision must also be interpreted within this limited scope. These indicators were designed to improve transparency regarding the corpus, such as the distribution of articles, themes, frames, or territorial references at the article level. However, they should not be read as inferential measures of national media frequency or as evidence of broader statistical trends in Ecuadorian journalism. In this sense, the quantitative component plays a complementary descriptive role, but this study remains primarily qualitative and interpretive. This distinction is important because a qualitative content analysis may include counts or descriptive indicators without converting the research into a statistically generalizable design [34,35].

This study focuses on national digital press and does not include television, radio, social media platforms, institutional communication campaigns, or local community-based narratives. This delimitation necessarily restricts the range of representations analyzed. Television and radio may construct insecurity through audiovisual immediacy, sound, testimony, and emotional dramatization; social media may circulate more fragmented, affective, or participatory narratives; and community accounts may offer alternative meanings grounded in lived experience, memory, resilience, and territorial belonging. As a result, the corpus captures an important but partial dimension of the public representation of Puerto Bolívar and Jambelí. Media discourse is heterogeneous, and different platforms may produce different forms of visibility, silence, amplification, or resistance [19,52,53].

The temporal scope of the corpus should also be considered. The selected articles correspond to a specific period in which violence, extortion, public fear, and territorial vulnerability received heightened journalistic attention. Consequently, the findings capture a particular moment of media visibility and crisis narration. They do not necessarily account for longer-term transformations in the representation of Machala or Puerto Bolívar before or after the period analyzed. Media frames are dynamic and territorial representations may shift depending on political events, security interventions, tourism campaigns, community mobilization, or changes in editorial priorities. A longitudinal design would be necessary to determine whether the frames identified in this study persist, intensify, decline, or transform over time.

This study is limited by its reliance on published journalistic material. News articles are not neutral windows into reality; they are mediated constructions shaped by editorial routines, source selection, institutional agendas, journalistic conventions, newsworthiness criteria, and broader political-economic conditions of media production [8,23]. Therefore, the analysis cannot assume that the press directly reflects the empirical reality of Puerto Bolívar. Rather, it examines how that reality is publicly narrated, organized, and made intelligible through journalistic discourse. This limitation is also a strength of this study, since its main objective is precisely to understand the symbolic and discursive production of territorial meaning.

This study gives analytical priority to insecurity, fear, and cultural vulnerability, which may limit the visibility of the other dimensions of Puerto Bolívar's social life. Although the analysis seeks to avoid reducing the territory to violence, the very focus of the research necessarily centers on narratives of risk, crisis, and symbolic enclosure. This creates an ethical and analytical challenge; namely, how to study harmful representations without unintentionally reproducing territorial stigma. For this reason, the article emphasizes structural interpretation, community agency, cultural memory, and policy relevance. Nevertheless,

future research should more directly examine counter-narratives of resilience, everyday solidarity, cultural continuity, local entrepreneurship, and community-led recovery.

The policy recommendations derived from the findings should be understood as analytical implications rather than fully evaluated public policy interventions. This study identifies possible directions for security governance, cultural reactivation, responsible communication, and heritage-oriented territorial recovery, but it does not assess the feasibility, cost, implementation capacity, or political sustainability of these measures. A more policy-oriented study would require interviews with institutional actors, local government officials, tourism authorities, security agencies, community organizations, and economic stakeholders. It would also require the integration of administrative data, mobility records, tourism statistics, business activity indicators, and community perception surveys.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that the recent crisis affecting Machala, particularly Puerto Bolívar and the social-maritime circuit that connects the city to Jambelí, should be interpreted not only as a public security problem, but as a heritage problem. Violence does not need to destroy places physically in order to weaken them culturally. It is enough for fear, territorial dispute, extortion, and insecurity to interrupt the social practices through which those places are recognized, inhabited, visited, and transmitted as meaningful environments [3,6,7]. The following conclusions can be drawn:

- The first conclusion is conceptual. This study clarifies intangible cultural access as the socially effective possibility of using, inhabiting, narrating, and transmitting meaningful cultural spaces. It also clarifies symbolic enclosure as a condition in which a space remains legally open and materially visible, yet becomes functionally narrowed through fear, stigma, media repetition, guarded mobility, and routine avoidance. These concepts respond to a gap in heritage studies by showing how cultural erosion may occur without material destruction.
- The second conclusion is empirical. The Ecuadorian national digital press represented Machala and especially Puerto Bolívar through the following five dominant patterns: urban siege, territorial deterioration, public fear, guarded mobility, and economic-cultural thinning. Descriptive article-level indicators show that criminal violence and insecurity appeared across the entire focal corpus, while symbolic enclosure indicators were present in most texts. Direct textual evidence demonstrates that the press described the city not only as violent, but as increasingly difficult to inhabit, traverse, visit, and imagine through ordinary civic belonging.
- The third conclusion is theoretical. By connecting critical heritage studies, media framing, urban fear, and Latin American securitization research, this article shows that public-cultural access is shaped simultaneously by material insecurity, mediated representation, and affective experience. This study therefore extends heritage research toward contexts of criminal violence and offers communication studies a heritage-sensitive lens for analyzing territorial crisis narratives.
- The fourth conclusion is practical. Recovering Machala's intangible cultural life cannot depend exclusively on policing, nor can it be entrusted only to tourism promotion or urban beautification. What is required is an integrated strategy linking territorial security, cultural policy, local commerce, maritime mobility, public space protection, community trust restoration, and responsible public communication. Heritage governance and security governance must be treated as interconnected fields if public-cultural access is to be genuinely restored.

The research offers a substantive interdisciplinary contribution to the field by demonstrating that heritage erosion can occur not only through material destruction, institutional neglect, or physical displacement, but through the fear-driven weakening of everyday use, affective attachment, and cultural participation, even when spaces remain materially intact and formally accessible. By doing so, it expands critical heritage studies by conceptualizing access as a lived, social, and symbolic condition rather than as a merely legal or physical possibility. It also contributes to media and communication studies by showing how crime reporting can participate in the symbolic redefinition of territories, transforming places historically associated with tourism, commerce, maritime life, memory, and sociability into publicly recognizable spaces of risk, avoidance, and vulnerability.

This study advances urban and policy scholarship by arguing that security governance and heritage governance cannot be treated as separate domains in contexts where violence alters mobility, public trust, local economies, and the everyday practices through which cultural meaning is sustained [3,6,8]. In this sense, the article contributes not only a case-based interpretation of Puerto Bolívar, but a transferable analytical vocabulary for studying other coastal, port, or tourism-dependent territories where criminal violence does not necessarily erase heritage physically, yet progressively restricts the social conditions that allow communities to access, reproduce, and transmit it.

6.1. Actionable Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that the recovery of Puerto Bolívar cannot be addressed exclusively through conventional security responses. Rather, it requires an integrated public policy strategy capable of articulating urban safety, cultural reactivation, economic resilience, community participation, and responsible media communication. In this regard, the following recommendations are proposed as actionable guidelines for local, provincial, and national authorities, as well as for cultural, tourism, security, and community stakeholders.

Three policy priorities emerge from the analysis, as follows: (1) protect mobility and public-cultural corridors so that residents, visitors, and maritime workers can reoccupy culturally meaningful spaces; (2) reactivate Puerto Bolívar's maritime, gastronomic, and community identity through cultural programming, local commerce support, and anti-extortion protection; (3) establish responsible communication and evidence-based governance mechanisms that monitor safety, perceived trust, public space use, and cultural participation.

A first policy priority should be the creation of a protected public-cultural corridor that reconnects central Machala with Puerto Bolívar, the cabotage pier, and the maritime route to Jambelí. This corridor should not be conceived merely as a security perimeter, but as a symbolic and functional infrastructure for restoring mobility, public confidence, and cultural access. It should combine visible but community-sensitive security presence, improved lighting, emergency communication points, safe pedestrian routes, maritime coordination mechanisms, and community-based monitoring. From an urban safety perspective, public spaces become more resilient when they are accessible, well-managed, socially used, and institutionally protected, rather than abandoned to fear or informal control [70–72]. Therefore, the corridor should operate as both a preventive security device and a cultural reconnection strategy, allowing residents, visitors, students, workers, fishers, transport operators, and families to progressively reoccupy the territory under safer and more dignified conditions.

A second recommendation is the development of a cultural reactivation plan specifically focused on Puerto Bolívar's maritime identity, gastronomic traditions, fisher

communities, port memory, public art, guided heritage walks, school–community activities, and family-oriented cultural programming. This plan should avoid reducing culture to occasional events and instead understand it as a long-term mechanism for rebuilding social trust, strengthening territorial identity, and restoring the public value of shared spaces. Cultural policies can contribute to urban recovery when they recognize local communities not only as beneficiaries, but as active producers of memory, heritage, and collective meaning [28]. In this sense, gastronomy, fishing practices, oral histories, community narratives, music, visual arts, and educational heritage activities could function as instruments of symbolic repair, helping to counteract the stigmatization of Puerto Bolívar and reposition it as a living cultural territory rather than merely as a space associated with risk.

Given the socioeconomic effects associated with fear, business closure, reduced mobility, and community vulnerability, it is essential to implement a coordinated anti-extortion protocol aimed at local businesses, restaurants, transport operators, fishers, tourism actors, and health professionals. This protocol should include confidential reporting channels, legal accompaniment, victim-sensitive institutional follow-up, psychosocial orientation, interagency coordination, and periodic assessment of reported cases. However, such a mechanism should not rely only on punitive responses; it should be embedded within broader crime prevention policies based on local diagnosis, community trust, institutional coordination, and protection of victims [71,72].

The effectiveness of this protocol will depend on whether the affected actors perceive that reporting does not expose them to further risk, bureaucratic abandonment, or public stigmatization. For this reason, confidentiality, rapid response, and institutional credibility must be central principles of implementation.

Public institutions, local media, and community stakeholders should develop a responsible communication strategy that informs citizens about insecurity without reducing Puerto Bolívar to a homogeneous narrative of danger. This recommendation is particularly important because media discourse does not simply describe reality; it also contributes to framing public problems, shaping perceptions of risk, and influencing the symbolic reputation of territories [8,23]. A responsible communication strategy should therefore combine factual information on security measures with stories of resilience, cultural vitality, economic recovery, community organization, and institutional action. This does not mean minimizing violence or silencing legitimate concerns; rather, it implies avoiding sensationalist or stigmatizing narratives that may intensify fear, weaken local commerce, and discourage public use of culturally significant spaces. Communication should become a tool for democratic accountability and social recovery, not merely a mechanism for crisis amplification.

Authorities should establish a system of periodic indicators to measure the recovery of public–cultural access in Puerto Bolívar. These indicators should include visitor flow, reopening of businesses, perceived safety, use of the malecón, maritime travel to Jambelí, occupation of public space, participation in cultural activities, school visits, tourism activity, commercial dynamism, and community satisfaction. Such indicators would make it possible to evaluate whether policy interventions are producing tangible improvements or whether they remain limited to short-term institutional announcements. From a methodological standpoint, the use of mixed indicators is especially relevant because it allows for the integration of quantitative data with qualitative perceptions, narratives, and lived experiences [11,13]. In this way, public policy would be able to move beyond reactive decision-making and develop a more precise understanding of how safety, mobility, culture, and trust interact in everyday territorial life.

The recovery of Puerto Bolívar requires an interinstitutional governance mechanism that connects municipal, provincial, and national policies. For this reason, it is recommended to create a heritage and security governance table involving cultural authorities, tourism officials, security institutions, local commerce, fisher associations, transport operators, educational institutions, health sector representatives, and community leaders. This governance table should have clearly defined responsibilities, meeting schedules, monitoring instruments, and public accountability mechanisms. Collaborative governance is especially useful when complex public problems cannot be solved by a single institution and require coordination across sectors, scales, and forms of knowledge [73]. In the case of Puerto Bolívar, this table would help prevent fragmented interventions and instead promote a comprehensive agenda that simultaneously addresses security, cultural reactivation, tourism recovery, economic protection, and community participation.

It is recommended to develop a recovery dashboard for Puerto Bolívar that integrates qualitative and quantitative data on mobility, perceived safety, tourism, commerce, cultural programming, institutional response, public space occupation, and media representation. This dashboard should not be conceived as a purely technical platform, but as a public management tool for evidence-based decision-making, transparency, and policy learning.

Urban dashboards can support governance when they make complex territorial processes visible, comparable, and periodically assessable; however, they must be interpreted critically and be complemented with community knowledge to avoid reducing social realities to isolated metrics [74]. In this case, the dashboard would allow authorities and stakeholders to monitor whether Puerto Bolívar is recovering not only in terms of security statistics, but in terms of public confidence, cultural vitality, economic reopening, and symbolic revaluation.

6.2. Future Research Perspectives

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the empirical corpus and adopting a broader, comparative, and methodologically integrated research design. First, enlarging the corpus would make it possible to examine whether the discursive patterns identified in this study are sustained across a wider range of media outlets, time periods, genres, and editorial lines. This would strengthen the analytical validity of the findings, particularly because a systematic content analysis requires sufficiently diverse and well-delimited samples to capture recurring meanings, narrative structures, and representational tendencies [34]. Second, subsequent studies should incorporate interviews, focus groups, or community-based qualitative approaches with audiences, affected communities, journalists, and local stakeholders. Such a strategy would allow researchers to move beyond textual analysis and to examine how media narratives are interpreted, negotiated, resisted, or internalized by different members of the public, in line with audience reception perspectives that emphasize the active role of audiences in meaning-making processes [75,76].

Additionally, future research should develop comparative analyses between the local and national media in order to identify possible differences in agenda construction, framing strategies, territorial proximity, and the symbolic representation of affected communities. This comparison is particularly relevant because the media do not merely transmit information; they contribute to defining which issues become socially visible and how these issues are hierarchized within public debate [23]. Likewise, a comparative approach would help determine whether local outlets provide more contextualized, community-sensitive, and territorially grounded narratives or whether they reproduce the same dominant frames

circulated by the national media. From a framing perspective, this line of inquiry would be especially valuable for examining how specific aspects of reality are selected, emphasized, or marginalized in news discourse, shaping public interpretations of social problems and institutional responses [8].

Future studies should incorporate mixed-method indicators capable of connecting media frequency, audience perception, and potential changes in community mobility, behavior, or social practices. A mixed-methods design would enable the integration of quantitative indicators—such as frequency of coverage, prominence, source distribution, recurrence of frames, and temporal peaks in media attention—with qualitative evidence derived from interviews, testimonies, or ethnographic observation. This methodological triangulation would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between media discourse, public perception, and everyday community dynamics [11–13]. In this sense, future research should not only ask how the media represent a given social phenomenon, but how such representations circulate, how they are interpreted by communities, and what practical consequences they may have for fear, trust, mobility, institutional legitimacy, and collective imaginaries.

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