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From Online to Offline: Mexican Cartels' Recruitment Tactics Through Social Media

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Executive Summary

In order to maintain their sizable and often decentralized operations, Mexican cartels rely on an extraordinarily high recruitment rate for their forces. To accomplish this, cartels have increasingly been turning to social media as a means to reach a wider audience, particularly youth who use these platforms. These social media posts, disseminated by cartel-affiliated accounts, often explicitly advertise opportunities for “work.” Furthermore, they romanticize life in organized crime to their audience, thus enticing viewers to reach out to join. Despite efforts by social media platforms to remove these posts and the accounts that make them, cartels prove to be adept at circumventing AI content moderation software, either by obscuring the nature of their posts or by creating new accounts when one is banned. Additionally, the “engagement optimization” algorithms that social media platforms use to draw in and retain users serve to exacerbate this issue and enables harmful posts to spread to wider audiences. Even though such recruitment occurs outside of U.S. territory and jurisdiction, there are several policy options available to U.S. policymakers to combat this phenomenon: 1) help social media platforms improve their content moderation capabilities; 2) pressure companies to change content recommendation algorithms; 3) investigate, implement, and facilitate new opportunities for direct investment into economic development in Mexico.

Problem Statement

Cartels in Mexico are estimated to have around 175,000 members and a recruitment rate of around 350 people per week, which implies that they are, cumulatively, the country’s fifth largest employer and top recruiter.ⁱ Such a high recruitment rate is one reason why cartels are able to grow and sustain their sizable operations despite the high mortality and disappearance rate associated with organized crime. Cartels use this massive pool of personnel to conduct drug smuggling operations in both Mexico and the United States, where drug-related violence and addiction put millions of people at risk and poses a significant national security threat.

Since the advent of social media, violent organizations have sought to use this new frontier to communicate with wide audiences. For example, ISIS was infamous for utilizing social media and the internet to spread propaganda, leading to the recruitment of thousands of Westerners.ⁱⁱ However, cartels are notoriously difficult to identify online compared with Islamic fundamentalist groups, whose outward orientation is much more ideological and thus more easily recognizable. Cartels, on the other hand, lack a unified and distinct digital fingerprint, as their enterprises are more business-like than political or religious.ⁱⁱⁱ Even though companies have adopted policies that prohibit the use of their platforms for such purposes, efforts to stop organized crime groups from utilizing social media have been characterized as insufficient.^{iv}

Recruitment Content

The actual content of cartel social media recruitment posts varies significantly. Researchers at Colegio de Mexico identified several different types of recruitment posts, ranging from explicit, open solicitations for work to posts that romanticize life in organized crime and thus elicit requests to join from viewers.

Social media accounts that post recruitment and propaganda content use a variety of ways to skirt content moderation. For example, posts commonly use emojis with specific connotations that aren’t entirely obvious to the outside observer or moderator. Posts associated with the Jalisco

New Generation Cartel (CJNG), which maintains a significantly more visible social media presence than other organizations,^v frequently include an “NG” emoji (meaning Nueva Generación, or New Generation, see Image 3 in Appendix) and a rooster emoji (alluding to the former head of CJNG, El Mencho, who was recently killed in a Mexican military operation).^{vi} Ninja emojis signify *sicarios*, or hired hitmen for cartels.^{vii} Furthermore, many posts include hashtags that provide further information for viewers and allude to cartel affiliation. Many posts linked to CJNG use the hashtag “#4letras” or “#4l” (“4 letters”) to indicate allegiance to that organization.^{viii} Finally, posts frequently incorporate music which contain lyrics that glorify life in organized crime. Mexico has a long tradition of *narcocorridos*, a specific genre of music that idealizes drug trafficking, that predates the creation of social media.^{ix} However, social media posts include not only these more traditional songs, but also newer forms and subgenres of trap, rap, and hip-hop that openly romanticize life in the cartel.

Explicit solicitations for work operate like job advertisements. Despite their vague nature, they offer similar promises: good pay, lodging, food, and an opportunity to improve one’s position in life (see Appendix, images 1-3). Some posts combine these offers with photos of pick-up trucks, planes, mountains, and more, in order to create a certain aesthetic that depicts life in organized crime as exciting, legitimate, and lucrative.^x

Just as common are posts that, although aren’t explicitly concerned with recruitment, romanticize or idealize cartel life in such a way that viewers reach out to join. Such posts depict exotic pets, guns, high-speed boat chases, expensive jewelry, and more.^{xi} This imagery drives viewers, particularly young people, to seek out these “glorious” lifestyles. The strategy works reasonably well; an employee at Meta claimed that, based on anecdotal evidence, around “half of the recruitment instances that are found are people approaching cartel posters saying, how do I join?”^{xii} (See Appendix, image 4 for an example).

Importantly, it can be difficult to differentiate (particularly for this second category of posts) between an organized, concentrated effort by cartels to recruit, and low-level, often young, cartel members who simply post to show off their lifestyle. Some experts observe that low-level *sicarios* oftentimes post on social media because “they want attention, and if they pose with guns, girls give them a like [on their post].”^{xiii} Nevertheless, both types of posts result in similar outcomes: an influx of expendable recruits for cartels to exploit.

In a similar vein, cartels use social media to depict themselves as innocuous, even benevolent, actors. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, cartels filmed themselves handing out packages of food and other basic necessities to those in need.^{xiv} Items were often stamped with emblems of El Mencho or El Chapo Guzman (former leader of the Sinaloa cartel). When it comes to recruitment, cartels attempt to depict themselves as non-threatening towards potential recruits. In one TikTok video, cartel members demonstrate their supposed kindness by allowing a potential recruit to decline their offer to join and letting him go back home to his family without any harm or threat of violence (see translated transcript in Appendix, Image 5).^{xv} This enactment of a seemingly normal interaction is evidently intended to counteract the predominant narrative in Mexican society, which is that cartel recruitment is violent and forced, rather than voluntary. The cartel narrative is, of course, not reflective of reality, as evidenced by leaked internal Facebook documents that show cartels threatening young potential recruits with maiming and death “if they try to leave the training camp.”^{xvi}

Content Moderation Failures

For a variety of reasons, these posts—and the accounts associated with them—are often not flagged and removed in a prompt manner. Some critics characterize social media companies’ lack of moderation as a product of neglect and an ambivalence towards user harm that is outweighed by the goal of “retaining users.”^{xvii} Others point to the fact that it is exceptionally difficult to root out every single cartel social media post. Most content moderation programs use AI, which struggles to distinguish between nefarious and innocuous posts given the cartel’s extensive use of ambiguous emojis, music, and imagery.^{xviii} Even when the Mexican government implements blanket bans on recruitment accounts, they are rarely comprehensive, and many cartel accounts manage to evade them.^{xix} Furthermore, social media companies have been accused of lacking a sufficient amount of human moderators that are knowledgeable of non-English languages, particularly regional dialects and slang, which recruitment posts frequently contain. The human moderators that do exist claim that they experience bad working conditions, low pay, and a lack of mental health support from companies. This impacts their ability to do their work well, especially given that they are tasked with sifting through hundreds of psychologically traumatizing images and videos.^{xx}

Social Media Algorithms

In isolation, cartel social media posts may not have a huge reach. However, since they manage to bypass moderation systems, they are amplified and spread through content recommendation algorithms. Although different social media platforms have slightly different recommendation algorithms, they all follow similar logic. Algorithms are designed to “maximize user engagement” with content, whether that be through increased watch time, more likes on posts, or any other metric.^{xxi} For any given post, the algorithm attempts to predict a user’s engagement with that post by observing how other users with similar profiles engaged with posts of similar content.^{xxii} If a specific post gets recommended to enough users, and even a portion of those users engage with the post in a significant manner (such as commenting, rewatching, etc.), the post can go viral, enabling it to reach an even wider audience. It is essentially unpredictable to determine whether or not any given post will go viral, even though viral posts make up a large portion of user engagement.^{xxiii} Furthermore, once a post does go viral, if it contains harmful content that violates social media platform rules, it is much more likely that the post will be removed or “demoted,” such that less users (or no users at all) will be able to see it.^{xxiv} Nevertheless, even if a given user views one viral post containing harmful content—before it is taken down—the algorithm may offer them more posts of a similar nature. Such a process happened to one teenager from California, whose algorithm-driven TikTok account showed him many posts related to cartel life after watching one viral video of a cartel’s high-speed boat chase from authorities.^{xxv}

Policy Implications

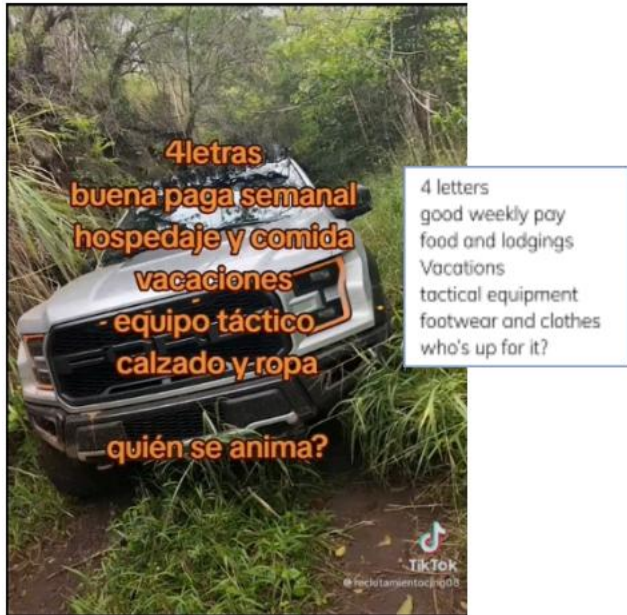
As digital platforms continue to play a prominent role in individuals’ lives around the world, cartel recruitment through social media is not a phenomenon that will go away on its own. This problem becomes even more urgent given that cartel violence and drug smuggling pose a significant national security threat. Even though much of the cartel recruitment occurs within Mexico, there are several measures U.S. policymakers can take to help partners in the Mexican government curtail recruitment.

- **Help social media platforms to enhance moderation programs.** Companies should improve AI and machine learning-based algorithms, utilizing improved computer vision systems and LLMs, to more effectively filter out harmful content. This process should be complemented by an equally robust initiative to increase the number of human moderators—particularly ones well versed in local/regional events, dialects, and slang—and ensure better working conditions for them.
- **Pressure platforms to change content recommendation algorithms.** Platforms should make a significant shift away from “engagement optimization” algorithms.^{xxvi} Rather than creating algorithms that are designed to keep users constantly engaged with social media, platforms should consider shifting content ranking, which algorithms rely upon for recommendations. Some experts suggest a change in algorithm prioritization from purely image-based content to more long-form, journalistic-like text. This would allow users to more frequently engage with factual news content rather than potential cartel propaganda.^{xxvii}
- **Facilitate greater investment into Mexican development.** One of the predominant sources of recruitment for cartels is young people in economically disadvantaged places that turn to cartel life for lack of alternatives. Stopping this problem at the root would significantly decrease this base of cartel labor. Aside from American investment in Mexico, the U.S. should facilitate more multilateral development enterprises that increase foreign investment into Mexico from other countries.^{xxviii}

There is no isolated policy solution that would stop cartel recruitment through social media. Furthermore, diminishing recruitment on its own does not guarantee the collapse of cartels. However, addressing high cartel recruitment rates, and the weaponization of social media for these ends, would constitute a significant step towards alleviating the cartel crisis in Mexico and protecting U.S. national security.

Appendix

Image 1



TikTok Post. Translation provided in image by Colegio de Mexico.

Source: Seminar on Violence and Peace, Odio y Concordia Lab, "Criminal Recruitment on TikTok: A Research Project Documenting over One Hundred Active Accounts in Mexico," El Colegio de México, April 2025, 14, accessed July 8, 2026,

<https://violenciaypaz.colmex.mx/archivos/UHVibGljYWNpb24KIDExNwpkb2N1bWVudG8=/TikTok%20New%20Frontiers%20-%20English.pdf>.

Image 2



TikTok post and corresponding comment section.

Author's translation¹: (left side) "Actively recruiting, continuing to expand, those who are interested send a message [presumably to the social media account], \$15,000 to \$20,000 [presumably weekly pay in pesos]." Comments (right side, from top to bottom): "Good evening all sorry to those I didn't get to respond to there's a lot of messages for that I'm here to answer at your service." "I'm interested." "I want information." "What group or what work is it."

Source: Seminario sobre Violencia y Paz, "Del scroll al 'jale': cómo se recluta en TikTok," El Colegio de México, 64, accessed July 8, 2026, <https://violenciaypaz.colmex.mx/archivos/UHVibGljYWNPb24KIDE0MApkb2N1bWVudG8=/ScrollAlJale.pdf>.

¹ All translations in this paper were done by the author without any use of AI.

Image 3



TikTok post.

Author's translation: "The Four Letters [CJNG] is recruiting, don't lose this opportunity. Jobs for men and women. Private message or comment for info. This is your opportunity to get ahead."

Source: Seminario sobre Violencia y Paz, "Del scroll al 'jale': cómo se recluta en TikTok," El Colegio de México, 56, accessed July 8, 2026,

<https://violenciaypaz.colmex.mx/archivos/UHVibGljYWNPb24KIDE0MApkb2N1bWVudG8=/ScrollAlJale.pdf>.

Image 4



TikTok post's comment section.

Author's translation: (top to bottom) "Who wants to join?" "Can I!?" "Send a text." "Can I"

Source: Seminario sobre Violencia y Paz, "Del scroll al 'jale': cómo se recluta en TikTok," El Colegio de México, 47, accessed July 8, 2026,

<https://violenciaypaz.colmex.mx/archivos/UHVibGljYWVudG8=/ScrollAlJale.pdf>.

Image 5

—¿Qué [*sic*] es lo que tienes miedo? — pregunta uno de los dos interlocutores detrás de cámara. El joven habla sobre su familia, a lo que le responden:

—Nosotros entramos aquí para nuestras familias... porque ocupamos dinero—. La oferta es clara, un trabajo con pagos semanales y vacaciones que le permiten contactar a su familia de nuevo. El joven duda, pero finalmente responde que prefiere volver a su casa.

—Es mejor que mi mamá no se preocupe—. Los presuntos reclutadores parecen conformes y dejan de grabar.

No hay música o emojis, sólo un hashtag acompañado de una frase: “#reclutamiento/se regresó para casa por qué no quiso no es como piensan” [*sic*].

Transcript of TikTok video.

Author’s translation:

—“What are you afraid of?” asks one of the interlocutors behind the camera. The young man talks about his family, to which they respond:

—“We joined here for our families... because we need money.” The offer is clear, a job with weekly payment and vacations that lets him contact his family again. The young man hesitates, but finally responds that he would rather go back home.

—“It’s better that my mom doesn’t worry.” The presumed recruiters seemed satisfied and stop recording.

There’s no music or emojis, just a hashtag with the phrase: “#recruiting/he returned home because he didn’t want to, it’s not like how you all think it is.”

Source: Seminario sobre Violencia y Paz, "Del scroll al 'jale': cómo se recluta en TikTok," El Colegio de México, 23, accessed July 8, 2026, <https://violenciaypaz.colmex.mx/archivos/UHVibGljYWNPb24KIDE0MApkb2N1bWVudG8=/ScrollAlJale.pdf>.

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