



VISUALITIES OF ENTREPRENEURIAL FUTURES IN CONTEMPORARY ECUADOR

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how visual representations of entrepreneurship in Ecuador shape the symbolic foundations of its imagined futures. Using a corpus of 120 images and applying Causal Layered Analysis, the study reveals a visual regime dominated by low-complexity production, ceremonial state presence, and moralized narratives of individual effort. These layers constrain the emergence of knowledge-based futures while naturalizing subsistence-oriented imaginaries. Yet, the expert panel identified early signals of a Transformation archetype grounded in collaboration, scientific capability, and creative experimentation. These findings highlight the cultural conditions necessary for reorienting Ecuador's entrepreneurial trajectory.

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1. Introduction

The Ecuadorian entrepreneurial ecosystem exhibits an apparent vitality that conceals deep structural tensions. In 2023, the country recorded a Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate of 32.7%, one of the highest worldwide, while nearly 90% of entrepreneurs reported starting businesses out of necessity rather than opportunity (ESPAE, 2024). At the same time, high levels of labor informality (over 68%), early business discontinuity, and limited access to formal financing persist, shaping an environment marked by productive fragility, low technological sophistication, and restricted potential for scaling (AEI, 2023; INEC, 2023; MIPRO, 2022). This paradox between entrepreneurial hyperactivity and systemic weakness demands an examination not only of economic indicators but also of the cultural narratives that sustain how the country imagines its productive future.

Despite recent initiatives such as the *Organic Law on Entrepreneurship and Innovation* (Republic of Ecuador, 2020) and the *Ecuador Emprendedor, Innovador y Sostenible 2030* strategy (Secretaría Técnica de Planificación, 2021), persistent inequalities reveal a deeper, understudied challenge: the absence of cultural imaginaries capable of supporting a knowledge- and technology-based model of entrepreneurship. Polak (1973) argued that the trajectory of a civilization depends on the strength of its images of the future, while Boulding (1988) warned that societies lacking such images lose historical direction. In Ecuador, representations of the entrepreneur as a figure of subsistence, improvised resilience, or artisanal creativity continue to dominate collective imaginaries, constraining the emergence of innovative and science-driven visions.

This condition leads to a clear scientific gap. Although prior research has examined structural barriers to entrepreneurship in Ecuador, little attention has been paid to how the discourses, visualities, and metaphors circulating in public space shape the ways in which future entrepreneurial pathways are conceived. Berger and Luckmann (1966) demonstrated that social reality is constructed through shared meanings; Sardar (1999) emphasized that studying the future requires interrogating the imaginaries that structure expectations; and Jasanoff and Kim (2015) showed that nations advance through sociotechnical imaginaries rather than policies or material capacities alone. This symbolic dimension remains largely absent from analyses of the Ecuadorian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

To address this gap, the present article applies Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) as a hermeneutic framework to explore the discursive, visual, and metaphorical layers that structure Ecuador's entrepreneurial imaginary. According to Inayatullah (1998, 2004), CLA reveals the deeper strata (litany, systemic causes, worldviews, and myths) through which images of the future take shape, while Slaughter (2002) asserts that such images form the foundational material from which societies negotiate long-term horizons. CLA therefore provides a rigorous methodological pathway for deconstructing symbolic configurations such as the "artisanal entrepreneur," the idea of innovation as an individual talent, and the perception of science as a distant or elitized sphere disconnected from everyday production.

The aim of this study is to analyze the visualities, narratives, and metaphors that shape Ecuador's imagined entrepreneurial futures, integrating futures studies methodologies with a critical visual culture perspective. The article's primary contribution lies in offering an integrated analytical framework (structural, discursive, and symbolic) that illuminates how visions of a science- and technology-based entrepreneurial ecosystem are constructed, legitimized, or constrained. By doing so, it advances a novel lens for development analysis that aligns with contemporary research exploring the relationships between cultural imaginaries, visual futures, and socio-economic transformation.

2. Research Objectives

2.1. General Objective

To analyze how visual representations of entrepreneurship in Ecuador configure dominant and emergent imaginaries of entrepreneurial futures, through the application of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) to a corpus of contemporary images interpreted by an expert panel.

2.2. Specific Objectives

- OE1. To identify and systematize recurrent visual patterns and motifs that characterize the public representation of entrepreneurship in Ecuador at the litany level, as expressed in institutional, media, and digital visualities.
- OE2. To examine the systemic structures, discursive frameworks, and cultural worldviews that underpin these visual patterns, revealing how they stabilize subsistence-oriented and low-complexity entrepreneurial imaginaries.
- OE3. To explore the deep myths, metaphors, and archetypal futures embedded in entrepreneurial visualities, identifying both dominant narratives and emergent signals associated with transformative, knowledge-based futures.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Visual Culture, Representation, and the Symbolic Construction of the Future

Visual culture operates as an epistemic architecture that regulates how societies see, interpret, and anticipate reality, functioning as a system that entangles power, knowledge, and collective sensibilities. Its scope exceeds the analysis of images as isolated objects; rather, it requires recognizing visuality as a disciplinary regime that organizes perception and distributes authority over what may be seen, narrated, and rendered meaningful (Mirzoeff, 2011). From this perspective, visuality is not neutral but a mode of governing the sensible that establishes the boundaries between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable. In the same vein, Mitchell (1994) argues that images should not be understood merely as representations but as cultural “agents” that intervene in the production of the social world by mobilizing affects, legitimizing discourses, and shaping belief structures. Rose (2016) complements this view by emphasizing that every image is embedded within material practices, technologies of vision, and institutional frameworks that determine its “social life,” while Berger (1972) asserts that seeing is a political act conditioned by power relations and ideologies that reorganize what is considered real.

This shift from the image toward visuality has made it possible to understand that representation does not simply describe the world; it produces it through symbolic mechanisms that link experience and futurity. Barthes (1957) demonstrated that images operate as modern mythologies that naturalize cultural meanings by presenting them as self-evident truths, functioning as devices that sediment collective values. Sontag (1977) added that photographic images generate “new grammars of sensitivity,” creating moral distances and establishing affective frames through which social phenomena are interpreted. Flusser (1983) expanded this notion by arguing that technical images not only mediate experience but establish new ontologies of the real, within which the possibilities of thought depend on the visual materialities that structure social imagination. Together, these perspectives converge in the idea that visuality constitutes a symbolic infrastructure that conditions how societies construct possible futures, selecting certain narratives as credible while discarding others.

Within futures studies, this visual dimension becomes central. Appadurai (2013) argues that all projections of the future depend on “capitals of aspiration” sustained by symbolic and visual repertoires that give shape to what is deemed possible. Sardar (1999) notes that the future is a culturally contested territory where different groups struggle to impose their regimes of anticipation. Slaughter (2002) maintains that images of the future constitute the “deep matrix” from which societies negotiate historical meaning and orient decision-making in contexts of uncertainty. Contemporary research confirms this growing visual emphasis. Von der Gracht (2023) shows that futures studies increasingly rely on visual techniques (system maps, causal diagrams, iconographic scenarios) to represent complexity, while Önnared and Chichilanov (2025) demonstrate that the education of futurists involves acquiring visual repertoires that shape modes of perception and anticipation. Ouma (2021), in his work on transformative foresight in post-conflict contexts, argues that futures emerge through internal visual reconfigurations that reorganize images of agency, security, and personal possibility.

Visual culture also plays a decisive role in shaping sociotechnical imaginaries, understood as cultural frameworks that link technology, identity, and collective destiny (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). These imaginaries materialize in iconographies of progress (smart cities, futuristic laboratories, heroic

entrepreneurs, digital platforms) that naturalize specific trajectories of modernization. Zavyalova et al. (2023) show how entrepreneurial ecosystems in Russia depend on visual representations that seek to stabilize national identities under tension; Nguyen and Pham (2022) indicate that global tech unicorns have become symbolic references that guide economic policies; Latour (1986) argues that scientific visualizations function as “immutable mobiles” that consolidate authority and visibility; and Debord (1967) warns that contemporary society is mediated by spectacularization, a logic in which the visual substitutes the political as a key articulator of collective meaning. These perspectives reveal that visibility is not a secondary discourse in constructing futures; it is their very condition of possibility.

In moments of civilizational crisis and systemic transition, visibility acquires crucial cognitive functions. Haraway (1991) and Steyerl (2009) emphasize that images shape modes of inhabiting the present and imagining alternatives to dominant technological systems. Scharmer and Kaufer (2020) show that visual metaphors (ecosystems, fractures, thresholds, networks) enable the navigation of complexity in processes of deep transformation, while Kostakis and Bauwens (2014) caution that techno-optimistic visualities may foreclose critical horizons by presenting corporate futures as inevitable. Azoulay (2012) proposes the notion of “visual citizenship,” framing representation as a political act that reveals how certain collectives are excluded from the imagination of the future. Together, these frameworks highlight that every image of the future is also a site of negotiation: each visibility competes to define which futures may be legitimate and who is authorized to imagine them.

This understanding of the future as a representational practice deepens when combined with Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). Inayatullah (1998, 2004, 2017) conceptualizes the future as a stratified construction encompassing four layers (litany, systemic causes, worldview, and myth) each structured by its own semiologies and visual narratives. Pham (2021) shows that digital taxation debates in Vietnam rely on surface images of “technological disorder” that obscure deeper myths about sovereignty and modernization; Nguyen (2023) demonstrates that Industry 4.0 imaginaries depend on recurring visual metaphors that fabricate a sense of inevitability; and Martínez and López (2022) argue that European SMEs use strategic visualizations to conceptualize scenarios and possible trajectories. These analyses confirm that visibility constitutes the symbolic substrate from which future narratives emerge, and that understanding it enables researchers to identify both the limits and the latent possibilities of imagined horizons.

Altogether, visual culture functions not as a complement to social analysis but as its structuring foundation, a field where the conditions of imagination are defined, meanings are contested, and futures are stabilized. Understanding it requires examining how images operate as anticipatory technologies that shape what is thinkable, desirable, and possible within a given social order. From this perspective, analyzing the visualities of contemporary entrepreneurship, including its metaphors, iconographies, aesthetic devices, and institutional representations, offers a privileged window into the processes through which futures are produced and negotiated in contexts where innovation, development, and national imagination intersect.

3.2. Future Imaginaries and the Cultural Structures of Anticipation

Contemporary societies do not imagine their futures from a conceptual void but through symbolic repertoires that structure expectations, organize experiences, and delineate horizons of possibility. Castoriadis’s (1997) concept of the “social imaginary” is fundamental for understanding how collectivities produce meanings that orient their understanding of the world and legitimize specific courses of action. Similarly, Taylor (2004) argues that modern imaginaries operate as narrative frameworks that render notions of progress, development, and collective agency thinkable. Hartog’s (2015) formulation of “regimes of historicity” adds that each epoch organizes its experience of time, defining what is remembered, anticipated, and feared. Together, these perspectives highlight that the future is not an objective projection but a cultural construction rooted in shared symbols, narratives, and sensibilities.

When future-making intersects with innovation, development, or modernization, it gives rise to dynamics in which communities negotiate meanings of change. From science and technology studies (STS), Bijker and Pinch (1987) demonstrate that technological artifacts (and the visions of progress attached to them) gain significance through interpretive processes rather than intrinsic properties. Castells (1996) notes that the network society reshapes not only communication structures but also the expectations that organize global imaginaries of modernity. Wynne (1996) shows that public trust in future-oriented visions depends on cultural matrices that determine who is authorized to anticipate

change. These contributions illuminate that promises of the future are upheld through cultural processes that shape what societies deem desirable or possible.

This relationship between anticipation and cultural order becomes more complex when considering the role of power in shaping imagined futures. Mbembe (2003) reveals that contemporary governmentalities rely on visual practices that determine which lives are considered viable and which trajectories are deemed inevitable. Steyerl (2012) examines how technological aesthetics naturalize logics of mobility, surveillance, and precision that shape subjectivities. Crary (1990) argues that modernity instituted modes of attention that organize both perception and imagined futures. These insights underscore that anticipation operates within visual and discursive ecologies saturated with asymmetries of power, cultural struggles, and perceptual structures that orient imaginaries of change.

Understanding how futures are contested also requires considering the tensions between temporal experience and expectation. Bloch (1986) introduces the “principle of hope” as a utopian force animating all projections toward the future. Koselleck (2004) characterizes modern futurity as a rupture between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation,” producing both openness and anxiety. Adam (1998) conceptualizes contemporary time as a “timescape” in which biographical, institutional, and technological rhythms intersect, generating contradictions that influence how change is imagined. Rosa (2013) argues that social acceleration reshapes temporal relations, fueling discourses of urgency, innovation, or collapse. Together, these theories reveal that anticipatory practices unfold within conflicted temporalities where aspirations for transformation coexist with experiences of uncertainty.

Within this conceptual landscape, Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) offers a framework for decomposing future narratives into different levels of depth. Inayatullah (1998) posits that discourses operate across layers ranging from surface claims to deeply sedimented myths, a view that resonates with Ricoeur’s (1988) notion of narrative mediation. Barry (2001) argues that technologies and institutional practices should be understood as interpretive assemblages, while Marres (2012) shows that public problems take shape through material and symbolic practices that reorganize participation. Seen through these lenses, the stratification proposed by CLA is not merely a methodological tool but an epistemological model for understanding how meanings that sustain visions of the future are organized.

This section therefore integrates theories of imaginaries, temporality, and power with the logic of CLA, providing a conceptual foundation aligned with the visual and narrative analysis developed in this study. Focusing on layered meanings (from the superficial to the mythical) enables a deep reading of the images, discourses, and aspirations that shape Ecuador’s contemporary entrepreneurial imagination, without assuming technological determinism or linearity, but instead acknowledging the cultural density that underlies all projections of the future.

4. Methodology

This study follows a qualitative and interpretive research design grounded in Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), a methodological framework that examines futures as multilayered constructions shaped by cultural narratives, systemic structures, and deep-seated myths (Inayatullah, 1998, 2004, 2017). The methodological strategy integrates three complementary components: (1) the construction of a visual corpus of contemporary representations of Ecuadorian entrepreneurship; (2) a structured analysis conducted by an expert panel using CLA; and (3) the elaboration of an interpretive synthesis that identifies patterns across the four layers of the method. This design allows for a rigorous examination of how visualities, discourses, and sociotechnical imaginaries shape the possible futures of the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

4.1. Construction of the Visual Corpus

To capture the dominant visualities surrounding entrepreneurship in Ecuador, a corpus of 120 images was systematically collected using Google Images and other open digital sources. Two search queries were used (“emprededor ecuatoriano” and “ecosistema emprendedor ecuatoriano”) chosen because they reflect how citizens, institutions, and media platforms frame the entrepreneurial figure. The first 60 images of each search result were extracted, excluding duplicates, irrelevant content, and non-contextual visuals (e.g., stock images from foreign contexts). The resulting dataset reflects a diverse set of institutional communications, media portrayals, promotional materials, event documentation, and informal visual expressions.

This visual corpus served as a “detonator” for the CLA process. Following Rose’s (2016) and Mitchell’s (1994) principles for visual analysis, the images were not interpreted individually but as a collective field of representation that reveals patterns, omissions, and symbolic continuities. The aim was not to assess aesthetic qualities but to identify the cultural grammars that organize the social imagination of entrepreneurship.

The corpus was collected between 2022 and 2025, a period characterized by heightened public visibility of entrepreneurship in Ecuador following post-pandemic recovery initiatives and the consolidation of national support programs. Google Images was employed not as a neutral repository, but as a space of public visibility where institutional, media, and algorithmically amplified representations converge. Accordingly, the aim was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to capture dominant and hegemonic visual patterns circulating in the public sphere. This approach aligns with visual culture research that prioritizes symbolic prevalence, public visibility, and narrative stabilization over quantitative frequency.

4.2. Expert Panel and Analytical Procedure

A panel of ten experts participated in the analysis. These individuals were selected for their extensive experience in futures studies, entrepreneurship, public policy, innovation ecosystems, or visual culture. All experts had postgraduate training and professional experience in fields relevant to the study. Consistent with Inayatullah’s methodological prescriptions, experts were provided with the full visual corpus and a structured facilitation guide explaining the logic of the four CLA layers: (1) litany; (2) systemic causes; (3) worldview/discourse; and (4) myth/metaphor.

The panel conducted the analysis through a series of structured sessions. In the first phase, participants individually reviewed the images and noted recurrent motifs, themes, absences, and discursive tensions. In the second phase, these perceptions were synthesized collaboratively in a moderated virtual workshop. The objective was to build a multilayered interpretation of the visual corpus while avoiding premature consensus, enabling competing readings to surface. This participatory structure aligns with Önnerved and Chichilanov’s (2025) and Ouma’s (2021) emphasis on collective sense-making in futures research.

4.3. Application of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

The CLA process unfolded across the four layers proposed by Inayatullah (1998, 2004, 2017):

- Litany: identification of surface-level visual patterns such as artisanal crafts, low-tech commercial activities, state ceremonialism, and portrayals of self-reliant entrepreneurs.
- Systemic Causes: exploration of structural constraints suggested by the images, including informality, limited scientific infrastructure, resource scarcity, and dependence on state-led promotion.
- Worldview/Discourse: reconstruction of deeper narrative structures such as meritocracy, subsistence-oriented entrepreneurship, incrementalism, and the normalization of low-complexity production.
- Myth/Metaphor: extraction of foundational cultural archetypes such as the “artisanal entrepreneur,” the “heroic self-made worker,” and the perception of innovation as an individual rather than systemic attribute.

The outputs generated by the panel were tabulated for each layer and subsequently integrated into a comprehensive interpretive schema. This synthesis emphasizes coherence between layers, allowing the identification of patterns that stabilize current entrepreneurial imaginaries and restrict alternative sociotechnical futures.

4.4. Analytical Integration and Interpretation

The final stage involved consolidating the multilayered findings into an interpretive matrix, incorporating insights from the expert panel, the visual corpus, and the theoretical framework. This included cross-layer comparisons, detection of symbolic gaps, and identification of tensions between surface representations and deep cultural assumptions. The synthesis also involved mapping the results onto the Futures Archetypes proposed by Dator (Continued Growth, Collapse, Discipline, and Transformation) to refine the identification of emergent anticipatory structures.

This integrative approach aligns with Ricoeur’s (1988) view of narrative as mediating meaning across levels of depth, Barry’s (2001) interpretation of technologies as discursive assemblages, and Marres’s (2012) emphasis on the material and symbolic dimensions of public problems. The methodological coherence between visual analysis, expert interpretation, and layered synthesis ensures a rigorous and culturally grounded examination of Ecuador’s entrepreneurial imaginaries.

5. Results

The results derive from the stratified analysis conducted with the expert panel, in which images of the Ecuadorian entrepreneurial ecosystem functioned as interpretive triggers for identifying visual patterns, discursive tensions, and deeper symbolic structures that shape prevailing narratives about entrepreneurship in the country. The collective reading of the visual corpus, combined with the systematic progression through the four layers of CLA, made it possible to reconstruct the symbolic architecture sustaining current entrepreneurial visualities, distinguishing between surface-level elements, structural factors, institutional rationalities, and underlying metaphors.

The analysis was based on 120 images extracted from governmental platforms, news media, and institutional social networks, in which entrepreneurship is depicted through recurrent scenes such as photographs of productive fairs, official training events, young entrepreneurs showcasing products, improvised street stands, and institutional portraits highlighting the State’s presence as guarantor of economic progress (Figures 1–5). These visualities, marked by everyday aesthetics, a strong orientation toward self-production, and the centrality of the entrepreneur as an individual actor, served as the initial input for the interpretive process. Their examination revealed how certain visual codes naturalize expectations, hierarchies, and values associated with entrepreneurship, exposing symbolic patterns that were subsequently reinterpreted across the four CLA layers.

Figure 1. Facebook post from the Alliance for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (AEI)



Source: AEI Facebook Page, January 2022.

Figure 1 constructs a representation of entrepreneurship grounded in a logic of competition and individual performance, drawing on a visual aesthetic closely aligned with widely recognizable narratives from contemporary popular culture. The coordinated movement of bodies, uniform clothing, and spatial arrangement evoke a dynamic of testing, selection, and progression, in which not all participants advance equally. Entrepreneurship is framed as a “serious game”: a demanding yet regulated trajectory where success depends primarily on individual resilience and the ability to remain in play. At the litany level, this visuality emphasizes meritocratic effort and personal endurance, while rendering structural conditions, technological infrastructures, and institutional asymmetries largely invisible.

Figure 2. Main image from the article “Who Are Ecuadorian Entrepreneurs?”



Source: Forbes Ecuador, October 2024.

Figure 2 represents entrepreneurship through an aesthetic of proximity, domestic production, and manual labor, centered on artisanal practices and interpersonal interaction within a small-scale productive setting. The scene privileges intimacy, emotional engagement, and low technological complexity, associating entrepreneurial value with craftsmanship, cooperation, and everyday creativity. This visual framing reinforces an imaginary in which entrepreneurship is embedded in household or community spaces and disconnected from scientific infrastructures, advanced innovation processes, or knowledge-intensive value chains. Within the CLA framework, the image contributes to the normalization of subsistence-oriented entrepreneurship and delimits the horizon of imaginable productive futures.

Figure 3. Traditional entrepreneurship fair in Ecuador



Source: Diario La Prensa, April 2025.

Figure 3 condenses one of the most recurrent visual motifs identified across the corpus: the fair as the central spatial expression of entrepreneurship. The arrangement of products on improvised tables, the emphasis on direct exchange, and the temporality of the event configure an economy of proximity oriented toward immediate commercialization. Entrepreneurship is thus represented as a localized, short-term, and low-scale practice, where success is measured by direct sales rather than by processes of accumulation, innovation, or scaling. At the litany level, the fair operates as a visual symbol of economic vitality, while simultaneously obscuring structural constraints related to technological upgrading and long-term ecosystem development.

Figure 4. Delivery of benefits to entrepreneurs by the President



Source: @Presidencia_Ec on Instagram, August 2025.

Figure 4 shifts the visual focus from entrepreneurial practice to the staging of the State as a central and visible actor. Political authorities occupy a prominent position within the composition, while entrepreneurs are portrayed primarily as recipients of recognition, support, or validation. The ceremonial format, the public setting, and the presence of official symbols construct a narrative in which economic progress is represented as the outcome of visible governmental intervention rather than structural transformation. Within the CLA perspective, this visibility reinforces a worldview that assigns the State a paternalistic and legitimizing role, foregrounding symbolic action over systemic capacity building.

Figure 5. Entrepreneurs receiving the “Emprende Incentive Bonus”



Source: Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency, October 2025.

Figure 5 deepens this ceremonial logic by portraying entrepreneurship as an object of incentive, reward, and public display. Entrepreneurs pose alongside their products within a clearly institutionalized environment, reinforcing the idea that entrepreneurial success is validated through official recognition. The image prioritizes the moment of benefit delivery and institutional visibility over productive processes, technological capabilities, or organizational development. As a result, this visual representation contributes to an imaginary in which the future of entrepreneurship appears dependent on assistential programs and punctual incentives, rather than on sustained strategies aimed at strengthening scientific, technological, and innovative capacities.

Taken together, Figures 1–5 reveal a heterogeneous yet patterned visual field in which different representations of entrepreneurship coexist, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes contradicting one another. While certain images emphasize competition, individual performance, and aspirational narratives, others foreground artisanal production, economies of proximity, and ceremonial forms of State intervention. Rather than interpreting these visualities in isolation, the analysis treats them as interconnected symbolic expressions that activate deeper layers of meaning. To move beyond surface description and examine how these images structure expectations, normalize values, and delimit

future horizons, the study advances through the four analytical layers of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). The following section begins with the litany layer, focusing on the most visible, repetitive, and publicly legible patterns through which entrepreneurship is represented in Ecuador.

5.1. Litany Layer: Surface Patterns and Public Representations

The first layer of CLA allowed the systematization of the most visible and recurrent elements within the corpus, which configure the surface discourse through which entrepreneurship is publicly presented in Ecuador. These representations are characterized by their emphasis on everyday, highly recognizable scenes such as commercial fairs with minimal infrastructure, entrepreneurs directly exhibiting products, official events dominated by ceremonial acts, and institutional photographs that celebrate individual achievements as collective milestones. At this level, images reproduce simple and repetitive messages, including self-employment as an immediate solution, personal effort as the engine of progress, and State presence as a legitimizing force, generating a linear and optimistic reading of the phenomenon (Table 1).

Table 1. Litany Layer: Dominant Surface Patterns in Ecuadorian Entrepreneurial Visualities

Surface Pattern	Analytical Description
Artisanal scenery as central imaginary	Images situate entrepreneurship in fairs, tents, and improvised tables, establishing a low-infrastructure aesthetic that naturalizes the entrepreneur as an informal micro-producer.
Low technological complexity	Visuals privilege simple products (artisan foods, basic textiles, homemade cosmetics, plants, jewelry), reinforcing the notion of entrepreneurship centered on manual crafts rather than innovation.
State-centered ceremonial iconography	Abundant images of authorities handing out certificates, checks, or visiting stands shift attention from productive processes to symbolic rituals of public legitimacy.
Feminized entrepreneurship	The prevalence of women in domestic-economy activities associates entrepreneurship with extended care roles and reinforces historical gender hierarchies.
Subsistence economies as visual horizon	The absence of laboratories, prototyping, machinery, or tech startups constructs entrepreneurship as small sales, home production, and immediate economic solutions disconnected from science or technology.

Source: Author’s elaboration, 2025.

For the expert panel, these visualities do not offer analytical depth; instead, they function as standardized narratives that celebrate fairs, direct sales, and micro-productive activities as evidence of economic dynamism. The repetition of artisanal products, subsistence scenes, ceremonial events, and individual portraits constructs an imaginary where entrepreneurship appears simple, accessible, and self-explanatory, with success tied to personal effort and State intervention depicted as symbolic rather than structural.

5.2. Systemic Causes: Structural Conditions Underlying the Visual Field

Building on the litany, the analysis advanced into the layer of systemic causes, where the panel examined the structures enabling the emergence and repetition of these visual patterns. In this layer, experts shifted attention from what is visible to the economic, institutional, technological, and historical mechanisms shaping public representations of entrepreneurship. The recurrence of fairs, micro-production, and State-centered events appeared linked to structural conditions that constrain productive capacities, reproduce historical inequalities, and steer the ecosystem toward low-complexity activities (Table 2).

Table 2. Systemic Causes Underpinning Represented Entrepreneurship in Ecuador

Structural Factor	Analytical Description
Economic model based on informal micro-entrepreneurship	High informality, predominance of micro- and small businesses, limited diversification and scale, leading to survival-oriented rather than innovation-oriented entrepreneurship.
Persistent technological gaps	Insufficient investment in innovation, scarce R&D infrastructure, weak technology adoption, and poor alignment between science policy and entrepreneurship restrict the rise of higher-complexity sectors.
Dependence on assistentialist policies	State programs favor visibility through ceremonies, contests, and certifications, producing symbolic legitimacy rather than strengthening deep productive capacities.
Gender inequalities and socioeconomic segmentation	Women remain concentrated in domestic productive activities, face unequal financing access, and are underrepresented in knowledge-intensive sectors.
Fragmentation of the ecosystem and weak institutional articulation	Limited connections among academia, business, government, and civil society; no clear scaling pathways; weak knowledge-transfer mechanisms.
Public policy focused on events, not infrastructure	Fairs, workshops, and visible activities dominate over long-term strategies emphasizing technological development, specialized training, or institutional consolidation.

Source: Author’s elaboration, 2025.

Together, these systemic constraints demonstrate that the entrepreneurial ecosystem operates within a structural matrix that hinders transitions toward knowledge- or innovation-based models. For the panel, the dominant visualities do not merely represent the present; they reinforce a limited anticipatory horizon from which futures are conceived.

5.3. *Worldview/Discourse: Deep Interpretive Frames Giving Meaning to Visualities*

At this layer, the analysis moves from objective structures to the interpretive frameworks that give symbolic coherence to Ecuador’s entrepreneurial ecosystem. The panel recognized that these worldviews legitimize what appears in the litany and systemic layers: narratives of progress, meritocratic discourses, technocratic ideals of development, and cultural expectations surrounding the roles of the State and the individual (Table 3).

Table 3. Worldviews and Discourses Structuring Ecuadorian Entrepreneurial Visualities

Worldview / Discourse	Analytical Description
Entrepreneurial meritocracy	Frames entrepreneurship as the expression of individual effort, naturalizing structural inequalities and legitimizing the belief that success depends almost exclusively on personal will.
Technocratic progress	Projects technological modernization as an inevitable and desirable future, even when actual visualities show a lack of scientific or innovative infrastructure. Functions as a deferred promise.
State ceremonialism of development	Assigns the State a symbolic rather than transformational role, locating its action in events, fairs, and certifications that stage support without altering structural capacities.
Entrepreneurship as moral virtue	Constructs the entrepreneur as resilient and hardworking, reinforcing the idea that entrepreneurship is an ethical obligation amid economic crisis.
Domesticated future	Reduces future imaginaries to incremental improvements, avoiding visions of deep transformation or sociotechnical rupture. The future appears contained, proximate, and risk-averse.

Source: Author’s elaboration, 2025.

These discourses show that Ecuadorian entrepreneurial visualities do not merely reflect structures: they are anchored in interpretive regimes that narrow the horizon of the possible. For the panel, this layer revealed that entrepreneurial imagination operates within a discursive order that stabilizes expectations and limits the emergence of transformative alternatives.

5.4. Myth/Metaphor: Deep Archetypes Shaping Entrepreneurial Imagination

The final layer explores the symbolic terrain where rationalities operate no longer as arguments but as fundamental images orienting unconscious understandings of entrepreneurship. Here, representations are guided by cultural archetypes shaping notions of identity, progress, destiny, and collective aspiration (Table 4).

Table 4. Myth/Metaphor: Deep Archetypes Shaping Entrepreneurial Imagination

Myth / Metaphor	Deep Analytical Description
The entrepreneur-hero	Portrays the entrepreneur as a morally elevated figure who overcomes adversity through relentless work, an epic narrative that is more emotional than economic.
Innovation as redemptive destiny	Imagines technological futures as deferred salvation. Despite low-complexity visualities, the belief persists that “one day” technology will rescue the country.
The benevolent State-father	Frames the State not as a structural actor but as a paternal figure that “recognizes,” “accompanies,” or “rewards” entrepreneurs.
The economy as household	A feminized metaphor where entrepreneurship is an extension of home-based production rather than a project of productive transformation.
The future as restricted territory	Imagines the future as a limited and controlled space that is safe, predictable, and constrained, rather than an open horizon.

Source: Author’s elaboration, 2025.

Together, these metaphors reveal that Ecuadorian entrepreneurship operates within a symbolic architecture combining sacrificial heroism, expectations of technological redemption, and affective ties to a paternal State. For the panel, this layer demonstrated that entrepreneurial imagination is anchored to mythologies of safety, familiarity, and deferred salvation, restricting visions of disruptive futures.

5.5. Archetypal Futures: Synthesis of CLA Layers Through Dator’s Framework

The synthesis of the four CLA layers was then projected onto Dator’s archetypes, including Continued Growth, Collapse, Discipline/Order, and Transformation, to visualize how present symbolic structures condition imagined futures. The resulting matrix is shown below (Table 5).

Table 5. Integrated CLA–Dator Mapping of Entrepreneurial Futures

CLA Layer	Continued Growth	Collapse	Discipline / Order	Transformation
Litany	Expansion of fairs and moderate growth of micro-entrepreneurship	Saturation and extreme precarity	Strict ordering and reduced visible informality	Emergence of innovation-oriented visualities
Systemic Causes	Gradual improvements in basic infrastructure	Intensified technological gaps, weakened institutions	Forced formalization and strong regulatory control	Structural reorientation toward technology, knowledge networks
Worldview/Discourse	Meritocratic optimism	Narratives of loss, risk, institutional distrust	Discourses of stability, responsibility, and order	Imaginariness of cooperation, creativity, knowledge democratization
Myth/Metaphor	Hero-entrepreneur in a stable system	Future as threat and exhaustion	State-father as protector	Metaphors of rebirth, leap, and deep reconstruction

Source: Author’s elaboration, 2025.

The synthesis shows that Ecuadorian entrepreneurial futures are heavily conditioned by the symbolic layers structuring the present. Dator’s archetypes emerge not as abstract projections but as extensions or ruptures of the narratives, structures, and mythologies identified throughout the analysis. Some scenarios reinforce existing patterns, such as incremental growth or institutional disciplinarianization, while others highlight systemic vulnerabilities associated with collapse.

Within this landscape, the Transformation archetype stands out as a particularly significant finding. Although still emergent, the expert panel identified clear signals of alternative sociotechnical imaginaries grounded in collaboration, scientific capability, and collective creativity. This archetype

reveals latent possibilities that transcend the current symbolic confines of subsistence-oriented visualities, offering a valuable foundation for rethinking institutional strategies, policy design, and long-term innovation pathways. Its presence demonstrates that genuine transformative potential exists, even within a constrained cultural horizon.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Ecuador's entrepreneurial imagination is structured by a visual regime that reinforces low-complexity understandings of production, shaping a future horizon marked by incrementalism rather than structural transformation. At the surface level, the predominance of artisanal aesthetics and ceremonial State imagery supports what Mitchell (1994) describes as the "pictorial ordering" of social life, in which images guide public sense-making by delimiting what is visible, credible, and socially legitimate. In Ecuador's case, this ordering normalizes an entrepreneurial landscape centered on subsistence, immediate survival, and institutional ritualism. As Mirzoeff (2011) notes, visibility operates as a mode of governance; the imagery analyzed here not only reflects material constraints but reinforces them by establishing a perceptual frame that makes low-tech entrepreneurship appear natural and sufficient.

When examined in deeper layers, these visualities reveal structural conditions that help explain their persistence. The absence of scientific and technological representations aligns with the systemic gaps identified by Martínez and López (2022), who argue that weak innovation infrastructures limit not only productive capacity but also the symbolic resources societies use to imagine alternative futures. Similarly, Zavyalova et al. (2023) demonstrate how entrepreneurial ecosystems reproduce visual narratives that seek to stabilize identities in contexts of uncertainty. The Ecuadorian case mirrors this dynamic because the repeated focus on fairs, microenterprises, and low-cost initiatives reproduces a symbolic order that privileges immediate economic coping over long-term sociotechnical development. This tension reinforces Castoriadis's (1997) insight that imaginaries are not descriptive but constitutive, since they shape what societies consider thinkable and possible.

At the worldview level, the study reveals discursive logics that sustain and legitimize the ecosystem's visual patterns. Meritocracy, self-discipline, and moralized narratives of effort dominate entrepreneurial discourse, echoing Wynne's (1996) argument that public expectations of change are often culturally driven rather than empirically grounded. These discourses situate the entrepreneur as an isolated figure whose success depends primarily on personal resilience, obscuring structural inequalities and narrowing the horizon of expectation. As Hartog (2015) explains, regimes of historicity shape how societies relate to the future; when the future is imagined as an extension of the present, possibilities for rupture or innovation become difficult to articulate. The Ecuadorian visual repertoire confirms this dynamic by privileging continuity over transformation.

The deepest layer of the analysis reveals the cultural metaphors underpinning these discourses. The recurring archetype of the self-made entrepreneur, the paternalistic role assigned to the State, and the notion of innovation as deferred salvation echo Barthes's (1957) characterization of modern myths as cultural devices that naturalize historically contingent meanings. These metaphors contribute to a symbolic order in which technological futures appear distant, exceptional, or incompatible with everyday economic realities. Recent work by Nguyen (2023) shows how metaphoric structures guide national expectations regarding technological change, often limiting more ambitious imaginaries. In this sense, Ecuador's entrepreneurial metaphors contribute to the containment of future horizons.

Projecting the four layers of CLA onto Dator's archetypes amplifies these insights and reveals a landscape in which growth, collapse, and discipline align closely with established visual patterns. The Transformation archetype emerges as a particularly meaningful finding. Although it is not the dominant reading, the expert panel identified clear signals of alternative sociotechnical imaginaries grounded in collaborative innovation, scientific capacity, and creative experimentation. These signals resonate with contemporary foresight scholarship that highlights the role of emergent visual repertoires in enabling systemic change (Önnered and Chichilanov, 2025; Ouma, 2021). Their presence suggests that even within a constrained visual ecosystem, the cultural groundwork for transformative futures already exists, although it remains fragile and early in its development.

This insight is central to the contribution of the study. The results indicate that meaningful change will not stem solely from policy reforms or institutional restructuring unless there is also a reconfiguration of the symbolic infrastructures that shape how entrepreneurship is imagined. Visual

culture functions as both symptom and driver of the ecosystem's developmental trajectory. The emergence of a transformative imaginary, even in a marginal form, signals the possibility of reorienting entrepreneurial futures toward knowledge-based, collaborative, and technologically capable horizons. Recognizing and cultivating these symbolic openings can provide a more fertile foundation for long-term innovation policies, ecosystem design, and strategic foresight processes with national relevance.

7. Methodological Limitations

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, and the methodological choices made serve to delimit the scope of the findings rather than to signal analytical shortcomings. In this context, the visual corpus is not intended to provide statistical representativeness of all entrepreneurial imagery in Ecuador, but to identify dominant and recurrent visual configurations that acquire visibility within the public sphere. Likewise, the use of digital platforms such as Google Images reflects their role as key spaces for the circulation and amplification of institutional and media-based visual narratives, which shapes the types of representations observed. Finally, the application of Causal Layered Analysis prioritizes an in-depth interpretive engagement with symbolic structures and cultural imaginaries, aiming to illuminate how particular visions of the future are constructed and stabilized, rather than to establish causally generalizable relationships.

8. Conclusions

The results of this study demonstrate that Ecuador's entrepreneurial future is shaped not only by economic constraints or institutional limitations but also by a deeper symbolic architecture that organizes how entrepreneurship is imagined, represented, and socially legitimized. The visualities analyzed, anchored in artisanal production, subsistence practices, and ceremonial State presence, operate as an anticipatory regime that narrows the cultural horizon of possibility. Such imagery does not simply document present conditions; it stabilizes them by reinforcing a perceptual framework in which low-complexity entrepreneurship appears natural, viable, and sufficient.

Causal Layered Analysis reveals that these visual patterns are supported by structural gaps, meritocratic discourses, and deep cultural metaphors that collectively constrain the emergence of knowledge-based or technologically sophisticated futures. The repetition of the "artisan entrepreneur," the paternalistic image of the State, and narratives of innovation as a distant promise highlight the symbolic mechanisms through which the entrepreneurial ecosystem reproduces its own limitations. These findings confirm that imaginaries are not passive reflections of reality but active forces that shape agency, expectation, and collective aspiration.

At the same time, the study identifies a meaningful counterpoint. While dominant visualities reinforce continuity, the expert panel detected emergent signals aligned with Dator's Transformation archetype. These signals, linked to collaboration, scientific capacity, and creative experimentation, indicate that alternative sociotechnical imaginaries do exist, even if still marginal. Their presence suggests that Ecuador possesses the symbolic seeds necessary to reorient its entrepreneurial ecosystem toward more ambitious, future-oriented trajectories.

This insight underscores a central contribution of the study: meaningful transformation will require more than policy reforms or isolated institutional initiatives. It demands a reconfiguration of the symbolic and visual foundations through which the nation imagines its entrepreneurial future. Strengthening scientific infrastructure, integrating knowledge networks, and promoting collaborative innovation must be accompanied by new visual imaginaries that expand the spectrum of what is collectively perceived as possible.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that visual culture is not merely a context for entrepreneurship but a constitutive element of its future. By revealing the layered symbolic structures that underlie Ecuador's current entrepreneurial representations, the analysis provides a foundation for designing strategies that foster more inclusive, technologically capable, and transformative trajectories. The findings affirm that the future is not predetermined; it is imagined, negotiated, and constructed through the cultural frameworks that shape how societies envision change.

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