

Graphika

Hidden in Plain Sight

¿Hablas Emoji? Decoding Signals
of Support for a Mexican Cartel on
TikTok

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Overview

Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) is one of Mexico's most prominent and operationally significant criminal organizations, drawing sustained public and policy attention. In the context of [evolving](#) security dynamics and upcoming international events, such as the 2026 FIFA World Cup, it's increasingly relevant to understand the cartel's online presence.

We identified a cluster of TikTok accounts displaying textual and audiovisual characteristics commonly [associated](#) with CJNG, such as coded usernames, symbols, references to cartel factions, and recurring themes. Open sources did not provide evidence that CJNG members operate these accounts, but the consistent, obfuscated references to the cartel indicate there may be a link between these accounts and CJNG. The recurring features, found in profiles and posts, signify at least support for CJNG – if not direct association – and help boost the cartel's profile, disseminate its messaging, and attract other supporters.

This report summarizes a sample of 100 TikTok accounts reviewed between April 5 and April 15, 2026. We collected this sample from seed accounts identified through organizational markers – such as initials, numeric references, and cartel faction-linked names. We then expanded the set based on recurring signals, follower relationships, and thematic consistency.

The results of our analysis reflect identity indicators and content patterns, together forming a structured but decentralized content environment. We have highlighted observable patterns within the sample, although not establishing direct account affiliation with the CJNG or providing a comprehensive view of CJNG-related activity across platforms.

Key Findings

- **Certain terms, visuals, and audio content allude to CJNG affiliation.**

The accounts are likely conveying support for CJNG by consistently using certain abbreviations, visual symbols, and audio signifiers without explicitly naming the cartel.

- **Visual cues are the strongest indicator of identity.**

A military or combat-style aesthetic, death symbols, and hand gesture imagery are contributing to a strong and recognizable visual identity across the TikTok accounts.

- **Audio content and mutual followers enable content circulation.**

[Narcocorrido](#) songs and follower visibility are likely helping CJNG-supporting TikTok users find each other and share content without indicating coordination.

- **Obfuscation lets accounts avoid platform moderation.**

Characteristics of known CJNG content appear subtly, in overlaid text, visuals, and format features that enable recognition while maintaining ambiguity about the accounts' owner.

- **Public-facing content includes recruitment efforts.**

Some accounts post employment-framed calls to action, along with references to compensation and specific locations, indicating pathways to participate in CJNG.

Methodology

- This analysis is based on a qualitative review of TikTok accounts whose posted content and profiles feature characteristics commonly associated with CJNG (e.g., language, visuals, audio, emojis, coded identifiers), focusing on activity between April 5 and April 15, 2026. Open-source references, including media [reporting](#) and prior research, have established the observed characteristics as related to CJNG symbolism and narratives.
- We identified accounts using a “snowball” sampling approach, selecting initial seed accounts based on the feature mentioned above, then identifying additional accounts through follower and following relationships, and manually reviewing those accounts to determine eligibility for the sample set.
- The choice to examine 100 accounts reflects our efforts to focus analysis while maintaining sufficient variation to identify recurring patterns.
- In the sample set, we analyzed how identity indicators are expressed and combined across accounts, to identify recurring themes and shared content patterns.

Limitations

- The analysis relies exclusively on publicly available data and does not include private accounts, deleted content, direct messages, or offline activity. As a result, less visible forms of coordination or communication were not collected or analyzed.

- Findings are limited to TikTok; content strategies and audience dynamics on other platforms may differ.
 - Account identification is based on observable signals and does not constitute evidence of formal CJNG membership, coordination, or control. Similarly, followerships indicate potential proximity but not necessarily meaningful interaction.
 - The focus on a single organization limits the applicability of these findings to other groups.
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Textual Indicators

Spanish-language textual indicators are among the most consistent and scalable in the dataset. Their use across the TikTok accounts is likely meant to convey identity, subgroup alignment, loyalty, and status while maintaining ambiguity and reducing exposure to platform moderators. We observed the following patterns.

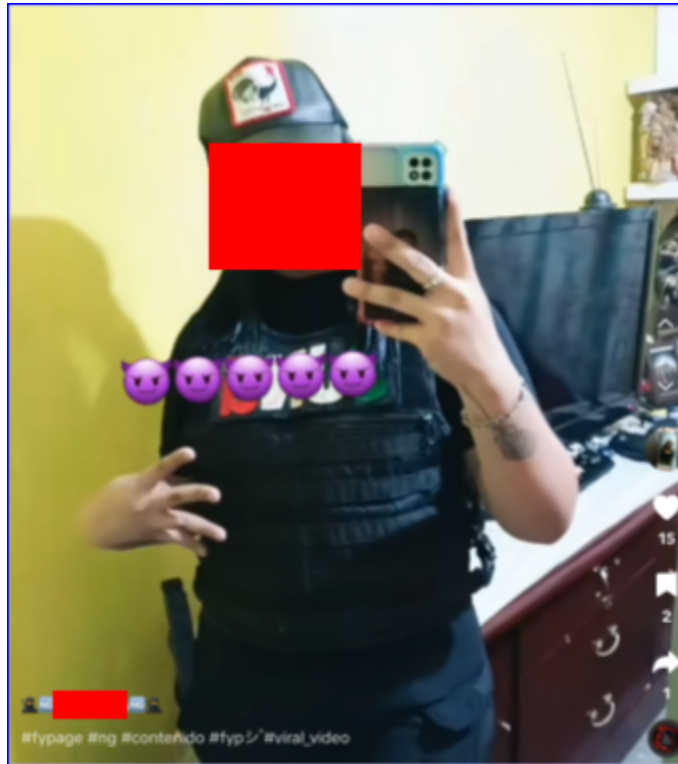
- **Avoidance of explicit names:** Abbreviations, numeric references, and partial identifiers are more common than full organizational names.
- **Frequent use of “NG” and “4”:** These core identifiers recur across usernames, bios, captions, and overlaid text.
- **Subgroup- and role-coded language:** Terms such as FEM, (Fuerzas Especiales Mencho [Mencho’s Special Forces]), Grupo Élite (Elite Group), Fuerzas Especiales (Special Forces), comando (commando), and operativo (operation/operative), as well as abbreviations (e.g., R03) appear in consistent formats across usernames, bios, and captions. They likely refer to specific factions, groups, functions or hierarchies within CJNG.
- **Standardized loyalty rhetoric:** Terms or phrases including “firmes” (steady/loyal), “a la orden” (at your service), and “hasta la muerte” (until death) are common and likely intended to reinforce a sense of belonging and permanence across profiles and content.



Still from a TikTok video showing a group of masked individuals in coordinated tactical attire, including plate carriers and camouflage, using a "4" hand signal to communicate shared identity and affiliation. (Redactions by Graphika)



Still from a TikTok video showing a multi-vehicle convoy traveling through a rural area, posted by an account whose username and caption reference "4 NG," alluding to mobility, territory, and identity. (Redaction by Graphika)



Still from a TikTok selfie video of a female-presenting individual in a domestic setting wearing a tactical vest and clothing with the letters CJNG partially obscured by emojis. (Redactions by Graphika)

Audio Indicators

Audio content is a connective layer across the dataset, and potentially helps boost mutual discovery and circulation of content among accounts. We observed the following patterns.

- **Use of narcocorridos:** Similar songs and audio styles, particularly narcocorridos, are used across posted content, with a frequent focus on certain artists, such as El Pitbull LDK.
- **Role in discovery:** TikTok groups posts using the same audio track together, making it easy for users to discover related content and become linked to other accounts through shared content. Using the same audio tracks could also cause the platform algorithm to recommend other content featuring that audio.
- **Reinforcement of themes:** Lyrics describe or praise aspects of cartel life, with recurring themes of loyalty, violence, pride, hardship, retaliation, and status, sometimes explicitly or using coded references, such as "[4 letras](#)" or "Mencho" (referring to the late leader of CJNG).
- **Indirect signaling:** Music is likely affording these accounts an easy way to signal group belonging without explicit textual or visual cues, while avoiding platform moderation.



Multiple TikTok posts across different accounts show the use of audio tracks associated with the musical artist El Pitbull LDK, alongside recurring identifiers, such as “NG,” “CJNG,” and “4 letras.” (Redactions by Graphika)

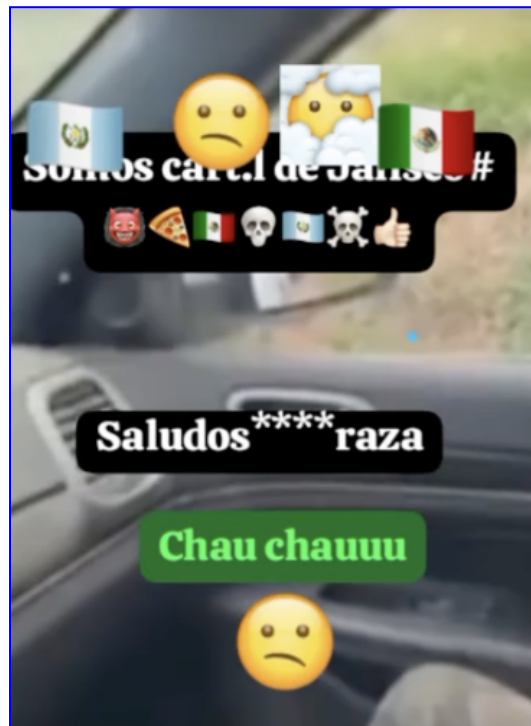
Obfuscation and Adaptation

The likelihood of detection by platform moderators becomes higher when explicit keywords are used, or direct references are made to known organizations or individuals; conscious of the risks of moderation or attribution, these accounts tend to “soften” and distribute CJNG-related references across multiple elements. We observed the following patterns.

- **Ambiguity as a core technique:** Signaling relies on partial cues, such as “4 letras” to represent CJNG, that remain interpretable to intended audiences while limiting clarity.
- **Strategically sized and placed markers:** Small logos and embedded symbols function as subtle identifiers without drawing attention.
- **Media-embedded messaging:** Text is often placed within images and videos, rather than static fields like bios or captions, likely reducing exposure to automated detection tools.
- **Blending with platform norms:** Coded elements are integrated into memes, lifestyle imagery, and mainstream TikTok video formats (blending in with standard content on the platform), likely making them harder for moderators to identify.



Still from a TikTok video showing a masked individual in tactical gear, with a weapon partially obscured by emojis and a barely visible "CJNG" label embedded at the top of the frame.



Still from a TikTok video with partly obscured, explicit text; meaning is retained through emojis and contextual cues.

Recruitment Indicators

References to recruitment are also presented with an element of ambiguity, offering potential avenues for other users to become involved in CJNG. We observed the following patterns.

- **Employment-style framing:** Recruitment content takes the guise of job offers, often displaying structured formats and details of roles, requirements, compensation, and benefits. Posts include phrases such as “se busca personal” (staff wanted), “jale” (job/work), and “trabajo” (work/job).
- **Structured engagement pathway:** Phrases such as “manden mensaje” (send a message), “info al privado” (information via private message), and “inbox” signal a push to move interested parties from public posts to private communication channels.
- **Geographic candidate targeting:** Locations such as Jalisco and Guadalajara are frequently mentioned, indicating location-specific outreach.



Still from a TikTok video promoting recruitment using “4L” and rooster iconography (associated with the alias of CJNG leader “Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes,” aka Lord of the Roosters) alongside salary incentives, and job-like messaging.



Still from a TikTok video encouraging recruitment by listing targeted states across multiple regions, combined with convoy imagery and group insignia. (Redaction by Graphika)

Annex: Observed Indicators and Interpretation

Category	Indicator Type	Observed Indicators	Description/Analytical Value
Textual	Core identifiers	NG, CJNG, 4, 4 letras, puras 4, 4LT	Common abbreviations likely used to convey identity without explicit naming; among the most consistent markers observed across the dataset
Textual	Sub-group/role terms	fuerzas especiales, grupo élite, comando, delta, FEM, TLK, Tio Lako	Likely reflect internal hierarchy, specialization, or subgroup identity

Textual	Loyalty rhetoric	firmes, a la orden, hasta la muerte, al mando, con todo	Standardized language likely to reinforce themes of obedience, permanence, and group belonging
Textual	Numeric/ alphanumeric code	03, 07, 20, R1, R35, R39	Liley reflects internal group structure or ranking
Visual	Emoji clusters		Express identity, aggression, or alignment without words
Visual	Combat-ready identity	imagery featuring camouflage, plate carriers, helmets, goggles, balaclavas	Prominent aesthetic that expresses a combat-ready identity
Visual	Face concealment	imagery featuring masks, balaclavas, covered faces	Likely prevents recognition while signaling intimidation or alignment
Visual	Death symbolism	imagery featuring skulls, skeletons, skeleton hands, grim reaper graphics	Widely observed symbolism associated with violence, mortality, and fearlessness
Visual	Religious symbolism	imagery featuring Santa Muerte altars, candles, statues	Secondary symbolic layer likely linked to protection, devotion, and myth-building
Visual	Hand signals	imagery featuring four-finger gesture	Casual but recurring signifiers embedded in lifestyle images, likely used to convey CJNG identity

Visual	Environment	imagery featuring trucks, convoys, rural roads, forests, nighttime driving	Reinforces themes of mobility, territorial presence, and operational identity
Visual	Suggestions of violence	imagery featuring dead bodies, violence aftermath	Less frequent indicators that are often symbolic
Audio	Music type	narcocorridos	Core cultural indicator that likely links accounts through shared narrative themes
Audio	Lyrical themes	loyalty, violence, power, retaliation, status	Reinforces identity-related themes across content
Audio	Repetition pattern	same songs reused across accounts (notably El Pitbull LDK)	Likely helps TikTok clustering, discovery, and algorithmic amplification
Behavioral	Engagement pattern	high number of likes/views, low post count	Likely reflects amplification patterns, account cycling, or visibility dynamics
Content Type	Lifestyle normalization	imagery featuring vehicles, outfits, daily routines, "NG"/emoji overlays	Integrates CJNG identity into everyday content, likely lowering perceived risk
Content Type	Emotional narratives	betrayal, loyalty, pain, resilience ("firmes")	Likely reinforces psychological and social dimensions of belonging
Content Type	Memorial content	candles, graves, "descansa en paz," "hasta el cielo"	Contributes to narratives centered on death and sacrifice
Recruitment	Job-seeker	"se busca personal,"	Signals opportunities for

	terminology	“ocupo gente,” “jale,” “trabajo,” “manden mensaje,” “info al privado”	CJNG participation, often framed as employment
Recruitment	References to compensation	“\$10,000 semanales,” “pago quincenal”	Frames participation in employment-like terms
Recruitment	Targeting specifics	city/state references	Reflects geographically specific opportunities, suggesting localized outreach
Recruitment	Call to action	“manden mensaje,” “interesados,” “inbox”	Moves users toward private communication channels
Obfuscation	Visual embedding	small logos, text overlaid on videos	Reduces detectability for automated moderation systems

Estimative Language Legend

Assessments of Likelihood

Graphika uses the following vocabulary to indicate the likelihood of a hypothesis proving correct. If we are unable to assess likelihood due to limited or non-existent information, we may use terms such as “suggest.”

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Real Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain(ly)
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

