NEW FRONTIERS
IN DIGITAL RECRUITMENT

Recruitment strategies used on
TikTok by organized crime

EL COLEGIO DE MÉXICO

NORTHEASTERN CIVIC A.I. LAB

SEMINARIO SOBRE VIOLENCIA Y PAZ

laboratorio de odio y concordia.

NEW ┊ FRONTIERS
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*Dedicated to the social groups who, despite adversity, are **still looking for those who have disappeared.***

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Executive Summary

Criminal recruitment on TikTok: a research project documenting over one hundred active accounts in Mexico

Colegio de México's Seminar on Violence and Peace is pleased to release a study revealing how social networks, particularly TikTok, are used by criminal organizations to recruit young people. The Seminar on Violence and Peace, funded by the academic Sergio Aguayo, is pleased to present the preliminary findings of a research project documenting over one hundred active TikTok accounts associated with criminal recruitment activities, crime propaganda, weapons sales, and human trafficking.

This study (conducted by the Odio y Concordia Lab in collaboration with Northeastern University's Civic A.I. Lab.) reveals how drug cartels such as the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación: CJNG) and the Sinaloa Cartel (Cártel de Sinaloa) use emojis, hashtags, music, viral audios and visual content to entice young people into their ranks.

The most relevant findings include:

- Active accounts offering fake "jobs" with promises of lodgings, pay, and training.
- The CJNG is the leader of the pack concerning the use of TikTok as a recruitment and propaganda channel employing hashtags like #4letras, #mencho, and #trabajoparalamaña.
- Emojis like 🐓, 🥷 and 🍕 are used systematically as symbols identifying criminal factions.
- Content also targets women by offering support to "single mothers and students".

Notes:
4letras = CJNG
mencho = CJNG leader Nemesio Oceguera,
aka el señor de los gallos (lord of the roosters)
maña = criminals (in this context, narcos) =
#I work for the narcos

The research is divided into two phases: digital ethnography that identified patterns of symbols in TikTok, and quantitative analysis that uncovered relationships between engagement variables, service offerings and the language used.

The document affirms that "TikTok is not just entertainment. It is also a space where organized crime engages in identity and community building with promises of belonging".

This work is one of the projects undertaken by the Odio y Concordia Lab: a cross-cutting initiative implemented by the Seminar to analyze contemporary violence, polarization and criminal culture phenomena.

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I.   Context

The Seminar on Violence and Peace has documented the activities of one hundred TikTok accounts dedicated to personnel recruitment for different criminal organizations and the promotion of a variety of illegal online activities. This document reports preliminary research outcomes and the methodology we used to find the information.

On March 5, 2025, the Seaching Warriors of Jalisco (Guerreros Buscadores de Jalisco) announced the discovery of the Izaguirre Ranch in Teuchitlán, Jalisco, which had apparently been used as a training and extermination camp by the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG), one of the strongest and most violent criminal organizations in the country. The horrors found there set all of Mexico talking about a problem that had been raising its head for some time: the recruitment of young people by criminal organizations.

The issue was discussed in different spheres: groups of searching mothers who shared their findings and posted messages on social networks; the mass media who published testimonies of young survivors; internet personalities who analyzed what had been found; and federal authorities who questioned the veracity of the narratives concerning the Izaguirre Ranch.

Diverse media outlets had been talking for months about drug cartels posting job offers on platforms like Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. The disappearance of many young people in the Valley of Mexico had already been connected with fraudulent job offers they came across on social media. They would get on a bus bound for Jalisco to start work and, a short time later, they were never heard of again.

This modus operandi of several criminal organizations was confirmed at the Mañanera (morning press briefing given by the government) on Monday the 24th of March 2025, when Omar Harfuch, the Mexican Secretary of Public Safety and Protection (SSPC: initials in Spanish), gave a report on the Teuchitlán case and named José Gregorio (aka "el

Lastra" and "Commander Lastra") as one of those mainly responsible for CJNG recruitment efforts in Jalisco, Nayarit and Zacatecas. According to the report, "el Lastra" was in charge of the training programs conducted at the Izaguirre Ranch.[1]

Furthermore, the SSPC's investigation and cyber patrol departments had looked into several social media accounts to identify criminal recruitment networks. Thanks to these analyses, they had been able to identify thirty-nine accounts dedicated to recruitment across the platforms. Omar Garcia Harfuch also mentioned that the SSPC's online activities were ongoing and that, in the future, they would submit requests for more profiles to be removed.[2]

Profiles were identified on the TikTok platform; consequently, the information required to cancel them was provided to the service supplier, which resulted in the elimination of the thirty-nine profiles listed below:

Image 1. List of accounts found on platforms and social media and eliminated because of content designed to recruit people for organized crime activities

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[1] Source: Omar García Harfuch (March 24, 2025). Report on the Izaguirre Ranch in Teuchitlán, Jalisco (Video File)https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0lTulUh0zE
[2] Op- cit.

Federal government reports notwithstanding, it should be noted that the efforts made by organized crime to fill its ranks with young people have not stopped. This research demonstrates how social networks have become essential to criminal organizations to construct online identities and entice new people to join up.

The following section presents the methodology we used to identify one hundred accounts dedicated to recruitment and other illegal activities on TikTok.

II.   Methodology

This research project was conceived with the main goal of identifying and analyzing content and account patterns on TikTok related to recruitment, as well as examining the correlation between different variables associated with the selected accounts. We chose to adopt a mixed investigative approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collection and analysis. The research was divided into two phases:

Phase 1: Digital Ethnography and Information Gathering

We first used digital ethnography to identify words, songs, hashtags and symbols that recruitment posts on TikTok had in common. This stage was essential to obtain a sample of one hundred accounts primarily concerned with recruitment. We retrieved the usernames of these accounts, the criminal organization with which they were associated and classified the type of content they produced into six categories:

- **a)** Recruitment by criminal groups
- **b)** Border crossings
- **c)** Invitations to suspicious businesses
- **d)** Presumed prostitution
- **e)** Propaganda with criminal overtones
- **f)** Arms trafficking

We then sent the database we had created to Northeastern's Civic A.I. Lab because they have access to TikTok's Application Programming Interface (API). Their collaboration was fundamental to the development of our research as they helped compile accurate information on the activity of these accounts and their engagement metrics. The Civic A.I. team sent us back a structured database incorporating variables such as:

○ The account name
○ The number of followers
○ The number of posted videos
○ The main topics dealt with
○ Interactions levels (average number of likes, comments, and shares)
○ The use of specific emojis (NG, ninja)
○ Specific service offers (pay, entertainment, lodgings)
○ Other relevant qualitative characteristics

Phase 2: Quantitative Data Analysis

In this phase we took the information from the accounts in our sample and carried out descriptive statistical analyses to identify patterns and correlations among the data collected. The data analysis team was in charge of calculating measures of central tendency. They also produced tables and graphs that enabled us to visualize the distribution of certain variables, such as our population of interest and target accounts and, finally, they presented a correlation analysis between different variables like numbers of followers, interaction levels, services offered and engagement.

It should be noted that our research is hampered by several methodological limitations since, the information having been gathered manually by people with different criteria, our sample was not random and therefore somewhat biased. In this sense, we cannot make inferences about the total number of accounts that engage in this type of activity. Furthermore, many of the accounts we analyzed were only active for a short period of time, either because they were shut down by the platform or were deleted by the users themselves, which prevented us from doing retrospective sampling.

Despite our methodological limitations, the findings obtained allowed us to identify key trends regarding the production and consumption of TikTok content. We found significant correlations between different variables and, although our sample may not be entirely representative, the analysis does help us understand the scope of the problem and identify patterns of behavior of different criminal organizations searching online for new recruits for their ranks.

The Seminar on Violence and Peace has decided not to list the TikTok accounts we based this research on pursuant to the criteria listed below:

- Security: some of the accounts we identified belonged to minors publishing whose names could expose them to additional risks. Moreover, we do not intend to re-victimize young users recruited or co-opted by organized crime in any way.
- Ethics: we do not wish to raise the visibility of crime-related accounts so as not to contribute to the normalization of sharing violent or crime-related content on social networks.
- Legality: we respect TikTok's privacy and personal data protection policies.

III.   Results

A) Digital Ethnography Results

The accounts that made up our sample contained explicit references to organized crime through commonly used expressions, symbols, and songs. This section presents the most relevant findings concerning the content posted on the accounts we identified during our digital ethnography phase.

One of the most important elements that helped us identify organized crime-related content on the TikTok platform was the systematic use of emojis. Both in video descriptions and in certain comments, these symbols made references to criminal life in general or were even used by certain criminal factions to set themselves apart from the rest. Some examples of how these emojis were used are:
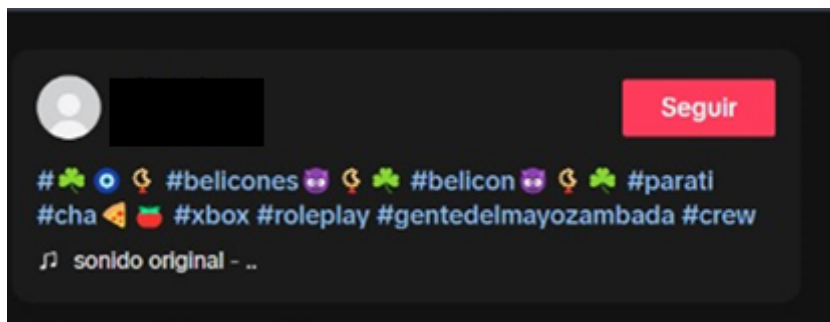
Why make a fuss if you already know which shirt fits you best

original sound

Don't be afraid of anything or anyone

(what's for you won't go by you / destiny awaits)

Follow

Images 2, 3 and 4. Tiktok screenshots showing the ubiquitous use of emojis across a variety of posts connected with organized crime

The following is a selection of the emojis most commonly used in the posts comprising our sample. We also provide details of the context in which they are used and the meaning given to them in social media.

Table 1. Emojis and their use on TikTok by organized crime

Emoji	Descripción
	The ninja emoji was one of the most commonly used in the profiles we found. It is used to represent thieves or people who work for the cartels and wear hoods in multimedia content.
	The helmet emoji was used in videos featuring heavily armed people. Oftentimes these people were seen posing in military uniforms in luxury cars and vans.
	The devil emoji was often used alongside some of the other emojis in this table. It represents evil.
	This emoji represents Namahague, a Japanese ogre; however, it was used on TikTok as a variant of the devil. It commonly appeared in posts that made use of Makabélico songs.[3]
	The Turkish eye emoji, which is commonly associated with protection against the evil eye and bad energies, was used along with other emojis on this list in posts directly referencing "la maña" (the narco gang). We were unable to find the meaning assigned to this figure by users in criminal contexts.
	The pizza emoji appeared systematically in accounts connected to the Sinaloa Cartel, specifically the faction led by Joaquín "el Chapo" Guzmán. This figure was almost always used after the letters 'ch' (ch🍕) to form the word "chapizza" (Chapo + pizza).
	The rooster emoji was always featured in CJNG recruitment accounts. It was specifically used to refer to Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, aka El Mencho and 'El señor de los gallos' (lord of the roosters), who is the ranking leader of this criminal organization.
	The NG emoji always appeared in CJNG recruitment accounts. The letters mean Nueva Generación (New Generation). This emoji was often used after the number 4.

Source: our own work from information gathered during the digital ethnography phase.

Emojis were used in both videos and descriptions; however, these were not the only elements that appeared in the posts we analyzed in our sample. Hashtags played a central role in our digital ethnography as they enabled us to identify and thematically classify some profiles and posts more easily. Below, we present a table with the hashtags most commonly used in the publications we studied, their meaning and the criminal organization with which they are associated.

[3] Makabélico is a Mexican rapper whose urban music deals with organized crime and raw violence in Mexico. Some of his musical productions are used as banners by members of criminal organizations on social media.

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Table 2. Hashtags and their use on TikTok by organized crime

Hashtag	Descripción	Cártel vinculado
#gentedelmz	These hashtags were used to show support for the Mayiza faction of the Sinaloa Cartel. They frequently appeared in posts alongside 'narcocorridos' (gangsta rap) or posts promoting the organized crime lifestyle.	CDS - Los mayos
#mayozambada		CDS - Los mayos
#operativamz		CDS - Los mayos
#gentedelmayozambada		CDS - Los mayos
#nuevageneración	These are the most common hashtags on TikTok. They are associated with the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG) and were mostly used in recruitment posts.	CJNG
#4letras		CJNG
#4l		CJNG
#ng		CJNG
#mencho		CJNG
#mecho (sic.)		CJNG
#señormencho		CJNG
#ElSeñorDeLosGallos		CJNG
#maña	These hashtags appeared in various posts, regardless of the criminal organization to which they belonged. They refer to criminal life and commonly accompany posts featuring 'narcocorridos' (gangsta rap) and pictures of heavily armed people.	General
#trabajoparalamaña		General
#belicones		General
#belicones		General
#fracesbelicas (sic.)		General
#makabelico_oficial	These hashtags are associated with people who make urban music dealing with issues such as drug trafficking and organized crime. Makabélico and Víctor Mendívil's songs appear repeatedly in posts whose goal is to recruit new members and glorify crime.	General
#ondeado		General
#victormendivil		General
#makabelico		General

Source: our own work from information gathered during the digital ethnography phase.

Other elements our digital ethnography considered were the songs and audios that appeared in the different videos, most of which were music from the north of Mexico, traditional Mexican songs, Latin trap, or hip-hop dealing directly with organized crime. Some of the audios made references to specific cartels, while others talked about the criminal lifestyle in general. Thanks to this research, we were able to put together a brief catalog of songs that feature organized crime content on TikTok (see below). It is worth noting that not all users who play these audios belong to criminal organizations; there are many videos where people are just recording themselves enjoying this music without making further references to criminal groups.

Table 3. Songs and audios associated with organized crime on TikTok

Canción	Artista	Cártel Mencionado
Pura Gente del Mencho	Revolver Cannabis	CJNG
Cartel de Jalisco	El Komander	CJNG
Los Cuatro de las Cuatro Letras	Los Alegres del Barranco	CJNG
El Señor de la Virgen	Los Plebes del Rancho	CJNG
El 03	Fuerza Regida	CJNG
Gente del General	Fuerza Regida	CJNG
El Mayo Zambada	Los Tucanes de Tijuana	Sinaloa Cartel
JGL	La Adictiva	Sinaloa Cartel
El Azul	Edén Muñoz	Sinaloa Cartel
Sanguinarios del M1	Movimiento Alterado	Sinaloa Cartel
Comandante Toro	Beto Vega	CDG vs. CJNG
Tropa del Infierno	Diferentes intérpretes	CDN
El Señor Guzmán	El Komander	Sinaloa Cartel
Culiacán vs. Jalisco	Lenin Ramírez	CDS vs. CJNG
El Corrido del Flaco	Lenin Ramírez ft. Fuerza Regida	CJNG
Pacas de a Kilo	Chalino Sánchez	General
Fierro por la 300	Lenin Ramírez	CDS
Mafia Nueva	Grupo Arriesgado	CDS
El Gallito	Fuerza Regida	CJNG
SU CASA	Peso Pluma	CJNG
GTA II	Jasiel Núñez	CJNG
El 3	Ian Córdova	CJNG
Tierno	Ian Córdova	CJNG

| Canción	Artista	Cártel Mencionado
El 3 mil del Barco	Cyklon	CJNG
El Plumas	Víctor Mendívil	CJNG
Sound de Barrio	Música de Narcos	General
Pecado en el espejo	Los Tucanes de Durango	General
El Caguamo del CJNG	Desconocido	CJNG
Furia Blanca	Desconocido	CJNG
Hay Peda	Manci Maka	CJNG
Soy el Rebelde	Pitufo BDA y Choko JG	CJNG
El Fer CJNG	El Pitbull LDK	CJNG
En El Radio Un Cochinero	Kinto Sol	General
Un Scar	Jesús Chairez	General
El Muchacho	Fuerza Regida	General
El mayor de los Ranas	Víctor Valverde y JR Torres	General

Source: our own work from information gathered during the digital ethnography phase.

Finally, many of the videos in our sample incorporated visual elements designed to make the content appealing to their target audience. While image and video formats varied across accounts, repeated elements included:

Images 5 y 6. TikTok screenshots featuring representations of the Santa Muerte (Our Lady of Holy Death) and individuals involved in "halconeo" (spying on public security institutions) for a criminal organization.

- Pictures or videos of people speaking on hand-held radios. This content could be referring to "halconeo" (spying on public security institutions), an activity some recruits perform for different criminal organizations (see image 6).
- Images in which death appears (see image 5).
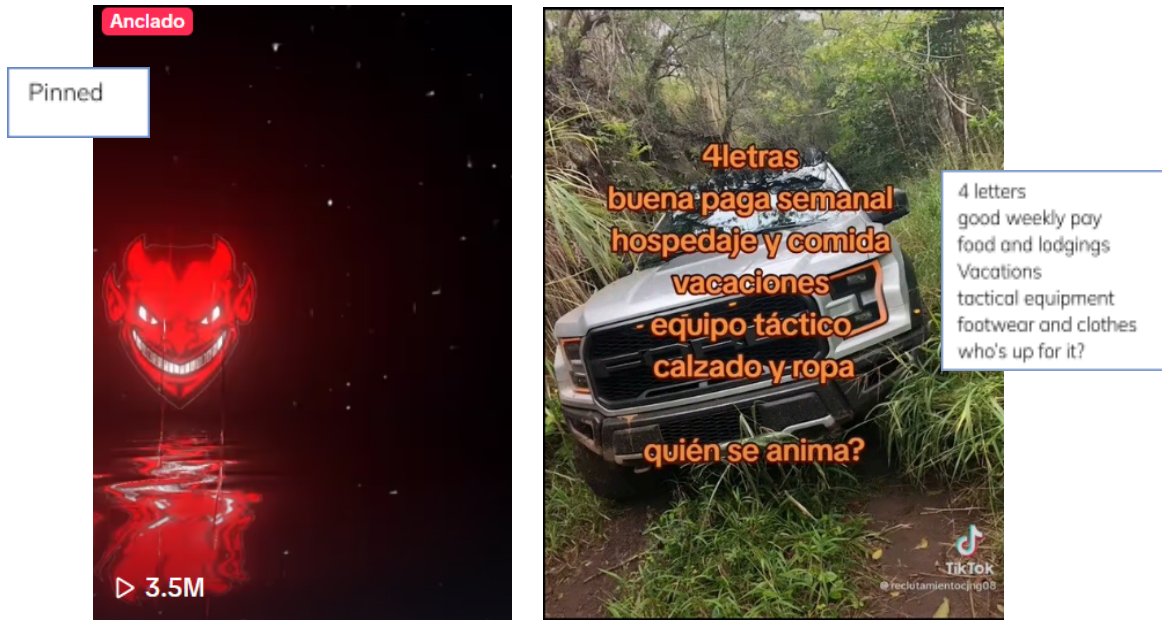
Images 7 y 8. TikTok screenshots featuring a red devil and a luxury van with a recruitment message.

- Images of a red devil, apparently related to Makabélico. Some videos featuring this image also claimed they were associated with the Northeast Cartel (Cártel del Noreste) (see image 7).
- Images or videos of people in luxury cars and vans, sometimes in convoys, patrolling urban areas or driving through native areas (see image 8).

While the analyses we conducted during the first research phase may not encompass all the manifestations of organized crime on TikTok, they do allow us to sketch out ideas about how criminal identities are constructed on social media and how they manifest themselves. In the following section we briefly present the results of the quantitative study we conducted to identify behavioral patterns on a larger scale.

B) Quantitative Analysis Results

This section presents an analysis of data concerning recruitment and propaganda activities on TikToc. Here we use graphic presentations to take a close look at content categories, target population and other characteristics. Furthermore, we present a correlation analysis that allows us to see interactions between the variables we are interested in. Before we begin, it is pertinent to establish certain considerations:

1. Correlation does not imply causation: Further studies are required to determine causal relationships.
2. Correlations between 0.2 and 0.4 should be interpreted cautiously as they may be influenced by external factors not included in the matrix.
3. Correlations between -.1 and .1 suggest statistical independence.

Our data selection process was primarily aimed at identifying accounts dedicated to recruitment; however, we ended up incorporating users who fomented other types of criminal activity (see figure 1).

Figure 1. The purpose of TikTok accounts linked to organized crime
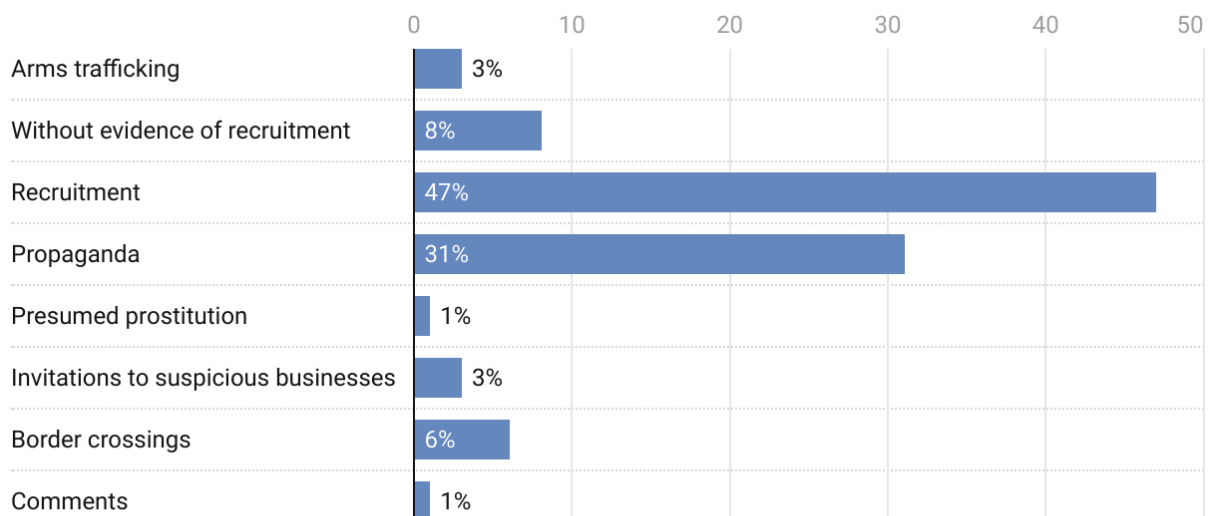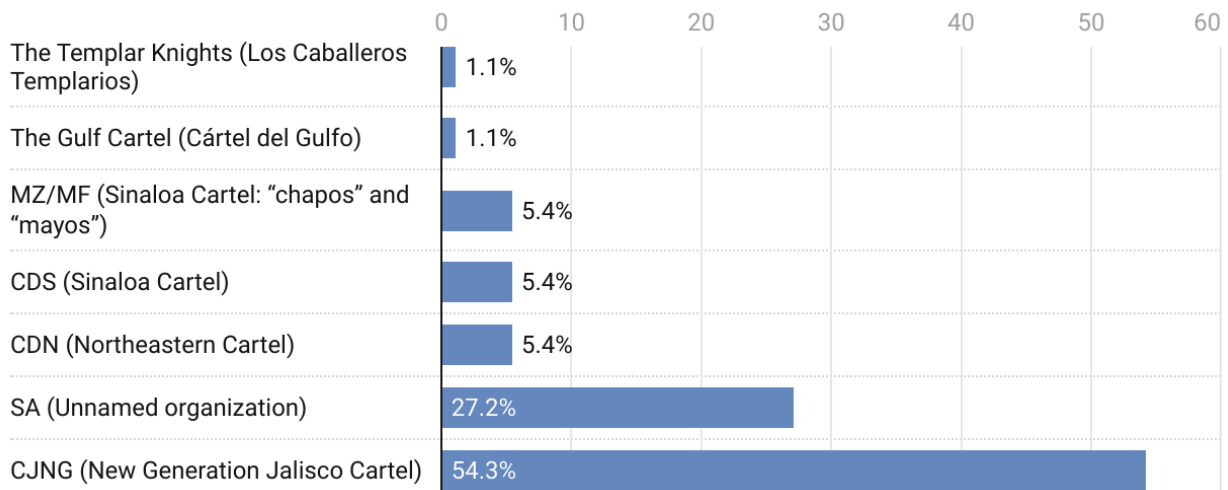

Source: our own work from information gathered with the TikTok API.

Of the one hundred accounts in our sample, 47% engaged in explicit recruitment activities. Propaganda came second with 31% of the accounts: accounts which actively promote the criminal organization's name through music and other symbols, but which are not used for the purpose of recruiting more young people. Moreover, we found another kind of account —invitations to suspicious businesses— that offered easy money in exchange for taking on lucrative jobs. These accounts did not use symbols associated with organized crime but invited interested parties to send them a private message to request further information. Finally, we found accounts not directly associated with any criminal organization that offered illegal products and services like guns (3%) or border crossings into the United States (6%).

In the course of our investigation, we uncovered that the most active criminal organization was the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG), which occasionally appeared under the names "the four letters" or "the Jalisco company". However, we also discovered the presence of other criminal organizations (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Criminal groups linked to the TikTok accounts studied
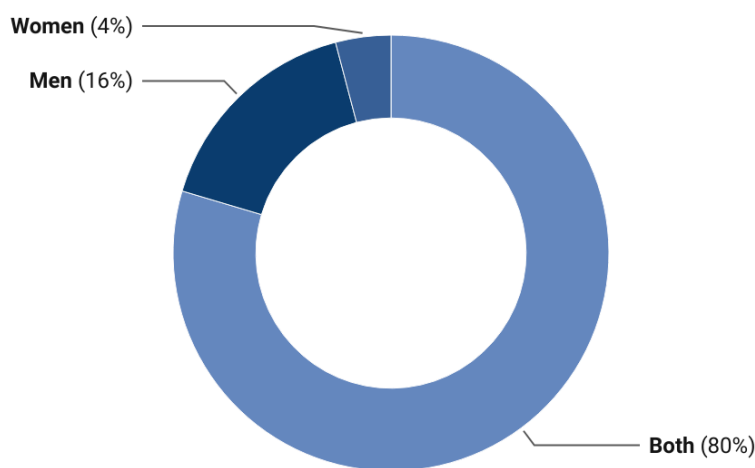

Source: our own work from information gathered with the TikTok API.

In the above graph, "SA" refers to, but does not specifically name a criminal organization. As we can see, this was the second largest category in our sample, which indicates that much of the content alluding to organized crime on TikTok is not necessarily promoted by particular factions. Moreover, the activities of other groups like the Sinaloa Cartel (CDS) —both the "chapo" and "mayos" factions (MZ/MF)— and the Northeast Cartel (CDN) was much lower than those of the CJNG. It should be noted that, in the case of the CDS, recruitment videos were aimed at creating teams for a video game called Roblox. We do not know if this medium has become a recruitment channel for even younger audiences.

We sought to identify whether recruitment content on TikTok was targeted to specific audiences or whether, for instance, recruitment strategies were different for men and women (see Figure 3). In our sample, almost 80% of the videos collected targeted both audiences, while about 16% were aimed directly at men. Recruitment efforts directed at women, while less prevalent in our sample, differed from the previous categories; oftentimes, these were accounts run by women offering support to "single mothers and students" to help them get ahead.

Figure 3. Target audiences of TikTok recruitment videos

Women (4%)

Men (16%)

Both (80%)

Source: our own work from information gathered with the TikTok API.

We also conducted an analysis to find out how often certain elements in the videos in our sample accounts appeared in TikTok posts concerning organized crime. We focused on what could be strategies to attract larger audiences: offering lodgings or a house in exchange for joining the cartel's ranks, training for new recruits, and attractive salaries. Moreover, we explored the use of slang, hashtags and emojis in the descriptions of the videos collected. Figure 4 illustrates the proportion of posts in which we were able to find these elements. It should be noted that these graphs were made by taking the descriptions of the videos into consideration; we need to process the content of the images and videos to obtain more concrete outcomes.
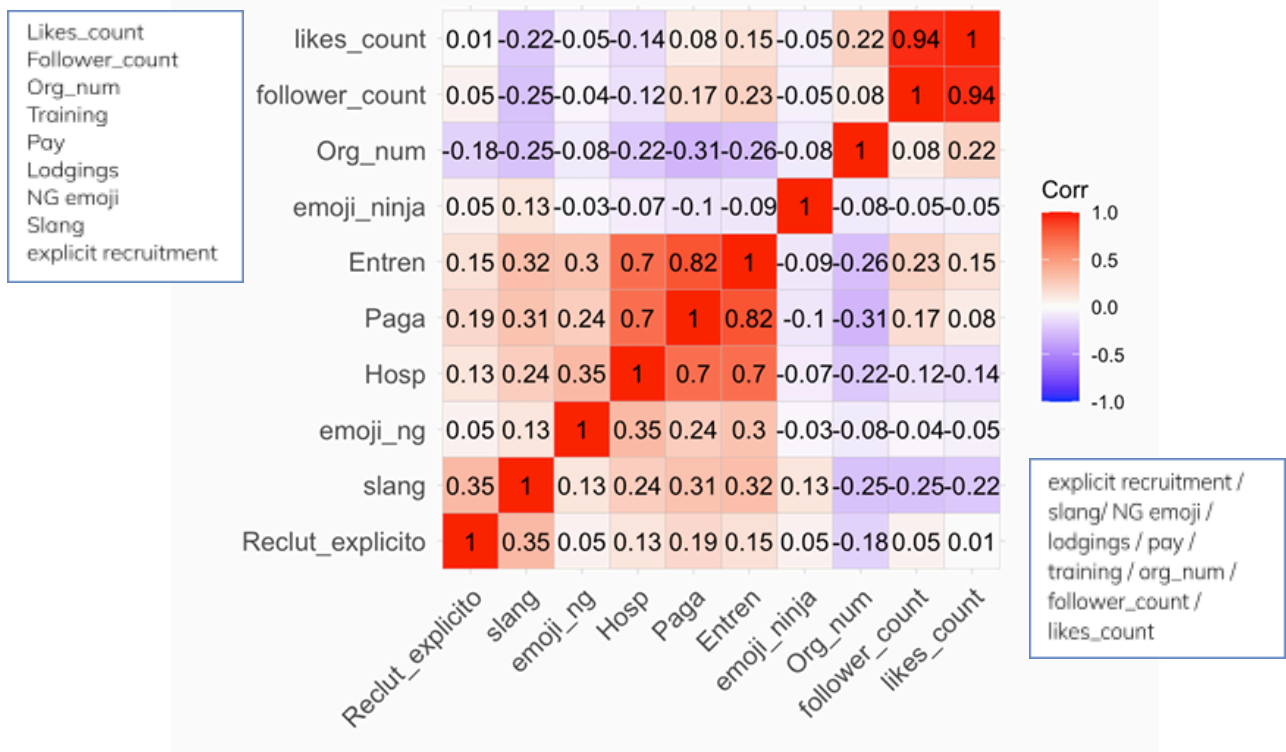
Figure 4. Identified audience attraction strategies
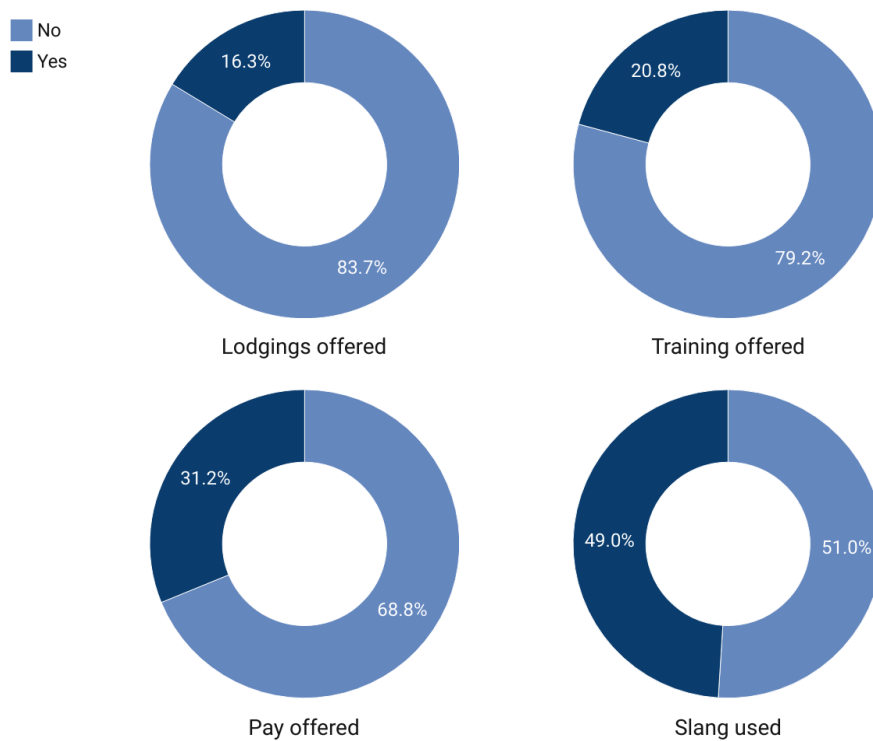
Source: our own work from information gathered with the TikTok API.

Finally, we drew up a correlation matrix (Figure 5) to see how the variables of interest are interrelated. The following is a breakdown of the meanings of the most important relationships for our study:

Figure 4. Correlation matrix

Source: our own work from information gathered with the TikTok API.

Strong positive correlations (0.7-1.0)

1. likes_count and follower_count (0.94): A very strong relationship indicating a direct link between numbers of followers and likes. This suggests that the size of the audience largely determines the degree of interaction through likes.
2. Pay and training (0.82): Very high correlation indicates a strong relationship between pay and training, which suggests that training is usually paid. Lodgings, pay and training (0.7): Lodgings shows a high correlation with pay (0.7) and training (0.7), which forms a triangle of highly related variables.

Negative and moderate/weak correlations

In general, there are no high negative correlations (greater than -0.5), which suggests a complete absence of significant inverse relationships among the variables studied.

Analysis by group

1. **Engagement: likes_count and follower_count (0.94):** These items form a clearly defined engagement cluster. Both metrics show positive weak correlations with Org_num (0.22 y 0.09 respectively). Negative weak correlations with slang (-0.22 y -0.25) and lodgings (-0.14 and -0.12), and practically none at all with explicit recruitment (0.01 and 0.05).
2. **Services: Pay, training and lodgings:** These items form a triangle with very high correlations between them (0.7-0.82). This group shows moderate correlations with the NG emoji (0.24-0.35) and slang (0.24-0.32). Weak correlations with explicit recruitment (0.13-0.19). Negative weak correlations with con Org_num (-0.2 a -0.28) and engagement metrics (-0.12 a -0.14 with likes_count).
3. **Communication: Slang and explicit recruitment (0.35):** Positive moderate correlation with the NG emoji: moderate correlations with lodgings (0.35) and training (0.3). Ninja emoji: This item shows weak correlations with all other variables, which suggests that it is used independently.

Follower attraction strategy

1. Negative correlation between slang and engagement (likes_count -0.22, follower_count -0.25) suggests the use of language like "la maña" (narcos) or "belikon" (warrior) may not be effective at attracting followers or generating likes.
2. Service variables (lodgings, pay, training) also show correlation. However, explicit recruitment has a higher correlation with slang (0.35), which suggests that explicit recruitment tends to use language more like that mentioned above.
3. High correlations between lodgings, pay and training (all ≥0.7) suggest a business model in which services are offered as a package.

IV.   Conclusions and next steps

Social networks have become fertile soil for the growth of criminal organizations. In a context rife with growing violence and rivalry (between criminal gangs and against the State), these organization have sought to approach young people and entice them into their ranks. TikTok, a social network with less content moderation than other digital platforms, has made it easier for organized crime to build new identities that appear as common images, emojis, hashtags and songs. In this way, organized crime is able to reach Mexican youth with the promise of belonging to a gang where they will be accepted and offered "more favorable opportunities for future development".

If we are to limit this phenomenon, we must become aware of the recruitment processes employed by criminal organizations and why those who volunteer to become hired enforcers have decided to go down this path. In this sense, it would be prudent to conduct research into the elements that make a young person vulnerable to organized crime so as to be able to implement more concrete measures. For the time being, family and school environments are key to engaging young people in dialog concerning the risks they may come up against if they fail to use their social networks responsibly.

At the *Odio y Concordia Lab* we shall continue with our efforts to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon and be able to design effective public policies that prevent our young people from becoming "cannon fodder" for organized crime.