#CartelTikTok:
How Drug Cartels Utilise Social Media

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Abstract

Mexican drug cartels have become some of the most powerful organisations in the world. Contrary to most scholarship, I argue that drug cartels are not political organisations but rather function as criminal enterprises like private companies, as their main objective is a quest for profit. Like any profit-led enterprise, cartels have specific objectives, strategies, actions, and actors that help augment their profit and power. To achieve their objectives, cartels utilise branding strategies, referred to throughout this dissertation as *narco branding*. Narcobranding can consist of in-person strategies carried out by cartel members or others related to their activities or online content through posting videos, creating digital communities, or using social media. This dissertation focuses exclusively on the use of social media, specifically TikTok, by Mexico's two most important cartels: the Sinaloa Cartel and the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación. This research found that through using TikTok, cartels intend to garner legitimacy, recruit new members, and demonstrate their power to achieve greater objectives. The most popular actions and actors within social media that contribute directly or indirectly to cartels' strategies are known as *narco-influencing*. I analysed 250 TikTok videos and the elements that integrate their visual composition and overall branding purpose.

***Keywords**: TikTok, social media, Mexican drug cartels, Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG*

Resumen

Los cárteles de drogas mexicanos se han convertido en algunas de las organizaciones más poderosas del mundo. Contrario a la mayoría de las investigaciones, argumento que los cárteles de drogas no son organizaciones políticas, sino que funcionan como empresas criminales similares a compañías privadas, ya que su principal objetivo es la búsqueda de beneficios económicos. Como cualquier empresa dirigida por el lucro, los cárteles tienen objetivos específicos, estrategias, acciones y actores que ayudan a lograr el gran objetivo de aumentar sus ganancias y poder. Para alcanzar sus objetivos, los cárteles utilizan estrategias de marca, lo que en esta tesis se denomina "narcobranding". El narcobranding puede consistir en estrategias llevadas a cabo en persona por miembros del cártel u otras personas relacionadas con sus actividades, o en contenido en línea a través de la publicación de videos, la creación de comunidades digitales o el uso de redes sociales. Esta investigación se centra exclusivamente en el uso de las redes sociales, específicamente TikTok, por los dos cárteles más importantes de México: el Cártel de Sinaloa y el Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación. Este estudio encontró que a través del uso de TikTok, los cárteles tienen la intención de obtener legitimidad, reclutar nuevos miembros y demostrar su poder para lograr sus objetivos mayores. Las acciones y actores más populares en las redes sociales que contribuyen directa o indirectamente a las estrategias de los cárteles se conocen como "narco-influencers". Para ello, analicé 250 videos de TikTok y los elementos que integran su composición visual y propósito general de marca.

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Introduction

One day, I was watching TikTok. After hours and hours of people dancing, singing, using filters, and doing famous challenges, I encountered a rather peculiar video. In it, alleged members of the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, the most important criminal organisation in Mexico (Infobae, 2023), were showcasing high-calibre weaponry and armoured vehicles, wearing tactical equipment such as bulletproof vests and radios, and threatening to kill anyone that dared to question their directives. Whilst this was transpiring, an apparently feel-good song lionising the cartel's leader was playing in the background. I was not only confused by the content I had just seen but also frightened to learn that the video had thousands of views, likes, and shares. I had just discovered #CartelTikTok.

Drug cartels are some of the most powerful organisations in the world. Factors like venality, poverty, and violence, have enabled them to continue their pursuit of profits. Known to be some of the most ruthless organisations, they have garnered an extraordinary influence in our society due to their public displays of violence and through music, series, films, and social media presence. However, historically cartels have not been defined within Security Studies as threats to international security. Moreover, they have been regarded as politically-driven organisations, similar to extremist or terrorist groups, instead of Transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) with a greater financial objective. Shelley (1995) establishes that TCOs undermine political structures, the economic system, and the social tissue in the territories in which they operate. It is important to point out that there are nefarious consequences for countries worldwide with the operation of TCOs, and in particular cartels. Some of these are the constant violation of human rights such as freedom of speech, a state of generalised insecurity that allows criminality to flourish, environmental degradation, festering of the rule of law, among other outcomes. Thus, TCOs

represent clear challenges to the international arena similar to those posed by other non-state actors.

Scholars like Campbell (2012) have analysed the public communication strategies of cartels and their importance for achieving specific objectives. Nevertheless, the analysis of social media has not evolved in Academia. In the past, alleged cartel members and supporters uploaded videos containing brutal tortures and murders to Youtube; however, due to community guidelines and changing consumer habits, cartels have now focused on new outlets. TikTok is currently one of the most popular sites in Mexico and the world (Fundación UNAM, 2021), and cartels have seen it as an extraordinary tool to further their objectives.

The framework for my dissertation derives from a case study provided by Downing (2023) in which he analyses how [in]security speak is developed in social media outlets. The study analyses how criminal groups such as drug cartels, human traffickers, and procurers utilise Snapchat to further their illegal activities through a carefully constructed branding process. Downing elucidates how using idioms helps criminals construct narratives of [in]security in which they can peddle their products and services. This approach is significantly relevant as it demonstrates how security speak is not only exclusive to elites and normal individuals but is also available to criminals (Garcia, 2021; Downing, 2023). Moreover, it proves how vernacular studies apply to analysing criminality in cyberspace.

The central focus of this study revolves around exploring the utilisation of social media by Mexican drug cartels, with a specific emphasis on understanding the construction of [in]security discourses related to the Sinaloa Cartel (CDS) and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) on TikTok. By investigating their social media strategies, the research aims to show how these criminal enterprises leverage online platforms, particularly TikTok, to achieve their branding

strategies and overall objectives. The primary research question that guides this inquiry is: "How do Mexican drug cartels employ social media as part of their operations?" A more specific inquiry emerges: "In what specific ways do the Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco New Generation Cartel utilise TikTok?"

This research seeks to gain insights into the motivations and impacts of these cartels' social media engagement and the elements that constitute their social media presence. My main objective is to establish a detailed description of how Cartel-related videos are crafted, namely imagery, narratives, music, and other characteristics, and ponder who they are directed towards. By doing so, I was able to find out the similarities and differences of these elements between Cartels, variations, and categories of the content posted by members or supporters within each of the organisations and to which audience they are directed.

The selection criteria for the TikToks include captions and hashtags related to CDS and CJNG and an engagement threshold, which will be determined after concluding the first two methodological steps. The reason for choosing the CDS and the CJNG is that they are considered the most powerful Cartels in Mexico. Both are the criminal enterprises with the largest following in the country and are regarded by journalists as the most critical diffusers of narco-propaganda in recent times.

As part of my methodology, I used digital ethnography by creating an anonymous TikTok account and training the algorithm by liking and following content to uncover popular accounts and hashtags of related videos. Secondly, I established visual content analysis and content analysis. The former will allow me to look at the aesthetics, music, and other elements that make up the videos and which elements of narco-culture are highlighted the most. To do so, I used the software AtlasTI and a mix of deductive and inductive approaches to code each object of study.

I structured this dissertation into four chapters to better understand my objectives and research questions. Chapter 1: Literature Review delves into available scholarship on the nature of Cartels and their use of social media. Chapter 2: Methodology thoroughly explores this dissertation's methodological and theoretical frameworks. Chapter 3: Findings presents the findings of the 250 TikTok videos. The analysis of these videos is engaged in Chapter 4: Discussion, which looks at TikToks from a security perspective and tries to answer whether a strategy of narco branding and narco-influencing is present. Finally, in Chapter 5: Conclusions, I present my final thoughts on the study and layout learnings for future research endeavours.

My dissertation makes a significant academic contribution by filling the existing gap in the literature and advancing the limited scholarship that emphasises the inclusion of TCOs within the field of security studies. By examining the intersection of VSS and TikTok, this research not only enhances our understanding of how criminal organisations engage with social media but also contributes to broader conversations on the role of digital platforms in shaping security discourses. It underscores the importance of studying emerging technologies and their impact on security dynamics, offering valuable insights into the complex relationship between social media, vernacular constructions of security, and the activities of criminal groups

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Section 1: The Case for Cartels as Threats to International Security

Traditional Security studies characterised the concept of security as a lack of military threats (Downing, 2023). As the founding framework in International Relations, this understanding posited a state-centric perspective, namely, considering the State as the principal actor. Its most relevant tenents consisted of prioritising national interests, defending territorial integrity, and developing military capabilities (McFarlane and Mclennan, 1996; Shelley, 1995; Williams 1994). This framework states that military power and deterrence are primordial elements in an anarchical realm where self-interest is necessary to guarantee survival. With the end of the Cold War, the traditionalist approach, which primarily focused on military security aspects, faced criticism for its limited scope and neglect of non-military security concerns (Degaut, 2015). New approaches emerged, such as the Paris, Welsh, and Copenhagen schools of thought (Downing, 2023; Shelley, 1995), which sought to broaden the understanding of security beyond narrow military perspectives and consider a broader range of threats and vulnerabilities that impact individuals, communities, and societies (Shelley, 1995; Castle, 1997).

In this discussion, the Copenhagen School (CS) proposed the idea of securitisation, which consists of framing a given situation as an existential threat to justify extraordinary measures to counter it (Lipschutz and Waever,1995; Balzacq, 2005). This approach proposes that speech plays a fundamental role in what they call securitising acts, which involve security elites who construct through speech, discourses, and symbols the threats they consider as their risks to survival with a sense of urgency and by doing so, they establish referent objects to be protected (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1997). The CS posits that security cannot be conceptualised as a constant because each entity of the

international system would understand it differently depending on contextual characteristics and as something that states would define by themselves (Castle, 1997). Moreover, besides military concerns to security, political, economic, societal, and environmental realms pose different challenges to international affairs (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1997).

This approach challenged the traditional conceptualisation of security and recognised the influence of non-state actors in the configuration of international security agendas (Downing, 2023). After 9/11, non-state actors caught the attention of considerable security scholars as one of the sources of international instability (Garcia, 2021; Downing, 2023). Nonetheless, it is notable that the entities studied are generally ideologically/politically founded organisations (Shelley, 1995; Williams, 1994). For instance, a mammoth literature surrounds terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and the Islamic State, among other similar organisations, derived from a bevvy of terrorist acts and their media presence (Farkas, Schou, and Neumayer, 2017; Gates and Podder, 2015; Hassan and Azman; 2020; Milton, 2018; Wakeford and Smith, 2019). Moreover, groups such as Qanon, Alt-right groups, and conspiracy theorist groups have also garnered attention in recent years derived from their infamous attacks on civilians and their potential to erode democratic values (Boucher, 2022; Braddock, Hughes, Goldberg, and Miller-Idriss, 2022; ISD, 2021).

It is important to distinguish between the non-state actors mentioned previously, particularly when discussing cartels. Terrorist and extremist organisations are ideologically/politically founded; their primary objective is a particular idea, world vision, belief, or mentality (Williams, 1994; McFarlane and McLennan, 1996; Wainwright, 2017). For instance, the Islamic State's primary objectives were the establishment of a caliphate governed by a radical interpretation of Islamic principles, promoting Jihad, and global expansion (BBC, 2014). Another example is that of Alt-Right aggrupations which aim to further principles such as white nationalism, defence against globalists' agenda, and the

rejection of the political establishment (ISD, 2021). Even though these organisations oppose each other and have diametrically different world visions, they are internationally regarded as non-state actors that produce insecurity in the international system.

On the other hand, criminal enterprises do not have a political foundation, as their main objective is maximising profits (Wainwright, 2017). It has been argued that transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) have a direct say in politics through venality and violence (Campbell, 2012); nevertheless, this incursion obeys the protection of their financial interests (Castle, 1994). Their acting is not different to enterprises lobbying for particular politicians in a legal sense, meaning that they sponsor certain figures into important posts to pass legislation in their favour and avoid regulation or governmental scrutiny. In its foundation, the CS proposed that international criminal organisations should be considered in discussing global security threats (Downing, 2023). However, security scholars have left this area unaccounted for or misrepresented.

This gap is notable in academia as the study of TCOs has not received sufficient attention and has only been perused by Economics, Anthropology and Sociology scholars (Downing, 2023). The reason for the former is that some scholars object to their analysis in Security studies based on the following arguments: 1) that crime is a domestic problem and therefore does not enter the realm of international politics (Downing, 2023; Shelley, 1995), 2) that they do not generate the same impact that other non-state actors accomplish, 3) that the commercial component of the TCOs disqualifies them (Löwenheim, 2022). In the following sections, I explain how these arguments are unfounded and the importance of considering TCOs as relevant actors in the study of security.

Transnational element

The international presence of TCOs cannot be understated. Although there is no international conglomerate of criminal aggrupations, TCOs have developed an

intricate network of contacts worldwide (Shelley, 1995; Williams, 1994). These networks are multifaceted and combine formal and informal connections that operate across national borders for criminal activities such as drug trafficking and money laundering (Infobae, 2018; Shelley, 1995; Castle, 1997). TCOs exploit ideologies, ethnic ties, economic interests, and technological advancements in their favour to enhance the flow of illegal goods and services (Downing, 2023). These entities utilise their network to surpass legislation and law enforcement and exploit corrupt officials and government contacts to foster their activities (Krasna, 1999).

TCOs have benefited from the increasing economic interdependence of the world and globalization (McFarlane and McLennan, 1996; Williams, 1994). For instance, drug cartels employ cheap labour or raw materials from different countries, enabling them to engender machinations for producing, distributing, and marketing narcotics (Felbab-Brown, 2022; Wainwright, 2017; CFR.org, 2022). In a world with open borders for businesses, geographic demarcations are a mere inconvenience for the transit of their products (McFarlane and McLennan, 1996). As Shelley (1995) proposes, the transnational character of criminal enterprises links them to the global political agenda; therefore, their influence is undeniable. As Downing (2023) suggests, this remarks how certain elements from TCOs would not be possible without an international incentive for profit.

Not Affected, Not Interested

Security studies derive from a rigid foundation in Western ideals (Jouenne, 2020). Unfortunately, this has led to the marginalisation of a plethora of voices from the periphery to have a say in understanding security threats (Adamson, 2019). This phenomenon is not exclusive to scholarship, as governments from the most developed countries define global security threats based on their understanding (Downing, 2023). Contrary to non-state actors, such as terrorist organisations, TCOs and particularly cartels, have not performed a high-profile

case of an “organised crime attack” against individuals, public officials, and infrastructure on Western soil. It was until Western assets and people were at the peril of a terrorist attack that radical aggrupations became a priority for international security, even when some were circumscribed to particular locations (Garcia, 2021; Downing; 2023).

One rationale behind this obeys a logic which circumscribes criminal groups to particular geographies; for instance, Löwenheim (2002) ignores the transborder dimension of organised crime to claim that TCOs have “strong ethnic, national, and religious inclinations” that despoil them of a supranational status (p.). He exemplifies this point by saying that TCOs are related to their country of origin, Colombian cartels or Italian mafia, thus omitting how their crimes are committed in more than one state, the nexus between criminal enterprises worldwide, and the potential effects their activities have on another. CDS expansion has shown a thriving international crime network with a presence in many locations in continents such as Asia, Oceania, and Africa (Infobae, 2018). Although the aggrupation is Mexican, that does not downgrade its international presence and potential impact on international affairs.

Löwenheim (2002) proposes that TCOs present smaller challenges than non-state actors. However, Krasna (1999) has identified two significant shortcomings in this perspective. Firstly, it fails to recognise the comprehensive security challenges that producing and transit countries face due to TCO activities. These challenges include violence, corruption, erosion of state institutions in production-oriented countries, territorial disputes, and the infiltration of state institutions in transit areas (Williams, 1994). Secondly, the perspective underestimates the actual impact of TCOs on consumer countries. Beyond public health crises and social disruption, TCO activities undermine law enforcement efforts and divert resources from addressing other security concerns (Krasna, 1999; Williams, 1994).

The impacts on consumer countries may not be as visibly apparent as in production and transit countries (Williams, 1994; Krasna, 1999). In terms of militaristic impact, while there may not be a dedicated cartel militia specifically targeting consumer states like the United States, there are still instances of violence associated with drug dealing activities that governments have to deal with (Krasna, 1999). In the political realm, the influence of TCOs is significant as corruption is pervasive, with individuals in customs and public officials being compromised (McFarlane and McLennan, 1996). While the erosion of the rule of law may not be widespread, criminal enterprises gradually infiltrate the structures of consumer countries (Krasna, 1999). Although environmental impacts may not be as visible in consumer countries, it does not imply their absence (Williams, 1994, Shelley, 1995; Krasna, 1999). For instance, the avocado industry in Mexico has faced issues related to deforestation and environmental degradation due to the illicit activities of TCOs (Linthicum, 2019). In the economic realm, TCOs have an impact through activities such as money laundering and extortion (Krasna, 1999). In the social realm, it manifests in addiction crises and health-related issues, and migration flows (McFarlane and McLennan, 1996; Krasna, 1999). Thus, TCOs represent clear challenges to the international arena similar to those other non-state actors pose.

TCOs' Commercial Nature

The final objection from security to considering TCOs as actors in Security studies is the economic incentive these groups have. Scholars like Löwenheim (2002) propose that TCOs'members do not want to be characterised as criminals as this is detrimental to business. Although this varies from one organisation to the other, certain groups want that characterisation to play to their benefit to garner more members, legitimise their actions, and destroy their competition (Guerrero, 2009; Dalby, 2022a; Garcia, 2021). For instance, Italian mafias on social media are constantly peddling narratives about criminal activities being a

respectable profession in an aspirational and prideful fashion (Nocera and D'Avino, 2020; Ravveduto, 2023).

This approach would be mistaken, as it ignores an atmosphere of death prevalent inside the country where the cartel operates and in other regions where it has a presence (Garcia, 2021; Infobae, 2023). This assessment establishes that violence only causes problems for organisations as it attracts governmental responses, which are bad for business (Löwenheim, 2002). Nevertheless, this analysis lacks considerable empirical justification. Criminal enterprises exert violence to establish a larger territorial control, send messages to the government and other competitors, and further their economic interests (Wainwright, 2017). Moreover, if we follow his logic, the employment of armed attacks against civilians, scrimmages between factions, the assassination of public officials and journalists, kidnappings, extortion, and a plethora of other violent means are not as extensive as terrorist groups (Campbell, 2012).

Löwenheim (2002) argues that contrary to terrorist organisations, which employ violence, chaos, and destruction through indiscriminate and constant means, TCOs will use violence in a more parsimonious and local fashion as they are more rational as the usage of violent means will irrevocably result in governmental crackdowns and operations that put their businesses in peril. The author paints all TCOs with the same brush, which is problematic as each organisation derives from a particular idiosyncrasy even though they all search for monetary gains (Downing, 2023; Williams, 1994). For instance, Mexican drug cartels have not only different configurations amongst themselves and act and represent themselves diametrically differently from those from other latitudes (Wainwright, 2017). This conceptualisation is relevant because violence depends on the characteristics of each organisation and the end they are using it.

Section 2: Social Media in International Affairs and Security Studies

In the realm of International affairs, social media emerged as a powerful tool with considerable implications (Downing, 2023). The rapid dissemination of information through social media platforms has enabled individuals to voice their experiences circumnavigating traditional media outlets (Garcia, 2021). Within the field of Security studies, the vast amount of data generated on social media platforms offers valuable insights into extremist ideologies, recruitment patterns, and the dissemination of propaganda (Downing, 2023). Additionally, social media's role in cyber warfare, diplomacy, and the spread of disinformation has raised concerns about its implications for national security and political stability (Singer and Brooking, 2019; Barrinha, 2020).

Even though the CS allows the integration of drug cartels into the discussion of non-state actors affecting security, it does not account for two main factors when researchers analyse social media (Downing, 2023). Burbandt (2005) posits that the first refers to the CS' rigid understanding of security elites and the second to the process requiring speech to securitise an issue effectively. In securitisation theory, security elites refer to those entities holding a position of power in a given context, such as officials, policymakers, the intelligence community, members of the army, scholars, and individuals allowed to talk about security derived from their influence in the sector (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2015; Jarvis, 2018; Downing, 2023). With their resources, they can establish a set of actions to define the security agenda, namely, the actors and situations that trigger some level of threat and which actions should be taken to counter them. (Buzan, Weaver, and De Wilde, 1997).

The CS' conceptualisation of security is hierarchical, as only particular individuals are allowed to say what should be considered security (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2015). Downing (2023) proposes that even though this school's approach allows for a discursive analysis, it limits which speeches constructing security can be considered, as those with power hold the sole right

to ‘talk security’, whilst the voices trying to establish discourse are marginalised and not considered in academia. This understanding is crucial as social media encompasses a plethora of voices which enunciate security discourses but lack the agency to securitise a particular issue; therefore, this approach cannot account for all the voices left unheard due to its design (Jarvis, 2018; Downing, 2023).

To assume that security only exists when elites establish verbal utterances ignores a universe of voices that talk about security, particularly in an environment such as social media where hundreds of millions of individuals are constantly producing content where they, through their own experiences, contexts, and views, post what they conceptualise as security (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2015; Benzing, 2019; Downing, Gerwens and Dron, 2022). Downing (2023) proposes that security scholars must understand that security can be found in places that are not traditional and that these iterations can have considerable variations. Moreover, social media users may not have the same puissance as security elites to create threats; nevertheless, they can still have sizable weight in the conceptual construction of security (Downing, 2023). The CS cannot account for all the content posted on social media, as it encompasses videos, images, audio, texts, and other elements that convey particular meanings (Jarvis 2018; 2019). Even if we omitted security elites from the equation, verbal utterances are limited to speech, which prevents this framework from understanding all manifestations of security ((Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2015; Jarvis, 2018).

#Security

Vernacular Security Studies (VSS) is the framework that I chose to analyse the phenomenon of drug cartels utilising social media and its relation to security studies. This burgeoning school of security, introduced by Burbandt (2005), rejects the hierarchical approach in Security studies in which only security elites

are allowed to speak about security, and in turn, posits that security is "constructed in everyday terms" (Jarvis, 2013; 2019). Scholarship fostering this approach highlights the relevance of local and everyday experiences in conceptualising security (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2015; Jarvis, 2018). Moreover, this vision establishes that security is engrained in realities, cultures, and communities in which individuals are immersed, thus allowing researchers to peruse how they perceive, experience, and respond to security concerns in their everyday lives (Downing, 2023; Jarvis, 2019).

Jarvis (2018; 2019) posits that VSS is an approach that rejects universality contrary to other security schools; namely, it describes particular contexts and their relation with security, a fact that gives uniqueness to said perspective (Jarvis and Lister, 2013). The vernacular assumes there is no rigid understanding of security, as it is malleable, changing, and flexible to the contexts of the individuals who speak security in local settings and not dominant narratives on security issues (Jarvis, 2018; Luckman and Kirk, 2013). Jarvis's work highlights a fundamental characteristic of VSS, namely, its "theoretical emptiness" (Jarvis, 2018; Downing, 2023). This concept underscores VSS's inherent flexibility and openness as an analytical framework.

Scholars that employ this vision postulate that it provides individuals with agency after the marginalisation of global politics, as they enunciate the way they construct and experience security and insecurity in what Bubandt (2005), Jarvis (2013), and Downing (2023) call "idioms" - which are colloquial expressions, narratives, symbols, and history, among other features that allow individuals from a particular community to articulate their experiences. Idioms play a significant role in vernacular security studies as they capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and responses to security challenges from the perspective of those directly affected by them (Downing, 2023; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2015; Benzing, 2019; Bubandt, 2005). These can include metaphors, fashion, traditions, songs, nationality, socioeconomic level,

symbols, proverbs, slang, and other linguistic or non-linguistic characteristics that reflect the local context and cultural specificities. Moreover, this approach is telling as it undiscloses how “security imaginaries” from below engender and how they operate in their contexts (Jarvis, 2018).

Downing's (2023) contribution is relevant as he is among the pioneering scholars who have incorporated social media study within the framework of VSS and criminal organisations. It is important to acknowledge that a limited body of research exists that specifically investigates how the language of security can be employed to generate [in]security (Downing, 2023; Moyle, Childs, Coomber, and Barratt, 2019). This gap in the literature is particularly notable when considering the activities of criminal organisations utilising idioms from that locality to reach their goals. Social media remains underresearched by VSS even though it provides a bevvy of vernacular constructions (Downing, 2023), where users establish how they understand security through their experiences and context how they understand security.

TikTok is an evolving and plentiful source of vernacular constructions, allowing users to post their interpretations of security through various content (Downing, 2023; Starkey, 2023). The present dissertation is one of the first attempts to explore how Mexican drug cartels exploit this space, shedding light on how they employ TikTok’s algorithm to disseminate their narratives, recruit followers, and gain social acceptability. By examining the intersection of Vernacular Security Studies and TikTok, this research not only enhances our understanding of how criminal organisations engage with social media but also contributes to broader conversations on the role of digital platforms in shaping security discourses. It underscores the importance of studying emerging technologies and their impact on security dynamics, offering valuable insights into the complex relationship between social media, vernacular constructions of security, and the activities of criminal groups.

Section 3: Cartels and Social Media

Drug Trafficking: a historical overview

Drug trafficking in Mexico is not a new phenomenon (Astorga, 2005). As Garcia (2021) argues, Mexico is historically a producer of marijuana, opium, and heroin due to its biodiversity, and it works as a nexus between the United States and Central and South America and a link between the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans. In 1994, the enacting of neoliberal reforms culminating in the establishment of NAFTA triggered two important effects on the dynamics of the drug trade (Gootenberg and Campos, 2015; Astorga, 2005; Eiss, 2014). Firstly, growing inequality derived from neoliberal policies and privatisations hampered millions of individuals, especially those already marginalised (Garcia, 2021; McKibben, 2015). Secondly, the agreement allowed for the free flow of goods and services between North American governments, which made narcotics control tremendously complicated.

In 2006, Felipe Calderon (FECAL) became the Mexican president after a tumultuous election where he was accused of committing fraud against Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) (Grayson, 2013; Beittel, 2020). To garner legitimacy, he declared the beginning of the so-called "War on Drugs", which consisted of an all-out campaign between the Mexican government and various cartels, which immersed the country in a downward spiral of violence (Garcia, 2021). The strategy consisted of the extreme militarisation of public affairs, where the armed forces conducted the entire effort against cartels (Bow, Santa Cruz, Anaya, 2013). The strategy nonetheless had disastrous results for the country, which has been unable to overcome (Linthicum, 2022). The government plan led to increased violence in a myriad of cities around the country which resulted in human rights abuses committed by the Mexican military, deadly and daily confrontations between drug cartels and the government, forced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial killings,

assassinations, murders, extortion, among other pervasive consequences (Garcia, 2021; Grayson, 2013; Campbell, 2012).

Additionally, the crackdown on cartels caused the fragmentation of criminal groups, leading to the emergence of smaller, more violent factions (Garcia, 2021). The drug trade evolved, with cartels diversifying their activities beyond drug trafficking into areas such as human smuggling, extortion, and fuel theft (Martínez, 2022; Wainwright, 2017). Moreover, the strategy had a ballooning effect, referring to how criminal aggrupations are displaced from one area by governmental authorities to “safer” locations where they can operate (Puyana, 2017). The campaign, however, profoundly impacted the criminal landscape within the country (Pereyra, 2012; Grayson, 2013). During this period, the Sinaloa Cartel experienced exponential growth, facilitated by an alliance with Secretary GGL (Garcia, 2021). This alliance aimed to confront their primary rival, Los Zetas, leading to the dismantlement of the latter group, simultaneously, several other organisations, including Los Caballeros Templarios, la Familia Michoacana, the Beltran Leyva cartel, remnants of the Zetas, and numerous smaller groups, began to gain significant prominence (Pardo and Arredondo, 2021; Garcia, 2021; Grayson 2013)

The security situation further deteriorated in the subsequent administration, and as a result, another cartel began rapidly expanding, comprising various remnants from different cartels (Infobae, 2020b). This new organisation was led by a ruthless and influential leader named Nemesio Oseguera (Redacción El Financiero, 2021). Founding the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), Oseguera's group swiftly became the most powerful cartel in the country. Despite the efforts of the governments under presidents FECAL, Enrique Peña Nieto, and AMLO, the government has been unable to effectively counter the activities of criminal organisations in the country (Infobae, 2023). As of 2023, this year has witnessed the highest number of recorded deaths resulting from intentional homicides (Arista, 2022).

Drug Cartels as Enterprise: Organisation and PR

The analysis of drug cartels in Mexico cannot be complete without describing the "Narcoculture" inchoated in the social tissue. Becerra (2005) proposes that the term has been mainly analysed in two main parts; the first one refers to an "aesthetic orientation" of the term which describes how members and non-members of drug cartels bestow particular meanings to a series of symbols that are prevalent in music, films, series, and even religious figures. Villarreal (2019) and Becerra (2005) describe that it encompasses a set of cultural practices and products such as music, language, fashion, accessories, and other elements that allow cartels to immerse in society. The diffusion of this symbology is key for the cartels to advance their objectives, and mass media gives them a platform to do so (Downing, 2023). The second one characterises narcoculture as "all practices and social representations" (Becerra, 2005), engendering a way of life governed by specific rules and norms (Mondaca and Quintana, 2012). For these authors, this way of life goes beyond only those directly involved in criminal activities and permeates the rest of society.

Narcoculture for Garcia (2021) is necessary for cartels to continue in existence as it provides them with social acceptability because, through these sets of norms and features, trust and legitimacy are engendered between society and criminal organisations through these sets of norms and features. Cartels attempt to convey particular narratives based on their needs, objectives, and audiences (Campbell, 2012). One interesting scope to analyse this phenomenon is the framing proposed by Goffman (2017), which refers to different processes that given entities utilise to deliver information to exert some level of influence on the receptor. Cartels establish a process of agenda-setting in which they guide their audiences to act and react in particular fashions (Campbell, 2012).

The nature of drug cartels is considerably mischaracterised in academia. For this matter, Wainwright (2017) proposes to call these groups criminal enterprises since they do not have a political motivation for their activities. Many scholars

(Garcia, 2021; Campbell, 2012; Ríos, 2018) characterise them as political entities or evil organisations without any objective but to produce violence. Nevertheless, these organisations operate similarly to legitimate businesses with more extreme methods (Wainright, 2017; Balderas, 2021). Although cartels undergo illegal and violent operations, these obey business principles, for instance, employing organisational structures, division of labour, and strategic planning to fulfil their objectives (Wainwright, 2017; Williams, 1994). Cartels can identify and adapt to changing circumstances in the market and recognise new business opportunities to maximise their profits, which translates into intricate logistics to produce, transport, and sell their products (Wainwright, 2017; Nieto, 2019).

As with any other enterprise, cartels have a mission, a vision, and values which shape their behaviour, strategies and objectives (Wainwright, 2017). In this sense, cartels are constantly building their brand, which is interrelated with their communication strategies (Wiliams, 1994; Shelley, 1995). According to the American Marketing Association (2023), a brand is "a name, term design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers". Anholt (2013) proposes the idea of nation branding, which refers to the application of corporate branding to countries. In this sense, governments develop a series of strategies in which their brand is regarded as an invaluable resource, thus having an incentive to develop a myriad of strategies to enhance it and establish the idea of a common objective their country should aspire to meet. (Teslik, 2007; Dinnie, 2022; Anholt, 2014) In this dissertation, I go one step further and utilise this proposition to analyse non-state actors and the utilisation of corporate branding to further their interests. For drug cartels, their brand identity is closely tied to their communication strategies, which are utilised to establish their distinct image, reinforce their values, and project their desired perception among members, rivals, and the public. This branding plays a significant role in maintaining their influence, instilling fear, and promoting loyalty within their criminal networks.

Ríos and Philips (2020) argue that competition with the government and other groups for the local market and drug production makes criminal groups resort to public communication. In that sense, Campbell (2012) coined the term *narco propaganda,* which refers to a set of communication strategies he identified from different cartels through ethnographic studies. These categories are 1) spectacles of symbolic violence for public view, 2) narco-messages, also known as *narco mantas*, 3) control and censorship of the mass media and information, 4) narco-genres of music and lyrics, and 5) videos and cyber-postings (Campbell, 2012).

The first refers to violent acts in obvious locations to assert dominance in particular regions over governments, competitors and the general population. Wainwright (2017) proposes that cartels would also employ these to increase governmental pressure on a competitor's turf. The second one is narco-messages, which are displayed in public spaces or spots where cartels have violent encounters to voice their demands, threats, or plans in a particular area. These would normally look like sheets of paper or fabric and be displayed on bridges, multitudinous locations, or bodies (Mendoza, 2016). The third category highlights how drug cartels exercise control over media outlets and engage in censorship practices. By manipulating or coercing media organisations, cartels limit access to certain news or information that could jeopardise their operations (Garcia, 2021). This control extends to crafting biased narratives that favour their activities, such as discrediting or attacking public officials who are actively pursuing them or pressuring media outlets to focus solely on their rivals or competitors (Campbell, 2012). This enables cartels to manipulate public perception, shield their operations from scrutiny, and shape narratives that align with their interests and agenda.

The fourth category is Narcocorridos, a subgenre of *corridos*, which have emerged as a significant aspect of the oral tradition in Mexican culture (Gurza, 2017; Burnett, 2019). Corridos, known for their narrative depiction of various

figures ranging from historical leaders to ordinary individuals, serve as a means to preserve collective memory and address themes of justice, social inequality, love, and struggle (Goldsworthy, 2011; Gurza, 2017). However, since the 1970s, there has been a notable shift within the genre, with a predominant focus on drug-related individuals (Goldsworthy, 2011). This transformation, attributed to the rise of drug cartels in Mexico, has given rise to narcocorridos (Gurza, 2017). Narcocorridos can be classified into three main categories: "Arremangada" songs that portray opulent lifestyles, "Personales" that narrate stories of traffickers, entrepreneurs, and incarcerated individuals, and "Alterados" that glorify violent activities (Vice, 2014a,b,c). This evolution in *corrido* content reflects sociocultural factors that position the narco figure as a symbol of subversion on a global scale (Gurza, 2017).

The final category, identified by Campbell (2012) in his analysis, is that of cyber-postings, which serve as a segue to the subsequent section. This category entails the utilisation of online platforms such as websites, blogs, and YouTube videos by drug traffickers to garner respect or instil fear (Garcia, 2021). Sites like El Blog del Narco (2023) showcase videos where cartels interrogate, torture, and murder individuals, often accumulating thousands of views and comments. Some of these videos feature crime scene footage accompanied by narcocorridos playing in the background (Burnett, 2019; Goldsworthy, 2011). For instance, Campbell (2012) discusses a specific video that showcased photographs depicting the torture and murder of prominent members of the Juarez Cartel, complemented by a song that lionised the virtues of the Sinaloa Cartel. These types of videos were often uploaded anonymously, as the internet provided minimal regulations regarding the types of content permitted for upload (Villegas, 2023).

The communication strategies are tailored to each cell or faction's specific needs and the dynamics of each cell or faction within the cartel (Ríos, 2018; Wainwright, 2017; Campbell, 2012). Cartels utilise all the communication

techniques proposed by Campbell, maintaining a comprehensive approach to secure and efficient communication. However, notable differences arise in the use of two specific methods: narcocorridos and cyber-postings. The evolution of these communication techniques will be explored in detail in the upcoming section, shedding light on how they have diverged from the traditional models proposed by Campbell. Nevertheless, it is important to note the main aims of cartels regarding their usage of public communication as described by the scholars mentioned in this section.

Literature on Social Media and Drug Cartels

In the past, social media had positively been regarded by Academia and considered a tool that furthered democracy and human rights (Garcia, 2021). The positive vision of social media ended with global scholarship centring around the employment of various outlets by terrorist organisations such as the Islamic State (Downing, 2023). The "dark turn", as Garcia (2021) describes, made Academia try to explain the presence of non-state actors in social media on three main directives: 1) the consideration of social media as an enabler, 2) social media as a force multiplier, and 3) social media as a tool of psychological warfare. Contrary to what is posited by Garcia, there was not a dark turn in Mexico, as darkness was already prevalent.

In the Mexican context, popular social media outlets emerged concurrently with the so-called "War on Drugs"(Garcia, 2021; Grayson, 2013; Ernst, 2019). Cartels targeted journalists who attempted to report on their activities, using violence and threats to suppress any coverage that could expose their criminal operations (Garcia, 2021). Journalists who dared to speak out against the cartels often faced dire consequences, including abduction, torture, and even assassination (Ernst, 2019). This led to self-censorship among media outlets and journalists, as they feared for their own safety and the safety of their families (Eiss, 2014; Garcia, 2021). Simultaneously, the government also sought to control the narrative by censoring media coverage of the War on Drugs (Eiss,

2014; Ernst, 2019; Wainwright, 2017). Journalists who attempted to report critically on the government's strategies or exposed instances of corruption and collusion between officials and cartels were subjected to harassment, intimidation, and even legal actions (Ernst, 2019; Garcia, 2021).

This situation led Mexican civilians to utilise social media platforms to voice their experiences of insecurity. Outlets such as Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook, along with famous blogs such as “El Blog del Narco”, allowed them to share information, manifest their concerns, raise awareness about the conditions of their communities, and publish videos and photos in real-time of violent confrontations between cartels and the government (Campbell, 2012). In that sense, civilians bypassed the gatekeeping prevalent in corporate media and exponentiated by censorship established by cartels and governments (Garcia, 2021). Social media outlets also have allowed civilians to engender social networks to organise and mobilise, disseminate safety information, and support and protect each other (Eiss, 2014).

The former is a perfect example of Vernacular Security as these individuals communicated, through their local idioms, their worries about violence and insecurity but, at the same time, contested the governmental strategy that produced terrible consequences for the citizenry. Nonetheless, vernacular security speak is not only exclusive to those countering the effects of security policies but also functions as a way for criminal organisations to produce discourses of (in)security (Jarvis, 2019; Downing, 2023b; Moyle, Childs, Coomber, and Barrat, 2019). As Garcia (2021) postulates, Mexican Cartels figured out they could also utilise social media outlets in their favour. Their strategies have varied over time; nonetheless, during that period, outlets such as YouTube became a way for cartels to combine elements of songs and gruesome images of beheadings and torture as a way to foster their brand and objectives, as will be explained further (Campbell, 2012).

Although the majority of cartel-related content and interactions have undergone significant changes due to various restrictions within social media platforms, there still exists a substantial amount of cartel-related content depicting decapitations, kidnappings, sexual assaults, murders, and other criminal activities (GTN Redacción, 2021). However, this content is primarily uploaded to websites that allow explicit material (Blog del Narco, 2023).

Records of their presence

As Garcia (2021) mentions, although considerable journalistic reports point out cartels' activities in cyberspace with valuable insights, they lack academic rigour (Guerrero, 2009; Fregoso, 2018; All That's Interesting, 2015; Araújo; 2019). Baverstock (2015) released an investigation that uncovered how top cartel members of the Sinaloa Cartel were utilising outlets such as Instagram to exhibit their luxurious lifestyles with images of exotic animals, women, sports cars, vacations, and designer clothing, among other elements. These individuals would also post pictures of governmental vehicles destroyed by gunshots, purportedly after scrimmages with cartel members (Baverstock, 2015). This investigation also highlights that after the emergence of this trend, other cartels from Mexico and Colombia followed their example to garner the same level of engagement (Baverstock, 2015). This trend served the purpose of recruiting individuals through the creation of an aspirational image and showing competitors and governments how unchallengeable they feel.

Lira and Tamayo (2020) conducted a study on cartels' actions, specifically CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that these cartels distributed various essential items, such as food and cleaning supplies, to individuals facing poverty. A notable aspect highlighted in their journalistic piece was the CJNG's meticulous recording and subsequent upload of the delivery events (Lira and Tamayo, 2020). The cartel invested significant resources in music and employed specialised cameras for filming, aiming to legitimise themselves among the local population they were assisting and the

broader society (Infobae, 2021). They sought to differentiate themselves from other cartels and the government by showcasing their care for the people.

Moreover, an important study by Dalby (2022) sheds light on the utilisation of social media platforms, particularly TikTok, by the Sinaloa cartel. This study reveals how the cartel employs social platforms for intimidation and recruitment purposes. In this context, the term "narco-influencer" emerges, referring to individuals who engage in illicit activities, including drug sales, while leveraging their business expertise to promote a specific lifestyle (Dalby, 2022). However, it is worth noting that Dalby's work lacks an in-depth exploration of this lifestyle and does not provide a comprehensive understanding of a narco-influencer. A more thorough analysis and discussion of these points will be presented in Chapter 4 to address this gap.

It is important to address this gap by pointing out that even though the employment of social media outlets by drug cartels is not a new phenomenon (Campbell, 2012; Garcia 2022), there are seldom scholars who have engaged in its analysis. This situation has led to scarce and mostly outdated literature or scholarship misinterpreting the nature of cartels. As mentioned before, Campbell (2012) explored how cartels utilised YouTube to post about beheadings and other violent acts accompanied by narcocorridos. Community guidelines since then have dramatically changed to tackle violent content, and cartel-related content has evolved (Bateman, Thompson, and Smith, 2021). Moreover, Womer and Bunker (2010) developed a seminal study on the presence of Mexican cartels in social media outlets in which they uncovered through a study of the most important cartels of the time how they used the Internet to disseminate propaganda and social networking. Nevertheless, their study is from 2010, and the outlets they peruse are no longer in use, such as MySpace, Funformobile Hi5, Bebo, and Migente. Not only has the criminal map changed dramatically over this period, but social media consumers are now present in different outlets (Infobae, 2023).

Three notable academic works contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of cartels in the digital realm. Firstly, García's (2022) study provides a meticulous exploration of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, specifically focusing on their utilisation by the Sinaloa cartel, the Zetas cartel, and the Knights Templar cartel. This work highlights how these cartels employ these platforms to enhance their survival prospects and improve logistical capabilities, as proposed by Villegas (2023). While García's work is ambitious, it has three primary limitations. Firstly, the assumption of ideological motives overlooks the cartels' primary monetary objectives (Williams, 1994). Secondly, the analysis includes the Zetas and Knights Templar cartels, which have waned in recent years, overlooking more current trends within the criminal landscape (Infobae, 2023). Lastly, the emphasis on Twitter and Facebook neglects other platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, which can have distinct commercial implications. These considerations will be addressed in detail in the methodology section.

Villegas's (2023) research is one of the first to unveil the presence of cartels on TikTok, in particular that of the Sinaloa cartel. The author conducts a detailed analysis of the symbols and elements featured in TikTok videos while also examining the significance of "narco corridos" for criminal enterprises involved in drug trafficking. However, Villegas takes a controversial approach arguing that cartel-related content in the platform follows a logic of personal entertainment rather than a strategy to fulfil cartel objectives. This approach has various shortcomings. Firstly, it neglects the economic incentive derived from social media communication since there is a strong probability that the content is part of a general strategy of Cartel chieftains, members, and supporters to recruit or intimidate. Secondly, even if the content is shared for individual gain, it automatically generates legitimacy or publicity for the Cartel, which may play in its favour (Dalby, 2022a). Finally, his proposal establishes a detailed but limited analysis of how TikTok functions as a way for people related to Cartels to show their daily lives. His argument does not engage in the aesthetics shared

in the chosen videos, their engagement, and who they might be directed towards, hence neglecting their utilisation to comply with cartel objectives.

Given the scarcity of literature on the subject, this research extends beyond drug cartels to encompass other transnational criminal enterprises that have already been studied with TikTok. Ravveduto's (2023) investigation provides valuable insights into the major Italian mafia groups across various prominent social media platforms. The author compares content differences among platforms and examines the symbols, narratives, and strategies employed by each mafia group. The present study incorporates relevant concepts that explore how cartels seek visibility in contrast to others that actively avoid it and how such dynamics shape their engagement with social media.

To effectively understand the interaction of drug cartels and social media, especially regarding the construction of idioms and the production of new narratives and strategies, a researcher needs an in-depth exploration that can only be achieved by exposing themselves to a particular social media platform. The next chapter, Chapter 2: Methodology, presents an exploration of the diverse research methods employed in this research and their contextual significance.

Chapter 2: Methodology

My research centred around only two drug cartels. The rationale behind selecting CDS and CJNG as the focal points lie in their reputation as the most powerful cartels in Mexico (Infobae, 2023). Both entities have garnered considerable puissance and possess the largest following among criminal enterprises within the country. Additionally, they have been recognised as the primary disseminators of narco-related content in recent times (Savio; 2020; Infobae, 2021c; Garcia 2021; Villegas, 2023). Notably, CDS and CJNG's

extensive reach and prominence in narco-propaganda make them pertinent subjects for investigation. By incorporating captions and hashtags related to these cartels, the study aims to examine the prevalence and impact of their content on TikTok and security. The advent of digital technologies has overtaken every aspect of our everyday lives. These have enabled everyone with an electronic device and an internet connection to record, post, and share content in a plethora of platforms and spaces (McFarlane, 1996; Garcia, 2021). As such, most of these interactions happen in social media outlets and provide researchers with access to vast amounts of user-generated content (Downing, 2023). I utilised a mixed methods approach to unravel the intricate Cartel Tiktok ecosystem. I combined digital ethnography, visual content analysis, and quantitative social media analysis.

Step 1. Digital Ethnography

With the development of new software and AI, quantitative methods have become prominent in academia, as they allow researchers to efficiently analyse large datasets and quickly recognise trends after they input information (Kang and Evans, 2020). A disadvantage of these methods without qualitative analysis is that they may overlook particular characteristics of user behaviour online, how interactions are shaped, the content they share, and the relations they make (Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2017; Andreotta et al., 2019). On this train of thought, capturing interactions, comments, content, and user behaviours from a qualitative perspective is essential to understanding social dynamics and practices because it provides a nuanced and contextual understanding of the underlying meanings, motivations, and experiences that shape social media interactions. Qualitative research allows a deep exploration of user experiences, sentiments, and voices, disclosing dynamics and providing rich insights around social media engagement (Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2017; Villareal, 2019; Hine, 2020).

For this reason, digital ethnography is a germane method for the analysis of social media as it can portray a detailed description of people, cultures, behaviours and ideas by combining the principles of ethnography with the characteristics of digital media (Downing, 2023). Ethnography, as defined by Van Maanen (2010), is the study of and representation of culture as used by particular people in particular places and particular times. Bearing that in mind, digital ethnography enhances the understanding of meanings and the cultural experiences that enable or are enabled by technology (Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2017; Villarreal, 2019; Hine 2020). As proposed by Dutta and Kaur-Gill (2017), a researcher applying this method processes texts or graphics available in cyberspace and produces an interpretation of the content.

The first step to establishing my research began by identifying the field site. My digital ethnographic study was circumscribed to Tiktok. The reasoning behind this decision was based on three main factors. Firstly, I started scouting various social media outlets to understand the presence of drug cartels, their members, and their supporters in cyberspace. Facebook is mainly used by drug cartel members to communicate with each other (Plevin and Ornelas, 2019). This outlet is a great communication tool as many cartel members are illiterate, and this allows them to send voice notes and use other visual tools for communicating (Infobae, 2019d; Hernández, 2020; 2022). In addition, Facebook also works to scout for potential victims (Woody, 2016). By looking at their business activities, cartel members can then decide who to kidnap, extort, or target (Plevin and Ornelas, 2019). At one point, Facebook was utilised by members of drug cartels and other criminal organisations to post their activities; nevertheless, new terms of service and community guidelines have limited this behaviour (Bateman, Thompson, and Smith, 2021).

In turn, Twitter is usually considered a social network used by intellectuals or as an informative source in Mexico (AB Estudio de Comunicación, 2021). Cartel members originally used YouTube to post videos of deaths, beheadings,

and violence in general (Campbell, 2012). However, due to restrictions and norms established by the platform, these videos can no longer be posted. Moreover, Instagram was and continues to be one of the most relevant social networks for drug cartel members. For example, El Chino Antrax rose to fame with his use of the platform and gathered followers in and outside the platform (Baverstock, 2015). However, similarly to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, most of the videos published on Instagram are reposts of TikTok shorts, and most hashtags are similar or equal. There is an incredible amount of repetition between platforms, hence the relevance of directly analysing TikTok as the source of content creation and publication.

Secondly, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the popularity of the app skyrocketed worldwide, amassing more than one billion users. Mexico was no exception and, in fact, was one of the countries where the company increased its presence the most (Fundación UNAM, 2021; Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). In January 2023, Mexican users equated to more than 57 million, making the country the fourth largest holder of active users globally (Aguilar, 2023; Pool, 2023). Although Tiktok is not the largest app in Mexico, it is the most popular as it has constantly garnered new unique users and registered the largest growth in the country since 2020 (Fundación UNAM, 2021; Aguilar, 2023) .

Thirdly, due to its novelty, its innovative and intricate algorithm is underresearched. This fact offers an opportunity to analyse one of the most effective and complex algorithms that feeds the user with hours of tailored content (Harwell, 2022; Bhandari and Bimo, 2022) . The engagement is also derived from its short video format, ranging from 15 to 60 seconds which allows users to create fast paced content for consumers with increasingly short attention spans (Montenegro, 2021). Tiktok´s infrastructure has allowed anyone to become a creator that can go viral at any moment. Said situation has triggered the engendering of challenges, trends, and memes, which make the community vibrant and dynamic, along with establishing a sentiment of belonging among

users (Barta, Belanche, Fernández, and Flavián, 2023; Bhandari and Bimo, 2022).

Having said that, the next step was establishing the ethnography to study Tiktok. I chose "cyber stealth", a method for completely unobtrusive observation of online spaces (Robinson, Jones and Janicke, 2015; Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2017). The first reason for the former is security reasons because a plethora of researchers and investigators have been harassed and threatened by criminal enterprises due to their findings or publications (Garcia, 2021). The second reason was to take advantage of the principle of anonymity in ethnographic studies as it allowed me to have an unbiased observation of the platform, that is, participants will tend to act as they would normally do as they are not aware that they are being studied (Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2017). Moreover, I protected the privacy of users as I only studied public information derived from their videos and did not analyse any videos from profiles I deemed to be owned by minors.

To start analysing Tiktok videos safely, I created a Sock Puppet (SP) to carry out my investigation. SPs can be used as a tool for studying and understanding online behaviour and social networks (Gil, 2023). Researchers can observe how people interact with online identities and study the influence of online personas on social media platforms (Cybervie, 2021). On this train of thought, I utilised the fakenamegenerator.com tool that allowed me to create a fake persona with particular characteristics. The tool randomly gave me a name based on a particular set and enabled me to choose the country, age, sex, and ethnic origin of my SP. I established my fake persona as a 22-year-old Hispanic male called Ezekiel Palacios Guerrero, born on August 10th, 2000 and residing in northern Mexico. Moreover, I utilised a tool called thispersondoesnotexist.net which enabled me to create a brand new and untraceable profile picture that fitted my SP's personal characteristics.

The next step was to train the TikTok algorithm to display cartel-related content. According to Newberry (2023), the TikTok algorithm considers many factors

to craft a user's "For You Page" (FYP). In particular, it focuses on signals derived from device and account settings, video information, and user interactions. Device and accounts settings signals consider the language of your choosing, the country setting, the type of mobile device, and the categories of interest you select when signing up for the app (Newberry, 2023). For security and location reasons, I utilised a VPN provider to receive content from Mexico through an alternative mobile phone and did not choose any particular categories of liking.

Conversely, Video information signals consider what you input in your discovery and search options. This refers to captions, sounds, and hashtags to identify content, effects for your video, and trending topics a user searches (Newberry, 2023). In this sense, I did not know specific hashtags or accounts I needed to search to start viewing cartel-related content in my FYP. I started searching for the names of the cartels, important members of the criminal enterprises, and widely known hashtags such as #Chapizza. Based on this method, I started gathering a list of accounts, hashtags, songs, and other elements to search for different videos related to them and trained the algorithm whilst compiling a list of these features.

Interaction signals take into consideration the accounts you follow, which comments you post, videos you like, videos you share, videos you marked as "Not Interested", videos you reported, times you watch a video, duration of each video, and content you post, among other factors (Newberry, 2023). I did not comment, or report videos, and I did not send personal messages to any user or content creator. My interaction signals were limited to following particular accounts, liking videos, marking videos as "Not Interested", and downloading a total of 250 videos. All these factors intertwine to retain a user's attention for the longest time by providing it with content it is expected to enjoy.

My initial plan was to only take into consideration videos from 2021 as they coincided with a period where cartel-related videos made the headlines in a

bevvy of media outlets. Nevertheless, after due consideration and observation, cartel-related videos have continued to trend on the platform since then. It is crucial to clarify that the videos I downloaded on my phone were so randomly after a thorough process of algorithmic training. This was done so regardless of the number of likes, amount of followers, captions, hashtags, number of comments, etc.

Step 2. Visual Content Analysis

Content analysis is a methodology to uncover themes, concepts, ideas, and characterisations of particular qualitative data and allow researchers to undisclosed and describe meanings, and relationships among these (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). As defined by Berelson (1952), it is a technique for the "objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (p.18). In this sense, visual content analysis is a research tool to derive meaningful descriptors for image and video data. As proposed by Worring and Snoek (2009), this tool allows researchers to extract meaning and symbols of visual data through the establishment of various techniques to process said information. With the utilisation of a semantic operator, this method is helpful to identify trends, intentions, symbols, and behaviours.

To analyse the files, I utilised the content analysis software called AtlasTI. The reasoning for this decision was that this software has intricate but intuitive functions to organise a plethora of unstructured data, establish coding schemes, and provide insightful visualisations. Codes are employed to discern meaning from data and measure tendencies and occurrences not readily apparent. In this sense, I chose a mixed approach for the analysis of the content, that is, a deductive and inductive route. The former refers to those codes of themes, concepts, or messages that I believe I was going to find, whilst the latter pertains

to those codes that referred to particular themes, concepts, or messages that I had not accounted for at first.

I coined the idea of Tiktok "composition", which comprises all the elements that I analysed from each one of the videos. The composition included the captions, hashtags, songs played, profile picture and nametag of the user, and the visual elements present in the video itself. This is based on the principle of aesthetic composition, which refers to how different elements in an artwork are combined and arranged to convey particular significance (Anapur, 2016; Herwanto, 2020; Rise Art, 2020). This approach allows researchers for a holistic view of the downloaded files considering visual, textual, and audio components (Highfield and Leaver, 2016; Anapur, 2016). With the examination of captions and hashtags, there are discernible themes, trends, and user objectives behind the content. The songs played in the background played an important role in the impact of the videos. Finally, the profile picture and username allowed me to figure out personal branding choices, which could influence the reception of their content.

I created two main categories of codes. The first one is codes that depict general themes and concepts present in the videos regardless of their relation to a cartel, mainly descriptions, iterations, and mentions of clothing, vehicles, luxuries, family values, violence, hashtags, among other topics. The second category refers to hashtags, iterations, mentions, appearance or any type of reference to cartels, their members, prominent leaders, symbols, songs, and representations. In each one of the groups, I established divisions regarding the most prominent cells of each cartel featured in the files. The former allowed me to look at the aesthetics, music, and features that make up the videos and which elements of narco-culture were highlighted the most.

After coding, I reviewed and reduced the original number of codes to almost 100. I did this to avoid repetitive codes and to design them in a more general fashion to encompass more themes. For instance, if there was a hashtag, symbol,

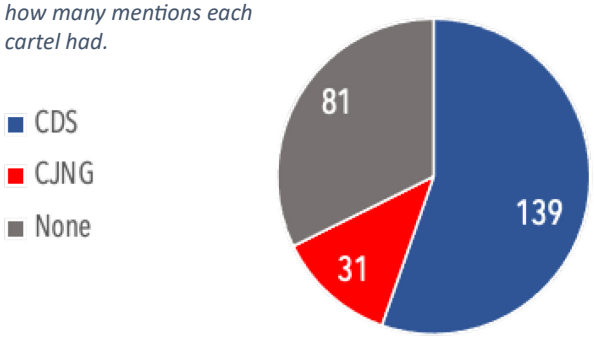
image, song, or any iteration related to Joaquín Guzmán Loera (El Chapo) in one of the videos, a code called “Chapo” encompassed all these into one. After this, I utilised tools within AtlasTI to observe the occurrences of codes in the documents and co-occurrences between codes to peruse the most important themes and tendencies within the files.

The findings from utilising these software and methods are presented in the next chapter, Chapter 3: Findings and further analysed in Chapter 4: Discussion. By carefully sifting through the data, spotting patterns, and identifying emerging themes, the following chapters aim to weave together an understanding of the empirical evidence collected.

Chapter 3: Findings

This Chapter delves into a comprehensive examination of TikToks, aiming to unravel how Mexican drug cartels use this social media and the distinct elements that make up the videos related to each organisation, the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG. My findings are divided by cartel and subdivided into so-called soft and hard elements. Through an in-depth exploration of the data, this section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between influencing, branding, and social media engagement in the realm of drug cartels and the relation of the material generated within this platform with (in)security idioms. For this investigation, I analysed a total of 250 videos of cartel-related TikToks, from which 139 (55%) had some level of relation to the CDS, 32 (13%) were related to CJNG, and 81 (32%) did not have a discernible difference from those cartels. Notwithstanding the exclusive concentration of this investigation on two cartels and the conscientious task to train the algorithm as impartially as possible to capture content about both groups, a notable disparity between them became evident.

Figure 1. This graph shows how many mentions each cartel had.



Although this investigation mainly delves into CDS and CJNG videos, the third category of TikToks highlighted the intricate narcoculture prevalent on the platform but was not openly related to any of the cartels. Some of the videos referenced criminal groups such as Cartel del Noreste, La Familia Michoacana, and other cartels. Another important note is that a bevvy of these videos offered a variety of goods, services, and even jobs. For instance, some

videos offered products such as jewellery, untraceable phones, drugs, and counterfeit money. Other videos offered “human smuggling services”, which consisted of TikToks showcasing how the organisation had already “helped” individuals enter the United States illegally and, in some cases, offered jobs to potential and “courageous” drivers willing to take the risk.

To gain insights into how cartel-related content tailors its objectives for TikTok users, I will analyse the following section into "soft" and "hard” elements that make up the videos and the strategies behind them. The focus will be on how the CDS and CJNG employ these elements. Soft elements aim to portray the drug trafficking lifestyle in a positive light. These elements highlight the non-violent aspects of narcoculture and the lives of drug traffickers and those who identify with them. Consequently, they obscure the true complexities that arise from such a lifestyle. The cartels effectively persuade their target audience by showcasing benefits, wealth, and other enticing aspects. Hard elements delve into the darker and more challenging realities of cartels. These "hard" elements offer an inside look into the actual workings of the drug trade. They may reveal the dangers of their work, providing glimpses of the challenges involved, the clandestine operations they undertake, and the tactics they use to evade law enforcement. Additionally, such content may highlight these individuals' weaponry and tactical equipment, emphasising their enterprises' ruthlessness and violent nature.

It is important to note that both soft and hard elements coexist in most videos, creating a multifaceted approach by the cartels to appeal to TikTok users. Another aspect is narratives, which can be understood as constructions of perceptions and meanings that aim to frame reality in a particular way or create behaviour patterns. These narratives are prevalent in most of the analysed videos. An important consideration is that of the TikTok user experience, which means that once you train your algorithm, you will only see content you will

probably enjoy, thus generating a cycle of similar themes. Therefore, users will watch soft and hard elements alone or combined.

Sinaloa Cartel

The Sinaloa Cartel is divided into several factions (CNN español, 2023; Hernandez, 2020). However, only two appear in Tiktoks: the Chapizza and the Mayiza. The faction with the most significant number of mentions and references is the Chapizza, but interestingly in real life is currently considered less powerful than the Mayiza, which is seen as a more established faction (Infobae, 2022a). It has also been reported that both factions have ongoing disputes for power and control of the market (Infobae, 2022a; Infobae, 2022b; Redacción Radio Fórmula, 2022). A reason behind its dominance on social media, particularly in Tiktok, may be due to the media presence generated by El Chapo Guzmán in series, music, films, and his multiple escapes from prison. Another contributing factor to the popularity of the Chapizza faction is the extensive utilisation of social media by El Chapo's sons, the Chapitos, even before the Chapizza's current popularity. Additionally, the Culiacanazo incident has played a role in attracting attention to this faction (López Ortiz, 2023). Furthermore, the U.S. government's securitisation efforts against the Chapizza, partly attributed to the ongoing fentanyl crisis, have heightened its visibility (Cano, 2023; U.S. Office of Public Affairs, 2023). Other notable factions like El Guano's are not present at all .

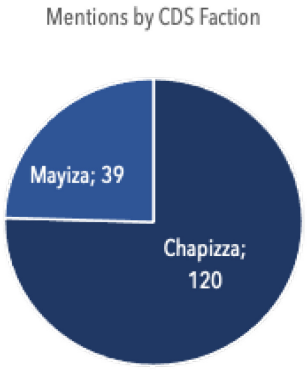


Figure 2. This chart shows the distribution between CDS factions.

The Sinaloa Cartel (CDS) agglutinated a series of codes that primarily referred to cartel figures, events related to the

cartel (e.g. the Culiacanazo[1]), and geographical locations (e.g. Culiacán, Sinaloa, etc.). However, the most critical codes were about the cartel's factions, the Chapizza and the Mayiza. The Chapizza represents the conjunction of three principal codes: mentions, hashtags, images, and symbols related to 1) Joaquín Guzmán Loera, AKA El Chapo, 2) his children, AKA Los Chapitos, and 3) those that do not reference El Chapo nor Los Chapitos but exclusively symbolise the Chapizza as a figure in itself and its supporters. The other faction mentioned in the videos was La Mayiza[2], whose codes reference its leader Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada and José Rodrigo "Chino Antrax" Aréchiga.

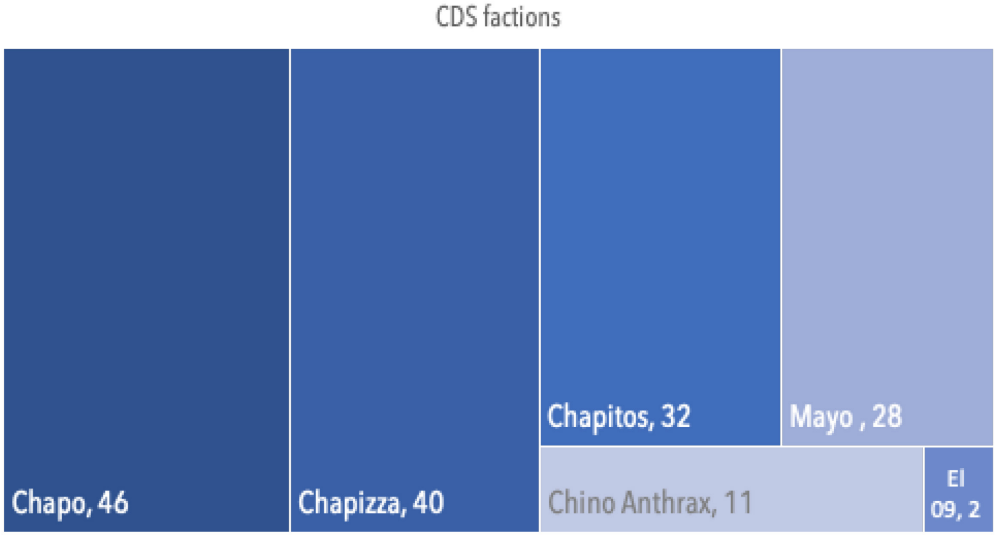


Figure 3. This figure shows the distribution of mentions referring to prominent figures from both cartels.

[1] The "Culiacanazo" refers to an event in which Mexican security forces captured Ovidio Guzmán, but after violent confrontations between State forces, cartel members, and civilians, the Mexican president López Obrador decided to release him to avoid further bloodshed.
[2] The Mayiza takes its name trying to emulate that of the Chapizza and give its followers to name themselves and follow.

The Sinaloa Cartel and its various factions strategically employ a range of symbols to establish their brand and reach a broad segment of society. Among these symbols, one of the primary ones is the pizza logo, known as "La Chapizza," which cleverly combines the word "pizza" with references to El Chapo and his sons. In social media, primarily through emojis and hashtags, these symbols have become a part of the TikTok composition and may circumvent restrictions while explicitly targeting references to the Sinaloa cartel. Within my research, hashtags were one of the most relevant elements I considered to codify each video. Each figure within the cartels has a specific set of hashtags which may have distinct variations in how they are written or presented, for example, by including a combination of words and emojis. Additionally, each of the hashtags has a different amount of visualisation.

The best way to exemplify this is by looking at hashtags related to El Chapo, the figure with the largest number of references within this research's videos. As seen in figure 5, El Chapo is referred to as #JGL, #701, #chapo. The initials JGL, Joaquín Guzmán Loera, are used to circumvent social media restrictions, while the number 701 references El Chapo's position on Forbes' list of the world's richest men. These hashtags and others might also be accompanied by emojis like 🍕 or 👦. While different, all these hashtags are related to the kingpin. This trend was prevalent in

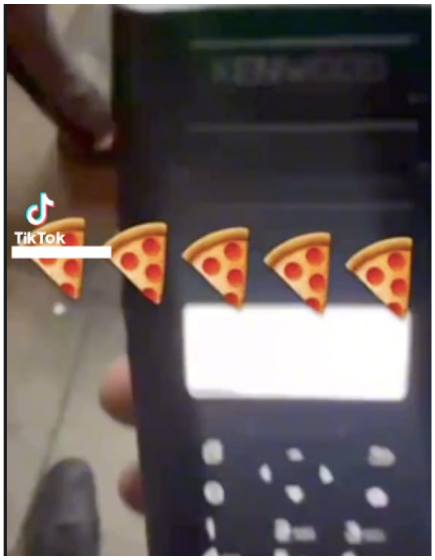


Figure 4. This image shows the usage of the Pizza emoji to refer to La Chapizza.

Figure 5. This image sows the usage of the JGL in a pool party.

all the figures from the CDS.

Soft Narco-Influencing Elements

Table 1. This shows the distribution of Soft Narco-Influencing Elements related to the CDS

Soft Narco-Influencing Elements	CDS	Chapizza				Mayiza	
		Chapo	Chapizza	Chapitos	El 09	Mayo	Chino Anthrax
Fashion and Cartel Paraphernalia	61	21	12	14	1	9	7
Women	33	15	6	12	0	4	2
Jewels	28	13	5	7	0	2	1
Alcohol and Drug Consumption	24	11	7	9	0	4	1
Mansion	20	8	9	5	0	3	1
Sports Cars	16	6	4	5	0	2	3
Party	16	5	3	6	1	4	2
Flashing Money	9	4	0	3	0	1	0
RZRs	7	5	2	2	0	1	0
Exotic Animals	4	1	1	1	0	0	0

Fashion elements are used to display cartel-related symbols that hold particular significance in conveying affiliation to a specific cartel or cartel faction or simply are a part of the overall narco-aesthetic. The aesthetic between the two main factions of the Sinaloa Cartel is very similar; however, there are certain specificities within fashion pieces or trends. For example, in the case of the Chapizza, caps display specific symbols of the faction by showing primordially characters such as JGL and 701, the logo of a pizza referring to Chapizza, or the cartoon of a mouse referring to Ovidio Guzmán AKA “El Ratón”. These caps are brandished in the videos by the content creators and offered by purveyors on the platform. Similarly, the number "09" and the image of a chicken symbolise Néstor Isidro Pérez Salas, a prominent member of the Chapitos faction, aiding in communicating his presence and activities and garnering recognition and loyalty from followers.

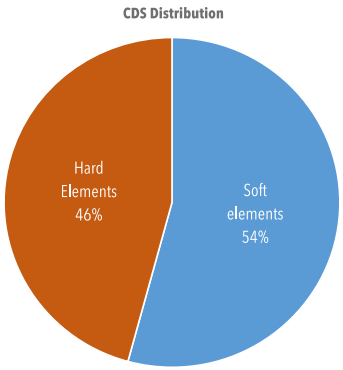


Figure 6. This chart shows the distribution of elements related to the CDS.

Figure 7. Shows a cap with the letters JGL referring to El Chapo.

Within the Mayiza, hats - historically associated with the pride of rural lifestyles, ranching, and fieldwork - have become emblematic of its faction within narco culture. Hats are mostly associated with Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada but are not only worn as standalone pieces but have become symbols used as pins or prints in other clothing attire, mostly caps.

Regarding designer clothes, the ones highlighted in the factions' videos tend to be T-shirts, shirts, and trousers of brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Boss, Ralph Lauren, and Versace. This trend is not organic or generated by designers but by the cartels themselves. Both factions use these pieces, however, as notable in **Table 1,** the proportion favours the Chapizza. Other pieces of clothing present in the videos were not those of high-end brands but simply T-shirts stamped with the image of El Chapo or of a pizza; these pieces did not contain references to the Mayiza.

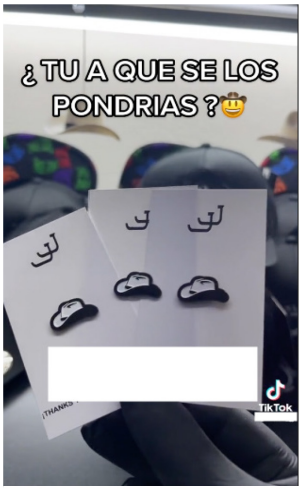


Figure 8. Shows pins and caps related to el Mayo Zambada.

Another element related to fashion in the videos is the use of high-end sneakers (i.e. Nike, Adidas, and Louis Vuitton, among others). With evolving aesthetics, sneakers have become increasingly prevalent due to the modern preference among younger individuals, as formal footwear has diminished in popularity owing to comfort. Christian Louboutin is probably the most prevalent brand in cartel footwear. Its popularity derived from the Mayiza faction, particularly El Chino Antrax, renowned for his role as a bodyguard to one of Mayo Zambada's sons, a prominent cartel leader. The famous hitman had adopted these classic formal shoes with red soles, subsequently endowing them with symbolic significance, representing the attire

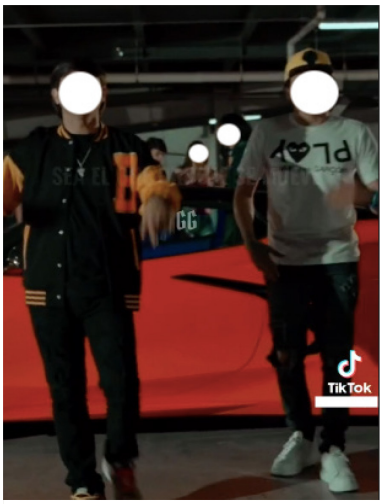


Figure 9. Example of fashion utilised in CDS-related content.

of a drug trafficker. While El Chino Antrax belongs to the Mayiza, this fashion trend is now widespread among all the CDS, including the Chapizza, and within the larger narcoculture.

Among both factions, crossbody bags have become one of the most important fashion trends. These bags are mostly from designer brands like Louis Vuitton or Gucci - or their counterfeit imitations - and serve a double purpose. Apart from being a statement piece, crossbody bags, as shown in the videos, are used to carry large amounts of money, low-calibre firearms, and small drug packages or *pacas*. Crossbody bags are sometimes present in videos of individuals flashing money, primarily showing MXN 1,000[3] or MXN 500 bills, the highest notes in Mexico, or USD 100 bills. Other videos show money in large containers or duffle bags and cash-counting machines showing thousands of pesos or dollars.

[3] 1 GBP = 21.56 MXN according to conversion in August 2023.

Jewellery and watches constitute a pivotal facet of the narco aesthetic, representing an amalgamation of luxury, power, and personal beliefs. Regarding jewellery, gold necklaces frequently featuring lavishly adorned pendants hold particular significance. These are not only made up of precious stones or metals but may also symbolise prominent figures within cartel history. Examples of the Chapizza include pendants depicting a mouse symbolising Ovidio Guzmán or lighting associated with late hitman Armando "El Rayo" García. The narco aesthetic extends its influence to encompass necklaces associated with various belief systems, including Catholicism, Jesús Malverde cult, Santería, or Buddhism. Furthermore, watches, notably from Cartier or Rolex, abound in narco TikTok videos. Only three videos related to the Mayiza show jewellery elements, most are modest pieces.

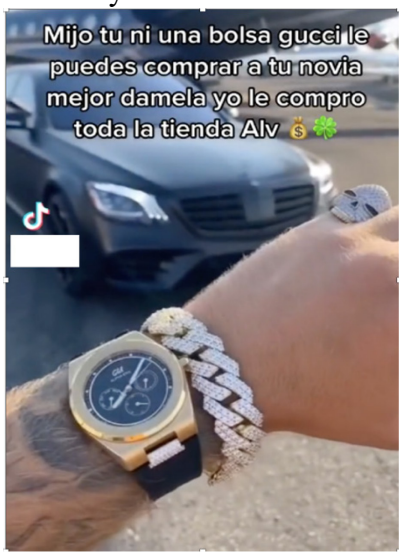


Figure 10 Caption translates as "Son you can't even buy your girlfriend a Gucci bag. Give her to me, I can buy the whole store for her"

Within the analysed video ecosystem, vehicles have great significance. For this research, vehicles were separated into four categories: sports cars, RZR or racers, trucks, and armoured vehicles. The first two are considered within my description of soft-influencing elements. In videos related to the Chapizza, it was remarkably common to find people flaunting their garages containing several high-end vehicles (e.g. Mercedes Benz, Ferrari, Lamborghini, etc.) or at impressionable places like the beach. Several

Figure 11 Video of various luxury vehicles.

videos depicting sportscars also show luxurious houses with swimming pools, expensive furniture, and views of natural landscapes. Videos containing high-end vehicles or mansions showed, at times, exotic animals like jaguars, tigers, and panthers being kept as pets. Contrastingly, videos related to the Mayiza do not show as many and as luxurious vehicles. A prevalent element within Mayiza videos is a small hat hanging on the rear-view mirror.

Vehicles like RZRs are not only employed as a display of wealth and competitiveness but also as means of travel in hard-to-access places, like the rocky or sandy terrains prevalent in Northern Mexican sierras. Some of the videos from the Chapizza were accompanied by text referencing cartel life or prominent cartel figures with a pretentious undertone (see **Figure 10**). Meanwhile, this type of vehicle does not appear in videos related to the Mayiza.

Another recurring element among both factions were parties, multitudinous or at exclusive bars and clubs, accompanied by live music performances. The presence of great amounts of alcohol and drug consumption is framed as fun and aspirational. Champagne and high-value spirits are the main types of beverages present, and women appear to be attention-drawing accessories. Drugs are seen as tools to "keep the party going", cocaine being the most popular in the videos. However, the latter is not only seen as a recreative tool but also as something to keep you alert in case urgent cartel-related activity is needed. Some other videos are simply TikTok users at their homes pretending to be at a party or imitating party-related situations like dancing with women or beating up other men, which is considered fun and *macho*.

It is important to mention that not all soft narco-influencing elements constitute physical objects that signify wealth, rather include anything or anyone that can be easily objectifiable, such as women. In TikToks, women are shown in three ways: as active subjects, accessories, or mere references in catchphrases. As subjects, women - primarily young women - appear dancing and singing cartel-related music and are accompanied by images of kingpins like El Chapo.

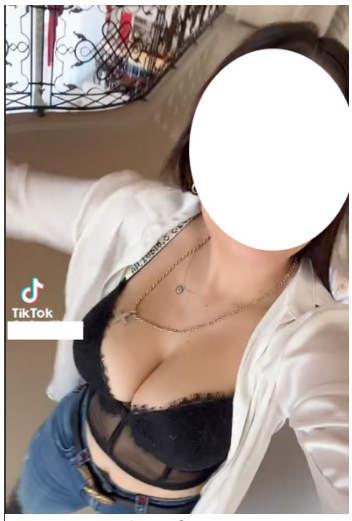


Figure 12 Video of a young woman with alucin symbols.

Women who are portrayed as accessories appear as props to men flaunting their wealthy lifestyle or dancing in the background of live music performances. They are nothing more but a still-standing element. Most of the women in the videos are dressed as alucines, buchonas or in the aspirational narco aesthetic; they are voluptuous and have esthetical surgeries or heavy make-up. The other scenario does not feature women as bodies or subjects of the video but as narratives or catchphrases. For example, women are mentioned as being less valuable than money or as less important than men, especially in comparison to cartel figures. Some users utilise words like *viejas* or *morras*, which refer to young women in an infantilising and objectifying manner.

Hard Narco-influencing Elements

Table 2. This table shows the distribution of Hard Narco-Influencing Elements related to the CDS

Hard Narco-Influencing Elements	CDS	Chapizza				Mayiza	
		Chapo	Chapizza	Chapitos	El 09	Mayo	Chino Anthrax
Truck	58	18	21	11	0	10	4
Weapons	51	14	20	19	2	11	3
Sierra	34	10	13	5	0	5	2
Armoured vehicles	17	4	6	5	0	3	0
Airplanes	14	3	5	2	0	3	1
Drugs	10	3	3	2	1	2	0
Size of the army	10	4	8	4	0	1	0

The most relevant hard narco-influencing element present in the TikTok videos from the Chapizza and Mayiza was “trucks”. As shown in the videos, trucks could be armoured or not, depending on their usage; they were sometimes shown together flaunting weapons or rapidly fleeing a scene. Non-armoured trucks are used as a work tool and are used in complex terrains, violent encounters, and infamous cartel gatherings. It was common to find at least two vehicles present in a video, which symbolised the alliance and strength of the cartel faction. Inside the trucks, a myriad of cartel symbols can be found, and *narcocorridos* are blasted. Similarly, militarily modified vehicles appeared, for example, trucks with military-grade protection attached to the body of the vehicle or turrets installed to use high-calibre weapons. These modifications to the trucks or vehicles usually are adorned by symbols representing kingpins, death, or other cartel-related emblems.

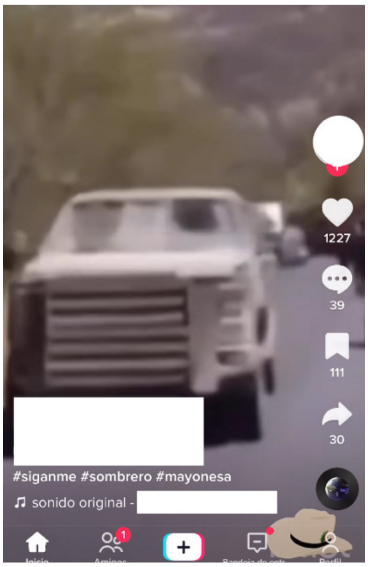


Figure 13 Video of armoured vehicle with a Mayiza hat.

Several videos showed individuals using tactical equipment - such as military-type uniforms, helmets, bulletproof vests, and radios - primarily in real-life cartel operations or altercations. Bulletproof vests and radios were also shown as accessories in humorous or casual videos related to the Chapizza that highlighted the readiness to wear them in upcoming confrontations. In conjunction with trucks (armoured and not), tactical equipment is used to show the cartel's army's power, strength, and size.

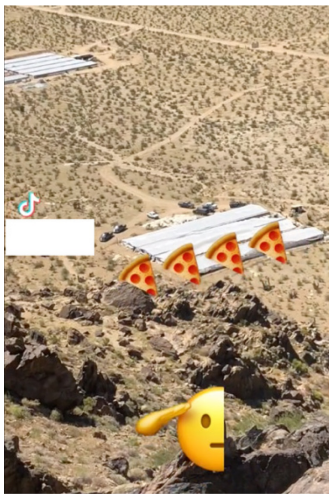


Figure 15 Video overseeing cartel activities in the sierra with Chapizza-related symbols

At least 28 videos of the Chapizza and seven from the Mayiza were recorded in the *sierra* or showed it as part of the landscape. Plenty of cartel activities are carried out in the sierras as they are hard to access and allow for better undercover actions. The TikToks showed different actors and actions in the sierra, from alleged narco-members walking or driving trucks in its complex terrain to individuals flying over in helicopters or aeroplanes. At times the videos revealed the existence of poppy fields in the *sierras*. While not necessarily located in the sierra, some videos from the Chapizza also displayed the cocaine preparation process, both cooking and packaging. Interestingly, the depiction of drug production or trade is notably absent, with only 5% of the videos directly related to drugs.

Figure 14 Video of an individual allegedly preparing cocaine.

Narratives

Table 3. This table shows the distribution of Narratives related to the CDS

Narratives	CDS	Chapizza				Mayiza	
		Chapo	Chapizza	Chapitos	El 09	Mayo	Chino Anthrax
Threat to use violence	44	11	14	12	1	9	2
Belicón	19	6	3	3	0	3	1
Machismo	17	8	4	3	0	2	2
Government Mentions	12	3	6	4	1	1	1
It is worth dying	12	5	3	4	0	1	1
Grind	11	2	2	5	0	2	0
Family	6	3	2	0	0	2	0
Studying/other professions not the answer	4	1	0	0	0	1	0

The main narrative within the videos of both factions was "Threat to use violence", which refers to any threat against enemies. These threats could be spoken, shown as text in the videos, communicated through specific song lyrics, displayed as weapons, or written in the caption or hashtags. At its core, this narrative conveyed the use of violence, the lack of fear, and the readiness to act in confrontational situations. Intrinsically related to the *threat to use violence*, the narrative of *bélico* or *belicoso* is used by individuals to characterise themselves or others as violent or as ready to use violence. The term itself is translated as *warlike* and refers to an environment of constant war or conflict.

Figure 16 Musicians singing CDS-related songs surrounded by women

The second most present narrative was *machismo*, which refers to the belief that men are inherently superior to women, non-heterosexual men, and so-called gender dissidence, undermining their agency, rights and opportunities (Lira, 2018). It reinforces power dynamics and reproduces social, political, and economic disparities (Lira, 2018; Tang, 2021). Contrary to terms like sexism or chauvinism,

machismo refers to an ingrained and normalised culture within Mexican idiosyncrasy (Lira, 2018). *Machismo* is represented in multiple ways within the videos: men threatening their female partners to obey, mockingly showing they are willing to kill other men who get close to their partners, women being objectified and sexualised, and women as bargaining chips you can own by being narco or having money.

The analysed content establishes a series of narratives characterising the government as corrupt and incapable of countering the power of drug cartels. Approximately 10% of the analysed videos mention the government in some capacity. In these videos, evading capture by the authorities is depicted as a matter of pride and intelligence, which implies that the State's intelligence capabilities and weaponry are insufficient compared to the cartels' might and brilliance. For instance, there are videos suggesting that the army arrived late to capture Mayo Zambada due to their lack of skills. Another idea portrayed in screenshots is how the music references the cartel members' vehicles and their driving abilities, making it impossible for the police to keep up with them. Another way this is depicted is in videos (as shown in screenshots) claiming that deceiving the government to evade tracking or the arrest of cartel members is easy, providing crude examples such as acting naturally or removing a cap to conceal their cartel affiliation. Demeaning governmental authority allows criminal organisations to operate without supervision, which undermines the State’s use of force in the eyes of the citizenry and will refrain from cooperating with law enforcement as they deem it ineffective. The narrative allows cartels to show that they hold more complex intelligence services, weaponry, abilities, and vehicles than the state, which translates into an image of power that ought to be respected and public legitimacy as they are regarded as the most important authority.

In addition to this characterisation of the government, another portrayal depicts it as having no authority whatsoever. For instance, a video displays the phrase, "*Queen, how can you say that I don't love you if I go through Culiacán and Mazatlán without a bulletproof vest,*" (**Figure 17**) accompanied by a police officer pointing his gun at the video's driver. This depiction implies that, despite the scene appearing as a police detention, the video depicts an individual attempting to court a woman. In this sense, the police action becomes irrelevant. Their irrelevance could be attributed to law enforcement officers fearing those they detain due to their connections or because the criminals themselves carry heavy weaponry, making arrests difficult. This portrayal of law enforcement fosters a culture of impunity that allows criminals to work without stopping, eroding the rule of law.

Figure 17 Video of a police man being ignored by the content creator, accompanied by alucín symbols.

Another conception within the videos aims to downgrade the 'manhood' of soldiers. For instance, a video shows two soldiers dancing together to a song, and TikTok's aesthetic composition promotes the idea that they are 'homosexuals' in a mocking tone. It is important to point out that this is based on the *Machismo* culture prevalent in Mexico, which refers to the belief that men are inherently superior to women, non-heterosexual men, and so-called gender dissidence, which undermine their agency, rights, and opportunities (Lira, 2018). Furthermore, it reinforces power dynamics and reproduces social, political, and economic disparities. (Lira, 2018; Tang, 2021). This means that not complying with *macho* standards is seen as a sign of weakness, which means characterising them as 'homosexuals' diminishes their authority and legitimacy. Thus, governmental authority is weak as it is not as 'manly' as that held by cartels.

Figure 18 Caption translates as "He who was born ready to die, will never be afraid of killing".

Within the videos, an evident narrative is the "grinding mentality", which encompasses the idea of working hard and complying with your superiors. Phrases associated with this narrative included: "I*f you want to be someone in life, you need to work; nothing is for free"* and "*If you work hard, you will be great"*. A similar narrative exalts that studying and working in formal professions (e.g. teacher, lawyer, office employee) will not lead you to anything worthwhile because the only and best way to move forward is to become a narco. Based on these two narratives, another one surfaces: it is worth dying for the cause. This narrative includes a sense of ownership and belonging within the cartel and the idea of dying for its objectives and sacrificing everything to accomplish your dreams. A narrative related to the grinding mentality within narco culture is that engaging in these activities gives you a better opportunity to help your family. Another element within this narrative is the idea that upon your death, you become a hero to your family and friends, who will feel prideful for the job you have accomplished. This narrative echoes Ravveduto (2023) on the commercial nature of TCOs which characterise criminal activities as respectable professions in a prideful way.

Music

Music plays a pivotal role within the TikTok ecosystem related to the Sinaloa Cartel. The songs featured in these videos possess a unique blend of soft and hard elements, often conveying a series of narratives that merit their category of analysis. Notably, music is a crucial element for the Sinaloa Cartel, as it benefits from influential record labels that specialise in producing Narcocorridos, many of which originated from or are based in Sinaloa. Around 65% of the videos analysed were associated with the Sinaloa cartel. They showcase songs that glorify the cartel lifestyle, exalt its leaders, and advocate violence against those questioning the cartel's authority.

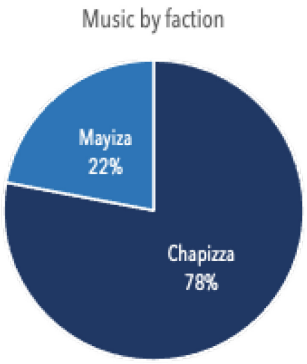


Figure 19. This graph shows the distribution of music related to each CDS faction.

Most of the songs analysed represent a modern version of the corrido called *corrido tumbado*[4]. Songs on the Tiktoks studied are predominantly sung by some of the most prominent artists globally, including figures like Fuerza Regida, Peso Pluma, Natanael Cano, Juanpa Salazar, Luis R Conriquez, Chino Pacas, and Grupo Arriesgado, among others, who have garnered millions of listens on platforms like Spotify (Balbastro, 2022; Pérez, 2023). As evidenced by this investigation, the most popular songs often revolve around the Chapizza faction, paying homage to individuals like Chapo Guzmán and los Chapitos, celebrating their combat prowess, formidable arsenal, and lavish possessions, such as luxury cars, trucks, watches, and clothing. These songs sometimes echo national anthems, paying allegiance and legitimising the cartel's leader. While La Mayiza also features songs with a less modern style and sung by artists with less prominence than those previously mentioned. Many songs commemorate

[4] *Corridos tumbados* are a Gen Z versión of narcocorridos with less musicians and with a combination of trap music.

Chino Antrax, transforming him into a martyr and an inspiration, resulting in songs commemorating a fallen hero.

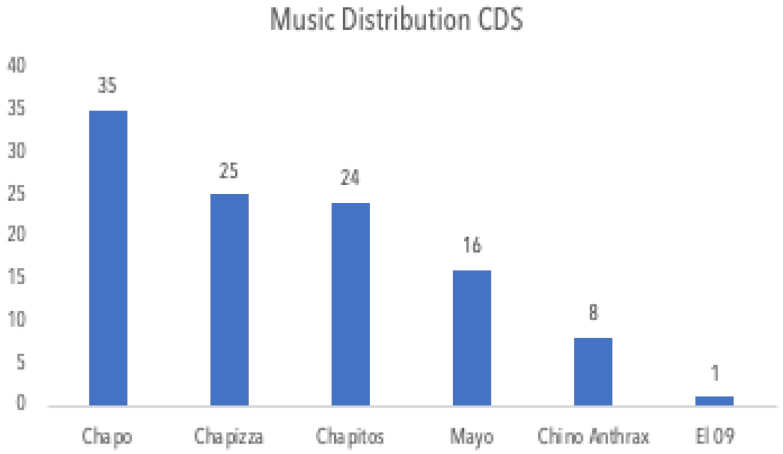


Figure 20. This graph shows the distribution of songs related to prominent entities of the CDS.

CJNG

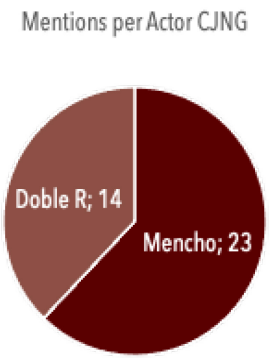


Figure 21. This graph shows the distribution of prominent actors from the CJNG.

While for the CDS, there is a large number of symbols and hashtags referring to its leaders, it is not the case for the CJNG because there are only two prominent symbols: roosters and *RR*. An interesting point is TikTok bans that #CJNG, however, you can still find hashtags with the cartel's initials rearranged differently or followed by emojis (e.g. #cngj #njgc #cjng😈). Moreover, contrary to the CDS discernible division between factions, CJNG videos did not reveal a considerable difference between groups within the organisation. The two central figures appearing in the videos were the leader of the cartel Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera and the elite hitmen group leader Ricardo "El Doble R" Ruiz.

Soft Narco-influencing Elements

Figure 22 Local musician singing in a rural setting.

Like with CDS, the most prevalent soft narco-influencing element is Fashion and cartel paraphernalia. However, contrary to the Sinaloa Cartel, there is not a well-defined aesthetic related to the cartel. Fashion pieces do not necessarily make a statement nor consciously exist to create trends, instead, they appear to be used organically by individuals appearing in the videos. These individuals wear denim, hats and shirts, usually associated with ranching or rural lifestyle, which is not necessarily exclusive to the CJNG. In turn, cartel paraphernalia is only seen in caps embroidered or printed with the initials of the cartel or with the image of a rooster associated with kingpin Nemesio Oseguera AKA "El Mencho" and "El Señor de los Gallos". Jewellery is present in some of these videos but is not as flamboyant as the CDS TikToks, nor does it reference any type of religious iconography.

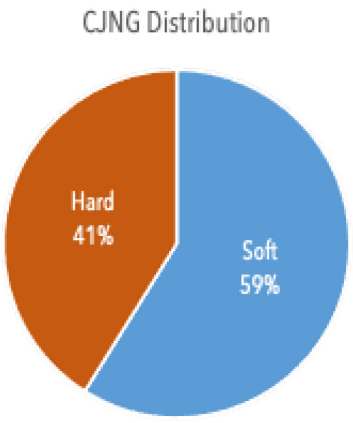


Figure 23 Distribution between soft and hard elements related to the CJNG.

In TikTok compositions related to the CJNG cartel, sports cars are subtly incorporated through references in accompanying songs rather than direct visual displays, like the Sinaloa Cartel. Opulence is occasionally visually emphasised with luxury brands like Ferrari and Bentley, sometimes accompanied by exotic animals like tigers, adding to the allure of extravagance. However, it is worth noting that sports cars are primarily featured in videos recorded by musicians, not alleged cartel affiliates or

sympathisers. Additionally, the CJNG content does not showcase RZR vehicles, instead uses horses to symbolise luxury and rural labour.

Table 4. This table shows the distribution of Soft Narco-Influencing Elements related to the CJNG.

Soft Narco-Influencing Elements	CJNG	Mencho	Doble R
Fashion and Cartel Paraphernalia	13	10	5
Alcohol or Drug Consumption	6	5	3
Sports Cars	6	5	4
Jewels	6	3	2
Women	5	5	0
Exotic Animals	2	1	1
Flashing Money	2	1	0
Party	2	2	1
Mansion	1	0	0
RZR Vehicles	0	0	0

In terms of alcohol consumption and partying, the videos mainly focus on music figures singing cartel-related songs rather than featuring actual cartel members or supporters. While these elements are not visible, they are prominently mentioned in the background music, particularly highlighting the enjoyment of expensive spirits and are often associated with El Doble R. References to CJNG leader El Mencho within these elements are incidental and typically occur when characters in the videos express loyalty to him before celebrating through alcohol and parties. In contrast to the Sinaloa Cartel, women in CJNG-related content are mainly mentioned in songs as trophies attainable by individuals working for the cartel. The videos feature women actively participating, dancing, and

Figure 24 Woman dancing to a song referring to el Mencho

singing cartel-related music, contrastingly with CDS, not flaunting physical attributes or being highly sexualised.

Hard Narco-influencing Elements

The most prevalent hard narco-influencing element of the cartel was the display or mention of the size of the CJNG army. Mainly, the messages that thousands of soldiers hold a plethora of territory are mentioned in the songs playing in the background. For instance, one video highlights how the elite group of the CJNG has now more than 200 members and another exalts how there are over 1,000 members fighting in more than four states. Moreover, the theme surrounding weaponry is another important element in the CJNG's videos. In three of the videos, individuals hoisting assault rifles are shown whilst shouting threats against rivals. However, most of the time weapons were only mentioned in song lyrics but not shown on screen. The element that is perhaps the most visible in the videos is tactical equipment. In three videos, there are individuals utilising military uniforms, night vision goggles, radios, and bulletproof vests. It is important to note that the description of this aesthetic is also present in the music of these and other videos.

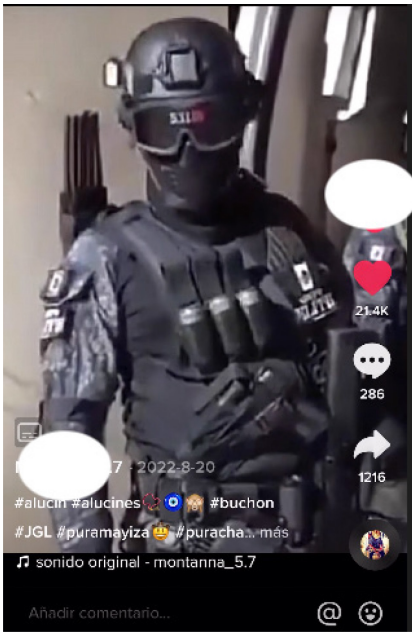


Figure 25 Alleged members of the Elite group threatening rivals.

Table 5. This table shows the distribution of Hard Narco-Influencing Elements related to the CJNG.

Hard Narco-Influencing Elements	CJNG	Mencho	Doble R
Weapons	9	7	4
Size of the army	8	8	5
Trucks	5	3	4
Armoured Vehicles	3	3	2
Drugs	2	2	1
Sierra	2	0	2
Airplanes	1	1	1

Another element in the videos is that of the *sierra*; however, contrary to the videos of the CDS, the rural lands only appear in music videos as a backdrop rather than create a narrative. Aeroplanes are mentioned just one time and do not show the actual machine flying, in fact, it shows a mini model of a Cessna with CJNG music playing. Finally, surrounding trucks and military vehicles, just three videos display them whilst the rest are just mentioned in songs.

Narratives

The main narrative present in at least half of the CJNG videos was the Threat to use violence. One video categorised under this narrative shows the CJNG elite task force, "Grupo Élite", threatening rivals. The narrative is also present in humorous-type videos in which users threaten with the use of force if their orders are not followed. The rest of the videos are either music videos or lyrics found in the background of other TikToks. The threats communicated through song lyrics encompass the readiness of action with high-calibre weapons and highly equipped vehicles and

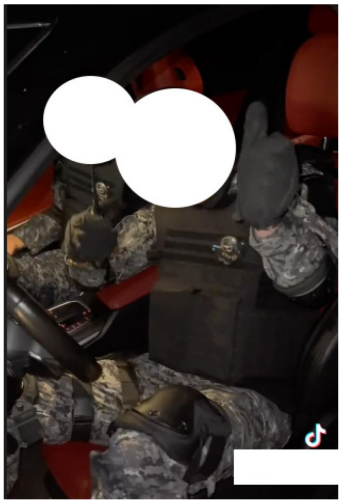


Figure 26 Two young men wearing military and tactical gear while jokingly threatening others.

the notion of signing a death sentence for not complying with cartel orders.

The following narrative is the grinding mentality which is primarily reflected in two songs related to El Doble R. These songs highlight the reasons why he became a narco and how, through hard work, he became the leader of the CJNG's elite task force. The next narrative refers to the notion of dying for the cause, which, similar to the Sinaloa Cartel, accentuates the 'good' work the cartel and its leaders have done for the people and the fact that working for them and their cause is worth losing your life for. The last narrative is represented using terms like *bélico* or *belicoso* and follows the warlike notion of always being ready for the fight.

Table 6. This table shows the distribution of Narratives related to the CJNG.

Narratives	CJNG	Mencho	Doble R
Threat to use violence	15	11	7
Government Mentions	2	1	0
Grind	2	2	2
It is worth dying	2	2	1
Belicón	1	1	1
Family	1	1	1
Machismo	0	0	0
Studying/other professions not the answer	0	0	0

CJNG videos also feature the narrative that government officials collaborate with or work for the cartel, fostering the perception that authorities are aligned with the cartel's interests. This notion seeks to establish cartel leaders as influential local figures, encouraging respect and compliance with their instructions to avoid retribution. Additionally, this narrative deteriorates public trust in government institutions, promoting citizen cooperation with cartels. Within the *government* narrative, the government is portrayed as the enemy of the people, alleging corruption and prioritisation of wealth over welfare while positioning cartels as defenders of the marginalised. By portraying themselves as champions of the oppressed, CJNG attempts to gain sympathy and support

from vulnerable communities. This tactic is aimed at solidifying their control over illicit activities and expanding their influence.

Music

The majority of videos analysed feature local bands and groups singing in favour of the CJNG, often filmed in rural settings. These videos lack professional production quality, evident from the noticeable marginalisation in the background. The songs exalt El Mencho as an exceptional leader but are dedicated to other local chieftains. Notably, the narcocorrido genre portrayed in these videos returns to its version from over 15 years ago, featuring performances by small and local artists and large bands. Ultimately, the impact of these videos remains predominantly local, failing to reach the TikTok generation that currently dominates the platform. This localised reach suggests that their messaging and musical style may not effectively resonate with the broader, younger audience that frequents TikTok.

Table 7. This table shows the distribution of soft and hard narco-influencing elements, and narratives contained in CJNG music.

Soft Narco-Influencing Elements	Count	Hard Narco-Influencing Elements	Count	Narratives	Count
Fashion and Cartel Paraphernalia	11	Size of the Army	8	Threat to use violence	11
Sports Cars	6	Weapons	7	Grind	2
Alcohol and Drug Consumption	5	Truck	5	It is worth dying	2
Jewels	5	Armoured Vehicles	3	Belicón	1
Women	4	Sierra	2	Family	1
Exotic Animals	2	Airplanes	1	Government Mentions	1
Flashing Money	2	Drugs	1	Machismo	0
Party	2				
Mansion	1			Studying/other professions not the answer	0
RZRs	0				

Nonetheless, some videos showcase prominent music figures such as Peso Pluma, Victor Cibrian, and Fuerza Regida in videos where they appear in the background, with their song lyrics overlaid. Interestingly, these TikTok videos take a contrasting approach to the Sinaloa Cartel, as here, music takes on a central role, aiming to captivate viewers. The emphasis on music is reinforced by the strategic use of relevant hashtags in the videos.

Figure 27 Local musicians sing about CJNG's power over the government and territorial control.

Notably, the lyrics of these songs convey the grind mentality, glorifying the cartels' members and their formidable armaments, which include AK47s, bazookas, C4-equipped drones, armoured trucks, military-grade vehicles, bulletproof vests, and tactical gear. Moreover, the songs boast about the cartel's large membership while expressing a certain reverence for Nemesio Oseguera. However, the focus lies in dedicating these songs to a specific leader of the CJNG's elite group, known as the Doble R, renowned for his criminal exploits. The music of the Doble R exhibits a modern style, catering to the preferences of the younger generation, who predominantly listen to this new version of the genre.

Chapter 4: Discussion

This Chapter discusses the intricate relationship between my main findings within the 250 TikTok videos and the realm of security. Particularly, the analysis of these videos provides valuable insights into the concepts of "influencing" and "branding" within the context of these criminal enterprises. The data analysis revolves around deciphering the visual composition, content, and overall purpose behind the tactics utilised in these videos. This analysis will integrate the theoretical basis of Vernacular Studies and the theory of Nation Branding. The chapter seeks to understand how these cartels employ TikTok to influence their target audience, establish legitimacy, comply with other objectives or strategies, and augment their influence in the digital landscape.

Narco branding and narco influencing, novel cartel strategies on TikTok

To understand how the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG use TikTok, it is essential to elucidate why they do so. It must be assumed that the cartels, unlike non-state organisations and states themselves, are not political entities, hence their main goal will be profit maximisation. Historically, States have sought to combat cartels' advances through a series of strategies, mainly military and in some cases, financial, that characterise them as evil entities that must be eradicated at all costs (Shelley, 1995; Campbell, 2012; Garcia, 2021; Downing, 2023). To avoid their disappearance derived from competition with other cartels and state pressure, the cartels use public communication, as mentioned by Ríos (2018).

It is discernible in scholarship that drug cartels use public communication and branding strategies to achieve very particular objectives. The exercise of public communication by cartels holds security implications that are unaccounted for by the CS, especially due to the premise that only States, or other security elites can address and define security matters according to their own intentions (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2015). However, it is imperative to consider, as proposed by Jarvis (2018) and Downing (2023), that security is contextual

and the exclusivity over who can create security discourses marginalises individuals who experience [in]security in diverse ways.

The branding strategies employed by cartels vary not only between different cartels but also within an individual cartel. This notion coincides with Jarvis' proposition (2018; 2019) on how security has not a rigid understanding and how it is flexible depending on contextual factors. As profit-led enterprises (Wainwright, 2017), the underlying purpose of public communication and branding strategies remains consistent: achieving specific financial goals or objectives. The grand objective can have specific objectives obtained through distinct strategies involving particular actors and actions.

Based on my experience working with over 250 TikToks, I propose the following scheme based on Anholt's (2013) proposition of 'branding' to understand better how branding is created and utilised within criminal enterprises. (**See Figure 21.)**

As established in Chapter 1, branding is vital for criminal enterprises as it shapes their behaviour, strategies and objectives. Organisations foster what Anholt (2013; 2014) describes as strategies and substance to address them. The former are all machinations that organisations utilise to fulfil their objectives. Strategies will also vary in number and type between each organisation by its nature and characteristics. Cartels as profit-led organisations have an overall grand objective of maximising their profits, allowing them to guarantee their continuation as any other enterprise (Wainwright, 2017). Each faction has different types and amounts of objectives, which may vary through time as conditions of the market are constantly evolving. Different factions with differing or similar objectives contribute to meeting the overall goal.

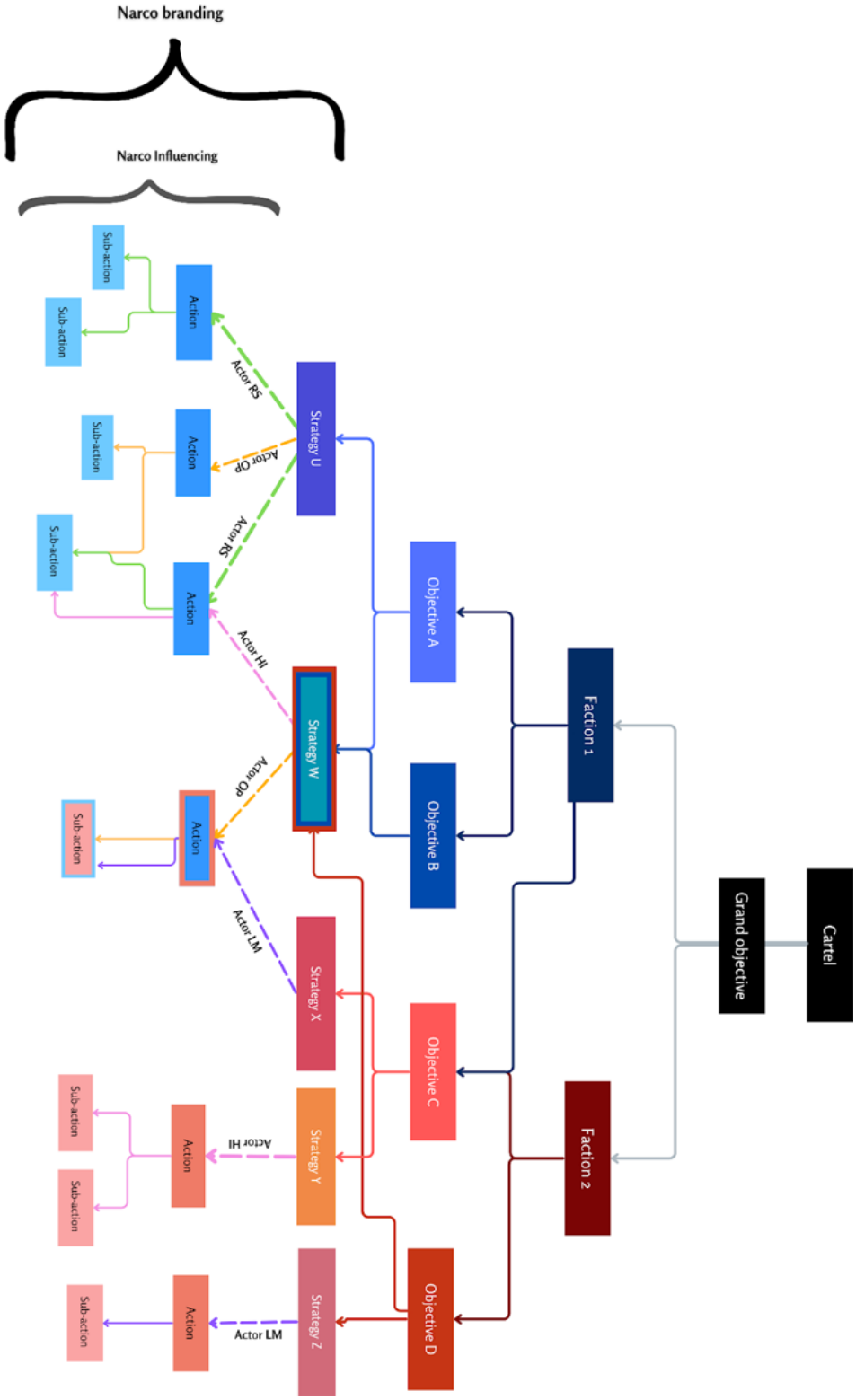


Figure 28 Narco-branding model proposed by Tamayo.

These strategies are fulfilled through their substance which refers to the execution of said machinations in the form of different actions by a set of actors (Anholt, 2013). For example, the strategy of a cartel may be to increase its revenue within one locality. This will need specific actors, like local groups and governments, and actions to achieve the strategy, perhaps targeting prominent agricultural entrepreneurs in the area. Hence, actions are the actual practical activities and machinations organisations establish to fulfil their strategies. Actors may have different faces and natures; nonetheless, it is important to mention that these may follow cartels' instructions or be used by criminal enterprises unbeknownst to them. For instance, an individual might be paid by a given cartel to create and perform a *narcocorrido* in favour of its leader. Conversely, cartels might build a school in a marginalised area to garner positive publicity and legitimacy from the benefited population that talks about them in their social circles. Actors may be employed to develop various actions or to serve different strategies at the same time, whilst actions may function to fulfil more than one strategy.

Strategy and substance create what I coined as *narco-branding* in the case of drug organisations, which can be understood as the variety of strategies, actions, and actors that cartels utilise to fulfil particular objectives. To accomplish these, the cartel would employ strategies such as diversification, recruitment, supply chain innovation, franchising, or any other method they see fit.

Each strategy will employ particular actors such as cartel members, governments, civil society groups, entrepreneurs, or simple citizens and enforce practical activities such as creating social media content, delivering food to the impecunious, or throwing the heads of their victims at their enemy's territory. Moreover, narco-branding aims to enhance the competitiveness of a cartel over another, namely, a set of particular strategies that differentiates it from others and grants it some level of advantage. Like companies or states, each of these strategies must be followed by effective brand management to be achieved

(Anholt, 2013). This concept expands on Campbell's (2012) notion of *narco propaganda* since my model explains their communication strategies based on an economic incentive and the actors and elements contributing to a particular strategy.

Returning to the theoretical emptiness of Vernacular Security Studies proposed by Jarvis (2019) and Downing's (2023) proposal regarding multiple voices that speak security, it is crucial to remember that each context sees, lives, and communicates security differently. However, to speak security in a context like drug cartels, a series of idiosyncratic elements are needed, which construct the security discourses through which people understand security. In this sense, narco-branding is constructed through a series of idioms representing typical or unique expressions from an area, group, or country, resignifying a set of symbols that convey specific strategies. Narco-branding represents how cartels establish (in)security speech through crafting an aesthetic that Becerra (2005) describe as a set of cultural practices and products such as music, language, fashion, accessories and other elements that work in their favour.

Communication is a prevalent element in the narco-branding process. Each strategy must convince a particular public, engender an identity, and persuasively transmit a message. Narco-branding can happen in person or through social media. In today's digital age, social media outlets have become powerful tools for organisations to connect audiences and build their brands. Companies, nations - and in this case - cartels carefully craft their social media strategies to create content, foster interactions, and establish a strong online presence (Anholt, 2013). A popular strategy is the use of influencing. Influencing, in the realm of social media, can be understood as persuading and impacting other entities' behaviours, practices, judgments, and views through content (Casey and Littler, 2022). Influencers utilise framing to deliver information to an audience to exert control over the receptor. To do so, they

utilise a set of discourses based on their credibility, language, origin, music, and other elements that connect them with particular audiences (Downing, 2023).

After looking at the hundreds of videos that make up my research and understanding the relationship between influencing and branding, I present the term *narco influencing.* This term refers to a specific set of actions carried out by actors with a social media presence that contribute to constructing idioms of [in]security in social media through narco-branding. Influencing within the narco culture can help humanise activities, provide testimonials, and generate trust among their followers. These videos allow their producers to better connect with their audience through a deeper emotional connection. Contrary to the common usage of influencing and influencers, in narco-influencing, celebrity-like personas are not as easy to identify. While they may exist, this research looks at narco-influencing as a whole set of digital actions on Tiktok rather than solely on personalities with many followers or engagement. The adaptability and pervasive nature of *narco-influencing* can shape the digital landscape and perpetuate cultural representations that have far-reaching implications among Mexican social media users.

The idioms that are being fed to you will influence your identity, your conception of what is right and what is wrong, and your interests. The problem is that you find yourself in a hard-to-escape pattern within an echo chamber with cyclical content. Social media outlets serve as a fertile ground for the manifestation of vernacular security discourses, as users engage in discussions, share personal experiences, and actively contribute to shaping their security perceptions within their distinctive contextual frameworks (Downing, 2023). In simple terms, narco-influencing is the translation of narco-branding strategies in cyberspace, and through its elements (soft or hard), actions, and actors, creates [in]security by and for social media users. In the following section, I will analyse how metaphors, fashion, songs, and other elements engender vernacular

constructions and how security imaginaries from below develop in particular contexts (Jarvis, 2018)

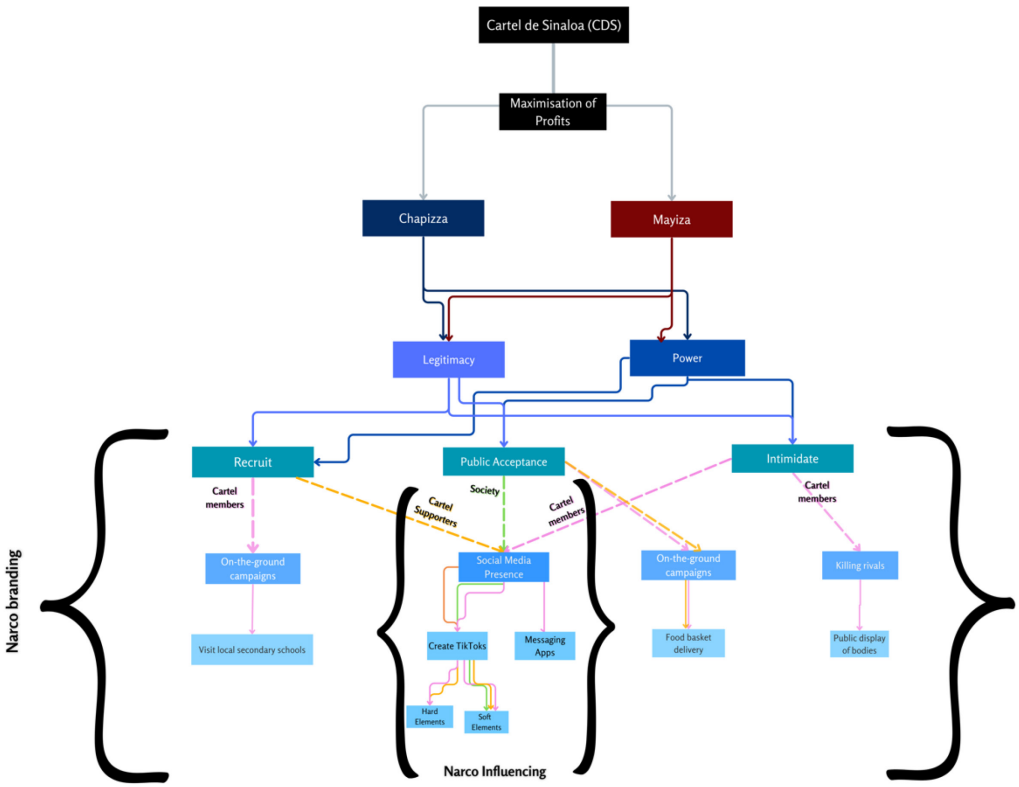


Figure 29 Example of Narco-branding and Narco-influencing (CDS)

How do cartels generate [in]security?: CDS and CJNG through the narco-influencing model

As established in the previous model, as criminal enterprises, each cartel has specific objectives to achieve the overall goal of maximisation of profits. This goal can only be achieved by fulfilling particular and, at times, contextual objectives. Grounded in the framework of narco-branding and narco-influencing, we can discern that the cartels' engagement in the vernacular construction of insecurity legitimises and empowers the cartels. To attain these objectives, cartels employ strategies such as recruitment, intimidation, and social acceptance.

Based on the analysed videos and existing scholarship, two of the main objectives of the CDS are to be the most powerful cartel and garner legitimacy (Flanigan, 2012; Ríos, 2018; Campbell, 2012). In this case, both factions, the Chapizza and the Mayiza, try to meet these same objectives while trying to become the most powerful group within the cartel. The latter and their characteristics make their strategies differ. The strategies related to establishing power are to recruit more members to allow for a larger geographical dominance, intimidate rivals, and produce some synergy with government officials, among others.

According to Nicaso and Mantovani (2023), the use of narratives surrounding violence and the hard elements embroidered in the content allows organisations to remind everyone that they can inflict extraordinary damage on their enemies without actually needing to do so in person (Ríos, 2018). The fact that individuals constantly display weapons is a sign of power and superiority; if someone questions their authority, they may face fatal consequences. The messages transmitted through this narrative extend beyond cartel activities, as you can neither question the cartel's activities or its members' decisions nor mess with the personal life of its affiliates.

Music is an essential part of the composition of most TikToks. In the case of the Sinaloa Cartel-related videos, the expertise of record labels and artists grants the CDS reach and influence. This powerful allows them to maintain their strong media presence, perpetuating its influence in the collective consciousness and its dominance over the narco culture. This strategic move solidifies the cartel's objectives, ensuring its music becomes an instrument to shape public opinion. The studied videos showed a significant number of young users who actively engage in creating and possibly consuming content. By targeting this demographic, the CDS can foster admiration or loyalty towards the cartel's lifestyle and ideologies. TikTok's trend culture generates a cascade of user-generated videos featuring the music, further amplifying its exposure and

disseminating cartel narratives to a diverse audience, fundamentally using users in their favour unbeknownst to them. Through songs, elements and narratives are conveyed more effortlessly to achieve their objectives.

In the case of CJNG, music references the vast manpower and reinforces its reputation of strength and dominance, showcasing its ability to operate on a large scale and hold significant territorial control. Such messaging not only appeals to the cartel's followers and sympathisers but also intimidates their rivals and adversaries within the world of drug trafficking. By using TikTok as a platform to highlight their army's size and power, the CJNG aims to establish a strong presence and leave a lasting impression on the audience based on fear.

The Impact of Soft Elements in Narco-influencing and Narco-branding

Sinaloa Cartel

Prominent figures of the cartel, such as Ovidio Guzmán and his gunmen, utilise specific types of clothing to demonstrate wealth and power. In this sense, cartels promote and embrace this style and aim to establish legitimacy by suggesting that engaging in drug trafficking can lead to the kind of wealth that affords such extravagant clothing (Agencias, 2022). However, it is worth noting that not everyone can afford such lavish attire, creating a significant market for counterfeit products sold at lower prices. This allows others to imitate the narco style without possessing the same wealth or resources, which is just a sign of the aspirational action established by cartels to garner legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

The narco aesthetic transcends mere displays of wealth; it combines distinctive elements with flamboyant or more restrained pieces, creating a unique blend of opulence. This aesthetic is carried out by two main fashion trends or movements: *alucines* and *buchones*. Beyond fashion elements, both are usually

described as a narco lifestyle. Ravvedutto (2023) mentioned that what is promoted through designer clothes is not the high-end brand itself, but the cartel's brand and identity. Alucines (Agencias, 2022) take their name from people under the influence of narcotics and base their fashion style on urban and Gen-Z trends while keeping kitsch elements of Mexican culture or narco culture. Meanwhile, the buchón(a) (León, 2019; Miranda, 2021) style represents a more rural aesthetic that highlights the rural pride of working in the narco-owned fields with white shirts, denim, and hats while promoting high-end brands. While the origins of the alucín style cannot be effectively traced, it has a profound connection with the Sinaloa Cartel and the Chapizza faction; it also appears the most in the analysed videos compared to the buchon(a)[5] style.

In all videos, the male gaze[6] (Mulvey, 1989) is deeply present; even when women are recording themselves and appear without men, they focalise their physical attributes, revindicating gender roles in which women are only valuable because of their beauty or sex appeal. Furthermore, even as subjects, women do not appear to be agents of their lifestyle or wealth as - contrary to most men in the videos - very few are shown as owners of great amounts of cash, luxurious vehicles or other riches. Men are in action, fighting and contributing to the cartel, while women are restricted to dancing and showing off their bodies.

Each one of the soft elements of narco-influencing has the task of generating authority, power, and legitimacy. The display of designer clothing, jewellery, luxury cars or houses, and other representations of wealth, creates status, power, and culture around aspiration. Consequently, platform users follow these trends and try to emulate this lifestyle under the understanding that working for a drug

[5] *Buchon (a)* is a term popularised first in the state of Sinaloa to describe narcos or their partners with a taste for flashy clothes, flamboyant lifestyles, body enhancing surgeries, and wealth.

[6] The 'male gaze', as defined in feminist theory, can be understood as the depiction of women or female bodies through a hetero-masculine perspective which objectifies and sexualises them.

cartel, in this case, the Chapizza faction, will allow them to become successful and powerful.

Through all the elements and narratives described, the Sinaloa Cartel and its factions have attempted to establish specific [in]security discourses developed through vernacular constructions. The utilisation of soft elements has various functions. The first one is the cultivation of an aspirational culture. The utilisation of designer clothes, jewellery, sports cars, and similar elements was and is brandished by alleged members and notable sympathisers of cartels, such as in the case of El Chino Anthrax and Los Chapitos using Instagram to boast about their luxuries (Grupo Reforma, 2020; Hernández, 2023). As a result of their public communication and notoriety, along with logic derived from the capitalist system that extols individuals who have and brag about their financial resources and luxuries, deeming them successful, there are two main consequences. Firstly, through soft elements, cartels and their supporters engender vernacular constructions in which cartel-related figures are regarded as aspirational figures as they embody what it means to be successful, which signifies wealth, ascribing to a particular fashion and partying lavishly.

Secondly, the vernacular construction fosters the idea that individuals emulate the same behaviours and styles to achieve success. The pursuit of mirroring an aesthetic becomes a way for individuals under this notion to achieve prosperity. Nevertheless, this goes beyond just pairing a tendency, as the generated narrative reinforces the idea that success is achievable or, in some cases, even synonymous with involvement in the cartel. Cartel members and supporters on TikTok are constantly displaying opulence which encourages the normalisation of cartel-related symbols which intertwine in society and become what Becerra (2005) considers a cultural narrative surrounding cartels. This is exacerbated by the TikTok algorithm, which feeds users similar content based on their consuming patterns, which triggers the popularisation of cartel-related videos

and produces cycles which characterise reality in a particular fashion based on the cartel's construction (Newberry, 2023).

Individuals on Tiktok will try to replicate similar content with an aspirational objective and an inclusion goal. This means that social media tendencies potentiated by Tiktok lead individuals to replicate behaviours, styles, and actions (Ravveduto, 2023). With the understanding that the symbols from cartels are ubiquitous, as shown by the videos analysed, individuals following the content are incentivised to mirror it to generate attention or simply to replicate what friends or influencers produce (Ravveduto, 2023). Beyond the inclusion objective, there is another repercussion derived from replication which is that it generates a form of allegiance to the cartel. Individuals who produce cartel-related content are consciously or unconsciously defending or whitewashing cartels such as CDS, regardless of their real-world actions. A series of behaviours or portrayals are established within the "us vs. them" narrative, dictating prerequisites for belonging. that you must follow in order to belong. This phenomenon is further compounded by continuous exposure to similar content.

The CDS benefits from this as it allows them to garner legitimacy and provides them with authority. Cartel-related content frames cartel kingpins and members as powerful and successful and that it is worth following their blueprint to achieve greatness. This notion grants them the privilege of being highly regarded by society, which allows them to carry out their operations with the approval of the citizenry. Moreover, due to their popularity, cartels achieve considerable authority as they are, on most occasions, the generators of tendencies that are later replicated. With this advantage, they can frame anything in their favour by packaging it together with soft elements.

Based on Jarvis'(2019) understanding, soft elements garner a larger attraction due to their resonance with people's everyday lives and aspirations, which

makes them relatable. This dynamic is put in practice by the CDS and, in particular, the Chapizza faction. The tendency to do so by the CDS is visible through two different aspects: the first one is the constant use of these elements, which make them recurring motifs, and the second is how there is a wide variety of elements that function to entice different audiences. Soft elements portray the "light side" of what it means to be involved in a criminal organisation, which conceals the actual risks intrinsically related to a life of crime, effectively downplaying them. When combined with hard elements, another consequence is the development of a construction in which it is established that risks associated with criminal behaviours are justified if that will grant an individual success.

The actors producing these narratives are several, for instance, musical artists who create narcocorridos and utilise cartel-related attires, cartel members showcasing their lives on TikTok, and society as a whole contributing to the cartel's branding strategy by sharing and replicating content related to its objectives. Based on Bubandt (2005), Jarvis (2019) and Downing (2022), the resulting narratives are not those established by governments that vehemently criticise cartels and their actions; they are those produced by the interaction of cartels, society and their context.

CJNG

In the context of the CJNG, the presence of an aspirational dimension within the soft narco-influencing elements is not readily discernible. Frequently, the associated videos feature musical personas of lesser prominence or localised influence. The aspirational facet is notably absent as the soft elements in CJNG's TikToks appear more organic, portraying the image of a *rancher narco* rather than an overtly fashionable or luxurious one. It is pertinent to observe that even when these videos incorporate soft elements, their objective does not

necessarily revolve around highlighting them as part of the cartel's identity or aspirationality. This dynamic contrasts the approach adopted by the CDS, which prominently emphasises wealth and has gained significant clout. Notably, the scarcity of widely popular songs, individuals dressed with specific fashion trends, and parties suggests that CJNG seeks to develop their legitimacy and authority differently. Evidently, these endeavours do not constitute their primary focus. This distinction could account for their comparatively limited footprint on TikTok, particularly when juxtaposed against the rugged presence of CDS. A key aspect concerning the CJNG is that, in contrast to the CDS, the idea that success needs luxury possessions or high-end brands does not prevail. The CJNG places little importance on such matters, rather focusing on the value of hard narco-influencing elements or the discourse of respect towards kingpins like El Mencho.

When considering how VSS intersects with CJNG's TikTok presence, we can say that its vernacular aspects can be characterised as a 'vernacular of the ordinary', whereas that of the CDS is a 'digital vernacular'. The soft elements of the CJNG constitute a vernacular rooted in local contexts. For example, CJNG parties portray family and community dynamics, while in CDS-related content, they occur within nightclubs, mansions, and similar venues. These two perspectives diverge significantly in their portrayal of everyday experiences, with their relatability being contextual.

The Impact of Hard Narco-Influencing Elements

Sinaloa Cartel

Hard narco-influencing elements allow cartels to showcase their power beyond the authority and monopoly of violence owned by the State. The hard elements of the Sinaloa Cartel aim to construct an image of exceptional strength through the symbols previously described. Consequently communicating their capacity

to confront any adversary, be it the State, rival cartels, or other types of enemies. The fact that 26% of the cartel's hard elements are related to the use of weapons speaks to this logic of violence, wherein they assert their readiness to employ such means to achieve their objectives, thus justifying their use. Displaying weaponry, armoured vehicles, and tactical equipment works to frame them as entities projecting power, legitimacy, and authority while commanding respect through users' perception of their power. This exercise of violence, in turn, establishes the rules that others must follow. Notably, this image becomes aspirational, as it portrays the desire for empowerment alongside wealth, necessitating the possession of arms and brute force.

Interestingly, this discourse of [in]security ultimately results in a scenario where the combination of soft and hard elements that show the constant confrontation and evasion of the law shapes a lifestyle similar to any other profession. The constant exposure to such content, significantly if an individual grew up during Calderón's War on Drugs and its accompanying narcoculture, normalises these elements (Garcia, 2021). If users witness a myriad of individuals engaging in such activities, the narco life can be perceived as the most common way of life, similar to any other occupation. The constant utilisation of hard elements grants the CDS legitimacy in the eyes of individuals aspiring to emulate them. Another crucial aim is to intimidate, as instilling fear in a community deters any inclination to voice opposition. This also communicates to their adversaries and those sympathetic to their rivals the potential consequences they might face. Demonstrating their capabilities further allows the CDS to control specific populations through fear .

The underlying objective of these hard elements is to establish dominance and become the most powerful faction and cartel. Concurrently, this conveys to the populace that their possession of arms affords them a specific authority, demanding respect. In return for such respect, they offer protection against perceived threats.

CJNG

Contrary to the Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG-related most important hard elements are related to weaponry and the size of their army. Despite not having a similar presence on TikTok, CJNG effectively communicates its violent essence through visual media. In this regard, the legitimacy that cartel-related content aims to produce is derived from its ability to use force instead of highlighting "lighter" elements, as CDS does. Multiple analysts consider the CJNG the most brutal organisation in Mexico, and its related content highlights that notion (Boyd et al., 2020; Redacción Radio Fórmula, 2022b; InSightCrime, 2017). The videos form a vernacular construction that underscores the number of individuals that the cartel has garnered through time and its territorial exploits, which function to establish its authority through violence. This further refutes Lowenheim's (2002) proposition that TCOs do not want to be characterised as violent criminals, as CJNG's image thrives on their perceived destruction potential.

CJNG-associated content shows individuals using armoured vehicles, military-grade weapons, and military uniforms. Although there are no discernible fashion trends exclusive to the CJNG in their soft elements, wearing military attire shows the version of the aspirational culture that this cartel tries to promote. The former represents the construction that if you want to be powerful, you must dress in this fashion and utilise destructive weaponry. Cartel members and supporters utilise military uniforms to strategically accentuate their military presence on TikTok to intimidate potential rivals. Their use also obeys the logic of framing themselves as the most crucial authority over their on-the-ground territories. In this sense, the cartel garners its legitimacy through narratives that establish what it means to be powerful and garner authority by framing itself as an unchallengeable force.

So, is there a strategy behind cartels' use of TikTok?

Drug cartels create a series of vernacular constructions, allowing them to generate discourses of [in]security aligning with their objectives. These discourses of [in]security are underpinned by idioms that utilise contextual variables to shift the perception and behaviour among the recipients of these discourses. Through my analysis, it becomes evident that the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG execute a spectrum of both soft and hard narco-influencing elements through actors like society, musical groups, alleged cartel members, and cartel supporters. These actors are harnessed primarily to foster favourable impressions of cartels and, concurrently, to exert intimidation over rivals while potentially recruiting new members.

Based on the analysed videos, one can determine that the CDS has one or several narco-influencing strategies on TikTok. Notably, it is interesting that this particular cartel demonstrates a more developed set of strategies, despite neither the CDS nor the Chapizza faction being the most preeminent forces in Mexico. The presence of clearer public acceptance and legitimacy strategies through TikTok is explicable through the cartel's extensive media presence across varied communication mediums, past engagement of certain members in social media platforms such as Instagram, and the penetration of the collective imagination. CDS likely seeks to characterise itself as the purveyor of opulence, financial and armed resources, and historical relevance. Thereby strategically using both soft and hard narco-influencing elements to consolidate its media recognition and capitalise upon trends to further its power projection.

In turn, CJNG is known to be one of the most violent organisations in the world (Infobae, 2023). The employment of violence has been one of the most critical factors that have let them garner benefits such as territorial control and an intimidatory presence (Vera and Castellanos, 2021). Despite being Mexico's most powerful cartel, CJNG had considerably less social media exposure; its content was divided into music videos that solely referenced the group, still-image videos, and TikToks with a very basic composition. The fact that CJNG has less social media exposure may be because the factions integrating the cartel have not yet mastered TikTok. This could be confirmed because the CJNG-related content is not as advanced or *trendy* as the CDS, leading to fewer views and interactions than its counterpart. However, this idea - even if plausible - leaves out two other explanations.

Figure 30 Still-image video showing el Mencho and an image of Death.

First, the cartel seeks to expand and amass as much power and profits as possible. This phenomenon suggests that one plausible explanation could be that the CJNG narco-branding strategy is neither rooted in nor reliant upon narco-influencing. Instead, it might be founded on alternative activities outside social media that enable the achievement of their objectives. Some of these activities can be extrusion, intimidation, delivery of food baskets, etc. The cartel consciously decides there are better ways than narco-influencing to execute its narco-branding and achieve its overall objectives. This could indicate that the cartel is not interested in generating media attention or promoting its brand by constructing [in]security discourses on TikTok.

Another possible argument is that there are other videos that the cartel has managed to viralise outside of TikTok. These videos are commonly short videos

of local cartel cells where they show armoured vehicles, weapons and tactical equipment while shouting harangues in favour of their loyalty towards El Mencho (Debate Digital, 2020). As exposed by Lira and Tamayo (2020), these videos can also show the delivery of food baskets or other goods to marginalised communities. However, in both cases, these videos are not systematic but sporadic outliers that are forgotten or go unreplicated after gaining some media traction.

The nature of these videos underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the cartels' online presence and their efforts to project distinct narratives that cater to their objectives.

Research limitations

My results cannot show how many people are a part of the cartels; this implies that you cannot necessarily create a criminal relationship map by analysing the TikToks. Another thing that cannot be discerned is how many people are recruited through TikTok. However, my research proves that potentially through soft and hard narco-influencing elements and narratives, a person can feel the desire to join a cartel or that even if they do not join, the cartels and their activities are portrayed in a positive light. There is currently no data nor academic studies regarding the motivations of why people join Mexican cartels. Moreover, there is no way to know exactly who generates the soft and hard elements found in the videos. Through my findings, one can discern some type of strategy within the cartel, but knowing if there is a specialised group or entity dedicated to creating social media narratives and their conjoint elements is not possible.

Another limitation is related to the algorithm and how, even when I tried to make it as neutral as possible, my research was solely based on my interaction with content related to two cartels. While certain commonalities and patterns

were identified because of the natural bias of social media algorithms, my research cannot entirely show how TikTok is used by all or most criminal enterprises in Mexico. To mitigate this challenge, I reviewed content on TikTok through a SockPuppet account. I sometimes changed the VPN location to evaluate how much the videos could differ, thus trying to get the best content overall.

A limitation to my research, and for that matter any research related to social media and criminality, is that social networks and criminal maps are constantly evolving. For example, while Campbell's (2012) research may have been considered revolutionary in the field of Sociology, new trends have arisen that change the environment. In my case, the prominence of TikTok as a social network or the dominance of the CDS and the CJNG cartels can change to the point where they can be less or more important. Despite this, my investigation has established a framework that allows for the understanding of how strategies of public communication and branding work within criminal enterprises, particularly cartels. This allows us to understand the elements and narratives that cartels utilise in a social network to achieve their overall objectives.

Finally, another limitation is that, unfortunately, one cannot know through visual content analysis who are the people behind the content, that is, actively posting and creating trends. It is possible to realise that there is an influence of the cartels on the content from the elements that I analysed. However, it is not possible to know precisely the degree of closeness the content creators have with these organisations.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

In the landscape of transnational criminal enterprises, Mexican drug cartels have risen to unprecedented levels of power and influence. One of this dissertation's first contributions to the existing literature is related to transnational criminal organisations and their relationship with security studies. I explained why groups such as cartels should be included in the discussion of non-governmental actors having considerable implications for security, both international and day-to-day security. My research has challenged prevailing scholars to establish that drug cartels operate as profit-oriented entities, akin to private corporations, rather than politically driven organisations. Cartels' driving force is an unrelenting pursuit of financial profit, and in this pursuit, they employ a spectrum of strategies, actions, and actors to bolster their power, profitability, and dominion. Like other non-state actors, cartels have been known to utilise social media to pursue specific objectives and create strong public communication. Within both cartels, the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG, I can conclude that no entity regulates or establishes which contents should be shared or produced on TikTok, contrary to ISIS or other terrorist organisations with specific groups within their hierarchy devoted to creating online strategies (Milton, 2018). This is mostly due to how cartels are organised because each of the factions constructs different [in]security discourses based on their distinct contexts and objectives.

In addition, this research is pioneering as it accounts for the evolution of criminal enterprises' structure and objectives and their relationship with social networks. This is relevant because there was not a clear idea in the literature of how cartels use social media and for what. Another significant contribution is related to VSS. This school continues to grow and allows flexibility from the understanding that security has different meanings in the lives and contexts of those who experience it. My approach is relevant as it demonstrates how

speaking security is not only exclusive to elites and individuals countering top-down policies but is also available to criminals pursuing an objective. And secondly, it proves how vernacular studies apply to the analysis of criminality in cyberspace. From the analysis of 250 videos on TikTok, I demonstrated how the CDS and the CJNG build discourses of insecurity from a series of idioms incarnated as soft and hard elements.

Intertwining the teachings of VSS and the conceptualisation of cartels as relevant TCOs in security, I described a model that I called *narco-branding* that consists of a series of strategies that seek the achievement of cartel objectives that will lead to maximising their profits. Within this model, I also described *narco-influencing*, which transfers these strategies to the realm of public communication through different actors and actions specifically enacted on social media. The application of the model was reflected in the hard and soft elements employed by the users. The difference lies in each cartel's importance to the elements. Moreover, the narco-branding / narco-influencing model can be applied to an entire organisation or the factions that coexist within it; for instance, it was used to analyse the Sinaloa Cartel or its different factions, such as La Chapizza and La Mayiza.

Cartels use narco-branding and narco-influencing to generate legitimacy and authority and demonstrate their power to fulfil their primary goal of maximising profits. In this sense, the narco-branding and narco-influencing model is perhaps the most outstanding contribution to the literature since this is one of the first and only works that effectively analyse the idioms that construct the discourses of insecurity and their implications when these are used by criminal groups such as Mexican cartels. Based on the findings of this research, the Sinaloa cartel and its various factions utilise a range of symbols to reach a wide segment of society and establish their brand. These symbols hold significant meaning and have been strategically developed for specific purposes. In the case of the Chappiza, the faction communicates a stronger brand identity using a more complex

TikTok composition of music, symbols and alluring content. On the other hand, the analysis of the CJNG showed how vernacular constructions were developed to characterise the group as powerful and legitimate by threatening to use violence on their videos and brandishing weaponry.

Unfortunately, despite the extensive analysis of videos, it was impossible to determine precisely how many people are recruited or convinced from the content on TikTok, nor the affiliation or closeness to the posters of the content creators, but one of the possible future lines of investigation would be a deeper ethnography through contacting users and conducting a series of interviews. While this dissertation is ending, the relevance and continuum of this research topic do not. Future investigations may analyse security using the proposed framework of narco-branding and narco-influencing to understand how other cartels in Mexico or other criminal groups of the world use social networks such as TikTok. Another line of analysis would be similar to Ravvedutto's (2023) research on how criminal groups exploit various social networks differently.

Finally, this research highlights problems of a region usually ignored by Security studies: Latin America. This is important because the predominant view of security is EuroUS-centric, which marginalises voices that define [in]security and what security threats mean. My research challenges the constant disregard for the fundamental principle that security is multidimensional. There is an urgent need for an integral understanding of [in]security that includes perspectives, languages, voices, and approaches outside the traditional canon of Security studies.

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Appendix

Annex 1 Coding scheme, distribution, and meaning of each code.

Code	Fundamentación	Meaning
○ #alucines	78	This code refers to any display or mention of an urban subculture which establishes drug cartel membership as something aspirational, glamorises elements utilised by drug cartels such as fashion, and lionises drug kingpins.
○ #belicon/belicos/belicosos	28	This code refers to any mention, iteration, or display of “bélico” and its variations. This term refers to warlike behaviour, that is looking aggressive and strong such as as a drug kingpin.
● #Chapizza	40	This code refers to any mention or display of the word Chapizza.
● #chinoantrax	11	This code refers to any mention or display of José Rodrigo Aréchiga Gamboa AKA “Chino Anthrax” and his elite team of hitmen. This includes variations of the term and hashtags related to him.
○ #corridos corridosbelicos corridos chingones corridos verdaderos	39	This code refers to any mention, iteration, or display of “corridos”.
● #Culiacan	23	This refers to any mention of the city of Culiacán, Sinaloa.

● #culiacanazo	3	This code refers to any mention of an event where Ovidio Guzmán escaped authorities after violent encounters with military forces.
● 4 letras	21	This code refers to any mention or display of the iteration of “4 Letras” and other iterations related to CJNG. This includes puranueva, nuevageneración, jalisconueva, puragentedelseñormencho, among other versions.
○ Airplanes, helicopters	17	This refers to all mentions or displays of airplanes, helicopters, or other aerial vehicles.
○ alcohol or drug consumption	43	This code refers to mentions or displays of drug or alcohol consumption.

○ buchon	36	This code refers to any mention or display of “buchón” looks or characteristics. With women, this will typically refer to lips with filler, slim fitted clothing, high heels, designer clothes, cosmetic surgery and implants, consumption of particular products, heavy makeup, wigs, among other features. With men this would typically look like cowboys with fancy clothes, big hats, jewellery, among other features.
○ Call for action	3	This refers to any literal mention of joining forces with cartels.
○ Cars, Vehicles	115	This code refers to the appearance or mention of vehicles. This is divided into sport cars, trucks, armoured trucks, and racers.
○ Armoured trucks	25	
○ Dragster	9	
○ Sport cars	28	
○ Truck	89	
● CDS	139	This code refers to videos that have images, songs, hashtags, music, or any type of mention of the Sinaloa Cartel.

● CDS music	90	This refers to all the videos which have music mentioning or lionising members of the Sinaloa cartel.
● chapitos	32	This refers to any mentions of “Chapitos”, this is, the sons of Joaquín Guzmán Loera and different hashtags and terms associated with them. This code includes Ovidio, Jesús Alfredo, and Iván Archivaldo.
● Chapo	46	This code refers to any mention or display of Joaquín Guzmán Loera AKA “Chapo”. This includes variations of the term and hashtags related to him.
○ Chilren	4	This code refers to any mention or display of children.
○ Ciudad	8	This refers to videos which mention or show cities.
● CJNG	31	This code refers to videos that have images, songs, hashtags, music, or any type of mention of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.
● CJNG music	26	This refers to all the videos which have music mentioning or lionising members of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

● Doble R	14	This code refers to any mention or display of Ricardo Ruiz AKA “Doble R”. This includes variations of the term and hashtags related to him.
○ Drugs displayed or mentioned	31	This code refers to all mentions or displays of drugs. This also includes production, consumption, and distribution of narcotics.
● El 08	1	
● el09	2	This code refers to Nestor Isidro Pérez Salas AKA “Chicken Little” and “09”.
○ exotic animals	11	This refers to any mention or display of exotic animals such as lions, tigers, and other felines, along with fighting cocks.
○ Family	10	This code encompasses the mentions or displays of family members of the users or protagonists of the video. It also includes the narrative of doing everything that means necessary for their family success.

○ Fashion and Cartel Paraphernalia	116	This code refers to the appearance or mention of “Narco fashion” which includes particular designer clothes such as shoes, caps, t-shirts, trousers. This also includes logos, images, or other depictions of drug kingpins.
○ Flashing money	25	This refers to any mention or display of individuals flashing big sums of cash.
○ Government mentions	22	This code refers to any mention of the government. This includes mentions of local, state and federal governments, along with police and military institutions.
○ grind	19	This refers to the narrative of working in a drug cartel in order to achieve your objectives. Grinding through every day, obeying orders, and being loyal in order to become an important member of the cartel.
● Guanajuato	2	This refers to any mention of the state of Guanajuato.

○ It is worth dying	21	This code refers to any mention or display of the narrative which lionises dying to become a cartel member as you will live with luxury (at least for a while) and die a hero that will be always remembered.
● Jalisco	12	This refers to any mention of the state of Jalisco.
○ Jewels	56	This code refers to any mention or appearance of jewellery.
○ Machismo	23	This code refers to sexist behaviour displayed or mentioned.
○ Mansion	34	This refers to any mention or display of big real estate.
● Mayo	28	This code refers to any mention or display of Ismael Zambada AKA “El Mayo”. This includes variations of the term and hashtags related to him.
● Mencho	23	This code refers to any mention or display of Nemesio Oseguera AKA “El Mencho”. This includes variations of the term and hashtags related to him.

○ Mentions of Famous or Fictional Narcos NOT Sinaloa or CJNG	18	This refers to any mentions or displays of individuals from other cartels and fictional characters such as Scarface.
● Michoacan	7	This refers to any mention of the state of Michoacán.
○ Music personality	34	This refers to the appearance of music personalities in the videos. Namely, if musicians are the main theme of the video or if musicians are playing in the background but can be seen.
● Ningun Cartel	81	
○ Party	26	This refers to any video where a party is mentioned or displayed.
○ religious figures	27	This refers to mentions or displays relative to San Judas Tadeo, Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, Jesus, Virgin Mary, amongst other figures.
○ Sierra	65	This refers to videos which mention or show rural and sierra landscapes.
● Sinaloa	23	This refers to any mention of the state of Sinaloa.

○ size of the army	22	This refers to any mention or display of a big number of trucks, purported cartel members, weapons, etc.
○ studying/ other professions is not the answer	7	This code refers to the narrative that studying or pursuing other professions different from cartel members are not the answer for your problems.
○ tactical equipment	41	This code refers to the display or mention of tactical equipment such as military type uniforms, namely helmets, bulletproof vests, goggles, etc.
○ Threat to use violence	74	This code refers to videos, text, hashtags or any threats to use violence against an enemy.
○ viaje	3	This code refers to any mention or display of luxury travel.
○ weapons displayed or mentioned	86	This code refers to any video that shows or mentions a weapon.
○ Women	50	This code refers to any appearance or mention of women.

Annex 2 Screenshots of similar hashtags.


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mayiza🤠culiacansinaloa 1175 visualizaciones
mayiza🤠 118.0M visualizaciones
mayiza_activa 1171 visualizaciones
mayiza🔥 278 visualizaciones
mayiza🌽 21.6K visualizaciones
mayiza🍀 9498 visualizaciones
la_mayiza 5329 visualizaciones
mayizafake 4969 visualizaciones
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puramayiza 98.7K visualizaciones
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izamay 51 visualizaciones
mayiza5158 440 visualizaciones


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mayozambadagarcia 150.4K visualizaciones
elhijodelmayozambada 81.7K visualizaciones
mayozambada🔥 3417 visualizaciones
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lospasajesdelmayozambada 284 visualizaciones
fundamayozambada 23.5K visualizaciones
elmayozambada 48.1M visualizaciones
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chinoantrax😍 701 visualizaciones
chinoantrax🤠 919 visualizaciones
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121 visualizaciones
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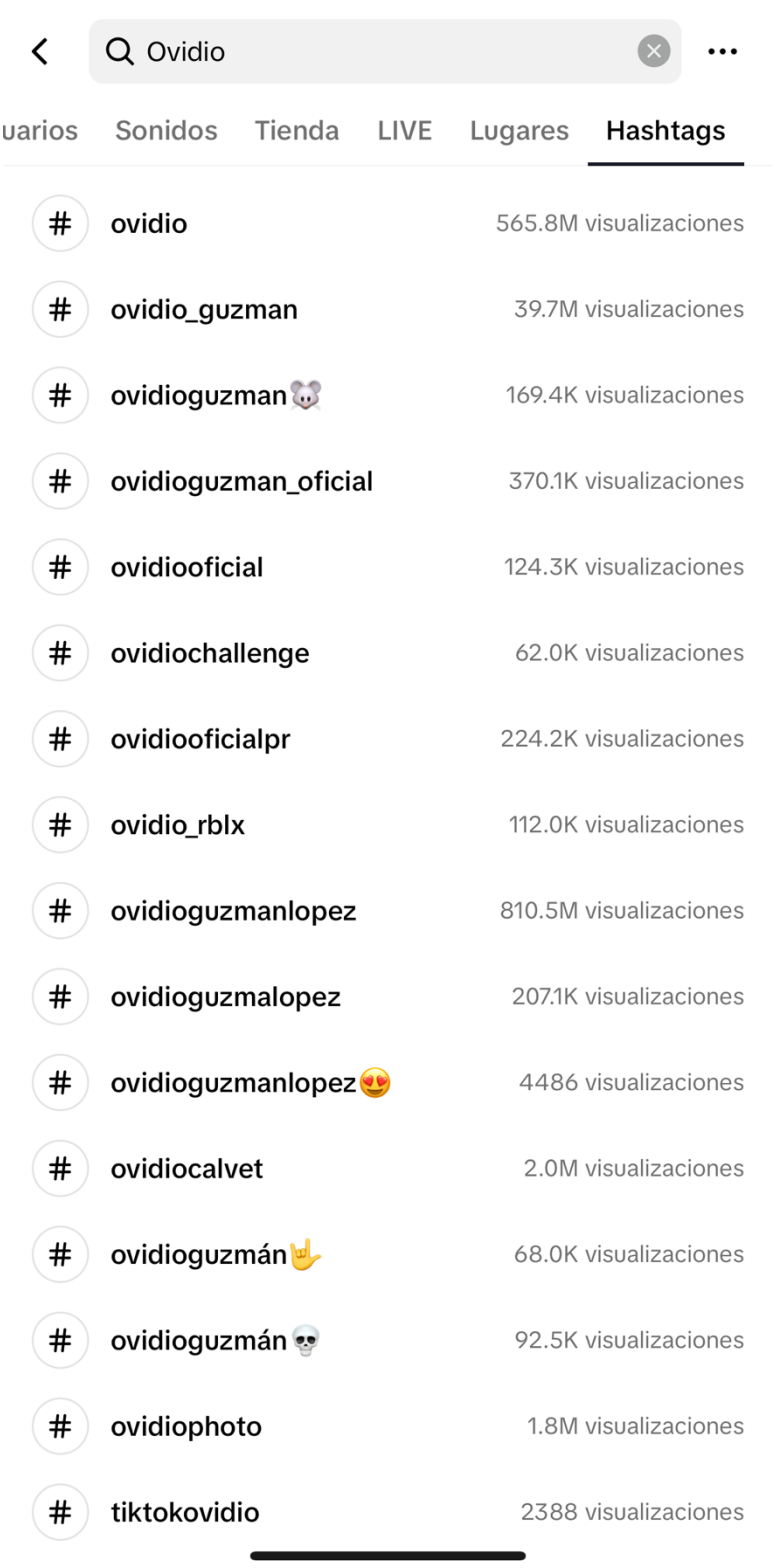
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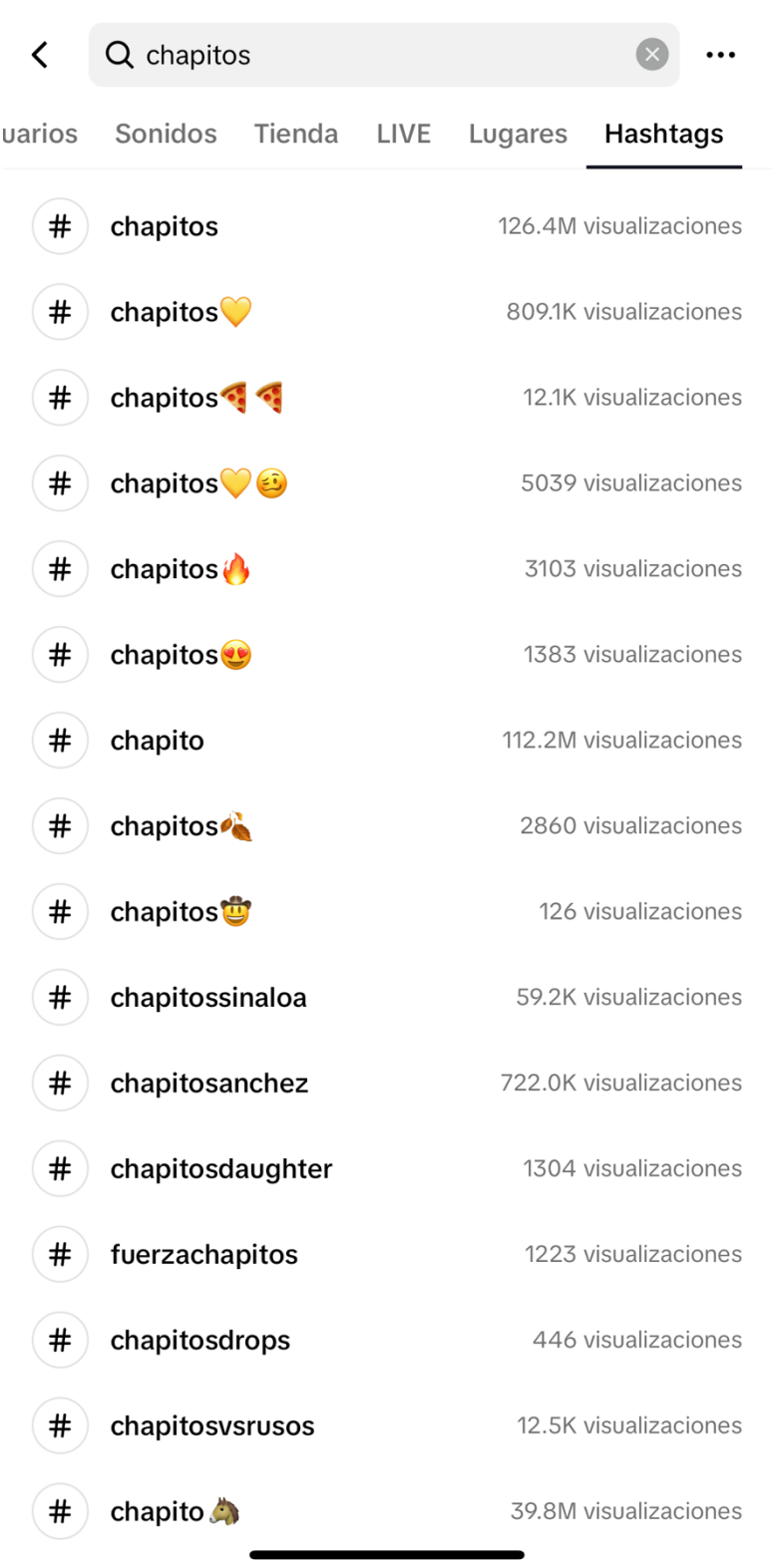
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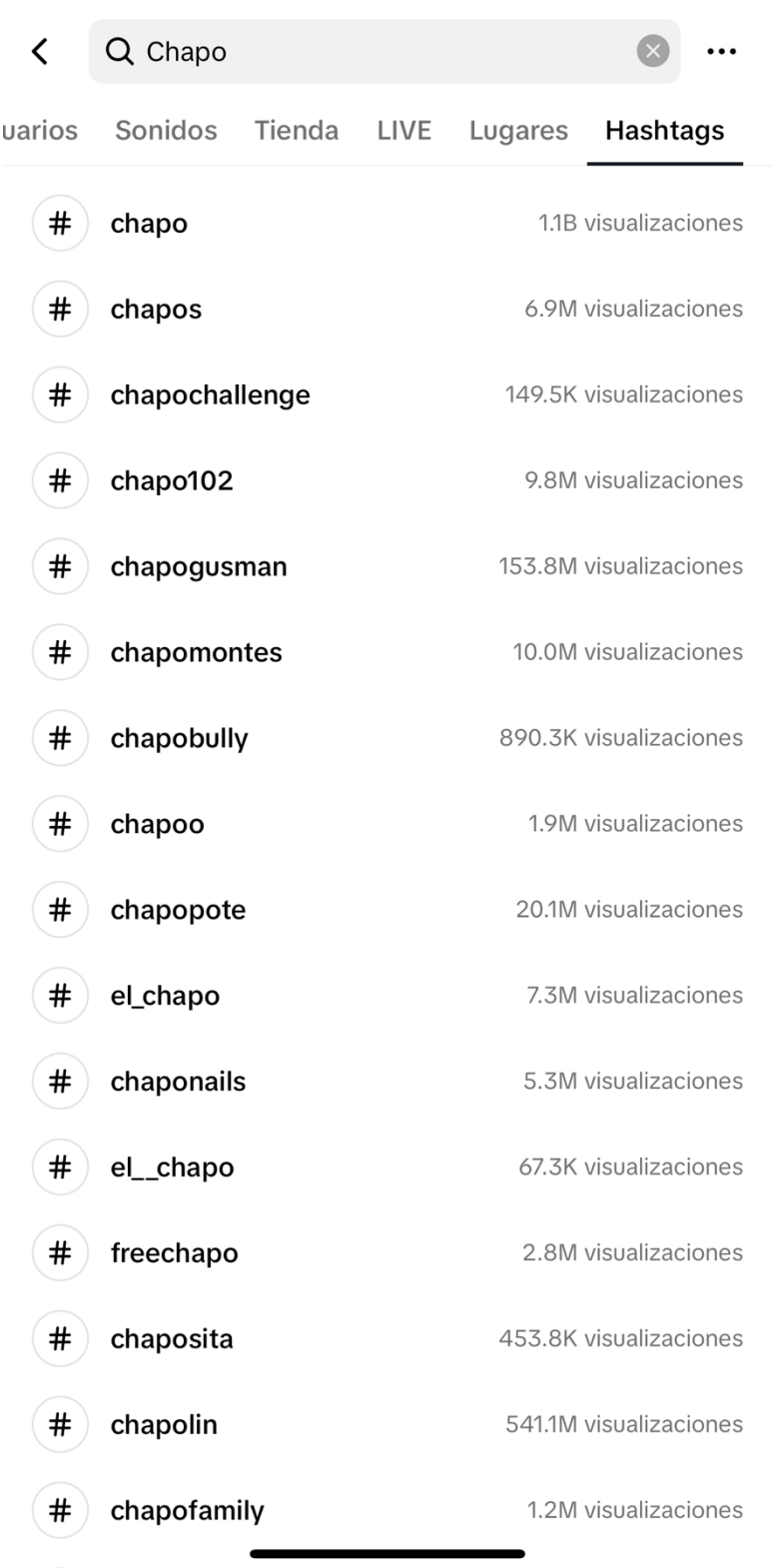
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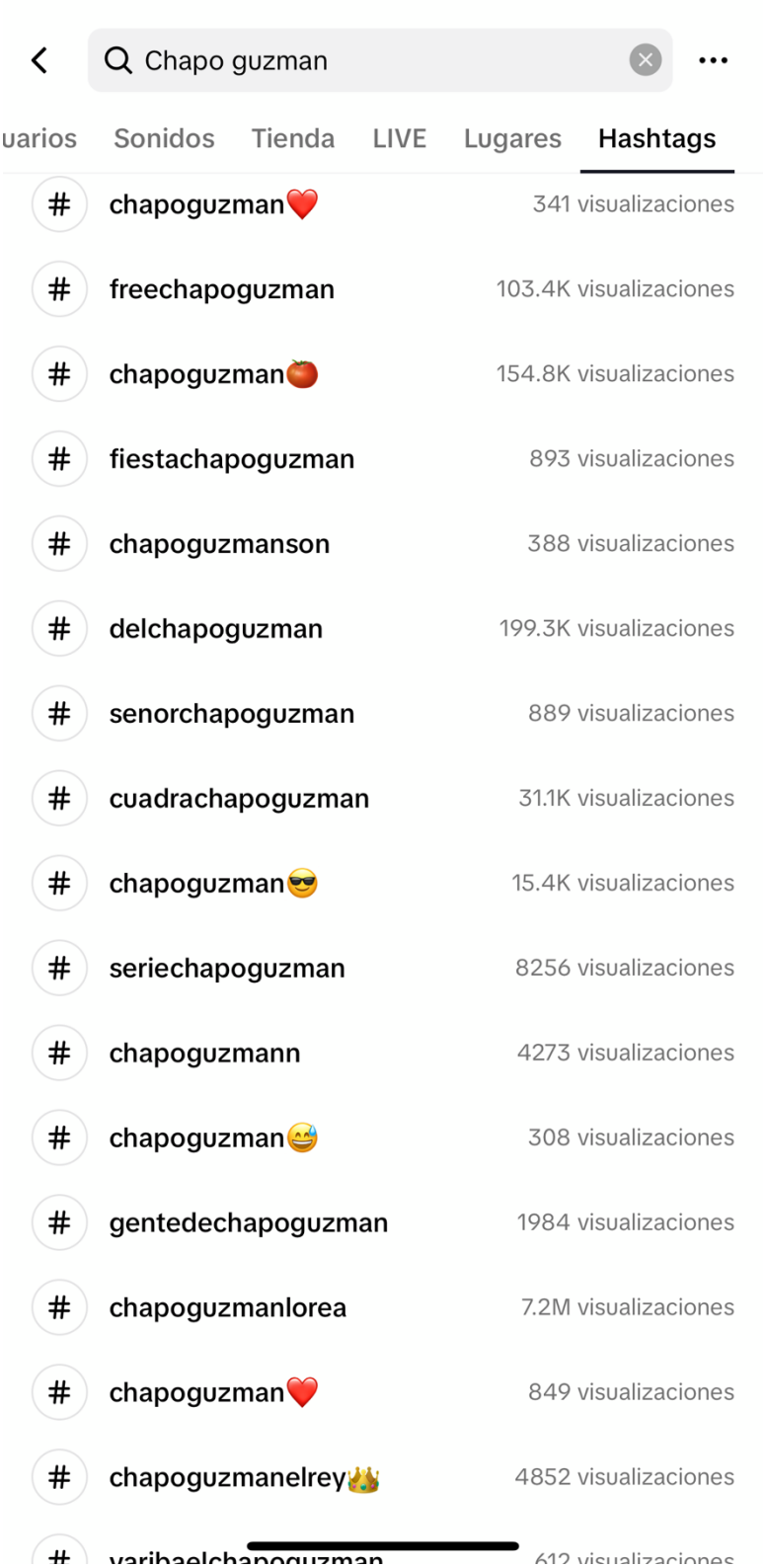
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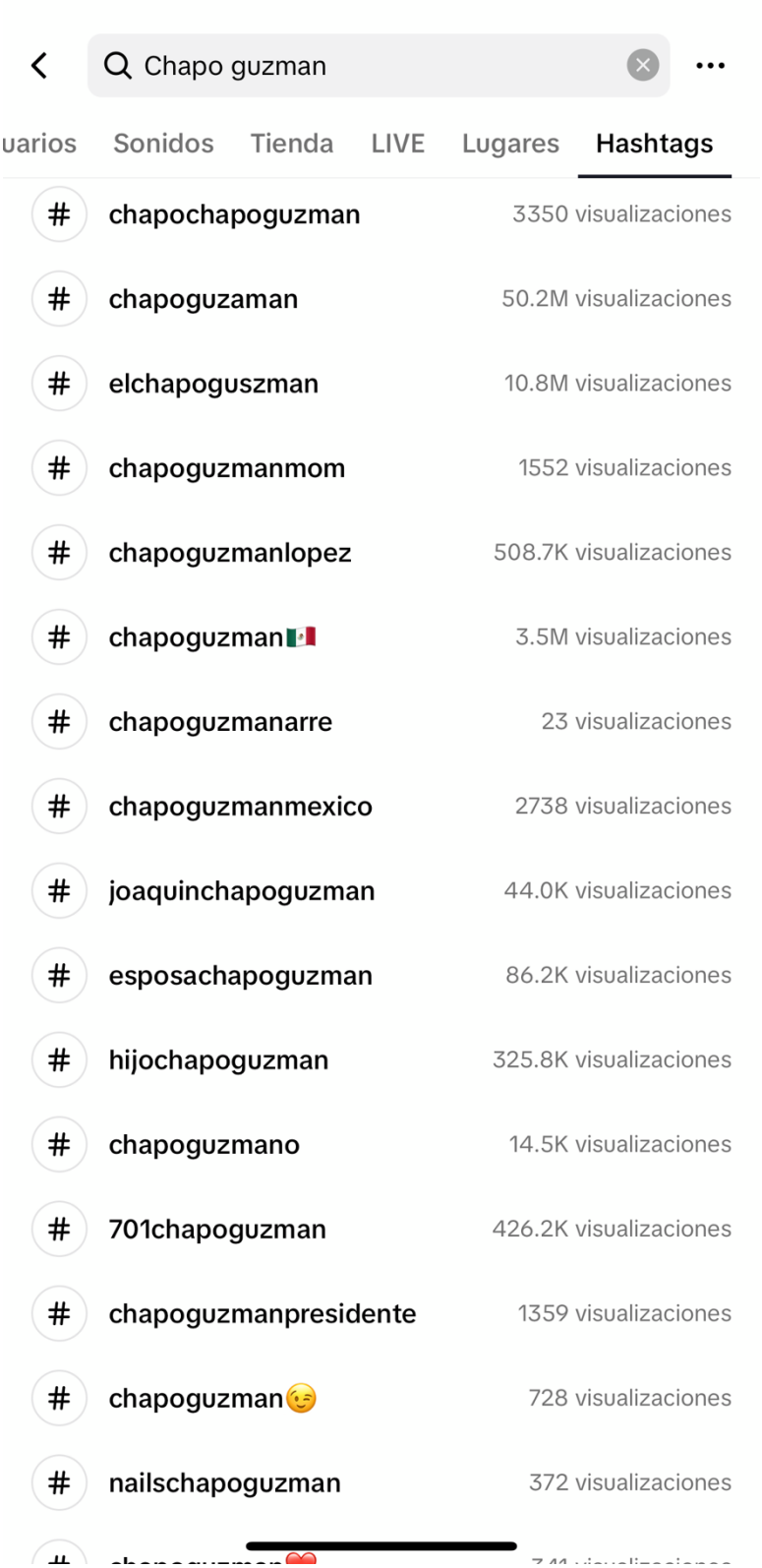
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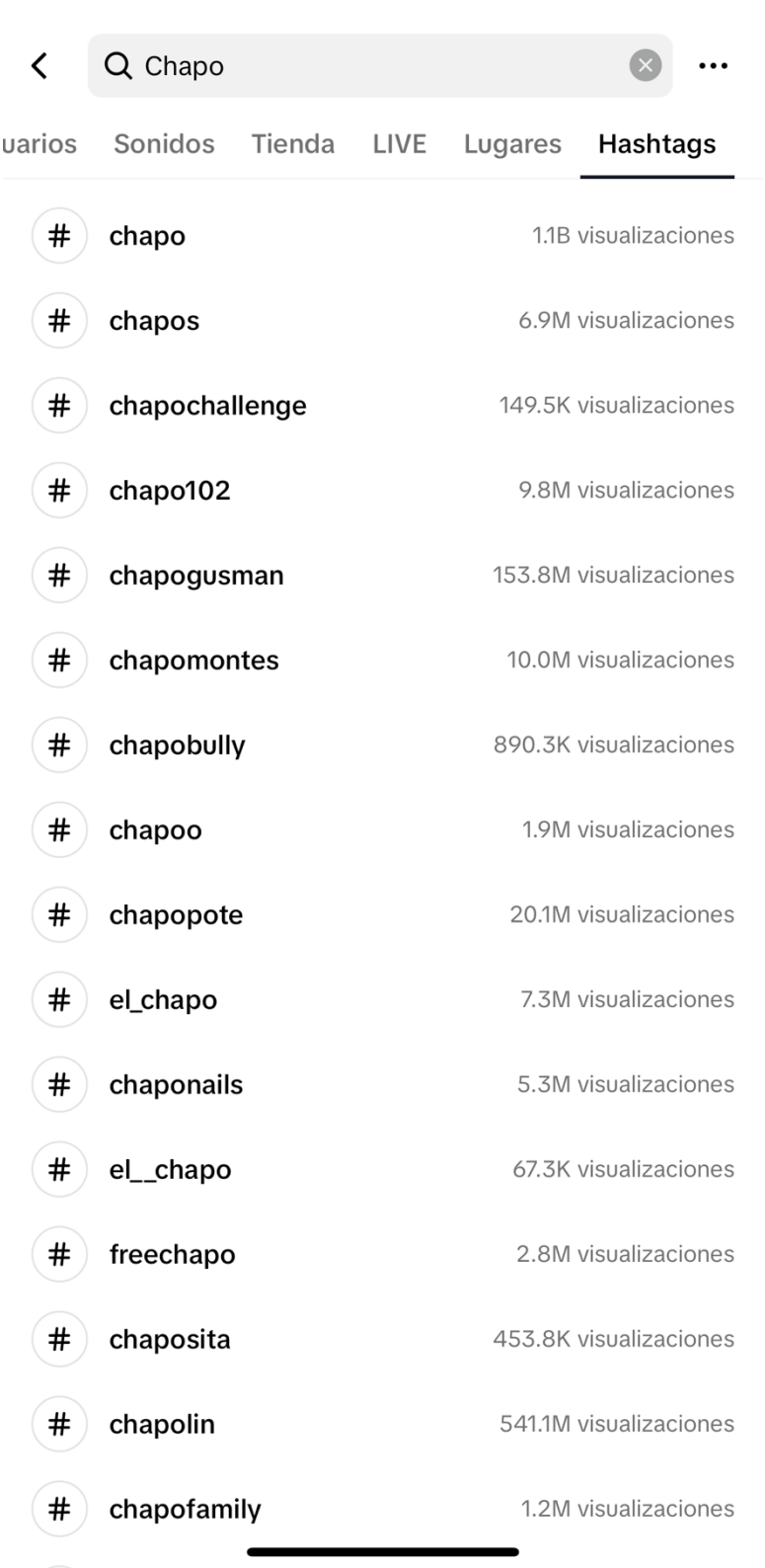
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Tienda
LIVE
Lugares
Hashtags
chapo 1.1B visualizaciones
chapos 6.9M visualizaciones
chapochallenge 149.5K visualizaciones
chapo102 9.8M visualizaciones
chapogusman 153.8M visualizaciones
chapomontes 10.0M visualizaciones
chapobully 890.3K visualizaciones
chapoo 1.9M visualizaciones
chapopote 20.1M visualizaciones
el_chapo 7.3M visualizaciones
chaponails 5.3M visualizaciones
el__chapo 67.3K visualizaciones
freechapo 2.8M visualizaciones
chaposita 453.8K visualizaciones
chapolin 541.1M visualizaciones
chapofamily 1.2M visualizaciones