

**Grantee: J.A. Strub**

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### **Report for the Musical Care International Network**

With the support of a 2024 MCIN medium projects grant, I carried out a collaborative research and documentation project with **Gabino “Gabo” Vera Benito**, founder of the YouTube channel *GavBroadcast*, one of the central nodes in the digital huapango ecosystem. Together, we conducted 12 in-depth interviews with highly engaged subscribers who identify as part of *la familia huapanguera*. These participants ranged in age from their 30s to late 60s and represented diverse educational, occupational, and geographic backgrounds, including Mexico City, other Mexican states such as Hidalgo, Puebla, Morelos, and Veracruz, and as far afield as Colombia. Interviews were conducted in both in-person and virtual formats, and each participant received an honorarium for their time.

The project’s main activities included:

- **Design and adaptation of interview methodology**, with questions centered on *everyday musical care* and adapted in response to cultural nuances around words like “support” and “benefit,” which can carry clientelistic undertones in Mexican Spanish
- **Execution of 12 interviews**, half in-person and half online, ranging from 30 minutes to one hour each; the online interviews were conducted using Zoom or WhatsApp, while the in-person interviews took place in Mexico City, the State of Mexico, and Hidalgo during a field expedition I took with Gabo. Participants were compensated with a small honorarium for their time and insights, and had the option of redacting their interviews to preserve certain personal details if desired.
- **Collaboration with Gabo**, ensuring that the process also generated insights relevant to his work as a cultural content creator, particularly regarding the perspectives of his most active subscribers. Gabo also received a stipend for his collaboration in this project.
- **Documentation and transcription** of interviews using the AI transcription software Descript, producing a valuable resource for further scholarly and

applied work.

The interviews yielded powerful insights into how subscribers experience and articulate **musical care** in digital spaces. Several key themes emerged:

- **Music as therapeutic intervention:** **Rocío**, a two-time cancer survivor, described how listening to huapangos and engaging in *GavBroadcast*'s chatbox during an extended period of chemotherapy brought her peace and tranquility, with music and simple supportive messages from fellow chat participants lifted her spirits during long hospital visits, difficult commutes, and periods of being bedridden. **Emma** describes how she introduced her ailing mother to *GavBroadcast*, recounting how her spirits greatly improved after listening to the nostalgia-filled music.
- **Music and grief work:** **Elías** recounted how the *GavBroadcast* community supported him through clinical depression following his mother's death, complementing psychiatric treatment with music and participation in digital community life. Elías credits his active participation as a chat moderator as a significant driver of his eventual "return" to social life. Similarly, **Aurelio** spoke of finding solace in huapango videos after the passing of both his parents, with the online community offering companionship during these periods of mourning. Both highlight the combined importance of both the music and the community, as well as said community's reciprocal dynamics of support and emotional aid.
- **Music as continuity and ritual:** Participants consistently emphasized the importance of scheduled livestreams such as *Tardes de Huapango*, which functioned not only as entertainment but as weekly rituals of belonging, companionship, and joy. For example, **Israel** highlighted how these transmissions afforded him the chance to connect to musicians and dancers in his hometown even as he pursued a career and education in Mexico City. **Elena**, who identified herself as shy and untrusting, found a close confidant in **Marta**, another *GavBroadcast* chat participant, a friendship she described as "life-giving" in her interview.
- **Music as cultural connection across distance:** Several interviewees spoke of feeling connected to their cultural roots or discovering new affiliations through huapango, even if they lived far from the Huasteca region or, in some cases, had never been there physically. **Hernando**, a Colombian national, recounted how he sees the channel as a way to learn about, participate in, and belong to a foreign culture, promoting a sense of brotherhood and intercultural affinity. **Gaby**, who

says she knew little about music before discovering the channel, now considers herself an “expert” in telling different tunes and performers apart, having educated herself in the style through the channel.

These findings reinforced the idea that musical care extends beyond performance into affective, relational, and digital domains. For many, huapango was not simply entertainment, but a “salve for the spirit” - a means of cultivating digital kinship, sustaining collective memory, and building resilience in the face of illness, grief, or geographic separation.

### **Outcomes and Reflections:**

- The project produced a rich body of qualitative material (interview transcripts and testimonies) that documents how music and digital community function as therapeutic interventions in everyday life.
- The collaboration offered practical feedback to Gabo, who gained a deeper understanding of his audience’s needs and the importance of sustaining participatory formats like *Tardes de Huapango*.
- For the participants, the process of being interviewed dignified and validated their experience as participants in a dynamic community of care. I will summarize some of their testimonials in a Spanish-language document that will be circulated among them.
- For MCIN, this research highlights a community-driven example of digital musical care, demonstrating how everyday music practices nurture wellbeing across distance.
- For my own research, the project provided a crucial bridge between applied ethnography and academic theorization of musical care within digital platforms and elective diasporas. The fourth chapter of my dissertation will focus on the results of the interviews and their critical interpretation through ethnomusicological and social scientific lenses.

I am deeply grateful for MCIN’s support. This grant made it possible to highlight a vibrant and affective community that exemplifies how music not only entertains but also heals, connects, and promotes cultural sustenance.