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Narratives, Democracy, and Global Reconfigurations
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Media discourses and tourism in El Salvador: image construction and narrative transformation (2022-2024)

Discursos mediáticos y turismo en El Salvador: construcción de imagen y transformación narrativa (2022-2024)

Haniel Valdés Velázquez¹ 

¹Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, Maestría en Estudios Latinoamericanos en Territorio, Sociedad y Cultura. México.

Corresponding author: Haniel Valdés Velázquez 

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how media discourses promoted by the Salvadoran national press, both pro-government and independent, have contributed to projecting a new image of the country as a tourist destination during the period 2022-2024, within the framework of a broader state strategy of international positioning. From a critical perspective, it examines how tourist discourse is articulated with security and modernity narratives promoted by the Salvadoran government, in a context of global reconfiguration and symbolic dispute over the attraction of capital, tourists, and foreign investment. The research is based on Critical Discourse Analysis, as well as on theoretical frameworks such as Agenda-Setting Theory, the Spiral of Silence, and the concept of media influence. The study draws on more than 100 news items from media outlets such as *Diario El Salvador*, the Presidential Press Secretariat, and *La Prensa Gráfica*. From this corpus, the main narrative strategies used to shift the country's image from one of violence to a narrative of development, well-being, and global openness are identified. The paper concludes that the media play a key role in the symbolic projection of a new El Salvador before the international community, constituting a form of discursive diplomacy in which identities, prestige, and state legitimacy are negotiated within the contemporary world order.

Keywords: Tourism; Geopolitics; Media Discourse; International Positioning; El Salvador.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza cómo los discursos mediáticos impulsados por la prensa nacional salvadoreña, tanto oficialista como independiente, han contribuido a proyectar una nueva imagen del país como destino turístico en el periodo 2022- 2024, en el marco de una estrategia estatal más amplia de posicionamiento internacional. Desde una perspectiva crítica, se examina cómo el discurso turístico se articula con narrativas de seguridad y modernidad promovidas por el gobierno salvadoreño, en un contexto de reconfiguración global y disputa simbólica por la atracción de capital, turistas e inversión extranjera. La investigación se basa en el Análisis Crítico del Discurso, así como en marcos teóricos como la Teoría de la Agenda-Setting, la Espiral del Silencio y el concepto de influencia mediática. El estudio se nutre de más de 100 piezas informativas de medios como *Diario El Salvador*, Secretaría de Prensa de la Presidencia y *La Prensa Gráfica*. A partir de ello, se identifican las principales estrategias narrativas empleadas para desplazar la imagen de violencia hacia una narrativa de desarrollo, bienestar y apertura global. Se concluye

que los medios juegan un rol clave en la proyección simbólica de un nuevo El Salvador ante la comunidad internacional, constituyendo una forma de diplomacia discursiva en la que se negocian identidades, prestigio y legitimidad estatal en el orden mundial contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: Turismo; Geopolítica; Discurso Mediático; Posicionamiento Internacional; El Salvador.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, El Salvador has been internationally recognized for its high rates of violence, insecurity, and forced migration, constructing a negative public image that has impacted both its domestic politics and its external projection. However, since 2022, the country has undergone a significant discursive transformation, aimed at repositioning its image through a strategy that emphasizes tourism as a key engine of development, security, and modernization. This change is neither accidental nor exclusively economic; it responds to a discursive operation of power that seeks to modify global perception and, at the same time, legitimize the current political project.

This work is based on a master's thesis that analyzes how media discourse in the Salvadoran national press, both pro-government and independent, has contributed to the construction and dissemination of a new tourism narrative during the period 2022-2024. Tourism is explored not only as an economic or cultural phenomenon, but also as a key element in the country's international positioning strategy, understood as a form of soft power that articulates political, economic, and symbolic interests in a highly competitive global context.

Supported by Critical Discourse Analysis, Agenda-Setting Theory, and the Spiral of Silence, the study examines more than 100 media pieces from sources such as *Diario El Salvador*, the Presidential Press Secretariat, and *La Prensa Gráfica*, identifying the main discursive strategies that have allowed the image of violence to be displaced toward a representation of El Salvador as a safe and modern destination. It reflects on how this process of symbolic reconfiguration operates in geopolitical terms, constituting a form of public diplomacy and symbolic dispute on the international stage.

The change in the media narrative about El Salvador is part of a broader process of sociopolitical transformation that not only affects the country's international image but also shapes the internal dynamics of power and legitimacy. The government's communication strategy has been aimed at consolidating a renewed national identity that appeals to values of progress, stability, and economic attractiveness, seeking not only to attract tourists but also investors and strategic allies. This context invites a careful examination of how official and media discourses shape these new representations.

Furthermore, the study of this discursive transition is relevant for understanding the relationship between media, power, and territory in Latin America, where developing countries face complex challenges in positioning themselves in a global arena marked by competition for resources and capital. El Salvador presents itself as a paradigmatic case that allows us to explore how tourism discourse functions as a vehicle of soft power, but also as a field of dispute in which political and economic interests are articulated amid deep social tensions.

The media analysis presented here contributes to academic discussions on the construction of

the public agenda and the media's influence on the formation of public opinion. Understanding how the issue of tourism has been placed on the national and international agenda is key to assessing the real impact of these discursive strategies and their capacity to transform perceptions, behaviors, and public policies.

It also contributes to understanding how the issue of tourism has been placed on the national and international agenda and is key to assessing the real impact of these discursive strategies and their ability to transform perceptions, behaviors, and public policies. It allows us to understand the role of the media in the construction of collective imaginaries and in the projection of national identities in Latin America, particularly in contexts where the official narrative seeks to legitimize structural changes and strategic repositioning at the global level.

DEVELOPMENT

The role of the media in constructing perceptions of insecurity and its impact on tourism

Tourism, a sector that had been little explored in El Salvador compared to its Central American neighbors, such as Costa Rica or Guatemala, began to receive greater attention during the early years of the 21st century. However, the hegemonic discourse on violence prevailed in the media and, despite the government's efforts to promote El Salvador as an emerging tourist destination, tourism growth lagged behind that of other countries in the region. International visitor numbers remained low, and the general perception of the country remained marked by fear and insecurity.

An analysis of the content of the main Salvadoran newspapers reveals that, in the years leading up to 2022, tourism news received considerably less coverage than violence-related news. News stories promoting tourist destinations in El Salvador were scarce and almost always relegated to less prominent sections, such as lifestyle or business. In contrast, news about homicides, arrests, and police operations often made the front page of daily editions, reinforcing the perception that violence was the most notable feature of the country.

Similarly, stories about people who were victims of human trafficking or who were in danger of dying at the hands of gang members occupied the front pages or the most-read sections of the newspaper. At the same time, other issues were given less prominence. The constant repetition of reports on murders and other violent crimes helped to consolidate an interpretive framework in which violence was not only a central problem but also the defining feature of the country.

This phenomenon is best understood through the concept of "agenda setting," which holds that the media not only report on events but also determine which issues are most important and how the public should interpret them. In the case of El Salvador, the media established that gang violence was the dominant issue, thus shaping public perception both nationally and internationally. The construction of this agenda contributed to reinforcing the stigma of El Salvador as one of the most dangerous countries in the world.

In addition, the media used a strategy of dramatization, where stories related to violence were often presented exaggeratedly, with sensationalist language and a focus on the most shocking aspects of crime. There are well-known cases in the press where Salvadorans, and to a lesser extent foreign visitors, recounted disturbing scenes of their encounters with gangs, or of robberies, muggings, or violence perpetrated by gang members. This strategy, while it may have been successful in attracting readers' attention, had negative side effects, promoting a one-dimensional view of the country as an unviable destination for tourism or foreign investment.

Currently, the Presidential Press and the official websites of the Government of El Salvador use the same stories to contrast with the peaceful atmosphere that prevails in much of the country, as a discursive strategy that allows us to see a change in security and opportunities for foreign visitors.

Even when promoting destinations such as the Pacific beaches or the archaeological site of Joya de Cerén, the dominant narrative of violence competed with attempts to position El Salvador as an attractive destination for tourism. In reports by *El Mundo* and *La Prensa Gráfica*, the few efforts to highlight the country's tourist resources were overshadowed by constant references to security problems, which negatively affected El Salvador's international image and could deter foreign tourists from considering El Salvador a viable option.

Media outlets, such as the Spanish newspaper *El País*, conduct research based on figures for homicides and armed confrontations within certain countries to create a list of countries that are unsafe for tourists to visit, or, conversely, the safest countries. While *El País* and other media outlets used to place El Salvador at the top of the list or among the top countries in terms of violence or insecurity, since 2022, it has begun to position itself as one of the safest countries. "El Salvador has gone from being the most violent country in the world to the safest in Latin America. Many Salvadorans are beginning to leave the horrors committed by gang members in the past."

Transition to a discourse of tourism development

The shift in Salvadoran media discourse, from coverage focused on violence to one that highlights tourism, should be understood as part of a broader process of reconfiguring the national narrative. This change not only responds to objective transformations in terms of security but is also part of a communication strategy aimed at repositioning the country's image nationally and internationally. In particular, starting in 2022, the pro-government media began strongly promoting tourism as a symbol of progress, within a government discourse that also includes achievements in foreign investment, infrastructure, social programs, and crime reduction.

At the end of 2021 and, mainly, at the beginning of 2022 and up to the present, the official Salvadoran media prioritized tourism, economic development, and international recognition as the main topics to be covered.

This change in discourse not only reflected a new reality but also actively contributed to the creation of a renewed image of the country, in which tourism was emerging as a key driver of economic and social development. Despite its small size, the country has numerous natural resources that support nature-based tourism and sports tourism, thanks to its beaches' capacity to host surfing events.

If we compare the official data from the Government of El Salvador, the homicide figures in the country were very high before 2021, when the tough-on-crime policy began, and the reduction in criminal activity has been inversely proportional to the number of foreign visitors in the last five years.

As the official media began to adopt this new narrative, more reports appeared on the country's tourist attractions, infrastructure improvements, government campaigns to attract tourists, and investment opportunities in the sector. *La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Diario de El Salvador*, and *El Mundo* played a leading role in this discursive transition, helping, in some cases, to

consolidate a narrative that no longer spoke only of violence but also offered a vision of hope, growth, and development through tourism.

This transition in the official media is not only a reflection of the country's internal conditions, but also an attempt by official media actors to participate in the reconfiguration of El Salvador's identity before the world. The official media, which in some cases depend on the government and in others seek to avoid censorship, decided to adopt the same government discourse in favor of economic growth, now with figures and in-depth research that allow comparison with the progress so often mentioned in the president's speeches.

This narrative aligns with the objectives of the executive branch, which seeks to consolidate a new model of development based on stability and capital attraction. In contrast, the non-official press and opposition sectors have maintained more critical positions, questioning both the sustainability of growth and the veracity of the figures released. From this perspective, tourism is part of an official narrative that obscures persistent structural problems, such as job insecurity, unequal access to public services, and the concentration of media discourse in the hands of political power.

The government of Nayib Bukele has played a leading role in transforming public discourse, particularly through the implementation of security policies such as the Territorial Control Plan, a strategy aimed at the territorial deployment of security forces in areas with a high gang presence, and the state of emergency, which has suspended constitutional guarantees in order to facilitate mass arrests and combat criminal structures. Although these measures have coincided with a decrease in official homicide rates, the debate over their legal, social, and democratic implications persists. In this context, the pro-government press has widely disseminated the narrative of success in security, presenting this new stage as a government achievement that lays the foundation for promoting sectors such as tourism. However, this link between security and economic growth is not universally accepted by social actors, nor is it supported by conclusive empirical evidence, making it necessary to critically analyze the media's role in constructing this perception.

One of the most obvious examples of this transformation in media discourse is the coverage of government-led tourism development projects. As security improved, media outlets such as *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* highlighted the state's efforts to diversify the economy through tourism, positioning the country as an emerging destination in Central America. An emblematic case of this new narrative is *El Diario de Hoy*'s 2022 coverage of the Surf City project, a government initiative that aims to capitalize on El Salvador's exceptional surfing conditions and attract tourists from around the world. *El Diario de El Salvador* has published several reports on the positive impact of Surf City, highlighting not only the economic potential of the initiative but also the transformation of coastal communities thanks to tourism.

La Prensa Gráfica has devoted significant coverage to the modernization of tourism infrastructure in El Salvador, highlighting flagship projects such as the expansion of the San Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez International Airport. An article published on February 8, 2022, details the characteristics of this project, which includes a three-story building, five waiting rooms, five boarding bridges, a new immigration and customs area, and a shopping area. In addition, it reports on additional investments earmarked for Surf City, with a projected \$100 million budget for complementary tourism infrastructure. These publications use language that emphasizes progress and modernization, accompanied by photographs of the new facilities and

the progress of the works. The media narrative suggests that these improvements are aimed at attracting international tourists and facilitating their mobility within the country, thereby contributing to the perception of El Salvador as a safer and more accessible destination.

New actors in the tourism discourse

Throughout this transition from a discourse focused on gang violence to one related to economic development and tourism opportunities, the media have not been alone in creating and disseminating the new tourism discourse. The Salvadoran government has played a central role in promoting this narrative through communication campaigns amplified by the media. In 2022, the Ministry of Tourism, in collaboration with the Salvadoran Tourism Corporation (CORSATUR), launched several advertising campaigns to promote the country as a safe and attractive tourist destination.

President Nayib Bukele's Press Office is one of the main spokespersons for the campaign to promote tourism, insisting not only on the importance of opening the doors of a safer country to foreign visitors but also on the need to continue creating spaces for the enjoyment of the local population, with an emphasis on creating local businesses in tourist areas to generate jobs. The Press Office is the government's main spokesperson and is often the primary source for various media outlets inside and outside the country. Having pages on different social media sites allows its messages to reach media outlets and readers outside El Salvador. These campaigns have had a wide reach both nationally and internationally, and the media have been instrumental in ensuring that the message reaches the national audience, highlighting the advantages of tourism as a tool for development.

Finally, it is important to highlight the role of digital media and social networks in this discursive transition. While traditional newspapers have been key in constructing the new discourse on tourism, social networks have broadened the reach of this narrative, allowing the country's success stories and tourist attractions to reach wider audiences. Media outlets such as *El Mundo* and *La Prensa Gráfica* have complemented their print publications with digital and multimedia content, helping position El Salvador on global platforms and attracting the attention of influencers, travel bloggers, and potential tourists from around the world.

The transition in media discourse about El Salvador, from a narrative focused on violence to one focused on tourism, occurred during the period 2022-2024. Even so, tourism is not the only topic highlighted in media publications; social progress also tends to occupy important pages in the main official media. The recovery of public spaces, the National Library of El Salvador, soccer fields in historically marginalized neighborhoods, price controls on necessities, attention to public transportation, and monitoring and response to natural disasters mean that the discourse allows us to see actions beyond the control of gangs and urban violence. However, news of this type continues to dominate in some newspapers. This change not only reflects improvements in the country's security and economic conditions but is also part of a broader strategy to redefine El Salvador's image globally.

The analysis of Salvadoran media discourse on violence and its subsequent shift to tourism reveals several crucial aspects of the power of media narrative and its ability to shape public perception. This chapter has explored how the Salvadoran press, represented by newspapers such as *La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Diario de El Salvador*, and *El Mundo*, played a central role in constructing an image of El Salvador dominated by violence for much of the 21st century, and how, beginning in 2022, these same media outlets began to articulate a more positive discourse

focused on opportunities for tourism development, following security improvements.

One of the most important findings is that the discourse on violence, intensely disseminated for more than two decades, created a hegemonic interpretive framework in which crime and gangs were perceived as omnipresent elements in the lives of Salvadorans. The media not only reported on acts of violence but also reinforced this narrative through a sensationalist approach that prioritized crime-related news to the detriment of other issues, such as economic development, culture, or tourism. This narrative, although based on the reality of widespread violence in El Salvador, contributed to fueling a negative perception of the country internationally, profoundly affecting El Salvador's image.

Tourism, a sector with great potential to contribute to the country's economic development, was severely affected by this media narrative. Over the years, the media portrayed El Salvador as a dangerous place, deterring potential tourists and limiting the sector's growth opportunities. References to tourism, when they appeared, were marginal and failed to counter the dominant discourse on insecurity. This phenomenon underscores the importance of media power not only in shaping internal perceptions but also in shaping how a country is perceived from the outside.

An example of this change in how El Salvador is viewed from abroad is that several internationally renowned media outlets emphasize reductions in homicide and violent crime rates and echo the stories of foreign visitors once they return from the country. Another example is the figures themselves, which are shown on data pages such as the Expansión or Forbes Centroamérica websites, reflecting the constant growth in the number of tourists arriving in the country, which tripled in the last year. Similarly, these websites offer historical data on the main countries of origin of tourists to El Salvador. Before 2019, they came only from Central American countries; today, the market has diversified, and they arrive from the United States, Canada, and European countries such as Spain and France.

This change in discourse not only reflects improvements in the country's internal conditions but also highlights the media's active role in reshaping the national image. The media are not mere passive observers of reality; they actively participate in creating interpretive frameworks that shape how audiences perceive certain issues. In this sense, the transition from discourse on violence to discourse focused on tourism demonstrates the media's ability to adapt and transform narratives in response to social and political changes, underscoring its role as a key player in the construction of national identities and the promotion of public policies.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has revealed that the construction of a new discourse on tourism development is not only a response to the decline in violence, but also responds to the need to diversify the country's economy and create new growth opportunities. Tourism, in this context, is presented not only as an economic activity but also as a strategic tool for projecting a renewed image of El Salvador to the world. By adopting this narrative, the media contribute to the construction of a collective imaginary in which the country is redefined as a safe and attractive tourist destination, progressively moving away from the stigma of violence. There are numerous examples of newspaper articles where the word security has begun to be used instead of violence, gangs, or homicides.

News stories about criminal acts often include phrases that suggest these are more isolated incidents than those that occurred regularly in previous years, or that emphasize the actions

of the police or army to resolve the situation. The use of words such as security, peace, and opportunities also gives the discourse about the country a positive slant. Although most of this discourse comes from official or government-affiliated media, it nonetheless influences and affects the audience.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Data curation: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Formal analysis: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Research: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Methodology: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Project management: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Resources: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Software: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Supervision: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Validation: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Visualization: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Writing - original draft: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.

Writing - review and editing: Haniel Valdés Velázquez.