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Narrating childhood under state violence: media power, territorial stigma and the Malvinas case in Ecuadorian journalism

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Introduction: This study examines how Ecuadorian digital newspapers constructed childhood and attributed responsibility in coverage of the Malvinas case, in which one child and three adolescents aged 11–15 were detained by military personnel in Guayaquil on 8 December 2024, forcibly disappeared, and later found dead near Taura. Childhood is conceptualized as a socially produced, rights-bearing category, while direct state violence is distinguished from structural violence.

Methods: A qualitative content analysis, informed by critical discourse analysis, framing, indexing theory, the hierarchy-of-influences model, moral-panic scholarship, and mediated-memory studies, was conducted on a purposive final corpus of 12 digital journalistic texts published by eight Ecuadorian outlets between December 2024 and August 2025. The analysis examined actor visibility, source hierarchy, lexical agency, territorialization, visual ethics, genre, narrative frame, underlying message, and transmitted values.

Results: Three recurrent configurations were identified: securitized/officialist, rights/forensic, and sensationalist. Officialist tendencies were strongest when coverage depended on military or governmental definers and when Las Malvinas was rendered as a geography of danger. Rights-oriented accounts emerged through family testimony, forensic evidence, legal categories, and longer investigative formats.

Discussion: Journalistic discourse can either reproduce institutional self-legitimation or re-humanize children as subjects of rights. Ethical reporting on child victims of state violence requires precise legal language, contextual depth, genre transparency, child-protection protocols, and an ethics of memory that resists territorial stigma and symbolic erasure.

KEYWORDS

children and media, human rights, media representation, qualitative content analysis, state violence

1 Introduction

Media coverage of violence involving children is not a transparent reflection of events but a constitutive arena in which childhood, legitimacy and responsibility are publicly negotiated. Children may be represented as rights-bearing social actors, passive victims, symbols of vulnerability or suspect bodies, while state action can be named as coercion, normalized as security procedure or displaced into an abstract context of insecurity

(Buckingham, 2019; Van Dijk, 2017). These representational choices acquire particular ethical significance when the victims are minors and the alleged perpetrators are public agents.

Against this conceptual background, the Malvinas case constitutes a paradigmatic episode for examining how journalism mediates the relation between childhood, public security and state power. On 8 December 2024, four minors from the Las Malvinas sector in southern Guayaquil—Steven Medina, aged 11; Josué Arroyo, 14; Ismael Arroyo, 15; and Nehemias Arboleda, 15—were detained by military personnel near Mall del Sur. Their families reported them missing the following day. The case rapidly became a national controversy as videos, military accounts, family testimony and prosecutorial information produced competing descriptions of what had happened. The remains of four persons were later found near Taura and the investigation proceeded under the legal category of enforced disappearance (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2024, 2025).

The analytical problem is therefore not whether the Ecuadorian press was uniformly “for” or “against” the state, but how journalistic routines, source hierarchies, lexical choices, territorial narratives, images and genre conventions distributed visibility, agency and moral responsibility. The manuscript responds to this problem by combining framing theory with critical discourse analysis, indexing theory, the hierarchy-of-influences model, moral-panic scholarship and mediated-memory studies.

The research question is: How did Ecuadorian digital press discourse construct childhood and state responsibility in coverage of the Malvinas case between December 2024 and August 2025 and what contextual organizational and discursive factors help explain the resulting frames? Two subsidiary questions guide the analysis: (RQ1) How did source hierarchies, lexical agency, imagery, genre and territorial references shape the visibility of the four minors as rights-bearing subjects? (RQ2) Under what conditions did coverage reproduce official/security definitions, adopt rights/forensic interpretations or shift toward sensationalist treatment?

The objective is therefore twofold: first, to identify the discursive and visual configurations through which childhood and state violence were represented; and second, to explain those configurations using theories of press-state relations, newsroom production and critical discourse. The study is justified by the ethical importance of communication in contexts where minors are harmed by public institutions. Because journalism can influence the social recognition of victims, the naming of wrongdoing and the durability of public memory, representational choices have democratic and deontological consequences.

The study contributes to communication research by connecting the social construction of childhood with direct and structural violence, press-state relations and territorial stigma. It argues that the public meaning of the Malvinas case emerged from the interaction between security discourse, institutional sourcing, journalistic genre and the socio-spatial stigmatization of Las Malvinas, with direct implications for media ethics, child protection and democratic accountability.

2 Theoretical and contextual framework

2.1 Constructing childhood and state violence: conceptual foundations

Any analysis of media discourse about children and institutional violence requires conceptual clarification before the empirical case is introduced. “Childhood” is not treated here as a purely biological stage or as a natural, universal condition whose meaning is self-evident. The sociology of childhood has shown that childhood is socially, historically and culturally constructed: societies define what counts as innocence, dependence, agency, vulnerability, responsibility and legitimate protection through institutions, legal norms and representational practices (James and Prout, 2015; Prout, 2011). This perspective does not deny children’s material vulnerability or developmental differences; rather, it emphasizes that the public meaning attached to those conditions is produced through discourse. Journalism is one of the institutions in which those meanings are stabilized, contested or transformed.

From this perspective, children are not merely objects of adult concern but social actors and rights-bearing subjects. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes that persons under 18 are entitled to protection, dignity, participation and the primacy of their best interests (CRC, 1989). In media discourse, however, these normative commitments coexist with cultural scripts that may render some children more innocent, visible or “grievable” than others. Class, neighborhood, race-coded social imaginaries, gender, perceived deviance and proximity to crime can alter the moral status assigned to minors in public narration (Butler, 2016; Cohen, 2011). Consequently, “constructing childhood” refers in this study to the discursive process through which news texts position minors as protected subjects, passive victims, suspicious bodies, collateral casualties, family members, citizens or symbols of public disorder.

State violence is likewise treated as a differentiated concept. Direct state violence refers to coercive acts attributable to state agents or institutions—such as unlawful detention, torture, enforced disappearance or lethal force—whose agency can be identified in a concrete chain of action. Structural violence, by contrast, describes durable social and institutional arrangements that produce avoidable, unequal exposure to harm even when no single act fully explains the resulting injury (Galtung, 1969). In this article, structural violence is therefore not used as a synonym for any violent event. It names the wider configuration in which poverty, territorial stigmatization, unequal access to protection, militarized security governance and asymmetric credibility between institutions and marginalized communities can make certain children more vulnerable to coercion and less visible as rights-holders.

The distinction is analytically important. The Malvinas case concerns alleged and subsequently judicially established acts of direct state coercion, but the media environment in which those acts were interpreted is shaped by structural conditions. A news story may report a detention accurately while simultaneously reproduce a hierarchy of worth through descriptors such as “conflictive zone”, by foregrounding presumed criminality, by

granting official sources epistemic priority or by omitting the children's biographies. In that sense, structural violence operates not only through material inequality but also through symbolic processes that normalize differential vulnerability. Media representation becomes one mechanism through which such asymmetries can be reproduced or challenged.

2.2 Media, childhood and the politics of representation: beyond framing theory

Media representation is approached here as a layered process rather than as the product of a single framing mechanism. Framing remains useful because it explains how journalists select aspects of reality, assign causal responsibility and organize moral evaluation (Entman, 2010). Yet framing alone cannot explain why certain frames become institutionally available, why official definitions dominate early coverage, why the language of some genres differs from others or why territorial stigma becomes narratively convenient. To address these questions, the theoretical architecture combines framing with critical discourse analysis, indexing theory, the hierarchy-of-influences model, moral-panic scholarship and theories of mediated memory.

Critical discourse analysis directs attention to how grammar, lexical choice, passivization, nomination and source attribution organize power in language (Fairclough, 2020, 2023; Van Dijk, 2015, 2017). In stories of institutional violence, the difference between “the children were left in Taura” and “military personnel transported and abandoned the children” is not stylistic: the grammatical assignment of agency changes the visibility of responsibility. Euphemisms such as “incident”, “excess” or “procedure” can reduce the perceived severity of coercion, while legally anchored terms such as “enforced disappearance” or “torture” can reinsert agency, norm violation and accountability into the narrative.

Indexing theory helps explain early dependence on official voices. Bennett (1990) argued that news often indexes the range of legitimate debate to disagreements among institutionally powerful actors. When executive, military and prosecutorial sources dominate the first interpretive cycle, journalism may reproduce official uncertainty even where community accounts contest it. This does not imply conspiracy or simple ideological alignment. Rather, it highlights a routine dependency: authoritative sources offer speed, verifiability, legal protection and ready-made language during unfolding crises. That routine can generate what this study calls an officialist tendency without requiring that journalists personally endorse state narratives.

The hierarchy-of-influences model further situates content within multiple levels of production: individual professional judgments, newsroom routines, organizational resources, institutional relationships and wider political-economic conditions (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). This framework is particularly relevant to the Ecuadorian case because differences between short breaking-news updates, crime reporting, editorials and resource-intensive investigations may reflect not only ideology but also time pressure, access, editorial specialization, competition for attention and the availability of investigative capacity. The model therefore provides a more plausible explanation for why “officialist frames” may emerge in some

outlets and later recede when forensic evidence and alternative sources become available.

Moral-panic scholarship adds a further dimension. In high-insecurity environments, young people from stigmatized neighborhoods can be narratively positioned near categories of threat even when they are victims (Cohen, 2011). Such proximity does not require an explicit accusation; it can be produced by repeated association between place, danger, suspected theft, gang activity and militarized order. Finally, mediated-memory scholarship emphasizes that journalism not only reports events but archives them. The accumulation of names, photographs, corrections, testimonies and legal milestones shapes how societies later remember victims and institutions (Jelin, 2022; Zelizer, 2021, 2022). Together, these approaches allow the analysis to move beyond a narrow inventory of frames toward an explanation of their social production and consequences.

2.3 The Malvinas case as a paradigmatic episode of state violence

Against this conceptual background, the Malvinas case constitutes a paradigmatic episode for examining how journalism mediates the relation between childhood, public security and state power. On 8 December 2024, four minors from the Las Malvinas sector in southern Guayaquil—Steven Medina, aged 11; Josué Arroyo, 14; Ismael Arroyo, 15; and Nehemías Arboleda, 15—were detained by military personnel near Mall del Sur. Their families reported them missing the following day. The case rapidly became a national controversy as videos, military accounts, family testimony and prosecutorial information produced competing descriptions of what had happened. The remains of four persons were later found near Taura and the investigation proceeded under the legal category of enforced disappearance (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2024, 2025).

For the purposes of this study, the significance of the case lies not only in its criminal-legal trajectory but also in the discursive struggle that surrounded it. Initial accounts circulated in a context of acute insecurity, a declared internal armed conflict and expanded military deployment. This setting made available a security vocabulary—operation, suspects, duty, procedure, conflictive area—that could potentially displace the children's legal status. At the same time, family mobilization, human-rights advocacy and subsequent forensic evidence generated a competing vocabulary centered on disappearance, torture, abuse of power and accountability. The case therefore permits close observation of how news discourse moves between institutional deference and critical witnessing.

2.4 Framing, power and the struggle over meaning

The central analytical problem is not whether the press was uniformly “for” or “against” the state, but how different journalistic practices distributed visibility, credibility and responsibility. The study examines which actors became primary definers; which verbs and adjectives attached agency to military

personnel or suspicion to the children; how the neighborhood was described; whether images humanized, anonymized or spectacularized; and how genre shaped permissible levels of evaluation. This approach treats meaning as a struggle among competing interpretive resources rather than as a fixed property of any article (Boltanski, 2011).

2.5 Socio-political context: militarization, insecurity and the crisis of civil governance

This section situates the corpus within the political and security environment that made particular journalistic frames plausible. Context is not treated as a background list of events but as part of the explanatory model: securitized language, institutional sourcing and public tolerance for exceptional measures acquire meaning only in relation to Ecuador's recent experience of organized crime, states of exception and military participation in internal security.

During 2024, Ecuador faced an acute security crisis associated with organized criminal violence and the government's declaration of an internal armed conflict. The expanded presence of military forces in urban security operations altered the everyday boundary between defense and policing. Within such a climate, institutional language emphasizing "war", "operations", "targets" and "duty" can enter journalism as taken-for-granted vocabulary. This is precisely where indexing and the hierarchy-of-influences model become relevant: when public institutions possess privileged access to information and legitimacy, their categories may structure early reporting before alternative evidence is fully available.

The geographic location of the case also matters. Guayaquil has been represented nationally through persistent narratives of insecurity and southern peripheral neighborhoods are often described through danger, poverty and criminality. When Las Malvinas is introduced primarily as a "conflictive" or "high-risk" area, territory can become an implicit explanatory device. The resulting geography of suspicion may subtly transfer causal weight from institutional action to the social environment of the victims. Accordingly, this study codes place references not as incidental scene-setting but as potential ideological resources that can either contextualize structural inequality or stigmatize the community.

2.6 Childhood as a symbolic battlefield in public discourse

Childhood becomes a symbolic battlefield when the same minors can be narrated simultaneously as vulnerable persons entitled to special protection, as possible participants in insecurity, as anonymous victims, as children embedded in families and communities or as evidence in a broader political conflict. These positions are not equivalent: each allocates empathy, credibility and responsibility differently.

For marginalized children, the symbolic stakes are particularly high. The social construction of innocence is uneven and territorial or class-coded cues can weaken presumptions of vulnerability. A rights-based approach resists this hierarchy by

treating minority itself as legally relevant and by foregrounding dignity, due process and the best interests of the child. This ethical orientation is reinforced by contemporary child-protection research, which emphasizes standardized, multidisciplinary and interinstitutional protocols for responding to abuse and preventing secondary harm (Argo et al., 2026). While that study concerns clinical-legal child-abuse pathways rather than journalism, its emphasis on harmonized protocols is transferable at the normative level: media institutions also need explicit procedures when reporting violence against minors.

The study thus begins from a relational proposition: the public meaning of childhood under state violence is produced at the intersection of law, territory, institutional power, journalistic routines and representational ethics. The Malvinas case serves as an empirical site through which that proposition can be tested.

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Research design and epistemological orientation

The study adopts a qualitative, constructivist and critical design combining qualitative content analysis with elements of critical discourse analysis. Qualitative content analysis was chosen because the research question concerns meaning, attribution and symbolic representation rather than the statistical prevalence of isolated words (Krippendorff, 2018). Critical discourse analysis supplements this technique by examining how language distributes agency, authority and legitimacy (Fairclough, 2023; Van Dijk, 2015). The design is interpretive but systematic: a pre-specified coding matrix was applied across all retained items, followed by comparative and reflexive analysis. The overall methodological design and analytical orientation are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Methodological design and analytical orientation.

Dimension	Specification
Paradigm	Constructivist, interpretive and critical.
Population	Digital coverage of the Malvinas case by eight selected Ecuadorian news outlets, 8 Dec 2024–31 Aug 2025.
Final sample	N = 12 purposively selected, identifiable journalistic texts.
Method	Qualitative content analysis + elements of critical discourse analysis.
Theoretical lenses	Framing; critical discourse analysis; indexing; hierarchy of influences; moral panic; mediated memory; child-rights ethics.
Primary unit	Complete digital journalistic item.
Coding units	Headline, lead, source attribution, actor nomination, clauses of agency, territorial references, visual/caption elements, evaluative passages.
Analytical aim	Explain how childhood and state responsibility were discursively constructed and why specific frames emerged.

3.2 Study population, outlet selection and final sample

The study population was defined as digital journalistic coverage of the Malvinas case published between 8 December 2024 and 31 August 2025 by eight Ecuadorian news organizations selected to capture variation in legacy/digital origin, editorial profile, crime-news tradition and national reach: El Comercio, El Universo, El Mercurio, La Hora, Primicias, GK, Extra and Expreso. The outlet selection was purposive rather than probabilistic. Its aim was theoretical diversity within the Ecuadorian press ecosystem, not statistical generalization to every news organization in the country.

The final analytical sample comprised 12 identifiable journalistic texts ($N = 12$) retained after applying the criteria below. These are the corpus items documented in the reference list and [Appendix A](#). The complete final analytical corpus is listed in [Table 5 \(Appendix A\)](#). The sample includes early breaking-news coverage, explanatory and investigative reporting, crime-news treatment and opinion/editorial material. The analysis therefore makes a narrow, reproducible claim: it concerns these 12 purposively selected texts, chosen for their substantive engagement with the case and their capacity to maximize variation in outlet, genre, temporal phase and interpretive stance.

3.3 Sampling strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria

Sampling was purposive, criterion-based and maximum-variation oriented ([Patton, 2014](#)). A text was included when it: (1) was published by one of the eight selected outlets within the study period; (2) referred substantively to the Malvinas case rather than mentioning it in passing; (3) contained analyzable material concerning the minors, military actors, the security context, family testimony, forensic/judicial developments or public accountability; and (4) was accessible in a stable digital version. Items were excluded when the case appeared only tangentially, when the text duplicated wire-service content without meaningful editorial adaptation, when the page was inaccessible or substantially incomplete or when the item did not contain sufficient discursive material for the coding variables.

The sampling strategy was designed to capture temporal movement. Early texts document uncertainty, official explanations and family mobilization; later texts incorporate forensic findings, judicial developments and stronger accountability language. This temporal variation is central because frames are not assumed to be fixed properties of outlets. Rather, the study examines whether they shift as evidence, source availability and institutional controversy change. The sampling criteria and genre safeguards are summarized in [Table 2](#).

3.4 Treatment of journalistic genres and potential bias

News reports, explanatory pieces, investigations, crime-news stories, interviews, editorials and signed opinion columns were eligible, but genre was explicitly coded and interpreted as an

TABLE 2 Sampling criteria and genre safeguards.

Component	Operational decision
Outlets	El Comercio, El Universo, El Mercurio, La Hora, Primicias, GK, Extra, Expreso.
Inclusion	Substantive case focus; within period; analyzable child/state/security/judicial content; stable digital access.
Exclusion	Tangential mention; substantial duplication; inaccessible/incomplete item; insufficient discursive content.
Opinion/editorials	Included as explicit normative discourse; not used as neutral factual evidence.
Reader letters	Excluded from the corpus due to inconsistent authorship/representativeness/editorial-control verification.
Bias control	Genre coded first; factual claims cross-checked against reporting/official records; conclusions limited to discourse patterns.
Sampling logic	Criterion-based maximum variation across outlet, genre, temporal phase and interpretive stance.

analytical condition. Opinion and editorial texts were not treated as neutral evidence about what “actually happened”. They were included because the research question concerns public meaning and normative positioning; such genres make evaluative assumptions more visible and therefore provide valuable material for analyzing the moral boundaries that media institutions or named commentators draw around state conduct.

Three safeguards were applied to address genre-related bias. First, factual reconstruction of the case was anchored in news, investigative, prosecutorial and forensic accounts rather than in opinion claims. Second, genre was coded before interpretive frame, preventing evaluative language that is conventional in an editorial from being mistaken for a breach of “objectivity” in straight news. Third, comparisons between outlets were made within and across genre where possible and conclusions were framed as discursive patterns rather than estimates of public opinion. Reader letters were excluded from the final corpus because their authorship, representativeness and degree of editorial intervention could not be established consistently. This exclusion directly reduces an avoidable source of interpretive uncertainty.

3.5 Units of analysis and coding schema

The unit of sampling was the complete digital journalistic item. Within each item, units of coding consisted of headlines, subheads, leads, source attributions, actor nominations, key clauses assigning agency, descriptions of place, visual elements/captions where available and evaluative passages. Nine analytical variables were coded: (1) child representation; (2) source hierarchy; (3) lexical agency and responsibility; (4) territorialization/place; (5) visual representation; (6) article length and contextual density; (7) genre and narrative mode; (8) underlying message/frame; and (9) transmitted values. The variables and coding categories are detailed in [Table 3](#).

The coding schema was deductive-inductive. Deductive sensitizing concepts came from framing, critical discourse analysis, indexing, the

hierarchy of influences, moral panic and child-rights ethics. Inductive codes were added when repeated patterns emerged from the corpus, particularly the “geography of suspicion”, biographical silence and temporal frame drift. Codes were then clustered into three higher-order narrative configurations: securitized/officialist, rights/forensic and sensationalist. These labels describe dominant tendencies within a text; they are not mutually exclusive ideological identities of

entire outlets. The defining features, likely production conditions, and ethical implications of these configurations are summarized in Table 4.

3.6 Visual semiotics and territorial discourse

Visual analysis considered what kinds of images accompanied the texts, who or what was made visible, whether photographs emphasized grief, protest, military actors, forensic procedure or spectacle and whether captions supplied legal or contextual information. Because the sample consists of digital editions, thumbnails and headline-image pairings were also treated as ethically significant: they often become the first or only layer encountered in algorithmic circulation (Stoilova et al., 2020).

Territorial discourse was included as a distinct variable because of the contextual nature of the case. References to Las Malvinas, southern Guayaquil, danger, conflict, marginality or criminality were coded for function. The analysis distinguished contextualization—explaining structural vulnerability without attributing blame—from stigmatization, in which the neighborhood itself operated as a shorthand explanation for suspicion or violence. This distinction permits analysis of how geographic and contextual factors may influence journalistic interpretation and the emergence of officialist frames.

3.7 Analytical procedure, reflexivity and trustworthiness

Analysis proceeded in six stages. First, all items were read for familiarization. Second, a structured coding sheet was completed for each text. Third, passages with strong agency, source, territorial or ethical signals were compared across outlets. Fourth, provisional frames were constructed and tested against disconfirming examples. Fifth, temporal comparisons were conducted to identify changes between disappearance/search coverage and later forensic/judicial reporting. Sixth, the interpretations were integrated with the theoretical frameworks to explain not only what frames appeared but why they were likely to emerge under particular production conditions.

Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail of corpus items and code definitions, iterative re-reading,

TABLE 3 Variables and coding categories.

Variable	Operational definition	Analytical question
Child representation	Names, ages, biography, agency, victim/suspect labels.	Are minors presented as persons with rights, anonymous victims or suspect bodies?
Source hierarchy	Ordering and prominence of military, government, prosecutors, families, advocates.	Who is authorized to define the event?
Lexical agency	Verbs, passives, euphemisms, legal labels, modality.	Is responsibility named, diluted or deferred?
Territorialization	Descriptions of Las Malvinas/Guayaquil and security geography.	Does place contextualize inequality or stigmatize victims?
Visual representation	Protests, portraits, military/forensic scenes, dramatic imagery.	Does the image humanize, evidence, anonymize or spectacularize?
Contextual density	Length, chronology, causal explanation, legal background.	How much explanatory depth is provided?
Genre/mode	Straight news, investigation, crime news, editorial/opinion.	What evaluative conventions are genre-appropriate?
Underlying frame	Securitized/officialist, rights/forensic, sensationalist, hybrid.	What dominant problem definition and causal logic is offered?
Values	Order, institutional trust, dignity, truth, justice, empathy, spectacle.	What moral economy does the text privilege?

TABLE 4 Dominant narrative configurations.

Configuration	Typical discursive features	Likely production conditions	Ethical risk/potential
Securitized/officialist	Duty/procedure lexicon; official sources first; passive agency; risky-area context.	Breaking-news pressure; institutional access; indexing; security crisis.	May normalize coercion or dilute responsibility; can provide necessary procedural information if contextualized.
Rights/forensic	Children as rights-holders; family voices; legal categories; causal chronology; forensic evidence.	Investigative time; plural sourcing; judicial evidence; editorial autonomy.	Supports accountability and humanization; must still avoid retraumatization.
Sensationalist	Shock headlines; dramatic detail; crime-story suspense; spectacle-oriented imagery.	Attention competition; tabloid/crime conventions; platform incentives.	Can mobilize outrage but may commodify suffering or cause secondary harm.

theoretical triangulation and reflexive attention to the researchers' normative commitment to children's rights (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Reflexivity is particularly important because the study addresses severe violence and institutional accountability. The analysis therefore distinguishes empirical observations (e.g., source order, lexical choices, imagery, genre) from normative evaluation (e.g., whether those choices are consistent with child-protection standards). Qualitative claims are presented as interpretive findings grounded in the corpus, not as frequency estimates for Ecuadorian journalism as a whole.

3.8 Ethical considerations

The study analyzes publicly available journalistic materials and does not involve direct research participation by children or families. Nevertheless, the subject matter demands heightened ethical care. The analysis avoids reproducing graphic descriptions or unnecessary identifying details, does not recirculate traumatic images and treats the names of the victims only where necessary to discuss humanization, memory and rights. Child-protection principles from UNICEF, the International Federation of Journalists and broader scholarship were used as normative benchmarks (IFJ, 2006; UNICEF, 2018). The best-interests principle is understood not as a reason to suppress accountability reporting but as a requirement to combine truth-telling with harm minimization. The ethical and integrity safeguards applied in the study are summarized in Table 6 (Appendix A).

4 Results

4.1 Visibility and narrative positioning of the child victims

The first major pattern concerns whether the four minors appeared as full social subjects or primarily as objects within a security event. Across the corpus, early coverage tended to organize information around disappearance, operational chronology and official responses. In that phase, biographical detail was relatively thin. The children were visible as a collective—"the four minors", "the disappeared children"—but less often as individuals embedded in school, family, friendship and neighborhood life. This is what the analysis identifies as biographical silence: the victims are named or counted without receiving narrative depth commensurate with the institutional actors who explain the event.

Humanization increased when family testimony became central. Reports that named the children, specified their ages, described relatives' searches or reconstructed their last communications created a different subject position: the boys appeared as sons, brothers and members of a community rather than as anonymous bodies in a security chain. GK and some El Universo coverage exemplified this shift, while later investigative and forensic reporting further anchored the children as rights-bearing subjects by connecting their minority to legal duties of protection.

The pattern demonstrates that visibility is not binary. Naming alone does not necessarily produce agency and anonymity does not always signify ethical failure. What mattered was the

combination of identification, contextual biography, source access and causal narration. When the children's lives disappeared behind institutional procedure, symbolic marginalization increased; when families and legal standards entered the story, personhood became harder to displace.

4.2 Source hierarchies and the production of officialist tendencies

The second pattern concerns source hierarchy. Early straight-news items frequently relied on military, ministerial, legislative or prosecutorial statements to establish what could be responsibly asserted. This produced an officialist tendency even in texts that did not explicitly defend the armed forces. Institutional speakers supplied the chronology, terminology and limits of certainty, while families and human-rights actors often appeared later or as reactive sources. The result was a structure of credibility in which the state initially possessed greater definitional power than the affected community.

This pattern is better explained by indexing and journalistic routine than by assuming partisan loyalty. During a developing disappearance case, official sources offer immediate access and apparent authority. Their language therefore enters headlines and leads quickly. As forensic information, videos, judicial proceedings and alternative testimony accumulated, the indexed range widened. Later articles became more willing to use terms such as "enforced disappearance", "torture", "execution" or "abuse", and some legacy outlets published explicitly accountability-oriented editorials. The temporal change indicates that officialism was contingent, not fixed.

Independent and long-form outlets more frequently inverted the source hierarchy by foregrounding parents, civil-society organizations, habeas-corpus claims and forensic reconstructions. This inversion shifted moral evaluation because the children's disappearance was no longer narrated chiefly from the perspective of operational necessity. Instead, the central question became what public agents had done to persons whom the state had a heightened obligation to protect.

4.3 Lexical agency: from "procedure" to enforced disappearance

Lexical analysis revealed a recurrent struggle over agency. Official or security-oriented language emphasized duty, procedure, uncertainty, collaboration with investigators and the conditions of an operation. Such wording did not always deny harm, but it often displaced the decisive action into passive or nominal constructions: the children "were left", an "incident" occurred or an "excess" was under investigation. These forms can grammatically separate outcome from actor.

By contrast, rights/forensic coverage increasingly employed active and legally specific vocabulary. Terms such as "detained", "abandoned", "beaten", "tortured", "forcibly disappeared" and "executed" materially reconnected acts with agents and legal categories. Primicias and later crime/judicial reporting used forensic detail to restore causal sequences. The key distinction is not between "emotional" and "objective" language but between evidentially supported precision and euphemistic indeterminacy.

The *Expreso* article reporting soldiers' statements that the boys "did not look like children" and were "taller" is especially revealing. The quotations reproduce a justificatory logic in which bodily appearance is mobilized to suspend the legal relevance of minority. Even when journalists present such claims critically, the quotation becomes part of the public discursive field. The ethical task is therefore not necessarily to suppress official testimony, but to contextualize it with verified ages, due-process obligations and the principle that perceived appearance cannot nullify child-protection duties.

4.4 Geography of suspicion: las Malvinas as context and stigma

A central revision to the analysis concerns geography. References to Las Malvinas and southern Guayaquil performed two different functions. In some texts, place contextualized the social conditions in which families lived, the community's fear and the wider security crisis. In others, place operated as a condensed sign of danger: terms such as "conflictive zone", "high-crime sector" or references to alleged delinquency placed the children inside a pre-existing map of suspicion.

This territorial framing helps explain why journalistic material sometimes drifted toward security logic. The event occurred in a city already intensely mediated through narratives of organized crime and militarized response. In such a context, neighborhood stigma can become a cognitive shortcut that makes extraordinary coercion appear more intelligible or expected. The risk is a subtle displacement of accountability: readers are invited to ask what kind of area the children came from before asking what obligations state agents had toward them.

Rights-oriented reporting countered this geography of suspicion by reconstructing the chain of custody—where the minors were intercepted, transported, abandoned and later located—and by treating place as evidence of institutional movement rather than as a moral property of the victims. This shift is analytically significant: the same geography can either stigmatize a community or reveal the spatial organization of state action.

4.5 Visual representation and semiotic dynamics

Images provided a parallel moral grammar. Photographs of vigils, relatives holding portraits and public demonstrations framed the case through grief, collective recognition and claims for justice. Such imagery positioned families as active rights-claimants and created a visual counterweight to official procedural language. Photographs of reconstruction sites, roads, tolls and forensic scenes served a different function: they made chains of action visible and supported an evidentiary reading.

Sensationalist visual treatment, especially when paired with shock-oriented headlines, increased affect but risked turning suffering into spectacle. The distinction was not simply between "strong" and "restrained" images. A powerful image can be ethically justified when it provides evidence, preserves dignity and contributes to public understanding. Ethical concern arises

when graphic or dramatic material exceeds informational necessity, strips victims of context or is repeatedly circulated for attention.

4.6 Genre, length and explanatory density

Genre strongly conditioned what could be said. Straight-news updates were concise and source-dependent; they often preserved procedural uncertainty because their immediate task was to report unfolding developments. Investigative explainers and reconstructions had greater capacity to assemble chronology, compare testimony, identify contradictions and name legal categories. Editorials and signed columns made normative judgments overt and therefore frequently articulated transparency, accountability or institutional legitimacy more directly.

Article length correlated qualitatively with explanatory density in the sampled texts. Longer pieces were more likely to connect detention, transfer, abandonment, forensic findings and judicial proceedings into a causal sequence. Shorter pieces were not necessarily unethical, but episodic compression increased dependence on the dominant source of the moment. This suggests that editorial resources and format are not peripheral variables: they shape the possibility of rights-based contextualization.

4.7 Temporal frame drift

The corpus shows clear temporal drift. The earliest phase was structured by uncertainty, search, family anguish and competing official accounts. As the deaths were confirmed and judicial proceedings advanced, accountability language became harder to avoid. Later reconstructions and forensic reporting further weakened narratives of mere operational irregularity. What began as a contested "security incident" was progressively narrated through the categories of enforced disappearance, torture and institutional responsibility.

This temporal movement also complicates any binary classification of outlets. Legacy media did not remain uniformly officialist and digital media were not uniformly rights-centered. Some mainstream editorials shifted toward transparency and justice; some digital or crime-oriented coverage combined legal precision with attention-maximizing aesthetics. The more accurate result is a continuum shaped by genre, evidence, sources, newsroom resources and the stage of the case.

4.8 Three dominant narrative configurations

Synthesizing the variables produced three recurrent narrative configurations. The securitized/officialist configuration privileged order, duty, procedural cooperation, official definers and uncertainty; it tended to reduce direct agency and sometimes relied on territorial danger as explanatory context. The rights/forensic configuration foregrounded the children's minority, family testimony, legal standards, forensic evidence and explicit attribution of responsibility. The sensationalist configuration

emphasized shock, revelation, graphic detail or crime-story suspense; it sometimes named violence precisely but risked aestheticizing suffering.

These configurations should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories assigned permanently to outlets. Hybrid texts were common. Their analytical value lies in showing how combinations of source hierarchy, grammar, place, image and genre create different moral economies of the same event.

5 Discussion

5.1 From framing effects to the social production of frames

The integrated theoretical model clarifies a limitation of a framing-only interpretation. Framing identifies the competing narratives, but indexing and the hierarchy of influences help explain their production. The early prominence of official/security definitions was consistent with routine dependence on authoritative sources during uncertain, high-risk events (Bennett, 1990; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). As alternative evidence became institutionally validated, the range of legitimate journalistic language expanded. This explains why terms associated with direct state violence became more visible over time without requiring a sudden ideological conversion by the press.

The finding is important for media-ethics research because it redirects critique from individual journalists alone toward the production environment. Officialism can be generated by deadline structures, verification norms, source accessibility and legal risk. Ethical reform must therefore address routines: source-diversity requirements, mandatory contextual boxes on child rights, editorial prompts that ask who is missing from the source field and protocols for updating earlier articles when official claims are contradicted by later evidence.

5.2 Constructing childhood: legal minority versus socially conditional innocence

The case confirms the central insight of childhood studies: legal age does not automatically guarantee equal symbolic protection. The soldiers' reported argument that the boys did not "look like children" illustrates how cultural judgments of appearance can compete with legal minority. Media reproduction of such claims without contextual rebuttal risks transforming childhood from a protected status into a negotiable visual category. James and Prout's social-construction perspective is therefore particularly useful: the issue is not whether the victims were biologically young, but how public discourse recognized—or failed to recognize—the social and legal meaning of that youth.

The findings also resonate with Butler's concept of differential grievability. Biographical silence, territorial stigma and proximity to crime can make some young lives less readily recognized as innocent or worthy of protection. Rights-oriented journalism reverses this hierarchy by restoring names, ages, family relations and legal duties. The re-humanization observed in long-form

coverage is thus more than narrative enrichment; it is a form of symbolic recognition.

5.3 Structural violence, territorial stigma and mediated vulnerability

A clear explanation of structural violence is essential because the concept operates at a different level from the direct acts investigated in the case. Galtung's formulation identifies violence in social structures that create avoidable inequalities in life chances and exposure to harm (Galtung, 1969). In the Malvinas coverage, structural violence is visible analytically in the convergence of marginalized territory, security exceptionalism, unequal credibility and weakened presumptions of innocence. No single headline "causes" structural violence, but repeated representations can normalize the social conditions through which some communities are governed primarily as security problems.

The geography-of-suspicion finding extends this argument. Las Malvinas was not merely a neutral location (Goffman, 1963). In some coverage, it operated as a signifier that made suspicion narratively available. This mechanism helps answer why journalistic material may behave differently in particular contexts: territorial stigma reduces the interpretive distance between "child" and "suspect", especially under militarized governance. Conversely, reporting that uses geography to trace institutional action rather than community deviance can expose structural inequality instead of reproducing it.

5.4 Critical discourse, agency and the ethics of precise naming

Critical discourse analysis shows that responsibility is negotiated in small linguistic forms. Passives, nominalizations and euphemisms can erase agents; active verbs and legally precise categories can restore them (Fairclough, 2023; Van Dijk, 2017). This does not mean journalists should adopt the most severe legal label before evidence warrants it. The ethical standard is evidentiary precision: terminology should evolve with verified information and clearly attribute contested labels to their sources.

Once judicial and forensic evidence supported categories such as enforced disappearance and torture, continued reliance on "incident" or "excess" became less defensible. At that point, lexical caution can paradoxically become distortion. The study therefore proposes a dynamic ethics of naming: early uncertainty should be explicit; later evidence should update the vocabulary of responsibility.

5.5 Opinion genres, bias and normative transparency

The inclusion of editorials and opinion columns requires a different standard from the analysis of straight news. Their "bias" is not a methodological contamination to be erased; it is part of their communicative function. Editorials institutionalize moral judgment, while signed columns make individual interpretation visible. The methodological problem arises only if

such texts are treated as factual evidence equivalent to investigative reporting. By stratifying genre and excluding reader letters, the study treats opinion as an object of discourse analysis rather than as a transparent source of events.

This distinction strengthens the results concerning moral horizons. Opinion genres often articulated thresholds of acceptable state conduct more explicitly than straight news. Their contribution is therefore analytical: they reveal how media institutions negotiate values such as order, justice, institutional trust and child protection. Bias is managed through genre transparency, not by pretending evaluative discourse is absent.

5.6 Toward a pedagogy of ethical journalism and child protection

The findings support newsroom education that integrates child-rights law, critical discourse awareness and trauma-informed practice. Journalists should be trained to recognize how ordinary language can criminalize, how place can stigmatize and how seemingly neutral source routines can privilege institutions over families. Exercises could include rewriting passive headlines, auditing source order, comparing a territorial-stigma lead with a structurally contextualized lead and evaluating whether an image contributes evidence or merely shock.

Argo et al. (2026) emphasize the need for standardized, multidisciplinary protocols in responding to child abuse across clinical and legal systems. Although journalism is a distinct professional field, the transferable principle is important: child protection should not depend solely on individual discretion at the moment of crisis. News organizations should maintain written protocols covering identification, imagery, consent, contact with bereaved families, legal terminology, correction of stigmatizing claims and escalation to specialist editors. Interinstitutional knowledge—legal, psychological, child-protection and journalistic—can reduce secondary harm.

5.7 Deontological imperatives: the best interests of the child

The best-interests principle should function as a structured editorial test, not as a vague appeal to sensitivity. Before publishing a child's name, image, school, home location or traumatic detail, editors should ask whether the information is necessary for public understanding, whether the same accountability function can be achieved with less exposure and whether publication may create foreseeable secondary harm. This assessment is especially important in digital environments, where thumbnails and reposted fragments detach images from explanatory context.

At the same time, the best interests of the child should not be interpreted as a reason to depoliticize or euphemize state violence. Protection and accountability are complementary. Precise documentation of enforced disappearance, torture or unlawful detention can serve children's rights when it is evidence-based, proportionate and respectful. The ethical failure lies either in sensational exploitation or in language so sanitized that institutional agency disappears.

5.8 Journalism and the ethics of memory

The ethics of memory is a strong extension of conventional journalism ethics because the digital archive gives reporting a long afterlife. News stories become searchable records through which future audiences encounter victims, institutions and disputed events. Memory is therefore produced not only by monuments or official histories but by accumulated headlines, photographs, corrections, metadata and narrative choices (Jelin, 2022; Zelizer, 2021).

For the Malvinas case, an ethics of memory requires more than respectful commemoration. It requires correction of stigmatizing or disproven claims; preservation of the children's names and biographies in dignified contexts; visible updates when judicial findings alter earlier uncertainty; and avoidance of archive structures that repeatedly foreground graphic imagery. Such practices recognize that journalism has a post-publication duty: it should not leave early official narratives frozen in search results after evidence has materially changed the public record.

This perspective also connects journalism to transitional and restorative dimensions of justice. Public memory can inhibit revisionism when the archive documents who spoke, what was known at each stage and how institutional explanations changed. The newspaper archive thus becomes part of democratic accountability. Ethical memory is not only remembering victims; it is preserving the evidentiary and discursive history of how society came to recognize the violation.

5.9 The transformative potential and limits of human-rights journalism

Rights-oriented reporting in the corpus demonstrates journalism's capacity to challenge institutional self-legitimation. Family testimony, forensic evidence and legal contextualization reconfigured the public question from "what happened during a security operation?" to "what obligations were violated and by whom?" This transformation exemplifies critical witnessing: journalism does not abandon verification but widens the field of credible voices and connects evidence to normative frameworks.

Nevertheless, rights journalism also faces limits. Market pressures, platform incentives, shrinking investigative budgets and physical risk can narrow the time available for contextual reporting. The hierarchy-of-influences model therefore cautions against reducing reform to professional virtue. Ethical journalism requires organizational investment, editorial policy, legal support, source diversity and sustainable investigative capacity.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Media discourse as an architect of childhood's public meaning

This study concludes that the public meaning of childhood in contexts of state violence is actively produced through journalism. Actor visibility, source hierarchy, grammar, territorial description,

imagery and genre determine whether minors appear as rights-bearing persons or as peripheral figures inside a security narrative. The Malvinas case shows that representation is not a neutral layer placed over events; it is part of the social process through which responsibility, innocence and institutional legitimacy become intelligible.

6.2 From direct to structural violence

A second conclusion is conceptual. Direct state violence and structural violence must remain analytically distinct. The former concerns identifiable acts and chains of coercion; the latter concerns durable arrangements that distribute vulnerability unequally. In the media sphere, structural violence is reproduced when marginalized territory, crime discourse and asymmetric source credibility make some children easier to suspect and harder to recognize. The geography of suspicion identified here is therefore a key mechanism linking communication to structural inequality.

6.3 Explaining officialist frames

Officialist frames are better understood as outcomes of press-state relations and production routines than as evidence of simple ideological loyalty. Indexing, deadline pressure, institutional access and legal uncertainty explain why official terms can dominate early coverage. As alternative evidence becomes authoritative, journalistic language can and did shift. This temporal plasticity is one of the study's most important findings and argues for continuous updating rather than static judgments about outlets.

6.4 Deontological imperatives and standardized protocols

Ethical reporting on child victims of institutional violence requires standardized newsroom protocols (Christians, 2019; Ward, 2019). These should include: mandatory verification of age and legal status; source-diversity checks; explicit scrutiny of territorial stigma; proportionality tests for images and identifying details; trauma-informed family contact; legally accurate terminology; genre transparency; and post-publication updating when evidence changes. The multidisciplinary protocol logic emphasized by Argo et al. (2026) reinforces the need to institutionalize child protection rather than leave it to *ad hoc* individual judgment.

6.5 Journalism and the ethics of memory

Journalism has a memory responsibility. Digital archives can preserve either stigma or accountability. Ethical memory requires dignified representation, correction of disproven claims, preservation of biographical humanity and transparent updates to the evidentiary record. In cases of severe rights

violations, the archive is part of democratic memory and should be designed accordingly.

6.6 Limitations and future research

The study is limited by its purposive sample of 12 texts, its focus on eight Ecuadorian outlets and the absence of audience reception or newsroom interviews. The qualitative design supports analytical depth but not statistical generalization. The findings should therefore be interpreted as theoretically informed patterns within the selected corpus. Future research should expand the sample through systematic database retrieval, compare Ecuador with other Latin American contexts of militarized security, interview journalists about source routines and editorial constraints and conduct reception studies testing how alternative headlines, place descriptors and images affect judgments of childhood, legitimacy and state responsibility.

Further work should also develop longitudinal archive studies. Because frames change as criminal cases evolve, researchers should examine whether search-visible articles are updated after judicial decisions and whether early stigmatizing language persists online. Such work would turn the ethics of memory from a normative proposal into an empirically testable dimension of media accountability.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

FT: Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis. JM-C: Writing – review & editing. IA: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Validation. ST: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Validation.

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The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT 4.0 for academic writing assistance, including language editing, summarization of theoretical concepts, and the refinement of citations in accordance with APA 7th edition. All outputs generated by the tool were critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors to ensure conceptual accuracy, academic integrity, and alignment with the study's objectives. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of this publication.

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Appendix A Final analytical corpus (N = 12).

TABLE 5 Final analytical corpus (N = 12).

Outlet	Year	Genre	Primary analytical contribution
El Comercio	2024	Straight news/politics	Military/government accountability and legislative scrutiny
El Comercio	2025	Straight news/judicial	Soldiers' "duty" justification
El Mercurio	2024	Opinion/column	Normative public response ("Nos faltan 4")
El Mercurio	2025	News/judicial reconstruction	Military testimony and violence sequence
El Universo	2024	News/community	Family protest and disappearance
El Universo	2025	News/community context	Las Malvinas, fear and neighborhood framing
Expreso	2024	News/security	Soldiers' statements about age/appearance
Extra	2025	Crime/human-interest	Biographical and affective reconstruction
GK	2024	Explainer/investigation	Case reconstruction and family/civil-society voices
GK	2025	Chronology/investigation	Forced-disappearance investigation timeline
La Hora	2025	News/judicial	Later-stage case and reconstruction
Primicias	2025	Investigative/forensic	Forensic violence and reconstruction

TABLE 6 Ethical and integrity safeguards.

Ethical dimension	Safeguard
Respect for victims	Avoid unnecessary repetition of traumatic details and graphic imagery.
Best interests of the child	Assess necessity, proportionality and foreseeable secondary harm.
Genre transparency	Analyze opinion as normative discourse, not neutral factual evidence.
Source accountability	Distinguish attributed claims from verified facts; update terminology with evidence.
Territorial fairness	Separate structural contextualization from neighborhood stigma.
Reflexivity	Explicitly acknowledge the normative child-rights orientation of the analysis.
Reproducibility	Identify the complete final corpus (N = 12), selection criteria and coding variables.