

The “Kolombia Regia”: Social Vindication in the Face of Stigma and Violence in Monterrey

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Cover photo: Kolombian dance where a sonidero is playing (photo by Yasodari Sanchez)

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Executive Summary

During the 1960s, a countercultural movement was established in the city of Monterrey, Mexico. This subculture called itself Kolombia for its love for Colombia and Cumbia, a traditional Latin-American musical rhythm. Beyond music, Kolombians have been distinguished by their unique fashion, hairstyles, and experiences. These forms of expression have been stigmatized as socially unacceptable, in part because Cumbia has been a musical genre historically enjoyed by marginalized groups. Both Cumbia and Kolombians have been associated with conflict,

violence, and street gangs, making them targets of discrimination.

While a prevailing media narrative suggests the disappearance of this subculture following the Mexican security crisis in the 2000s involving drug cartels’ high-profile violence, Kolombia Regia persists, maintaining a robust presence within and beyond the city. Heterogeneous and dynamic, Kolombian culture has continually reconfigured itself, preserving the legacy of previous generations and ensuring the culture’s future with its capacity for adaptation. We explore how this subculture has resisted different forms of violence and how it has been vindicated over time. We

also propose a series of recommendations for developing culturally sensitive public policies that tackle insecurity in the places that Kolombias reside.

The Kolombia of Monterrey

In the 1960s, people migrated from South American and Mexican regions like Puebla, Querétaro, the State of Mexico, San Luis Potosi, and Mexico City to Monterrey, Nuevo León. Given its industrial economic activity, education opportunities, and geographical proximity to the United States, Monterrey has historically attracted significant migration influxes, and positioned itself as a space for the interaction and blend of cultures, particularly in its most marginalized neighbourhoods, which include but are not limited to La Campana, La Independencia, and San Bernabé. With the arrival of migrants to La Independencia neighbourhood, one of the most characteristic urban subcultures in Mexico, and even internationally, was born: the Kolombia Regia.¹

Kolombia is in part a musical subculture, defined by a set of beliefs and unwritten rules shaped by the community's experiences. It comes to life with the celebration and appropriation of different Afro-Latin musical rhythms and variations. The term *Kolombia* doesn't allude directly to Colombians who migrated to Monterrey — it refers to the love for musical rhythms that originated in Colombia and found their way to Monterrey. The two most renowned are the Vallenato and the Cumbia, but especially Cumbia.

The Vallenato is a musical genre born on the Colombian Caribbean coast. Although the songs are primarily preoccupied with love and romance, in its beginnings they also talked about daily experiences and even social problems. By contrast, the roots of Colombian Cumbia can be traced back to Africa and the enslaved individuals forcibly brought by the Spaniards to the coasts.

It is claimed that in its beginnings, Cumbia was music listened to by enslaved people. Indeed, until a few years ago, Cumbia had always been identified as a rhythmic sound for marginalized people. I believe that one reason people in Monterrey, or anywhere in the world, identify so strongly with this musical genre is because many people unconsciously identify themselves with that situation of marginalization and alienation. (I.A.)²

When asked to describe Cumbia, the same word was used by almost all of our interviewees: joy. "The central theme of Cumbia revolves around everyday experiences and its rhythm is very contagious. Whether one knows the lyrics or not, listening to a Cumbia song will change one's mood. They can be perceived with more feeling, and it is easy to appropriate these songs, make them your own, and find one for every situation and stage in life" (M.D.).

1 *Regio/a* refers to someone or something from Monterrey so the Kolombia Regia refers to the Colombia from Monterrey.

2 All quotes from our interviews are followed by the initials of the person speaking.

Cumbia's Journey to Monterrey: A Brief History

In 1934, businessman Antonio Fuentes founded the record label that became a mass producer of Colombian music: Discos Fuentes. From its start, it produced tropical music, assembling large numbers of Colombian Cumbia record collections that would still be listened to in Monterrey 30 years later.

Vinyl records of Colombian Cumbia arrived in Monterrey via the Mexican capital and Houston, Texas. Music was exchanged between these cities because of their strategic location for Latin American migratory fluxes headed to the United States and the northern region of Mexico. Migrants leaving their birthlands bought these records to remember their people and stay connected with their roots through the stories the songs tell.

During the 1980s, the *sonideros* boom began after these records' commercialization. Sonideros are ambulant dance gatherings where a DJ plays music, particularly Cumbia. A sonidero's equipment involves a turntable, records, and some speakers. Their name stems from the fact that they placed their loudspeakers wherever they could and did not have a chance to equalize music. In a certain way, it was just "noise" reproducing itself in different places. People first encountering the music supposedly asked themselves: "¿Qué es ese sonidero?" which is roughly translated to "What is all that sound?"

The sonidero is the people's DJ who takes the public's requests and makes people dance for hours. The sonideros bring music to people, and that brings joy. Sonideros can also be considered a social movement because they break the paradigms of how and where music should be played— it is a musical revolution that can occur anywhere in the public space for people's enjoyment.

Dancing is central to Kolombian subculture, whether to vinyl records, cassettes, sonideros, or bands.³ As a vibrant and integral part of the community's identity, it allows people to connect with their heritage and express their emotions. Dancing is a bridge between the past and the present, encapsulating the culture's historical journey through its music. "The atmosphere is liberating. It becomes contagious because even if you don't know how to dance, you see other people, and start moving from one side to the other or tapping your feet or singing to it" (I.A).

Unlike other cultural movements that manifest through the creation of original rhythms and lyrics by artists, composers, and performers members of the culture, the Kolombia Regia predominantly comprises individuals who engage with the subculture by appropriating pre-existing music from other cultures, making song covers with variations resulting in a unique fusion. The hallmark songs of Kolombia often find their roots in Colombian musicians. This fact may go unnoticed by subculture members due to the significant evolution of rhythm over time.

Another distinctive feature of Kolombia Regia is the presence of graffiti art. People who did graffiti would take the names and lyrics of Cumbia songs, put them on walls, and sign them with their names. This form of artistic expression has held special significance for gangs, serving as a means to "mark their territories and signal that outsiders should respect these areas because they belong to the gang" (A.R).

Gangs don't necessarily denote violent groups. As a former Kolombian gang member put it, for him, gangs are

A group of friends from the same neighbourhood (sometimes), usually emerging from poverty and exclusion, with a strong sense of belonging to that

3 A *sonidero* in Monterrey refers to a DJ who mixes old vinyl records on their turntable, and acts as the main entertainer at a party. On 6 October 2023, the sonidero tradition was publicly recognized as cultural heritage by Mexico City's congress, and so a custom with almost five decades of history has just recently acquired public attention and recognition.

neighbourhood. Their bond is created by coexisting, sharing the block, and simply spending time in the streets. From a shared identity, codes, interactions, and forms of expression emerge, fostering a sense of belonging, complicity, and similarity. (A.R.)

In the public eye, these groups have always been stigmatized, linking them to crime, drugs, and theft, either because they were low-income people or because they were different from what the conservative status quo of Monterrey prefers.

Not all gang members identified themselves as Kolombias, and not all Kolombias were part of a gang. However, media coverage in online newspapers and articles popularized the notion that “all gangs were Kolombian.” For many people who are unfamiliar with the social and cultural context of graffiti, this expression is associated with vandalism and crime. Therefore, Kolombias started to be identified as criminals and consequently have been targets of discrimination and prejudices that impact them socially, economically, and politically.

Catholicism is another element that plays a vital role for the Kolombia Regia because the Basilica de Guadalupe is located at the heart of the Independencia neighbourhood.⁴ During fieldwork, we observed that the church’s community groups organize various activities like soccer tournaments to bring together residents of the neighbourhood. These events contribute to strengthening the social fabric by fostering connection and shared experiences among its residents.

Beyond music, Kolombia is a dynamic and multifaceted movement, shaped by historical, migratory, and social factors. It encompasses unique colloquialisms, dynamic fashion, and massive social gatherings, all fostering a strong

sense of community. Because this subculture is intergenerational, each generation adds its unique contributions, shaping the subculture’s future, and securing its continued relevance in a rapidly changing world.

Members of the subculture refer to themselves as Kolombias or Kolombians, employing both terms interchangeably. At least three generations actively interact with each other through diverse cultural practices such as music festivals and dances.

Although the Kolombia Regia is a male-dominated movement, women have always had a strong if unrecognized presence within it. Historically, their roles have been defined in relation to men, particularly to their husbands, in matters such as running family businesses and organizing community events. Despite these historical dynamics, women have gradually created their own legacy with all-female music ensembles, sonideros, and public figures.



Figure 1. A metal plate of the Virgin of Guadalupe with a painting of Colombia’s flag colours, in the Independencia neighbourhood

4 The Basilica of Guadalupe or Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe is one of the most important churches in Northern Mexico.

Beyond the Cholombiano Style

Kolombian men and women have dressed and styled themselves in different ways. Whether they wear Converse sneakers or accessories like Colombian sombreros (wide-brimmed hats), their expressions can be grouped into distinct styles or archetypes.

Archetype A is a mixture of the Chicano and cholo style. The term *Chicano* originally referred to Mexican Americans, especially those who were born in the United States or had lived there for a significant period. However, over time, it has evolved to encompass a broader cultural, social, and political identity. Chicano identity emerged during the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s when Mexican Americans sought to assert their cultural pride and advocate for social justice. The term was reclaimed as a symbol of empowerment, emphasizing a connection to Indigenous roots and resistance against discrimination. Chicanos often celebrate their unique cultural blend, which incorporates Mexican, Indigenous, and American influences.

Cholos are a subculture often recognized by their distinctive clothing, which may include baggy pants, oversized shirts, sports jackets, noticeable tattoos, and bandanas. They are also associated with a specific way of speaking and behaving. The word *cholo* does not have a single, universal definition, and its meaning can vary even within Mexico, but typically it refers to individuals who come from marginalized neighbourhoods and have tastes that differ from socially accepted norms, ranging from clothing styles (loose or baggy) to their unique hairstyles, which are often perceived as “exotic.” In some contexts, the word *cholo* may be used pejoratively, while in others, it may simply describe a specific lifestyle and cultural

identity. The perception and connotation of the term can change depending on the region and local cultural interpretation.

Some of the typical elements of this look are the use of the iconic Converse sneakers, *tumbado* or oversized jeans or shorts, oversized shirts, religious *escapularios* and crucifixes, and baseball caps.⁵ Their characteristic hairstyles are distinguished by the use of significant amounts of hair gel, sideburns, and shaven parts of the head. For women, it also includes using oversized clothes or mini-skirts, mini-shorts, and crop tops, Converse sneakers, bright makeup, styling their hair with headbands, and using different accessories that distinguish each person’s unique personality.

Archetype B represents the attire commonly seen among Kolombian musical ensembles, with the use of Colombian hats crafted from cane and clothing featuring the colours of the Colombian flag: blue, red, and yellow.

Archetype C is the “Celso Piña style.” It consists of shirts with graphic images of palm trees and other tropical elements paired with formal pants. However, there is no clear image of how women adapt to this style.

Archetype D depicts the 1980s rock style portrayed by jeans, black t-shirts, and unique hairstyles like mullets and “mob tops” (J.C.).

Archetype E showcases the “Texan style” (J.C.), which uses baseball caps (referred to locally as snapbacks) and polo shirts, similar to the narco style. For women it translates to using heels and mini dresses.

Unfortunately, rather than celebrating its diversity, the media has often portrayed Kolombia as a single archetype: the Cholombiano (see pictures in Figure 2), which exoticizes the participants. It is a look that disorients people in a conservative

5 An *escapulario* is a scapular — a religious item, specifically a piece of cloth, typically worn around the neck. It is often associated with certain Christian traditions, especially in the Catholic Church.



Figure 2. (From upper left to bottom right) Cholombiano man with a shaved and tattooed head, wearing a baggy sports shirt, dancing Cumbia Rebajada during Monterrey's Cumbiafest 2023. A music ensemble performing in Monterrey's Cumbiafest 2023. Cholombiana with a braided high ponytail and a bandana. She wears a sonidero's shirt and makes typical Kolombian hand gestures during Monterrey's Cumbiafest 2023. Celso Piña archetype — a man dressed in a red tropical shirt and making typical Kolombian hand gestures during Monterrey's Cumbiafest 2023. Texan style — a group of women, wearing dresses and heels, dance and sing during Monterrey's Cumbiafest 2023. "80s Rock style" archetype — a man dressed in a black shirt with a vest, dark sunglasses, and a bandana during Monterrey's Cumbiafest 2023 (photos by Yasodari Sanchez)

society like Monterrey, and many times it is related with crime. As one Kolombian told us,

When I styled my hair, it was almost certain that the cops were going to stop me for looking suspicious. They told me "Get in the police car" and I replied "why? I haven't done anything" — then they tell me "You're suspicious." Let's say people are walking toward me: the first thing they do when they see me is to move to the other sidewalk. If I'm using the bus and I sit in the middle, people will sit two or three spaces away from me. (A.M.)

Grouping all Kolombians in this category has perpetuated stereotypes and misconceptions that result in social and institutional discrimination, negatively impacting the lives and opportunities of community members. In response, many Kolombians disguise themselves to avoid being

targeted by police, employers, and society in general.

Given the diversity within this subculture, it's difficult to find characteristics common to all its members. After months of research, we discovered that the essential common ground among those who enjoy these musical rhythms is their admiration for Colombia and love for Cumbia.

They say "we are Colombian" when it is not true. We are Mexicans, live in Monterrey, and live in a neighbourhood called La Independencia, not a Colombian neighbourhood. However, they have ingrained that admiration and affection towards a country many do not even know and will probably never know, but they identify with it because of its music. (I.A.)

The Drug War's Lasting Effects on the Kolombian Subculture

To better understand how media have portrayed the Kolombia Regia and how they have linked it to crime, it is important to consider the context of the Mexican war against organized crime and its relation to the Kolombian neighbourhoods. In 2006, during Felipe Calderon's presidency, the government began operations to dismantle the main criminal organizations in Mexico known as narco (drug cartels), marking the beginning of the country's drug war.⁶ These operations initiated a significant and prolonged conflict that had far-reaching social consequences.

Because it is at the city's centre, Monterrey's La Independencia neighbourhood, where the Kolombian subculture was at its peak, became a strategic location for organized crime. Its mountainous landscape offers natural hiding spots and vantage points, allowing narco organizations to operate discreetly and evade law enforcement more effectively by having a wide view of the city and any access to the upper reaches of the neighbourhood.

To dismantle these criminal organizations, the government's main strategy was to capture the main heads of the cartels. Since many of these organizations had criminal cells that spread throughout various zones, several clashes took place to define which of these groups would take leadership of the organization, so these periods were characterized by a severe escalation of violence, massacres, and violent public "messages" to proclaim authority over a territory. Such "messages" included, but weren't limited to, the exposure of corpses in public spaces like roads, and *narco mantas*, which consisted of

blankets hung from bridges with death threats or messages declaring a cartel as the "ruler" of a territory. Sometimes, these methods were used together. However, government strategies were ineffective to dismantle these organized groups. Today, the war on drugs that began 17 years ago continues. In fact, many more narco organizations have been born, and the number of criminal activities where these groups are involved has increased — not only those related with drug trafficking, but also extortion, kidnapping, and the commercialization of piracy goods.

Life during these times was full of uncertainty and fear. Because the media delayed reporting on many of these escalating violent episodes, people used word of mouth to be informed of the security situation in the city. It was not uncommon to hear that many people were killed because of territory disputes between criminal organizations. People across the city were afraid to carry out their typical routines because they would need to leave their houses, and it was not safe to be outside.

One of the residents of La Independencia told us: Well, today people are still afraid to go out. This fear remains with us to this day. You see a black Suburban truck and remember when the narcos stopped in front of you and interrogated you about what you were doing. Some even tried to steal from you ... others also forced you to get in their trucks to partake in criminal activities, including theft and violence, and, sometimes, if they did not get into their trucks, they would shoot them in their cold feet. (D.P.)

Nowadays, life is different for people in the Independencia neighbourhood, and there is no longer a wave of violence like the one experienced during Felipe Calderon's

6 During Mexico's drug war, one of the most notorious cartels in Monterrey were the Zetas. They occupied strategic places in Monterrey like the Independencia neighbourhood.

government. However, the cartels are still present in these communities. Interviewees told us how these groups already know all the people who live in the neighbourhood, so they don't have any troubles — people know which streets not to walk through and at what times. If any outsiders visit the mountainous zone of the Independencia, they must go with a local. Although the nature of violence may have changed, the influence of narco entities still shapes the dynamics and precautions taken by the community.

Media Portrayal of Kolombians

Academic literature, documentaries, and news articles concerning Kolombians revolve around the assumption that Kolombian subculture began to gradually disappear as a result of the fear of being associated with gang members of criminal groups. The media suggested that Kolombia was merely a product of its time — a fleeting trend — disregarding its rich multigenerational history. The subculture was portrayed as a sorrowful tale of a movement that was doomed by violence. For example, newspaper headlines proclaimed “Who Were the Cholombianos? A Culture that Imitated Us in Mexico”; “The Mexican Urban Tribe that Disappeared with the Narcoterror”; and “Cholombianos: The Memory of an Unprecedented and Extinct Culture.”⁷ These types of articles reproduce a harmful stigma for Kolombia, since they reduce all forms of its expression to the most eye-catching and exotic

archetype that fits into a striking headline, in addition to claiming the culture's extinction. Such discourse has led to the subculture's exoticization and increased the structural violence that its members have experienced since the beginning of Mexico's drug war.⁸

This narrative that Kolombian subculture has disappeared is clearly not accurate. Because individuals who fit the media's stereotypical image of a Kolombian (the Cholombiano) became less visible, many social commentators insisted that Kolombia was a passing trend. However, the culture has persisted and reconfigured itself. Kolombia is a thriving subculture with deep roots and a powerful presence in Monterrey, and it endures because it shares people's stories and life experiences. Of course “aesthetics change according to time and context” (J.C.). Older generations may hold steadfast to conventional interpretations of Kolombia while younger people introduce fresh perspectives and adaptations.

Our research offers a new perspective on the Kolombian subculture. Our findings are based on qualitative methods such as fieldwork, in-depth semi-structured interviews, observation, as well as review of documentary evidence. We conducted 22 interviews among Kolombians, musical ensembles, famous sonideros, graffiti artists, DJs, academics, religious figures of the community, and Colombian record and souvenir export suppliers. We conducted participant observation and fieldwork between November 2022 and October 2023 in La Independencia neighbourhood, as well as Mercado Díaz Ordaz, el Puente del Papa, and the Cumbiafest music

7 Our emphasis.

8 According to Johan Galtung, violence extends beyond direct physical acts, and also manifests through inequalities in social, political, and economic structures. He also distinguishes between visible violence (concrete acts like wars and police brutality) and invisible violence (for example, unfair economic systems, being stereotyped and targeted within your community, and institutionalized discrimination). Percy Calderón Concha, “Teoría de conflictos de Johan Galtung” [Theory of Conflicts by Johan Galtung], *Revista de paz y conflictos* 2 (2009): 60–81.

festival in Monterrey, Nuevo León.⁹ Because we recognize that Kolombian subculture is not exclusive to any of these particular areas, in-person and virtual interviews were conducted with key figures of this movement from other parts of the city and state.

We recognize that knowledge will always be partial and situated. Our positionality as researchers determined what was possible to know about Kolombians and their movement. We are young and primarily white; we have high socioeconomic status; and we are completing our college education. Such elements of our identity directly affected how we related to the study subjects.

At the beginning of this research, we intended to explore how the Mexican security crisis impacted the cultural expression of Kolombians within the La Independencia neighbourhood. Our hypothesis was that young people from financially marginalized groups who weren't cartel members were embroiled in violence because of their socioeconomic circumstances and looks alone, which was why Kolombian subculture was disappearing.

However, after our research we realized that discussions about Kolombia often centre on inquiries into poverty, violence, and their effects on the lives of marginalized individuals. While it's tempting to sensationalize drug trafficking by giving it undue emphasis, we discovered that narcotraffic holds minimal significance compared to the broader cultural expressions within Kolombia today. Engaging in discussions about Kolombia proved to be a more complex and enriching endeavour, extending far beyond the narratives that exoticize drug cartels and poverty.

This research is motivated by an immense curiosity for a culture that is not ours. Shared language and experiences, like living through Mexico's drug war, residing in the city of Monterrey, enjoying the same musical rhythms, and frequent field visits allowed us to understand better and connect with the music and its proponents. We do not pretend to speak for our interviewees. Instead, we share what we have learned from and with them.

By shedding light on everyday experiences that Kolombians face, this research aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):



SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere



SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls



SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries



SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

9 The Mercado Diaz Ordaz is a market known for its various vendors selling a variety of goods, including local crafts, food, records, and other products. El Puente del Papa is a pedestrian bridge in Monterrey that spans the Santa Catarina River. Its name is derived from the visit of Pope John Paul II, during which he offered a Catholic mass on the bridge. Before the papal visit, the bridge was called "Puente San Luisito" because it connected the San Luisito neighbourhood (now the Independencia neighbourhood) with downtown Monterrey across the Santa Catarina River. The bridge has historical significance and is a well-known landmark. For example, before Hurricane Alex in 2010 this space was used for flea markets.



Figure 3. The Kolombia Regia neighbourhoods vs. one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Latin America. The map shows three of the most characteristic neighbourhoods where the Kolombia regia is present. The wealthiest neighbourhood in Latin America, and Tec de Monterrey, one of the most prestigious universities in Mexico, are highlighted in blue

Hard-to-Reach Community

While Kolombia cannot be located exclusively in a particular neighbourhood, La Independencia has played a significant role in its origins and expansion. Cumbia Rebajada and multiple musical ensembles originated in its streets. Kolombia subculture today has had a strong presence throughout Monterrey, particularly in specific lower-income neighbourhoods, including San Bernabé and La Campana. Figure 3 shows some of the different neighbourhoods in Monterrey where Kolombia is present and some of their socioeconomic data and characteristics.

The Kolombian subculture is a compelling example of how marginalized communities

are not solely located in rural settings, nor in the outskirts of urban areas. Some of the neighbourhoods that have fostered this subculture, such as La Independencia and La Campana, are situated in the central area of Monterrey. These neighbourhoods are also close to Jardines del Valle in the municipality of San Pedro Garza García, the wealthiest municipality in Latin America. These neighbourhoods are a clear example of the deep inequalities that people experience throughout the state — and the whole country — and how vastly the quality of lives can vary so much.

For example, as Table 1 shows, Jardines del Valle has a wide coverage of storm drains, which makes the neighbourhood more resilient to rainstorms, and almost all street blocks have public lighting.

Table 1. Comparison between some of the neighbourhoods where the Kolombia Regia is present and one of the richest neighbourhoods in Mexico, Jardines del Valle (team elaboration with the tool Espacio y datos de México from INEGI and Google Maps)


Neighbourhood (land area)	Independencia (329 hectares)	San Bernabé (26 hectares)	La Campana (38 hectares)	Jardines del Valle (11 hectares)
Total population	24,344	3,421	2,308	7,372
Population per square hectare	74	131	60	670
Population with disabilities (%)	5.8	4.5	2.9	1.3
Street blocks with access ramps for the handicapped (%)	14.2	2.3	0	6.3
Presence of healthcare facilities	No	Yes	No	Yes
Street blocks with bus stops (%)	13.3	4.5	0	14.3
Street blocks with storm drains (%)	16.6	0	0	66.1
Street blocks with public lighting (%)	6.2	13.6	0	94.6
Number of police stations within the neighborhood or within less than 5 km	4	4	4	1

This contrasts with the low coverage of the same public services in San Bernabé neighbourhood, or even the complete absence of these in La Campana, whose problems get multiplied by its location in the upper parts of Monterrey's mountainous zones. Also, there are few to no bus stops in the two latter neighbourhoods. La Independencia and La Campana face serious problems with access to healthcare, since there are currently no existing facilities that meet this social need there.

While the table shows deep infrastructural inequities in various neighbourhoods in Monterrey, the critical insight is not that these marginalized locations dramatically contrast with Jardines del Valle in their public goods like public lighting or storm drains. Instead, recognizing that providing the coverage of public needs is a state's duty, it's valuable to question why the state decides to show up in different ways depending on the neighbourhood. The state can be present

in two ways: in a developmental way, through guaranteeing the quality of public goods and social programs that elevate the quality of life of its inhabitants, or in a punitive way, threatening its inhabitants towards good conduct through the presence and use of armed forces.

Therefore, what Table 1 helps illustrate is whether the state shows up in a punitive or developmental form. These data reflect the government's lack of action to lessen the inequalities in these marginalized neighbourhoods by not activating the developmental form of the state.¹⁰ The government is responsible for building a more resilient infrastructure that covers residents' basic public needs, including the need for safety, in these marginalized communities where it has mainly shown up through punitive measures.

10 "Espacio y datos de México," INEGI, 2020.  We examined Google Maps for the neighbourhoods La Independencia, San Bernabé, Cerro de la Campana, and Jardines del Valle, and then looked for police stations within a Google-calculated travel distance of less than five kilometres.

Stigma and Marginalization as an Issue of Reach

With rhythms and lyrics that resonate across diverse audiences in Monterrey and an identity that has transcended their neighbourhoods of origin, Kolombians are not “hard to reach” geographically. However, they face barriers of a different kind. Despite residing in the same city, individuals and locations linked to this subculture have been subjected to discrimination, stigmatization, and exoticization. These affect their education, employment, and social interactions, leading to exclusion and further marginalization, creating a cycle of disadvantage.

Kolombians are a “hardly reached” community because of ideological and social barriers: the stereotypes that have personified them as violent subjects linked to organized crime and an unsophisticated (*naco*), low-income subculture.¹¹ In this sense, some Kolombians face discrimination simply because of their place of residency and the stigma these places hold given their socioeconomic status and association with crime. Kolombians who live in other areas of the city face discrimination because of the association of their cultural identity with these marginalized neighbourhoods. Outsiders often view this subculture through a lens of fear, resulting in their exclusion and rejection.¹²

Resistance and Vindication of the Subculture

In the face of many forms of structural violence, Kolombians resist and persist with the help of various elements that are part of their identity.

Music is at the culture’s beating heart and is a powerful expression of identity, joy, and of course resistance.

Resilience

In the words of one person we interviewed, “During the security crisis you could not be out of your house ... I always spent my time making music. I did not like to get involved in all of that” (D.P.). Music served as a coping mechanism in the face of adversity. Communities and individuals have faced numerous challenges like migration — some individuals migrated to the US to look for better socioeconomic opportunities, and some families relocated to safer neighbourhoods after receiving INFONAVIT grants to acquire housing.¹³ Additionally, they faced issues such as police brutality, experienced through being targeted and discriminated against in public spaces. In this context, music transcends mere entertainment; it becomes an emotional refuge and a means of expressing identity, enabling them to claim these new spaces as their own. Even in the most challenging times, music has brought hope and resilience to Monterrey’s violent landscape.

Community and Solidarity through Cumbia

The lively rhythms, infectious melodies, and danceable beats of Cumbia have a unique ability to uplift spirits and create a festive atmosphere.

Its lyrics tell everyday stories, whether about being in love or shared struggles. One of the interviewees commented: “When I am sad, I listen to Kolombian music to lift my spirit. I believe many people in the barrios share this sentiment of using this music to process their

11 *Naco* is a derogatory term commonly used to describe something vulgar, traditionally related to a low-income status.

12 “Perfil sociodemográfico: Colonia Independencia, Monterrey, en Nuevo León,” MarketDataMéxico. [🔗](#)

13 Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores (INFONAVIT), which translates to the “National Workers’ Housing Fund Institute,” is a Mexican government institution that provides financial resources and services to help workers in the formal sector (those with regular employment) access affordable housing.

emotions and find comfort. Overall, there is variety within Kolombian music, which allows individuals to choose the style that resonates most with their feelings at any given moment” (J.C.).

When many people from the Kolombia movement were killed during the drug war, families and friends had to keep working and did not have much time to cope with grief. Many residents of La Independencia are employed in local informal retailers that pay a salary far below the state average, and they receive no social security or contributions for a personal retirement fund.¹⁴

As a result, financial pressures alongside violence forced Kolombians to manifest their pain in artistic forms that could bring hope and unity in moments of crisis and uncertainty. One community member we spoke with told us how,

In that period, this one song became very famous among Kolombian bands. They played it in the barrios and modified the lyrics to greet someone who had passed away: “[Name/ Nickname], hey your friends greet you,” and it was so representative, especially in situations where the government did not respond to the killings of individuals. So Kolombian music ensembles played this song from two to three times, and each time they used the name of a beloved person. (J.C.)

Such musical tributes served to keep the memory of the departed alive but also demonstrated the sense of community and solidarity that Kolombians shared in the face of adversity. The music became a means of remembrance, healing, and collective support during difficult times like countless movements worldwide that have resisted oppression and

discrimination through music. (Reggae made popular by Bob Marley comes to mind, and Afrobeats’ Fela Kuti, who challenged the legacy of colonialism, is another recent example but of course there are dozens more.)

Kolombian Women’s Representation

Since the beginning of the Kolombia Regia, women have fulfilled a wide range of fundamental activities such as organizing community events, documenting the subculture’s history, and actively engaging with dance and music as performers and audiences. Despite their invaluable contributions, they have not consistently received public recognition or acclaim compared to their male counterparts. Most of the recognized figures are men like Celso Piña, Gabriel Dueñez, and Henry Murillo, among others. However numerous women have made significant contributions to the enduring legacy of the Kolombia Regia.

For example, Gabriela Dueñez is the daughter of Gabriel Dueñez, the king of Cumbia rebajada and founder of the Sonido Dueñez. Gaby continues the legacy of Sonido Dueñez as a performer and promotes infrastructure projects like the construction of one of the only parks in the Independencia neighbourhood. Her sister, Nunys Dueñez has played a pivotal role for Sonido Dueñez after immigrating to the US where she dedicates her time to collecting and sending music records, facilitating the cultural exchange of different rhythms. Yasodari Sanchez has spent over 10 years archiving Kolombia through documentaries, exhibitions, podcasts, and other media. She has also developed various initiatives to raise awareness about the role of women, and organized workshops for

14 “Perfil sociodemográfico.”

children and older adults to express themselves through art.

Ivonne Azpeytia has dedicated her career to creating cultural spaces like Kumbiafest for musicians and the public to enjoy Kolombia Regia. She is also one of the most prominent representatives of the movement in different documentaries and reports. Nadia Robles and her daughter Johanivana are musicians who play the Vallenato and Cumbia songs on violin and other instruments that are new for the genre. This creative fusion broadens its musical horizons, making it more inclusive and appealing to a wider audience.

During interviews, Kolombian women described a common experience of facing questions regarding their presence and involvement in dances and community activities. They described how men often assume their participation is driven by the pursuit of romantic interests. This assumption devalues women's contributions and perpetuates a sexist culture that undermines and discriminates against them. Recognizing women in the Kolombia Regia subculture is not only a

matter of justice but also a way to enrich the subculture's diversity, creativity, and resilience, ultimately contributing to its continued growth and evolution.

Reframing a Subculture

Given the media's focus on criminality, the identification of specific neighbourhoods with this subculture, and the lingering association with tragic and violent events from past security crises, these areas and people do not convey a sense of security to people unfamiliar with them. This association with insecurity directly affects Kolombians' ability to interact with the wider population in Monterrey, especially the authorities. Because of negative stereotypes and stigma, public policies have yet to be formulated based on the profound understanding of the issues and needs of Kolombians, nor on the study of the space they inhabit. Instead, they tend to be driven by social prejudices and biases, and/or indirectly



Figures 4 and 5. Campana Altamira and La Independencia neighbourhoods. Even from afar, these houses are easily distinguished because of their bright colours

promote it. Some examples of these ill-conceived public policies include the following.

Initiative Transforming Monterrey

This program is allocated in neighbourhoods such as La Independencia and others with the same socioeconomic characteristics. It includes working on certain infrastructure projects to improve the area's public lighting and streets, as well as painting houses with bright colours such as green, yellow, red, salmon, turquoise, pink, and orange. Despite the good intentions of this program, painting houses in these bright colours has contributed to a visual differentiation that highlights the economic situation of their residents. It consequently reinforces existing stereotypes and prejudices about low-income communities, and marks the places that "people from other socioeconomic backgrounds should avoid" (A.R.). And beyond reinforcing stereotypes, the colour coding that is present in only these neighbourhoods serves as an intangible barrier. It's

not a physical wall, but it still tells people not to go there.

Lack of Water and Lighting

People we spoke to told us "We don't have water supply; we only have one water tank, and sometimes when they go to check it, people fall and die" (J.S.). As Table 1 indicates, there is a lack of lighting to supply the whole neighbourhood. If we understand public policy as what the government does or does not do, we can see that the Monterrey government's inability to improve the Independencia neighbourhood residents' living conditions is also a public policy, because they choose not to allocate resources to deliver public services and infrastructure. This decision reflects societal biases and perceptions about the importance of this community, which contributes to perpetuating social hierarchies and reinforces existing inequalities. Insufficient services perpetuate a cycle of poverty.



Figures 6 and 7. Housing in the mountainous zone of La Independencia neighbourhood

Permanent Police Patrols

During our fieldtrips we noticed more than five police patrols, but no medical services. The presence of these permanent police patrols in this neighbourhood raises questions about the government's approach to improve the area's living conditions. Instead of focusing on development initiatives that could uplift the community, the government appears to adopt a punitive role, relying on law enforcement to control what is perceived as a high-conflict area. This punitive role reflects a reactive rather than a proactive approach to governance.

Lessons Learned

In the violent environment surrounding the Kolombian subculture, there is a clear need to implement strategic and research-based policy measures that aim to make the spaces where this community lives safer and allow its members to express their cultural identity and live dignified lives. State and municipal governments can make Kolombia's neighbourhoods safer. Potential governmental interventions currently lean toward punitive measures involving increased patrols and police presence to bolster control and surveillance. However, such activities make those neighbourhoods more policed, but not necessarily safer. Policing interventions will always be insufficient because reactive measures that don't address the root causes of crime can perpetuate a cycle of enforcement without creating sustainable solutions to community challenges.

Police also stigmatize and criminalize Kolombias, and police brutality can encourage members of the community to arm, or further arm, themselves in self-defence against potential abuses. In response, members of the community can feel trapped between police, criminal groups, and

armed individuals, experiencing intensified insecurity. Making these communities safer requires interventions that are both effective and democratic.

Art can play a crucial role because it facilitates historical memory and reconciliation with the past, and creates a sense of community for residents. Promoting culture is in itself a way of promoting safer spaces. As the state intervenes with the intent of development rather than punishment, cultural initiatives can play a vital role in deactivating violence.

The construction of community infrastructure would also represent the government's efforts to consolidate a safer community. Community spaces such as parks, cultural centres, and theatres are points of connection that allow for relationship building and strengthening among members of these neighbourhoods. While community is not found in a physical space, the space is the starting point to return to a sense of community — back to collective work, to public deliberation, to community decision making, and, most importantly, to a sense of belonging.

In the Kolombian context where there is a strong presence of narco and criminal gangs, the concept of community belonging plays an essential role because criminal groups exploit the need for belonging among their members in order to recruit more people. Recognizing belonging as a fundamental human need, the state must acknowledge that someone or something will inevitably foster it, and it is preferable that this source of belonging stems from neighbours, music, and dance and not from criminal activities.

As we discussed, the media has contributed to shaping today's criminalized image of the Kolombian subculture and, in the process, also criminalized the spaces that the movement inhabits. This has resulted in poor attention to

the infrastructure in places where this movement flourished, and limited spaces for self-expression and exposure of the Kolombian movement to newcomers and outsiders. We recommend that the government invest in educational programs and cultural events, promote Kolombian art, develop community infrastructure, and counter stigma.

Investing in Cultural Education Programs

While systemic, national policy change is needed, educational programs focused on dancing and musical skills are a valuable investment. They not only help preserve the subculture's artistic traditions but also offer opportunities for skill development. Many individuals within the Kolombian subculture have harnessed such skills to generate extra income. Supporting these programs can economically empower individuals and strengthen the community's cultural identity.

For example, Yasodari Sanchez and local musicians generously contribute their resources to organize workshops for children and older adults. The workshops cover a wide range of artistic forms, including photography, music, screen printing, and other forms of artistic expressions. However, their resources are constrained. The government should allocate funds to formalize and expand these projects.

Promoting Kolombian Art

From music to graffiti, the community's art forms are expressions of cultural identity and serve as valuable assets to Monterrey's broader artistic and cultural landscape. Promoting Kolombian art should involve the construction of cultural centres with dedicated spaces for musical ensembles to convene, compose, and rehearse, with open-air zones for gatherings and dance.

The construction of a building would represent institutional support and validation, affirming that such art has a recognized place in Monterrey. This space would not be merely physical but also a symbolic one. It would signify that the culture of the Kolombians is not in spite of the institutions but rather with the institutions. These kinds of spaces have already proven to be successful in Monterrey. A clear example is the Rosa de los Vientos Cultural Centre, the most significant and crucial art school in Northern Mexico.

Establishing museums or expositions dedicated to Kolombian art would also promote the subculture's unique artistic expressions. The private and public sectors have already carried out a famous example: the Museo Celso Piña is a space designed to celebrate all the countries where the singer's Cumbias are listened to. This space is a vivid reminder of the impact that Celso Piña and the Kolombian subculture has left worldwide and a place where Monterrey inhabitants can gather to look back with pride on the legacy left by an Independencia neighbourhood's artist. The acceptance and respect of Kolombian subculture can contribute to breaking down stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive and diverse society.

Investing in Cultural Events

Big cultural events such as Cumbia and Vallenato music festivals allow people to unite as a community and enjoy themselves. These sorts of events also represent an opportunity for Kolombians to showcase their talents and traditions and offer the broader community of Monterrey a chance to appreciate and learn from their culture.

However, as one of our interviewees highlighted, citizen-led events such as Cumbiafest encounter many challenges. These events receive no financial support from either state or municipal

governments. They also face logistical hurdles, lacking assistance in securing suitable public venues. Consequently, organizers struggle with securing sponsors and a central, accessible location that allows the entire community to participate.

Unlike state-led Cumbia and Vallenato cultural events, which are “used as a tool to attribute the achievements of the promotion of the Kolombian subculture to the government, leaving no room and offering no support to citizen-led initiatives” (I.A.), Kolombians feel it would be better for the state to support citizen-led initiatives that are carried out by the community. The state should provide financial support and actively advocate for events like Cumbiafest to take place, making sure organizers feel they are working with government support, not at the expense of it.

Advocating for Community Infrastructure

Community infrastructure interventions have the potential to mend the social fabric that is currently fractured in our fast-paced and hyperproductive world, where there is limited time for community building. Communal spaces are crucial. These spaces offer the prospect for children in future generations to grow up as integral members of a community.

Parks, playgrounds, and plazas play an essential role in providing a space to engage in social interaction that can create trust between members. Additionally, they serve as venues for cultural events, educational programs, and community gatherings. In neighbourhoods where Kolombians reside, the lack of basic public services is compounded by insufficient infrastructure to support community building. La Independencia neighbourhood, which spans 329 hectares, currently has only two parks. It is imperative for the municipal government to invest in the

creation and rehabilitation of community spaces. The government should invest in green areas, open auditoriums, parks, plazas, and venues for cultural events and educational programs.

Countering Stigmatizing Media Representation

Traditional media like newspapers and social platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram often present a limited perspective of Kolombians primarily focused on the Independencia neighbourhood. Stories assert the fading of this subculture and oversimplify the rich diversity of Kolombian expressions, reducing them solely to the Cholombiano archetype. Kolombians can counter this image in collaboration with the state.

Through collaborative projects with Kolombian members, the Secretary of Culture has the potential to endorse new media content, including documentaries and journalism that accurately depict the diversity of Kolombia Regia. This content should be collaboratively created with and by community members and then shared on government channels across social media and cultural activities such as magazines, events, and galleries. The goal is to challenge existing stereotypes and biases in the media, and foster a more accurate and comprehensive representation of Kolombian subculture.

Kolombian subculture is a diverse, intergenerational, and ever-changing movement that transcends borders. It exists, resists, and persists and will continue for as long as Cumbia exists. New musical genres — fusions of Cumbia and rap and Cumbia and Norteño — are emerging and growing in popularity, keeping their legacy alive.

Future research could fruitfully explore the personal narratives and life stories of women who have contributed substantially to the subculture. Examining their challenges and

triumphs could provide profound insights into how they navigated within a predominantly male-dominated space. A deeper investigation into Monterrey's perceptions about Kolombias could shed light on and help combat the existing stigma and stereotypes and foster a society that celebrates diversity and cultural richness.

Research Team



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Marla de la Cruz is pursuing a double major in international relations and government and public transformation. Her interests in education accessibility, sexual and reproductive rights, and youth have motivated her as a gender justice activist since 2016. In 2018, she founded Girl Up CIDEB (Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de Educación Bilingüe), and in 2021, she became the president of Girl Up Tec de Monterrey. Marla was part of the First Adolescent Girls Advisory Council of the Global Fund for Women from 2020 to 2023 and is currently an Adolescent Girls Advisory Fellow. She has been part of research projects with MexiCovidApp, Noria Research, and Impunidad Cero, among other institutions and organizations.



Arturo Nepomuceno is in the double major program in government and public transformation and economics at Tecnológico de Monterrey. He is interested in reducing social inequalities, especially socioeconomic inequity, and access to justice and education. His primary interests involve political history, the fight for the rights of the LGBT+ community, and music and arts. From January 2022 to January 2023, he was the president of the Government and Public Transformation Students Association. He currently participates in an education initiative for equity and quality in the Department of Quantitative Analysis and Data Science.



Iza María Sánchez Siller is a professor at the School of Social Sciences and Government at Tecnológico de Monterrey. She graduated in law from the Tecnológico de Monterrey and holds a PhD in social sciences, with a specialization in migration and public health, having completed research stays at Mississippi State University and University of Trento in Italy. Her current work on social development focuses on gender and violence from a sociological and legal perspective, especially with domestic migrants, through projects with Indigenous communities within the Monterrey Metropolitan Area. Sánchez Siller is co-founder of the program "Promoting Gender Equity in Adolescents and Young Women in Rural Areas" in Mitunguu, Kenya — a program that works with local high schools to reinforce the importance of higher education and decision making.



Founded at the University of Toronto in 2015, with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, the Reach Alliance has since scaled to seven other leading universities around the world. As a student-led, faculty-mentored, research and leadership initiative, Reach's unique approach uncovers how and why certain programs are successful (or not) in getting to some of the world's hardly reached populations. Research teams, comprised of top students and faculty from across disciplines, spend nine to twelve months investigating each case study. Once the data collection process is complete, teams write case reports that are published and disseminated across the Reach Alliance's diverse network of policymakers, practitioners, academics, and business leaders.

Inspired by the United Nations' call to eliminate global poverty by 2030 as part of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), our mission is to pursue the full achievement of the SDGs by equipping and empowering the next generation of global leaders to create knowledge and inspire action on reaching the hardest to reach.



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