# Discourse Analysis in Videos of Criminal Groups in Ecuador: Standardization of Violence and Contradictions in their Discourses

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**Abstract.** This study examines the communicative strategies employed by Organized Criminal Groups (OCGs) in Ecuador through the analysis of their audiovisual communications disseminated via social media platforms. Amidst Ecuador's most violent period on record, OCGs utilize social media channels to convey messages directly to the public, reflecting contemporary communication practices akin to those of digital natives. Through critical discourse analysis and sentiment analysis conducted with NPL software, the study elucidates the emotional and rhetorical dimensions of OCG communications. Findings reveal a prevalence of anger in OCG messaging, alongside a juxtaposition of peaceful rhetoric with symbols of violence, such as weapons, indicating a complex interplay between messaging and underlying motivations. Moreover, the study highlights the role of OCG communications in projecting power dynamics and resistance to official authority, underscoring the need for nuanced analysis beyond surface-level interpretation.

**Keywords:** Organized Criminal Groups (OCGs), Communication Strategies, Social Media

## 1 Introduction

Over the last decade, the proliferation of social media platforms and the accessibility of digital technology have revolutionized the creation and dissemination of messages, a phenomenon extending even to organized crime groups. In this context, Ecuador has emerged as a notable arena where certain armed groups actively utilize social networks to publish videos and speeches, revealing a complex interplay between the normalization of violence and the image they seek to project to the public.

Digital tools and online platforms have provided these groups with a direct conduit to reach audiences, transcending geographical barriers and circumventing traditional state media control. The rapid virality of content on social networks facilitates broad

and swift propagation of these messages, potentially exerting a significant impact on the formation of opinions regarding violence and peace [1].

To comprehend this phenomenon, it is imperative to contextualize the current state of violence prevailing in the country. Ecuador has witnessed a marked escalation of violence persisting until early 2024—indeed, 2023 was notable for recording the highest number of homicides in the nation's history. According to reports from the National Police, 7,592 violent deaths were documented in 2023, resulting in a homicide rate exceeding 40 per 100,000 inhabitants, said the Ecuadorian prosecutor. These statistics reflect an almost 66% increase compared to figures reported in 2022.

## 2    Theoretical framework

Violence, as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, has been a recurring theme in media throughout history. According to the World Health Organization, "Violence is the intentional use of physical strength or real power, or as a threat against oneself, another person, a group, or community that results in the possibility of psychological damage, injuries, death, deprivation, or adverse development or deprivations." In its essence, violence encompasses a wide range of manifestations, spanning from physical aggression to more subtle forms of coercion and domination.

The representation of violence in media has significantly influenced the construction of imaginaries in public perception and the development of social narratives. While media serve as tools for information and communication, they also act as mirrors of society, both reflecting and, in some cases, amplifying violent dynamics. Throughout the decades, the portrayal of violence in media has varied from its glamorization and glorification to its condemnation and denunciation, with this evolution being shaped by sociocultural, technological, and political changes.

When addressing the actions of organized crime groups (GDO for its Spanish initials), we refer to "urban common violence, normally linked to social conditions of high exclusion and inequality, a phenomenon typically observed in Latin America" [2].

### 2.1    The entertainment society

The concept of the entertainment society, coined by the French philosopher Guy Debord, describes a society in which everyday life is dominated by the production and consumption of images. The spectacle progressively molds and eventually supplants reality [3]. Within this framework, young individuals who engage in disseminating violent narratives on social networks are also influenced by this dynamic. They aspire to represent themselves in a manner that mirrors the ideals of power, success, and recognition championed by iconic figures, such as the prominent drug lords often depicted in popular culture.

Under the sway of the entertainment culture, these young individuals frequently seek to emulate the image of organized crime leaders who have achieved widespread notoriety through conventional or digital media. They admire these figures' ostensible wealth, power, and impunity. The normalization of violence within their social circles

further reinforces this distorted perception of reality, where aggression and power serve as markers of status and respect.

In this context, the narratives propagated on social networks not only aim to glorify violence but also project an image of themselves that aligns with the standards of success and recognition propagated by the entertainment society. They utilize violence as a means to garner recognition and legitimacy within their communities, thereby perpetuating a cycle of glorification of destructive behaviors.

## 2.2    Panic psychology

The dissemination of terror and violence narratives by insurgent groups on social networks can profoundly impact panic psychology within the general population. Prolonged exposure to content that normalizes violence and portrays a perpetual state of threat can evoke intense emotional reactions, such as extreme fear and anxiety [4]. These narratives reinforce perceptions of insecurity and vulnerability, fostering a pervasive atmosphere of fear that may detrimentally affect individuals' psychological well-being. Moreover, continual exposure to violent imagery and rhetoric can lead to desensitization, wherein violence is perceived as commonplace and acceptable, thereby contributing to increased tolerance for aggression and violence within society.

Beyond its direct impact on individual psychology, horror narratives can influence collective behaviors and social dynamics within communities. The fear and anxiety induced by these narratives can fuel attitudes of mistrust towards others and promote social isolation. Individuals may become more inclined to adopt extreme self-protective measures, such as avoiding leaving their homes or steering clear of areas deemed unsafe, ultimately diminishing social cohesion and fostering a widespread sense of alienation.

## 2.3    Social imaginaries vs the soft power

Martel [5] defines soft power as the influence exerted on individuals through their culture, encompassing what they consume as entertainment, their surroundings, and their traditions. Martel contrasts soft power with hard power, which typically entails coercive imposition executed by uniformed authorities, such as the military or police. According to Martel, the media serve as the primary conduit through which soft power is frequently wielded.

In contrast, social imaginaries, as defined by Castoriadis [6], are social or historical constructs contingent upon the environment of each individual. Castoriadis describes a social imaginary as a social and historical construct comprising various institutions, norms, and symbols characteristic of a particular social group. Despite its imaginative nature, a social imaginary shapes reality by influencing and regulating individuals' actions, thereby exerting profound consequences in their daily lives [6].

Castoriadis underscores the significant influence individuals undergo in forming their social imaginaries, particularly through the content they consume, be it through traditional or non-traditional media channels. When Castoriadis emphasizes the "imaginative character" of social imaginaries, he does not imply their fictional nature but

rather suggests that individuals shape their behavior based on their perception of reality rather than its objective parameters. Consequently, as Cegarra [7] posits, "Imagination is representative, the imaginary is interpretative". Each society, and indeed each individual, interprets the world differently, their perceptions influenced by historical, social, or cultural factors. Thus, it is expected that individuals' perceptions of their environment will vary, with social imaginaries encapsulating the diverse interpretations of reality within a general structure.

## 2.4     Communicative practices of the new generations

From the inception of the Network Society [8] to the present, the modes of human communication have evolved, culminating in the widespread use of new social media platforms, where immediacy plays a pivotal role in societal communication priorities. The categorization of users into age groups, as proposed by digital communication theorists like Piscitelli [9], initially distinguished between digital natives and migrants. However, new generational subdivisions have emerged regarding their online navigation habits. Ulloa-López and Gómez [10] argue that users are considered digital natives not solely based on age but rather on their access to technology, contingent upon the infrastructure provided by governments and their socioeconomic environments.

In this evolutionary process, the concept of the prosumer [11] has emerged, defining a consumer who not only consumes content from mainstream media but also actively creates content for others. Scolari highlights the shift in communication dynamics towards a many-to-many relationship. Moreover, the emergence of the Network State, as mentioned by Castells [12], is noteworthy as it signifies that communication is no longer monopolized solely by political power entities such as governments; rather, it is generated by all citizens, who are now considered prosumers.

Consequently, the communicative practices of prosumers are characterized by their horizontal nature, constituting a continuous flow of communication on topics of interest to various population groups. These practices unfold in real-time across diverse subjects, involving a plethora of participants, including governments, citizens, the masses, social groups, and even irregular groups. These digital communicative practices signify the transition of the public sphere, as conceptualized by John B. Habermas [13], from traditional agoras to digital spheres represented by social networks, where discussions on current issues transpire.

## 2.5     ADP vs. discourse analysis

(...) politicians are not the only participants in the field of politics. From the interactional point of view of discourse analysis, we should also include the various receptors of political communicative events, such as people, the people, citizens, the "masses," and other groups or categories. Once we place politics and its speeches in the public sphere, many other participants in political communication appear on stage [14].

Van Dick [15] highlights that political pronouncements are not exclusive actions of government officials who are elected by popular vote. The theorist highlights that since the conceptualization of the public sphere, citizens, the masses, professionals, young

people, and other groups that are part of society make politics; therefore, political discourse becomes an inexhaustible source of study because it can be analyzed not only as an instrument of formal power but from other angles. This means that political statements can be made by social groups, trade union movements, civil society, and groups that operate irregularly but have influence in society.

In this way, this study focuses on the critical analysis of discourse in order to study the forms of reproduction of the message of political power, domination, and abuse of power through discourse. A discourse that can be transmitted from various channels, for example, social networks.

Likewise, various forms of resistance or displays of power against forms of formal discursive power are analyzed. Therefore, the analysis is based on discursiveness and the consequences of political and social inequality that results from domination [16]. In this sense, the authors agree that the theoretical bases exist for critical discourse analysis to be carried out by social actors who are not part of the formal power or who are ordinary citizens because they are part of a social system.

## 3    Method

The study has a mixed methodological design and has an interpretivist paradigm. Due to its scope, the research is descriptive [15]. Likewise, the research method is netnography [17; 18] because researchers have observed digital communities in which content from organized crime groups is published during the second half of 2023. To implement the methodological design, several non-participant observation exercises [19] in the previously specified period were used to determine the communication practices of the Organized Crime Groups -GDO- of Ecuador. The publication of four videos of the groups that are the subject of our investigation was recorded. From this, a critical analysis of political discourse was implemented, highlighting the concept that members of the society make political pronouncements and are not exclusive to partisan groups or government officials, as proposed by Van Dijk. Likewise, a semiotic analysis of the videos was carried out to identify chains of signifiers, symbolism, and signs. Also, an analysis of the emotions and feelings was carried out, which was measured from the dialogues that were broadcast in the videos transmitted by the spokespersons of the GDOs that operate in Guayaquil.

Regarding the quantitative analysis, the Communication Evaluation Model 2.0 in the New social media was used to evaluate political communication on social networks. Therefore, GDO's communication, its updates, the political situation surrounding its messages, and the staging of its spokespersons are analyzed. As part of the analysis of the videos, natural language processing (NLP) technology was used, a branch of artificial intelligence that focuses on the interaction between computers and human language, whose objective is to allow machines to understand, interpret, and generate human language. In this context, Pysentimiento, an NLP model trained to examine emotions and feelings using linguistic analysis techniques and machine learning algorithms [21], was used. It is important to note that the sample of videos chosen for this study was determined to the extent that they had the greatest number of interactions compared

to the other videos published in the second half of 2023. This was because it was the most violent in the country due to the car bomb attacks that were recorded in the period mentioned above and due to official crime data.

## 4    Results

Data reported by the online newspaper Primicias [20] identify criminal gangs such as the Choneros, Lobos, and Tiguerones as the primary perpetrators of extortion in the city of Guayaquil. An analysis conducted by the National Police indicates that the Tiguerones are linked to 36% of reported cases, while both the Choneros and Lobos are implicated in 14% of these crimes reported in Ecuador's most populous city.

This study focuses on analyzing videos produced and disseminated by these recognized gangs via social networks in the context of the events that occurred between July and December 2023. Both the Tiguerones and the Lobos shared collective videos. Regarding the Choneros, particular attention was drawn to the involvement of Adolfo Macías, also known as "Fito," the leader of this organization, who was incarcerated at the time of the videos' release. Additionally, another video under scrutiny that garnered media attention featured the alias "Ben 10," leader of the "Chone Killers," a faction associated with the Choneros and recognized as their armed branch [21]. These videos analyzed were widely disseminated across various social media platforms, as well as through traditional media channels.

### 4.1    Analysis with Pysentimiento NPL software

In the four videos analyzed, a consistent pattern emerges where each begins by addressing the "Ecuadorian people." Notably, only the leaders serve as spokespeople, and in two of the videos [8], the leaders are introduced with their full names, while in the remaining videos, they are identified solely by their aliases, as recognized within their groups.

Upon conducting measurements with the Pysentimiento NPL software, a prevailing sentiment of anger is discernible in videos 1, 2, and 3, with scores exceeding 60 percent. Conversely, in video 4, the spokesperson, identified as alias Ben10, expresses sadness as the dominant emotion (Fig. 2).
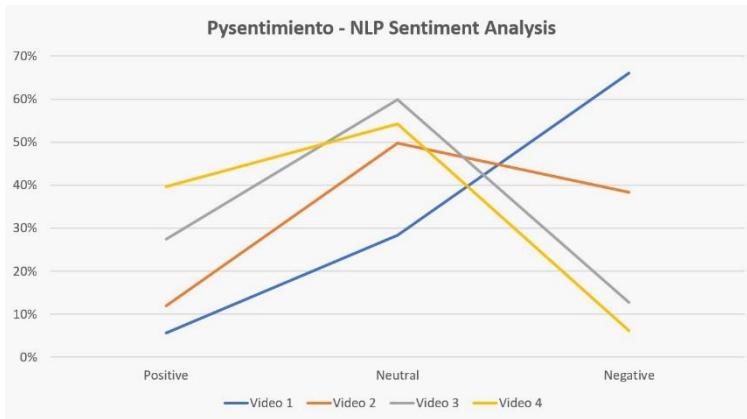
**Fig. 1.** NLP Sentiment Analysis of the videos.
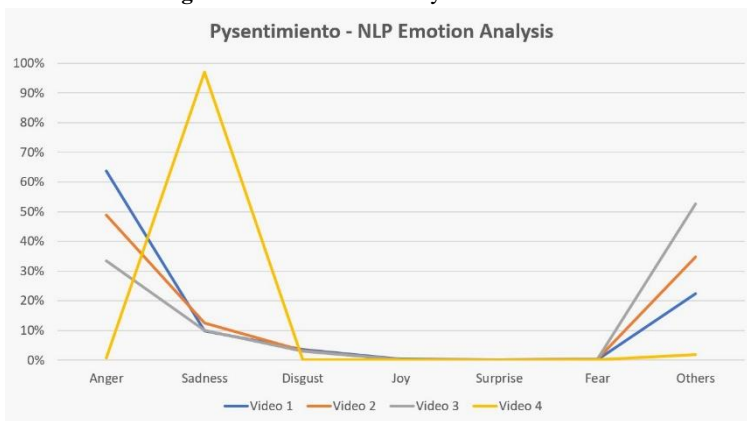


**Fig. 2.** NPL Emotion analysis of videos.

Transcription: Good evening, Ecuadorian people. This is Antonio Camacho, better known as Ben 10. Today, July 26th, 2023, I deeply regret what is happening in the country, what is happening to many innocent people. From my side and from the organization, there will be no more trouble in the streets, no more chaos. Likewise, I want the other organizations to listen: I don't want any more problems. The Eagles, the Latin Kings, Fatales, the Tiguerones, the Wolves, I don't want any more problems. I want peace, and I want all Ecuadorian citizens to be at peace. From my side, I will make a total change, and I hope the other organizations do the same. Thank you very much [22].

Ben10 is the most powerful band leader in Durán, the Chone Killers In the excerpt provided, it's highlighted that Ben10 holds a significant position as the foremost leader of the Chone Killers, operating in Durán, a suburb of Guayaquil, Ecuador's most populous and notoriously violent city. The quantitative analysis of Ben10's communication indicates a prevalence of neutral sentiments at 54%, with positive emotions at 40% and negative feelings at 6%.

Additionally, in the video featuring the self-identified GDO Los Lobos [23], a dominance of both emotions and negative sentiments is observed. According to the natural language processing analysis, anger constitutes 66% of the expressed sentiment, while negative feelings are recorded at 60% (Fig.1 y 2).

Transcription: Good evening, Ecuadorian people. Today, Tuesday, July 25th, on behalf of our supreme leader, the double emperor, we, the Tiguerones, due to the recent events in our country, feel morally obligated to make a peace pact with the Wolves, Eagles, Fatales, Choneros, Ben 10, Latin King, M18, R7. This is to seek a better future for the Ecuadorian people. With this treaty, we also put an end to extortions, "vaccines," and violent deaths to improve living conditions for Ecuadorian citizens. Alongside the national police, as part of our peace treaty, we are surrendering these weapons to demonstrate our commitment to ending the war for the Ecuadorian people [9].

In Communication Ecuador 2 [24], a video produced by the Organized Criminal Group (OCG) self-styled "Los Tiguerones" highlights the prevalence of the sentiment of anger at 48%. This video stands out from others due to the predominance of neutral feelings. It is notable that the leader of the OCG identifies himself solely by his alias, omitting his name and surname.

On the other hand, in Communication Ecuador 3 [25], the leader of the OCG "Choneros" communicates a peace agreement among the operational criminal groups in the country. In this case, the leader identifies himself as Adolfo Macías. According to the analysis of the software used, a predominance of neutral feelings is observed, exceeding 60%, while emotions show a prevalence of anger, albeit to a lesser extent, barely 30%. This contrasts with the communications of the other criminal groups under study.

The analysis conducted through NLP reveals a significant discrepancy between the content of the videos, which suggests a discourse of peace, disarmament, and commitment to citizen security, and the underlying feelings and emotions identified in the transcripts. Despite the seemingly positive message, neutral and negative feelings predominate in the analysis, as well as emotions such as anger, sadness, and others. This discrepancy between the explicit message and the underlying emotions highlights the communicative shortcomings of these criminal organizations, indicating a possible lack of authenticity in their declared intentions and a disconnect between their words and their actual actions. This finding underscores the importance of language analysis not only at a superficial level but also in its emotional and subjective dimension, for a more complete and accurate understanding of human communication.

## 4.2    Critical Discourse Analysis

The Organized Criminal Groups (OCGs) are criminal organizations with significant operational power that have operated in Ecuador in recent years. However, the oldest gang is the OCG identified as Los Choneros, which has been operating for over 25 years in the country. The pronouncements of the criminal groups occur in the most violent year in Ecuador's history. Moreover, they do so from the area with the highest

crime rate, such as Zone 8, which is how the Ecuadorian Police identifies the territory encompassing Guayaquil, Durán, and Samborondón. By June, Ecuador, but especially Zone 8, had already faced car bombings, murders, extortions, and a resurgence in kidnappings.

In this context, the criminal groups address the country through social media, as they state in the openings of their videos. The spokespersons of the OCGs release their videos amid a backdrop of violence that the country had been experiencing for months. Their pronouncement is political because they are part of the political sphere deliberately, as they are part of society, and their actions have repercussions in society. During those months, cities like Guayaquil reverted to virtual educational and work activities due to the violent attacks generated by criminal groups.

The communication channel of the OCGs is nothing more than the consequence of the communicative practices of the new audiences. Official data from the Government of Ecuador [26] reflect that the detainees in the country's prisons are mostly young people under 35 years old, i.e., millennials. While it is true that the socioeconomic environment of individuals will be determinant for whether they are digital natives or not, in the case of violence in Ecuador, information was transmitted from prisons through social media until 2023. This means that horizontal communication, as referred to by Castells from a Network state, is present in this case.

From a profound analysis of the videos, it can be connoted that the audiovisual capsules allow revealing communicative details that must be highlighted. The use of a table to legitimize the message, similar to presidential or official communications, with a central emitter accompanied by people showing support behind them, connotes a level of control and a sense of governance by these organizations. In this context, these entities present themselves as the only ones capable of guaranteeing security, adopting an authoritative role that attempts to "calm the people." These elements reveal a communicative strategy designed to convey the legitimation of the control they exercise, despite the evident contradictions between the message and reality.

Another crucial aspect of the videos is the presence of weapons in the scene, contrasting with the message of peace, which suggests a duality between peaceful rhetoric and violent reality. This contrast is prominently manifested in the video produced by the Wolves [9], where members of the organization appear in the background of the emitter, facing away and wearing white shirts for most of the footage. However, towards the end of the video, they remove their shirts revealing black shirts and brandishing weapons in a threatening attitude, while expressing, "We want a sovereign, free, and peaceful country, sincerely the Wolves, long live peace!" This action may represent a double-message tactic, where the organization attempts to convey an image of peace and tranquility while, at the same time, demonstrating its capacity and willingness to resort to violence if necessary.

The weapons, in this context, act as a powerful symbol of coercion and control, underscoring the authority of the organization and its ability to impose its will through force if necessary. The combination of these elements with the verbal message of peace creates a striking contradiction that can be interpreted as an attempt at emotional manipulation or a strategy to confuse or disorient the audience.

## 5      Conclusions

The fact that the OCGs transmit their communications through audiovisual capsules and social media is a communicative practice coherent with their age group and represents direct communication without intermediaries, much like the new generations of digital natives. Additionally, it also responds to a democratization of content because everyone can create and transmit content.

By transmitting their messages, the OCGs bring forth feelings and emotions that have been analyzed as objectively as possible, using software. This analysis has detected anger as the predominant emotion in most cases. Additionally, a neutral sentiment has been detected in the leader of Ecuador's oldest gang, indicating effective communication from the spokesperson. However, this does not necessarily imply a communication strategy in either case.

From the perspective of political discourse analysis, it is valid to analyze the discourse of other political sectors beyond government officials or candidates for public office. It is important to analyze the discourse of other actors in society, such as the OCGs. From this standpoint, it is determined that the communications have a way of projecting their messages that is efficient due to their reach and clarity, but deficient in the operationalization of their promises.

In this regard, there is an abuse of power from the media because there is a message proposing peace but allowing for a connotation of more violence due to the staging of the spokespersons, such as the display of signs and symbols typical of a culture of violence, such as weapons.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that the fact that the OCGs' spokespersons speak out on social media from prisons, with weapons, may be a display of resistance to official or governmental power, as suggested by the visual discourse composition in the audiovisual capsules.

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