



Latin America's Cartels Embrace Social Media to Sell Drugs and Narco Culture

OE Watch Commentary: During the COVID-19 pandemic, cartels have firmed up their presence on social media platforms. Even though the cartel's use of social media runs the risk of capture, groups throughout Latin America are posting to social media sites like TikTok and Facebook with increasing frequency. *El Tiempo* notes that throughout the hemisphere, these accounts are some of the most followed and the posts are some of the most consumed pieces on social media. Some of the videos, the author notes, were accompanied with the name "Mexico check," creating the appearance that narco culture was part of the essence of being Mexican. An article from *Diario Valor* states that Mexican law enforcement has tried to remove much of this content because it is illegal, but social media algorithms continue to suggest "narco videos" for users' feeds. According to the article, social media sites such as TikTok and Facebook have replaced the darknet as a leading platform for selling illicit drugs. After connecting on TikTok or Facebook, sellers and buyers link up on encrypted messaging applications such as Telegram, Signal, or WhatsApp. Both articles demonstrate how social media has the potential to "normalize" cartel lifestyle and attract younger recruits to join criminal groups throughout Latin America.

End OE Watch Commentary (Berg)



TikTok.

Source: Solen Feyiss via Wikimedia Commons, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/TikTok.jpg>, CC BY-SA 2.0, Public Domain

“With Mexico poised to break murder records again this year, organized crime experts say that Cartel TikTok is just the latest propaganda campaign designed to mask the bloodbath and use the promise of infinite wealth to attract essential young recruits.”

Source: “TikTok, Plataforma para el ‘Narcomarketing’ (TikTok, Platform for Narco-marketing),” *Diario Valor*, 2 December 2020. <https://diariovalor.com/tiktok-plataforma-para-el-narcomarketing-t202012021059.html>

Despite law enforcement's best efforts to delete narco content, it is swarming social media networks as cartels become more adept at using various platforms.

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Source: “Los descarados videos de narcos mexicanos que se viralizan en TikTok (The Shameless videos of Mexican narcos that go viral on TikTok),” *El Tiempo*, 4 December 2020. <https://www.eltiempo.com/cultura/gente/videos-de-narcos-y-carteles-mexicanos-mostrando-lujos-en-tiktok-552630>

Cartels are using savvy social media posts to promote the dangerous idea of cultural essentialism, i.e., that being a narco is tantamount to being Mexican, for recruitment purposes.

Some of the videos have been uploaded under the name ‘Mexico check,’ a kind of challenge in which social media users show certain images that seek to prove their ‘Mexicanness,’ a concept that for the authors of the videos is related to the posters...When inquiring about TikTok's policies to control this type of content, many of which incite violence, spokespersons assured that they were ‘committed to working with law enforcement to combat organized criminal activity.’ For this reason, the spokespersons added, they eliminate the contents and accounts that ‘promote illegal activity.’ However, TikTok's algorithm continues to recommend some of the ‘narcovideos’ in the ‘feed’...of the users because it has detected that some are potentially viral.