

Narratives and criminal diversification of transnational multi-crime: the case of the Tren de Aragua on Tiktok

Narrativas y diversificación delictiva del multicrimen transnacional: el caso del Tren de Aragua en Tiktok

Narrativas e diversificação criminal do multicrimen transnacional: o caso do Tren de Aragua no TikTok

• Date received: 2024/09/30
• Evaluation date: 2024/11/23
• Date of approval: 2025/02/11

To reference this article / Para citar este artículo / Para citar este artigo: Erazo-Patiño, L., Laverde-Rodríguez, C. A., & Devia-Acevedo, E. D. (2025). Narratives and criminal diversification of transnational multi-crime: the case of the Tren de Aragua on Tiktok. *Revista Criminalidad*, 67(1), 13-24. <https://doi.org/10.47741/17943108.681>

Lorena Erazo-Patiño

PhD Candidate in Political Science
Universidad de La Salle
Bogotá D. C., Colombia
lerazo@unisalle.edu.co
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2526-9044>

Carlos Alfonso Laverde-Rodríguez

PhD in Social Science with
a specialisation in Sociology
Universidad Militar Nueva Granada
Bogotá D. C., Colombia
carlos.laverde@unimilitar.edu.co
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0772-0337>

Emerson David Devia-Acevedo

PhD in Education and Society
Latin American Faculty of Social
Sciences (Flacso) Ecuador
Haueneberstein, Alemania
emerson.devia@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6015-9078>

Abstract

The Tren de Aragua, a transnational criminal organisation originating in Venezuela, exemplifies the concept of multi-crime by diversifying its illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking and illegal mining, adapting to diverse contexts in Latin America. This study analyses the narratives on transnational multi-crime on TikTok, taking the Tren de Aragua as a case study. Through web scraping techniques, discursive patterns are identified that reflect its operational structure and its perceived impact on the digital imaginary. The analysis is based on the framework of the Department against Transnational Organised Crime (DDOT) of the Organisation of American States (OAS), addressing dimensions such as money laundering, corruption and cybercrime. The hypothesis suggests that these narratives demonstrate the group's ability to exploit institutional and socio-economic vulnerabilities, amplifying its symbolic influence on digital platforms. The results allow us to identify patterns in their operations, proposing an interpretative model for understanding multi-crime in the region. In addition, analytical tools are sought to design effective public policies against organised crime. This approach highlights how digital narratives shape the perception of multi-crime in the contemporary public space.

Keywords:

Organised crime; social networks; digital narratives; public perception; transnational crime; multi-crime

Resumen

El Tren de Aragua, una organización criminal transnacional originaria de Venezuela, ejemplifica el concepto de *multicrimen* al diversificar sus actividades ilícitas, como tráfico de drogas, trata de personas y minería ilegal, adaptándose a diversos contextos en América Latina. Este estudio analiza las narrativas sobre el multicrimen transnacional en TikTok, tomando como caso el Tren de Aragua. A través de técnicas de *web scraping*, se identifican patrones discursivos que reflejan su estructura operativa y su impacto percibido en el imaginario digital. El análisis se fundamenta en el marco del Departamento contra la Delincuencia Organizada Transnacional (DDOT) de la Organización de los Estados Americanos (OEA), abordando dimensiones como lavado de activos, corrupción y ciberdelito. La hipótesis sugiere



Esta obra está bajo licencia CC BY-NC-ND 4.0®
por [Policía Nacional de Colombia](https://www.policia.gov.co/)

que estas narrativas evidencian la capacidad del grupo para explotar vulnerabilidades institucionales y socioeconómicas, amplificando su influencia simbólica en plataformas digitales. Los resultados permiten identificar patrones en su operatividad, proponiendo un modelo interpretativo para comprender el multicrimen en la región. Además, se buscan herramientas analíticas para diseñar políticas públicas efectivas contra el crimen organizado. Este enfoque destaca cómo las narrativas digitales configuran la percepción del multicrimen en el espacio público contemporáneo.

Palabras clave:

Crimen organizado; redes sociales; narrativas digitales; percepción pública; delincuencia transnacional; multicrimen

Resumo

O Tren de Aragua, uma organização criminoso transnacional originária da Venezuela, exemplifica o conceito de multictime ao diversificar suas atividades ilícitas, como tráfico de drogas, tráfico de pessoas e mineração ilegal, adaptando-se a diversos contextos na América Latina. Neste estudo, são analisadas as narrativas sobre multictime transnacional no TikTok, tomando o Tren de Aragua como um estudo de caso. Por meio de técnicas de *web scraping*, são identificados padrões discursivos que refletem sua estrutura operacional e seu impacto percebido no imaginário digital. A análise é baseada na estrutura do Departamento contra o Crime Organizado Transnacional da Organização dos Estados Americanos, abordando dimensões como lavagem de dinheiro, corrupção e crime cibernético. Parte-se da hipótese de que essas narrativas evidenciam a capacidade do grupo de explorar vulnerabilidades institucionais e socioeconômicas, ampliando sua influência simbólica em plataformas digitais. Os resultados permitem identificar padrões em suas operações e, a partir disso, propor um modelo interpretativo para entender o multictime na região. Além disso, busca-se desenvolver ferramentas analíticas para a elaboração de políticas públicas eficazes contra o crime organizado. Essa abordagem destaca como as narrativas digitais moldam a percepção do multictime no espaço público contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave:

Crime organizado; redes sociais; narrativas digitais; percepção pública; crime transnacional; multictime

Introduction

The Tren de Aragua is a criminal organisation originating in Venezuela, recognised for its expansive operations and significant influence in several Latin American countries (Erazo-Patiño et al., 2024). Initially rooted in local gang activities, this network has evolved into a central player in transnational multi-crime, engaging in a wide range of illicit activities such as drug trafficking, extortion, illegal mining and human trafficking. Their reputation

is reinforced by extremely violent tactics, such as filming assassinations to intimidate their opponents, which has allowed them to rapidly expand their influence (CNN en español, 10 de noviembre 2023).

The activities of the Tren de Aragua reflect the defining characteristics of multi-crime organisations, as conceptualised in Colombia's Security and Defence Policy: structured groups that commit a multiplicity of crimes and offences that threaten the lives and rights

of citizens in both rural and urban areas (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional [MinDefensa], 2023). This concept is also similar to the definition of transnational organised crime established by the United Nations, which describes these groups as structures made up of three or more persons acting in concert to commit serious crimes for economic or material gain (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2000). In this sense, the Tren de Aragua not only fits the category of multi-crime, but also meets the criteria of transnational organised crime, highlighting its structured nature, its criminal diversification and its expansion beyond national borders.

The geographical reach of the Tren de Aragua has expanded considerably beyond Venezuela, with confirmed operations in at least eight Latin American countries, including Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile and Bolivia (Sampó & Troncoso, 2024). This rapid expansion has generated concern among governments and security forces in the region, which have implemented various strategies to combat this security threat. Some actions have been carried out autonomously by states, such as the declaration of the group as a terrorist organisation by Ecuador and the United States, which implies the activation of prosecution mechanisms and specific sanctions (Ventas, 2024). In other cases, monitoring and joint operations have been carried out, such as those carried out by Colombia, where the Ombudsman's Office issued Early Alert 4 of 2024, indicating that the Tren de Aragua disputes territories in nine localities of Bogotá (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2024). These efforts have produced significant advances, including the capture of key ringleaders, including Leison Alexander Lorca Salazar, alias Jeison Comino, who plays a leadership role in the organisation (BBC News Mundo, 2024).

However, despite these actions, there is still a critical gap in the understanding of how narratives about transnational multi-crime are constructed and disseminated on contemporary digital platforms, particularly on TikTok. This study aims to analyse how such narratives regarding transnational multi-crime have been configured, taking as a case study the Tren de Aragua and its projection on this platform. The group's rapid and increasing expansion in Latin America has left open fundamental questions about how contemporary criminal organisations adapt their structures and illicit activities to heterogeneous national contexts. Although recent studies have examined their emergence in Venezuela or their links to drug trafficking in Colombia (Badillo & Mijares, 2021; Erazo-Patiño et al., 2024; Rísquez, 2022; Sampó & Troncoso, 2024), there is still a theoretical and empirical limitation when attempting to explain the differentiated dynamics of their multi-

criminal operation in countries with different levels of state capacity, regulatory frameworks and presence of illegal markets.

The Tren de Aragua's adaptability to the diverse contexts in which it operates has facilitated its expansion, allowing it to infiltrate multiple criminal markets and establish strategic alliances with local gangs, such as Brazil's First Capital Command (Rísquez, 2022). This collaboration has allowed it to consolidate its territorial control and optimise the acquisition of resources in new territories, demonstrating a calculated approach to maintaining its dominance over regional criminal activities. In this context, the analysis of digital narratives about the group not only contributes to understanding its real impact, but also its symbolic representation and its influence on the collective imaginary through platforms such as TikTok.

The study will build on the analytical framework of the OAS DDOT, addressing eight key dimensions: money laundering, corruption, illicit financing, human trafficking, arms trafficking, illegal mining, cybercrime and illicit cryptocurrency use. However, this analysis will focus on how these dimensions are represented and discussed in digital narratives about the Tren de Aragua on TikTok. The central hypothesis posits that the narratives concerning the group reflect its ability to strategically adapt its operations according to the contextual particularities of each country, highlighting its systematic exploitation of institutional, economic and regulatory vulnerabilities. From an analytical perspective, this dynamic suggests that the Tren de Aragua not only adjusts its criminal activities to take advantage of legal loopholes, weaknesses in control systems and adverse socio-economic conditions, but also projects a transnational image that amplifies its symbolic influence on digital platforms. This deliberate process of operational adjustment and media representation contributes to consolidating its position as a key actor in transnational multi-crime in Latin America.

Multi-crime as an analytical category for understanding the Tren de Aragua

The concept of multi-crime lacks a consolidated theoretical framework in security studies and international relations, despite its recurrent literal or tangential use in the institutional discourse against organised crime (Departamento Nacional de Planeación [DNP], 2023; MinDefensa, 2023; OAS, 2024). However, key analytical contributions emerge, such as the proposal by Quiroz Céspedes (2024), who defines it as a complex criminal phenomenon, characterised by the diversification and

strategic interconnection of multiple illicit activities in the same criminal structure. This operational model, far from being a mere aggregation of crimes, constitutes an efficiency mechanism for transnational organisations by reducing their dependence on single illegal markets, optimising profitability through economies of scale such as drug trafficking, human trafficking or illegal mining, and expanding their geopolitical influence by co-opting logistical corridors and corruption networks on a global scale (Sullivan, 2023).

Unlike specialised crime, multi-crime operates under an adaptive logic that prioritises organisational flexibility and the integration of transnational nodes, exploiting institutional asymmetries and contextual windows of opportunity (Andreas, 2011; Arias, 2016; Sullivan, 2023). The adaptation of these criminal organisations prevents the state from attacking simultaneous fronts, such as corruption, violence and drug trafficking (Lessing, 2017). Multi-crime is identified as revolving around four structural characteristics:

- **Hierarchical flexibility:** it combines a centralised chain of command with decentralised operational cells, allowing for rapid adjustments to exogenous pressures without compromising its strategic cohesion, achieving what Kenney (2007) calls competitive adaptation, strategies that allow criminal organisations to adapt to the actions of security agencies.
- **Intermarket criminal synergies:** generates economies of scope by interconnecting illegal markets. Transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) have developed business models based on the diversification of illicit activities. The existence of these inter-market criminal synergies allows them to reduce costs, maximise profits and increase the operational resilience of these criminal networks (UNODC, 2024).
- **Systemic resilience:** mitigates risks by diversifying revenue streams. For example, in the face of state strategies focused on drug trafficking, it redirects resources towards less exposed crimes, such as migrant smuggling or digital extortion, ensuring operational continuity (Lessing, 2017).
- **Social and territorial control:** this type of group exercises social domination in the communities where they operate, through practices such as extortion, control of illegal economies and regulation of the daily life of the population, undermining governance in the territories where they are present (MinDefensa, 2023).

These attributes not only highlight the sophistication of multi-crime as a transnational phenomenon, but also underline the inadequacy of fragmented state responses. As Quiroz Céspedes (2024) warns, combatting it requires comprehensive strategies that go beyond mere interdiction, incorporating financial intelligence, multilevel cooperation and situational prevention approaches. In this sense, multi-crime not only redefines the challenges of global security, but also forces us to rethink traditional governance paradigms in a context of growing criminal interdependence.

Multi-crime and digital narratives as symbolic projection

Digital platforms such as TikTok have transformed the way narratives about violence, power and organised crime are constructed, shared and consumed. Media are not mere transmitters of information, but spaces where meanings are negotiated and reinterpreted by different social actors (Hall, 1980). In this sense, TikTok acts as a hybrid space where narratives about the Tren de Aragua are produced both by the group itself (through promotional or intimidating videos) and by external users (through memes, denunciations or speculations).

This process of narrative construction allows the Tren de Aragua to project a transnational image that amplifies its symbolic influence through narratives of power and intimidation, apology and defence of criminal activity or social fear. In this regard, Goldhaber (1997) developed a proposal on the theory of attention economy that allows us to understand how digital platforms prioritise content that generates engagement or a sense of commitment that can encourage the viralisation of extreme or sensationalist narratives about the Tren de Aragua. This phenomenon turns TikTok into a space where reality and fiction intertwine, enhancing the group's symbolic influence.

In this sense, the power exercised by criminal organisations such as the Tren de Aragua is not only exercised through material resources (such as weapons or money), but also through symbolic capital, that is, the capacity to influence the perceptions, beliefs and emotions of others (Bourdieu, 2000). This symbolic capital can be built into narratives through internal legitimisation that reinforces the group's identity and cohesion, through external intimidation that facilitates the dissemination of violent and threatening acts, or, finally, through viralisation in networks that amplifies its image as a global network, which reinforces its reputation as a multi-criminal actor that is an omnipresent actor or threat, amplifying its symbolic influence.

Methodology

Using an exploratory approach, the research employed web scraping techniques to extract TikTok data related to hashtags associated with the Tren de Aragua and its criminal activities. A total of 1520 records were collected between 2020 and January 2025, which were subjected to cleaning and critiquing processes, reducing the sample to 1257 unique records. The data were classified according to thematic categories defined by the OAS DDOT, covering dimensions such as money laundering, corruption, human trafficking, arms trafficking, illegal mining, cybercrime and illicit use of cryptocurrencies.

This approach combined quantitative (frequency and trend analysis) and qualitative (interpretation of narratives) methods, making it possible to track how representations of transnational multi-crime are configured in digital space.

This methodology made it possible to trace the differential ways in which Tren de Aragua multi-crime is expressed in the countries where it operates, providing a detailed view of the impact on the affected population. By identifying specific patterns in the use of social networks, it was possible to better understand the evolution and adaptation of this criminal organisation to different socio-political and economic environments.

It is pertinent to note that a factor to consider in this study is its restricted sample size which is limited to TikTok only, and although (non-commercial) data science methodologies were employed, it is possible that the totality of the data may not be reflected.

Results

The classification of the data was done according to the main thematic equation or category, which, as noted, is associated with the DDOT classification of crimes. In this way, the crimes with the greatest presence in the digital discourses were identified (Table 1), where the main associations of the Tren de Aragua with crimes on TikTok are associated to a greater extent with money laundering and illicit financing with 378 records, while the category with the fewest records is that of human trafficking and illegal migration.

Table 1. | Number of records found by main subject category

Equation, main thematic category	Subtype X association	No. of videos
#TrendeAragua #AssetsLaundering #Financing	#moneylaundering, #illegalFinancing, #suspiciousmoney	378
#TrendeAragua #Corruption #financial crimes	#corruption, #bribery, #diversionOfFunds	243
#TrendeAragua #Traficodepersonas #migracionilegal	#TraffickingInPersons, #migrantsInDanger, #coyotes	138
#TrendeAragua #Traficodearmas #crimenviolentcrime	#weaponsTrafficking, #illegalweapons, #urbanviolence	166
#TrendeAragua #illegal #mining #environmental #crimes	#illegalmining, #deforestation, #environmentalCrime	282
#TrendeAragua #CyberCrime #cryptocurrencies	#cibercrime, #hackers, #illegalCryptocurrencies	313
Total registrations		1520

After the extraction process, the database was cleaned and critiqued, with the following results (Table 2).

Table 2. | Number of records found by main thematic category

Total uncritiqued registrations	1520
Total records with critique (eliminating duplicates)	1257

In terms of discursive trends, the analysis of the hashtags used in the extracted records identified the hashtag #trendeAragua with 347 mentions, followed by #venezuela with 281 and #noticias with 171. Other associated hashtags were also found, such as #viral #Chile and #Foryou (figures 1 and 2). In order to avoid bias, #TrendeAragua was excluded so as not to affect the interpretation of the data, as can be seen in the word cloud in Figure 3, which shows that these terms suggest a combination of geographical location and regional context, specifically with the hashtags #Venezuela #Chile and #Caracas; interest by TikTok users in news, and a relationship with crimes and illicit activities with the presence of terms such as #mineria, which can be associated with discussions about illegal mining or environmental crimes.

Figure 1. | Top 20 hashtags

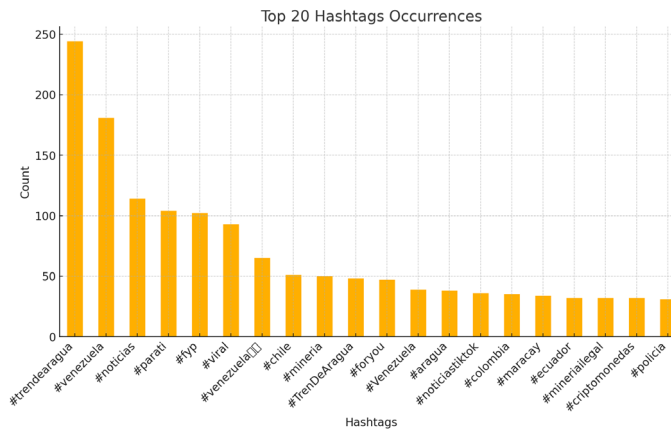


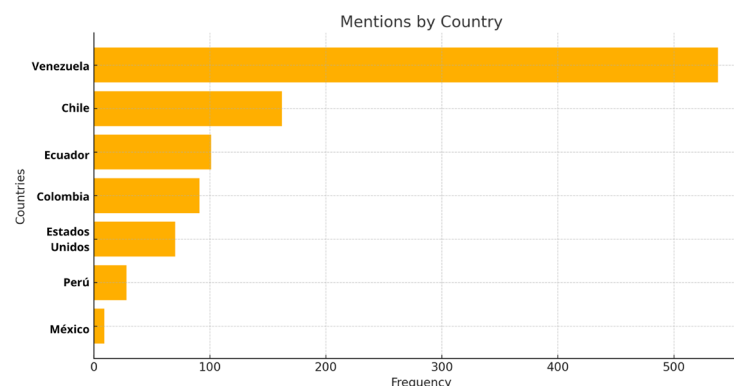
Figure 2. | Word cloud of hashtags



The geographical analysis of mentions in Latin America (Figure 3) shows that Venezuela leads the number of records related to the Tren de Aragua with 538 mentions, followed by Chile with 162 and Ecuador with 101. Something particularly interesting in this geographical distribution is the appearance of the United

States in these results with 70 mentions, which may imply an increase in interest in the criminal organisation. It is worth noting that no records were identified in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Brazil, Costa Rica and Panama.

Figure 3. | Hashtags mentions by country (Latin America)



Association with criminal categories according to the OAS

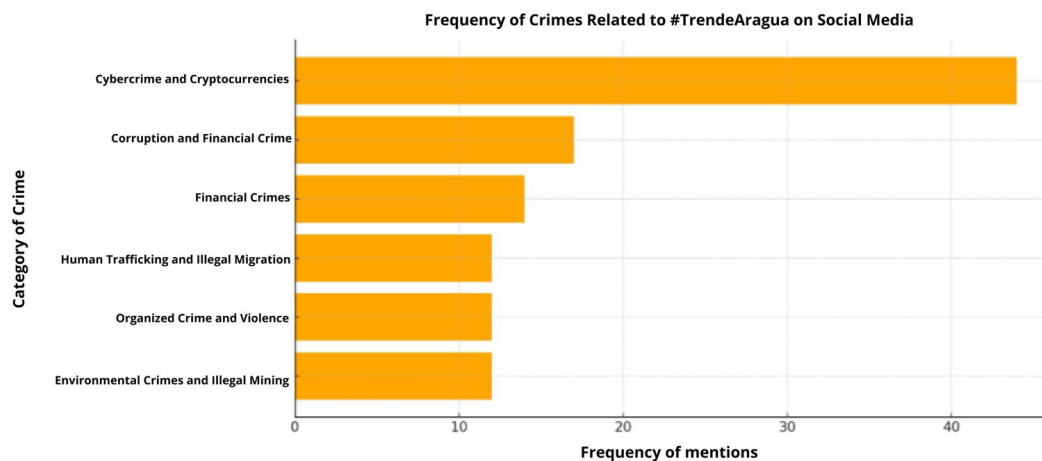
To determine the relationship of the Tren de Aragua with transnational crimes that can be associated with

multi-crime, a thematic mapping was carried out in line with the stipulations of the OAS DDOT (Table 3). The above indicates that cybercrime and cryptocurrencies are the most mentioned category in relation to the Tren de Aragua, followed by financial crimes and corruption.

Table 3. | Frequency of *hashtags* related to crimes according to the OAS

No	Main thematic category	Definition	Total Frequency*
5	Cybercrime and cryptocurrencies	Cybercrime and cryptocurrencies. Criminal activities including online fraud, digital money laundering and illicit financing through virtual assets.	44
1	Corruption and financial crime	Corruption and financial crime. Includes embezzlement, bribery and illicit practices in the financial sector that affect economic stability.	17
0	Financial crime	Money laundering and illicit financing. Refers to the process of concealing the source of funds obtained from criminal activities, including terrorist financing.	14
2	Trafficking in human beings and illegal migration	Human smuggling and illegal migration. Criminal activity that exploits people through smuggling or trafficking for the purpose of exploitation.	12
3	Organised crime and violence	Arms trafficking and violent crime. This refers to the illegal marketing and distribution of firearms and their relationship to organised criminal violence.	12
4	Environmental crime and illegal mining	Illegal mining and environmental crime. Involves the unauthorised extraction of minerals, affecting the environment and financing illegal activities.	12

Figure 4. | Frequency of crimes related to #TrenDeAragua in social networks



* Includes only the sum of the frequency of their individual elements, it is assumed that each hashtag has independent relevance.

Figure 4 composed of horizontal bars shows the frequency of mentions of each category of crime associated with #TrendeAragua on Tiktok. It can be seen that 'Cybercrime and cryptocurrencies' is the category with the most mentions, followed by 'Corruption and financial crime' and 'Financial crime'.

The recurring themes in the leads are:

- Tren de Aragua: multiple mentions of criminal activities, captures and international prosecution.
- Organised crime: cases of extortion, drug trafficking and the capture of criminal leaders.

- Regional context: Venezuela, Colombia, Perú, Ecuador and Chile are the countries most frequently mentioned in relation to the Tren de Aragua (Table 4).

Table 4. | Exemplification of texts and relation to the topic

Topic	Example in the text
Organised crime	'El Tren de Aragua in Mexico: Femicides, trafficking and exploitation'.
Government corruption	'Environment Minister under investigation for illicit enrichment'.
Insecurity and migration	'Former Peruvian police general blames Venezuelan immigration for the current situation in Ecuador'.
Money laundering and terrorist financing	'Prosecutor's office arrests high-ranking officials for money laundering'.

This indicates that the multimodality of crime by the Tren de Aragua is transnational, which consequently reveals that the group's illicit activities range from cybercrime to human and drug trafficking. Thus, the thematic mapping carried out under the guidelines of the OAS's DDOT revealed that the Tren de Aragua has extended its networks into various areas of transnational crime.

For example, when analysing the relationship with 'Cybercrime and cryptocurrencies' (first place in mentions) with the DDOT categorisation, the following operations are included: digital scams, extortion through deepfake and sextortion, use of cryptocurrencies and wrapping, and banking fraud: identity theft for access to digital bank accounts. On the other hand, in relation to corruption and financial crime (second place in mentions), DDOT's categorisation includes the following operations: co-opting of officials, infiltration of the banking system, financial fraud and tax evasion.

For its part, drug and arms trafficking (third in terms of mentions) includes the following operations: cocaine and marijuana trafficking, arms smuggling, and extreme violence and settling of scores. Furthermore, in relation to human trafficking and illegal migration (fourth in terms of mentions), the following operations are included: kidnapping and exploitation of Venezuelan, Colombian and Ecuadorian migrants, sale of false documents and prostitution networks. Finally, in terms of extortion and kidnapping (fifth in mentions), the following operations are included: vaccines or protection payments to traders and businessmen, express kidnappings with ransom demands in cryptocurrencies, and digital extortion through social networks and international calls.

This approach demonstrates the evolution of the Tren de Aragua from a prison gang to a transnational criminal organisation with a very diverse range of illegal activities. Through the analysis of thematic repetitions, it is evident that cybercrime and cryptocurrencies are positioned as its main operational categories, indicating the hidden complexity of its means of financing and illicit resources.

Corruption and financial crime emerged as a second area of operations, reflecting the group's ability to infiltrate state structures and manipulate the economy and the judicial system to its own advantage. A second level of concern is human trafficking and illegal immigration, where the organisation exploits the vulnerability of Latin American migration flows for exploitation and extortion.

Discussion

The results of the research show a significant diversification in the criminal activities of the Tren de Aragua (Table 5), which confirms its character as a TCO with a multi-crime structure. This finding is in line with the definition proposed by Quiroz Céspedes (2024), who describes multi-crime as a complex criminal phenomenon characterised by the diversification and strategic interconnection of multiple illicit activities within the same criminal structure. Among the main illicit activities identified, illegal mining (#mineríaIllegal, #deforestation) stands out with 282 mentions, consolidating itself as a key strategy for the exploitation of natural resources in territories with low state presence, which facilitates the financing of other illicit operations and contributes to the group's territorial expansion. This dynamic reflects what Sullivan (2023) calls 'economies of scope', in which the interconnection of illegal markets reduces costs, maximises profits and increases the operational resilience of criminal networks.

Table 5. | Main categories of multi-crime linked to the Tren de Aragua

Category of multi-crime	Tren de Aragua strategy
Financial crime and money laundering	Moving illicit money through international financial networks
Trafficking in persons and illegal migration	Exploitation of migrants in vulnerable conditions
Cybercrime and cryptocurrencies	Online fraud, money laundering through crypto-assets
Illegal mining and environmental crime	Exploitation of natural resources in unprotected areas
Arms trafficking and violent crime	Arms supply to criminal groups and territorial control

Cybercrime and the use of illegal cryptocurrencies (#cybercrime, #illegalcryptocurrencies) emerge as a relevant component with 313 mentions, reflecting the organisation's ability to adapt to digital technologies. This phenomenon allows the execution of online fraud, money laundering and illicit financing through virtual assets, which makes it difficult to trace funds and strengthens their global operations. According to Goldhaber (1997), digital platforms prioritise content that generates engagement, which can encourage the viralisation of extreme or sensationalist narratives about the Tren de Aragua. This context turns TikTok into a space where reality and fiction intertwine, enhancing the group's symbolic influence. Moreover, this strategic use of digital technologies reinforces Kenney's (2007) hypothesis about competitive adaptation, in which criminal organisations adjust their operational methods to respond to the actions of security agencies.

Likewise, money laundering and illicit financing (#moneylaundering, #illicitfinancing) is the category with the highest number of mentions (378), which highlights the group's high degree of financial sophistication. The mobilisation of illicit capital through international networks suggests, on the one hand, an articulation with broader criminal structures, or, on the other, a sufficiently broad internal structure to develop this type of criminal activity, which is leveraged by regulatory gaps in different countries in the Americas. This finding coincides with Lessing's (2017) proposal, who argues that the systemic resilience of criminal organisations is based on their ability to mitigate risks by diversifying revenue streams, thus ensuring their operational continuity, even in the face of state strategies focused on specific areas such as drug trafficking.

Human trafficking and the facilitation of illegal migration (#traffickingInPersons, #migrantsInDanger) were referenced in 138 mentions, indicating that the group exploits vulnerable populations, particularly migrants, in regional migration flows. This activity not only represents a source of income, but also expands their network of influence in contexts of forced displacement. This finding is particularly counterintuitive because, although the expansion of the Tren de Aragua has been associated with the trafficking of migrants, especially Venezuelans (InSight Crime, 2024; UNODC, 2023), from a theoretical perspective, this dynamic reflects how criminal organisations take advantage of institutional asymmetries and contextual windows of opportunity, as pointed out by Andreas (2011) and Arias (2016).

In terms of arms trafficking and the commission of violent crimes (#armstrafficking, #urbanviolence), 166 mentions were recorded, showing the use of violence as a central mechanism for territorial control and

deterrence of rival or state actors. Recently, in New York, ten members or associates of the Tren de Aragua were charged with running an arms trafficking ring in the city. This operation involved the sale of illegal firearms, including handguns and assault rifles, evidencing their involvement in arms trafficking and their ability to operate in illicit markets outside Venezuela. This strategic use of violence reinforces the idea put forward by the MinDefensa (2023) about the social and territorial control exercised by these organisations, which undermine governance in the territories where they operate.

These findings confirm that the Tren de Aragua operates under a multi-crime model of organised crime, characterised by the interconnection of various illicit activities that maximise its profitability and minimise the risk of interruption by the authorities. The analysis of these dynamics is essential for the design of comprehensive strategies to prevent and combat transnational crime, as suggested by Quiroz Céspedes (2024), who emphasises the need for approaches that incorporate financial intelligence, multilevel cooperation and situational prevention approaches.

Hashtag analysis

The analysis of hashtags shows that #trendeearagua is the most recurrent term, with 347 mentions, followed by #venezuela, with 281 mentions, which reaffirms the group's strong link with its country of origin and its growing transnational projection. In terms of geographical distribution, Venezuela leads with 538 mentions, followed by Chile (162), Ecuador (101) and Colombia (91). These data reflect the expansion of the Tren de Aragua and its capacity to adapt to different national contexts, which underlines its hierarchical flexibility and its ability to adjust quickly to exogenous pressures without compromising its strategic cohesion, as described by Kenney (2007).

In terms of the frequency of crimes according to the OAS, the analysis of related hashtags indicates that cybercrime and cryptocurrencies constitute the most recurrent category, with 44 mentions, followed by corruption and financial crime, with 17 mentions. This suggests that the use of digital technologies and virtual assets is a central strategy of the group to mobilise illicit funds and evade state controls. Furthermore, the presence of corruption and financial crime as key areas indicates that the organisation exploits institutional vulnerabilities to strengthen its influence and ensure its transnational operability.

The study of the predominant narratives surrounding the Tren de Aragua reveals the presence of highly polarised and sensationalist discourses. Firstly, there is a

growing concern about its transnational impact, reflected in its characterisation as a global threat. Secondly, the presence of an alarmist discourse, with a markedly sensationalist tone and emotional appeal, amplifies the perception of risk associated with the group. Finally, the association between migration and criminality is positioned as a recurrent narrative, despite the lack of empirical evidence to support this relationship. This discursive construction may have significant implications for the formulation of migration policies and the social perception of the Venezuelan migrant population.

From an analytical perspective, the findings allow us to identify three key dimensions in the operation of the Tren de Aragua. First, criminal diversification and strategic adaptability. The data confirm that the organisation operates under a multi-crime model, diversifying its illicit activities in order to maximise profits and mitigate risks. Its ability to adjust to specific national contexts, such as exploiting illegal mining in unprotected regions or engaging in cybercrime in digitised economies, demonstrates a high degree of operational sophistication and structural resilience (Andreas, 2011; Arias, 2016).

Second, the symbolic projection on digital platforms such as TikTok, where the circulation of digital narratives contributes to consolidating its image as an omnipresent and expanding organisation. Likewise, the strategic use of hashtags and sensationalist content amplifies its symbolic influence and reinforces its reputation as a transnational threat. This phenomenon reflects how digital platforms can be instrumentalised not only for the dissemination of information, but also for the construction of symbolic capital and the consolidation of imaginaries of power (Bourdieu, 2000).

Third, the regional impact and challenges for governance. The geographical expansion of the Tren de Aragua and its capacity to adapt to different national environments is evidence of its ability to exploit institutional gaps and socio-economic vulnerabilities. However, the predominant narratives that associate migration with criminality pose additional governance challenges, as they may contribute to the stigmatisation of mobile populations and encourage the adoption of restrictive migration policies. In this context, a comprehensive approach to the phenomenon requires transnational security strategies that incorporate not only the control of organised crime, but also the strengthening of institutions and the mitigation of discourses that may encourage dynamics of social exclusion (Quiroz Céspedes, 2024; Sullivan, 2023).

Conclusions

This study has explored the narrative construction of the Tren de Aragua on TikTok, providing an in-depth understanding of how this transnational criminal organisation is represented and projects its influence on digital platforms. From the analysis of 1257 records, discursive patterns were identified that reflect not only the criminal diversification of the group, but also its symbolic impact on collective imaginaries. These findings underline the relevance of digital narratives as key tools for the consolidation of its image as a central actor in transnational multi-crime.

The data analysed confirm that the Tren de Aragua operates under a model of organised multi-crime, characterised by the strategic diversification of illicit activities, including financial crime, arms trafficking, human trafficking, illegal mining and cybercrime. The identification of more than 300 mentions related to money laundering and cybercrime suggests that the organisation has developed advanced and sophisticated financial strategies to mobilise resources associated with illicit activities. Furthermore, the use of violence as an operational pillar reinforces its ability to exert territorial control and deter both rival criminal actors and the state.

From a geographical perspective, the analysis reveals a significant concentration of mentions in countries where the Tren de Aragua has been officially documented, such as Chile, Ecuador and Colombia. The presence of mentions in the United States highlights a growing international media interest in this group, which amplifies its perception as a transnational threat. This phenomenon shows how digital narratives on TikTok contribute to the symbolic consolidation of the Tren de Aragua, transforming it into a reference point for organised crime in the region. The viralisation of this content, driven by sensationalist and alarmist hashtags, not only describes criminal activities, but also amplifies the perception of risk associated with the organisation, potentially influencing security policies at the local and regional level.

Recognising the limitations of the study, particularly its restricted focus on a single digital platform, future research could expand the comparative analysis to other social networks such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and forums on the deep web. In addition, it would be relevant to incorporate artificial intelligence (AI)-based models to detect emerging patterns in the evolution of transnational organised crime and its interaction with digital spaces.

Finally, this study offers a novel perspective on how transnational multi-crime projects itself into the digital realm, consolidating its presence not only in physical territories, but also in symbolic spaces on social networks. The Tren de Aragua operates under a criminal business logic, adapting to new contexts and using economies of scale to maximise profits while minimising risks. Its systemic resilience, based on its ability to modify operating methods and diversify illicit income, allows it to absorb disruptions and reorganise itself without losing functionality in the face of state repression efforts. Moreover, their social and territorial control extends beyond direct violence, establishing criminal governance systems that contest the state's presence in regions with institutional weaknesses.

One of the most relevant findings is the lack of effective responses to the growth of the Tren de Aragua as a multi-crime structure. State efforts have been fragmented, prioritising the prosecution of certain crimes without addressing the strategic interconnectedness that defines this organisation. Economically, its operation discourages formal investment, increases informality and weakens trust in financial institutions due to money laundering through cryptocurrencies and corruption networks. From a security point of view, it has led to an increase in homicides, disappearances and kidnappings, affecting both individuals directly involved and entire communities. Finally, in terms of governance, the infiltration of justice and security agencies promotes a cycle of impunity that strengthens the expansion of its criminal network.

In conclusion, the Tren de Aragua represents a paradigmatic case of transnational multi-crime, whose expansion is not only due to the diversification of illicit activities, but to a calculated strategy that minimises risks, maximises profits and ensures its survival in the face of state repression efforts. This phenomenon calls for a multidimensional approach that integrates analyses of security, economics, governance and digital communication to address the complexity of contemporary organised crime.

Note on conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest among the authors of this academic research. We declare that we have no financial or personal relationships that could influence the interpretation and publication of the results obtained. All authors have contributed significantly to the development of this work and have given their final approval for publication. We also assure that we comply with ethical standards and scientific integrity at all times, in accordance with the guidelines established by the academic community and those dictated by this journal.

References

- Andreas, P. (2011). Illicit globalization: Myths, misconceptions, and historical lessons. *Political Science Quarterly*, 126(3), 403-425.
- Arias, E. D. (2016). *Criminal enterprises and governance in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Cambridge University Press.
- Badillo, R., & Mijares, V. M. (2021). Politicised crime: Causes for the discursive politicisation of organised crime in Latin America. *Global Crime*, 22(4), 312-335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2021.2024804>
- BBC News Mundo. (2024, 3 de julio). Capturan al “segundo cabecilla más importante del Tren de Aragua” en Colombia y el fiscal de Venezuela le agradece a Petro. *BBC News Mundo*. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c937w59grrdo>
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *El sentido práctico*. Siglo XXI.
- CNN en Español. (2023, 10 de noviembre). A base de torturas, asesinatos y violaciones el Tren de Aragua... CNN en Español. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2023/11/10/narcofiles-tren-aragua-el-colombia-parada-venezuela-orix>
- Defensoría del Pueblo. (2024, 21 de febrero). Alerta Temprana 4. Localización geográfica del riesgo. https://www.defensoria.gov.co/documents/20123/2723475/AT+-+004-24+PAT_Bogota_2202.pdf/58c0d14a-c359-6657-cc5c-2414e3df5f4d?t=1709059228423
- Departamento Nacional de Planeación. (2023). *Colombia, potencia mundial de la vida: Bases del Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2022-2026*. <https://colaboracion.dnp.gov.co/CDT/portalDNP/PND-2023/2023-02-23-bases-plan-nacional-de-desarrollo-web.pdf>
- Erazo-Patiño, L. A., Laverde-Rodríguez, C. A., & Devia-Acevedo, E. D. (2024). Medios digitales y percepción de la violencia: Un análisis de la expansión del Tren de Aragua. *Revista Científica General José María Córdova*, 22(46), 457-482. <https://doi.org/10.21830/19006586.1287>
- Goldhaber, M. H. (1997). The attention economy and the Net. *First Monday*, 2(4). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v2i4.519>

- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. En S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe & P. Willis (eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79* (pp. 128-138). Hutchinson.
- InSight Crime. (2024, 12 de julio). *Tren de Aragua*. <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-venezuela/tren-de-aragua/>
- Kenney, M. (2007). *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and terrorist networks, government bureaucracies, and competitive adaptation*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Lessing, B. (2017). *Making peace in drug wars: Crackdowns and cartels in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ministerio de Defensa Nacional. (2023). *Política de seguridad, defensa y convivencia ciudadana 2022-2026: Garantías para la vida y la paz*. <https://ddhhcolombia.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/GARANTIAS-PARA-LA-VIDA-Y-LA-PAZ.pdf>
- Organización de Estados Americanos. (2024). *Key OAS documents on transnational organized crime* (vol. 1). <https://www.oas.org/ext/DesktopModules/MVC/OASDnnModules/Views/Item/Download.aspx?type=1&id=1137&lang=2>
- Quiroz Céspedes, N. R. (2024). La taxonomía del multicrimen y el impacto de las economías ilegales en el Estado colombiano. *Revista de Estudios de la Vida Local*, 23, 157-180.
- Rísquez, R. (2022). *Tren de Aragua: la megabanda que revolucionó el crimen organizado en América Latina*. Dahbar.
- Sampó, C., & Troncoso, V. T. (2024). El tren de Aragua: La transnacionalización del crimen organizado a través del tráfico de migrantes. *Análisis Político*, 37(108), 147-176. <https://doi.org/10.15446/anpol.v37n108.116972>
- Sullivan, J. P. (2023). The information age: Transnational organized crime, networks, and illicit markets. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 16(1), 51-71. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.16.1.2049>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2020). *UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols thereto*. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2024). *World Drug Report 2024: Key findings and conclusions*. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2024.html>
- Ventas, L. (2024, 30 de enero). Qué significa que EE. UU. declare a los carteles mexicanos y al Tren de Aragua “organizaciones terroristas”. *BBC News Mundo*. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c805kp4e50>