Female narrative subversions in the 'narcoreality show' *Cartel Crew*

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Abstract: *This article analyses the depiction of female characters on the reality show Cartel Crew, which was broadcast on the US cable network VH1. For this analysis, a summary sheet was developed as a methodological instrument, with categories reflecting sociodemographic aspects and other elements related to relationships, violence, and objectification/sexualisation. These categories help to identify the level of empowerment female characters are given. The study has found that the autonomy and agency of leading female characters in this reality show continue to be mostly mediated by men, even when the women attain positions of power. The findings suggest that women continue to be assigned a particular role defined by a male gaze. While that role has been reconfigured to appear more fashionable and universally appealing, it cannot conceal the signs of the patriarchal vision that informs these productions.*
Keywords: *Narco-culture; Narrative; Reality show; Stereotypes; Women.*

Subversões narrativas femininas no 'narcoreality show' Cartel Crew
Resumo: *Este artigo analisa a representação de personagens femininas no reality show Cartel Crew, transmitido na rede de cabo dos EUA VH1. Para esta análise, foi desenvolvida uma folha de resumo com categorias que refletem aspetos sociodemográficos e outros elementos relacionados com as relações, a violência e a objectificação/sexualização. Estas categorias ajudam a identificar o nível de empoderamento das personagens femininas. O estudo descobriu que a agência das personagens femininas continuam a ser mediadas maioritariamente por homens, mesmo quando as mulheres alcançam posições de poder. As conclusões acima sugerem que as mulheres continuam a ser atribuídas a um papel específico definido por um olhar masculino. Embora esse papel tenha sido reconfigurado para parecer mais elegante e universalmente apelativo, não pode esconder os sinais da visão patriarcal da estas produções.*
Palavras-chave: *Narco-cultura, narrativa, reality show, estereótipos, mulheres.*

Subversiones narrativas femeninas en el 'narcoreality' Cartel Crew
Resumen: *El presente artículo analiza la representación de los personajes femenino en el formato de telerrealidad Cartel Crew, de la cadena estadounidense VH1. Para el análisis hemos desarrollado como instrumento metodológico una ficha con categorías donde se reflejan aspectos sociodemográficos y otros ítems relacionados con el protagonismo, su mundo relacional, la violencia y cosificación/sexualización del personaje femenino. Estas categorías nos permiten conocer el nivel de empoderamiento. El análisis nos permite establecer que la autonomía de las protagonistas sigue mayoritariamente mediatizada por el hombre, a pesar de que alcancen ciertas posiciones de poder. Se sigue, de este modo, demandando un papel determinado a la mujer, bajo una mirada masculina que se ha reconfigurado para ser elegante y universal, pero que no puede esconder las huellas de la visión patriarcal de estos productos.*
Palabras clave: *Narco-cultura, narrativa, reality show, estereotipos, mujeres.*

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a boom in film and television productions about the world of drug cartels (Alberto Alejandro ALZATE GIRALDO; César Alonso CARDONA CANO; Pedro Felipe DÍAZ ARENAS, 2021), consolidating the trend that began with the 'narcocinema' of the 1990s (Yolanda MERCADER, 2012) and the narco-telenovelas (or 'narconovelas') of the early 2000s (Karina TIZNADO ARMENTA, 2017).

Set in the context of "capitalist modernity" (Günther MAIHOLD; Rosa María SAUTER DE MAIHOLD, 2012, p. 65), the depiction of the lifestyle of drug barons has become a popular phenomenon on streaming platforms, social media and YouTube channels. These new productions have joined traditional forms such as 'narcoliterature' (María CARPIO-MANICKAM, 2020; Lise DEMEYER, 2016, Felipe OLIVER, 2012) and the music genre known as the 'narcocorrido' (Miguel Ángel CABAÑAS, 2008; Juan Carlos RAMÍREZ-PIMIENTA, 2010), with fiction and non-fiction stories about cartel life that have (re)constructed the understanding of the drug trade in the collective imagination. As América Tonantzin Becerra Romero (2018) suggests, it is a form of expression that reflects the consolidation and commercial success of these contemporary narrative formulas because "the stories now form part of consumers' everyday lives" (p. 17) and because the "narco way of life", as Mauricio De Bragança (2015) calls it, is being depicted in numerous mass media productions.

Beyond the potential ethical implications of these discourses and their influence on society in terms of their trivialisation of violence and mythologising of drug cartels (CARPIO-MANICKAM, 2020; Andrés Fernando OROZCO MACÍAS, 2021; Ainhoa VÁSQUEZ MEJÍAS, 2020a), Ainhoa Vásquez Mejías and Ingrid Urgelles Latorre (2022) make a convincing argument that 'narco' style has turned into an object of fashion, casting a spotlight on the peripheral, marginal world of organised crime in Latin America. For these two authors, 'narcoculture' is "a cultural device that has accumulated considerable capital, building biopolitical ideals of gender and sexuality, attracting fans […] [and] opening up legal business niches through marketing" (p. 40). It has also helped to shift the drug trade from a criminal to a legal context, defining the space of the cartels as 'narco-business' corporations operating in the world of high finance.

The information and entertainment industry's interest in the 'narcoculture' phenomenon needs to be understood in the context of the spectacular nature of the cartel lifestyle (Josefina HERNÁNDEZ TÉLLEZ; Cynthia PECH SALVADOR, 2020, p. 21) and the receptiveness of audiences to role models of quick success based on the brutal and gratuitous use of violence (Toby MILLER; Marta MILENA BARRIOS; Jesús ARROYAVE, 2019, p. 352). To support this theory, Sayak Valencia and Katia Sepúlveda (2016) argue that the mass production of 'narco-productions' is sustained by the fascination with violence among spectators who are attracted to the glamorous life of the drug baron and who overlook the suffering of the victims that the drug trade leaves in its wake. For Cabañas (2012), "[t]hey create a global voyeur-audience that 'enter' the secret world of the drug traffickers and the women involved with them" (p. 75).

Spectators are seduced into learning about – and imitating – the drug lords' lives, family, aesthetic and ethical tastes, etc., and the media has found a way of profiting off this. And because the final product is shown on streaming or social media platforms, it is targeted at all audiences, both those who are critical of the drug trade and those who normalise it by accepting it as a viable way out for people living in situations of extreme poverty (CABAÑAS, 2012, pp. 82-83).

This adaptability is achieved by means of some easily identifiable visual motifs that ensure the commercial success of these productions. The result is a depiction of the drug trade that bears the 'Made in America' seal (Polit, in VÁSQUEZ MEJÍAS; URGELLES LATORRE, 2022, p. 24), which makes these products suitable for an international audience (Marina S. JORGE, 2021a, p. 3). Supporting this idea, Cabañas (2014) argues that cultural expressions of the 'narco lifestyle' are taken out of the local context (eliminating the location's most characteristic features) and inserted into a transnational environment that is easily identifiable to any consumer (p. 9).

Women in traditional visual depictions of the 'narco world'

The preliminary considerations outlined above in relation to the global nature of the 'narcoculture' phenomenon in film and television are essential for understanding the capitalist rationalisation of the drug trade identified by some authors (CABAÑAS, 2014, p. 11) as a key factor influencing the inclusion of new, apparently transgressive female characters who challenge the roles traditionally assigned by the narcoculture.

In the new context of quality television, the need to create consumer products that are accessible to all audiences – especially audiences unfamiliar with the world of the cartels, including the role of women in that world – is the reason for the appearance of female characters in leading roles, depicted as heroes in their work as hitwomen or cartel bosses: "Women who, in the context of organised crime, also break traditional paradigms and invade territories formerly believed to be the exclusive domain of men" (Arturo SANTAMARÍA GÓMEZ, 2012, p. 17). These

depictions bring to the screen what was already a reality of day-to-day life in the drug trade. The fact that women have been active participants in these organised crime networks since the beginning of the twentieth century has been documented in numerous studies (Juan Antonio FERNÁNDEZ, 2014; SANTAMARÍA GÓMEZ, 2012; Marisol FRANCO DÍAZ, 2015), although it has not always been reflected in cultural products. Dina Siegel (2014) published a very interesting study that identifies a range of socioeconomic factors that offer a much more complex picture of the involvement of women in drug trafficking. The conversion of the narcoculture into a transnational business, the creation of new and profitable markets, the fascination of women with becoming successful and powerful figures in this culture, and the possibility of rebelling against a middle-class lifestyle should also be considered by researchers seeking to offer a study that is sensitive to the contemporary reality. Added to these factors are changes occurring to the organisational structure of the cartels themselves. On this point, both Linda M. Mais (2013) and Elsa Ivette Jiménez Valdez (2014) talk about the need for constant recruitment of new employees in a sector where so many (including bosses) end up dead or behind bars.

While recognising that women can become cartel bosses based on their own merits (Alejandra LEÓN OLVERA, 2019, p. 125), and of their own volition without needing a male mentor to introduce them to the business (TIZNADO ARMENTA, 2017, p. 208), either as a way out of a situation of marginalisation and poverty or simply for the thrill of taking part in organised crime (Howard CAMPBELL, 2008, pp. 248-250), this article adopts the perspective of Jorge (2021a; 2021b), who argues that the subversion that these women represent on a symbolic level is based on purely economic interests and not on a real desire for emancipation. As Jorge points out, these film and television productions "seek to bring to narconarratives feminist stances by making use of strong, competent and determined female characters who wish to conquer a place of their own and who have individual projects of ascension to power and wealth" (2021a, p. 159).

Women's agency, empowerment and independence are thus merely a fallacy used to ensure mass consumption by an international audience that is sensitive to the changes that women have experienced in contemporary societies and that cannot accept the traditional patterns of female representation in productions about the narcoculture. Moreover, as Jorge points out, the creators of these productions seek to attract female viewers by offering them protagonists they can identify with.

These new female protagonists are depicted as holding decision-making power and are no longer represented solely in the private space of the home. They no longer seek to be valued purely for their looks or their role as mothers, although they consciously use their bodies as sexual capital to improve their living conditions (LEÓN OLVERA, 2019; 2022). Yet despite this supposed openness to a contemporary representation of women, a new form of conventionalism is imposed in the traits and interests of these women that continues to reinforce the patriarchal hegemony of the 'narco world' (Isis GIRALDO, 2015).

Why should this be so? Essentially, because the context in which they are able to make decisions is never questioned. As a result, the structure of oppression represented by the cartel remains unchanged, regardless of whether the cartel boss is a man or a woman who, in any case, has assumed and internalised distinctly masculine qualities in order to reach the top of the hierarchy. Campbell (2008, p. 237), for example, describes this reality in terms of the "macha style" of the female drug lords (or 'drug ladies'). Gabrielle Pannetier Leboeuf (2022) and Jennifer C. Dunn and Rogelia Lily Ibarra (2015, p. 135) define them as "masculine queens", Tiznado Armenta (2017, p. 197) as "phallic women" of post-feminism, and Vásquez Mejías (2016, n. p.) as "women with male thoughts but female feelings." All these women imitate patriarchal models of violent and oppressive behaviour as qualities necessary for admission into a space traditionally occupied exclusively by men.

On this point, Silvia Ruiz Tresgallo (2017) argues that "far from being liberated, the woman ends up trapped in a restrictive framework in which she can only legitimise her hegemony by means of a hypermasculine performance" (p. 163). This argument is supported by Anajilda Mondaca Cota, Gloria Magdalena Cuamea Lizárraga and Rocío del Carmen Payares Flores (2015, p. 176), who assert that in this new representation, women succumb to the same hedonism and hyper-consumerism engaged in by their male counterparts. Similarly, Vásquez Mejías (2020b, p. 16) describes these women as victimisers who perpetrate violence on men, but also on other women, as an act of emotional deviation, naturalising and legitimising this tool of domination.

The subversion is thus limited to the level of the performative, because the woman's image is still constructed within the parameters of a masculine system. This theory calls into question the value of the potential counternarratives offered by these new ways of depicting women because the woman, although more violent and strong-willed, is ultimately "always subordinate to a dominant male" (VÁSQUEZ MEJÍAS, 2020a, p. 43). In this way, although they break free of certain traditional roles (such as motherhood), the patterns of domination remain largely unchanged.

Methodology

These theoretical considerations point to the need to expand the analysis of depictions of women to other film and television productions, in order to confirm whether such subversions occur in other 'narcocultural' products with empowered female characters that have not been previously explored, or whether they continue to depict women from the perspective of a male gaze that confines them to passiveness and objectification. For this study, the genre of reality TV was chosen, given that this genre constitutes a new vehicle for reaching transnational markets and global audiences. Specifically, the 'narcoreality' series *Cartel Crew*, broadcast by VH1, was selected for analysis. This series, which premièred on 1 January 2019 and ran for three seasons, follows eight individuals living in Miami who have family ties to drug trade. Packaged in a pleasant and aesthetically engaging way, *Cartel Crew* "posits an alternative reality where hegemonic cultural values are magnified with the intention of teaching viewers how they should behave in their reality" (Ainhoa VÁSQUEZ MEJÍAS; Andrés AGUILAR ROSALES, 2022, p. 236). As Lara Escudero Manchado and José Antonio Gabelas Barroso (2016) suggest, "reality television combines ingredients that are accepted by a wide and diverse range of TV viewers" (p. 10) to establish a "cognitive and emotional relationship' with the audience" (p. 19).

Regarding the reality show format, Francisco Perales (2011, p. 120) defines them as a program in which non-professional actors react in a spontaneous way, trying to compete between them. There is an attempt to portray everyday life in a group of people, although there are clearly scripts by the production team in order to trigger conflicts or situations for dramatisation purposes. Authors have criticized the ethics of a reality show ever since before *Cartel Crew*. Jelle Mast (2016, p. 16) stated that these unprofessional actors: their personaes, reputations and experiences are commodified; "it treats humans as mere means to an end-in this case, commercial success in a competitive media environment."

It is important to point out that one of the main interests in the case of *Cartel Crew* is that not only is a reality show that continues the misrepresentation, intrusion and humiliation that Mast pointed out in her article, but also has an apologetic narrative for organised crime and the stereotyping of Latin American communities in a highly conservative, right-wing and migrant-discriminative society as is Florida, United States. This brings a new perspective in theorizing the problems of reality shows.

For the analysis of the female characters in *Cartel Crew*, a summary sheet was developed as a methodological instrument – taking the work of Fátima Arranz Lozano (2020) as a reference – with categories reflecting sociodemographic aspects and other elements related to character prominence, relationships, violence (perpetrated by men on women and between women), and objectification/sexualisation. These categories help to identify the level of agency and empowerment female characters are given in social, private, economic, and physical terms.

Chart 1.- Summary sheet with categories of methodological instrument explained.

Item	**Application in the instrument**
Name of character	Given name and surname, nickname
Episodes featuring character	Episode Number/Season Number
Demographics	Age, origin, current occupation, marital status, family
Relationship to cartel	What is the character's relationship to the cartel?
Experience in cartel	Did the character work for the cartel? What did they do? Were they ever arrested or sentenced?
Economic or financial situation	What is their socioeconomic level? Is their money their own or inherited? What kind of lifestyle are they shown living?
Role	Protagonist or antagonist, supporting or leading role in the story of the episode
Initiative/Agency	What are their actions, projects or decisions during the episode? Which ones are by their own initiative or effort? Where does their financial support come from, if needed?
Relationships	Significant interactions in the episode: what emotions are reflected in this interaction? Is the relationship positive (friendly, caring, honest, romantic) or negative (enmity, competition, rivalry, dishonesty)?
Family relationships	Significant interactions with family members (including characters who are now dead, missing, or in prison, or who do not appear in the series or episode)

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Couples	Marital status and interaction with partner during episode
Sexual relations	Is there any mention, suggestion or depiction of the character having sexual relations during the episode? With whom? What sexual orientation is indicated?
Sexual objectification of women	Is there any element of clothing/gestures/postures or comments that may reflect the sexual objectification of the character?
Sexism	Does the character have any verbal expressions/attitudes/behaviours suggestive of a belief that men are superior to women? Is there another character who denigrates, belittles or dismisses the character because she is a woman? How?
Violence by women	Is there any depiction of an act of physical/verbal/non-verbal violence against another person? Explain the context and the violence.
Violence and aggression against women	Is there any act of physical/verbal/non-verbal violence against the character? Explain the context and the violence.
Other observations	

Source: Prepared by authors.
#SoEveryoneCanSee: Black and white summary sheet with two columns and eighteen rows. On the left we can access different items related to economic/social and demographic situation (relationship to and experience in the cartel, financial situation), relationships (family, couple, friends), violence acts perpetrated by characters (violence by and against women), and objectification/sexualisation (clothing/gestures/postures or comments that may reflect the sexual objectification), while the right column contains a brief description of these items.
Nine characters were identified for the study: Marie Ramírez-D'Arellano, Katie 'Tatu Baby' Flores, Stephanie Acevedo, Nicole Zavala, Dayana Castellanos, Salomé 'Betty Idol' Jackson, Ali Cabrera Tapia, Ivette Saucedo and Emma Coronel Aispuro (who appears as a guest on the show).

Results

One of the first points that should be highlighted when analysing the characters' relationship and/or experience with the cartels is that with the exception of Ivette Saucedo, all the female characters appearing in *Cartel Crew* have had or currently have an emotional connection to a male character who works or has worked actively in the drug trade. Marie Ramírez was born and raised in Little Havana. Her father was involved in the drug trade in Miami and spent some time in prison, as did her mother. Her partner is Michael Blanco, the son of Griselda Blanco, known as the Cocaine Queen.[1] Stephanie Acevedo's father is one of the kingpins of the Miami Narco Ring, while Kat Flores's father worked for Pablo Escobar and was killed when she was four years old. Flores is also in a romantic relationship with Eddie Soto, who has served time in prison for drug trafficking. Although she was raised in Miami, Nicole Zavala's family was associated with the Colombian cartel. Salomé Jackson moved to Miami to be close to her father, who is also in prison. Ali Cabrera's family was associated with the Dominican Republic cartel. Her boyfriend was killed a few months prior to the start of the first season, and at the beginning of the third season she talks about a cousin who was killed because he was suspected of being an informer. Finally, Emma Coronel Aispuro, who makes a guest appearance in the second season of *Cartel Crew*, is the third wife of Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán, the leader of Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel until his extradition to the United States in 2017. This character still had connections with the drug trade through her father and two of her brothers, in prison, and her uncle, Ignacio Coronel, also known as the 'King of Crystal', considered the third most senior member of the Sinaloa Cartel (EXPANSIÓN POLÍTICA, 2021).

As the above information shows, the first symbolic association that occurs between these women and the drug world arises from an emotional, sexual or family relationship with a man. 'Narcowives', 'narcomothers', 'narcodaughters', regular and occasional lovers, all dependent on a male character (Catalina GALLARDO ARENAS, 2022, p. 90; JIMÉNEZ VALDEZ, 2014, p. 112), have traditionally adopted a passive, complaisant role in most products of narcoculture, expressed in the form of submission, sacrifice and self-denial. These women are generally portrayed as "naive, compassionate, consoling, […] sensitive, […] caring, sweet, kind, childish, understanding, loyal,

[1] Also known as 'The Godmother', Griselda Blanco was one of the most powerful women in the drug trade (VÁSQUEZ MEJÍAS; URGELLES LATORRE, 2022, p. 19). She was a woman with a violent history (GIRALDO discusses a biography published about her that claims she killed 250 people, including her husbands). Alejandra León Olvera (2022) identifies Blanco as a 'low profile' cartel boss who didn't need to use her body or her relationships with men to build her own empire. Although she was killed in 2012, Griselda Blanco makes her presence felt in Cartel Crew. She is the inspiration for the clothing brand Pure Blanco, and Michael's vulnerability is due to his mother's influence. Moreover, her mother's legacy informs many of his decisions, such as his insistence on signing a prenuptial agreement or his approval of the use of firearms.

happy, affectionate, soft-spoken, shy, fragile, inclined to give in, and sensitive to other peoples' needs" (MERCADER, 2012, p. 227).

However, the female participants in *Cartel Crew*, in keeping with the new transnational paradigm in these types of film and television productions, occasionally dare to challenge these stereotypes. They thus reflect an evolution of the depiction from submissive daughter/partner to a liberated and somewhat aggressive woman, closely associated with the historical, economic and social changes of recent decades. However, as will be shown below, the image has not evolved entirely. It is important to point out though, that the female character who seems to be the most transgressive with women's representation is Griselda Blanco. Being Michael's mother and the image of Pure Blanco clothing brand they're embarking, she becomes the ultimate ideal for women in the communities of narco-families: strong, "the Queen of Cocaine", independent, good mother (as in she involved her sons in the business and taught them all about it), respected in her community.

For example, although Marie engages in several debates with Michael about their prenuptial agreement, challenging his male authority, she ultimately ends up signing it against her will (mainly convinced through sentimental blackmailing and against her own interests). Similarly, when she tries to get involved in the Pure Blanco business, Michael and his business partner Majix brush her off, which is why in the second season she decides to start her own business without Michael's support, despite the fact that he offers to help. Finally, in the third season we learn that Marie transferred half of her business to Michael.

Kat Flores, meanwhile, frequently insults Carlos 'Loz' Oliveros, and in the third season she posts a video in which she puts down her child's father, Eddie Soto, who has had a troubled relationship with her ever since he was unfaithful to her while she was pregnant, by speaking insultingly about her in a documentary. Even when she speaks openly about his betrayal and unloyalty, the main drama of their relationship centers on Kat missing Eddie, and feeling jealous of his new girlfriend. Meanwhile, Nicole Zavala dares to confront Torrey when she finds out he has been flirting with other women, ultimately ending their relationship as a result. This is an unusual situation given the prevailing stereotype in the drug world of the self-sacrificing woman who accepts the multiple relationships that her partner may have with both occasional and regular lovers.

In a sense it could be argued that the women in *Cartel Crew* do not conform entirely to the female stereotype of 'living for others', as their identity is not constructed "based on the needs, tastes and interests of others, and specifically of the men in their lives" (JIMÉNEZ VALDEZ, 2014, p. 113). In contrast to the traditional submissive women who are simply grateful that a man has noticed them (RUIZ TRESGALLO, 2017, p. 164), these women demand certain minimum standards in their relationships. Stephanie is a good example of this since she's not actively looking for a man, even when Nicole insists and pushes a date on her. Nicole mentions in several scenes how Stephanie would not be as aggressive if she had a man, which is a persistent stereotype of bitter women in media.

However, they do not break completely with the stereotype, as they often end up accepting some of the patriarchal decisions they rebel against. In particular, because the family must be prioritised above all else, it is a key factor behind some of the female protagonists' experiences in different seasons of the series, such as Marie's attempts to keep her family together, Stephanie's frustration with her parents' inability to maintain a respectful relationship, or Kat and Dayana as mothers completely dedicated to their children, whom they try to shelter from the kind of direct exposure to the drug world that they themselves had when they were young.

The categories analysing the characters' prominence and initiative taking (both encompassed in the capacity for agency) are the ones that have prompted scholarly discussion about possible changes to the depiction of women in cultural products associated with the drug world. Concepts such as 'empowerment', 'choice', 'agency', 'autonomy' and 'individuality' (GIRALDO, 2015, p. 71) often feature in the discourse of these types of film and television narratives. And *Cartel Crew* evokes these ideas as well through the women it depicts. Marie, for example, launches her own cosmetics brand and works decisively to become a partner in the Pure Blanco clothing business, along with Stephanie and Kat, whom she proposes as brand ambassadors. She is also responsible for organising various events to promote the brand in an effort to penetrate markets in cities like New York. Another example is Stephanie, who in the first season is shown struggling to get ahead in her career as a singer, promoting herself through various events that she herself organises in an effort to establish a foothold in the music industry. Kat is portrayed as a strong and empowered individual with her own business, who is also recognized by audiences in Facebook and Twitter for her previous shows as Tattoo Baby. Indeed, her purchase of a house in the third season is a clear exercise in hyper-consumerism and ostentation that transforms her into an active individual and a protagonist. Nicole, meanwhile, makes some personal decisions: she decides to become a single mother and leaves her work at a nightclub (Studio54) in order to achieve her goal. She also makes the decision to leave the apartment where she lives with her brother Michael Zavala to prove that she can support herself financially without help.

Dayana Castellanos becomes perhaps the most autonomous female character in the series when she decides to set up her own marijuana business as a way out of the dire financial straits that she and her husband are living in. She has a natural flair for business, as she subsequently founds a music company and purchases a Miracle Leaf franchise to sell medicinal marijuana. She also demonstrates her financial prowess by buying up real estate. She is an image of success, who uses the ostentatious display of consumption "as a parameter of fulfilment and success in life" (SANTAMARÍA GÓMEZ, 2012, p. 84). She may thus become a role model, a character admired by other generations who want to escape marginalisation but cannot find legal ways of doing it.

Salomé, on the other hand, appears to be more of an activist, less focused on acquiring material goods. He role in *Cartel Crew* is associated with initiatives such as organising a fundraising campaign to support migrant families separated at the US-Mexican border, while in the third season she supports the 'Justice for Gigi' march and travels to Washington DC to lobby for the 'Gigi Law'. Both these initiatives are related to gun control, which Salomé becomes an advocate for after the killing of her younger sister, Gigi, who was shot at the age of 17. Her stance on gun control also places her in opposition to Marie, who believes it is better to educate people in the responsible use of guns rather than banning them altogether.

As the wife of the notorious 'El Chapo', Emma Coronel sparked a lot of excitement with the news of her guest appearance in the second season. However, her role ended up being limited to meeting with Michael and Marie to talk about starting up a 'narcobrand' of clothing -like Pure Blanco- in honour of her husband, like the one Pablo Escobar had.

Under the category of sexism, we can find clear signs of the patriarchal system that characterises the cartels (PANNETIER LEBOEUF, 2022; MERCADER, 2012; GALLARDO ARENAS, 2022; Guillermo NÚÑEZ-NORIEGA; Claudia Esthela ESPINOZA CID, 2017; RUIZ TRESGALLO, 2017; Virginia FLORES GONZÁLEZ; Vianney E. FERNÁNDEZ PÉREZ, 2019; JIMÉNEZ VALDEZ, 2014; MILLER; MILENA BARRIOS; ARROYAVE, 2019) in the various settings for social interaction appearing in the three seasons of this 'narcoreality' show. The drug lord and his symbolic representation have consolidated the image of the subordinate, submissive, passive woman who needs to be protected, in a binary system that places her in opposition to a hypermasculinity (GIRALDO, 2015; Massiel Miranda YANES; Shanny VALDÉS, 2019) defined by "competition, hegemony, heterocentrism, the undervaluing of the private sphere, violence, courage, ambition and emotional repression" (VÁSQUEZ MEJÍAS, 2020a, p. 98). The result is a disempowerment of the woman, reflected in a disdain for her decisions and actions. The image of women in the representations of 'narcoculture' is one of disposable individuals who have no value or voice of their own in the public sphere (Gabrielle PANNETIER LEBOEUF, 2017, p. 44).

The signs of misogyny emerge, for example, when Marie tries to become a partner in the Pure Blanco brand and is dismissed by both Michael Zavala and Majix. She herself points out the irony of the fact that the brand stresses the empowerment of a woman (Griselda Blanco) and yet they refuse to take her seriously as a business partner. When Michael finds out that Marie has been doing webcamming under the pseudonym Giselle Rosario, he berates her, saying: 'you cannot turn a whore into a housewife.' When she questions the marijuana business in California, Michael replies: 'you gotta know your place woman; you gotta be there for me.' Evidence of the woman as object stereotype is revealed when Michael forces Marie to accompany him to meet Emma Coronel because '*en el mundo de patrones*, you can never meet with a wife of a patron alone; it is disrespectful.' In various conversations, Michael also keeps Marie in this position of marginalisation, as he determines whether or not he will allow her to travel. In the third season, Marie reveals that she transferred half of her cosmetic product business to Michael, even though he refuses to share his businesses with her. Other examples of the gender imbalance in Marie and Michael's relationship include his constant references to his desire to protect her. In fact, when the possibility arises that she may be put in prison, Michael says he will not allow her to spend a single night behind bars. Although Marie does not want Michael to get involved in the marijuana business, she tells him that she is proud of him and goes with him to the opening, finally accepting his decision.

When Nicole decides to move out on her own, her brother tells her that she doesn't know how to look after herself (while he is cooking breakfast for her, shortly after a scene in which she burns the breakfast for her ex-boyfriend, Torrey). Stephanie is also a victim of misogyny, as she is accused of using sex to secure deals in the music world. She is convinced that the reason why she is not offered any contracts is because other women have started rumours about her, linking her popularity to her relationship with Lil Wayne, a rumour that Nicole also mentions at the beginning of the series.

Stephanie's plight raises one of the most commonly explored questions in the analysis of narcoproducts from a gender perspective: is the woman's body a symbol of submission or of emancipation? On one side of the argument are all the studies that criticise the depersonalisation and objectification of the woman, whose body must always be available to the drug lord, who treats it as a disposable object emblematic of his success (Lillian Paola OVALLE; Corina GIACOMELLO, 2006, p. 305). Support for this argument can be found in the depiction of Kat, whose partner criticises her for not always being available to have sex with him.

On the other side of the argument is a group of studies that recognise sexual capital as a survival tactic for women in the 'narco world'. From this perspective, the woman uses her own body as an object to obtain power by profiting from it. Presented as a material good that yields returns, this could be one interpretation of Stephanie's strategy in sleeping with Lil Wayne to get ahead in her musical career.

Misogyny is also engaged in by the female characters in *Cartel Crew*, who accept certain values of the patriarchal system. For example, Kat demands Loz to look after the suitcases on their trip to Colombia because he is the only man travelling with them. As such, he has to take care of the girls, and gets furious at him for "leaving Kat and Nicole alone in Colombia" -even though they are the ones who left him in a restaurant with Dayana-. Nicole pretends to cook for Torrey because it is what he expects of her as a good wife. Dayana is harshly criticised when she decides to organise a 'baby shower' to introduce her new partner, a man much younger than she is. Indeed, there is an implicit depiction of Dayana as a 'sugar mommy', an older woman who provides financial or material support to a 'sugar baby', a handsome man with a good body who is younger than she is, in exchange for his company. Dayana breaks with convention by to deciding to prioritise her own pleasure. This inverts the relationship of objectification that has traditionally been associated with the depiction of women in the drug world. However, her decision makes her the subject of scathing criticism.

This question of objectification is reflected in the trope of the 'trophy wife', and the related phenomenon of the *buchona*, the voluptuous body type that has come to be associated with the narco wife (GALLARDO ARENAS, 2022). Other common nicknames attributed to them are the 'Barbie', the 'doll' (Omar RINCÓN, 2009), the 'beauty queen' and the *chica prepago* (TIZNADO ARMENTA, 2017, pp. 137-159), who exploits her own beauty, which is placed on permanent display as a symbol of the drug lord's power. This constant pursuit of hedonism, as Núñez-Noriega and Espinoza Cid (2017, p. 93) describe it, requires a kind of hyperfemininity (p. 112) whereby beauty (according to 'narco tastes') is turned into an emblem of success. Nicole fits this stereotype, as a clear example of the wealthy girls born into cartel families whose *buchona* status was assigned to them "more by tradition than by choice" (GÓMEZ SANTAMARÍA, 2012, p. 88). Nicole's family was associated with the Colombian cartel, but in the series she confesses that she never asked about it because she was only interested in maintaining the lifestyle that her family provided for her. She is extremely vain (and very preoccupied with her figure), she talks explicitly about the plastic surgery she has had done, and she is an inveterate Instagrammer.

There are numerous references in the research in this field to the physical features of 'narco women'. Rincón (2009) describes them as women with shapely, buxom bodies, "sexy bombshells who are not afraid to use silicone or to get into bed with the drug lord". Jiménez Valdez (2014) points out that "the image of women who are successful in the narco world is spectacular; ultra-slim but with large breasts and buttocks, thick lips, and long and usually dark hair" (p. 110). It is a body that has to conform to the 'narco aesthetic' and sexual standards, and thereby becomes a prototype for the body that other women want. The better a body conforms to the standard, the more it will be valued in the 'narco world', because it will then be more suitable for display as a background prop (GALLARDO ARENAS, 2022). This aligns very well with the culture of hyper consumerism and exaggerated traits of the narco culture, which likes to show off wealthiness. This is why the *buchonas* previously defined in the theoretical framework are typical within these representations.

Another key element for understanding the objectification of these characters is the type of clothing they wear, designed to highlight their physical attributes. As León Olvera (2019) suggests: "The women wear tight pants, close-fitting blouses, beads, jewels, and most recently, Colombian clothes and bandage dresses […]" (p. 10). These types of clothes are all seen regularly in all three seasons of *Cartel Crew*.

Chart 2.- Summary chart of clothing worn by female characters in *Cartel Crew*.

Marie	Generally wears clothes with plunging necklines that highlight her cleavage. Her make-up is thick and her lips are often red. Another constant is tight-fitting clothing and open-leg dresses.
Stephanie	Wears tight-fitting clothing, plunging necklines, thongs, and clothes that expose her midriff. Very thick make-up. When shown singing, she dances in a very sensual way.
Kat	Generally wears tight-fitting clothing, plunging necklines that show off her tattoos, and crop tops with midriff exposed.
Nicole	Always wears plunging necklines (all the way down to the bellybutton, or only covering her nipples). Thongs or see-through clothes that reveal her buttocks. Clothes are tight-fitting. In the jacuzzi she is shown topless. She occasionally goes out dressed in what is actually lingerie. At Marie's bachelorette party, her nipples are censored because they are exposed, and she wears latex lingerie.

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Dayana	Her clothing is usually tight-fitting, sometimes with openings or see-through fabric.
Ivette	Generally has plunging necklines. At Marie's bachelorette party, she wears lingerie with garters. Otherwise she tends to be the most relatively 'conservative' character in terms of her attire, as she does not generally appear in thongs or provocative clothing.
Salomé	Generally wears leggings, leotards or tight-fitting clothes. Sometimes has a plunging neckline and/or exposed midriff. At Marie's bachelorette party, she wears latex lingerie with an S&M theme.
Emma	-
Ali	Usually wears short dresses and tight-fitting clothes.

Source: Prepared by authors.

#SoEveryoneCanSee: Black and withe summary chart with two columns and nine rows, including in the left, the names of the nine characters identified for the study (Marie, Stephanie, Kat, Nicole, Dayana, Ivette, Salomé, Emma, and Ali) and in the right a brief description of clothing worn by them in the series (lingerie, tight-fitting and see-through clothes).

The women's slim and curvaceous bodies are displayed on social media, increasing the impact of their photos, videos and posts, ostentatiously foregrounding body worship and hedonism: "These women embody narcoglamour with their bodies when they consciously take part in the hedonistic campaigns of the narco world […]" (LEÓN OLVERA, 2019, p. 8).

Conclusions

This study has found that the autonomy and agency of leading female characters in the reality TV production *Cartel Crew* continue for the most part to be mediated by men, even when the women attain positions of power in their environment. This is the case because all the female characters have a symbolic connection to the drug trade by virtue of a romantic, sexual or family relationship with a man. Consequently, they are always depicted as ultimately accepting the decisions of men, even when they may initially challenge them. Moreover, the care they take to cultivate their femininity by displaying their physical beauty with certain types of clothing suggests that their image continues to be defined by the desire they are able to arouse in men through their appearance. This 'narco masculinity' can also be identified in the importance given to the family and the interpersonal relationships between the women.

These findings suggest that women continue to be assigned a particular role defined by a male gaze. While that role has been reconfigured to appear more fashionable and universal, it cannot conceal the signs of the patriarchal vision that informs these productions (JORGE, 2021b, p. 11). The various subversions observed in the study (Dayana's status as a 'sugar mommy', Marie challenging her future husband to allow her to take a leading role in a business, Stephanie leveraging her sexuality to get ahead in her musical career, and more generally, the violent attitude that all the women display in their constant fights, adopting a trait that has been traditionally assigned to men in the 'narco world') are permitted by the system, but invariably the natural order of male values is restored (MAIHOLD; SAUTER DE MAIHOLD, 2012, p. 83). Thus, for example, Marie accepts the conditions imposed by her future husband in their prenuptial agreement, while Nicole gives up everything to be a single mother, embracing a role that is a recurring female cliché in traditional melodrama (VÁSQUEZ MEJÍAS, 2020a, p. 52). In this way, their agency, courage and power are effectively constrained in this reality TV production.

Although it has been argued that these limited transgressions represent a first step towards upending the stereotypical identities of the women who form part of the symbolic universe of the 'narco world', they are clearly not enough to constitute depictions of genuinely independent and autonomous women. As Jorge concludes (2021b, pp. 162-163), these productions may have prompted certain expectations among international audiences seeking a more positive, contemporary depiction of women. However, this supposed progress has been mediated by a patriarchal discourse of violence towards women, who continue to be relegated to a secondary role in the 'narco universe' (Cecilia Mª Teresa LÓPEZ-BADANO; Silvia RUIZ-TRESGALLO, 2016, p. 197).

In this matter, it is important to note that violence against and even more problematic *within* women is still very visible. Using the categories from Women's Institute in Mexico City (2023) we see clear examples of sentimental violence (especially in the relationship between Marie and Michael with humiliations and emotional blackmailings), physical (encounters between Marie and Nicole, Marie and her parents that led to jail, and half of them yelling at each other in San Diego), economical or patrimonial (Nicole being dependant to her father, Marie giving half of her business but Michael not being reciprocal), and sexual (Nicole has an episode where she speaks about abuse, Stephanie over the gossip with Lil Wayne ruining her career). Amongst them there were frequent conflicts in which confrontations where aggressive instead of assertive, they acted passive aggressive and used strategies like Ice law or insults. All of them as a group can barely portray a healthy feminine community or sorority.

In this new trend towards characterising a woman as the hero in narratives about the violent 'narco world' (DEMEYER, 2016), where women are pretty but dangerous, the ambiguity between hero and villain ultimately leads to limited depictions that once again reflect the male hegemony. These women stand out for their exceptional nature, as isolated cases that grab media headlines – when they are discovered – because of the public fascination with violent women. "Women in the drug trade are and always will be a very appealing topic for the media because they are viewed as a pathology, making it easy for them to be treated with morbid fascination – and if there is anything that sells news, it is morbid fascination" (SANTAMARÍA GÓMEZ, 2012, p. 123).

The legacy on feminism from *Cartel Crew* can be seen -maybe with magnifying glasses- through characters such as Kat and Dayana as genuine autonomous entrepreneurs, since they manage both motherhood and their economic stability on their own (considering that both partners were in prison). They portray strong characters and particularly Dayana intersects with gender representation as she is openly bisexual, having both female and male partners throughout the series. Salomé on the other hand, also depicts a more pro social type of entrepreneurship, since she starts two initiatives in the group when going to San Diego to help immigrant families and when going to Washington DC to mobilise a law against guns. Neither one of these three women seem dependent in any way to others, and while they might be involved in conflicts, they seem to be neutral or pacifists compared to Stephanie or Marie.

Another intersection that is important to point out has to do with Latin American cultures, which are very family oriented. Therefore, we find a tendency to justify their families' decisions on becoming criminals if that is the means to giving their families a "better life" -economically speaking-. Even when there's a general discourse on not wanting to repeat stories with their own families, we do see an intent of having a glamorous life with a culture of hyper consumerism and exaggerating traits in their bodies: which conserves the narcoculture since its own representation in Latin American media and literature.

So although we see some steps forward in the feminist depiction of women, in contents that are dominated by women, there is important work still to be done. The second stage of this study will be focused on social media audiences, who had an impact in the behaviour of the female characters of some episodes. The reception will shed more light on the perceptions that individuals have on these characters and whether their autonomy and agency is something that transcends in public opinion.

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