

How do content creators on TikTok shape the narrative and perspective of the illicit drug trade of cocaine?

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ABSTRACT

The Annual Report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024) demonstrated the rise of trafficking cocaine with the production and coca cultivation increasing by 35% from 2020 to 2021. The advancement of technology and social media has been an advantage, allowing drug trafficking organisations to communicate and share videos for viewers to observe. Consequently, drug trafficking organisations have been able to develop to ensure the trafficking of cocaine continues to run smoothly without any issues from law enforcement. Utilising the social media platform TikTok has allowed drug trafficking organisations to shape the narrative and ideology that is shown to viewers regarding the illicit trade of cocaine. This research aims to illustrate how content creators on TikTok shape the narrative and ideology of the illegal chain of the cocaine production industry.

This research will utilise a qualitative research method and content analysis to explore the influence of TikTok content creators on shaping the narratives and perspectives regarding the illicit cocaine trade. It will analyse videos posted on the platform, examining the language used, as well as various features illustrated in the videos, such as visuals, music and other elements. This has been established by examining 90 posts on TikTok from different content creators, who illustrated the chain of the illegal cocaine production industry, and establishing key themes in different content. Analysing 90 TikTok posts illustrated that the consumption of cocaine has been glamorised by content creators using happy upbeat music and a party-like atmosphere. In addition, distributors and producers shape the narrative by showing the enjoyment of working within the trade and the pride they have in being part of the cocaine trade. Individuals viewing the videos do not demonstrate the sense of panic that is evident in mass media therefore it is clear that the perspective of the drug trade is changing. TikTok humanises these individuals, presenting them as ordinary people with ordinary struggles. However, this contrasts with the sensationalised and

criminalised portrayal that is often displayed in the media.

This study can be further adapted to observe more than one social media platform to compare the effects content creators have regarding the illicit drug trade. Consequently, this research is beneficial for higher authority, to create stricter guidelines to monitor what is being posted on social media as well as utilising content to prevent the cultivation of cocaine.

Drug trafficking and cocaine

Drug trafficking, as defined by the United Nations, is a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances prohibited by drug laws (Oxford University Press, 2023). Cocaine is a popular illicit drug derived from the coca plant and is trafficked on an immense scale. Colombia has emerged as the world's top producer and cultivator of the coca plant, due to its tropical climate (Morales, 1989). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's Global Report on Cocaine (2023) reported a 35% surge in cocaine trafficking between 2020 and 2021, following the global COVID-19 pandemic.

There are many aspects that contribute to the cocaine trade, including producers, distributors and consumers, which forms a supply chain that sustains the illicit trade (Picard, 2013). Producers cultivate coca on coca farms and process it into cocaine, while distributors, often organised crime groups or cartels, transport the drug via aircraft, vehicles and other forms of transport. Mexican cartels remain powerful at shifting alliances and creating conflict for control to dominate the market (United Nations, 2024). Countries like the United States of America and the United Kingdom are among the highest consumers of cocaine, further fuelling the trade (Cascant-Sempere et al., 2023).

The role of social media in the cocaine trade

Advances in technology, especially social media, have provided new ventures for the drug trade. Social media platforms offer room for communication, collaboration and adaptation for criminal organisations (Hardin, 2020). The Oxford Dictionary (2023) defines social media as websites or applications that allow users to create and share content or participate in social networking. This facilitates the illicit drug trade by enabling

networking opportunities among traffickers (Bichler et al., 2017).

TikTok, a social media platform with around 1.677 billion users as of 2023, has played a significant role in this dynamic (Ruby, 2023). TikTok users create and share videos, and some content goes viral, including 'memes' that reach a wide audience (Badlani, 2023). Despite TikTok's community guidelines designed to limit illegal content, drug traffickers and users exploit loopholes and grey areas to share content related to cocaine (Budz, 2023). This research aims to explore how TikTok content creators shape the narrative and perspective of the cocaine trade through their posts.

Research objective

This research will illustrate how TikTok content creators shape the public narrative surrounding the illicit cocaine trade. According to Lothian-McLean (2021), creating content related to drug use not only generates profit for the content creators but also endorses increased drug consumption, benefiting the traffickers. By normalising or promoting cocaine use, these creators contribute to a more accepting perspective of the drug trade (Gould, 1998). This study's findings could be essential for law enforcement and policymakers who aim to restrict the spread of drug-related content on social media and tackle the global cocaine trade with a more advanced approach.

Research methodology overview

Selecting the appropriate research methodology is essential for addressing the research questions effectively. Baxter and Jack (2008) emphasise that a well-suited methodology allows the collection of data that meets the study's objectives. This study adopts a qualitative approach using content analysis to examine narratives and perspectives on TikTok regarding the cocaine trade. Qualitative research can be time-consuming; however, it provides an in-

depth insight into the data (Triangulation, 2014), making it the ideal choice for this study as it creates a more comprehensive understanding of the social media posts related to cocaine (Bryman, 2016).

By analysing TikTok posts, the study unveils the motivations, beliefs and behaviours surrounding cocaine use and the trade (Rollinson, 2008). Kitzinger and Frith's (1999) study on breast cancer content on social media highlights the importance of qualitative research in revealing the negatives of social media behaviour, which is similarly relevant in analysing the cocaine trade on TikTok. While quantitative methods could be used to analyse a larger volume of TikTok posts and provide more generalisable data (Lerche, 2012), qualitative analysis is more suitable for interpreting the deeper meanings behind the content. Caplan and Johns (2022) emphasise that qualitative research methods offer a more detailed understanding of the social implications of content, making them particularly valuable for this study.

By focusing on the language, visual cues and broader social context of the posts, this research will capture the way in which these creators construct and communicate narratives about the illicit drug trade. Consequently, content analysis allows for a detailed examination of how TikTok videos engage or challenge the representation of drug use and trafficking. Hence, revealing the implicit messages and ideologies that may influence the platform's audience.

Structure of the article

This article is structured as follows: the literature review examines past research on the cocaine trade and its connection to social media, applying frameworks like social constructivism and Cohen's (2011) theory of moral panic to contextualise the analysis. Following the literature review, the methodology section outlines the research approach, providing an explanation for the selected qualitative methods. The data analysis section presents the findings on how TikTok content influences public perceptions of the cocaine trade. The conclusion summarises the study and provides recommendations for future research.

This research also examines how TikTok content creators influence public perceptions of the cocaine trade through their posts. Utilising qualitative methods, particularly content analysis, the study uncovers the underlying meanings of drug-related

content on TikTok. These insights can inform policymakers, law enforcement and global institutions working to mitigate the effects of the illicit drug trade globally. The study's findings also contribute to criminology by addressing the growing intersection between social media and drug trafficking, offering new directions for future research.

Literature review

The illicit trade of cocaine is an increasing global issue affecting many countries due to its negative socio-economic and political impacts within society. With technological advancements and the rise of social media with more users, the platform of this trade has evolved, providing drug organisations with new tools to adapt, expand, and continue their trade successfully. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, play a unique role in this transformation by shaping public perceptions and narratives. This literature review explores how social content creators on TikTok influence narratives surrounding the cocaine production industry. The review is framed by two key theories: social constructivism and Cohen's (2011) theory of moral panic. Social constructivism demonstrates how individuals and societies form their realities through shared interpretations (Andrews, 2012), particularly on platforms like TikTok. Consequently, Cohen's moral panic theory offers a lens through which we can analyse social reactions and responses to perceived threats, especially as amplified by media.

The role of TikTok in social media influence

TikTok has become an incredibly powerful tool for criminals in the cocaine industry. Compared to other platforms like Instagram or X (formerly Twitter), TikTok's unique video format and highly personalised algorithm has allowed for viral content to expand, particularly among younger audiences. Research shows that TikTok's algorithm tailors content based on user interaction. This can create an echo chamber that reinforces specific narratives and perspectives (Diaz & Nilsson, 2022) based on the user's interactions with distinct content.

TikTok's rapid spread of information and the platform's focus on visual content can also make it an ideal source to shape perceptions related to crime, including the illicit cocaine trade. Focusing on TikTok is essential due to its sheer influence and

reach among the demographic groups that are more likely to engage with illicit drug-related content. Studies show that TikTok's user base, comprising young adults, adds susceptibility to the persuasive power of visual content. Referring to the research aims, it makes it a focal point for understanding how social media platforms shape narratives around the cocaine industry (Li & Feng, 2022). Additionally, TikTok's wide range of content creations means that anyone can become popular, enabling individuals to shape public narratives and obscuring the distinction between credible news sources and influencers who may lack factual accuracy (Rogers, 2021).

Social constructivism

Social constructivism, first introduced by Lev Vygotsky, illustrates that knowledge and understanding are shaped through social interactions and cultural contexts (Ageyev, 2003). Vygotsky's theory highlights how cognitive functions develop through engagement with society and culture (Idrissi, 2022). Social constructivism is particularly relevant to understanding how content creators on TikTok shape narratives around cocaine. These creators often create content based on shared societal interpretations, which can either challenge or reinforce dominant narratives that they previously knew.

Historically, constructivism was used primarily in educational psychology, where Piaget and Vygotsky debated how knowledge is formed. Vygotsky highlighted the importance of social interaction (Pass, 2004). Over time, the application of social constructivism expanded to sociology, psychology and criminology. In criminology, constructivism offers a lens through which to understand how social factors, like race, gender and media representations, shape perceptions of crime (Potter, 2015). The narratives constructed around the cocaine trade on TikTok reflect this dynamic, as societal reactions, political factors and media representation come together to form a shared understanding of crime.

By applying social constructivism to social media, it becomes clear that platforms like TikTok allow users to construct new realities. These realities can challenge and question dominant narratives or sustain stigmatised views of crime. Content creators play a crucial role in this process by producing content that redefines societal views of cocaine

production and trafficking. Therefore, their influence extends beyond entertainment, contributing to the social construction of knowledge and the ways in which society understands criminal activities like drug trafficking.

History of social constructivism

To fully appreciate the implications of social constructivism in the context of the illicit drug trade, it is important to examine the evolution of the theory's evolution. Initially, constructivism was rooted in the cognitive development theories by Piaget, which was later expanded by Vygotsky's focus on social factors (Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000). Vygotsky emphasised cultural contexts, allowing social constructivism to develop into a broader sociological and psychological tool.

The theory offers insights into how social and cultural factors shape criminal behaviour and public perceptions of crime. For example, the media's portrayal of cocaine trafficking is not an objective truth but a socially constructed reality, influenced by cultural biases and political agendas (Haslanger, 2012). This theoretical perspective is essential in analysing the narratives constructed on TikTok, where representations of the cocaine trade are often sensationalised, glamorised or distorted.

Social constructivism and the illicit cocaine trade

When examining the cocaine trade through the lens of social constructivism, the illegality of the substance is not an inherent fact but a socially constructed label (Askew & Salinas, 2019). The 'war on drugs', launched by the US in 1971, shows how political and social processes construct the legal and moral frameworks surrounding drugs like cocaine (Bagley, 1988). This campaign, although aimed at reducing drug use, disproportionately targeted marginalised groups, reinforcing racial and class biases (Gibbs & Leech, 2006).

TikTok can amplify these socially constructed views by allowing content creators to craft their own narratives about the drug trade. Some TikTok users glamorise cocaine use, presenting it as a symbol of wealth, power and a fun pastime at parties. These portrayals, which circulate quickly due to the viral nature of the platform, can shift the public's understanding of cocaine from a dangerous substance to a marker of social status or something

that is socially acceptable to do with friends. Such shifts demonstrate the power of social constructivism in explaining how public narratives about illicit drugs are shaped by the media.

Moral panic theory

Moral panic, a concept developed by Stanley Cohen in 1972, explains how society reacts to perceived threats that challenge social norms (Cohen, 2011). The media plays a crucial role in creating these panics by sensationalising certain behaviours or groups, thus influencing public perception and policy. Moral panic theory is highly relevant to understanding how the media, including social media platforms like TikTok, can shape the narrative around the cocaine trade.

Historically, moral panics have been used to stigmatise marginalised groups, as seen in Cohen's original analysis of the 'Mods and Rockers' subcultures of the 1960s. In the context of cocaine trafficking, moral panic has been fuelled by portrayals in the media that demonise drug users and traffickers, creating public fear and shaping harsh drug policies. This fear often leads to disproportionate law enforcement responses, as seen in the 'war on drugs', where racial minorities were targeted and treated like criminals despite comparable drug use rates among white populations (Provine, 2008).

History of moral panic

Cohen's (2011) original work on moral panic outlined how the media can exaggerate and distort public perceptions of social threats, leading to widespread anxiety and fear. This concept has since been applied to various societal issues, such as youth crime, drug use and immigration. The media's role in constructing moral panic is especially evident in the context of the illicit drug trade. From the 'crack cocaine epidemic' of the 1980s to the present-day opioid crisis, where drug-related moral panic has influenced public policy and law enforcement practices (Haskins, 2019).

By sensationalising the dangers of drug use on social media, the media has often contributed to public fear by justifying harsh legal responses and sanctions that are in place. This pattern is evident today on social media platforms like TikTok, where content related to the cocaine trade is often dramatised to attract views and comments of users,

creating a distorted perception of the actual risks involved.

Moral panic and the illicit drug trade

Moral panic has played a significant role in shaping public perceptions and policy responses to the illicit cocaine trade. By sensationalising cocaine use, the media has not only created a climate of fear but also justified the criminalisation of users and traffickers. For instance, the 'war on drugs' campaign capitalised on the public's fear of drug users, leading to the implementation of mandatory minimum sentences for drug-related offences (Provine, 2008). These policies disproportionately affected communities of colour, reinforcing existing social and racial inequalities.

The moral panic surrounding the cocaine trade is further exacerbated by platforms like TikTok, where sensationalist content about drugs can spread rapidly. Videos that glamorise cocaine use contribute to a distorted public perception, making it harder to combat the real dangers associated with the drug. This perpetuates the cycle of fear and criminalisation, which continues to affect public policy and law enforcement practices.

Effects of social media

Due to social media becoming a significant factor in everyday life in society, several types of effects on its users have been noted. Research conducted by Siddiqui and Singh (2016) highlights how social media can affect different elements in an individual's life, like education and self-image, even though social media can be beneficial in a limited way. The global digital statistics report highlights that in 2023 around 60% of the world now uses social media with 150 million new users within the last 12 months (Radcliffe et al., 2024). Social media plays a contemporary and crucial role in the construction of social representations as individuals have become active content creators (Moscovici, 2001). They can shape representations and narratives that influence the knowledge and understanding of viewers. Social media encourages diverse voices and perspectives though it can challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative constructions of reality (Atenas et al., 2022).

Many studies have illustrated the impact social media can have on an individual's self-image due to the content that is consumed. Henriques and

Patnaik (2020) demonstrated that young adults consume many different beauty trends on social media, which creates an unrealistic standard that causes individuals to undergo beauty treatments to meet social media's standards of beauty. Consequently, Jan et al. (2017) emphasise the strong relationship between social media and self-esteem. An increase in social media usage causes the self-esteem of individuals to decrease. One hour spent on Facebook daily results in a 5.574 decrease in the self-esteem score of an individual. Another negative impact of social media includes an increase in cybercrime. Cybercrime can be defined as a type of crime that is conducted on a computer network or the internet (Wall, 2007). Social media has been affected by cyber security as cybercriminals target social media users using fake accounts to deceive users into providing personal information or access credentials by clicking links that download malicious software (Chin, 2023). Consequently, cybercrime can also be related to individuals who are bullied and harassed on social media. Thirty-six per cent of survey respondents in the UK confirmed they had been victims of bullying including cyberstalking in 2022 (Dixon, 2022). Similarly, over 40% of American users reported they had experienced cyberbullying in their lifetime (Dixon, 2023).

When examining the effects of social media, one theory that provides a critical framework is The Hypodermic Needle theory which was developed by several scholars, including Harold Lasswell who focused on the analysis of propaganda and the influence of the media (Bineham, 1988). The theory suggests that media messages are like an injection that influences the audience in shaping their opinions, attitudes and behaviours based on what they have seen (Ross & Nightingale, 2003). Therefore, this implies that the public is easily influenced by what they are presented with in the media. This theory can help demonstrate how social media platforms shape the narrative and perspective surrounding the topic of the illicit drug trade. As content is shared over social media platforms it can influence an individual's attitude or opinion towards the issue. For instance, if social media platforms like TikTok sensationalise stories regarding cocaine, and individuals post themselves glamorising the illicit drug, this may cause an individual to adopt the attitudes or beliefs about the drug trade based on the content they are exposed to on social media. Similarly, research conducted by Romer and Moreno (2017) established that digital media

provides increased opportunities for both marketing and social transmission of risky products and behaviour, including illegal drugs like cocaine. Individuals are easily influenced by what they are exposed to hence it can have a negative effect on them.

Consequently, social media personalises an individual's feed using an algorithm that can reinforce existing beliefs and perspectives. If an individual is often exposed to content that normalises and glamorises drug use, it can change their perception and attitudes towards the illicit drug trade. However, it could be argued that the theory is out of date as now individuals are able to select what they wish to see in the media and stop content they do not enjoy consuming (Bryant & Finklea, 2022).

Nonetheless, there have been some positive impacts of social media on society. For example, raising awareness on issues that need quick action from higher authorities like the government. A popular case of this was established in America in 2020, known as the George Floyd Movement. When an African American was violently detained by a police officer who knelt on him, causing him to suffocate to death after pleading for nine minutes that he could not breathe (Duchess & Gange, 2020). The incident triggered widespread protests against police brutality and systemic racism in the United States and globally. Social media played a significant role in raising awareness as it allowed organisations to post videos of evidence and share information on a wider spectrum (Dixon & Dundes, 2020). Furthermore, it allowed other victims of police brutality to share their experiences and demand change. Social media offers the opportunity of social change by raising awareness and spreading information. However, it could be argued that due to the high volume of users on social media, there is a high chance of misleading information being spread (Buchanan, 2020). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, research conducted by Gabarron et al. (2021) illustrated around 2% to 28.8% of posts on social media regarding the pandemic were incorrect and provided misinformation to users.

Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, play a vital role in shaping public perceptions of the cocaine trade. The theoretical frameworks of social constructivism and moral panic offer valuable insights into how these narratives are constructed.

By examining the intersection of social media and these theories, it becomes clear that content creators have significant influence over public understanding of the illicit cocaine trade. As TikTok continues to grow in popularity, its impact on societal narratives and moral panics related to drugs will only increase. Therefore, understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing the challenges posed by the evolving digital landscape and its impact on global issues like drug trafficking.

Methodology

This research utilises qualitative methods and content analysis to investigate the role of TikTok content creators in shaping public narratives and perceptions about the illicit cocaine trade. It aims to explore whether these creators contribute to the normalisation or stigmatisation of cocaine production, distribution and consumption through their posts. The study's data sample consists of 90 TikTok posts, analysed using a categorisation method like that proposed by Zhu et al. (2020). These posts will be sorted by content type, focusing on TikTok-specific features like hashtags, sounds and trends. It is also important to prove this method aligns with ethical standards set by the British Society of Criminology.

Research approach

Choosing the correct research approach is important to ensure the research questions are adequately addressed and that the study offers credible insights (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this case, the use of qualitative research is the most appropriate due to its ability to offer a rich, detailed understanding of social media behaviour. Unlike quantitative methods, which can offer generalised insights, qualitative methods ensure an in-depth exploration of specific narratives and viewpoints (Bryman, 2016). This is particularly useful for understanding complex and controversial topics, like the portrayal of the cocaine trade on TikTok.

Qualitative research captures the role of social media narratives, helping researchers uncover underlying motivations and beliefs related to the illicit drug trade (Rollinson, 2008). Kitzinger and Frith's (1999) study on social media posts about breast cancer highlights the value of qualitative research in revealing the details of user behaviour. While quantitative methods could potentially offer a broader analysis by examining a larger number of

TikTok posts (Lerche, 2012), the qualitative approach allows for further interpretation of the content, highlighting the aims of this study. The study can extract deeper insights into how TikTok content creators may glamorise or stigmatise the cocaine trade.

Research method

This study uses content analysis as the primary research method to identify themes and patterns in TikTok posts that discuss cocaine production, distribution and consumption. Content analysis enables researchers to examine how messages are constructed and conveyed on social media, which can have significant implications for public perception (Shen & Bissell, 2013). Researchers can see how TikTok content creators might glamorise or challenge state criminalisation of the cocaine trade. This method was used by Weimann and Masri's (2023) work, which utilised content analysis to examine how far-right groups spread propaganda on TikTok.

TikTok is unique as a platform because it uses a variety of elements, such as hashtags, viral sounds and trends that influence how messages are spread and received by the audience. Content analysis allows for the systematic coding of these elements, transforming qualitative data into patterns that can be further analysed (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). While content analysis can be labour-intensive, especially when dealing with a large data set (Neuendorf, 2017), this study's limited sample of 90 posts makes the process manageable and ensures that the analysis remains thorough. This strategic limitation in sample size helps stop potential challenges, such as coding fatigue or bias, and ensures the research remains focused and achievable.

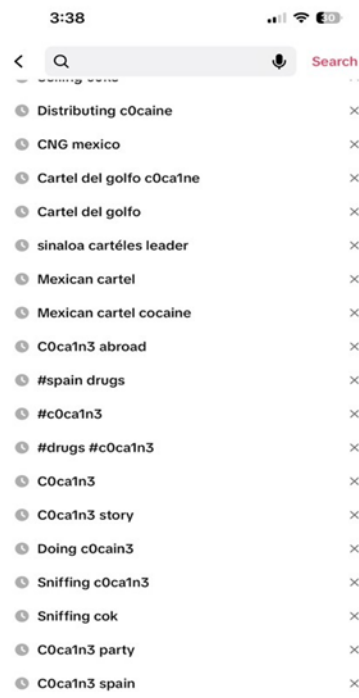
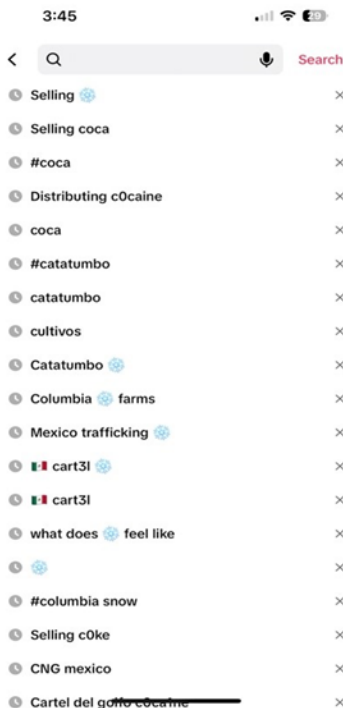
Data collection

The collection of data is an important phase when it comes to analysing social media platforms such as TikTok (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). For this study, the sample will consist of 90 TikTok posts, chosen for their relevance to the cocaine trade, and its three key components: production, distribution and consumption. These posts will offer a range of insights into how content creators portray these aspects of the drug trade, showing potential patterns in the narratives and trends that arise.

The posts will be organised into three categories: producers, distributors and consumers. Posts

related to producers will focus on areas known for cocaine production, like farms in Colombia, while distributor-related posts will feature content from Mexican cartels. Consumer-related posts will include TikToks from users in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, showing individuals using or referencing cocaine through memes or other forms of content. This categorisation enables the research to capture a holistic view of the illicit trade.

A challenge in collecting this data arises from TikTok's strict content policies, which prohibit posts about drugs like cocaine (Larsson, 2023). However, users have developed ways to bypass these guidelines by using code words, emojis and acronyms (McHaney, 2023). For example, terms like 'C0c41n3' and 'Dr0gs' allow creators to post content about cocaine without triggering TikTok's automatic content removal. This study will use these code words and related hashtags to gather the necessary posts for analysis, allowing the data to remain relevant and accurate despite the restrictions of the platform.



(TikTok search history for collecting data)

Data sampling

The categorisation of TikTok posts is an essential step in the analysis process, so that the data is both clear and interpretable. Zhu et al. (2020) provide a useful framework for this, using a table to separate TikTok features such as video type, background music and characters. This approach enables researchers to code and categorise content efficiently, highlighting different themes and trends that may appear during the analysis.

For this study, a similar approach will be taken, with posts divided into tables based on their role in the cocaine trade – whether related to producers, distributors or consumers. Each TikTok post will be analysed according to a variety of variables, such as likes, comments, music type, emotional tone and hashtags. This categorised analysis will allow the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions about how content creators shape public narratives and perceptions of the cocaine trade.

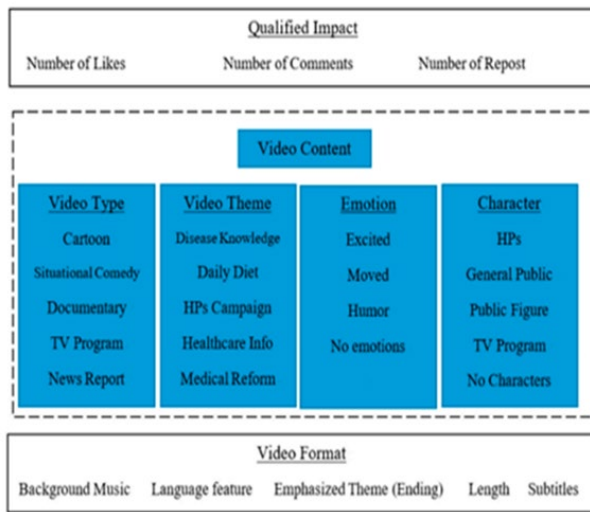


Table 1. The coding scheme for video analysis.

Index	Explanation
Number of Likes	Total number of Likes by 20 August 2019
Number of Comments	Total number of Comments received by 20 August 2019
Number of Reposts	Total number of Reposts by 20 August 2019
Video Type	Refers to the different types of health communication, divided into five categories, including: cartoon, documentary, situation comedy, excerpt from TV program, excerpt from news report.
Video Theme	Refers to the major topic involved in the micro-video, encompassing disease knowledge, daily diet, health professionals' image promotion, healthcare info, and health reforms.
Emotion	Refers to the major emotion involved; classified as excited, moved, humor or no specific emotion.
Character	Refers to the character playing the leading role or being shown most during the micro-video; divided into health professionals, public figures and general public (with patients included).
Background Music	Refers to the background music used, including no music, music selected from the Tik Tok music library, and original music.
Language Feature	Refers to the language used, including mandarin, and other local dialects.
Emphasized theme (Ending)	Refers to the technique of re-emphasizing the theme at the end of the micro-video.
Length	Refers to the length of the micro-videos.
Subtitles	Refers to the technique of using subtitles to display the words spoken in the micro-video as written text.

An excerpt of the table by Zhu et al. (2020) highlights different elements to code and analyse when examining TikTok posts.

Ethics

Following the ethical guidelines set by the British Society of Criminology is crucial for ensuring the research supports integrity and credibility (Bowen, 2005). One potential ethical concern in this study involves the nature of the content being analysed, as it may include explicit material related to drug consumption and illegal activities. To prevent any emotional or psychological harm, the researcher will have access to university support services, like well-being advice. In addition, the researcher will work closely with an academic supervisor to navigate these challenges.

Although this study does not involve direct human participants, ethical standards still apply when analysing user-generated content on TikTok. The researcher must remain unbiased during the research, ensuring the credibility of the analysis (Nardi, 2018). This is particularly important given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, as any bias could compromise the integrity of the research.

In conclusion, this research method, based on qualitative content analysis, provides an effective framework for exploring how TikTok content creators influence perceptions of the illicit cocaine trade. By using a detailed, structured approach to data collection and analysis, this study will reveal the narratives and themes that appear on social media concerning cocaine production, distribution and consumption. Drawing from methodologies such as those outlined by Zhu et al. (2020), the research aims to generate new insights into how social media can shape the narrative surrounding illegal activities. Ethical considerations, including adherence to the British Society of Criminology's guidelines, will ensure that the study remains both credible and responsible.

Data analysis

This section will analyse the data that has been collected from TikTok to illustrate how content creators shape the narrative and perspective of the illicit drug trade of cocaine. Ninety TikTok posts have been analysed to develop themes from the data that help answer the research question. It is evident that TikTok constructs a different social reality of the illicit drug trade of cocaine that viewers will use to understand the trade. The established narratives can explain the illicit drug trade from a unique perspective from traditional media portrayal. Using a social media platform like TikTok allows individuals who are part of the cocaine trade to show the reality of what occurs as illicit trade workers, which will be further emphasised in the themes from the data results. This section will explore various themes that have emerged from the analysis, including the glamorisation of cocaine use, the portrayal of illicit trade workers as charismatic figures and the emergence of the normalisation of the drug culture.

Construction of identity

The first theme established through the data set was the narrative of constructing an identity through posting various TikTok videos. Producers and distributors presented videos on TikTok that illustrated the reality of working in the cocaine industry that did not represent what had been shown through mass media. For instance, research conducted by Reeves and Campbell (1994) emphasises how the media sensationalised and criminalised workers who produced and distributed cocaine, although when looking at the content from individuals it showed a different side to the trade. A

variety of producer TikTok posts, including producer videos 1, 3, 7, 27, 14 and 30 from the data set, shows cocaine farm workers as happy and enjoying their work. The cocaine laboratories are in the open fields with happy upbeat songs playing. The emotions in the posts indicate a sense of happiness when working. This highlights how social constructivism plays a key role when shaping the narrative and perspective of the illicit drug trade as constructing a new identity allows others to create a new perspective on individuals who work on cocaine farms. It demonstrates to others that cocaine workers are also the same ordinary people who consider themselves normal working individuals. Consequently, this does not match Cohen's theory of moral panic as it provides a counter-narrative that does not create a sense of panic when viewing the content. This can also be proven when looking at the number of likes of the posts as it emphasises how viewers react to the post. Distributor video 8 had 195.1k views and producer video 25 had 10.2k, which implies viewers agreed to what they were watching. Some researchers (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021) demonstrate how many distributor workers are forced, with violence, by criminal organisation groups to conduct the trafficking of cocaine; however, the perception is shown differently through the TikTok posts. The distributor section of the data set shows individuals dancing and singing while trafficking cocaine, as well as relaxing on speed boats that transport the illegal drug. Distributor video 2 uses an upbeat Spanish song while displaying distributors showing peace signs on a speedboat filled with boxes of cocaine. Additionally, distributor 24 shows the workers enjoying themselves drinking while transporting cocaine. The posts highlight the sense of enjoyment and satisfaction of the work that was done to ensure the successful process of production. The use of individuals posting their subjective experiences creates a new narrative of the drug trade that shows the reality of what is happening but does not match what is shown in research and mass media. However, the poverty crisis that occurs in countries of production and distribution demonstrates how individuals can be forced into this labour as well as having no other options for income (Lee, 1991). This links to social constructivism and Cohen's (2011) theory of moral panic as it challenges a dominant narrative and displays a different perspective of the illicit trade of cocaine. TikTok humanises these individuals, presenting them as ordinary people with ordinary struggles. This

contrasts with the sensationalised and criminalised portrayal that is often presented in the media.



Distributor video 24 showing individuals drinking and enjoying themselves while transporting cocaine.

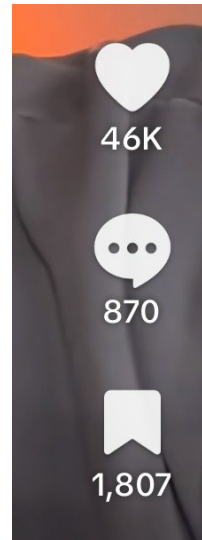
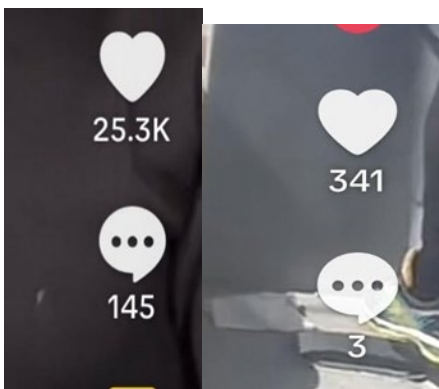


Producer video 14 of workers dancing in cocaine laboratories.

Normalisation of drugs

It has been illustrated that consumers of cocaine who post content on TikTok have shown a different narrative and perspective on consuming cocaine. TikTok videos include individuals consuming cocaine at parties with friends and creating memes that the viewers can relate to regarding cocaine. The number of likes these videos receive implies that the viewers enjoy the content. For instance, consumer video 20 includes individuals creating a relatable meme about using their house keys and consuming cocaine, which received 274.4k views. This indicates how viewers find the content entertaining and relatable. Consequently, videos that show the consumption of drugs also gain likes

from viewers. Such as consumer videos 21 and 18 both received over 200 likes where the drug was visible. This highlights how the narrative and perspective of the illicit drug trade have changed for society, as being exposed to this type of content adds to the normalisation of the drug. As many normal people can post content that can desensitise the issue of cocaine this could also allow the increased awareness of preventing drug abuse. It is also evident that other elements of the drug trade like the distributors and producers add to the theme of normalising cocaine as their posts do not illustrate violent behaviour that is usually linked to them in the mass media. Producers show the steps of making cocaine as a normal job that should not be criminalised with happy, upbeat Spanish and Mexican music. Additionally, distributors show the distribution of drugs by posting videos on speedboats and small planes where they are relaxing and are happy. These varied factors add to the normalisation of the drug by implying the reality of the drug trade as opposed to the reality portrayed in the mass media. The hashtags that are found under most of the data set establish that posting content regarding cocaine is normal as content creators can post content using certain hashtags like 'coca', 'Dr0gs', 'sn0w' and 'cartel'. Consequently, this allows viewers to search for other videos under the same hashtag and become more aware of the reality of the cocaine trade. Cohen's theory of moral panic can be applied to this concern as the content publicised on TikTok questions the conventional societal norms and beliefs regarding the consumption and portrayal of cocaine. The normalisation of drug use and the favourable portrayal of the drug trade can be presented as a form of moral panic, where society reacts to and fears the potential consequences of this countercultural content.



An example of consumer videos receiving more than 200 likes.

The sense of pride and contented self-confidence

One theme that was established from the data set was the sense of pride and happiness felt by the content creators. It was evident workers of the cocaine trade do not feel embarrassed or worried when working as the posts show individuals proudly showing their tasks and happily posting their locations in the hashtags. Throughout the data set videos from distributors and producers, many hashtags included locations like Mexico and Colombia with heart emojis. This suggests workers are proud of what they do as they publicly share the location and are not afraid of being caught by higher authority through technology. The upbeat music that was used such as in producer videos 6, 13 and 27 implied to the viewer the sense of empowerment and self-assurance which can link to the content creators being proud and happy in what they do. This could be because many researchers are aware that Colombia and Mexico are the main producers and distributors globally (Magaña, 2023) therefore some individuals feel proud to be part of it. Distinct countries that traffic and produce cocaine have many social and poverty inequalities, therefore individuals posting their videos being happy and content can link to the feeling of accomplishment for having a job and surviving in areas of poverty. This creates a different narrative and perspective of the drug trade as it shows viewers that some workers are proud and happy to be a part of the illicit drug trade due to the different circumstances an individual can be in.

Distributor videos 16, 14, 11 and 13 highlight how content creators' part of the trade can use humour to illustrate they are not serious as they do not care about the criminality or legal sanctions of their actions. They are proud of what they do and want everyone to see them being part of the illicit drug trade. Consequently, it is evident from both distributors and producers that confidence can also arise from the fact they have been able to adapt to any issue that occurs when trafficking cocaine. For instance, distributor video 8 shows how the window of the truck is triple-glazed to prevent the windows from shattering when it has been hit. Producer video 4 demonstrates a tour of the coca field and laboratory where adjustments have been made to prevent unauthorised people from entering. These factors highlight how content creators want the narrative of being proud and confident to be established for viewers to see, which is a counter-narrative to what has been established by the mass media. Regarding social constructivism, TikTok content creators are forming a narrative that challenges the traditional portrayal of shame and criminality associated with the trade. By proudly displaying their tasks, locations and accomplishments, they are shaping a new perspective that emphasises empowerment and self-assurance. This portrayal mirrors their individual experiences but emphasises the social and economic factors that contribute to their involvement in the trade. Thus, social constructivism provides a lens through which we can comprehend how these creators are powerfully shaping the narrative and perspective of the illicit drug trade on TikTok.

Glamorisation

The glamorisation of cocaine has been prevalent throughout the different elements of the drug trade. It shows cocaine as a fun drug that is harmless and provides individuals with employment opportunities in areas where cocaine is produced and trafficked. The consumer videos from the data sets show content creators using cocaine as a party drug that is fun to consume with friends to have a good time. It also emphasises the consumption of cocaine on posts by creating relatable humorous content that viewers could relate to. This is highlighted in consumer video 16, whereby the content creator creates a funny video at a party where cocaine is thrown around and consumed. It uses happy upbeat American hip hop music to reflect the party atmosphere and context. This adds to the glamorisation of the drug as it creates a desirability of wanting to try the drug to the viewer as it shows

positive emotions. Consequently, consumer videos 21, 25 and 22 also highlight the content creators enjoying their experience with cocaine using upbeat music and jokes to keep the viewers engaged in the content.

It was also established from the data that distributors and producers glamorise their roles in the industry as a recruitment opportunity for viewers who enjoy their content and beliefs of being a worker in the cocaine industry. Posts from the producers of the cocaine trade included working outside in great weather, and picking coca leaves to happy music, which indicated to the viewer an easy job that is appealing and can generate an income. This also becomes beneficial for the content creator as it allows them to recruit individuals who can become workers. Therefore, glamorising working in the cocaine fields and laboratories shows the viewers they have a pleasant job which they can try. However, it could be argued that in some posts the criminality of being part of the cocaine trade is still evident, which shows the viewer the seriousness of the criminal act. For example, in distributor video 8 the worker is standing in a truck filled with cocaine waving a firearm around. This emphasises the danger of becoming a distributor in the cocaine trade. Another distributor post (distributor video 13) shows a worker being caught by the police; however, the narrative of the video uses humour to make light of the situation. This shapes the narrative and perspective of the illicit drug trade of cocaine as it glamorises job roles as well as makes the drug appealing to consume. Hence, it creates a counter-narrative of the drug trade as it shows a different perspective that is not established by society.



A screenshot of consumer video 16



A screenshot of consumer video 26 of individuals at a party who have taken cocaine.

A feeling of unity and solidarity

Distributors and producers of the cocaine trade have created a community on TikTok that receives support from viewers who back individuals by liking and commenting on the posts to gain views and stand in solidarity with the workers. This can be explained by observing the ways viewers engage with the posts. For example, from all the data, the range of likes varies from around 269k views, which highlights the popularity of the posts and viewers who enjoy the content being posted. Hashtags were quite common throughout the data set which allows the TikTok software to place all the posts with the same hashtag in one place, therefore individuals are able to access posts with similar interests. This creates a sense of community as individuals who search and use the same hashtags form a community for viewers to join when interacting with the video. This can also be shown to the content creators who are able to engage and interact with the viewers. Hence a community of content creators and viewers who share the same views on a topic like cocaine. Furthermore, this also allows content creators to see which videos are most popular, which allows them to post the same type of video to receive a high number of likes and comments. For example, when searching the hashtag 'c0k3' it was evident that it was used throughout the 90 TikTok posts and shows related videos with the same amount of likes and comments as the community that has been created interacts and supports the videos that are being posted. Due to the community that has been formed, new hashtags like 'CartelTok' or 'MafiaTok' were present to establish the category of people who watch these TikTok posts surrounding cocaine content.

A sense of unity and solidarity was also present in the TikTok posts which showed workers enjoying their time working together laughing and dancing. For instance, producer videos 14, 26 and 22 show individuals working together and helping each other to complete their tasks like collecting coca leaves, as well as in distributor videos 24, 30 and 29 where workers dance while the distribution of cocaine takes place. It shows the happy community side of workers that is not shown in the media. It implies that the workers are content with their job and their co-workers. They have created a community that they are grateful for and wish to share with viewers. This demonstrates how the sense of unity and solidarity between content creators and viewers has been created, which illustrates a different narrative that has been created about the illicit drug trade of cocaine.



A screenshot of producer video 14 where the illicit trade worker is collecting coca leaf.

Mirroring a different reality

A theme that has arisen when analysing the data is the sense of a different reality of the drug trade that is not shown in the mass media. The posts on TikTok show a unique way of life of individuals. A different reality is illustrated of how individuals add to the trafficking of cocaine globally without showing the criminal aspect. For instance, some workers post content of coca leaves and coca fields that seems like a general task; however, this adds to the process of producing and distributing cocaine globally. Additionally, distributors trafficking cocaine is illegal, though the posts on TikTok only show the transportation process. These posts focus on the excitement and adventure of the illicit drug trade without revealing the illegal nature of their actions. The portrayal of a different reality on TikTok regarding the drug trade can influence the viewer to form a distorted or limited judgement, as it ignores the criminal aspect and the harm that is associated with the drug trade. The reality of what

is shown by an individual's personal experience of being part of the cocaine trade does not correlate with what is in the media, hence allowing individuals to socially construct an understanding of how they perceive the illicit global trade of cocaine. The content on TikTok that gives a different reality of the drug trade aligns with both social constructivism and Cohen's theory of moral panic. Social constructivism implies that people's perceptions of reality are created by their social and cultural contexts, and the posts question the dominant narrative presented in the mass media. Similarly, Cohen's theory of moral panic can be utilised as the content creators on TikTok are reshaping the narrative of the drug trade, potentially leading to a normalisation and desensitisation towards its harmful aspects.

Inadequate enforcement of the law

TikTok posts suggest law enforcement is struggling to control the explicit display of cocaine-related content. This poses a challenge as it creates an environment where the drug trade can excel publicly. This can present a challenge to authority and its effectiveness in law enforcement. Distributors openly share videos involving firearms and drug transportation without facing consequences, portraying the drug trade as more powerful than the police. Videos like distributor 13, where a worker evades the police, and other videos showing open drug use in the UK, emphasise this view. The absence of penalties emboldens content creators, fostering a sense of superiority over law enforcement. This undermines efforts to combat drug consumption and aligns with Cohen's theory of moral panic, suggesting the dominance of the drug trade over authorities through unrestricted content on TikTok.

To conclude, the data set of TikTok videos by producers, consumers and distributors in the cocaine industry illustrates a different side to the trade, such as portraying cocaine farm workers as happy and enjoying their work. Social constructivism plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and perspective of the illicit drug trade, as constructing a new identity allows others to create a new perspective of individuals who contribute to the illegal trade of cocaine. The use of individuals posting their personal experiences creates a new narrative of the drug trade that demonstrates the reality of what is happening but does not match what is shown in research and mass media. The data set also emphasises the normalisation of drugs by

consumers of cocaine who post content on TikTok, including consuming cocaine at parties with friends and creating relatable memes. The amount of likes these videos receive indicates that the viewers enjoy the content they are being shown. Distributors and producers also add to the theme of normalising cocaine as their posts do not illustrate violent behaviour, which is usually linked to them in the mass media, making it seem like a regular job that shouldn't be criminalised. The TikTok posts humanise these individuals, presenting them as ordinary people with ordinary struggles. However, this contrasts with the sensationalised and criminalised portrayal that is often displayed in the media.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study aimed to illustrate how content creators on TikTok shape societal discourse and encourage the use of illegal drugs. This was achieved by collecting 90 TikTok posts by different elements of the cocaine production industry. This included distributors, producers and consumers. It used content analysis to create themes that help understand the narrative and perspective shown on TikTok by a variety of content creators globally.

Different themes and ideas were established that highlight how a perspective of the drug trade has been created. For instance, the distributors and producers of cocaine are proud and happy when showing content and their roles in the trade; however, consumers of cocaine show the perspective of a glamorised party drug that gives you a happy feeling. The narratives highlight that TikTok is not in line with the reality of what is shown in the news and information generated by researchers. This adds to the glamorisation of drugs that has been emphasised by Hardin (2020). Consequently, it demonstrates how social constructivism does play a significant role in how an individual shapes a reality using the information and content that is presented to them. Social content creators can influence and shape the public's collective knowledge and understanding. As acknowledged by Elcherath et al. (2011), the presentation of a different reality by TikTok users can challenge the dominant narrative. Individuals viewing TikTok videos do not demonstrate a sense

of panic over time (after prolonged exposure), which suggests that mass media has an impact on individual and societal perspectives regarding the use of illegal drugs such as cocaine and heroin. This has been achieved by portraying the use of cocaine with content of people being happy at parties consuming the drug. Findings from the study suggest that individuals' perceptions of reality are shaped by their social and cultural contexts, as they question the dominant narrative presented to them via mass media. Furthermore, Cohen's theory of moral panic can be utilised as the content creators on TikTok are reshaping the narrative of the drug trade, potentially leading to normalisation and desensitisation towards its illegal and harmful aspects. This information is beneficial in the criminology field as it allows action to be taken to ensure the safety of users and society. The implications of this study emphasise the need for greater distinct regulatory measures and awareness to prevent the normalisation of illegal activities on social media platforms, consequently safeguarding both users and society from the harmful effects of such content.

The findings of this research highlight how content creators who post certain content on TikTok can create a new perspective and narrative for the viewer due to the things they are exposed to in the videos. It can have positive effects that can raise awareness on issues as well as negative effects that can desensitise viewers to explicit content. This indicates that social media platforms like TikTok need stricter measures to ensure the safety of their users. The findings also suggest a new perspective of the drug trade, demonstrated by content creators. It illustrates that individuals from a poorer background who take the role of producing cocaine are happy because they have a job that allows them to provide for their family. It indicates the need for awareness of people who are struggling in countries that turn to criminal activity for income. This sense of panic in viewers can be used to pressure the need for aid and change. However, this contrasts with the sensationalised and criminalised portrayal that is often displayed in the media.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations in the study such as the number of posts that were collected to be analysed. To gain a deeper and better understanding, more TikTok posts could be analysed to highlight different narratives and perspectives of the cocaine drug trade that are shown on TikTok. Additionally, this study can be utilised by other researchers to gain more information on TikTok and the cocaine trade. This research is essential in the criminology field as it adds new research to contemporary issues that are also finding ways to develop. Therefore, new research can help prevent the illicit drug trade from becoming stronger. This study can be conducted on a wider demographic, using different countries to compare the themes that arise which can help higher authorities create ways to prevent the development of the cocaine trade globally. The study can also be adapted to analyse more than one social media platform as many individuals use different platforms to post a variety of content. This allows the researcher to compare more than one social media platform and how they contribute to the way content creators can shape the narrative and perspective of the illicit drug trade of cocaine using different platforms.

The study is beneficial to help raise awareness among high authorities like the government to help monitor the content posted on TikTok to ensure the safety of its users and improve the existing process that has been implemented. It has been proven that content creators can post explicit content without breaking any rules or guidelines on social media. Social media platform creators need to also be aware of how individuals use the platform, therefore should be informed to create a safer environment on social media for individuals. Many different age ranges utilise TikTok. This research enables the development of solutions to help control and stop the illicit drug trade of cocaine. The data that has been collected can be provided to organisations like law enforcement to sanction those who are breaking the law by posting the consumption of cocaine and those involved in the trade. This demonstrates to others the seriousness of the issues and the consequences that will occur. This study allows

researchers to apply the same framework to analyse other social media platforms, demonstrating how terrorist organisations spread their propaganda and exploit vulnerable individuals.

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