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Algorithmic (in)visibility tactics among immigrant TikTokers
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ALGORITHMIC (IN)VISIBILITY TACTICS AMONG IMMIGRANT TIKTOKERS

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ABSTRACT

It is well established in scientific literature that immigrants are excluded from their own stories, which are often instrumentalized to fulfill specific communicative, othering intentions. In this sense, migrant agency and voice are, in many cases, absent from narratives related to their life experiences and subject to various symbolic, digital, and material borders. Moreover, although social media has been recognized as a prime space for self-representation across different segments of society, immigrants are often excluded from these spaces due to the risks that sharing certain information publicly represent to them. In this article I draw from a 16-month digital ethnography and inductive, multimodal content analysis of videos created by 53 Latin American immigrant tiktokers in the United States and Spain. This enables the conceptualization of their algorithmic (in)visibility practices which refer to the set of strategies deployed by immigrant content creators on social media —and possibly other marginalized and vulnerable populations— to negotiate the conspicuousness of their controversial content with the aim of avoiding its deletion from the platform. The findings unveil three exemplary algorithmic (in)visibility practices that include content reuse and re-upload, vernacular visibility, and partial deplatforming. I find that these strategies shift between collective and individual approaches to achieve selective visibility and concealed conspicuousness within algorithmic moderation systems.

Keywords: algorithms ▪ social media ▪ migrants ▪ visibility ▪ multimodal analysis

1.   INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the strategies deployed by immigrant content creators on Tik-Tok to convey controversial content by harnessing the unique genres, functions, and narrative configurations available on the platform. In the case of TikTok, these practices may include well-known tactics that are widespread among generalist tiktokers, such as the use of specific hashtags —e.g. #fyp, #viral and #foryou. They may also involve other, more subversive schemes, where creators negotiate the conspicuousness of their content through the deployment of specific platform vernaculars

(Gibbs et al., 2015). In some cases, immigrant tiktokers do this by creating videos that follow mainstream logics and grammars of the platform to present contentious content under the concealment of TikTok humor, choreography, overlaid text, and popular audio tracks. This content relates to intimate accounts of border crossing, tips to navigate life in the receiving country while undocumented and audio-visual evidence of discrimination and oppression against immigrants.

Videos that reflect overt discussions by content creators about their perspective of the algorithm and their interpretations of the platform's moderation practices (Gillespie, 2018) are also interesting, and they serve to assess the unique challenges faced by immigrant tiktokers to present their content. Thus, the paper focuses on the specific ways in which immigrant TikTok creators deploy their knowledge of platform vernaculars to negotiate their algorithmic positioning (Bucher, 2012) through an array of strategies adapted to their unique experiences, needs and identities.

In this article I draw from a 16-month digital ethnography involving content created by 53 Latin American immigrant tiktokers in the United States and Spain to assess and conceptualize their *algorithmic (in)visibility* practices on the platform. The exploration of these two countries is justified by their status as key destinations for immigrants from the Latin American region. For instance, Spain has seen a large increase in Latin American immigration in the last decades, with around 1.5 million Latin American immigrants residing in the country in 2022 (Cueto, 2022). The country boasts significant immigrant populations from different Latin American countries such as Colombia (295K), Venezuela (200K), Honduras (133K), and Ecuador (132K), recorded in 2021 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021). In the case of the US, Latin American migration is key, with around 51.3% of all migrants in the country originating from Latin America (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019).

Research on minority and sensitive TikTok content is also relevant to understand the strategies and challenges faced by this community. For instance, research on Holocaust-related TikTok reflects the use of functions and affordances that are unique to the platform such as green screen and duet to establish a dialogue with existing audiovisual content within this community of creators to describe and present sensitive information about the Holocaust (Ebbrecht-Hartmann, & Divon, 2022). Moreover, minorities on TikTok have voiced their perception of algorithmic injustice reflected by unequal moderation processes that seem to disproportionally affect them. This is the case of racial minorities who have reported problematic differences that allow phrases such as "I am a neo nazi" to be accepted and "Supporting Black voices" to be flagged as inappropriate. In response, TikTok has justified these instances as algorithmic glitches and errors (Ohlheiser, 2021). Moroccan-Spanish mixed couples on TikTok also receive attacks from different spheres of society as they attempt to (self)represent their relationship as an example of hybridity and coexistence, taking advantage of affordances and features such as *respond to comment* to challenge and discuss specific misrepresentations of who they are, while making their content visible using popular audio tracks (Civila & Jaramillo-Dent,

2022). Interracial couples in the United States have also been able to harness the visibility power of TikTok to monetize and attract support and hate on the platform (Trent, 2022).

The paper starts with a description of the challenges for immigrants creating content on social media, it then moves to an explanation of the uniqueness of TikTok as a platform, its affordances, and vernaculars, followed by a theoretical framework related to issues of visibility and conceptual notions of strategies and tactics within social media-based algorithmic systems. The research design and methods are then described, explaining the purposive sampling method (Palys, 2008) to extract illustrative examples that identify these strategies through an inductive, multimodal content and critical discourse analysis. In this paper the aim is to deepen the understanding of the different forms of *algorithmic (in)visibility* (Jaramillo-Dent et al, 2022), which refers to the set of strategies deployed by immigrant content creators on social media —and possibly other marginalized and vulnerable populations— to negotiate the conspicuousness of their controversial content with the aim of avoiding its deletion from the platform. These practices resemble Brit Rusert's (2017) description of the ways in which Black people become strategically visible and opaque in the face of oppressive representations of who they are. In this sense, the findings of the present paper unveil three exemplary *algorithmic (in)visibility* practices that include content reuse and re-upload, vernacular visibility, and partial deplatforming. I find that these strategies shift between collective and individual approaches to achieve selective visibility and concealed conspicuousness within algorithmic moderation systems.

2.   IMMIGRANTS, DIGITAL (SELF)REPRESENTATION, AND ALGORITHMS

It is well established in scientific literature that immigrants are excluded from their own stories, which are often instrumentalized to fulfill specific communicative, othering intentions (Szytniewski & Spierings, 2014). In this sense, migrant agency and voice are, in many cases, absent from narratives related to their life experiences and subject to various symbolic, digital, and material borders (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). Furthermore, Immigration is deeply rooted in colonial structures that define who migrates and where, through a hierarchized perspective of the representations, knowledge, and ideas of who immigrants are and what is involved in their experiences.

Although social media has been recognized as a prime space for self-representation across different segments of society, immigrants are often excluded from these spaces due to the risks that sharing certain information publicly represent to them. In this context, Appadurai (2019) described the difficulties faced by immigrants and their narratives to fit mainstream expectations set by modern nation-states. Moreover, Mitchell (2019) argues that social media storytelling by refugees creates a collective space of meaning-making which enables them to shape, resignify, and remix

these stories collaboratively from the bottom-up. She describes the ways in which the power of mainstream media industries has been replaced by social media platforms' algorithmic systems, who own these stories and have the power to shape, expand or constrain the reach of these contents (Mitchell, 2019). This is due to the combination of human and algorithmic moderation systems, which determine what is available, visible, and viral (Gillespie, 2010, 2018). Thus, colonial structures of dominance are perpetuated through coded biases (Benjamin, 2019) and algorithmized oppression systems (Noble, 2018). The internal functioning of these moderation infrastructures is obscure, although we can glimpse at them through the contents and discourse of creators who describe their experiences with the platform, its algorithm, and the moderation policies that shape and affect their content creation practices.

3.   TIKTOK'S ALGORITHM AND VERNACULARS: THE GRAMMARS AND LOGICS OF THE PLATFORM

To explore algorithmic visibility, the role of platform vernaculars becomes key. Gibbs et al. (2015) defined platform vernaculars as the specific genres of communication employed by users and enabled and constrained by the design of the social media platform and its affordances (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). In this section I will describe the unique content configurations and affordances of TikTok that comprise its vernacular logics. Emphasis will be placed on the uniqueness of TikTok's platform vernaculars due to their memetic and imitational nature, since they promote and facilitate imitation among users at different levels (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Defining and establishing the affordances that characterize TikTok when compared to other platforms is key to understanding the ways in which content creators deploy *algorithmic (in)visibility* tactics.

Audio is central to TikTok, it functions as a connector and cataloguing element on the platform (Abidin, 2021). It has been analyzed as a mode of storytelling (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) and a structurally memetic affordance (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) that is especially prominent prompting users to "use this audio". The platform features an audio track page where the user can follow and find every video that has used the audio track, with the "original" poster listed first and followed by other videos in an order defined by a combination of popularity and recency. This page also includes the number of videos on the platform that use that specific audio track, which serves to assess the popularity of a specific audio track.

Furthermore, reuse and resignification content creation possibilities are also noteworthy on TikTok. In this sense, the duet, stitch, and green screen affordances enable creators to incorporate existing videos in their new creations and interact with this content in different ways. Figure 1 describes these different affordances and their functions.
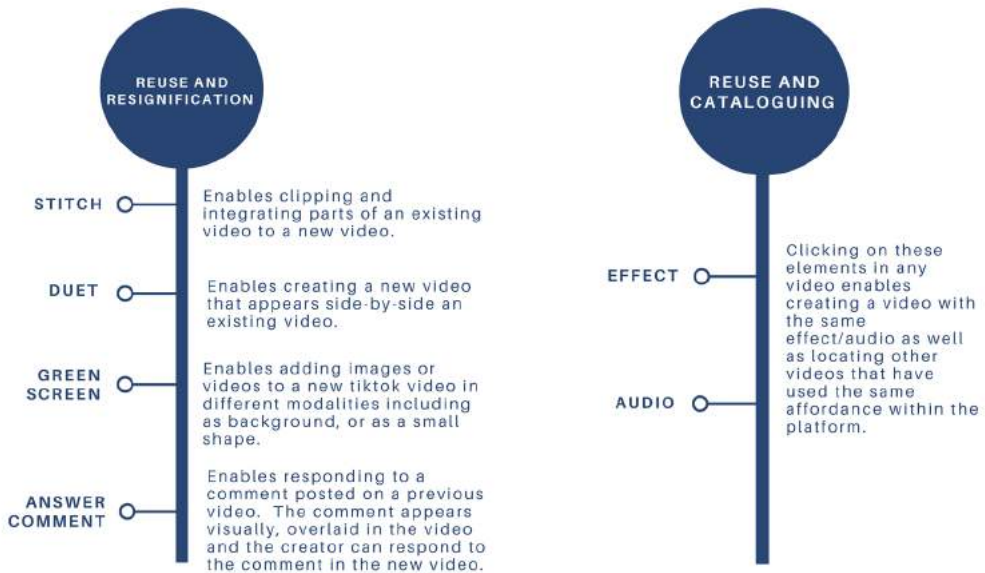
Figure 1. Affordances for reuse, resignification and cataloguing on TikTok. Adapted from Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022)

The algorithmic functions of TikTok related to visibility and moderation have prompted conversations and controversy among content creators, users, and other stakeholders. In this sense, research on aspects that users consider influential to the TikTok algorithm include "video engagement, posting time and adding and piling up hashtags" (Klug et al., 2021, p. 84). Klug et al. (2021) also provide evidence, through a content analysis, that two of these assumptions seem to affect the algorithmic popularity of a video. These include different forms of engagement such as likes, comments and shares, along with specific posting times. However, the use of hashtags such as #foryou or #fyp and using many popular hashtags on one video yield uncertain results regarding the likelihood of the video becoming "trending".

In the next section, previous research on algorithmic visibility and its implications for minority creators is presented.

4. ALGORITHMIC (IN)VISIBILITY IN THE FACE OF DIGITAL AND ALGORITHMIC BORDERS

Critical data expert Stefania Milan defines visibility as "the digital embodiment and online presence of individuals and groups and their associated meanings, which are (and need to be) constantly negotiated, reinvigorated, and updated" (Milan, 2015, p. 6). She suggests that politics of visibility begin and end with individuals and "ultimately create individuals-in-the-group rather than groups." (Milan, 2015, p. 1). She

also argues that, since social media are not neutral actors, content creators engage in a sensemaking process that harnesses their technical components to build their collective identity (Milan, 2015). This is relevant for research on immigrant creators because they are far from a monolithic group and their narrative and content-creation strategies often rely on individual stories that are unique and dependent on individual characteristics including their nationality, mode of entry to the country, and whether they fled due to a recognized crisis, a search for opportunity, among others. These narratives are also located within a public sphere of mediatized events that prompt content creation by different groups to clarify, position themselves or counter existing narratives and representations (Jaramillo-Dent & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021; Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022).

Moreover, it is relevant to delve into conceptual notions of *strategy* and *tactic* as key within this study. For this, an adaptation of De Certeau's (1984) conceptualizations to digital and algorithmic spaces is relevant. He describes the importance of considering the marginality that exists in cultural production and the power relationships that are created among members of society. According to De Certeau (1984), strategies and tactics emerge in response to existing power imbalances and lack of recognition by marginalized individuals in society. He argues that they are deployed to organize non-mainstream forms of communication in ways that resemble mass media. A *strategy*, according to the author, refers to the process in which power imbalances can be shifted by isolating dominant subjects (of superior power) by separating them from their context. A *tactic*, on the other hand, refers to an action that takes advantage of a lack of locus, where a subject/institution/entity is able to partially occupy the space of the other in order to take advantage of it. It is different from the strategy because of its lack of "place" and its need to seize any opportunities available.

Moreover, Karizat et al. (2021) describe how TikTok users' sensemaking process of the algorithmic *For You* feed is related to their identity. Their findings suggest that marginalized individuals' experiences with the algorithm differ due to personal identity characteristics that shape their feed. TikTok users identifying as minorities in terms of race, language or sexual orientation reported perceiving that their minority identities were not represented in their feed and considered that it would be less likely to become visible when creating content as a person from a non-dominant group.

Previous research on vernacular visibility has explored the ways in which feminist groups in Latin America appropriate the potential of four different social media platforms to gain visibility and argue that this process of adaptation shapes the feminist movement (Sued et al., 2021). These researchers describe how the aesthetics of their TikTok videos use specific features such as overlaid text and an emphasis on audio. Humor, role-play, and music are also mentioned as part of TikTok's unique narrative genres. Visually, these researchers also describe how female bodies are shaped by TikTok's configurations and appear sexualized. They also describe that a lot of this

content related to feminist activism does not follow established vernacular aesthetics of the platform. The findings of this study are relevant to our analysis because they point to TikTok as one of the main platforms that shapes the formats and configurations of content for visibility by minority groups discussing issues of abortion and women's rights. This case also differs from the present study in that their study focuses on established activist initiatives and this paper is geared towards a combination of users and microcelebrities who self-identify as Latin American immigrants making immigrant issues visible on the platform.

The concept of *algorithmic (in)visibility* is useful to explore the visibility practices of immigrants and other creators who advance controversial content. As mentioned before, *algorithmic (in)visibility* is defined as the set of strategies deployed by a community of creators to have their content picked up by the platform's algorithmic feed regardless of its level of controversy (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022). I argue that these strategies ensure different levels of visibility within the platform depending on the degree of controversy of the content. In the case of immigrants, controversial content may include discussions related to entering a country as a tourist to stay as an immigrant, supporting undocumented immigrants through fundraising initiatives, narrating very intimate stories about crossing the border, or providing information about how to navigate the system without documentation. They do this by using specific affordances and platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) to negotiate their visibility within TikTok's algorithmic structures.

These behaviors are closely related to algorithmic resistance tactics, understood as behaviors that work within the framework of the algorithm with the intention to prompt specific algorithmic outcomes (Velkova & Kaun, 2021). They also emerge in response to users' perspective of the straining nature of algorithmic social feeds which refers to

> (...) an algorithm recognizing, classifying, sorting and suppressing social identities based on its conception of which social identities are (or are not) 'valuable' and 'wanted', or which ones (do not) deserve visibility (Karizat et al., 2021, p. 21)

Algorithmic resistance emerges in response to perceived *algorithmic privilege* (Karizat et al., 2021) which refers to the idea that certain identities are at an advantage and less likely to be suppressed by the feed.

Thus, attempts to avoid moderation and ensure visibility on social media platforms emerge in the face of various coded biases that exist within algorithmic systems. These include the digital borders built through exclusionary narratives, representations, and symbols that place immigrants in established frames and classifications as victims or threats and reproduce these narratives constantly, constraining the ability of migrant creators and communities to challenge them (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). In parallel, coded borders exist in these sociotechnical systems that recognize and classify information such as Google, which have been found to be profoundly

biased when searching terms related to racial minorities (Noble, 2018). The problem of coded biases goes beyond narratives, representations, and searches to affect the likelihood of surveillance a specific group may receive (Benjamin, 2019). This becomes even more relevant for immigrants and refugees as their migratory status and personal safety can be affected by the contents they create and post online due to legislation that enables social media screening to establish refugee status (Brekke & Balke Staver, 2019) which means that creating social media content is often not an option for many immigrants, as they don't have the same communication rights as other members of society (Leurs, 2017).

Considering previous work and the implications of social media visibility for immigrants, in the next section I describe the methodological approach followed in this study.

5.   METHODS

This paper relies on observations from a 16-month digital ethnography exploring immigrant creators on TikTok, it was done through a five-step process:

1. Monthly walkthroughs (Light et al., 2018) of TikTok using the mobile app to understand the specific affordances and content configurations that are available on the platform. Two types of walkthroughs were carried out. The first included navigation of existing content, focusing on the aspects that imitate previous videos and the affordances that derive from existing TikTok trends, for instance navigating from a video through the audio link to explore the videos that used that audio track before. The second type of walkthrough involved the creation of new content to explore the process of content creation and understand whether some components of the content were created within the platform or if they used an external tool.

2. Identification of immigrant creators through searches of hashtags and keywords related to immigration in Spanish and English and the subsequent identification of coocurring hashtags that refer to specific nationalities residing in Spain and the US. This was followed by and the observation of specific profiles that featured migratory narratives to establish the creators' self-identification as immigrants.

3. Daily observations of the general TikTok feed and selected immigrant creator profiles five days a week for a minimum of one hour a day to understand general TikTok trends and specific practices of immigrant creators, as well as their adaptation to wider platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015). Observations were recorded using a system of fieldnotes and screenshots to exemplify phenomena of interest and connections between generalist content creators and immigrant creators.

4. Identification of content that mentions platform moderation practices and/or promotes actions to avoid content elimination and/or to make content visible

in the face of previous deletion. The final sample is purposive (Palys, 2008) as the examples analyzed were extracted from a wider observation due to their illustrative value to exemplify *algorithmic (in)visibility* tactics by these creators.

5. Manual, inductive coding of selected content to identify the characteristics and practices of these content creators and establishment of the types and subtypes of *algorithmic (in)visibility* tactics among these creators.

5.1.   A note on ethics

Due to the structural difficulty of contacting immigrant content creators directly to get their informed consent to use their data —as the platform does not allow users to contact creators directly unless they follow the user— following an adaptation of Markham's (2012) proposal of *fabrication as ethical practice* to protect vulnerable content creator's privacy. In this sense, the contents included in this paper have been translated from Spanish and presented as illustrated renderings of their content rather than screenshots. This was done to ensure that their identities remain protected while enabling the exemplification of the data analyzed with minimal risk for content creators.

6.   FINDINGS

In this section, the main findings are described and explained. The results are contextualized within TikTok as a unique platform, but these content creation practices provide insights about the possibilities of social media platforms for visible controversial storytelling by traditionally marginalized groups such as immigrants. In the digital/algorithmic spaces where this study is located, it is possible to consider De Certeau's (1984) strategy/tactic concepts. For instance, the strategic processes that happen when a popular audio track or effect on TikTok is considered a digital "space" that is occupied by a community of creators who reuse it and is also appropriated by immigrants for a specific narrative aim such as the example in section 6.2.2. On the other hand, tactics are more in line with the partial deplatforming example where the creator occupies and shifts between different digital spaces, to take advantage of the platforms that allow him to present his content more freely at any given time.

6.1.   Content reuse for visibility

The first tactic involves different forms of content reuse as well as the promotion of certain interactions by creators attempting to make their content visible and avoid deletion by the platform. This process follows the four mechanisms within the politics of visibility proposed by Milan (2015) by (1) centering on the performative nature of the migrant experience by giving voice to the original creator of the content; (2) prompting certain engagements and interactions by users through overlaid text or

in the caption; (3) expanding the duration of the protest by creating new, updated videos on the basis of existing content; (4) reproducing social action through the use of TikTok's imitation possibilities. In this case it involves more committed forms of interaction in which users are called upon to create new content using the existing video. This may involve the reuse of the audio track or the entire video through one of the affordances and content configurations available on TikTok such as green screen or duet. In this section, a few different examples of this tactic will be explained.

6.1.1. Audio re-upload and reuse to avoid deletion

This tactic is exemplified by narratives that rely on an audio track as the main controversial aspect of the content. An example of this is the recorded audio of a Latin American immigrant worker in Spain who was verbally abused by her employer and whose recording was used by several creators who expressed their support and empathy using captions and overlaid text. Creators who reshared this audio track also commented on their own experiences of abuse and the parts of the audio that are especially shocking. This strategy is deployed through two separate tactics that are seemingly opposite but may respond to a process of negotiation and learning of the creator community with the algorithmic feed to make content visible on the platform regardless of its level of controversy.

The first tactic involves creators uploading audio tracks as originals more than once to trick the algorithm into thinking that it is an "original" track. It is important to understand that the "original" label on TikTok audio tracks denotes that the creator uploaded (or recorded) the audio from their device. This means that a second creator who wants to share the same audio track without connecting with the original poster may upload it again and two "original" tracks featuring different creator names may indeed be the same recording that has been uploaded by two different creators. This has also been identified as a strategy to avoid attributing authorship to the original creator on TikTok by reuploading existing audio tracks that appear as original (Kaye et al., 2021). This practice arguably makes it harder for the algorithm to delete an audio track from all the videos where it appears because they keep emerging as different audio tracks under different names and connecting a different set of videos that have reused said track. In this case at least five different audio tracks featuring the exact recording under different creators' names were identified. Each of them had been reused between 20 and 40 times. The visual part of these videos often shows an empty wall or ceiling where no person appears and in other instances a person is looking at the camera, in most cases they are female creators. In the case of this recording, it is hard to know where the abuse is taking place, but it is so violent that the audio is successful in expressing the violence and fear experienced by the immigrant worker who recorded it. It is also possible to discern the Latin American accent of the immigrant woman as compared to the Spanish accent of the female voice who uses slurs and yells.

Almost all the videos that share this audio track also include overlaid text with

various functions which include: (1) describing the emotions of the poster about the audio track; (2) expressing having experienced similar instances of abuse; (3) explaining how common this type of experience is for other immigrants in Spain; (4) promoting specific actions to avoid the deletion of the video and/or audio track.

Figure 2 reflects a rendering of one of these "original" videos on the left and the audio track page that reflects the number of videos that have used the audio track on the right.
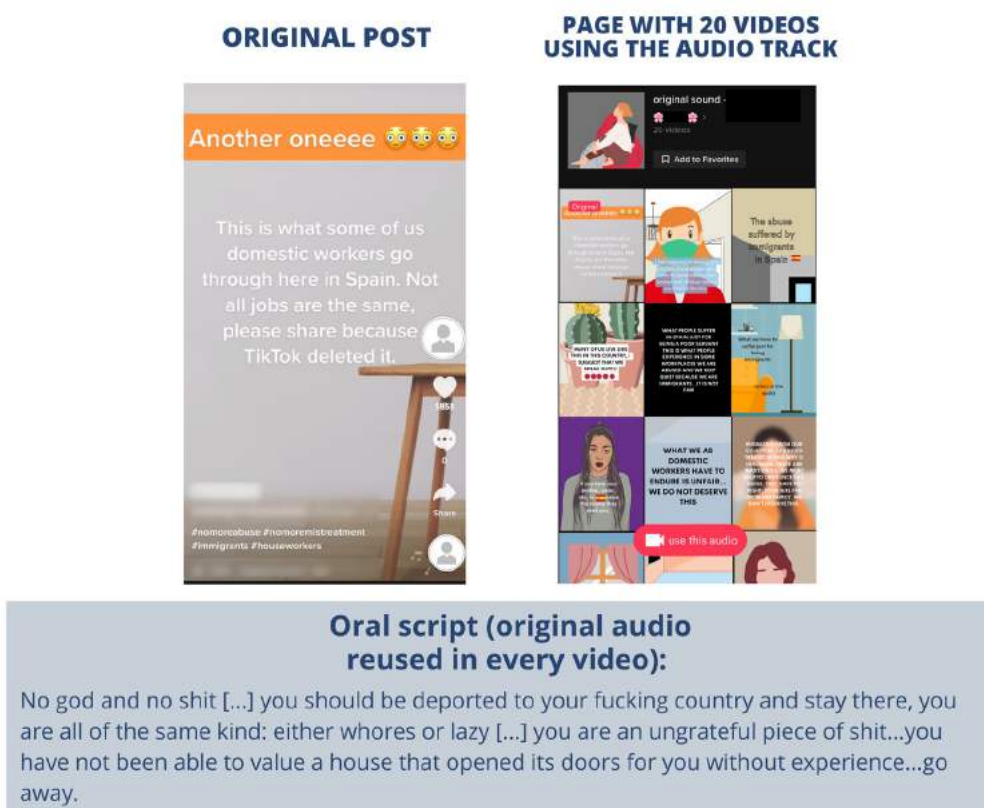

Figure 2. Rendering of (in)visible content made visible through audio reuse and re-upload. (Created and translated from Spanish by the author).

At the same time, the overlaid text in this case mentions the importance of sharing this video because it had already been taken down by TikTok. In this sense, this audio-based strategy follows two different actions, which may include re-uploading the audio track under a different name and then promoting the reuse of the audio track to avoid deletion. It is possible to argue that these are forms of algorithmic resistance (Velkova & Kaun, 2021) in which immigrant users reclaim their narratives and present them through the use of a range of the possibilities offered by the platform and through a process of negotiation with the algorithmic feed.

Moreover, TikTok videos that use this tactic often express in some way that they are the type of video TikTok eliminates, in the case of Figure 2 they describe that the video is a repost due to its previous deletion. It is noteworthy that many creators promote the reshare and reuse of the video and audio as a form of protest towards abusive employers and moderation guidelines. In this case the possibility to reuse the audio track —which is one of TikTok's main features and one of its main organizing principles (Abidin, 2021)— is instrumentalized for visibility and protest in the face of the TikTok community, society in general, and the algorithm.

It is noteworthy that this audio track goes against platform moderation guidelines under its "Abusive Behavior" guidelines, as it contains content that falls under

> (...) expressions of abuse, including threats or degrading statements intended to mock, humiliate, embarrass, intimidate, or hurt an individual. (...) Do not post, upload, stream, or share content that insults another individual, or disparages an individual on the basis of attributes such as intellect, appearance, personality traits, or hygiene (...) To minimize the spread of egregiously offensive terms, we remove all slurs from our platform (TikTok, n.d.).

This suggests that strategic use of audio tracks may bypass algorithmic moderation and enable instances of abuse to become visible on the platform. It is also possible that human moderators have allowed the content to stay up due to its value to public interest, as the intention of those who share this content is not to discriminate against immigrants but to provide visibility to an instance of abuse. This suggests that moderation processes may follow some forms of contextualization in order to decide to eliminate content, in line with internet scholar Tartleton Gillespie's (2010) description of the ways in which different platforms handle graphic content, mentioning context as an important aspect in moderation decisions. The issue of which content is moderated, and which content remains up is problematic considering the recent reports by Black TikTok creators who have experienced what they see as unfair moderation instances where their content is flagged citing "harassment and bullying" when they reshare content exemplifying racist attacks while the original discriminatory videos remain on the platform (Contreras & Martinez, 2021). This may be due to hybrid moderation systems that rely on a combination of algorithms, human moderators, responses to user reports and flagging. Regardless, the obscure nature of moderation systems (Myers West, 2018) makes it hard for creators to more effectively approach visibility on the platform.

6.1.2. Content reuse and resignification for visibility
This tactic is similar to the audio reuse tactic but in this case the entire video is

integrated into the new video. Creators use TikTok's reuse and resignification functions such as duet and green screen, as reflected on Figure 3.
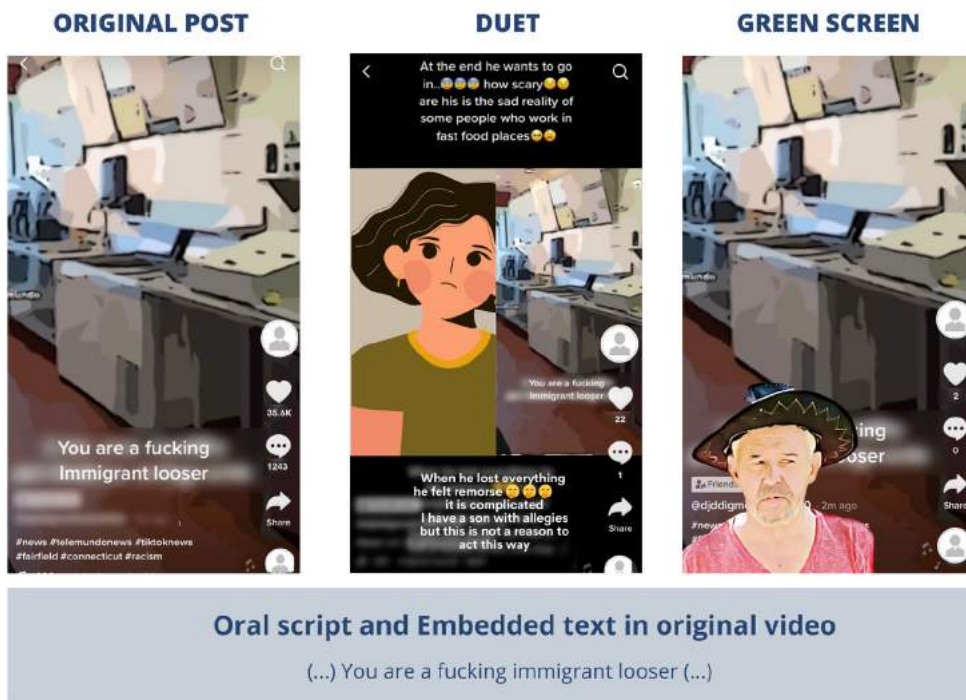

Figure 3. Rendering of different forms of content reuse for visibility. (Created and translated by the author)

In this case the original video is shared by the official profile of news channel Telemundo. This video was recorded by a fast-food restaurant worker who witnessed a xenophobic attack by a customer who was upset about his order. The customer utters the words "you are a fucking immigrant loser" and overlaid text is added to emphasize this part of the video. After the video was posted, immigrant creators appropriated the video and shared it through the duet and green screen affordances to comment about their own experiences and opinions about the attack.

Similar to the audio reuse strategy, overlaid text is often employed to express the creator's opinion or experiences related to the instance of abuse depicted in the video and it provides interesting insights as to the uses and functions of overlaid text for marginalized creators attempting to make abuse and oppression visible on the platform. The visual component provides more context and is more illustrative of the development of the specific instance of abuse. The presence of this content and its continued reuse and resignification exemplifies Mitchell's (2019) argument of digital narratives as collective spaces for meaning making. In this case immigrants use the green screen and duet configurations to asynchronously discuss their views on

this recorded instance of oppression, as well as its connection with wider collective experiences of discrimination.

6.2. Vernacular visibility on TikTok

This section explores how some of the specific TikTok platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015) are instrumentalized by immigrant creators to convey controversial topics, bypass moderation and enter the algorithmic feed. In this case it is possible to suggest that narrative configurations that are repeatedly present on the platform are part of these vernaculars. Zulli and Zulli (2020) suggested that there is a relationship between imitation of existing content and increased visibility on the platform by linking —through audio and effects— new content to existing, often highly viral content. These authors also explain that creating videos that follow a certain type that is available on TikTok may also boost their visibility through physical imitation, this includes modeling specific uses for available affordances such as overlaid text and imitating visual configurations.

6.2.1. Vernacular humor and sarcasm

Some of these content creators publish videos that discuss topics that are highly controversial such as strategies to enter a country as a tourist to stay. They are successful by following some aspects of the platform vernacular understood as the set of grammars, logics and narrative configurations that characterize a social media platform (Gibbs et al., 2015). Users learn these vernacular languages and their implications for visibility through their use and navigation of the platform, as well as through a set of folk theories that are shared by the community of users and creators (Karizat et al., 2021) which have also been described as algorithmic gossip (Bishop, 2019). Cotter (2022) proposes the notion of *practical knowledge* as a socially constructed process in which social media users gain familiarity with algorithms. Her proposal involves non-technical, collective, and contextual understandings of algorithmic processes. Moreover, vernacular visibility practices are made possible through the strategic use of vernacular affordances, understood as the sociotechnical aspects of the platform that reflect how users appropriate and make sense of available affordances for their own goals within the platform (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015).

In the case of TikTok the example provided includes two components of its vernacular: (1) the use of the "answer comment" affordance and (2) sarcastic humor. As can be seen in Figure 4, the creator explains that he entered the country as a tourist and managed to stay and obtain documentation. His message is surrounded by a series of humorous statements, many of them shocking. It is possible to suggest that this format is successful in tricking the moderation system and reach people, in this case with 71.3K views and 2.6K likes. This creator has 91.6K followers which suggests that he is very successful in presenting his content although it may be controversial.
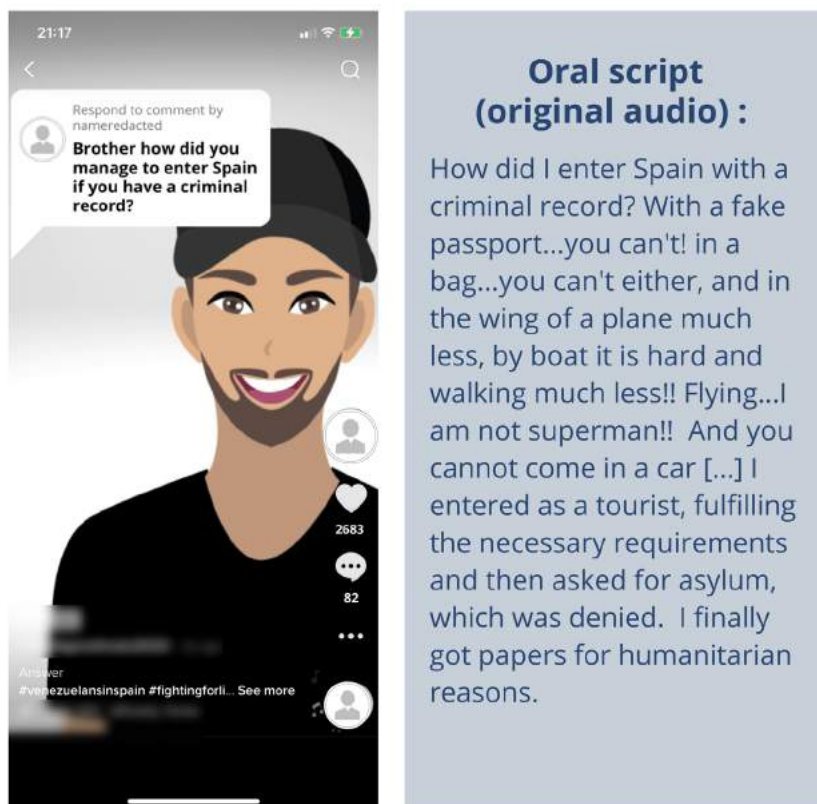
Figure 4. Rendering of visibility of controversial content through humor and sarcasm. Created and translated by the author from Spanish.

6.2.2. Overlaid text for (in)visibility

The use of a popular audio track was covered in a previous section but in this case, it is combined with an affordance that is part of the TikTok vernacular which is the use of overlaid text to customize the narrative while connecting to other creators through a popular music clip. In this case, a section of Natalia Lafourcade's song Hasta la Raíz with the lyrics: "Looking back you'll know that I haven't forgotten you. I carry you inside me" is appropriated by the immigrant community to tell controversial and profoundly intimate stories about crossing the border. It illustrates the ways in which this micro challenge is configured among immigrants who crossed the US-Mexico border around an audio meme (Abidin, 2021) extracted and curated around this song as a form of storytelling (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) to express this very specific experience of memory and identity. Figure 5 illustrates the different overlaid texts present in a few of the more than 6000 videos that use this audio track.

Figure 5. Examples of overlaid text used in videos with clip from the song "Hasta la raíz" by Natalia Lafourcade describing controversial intimate practices. Created by the author.

It is evident that these are stories of pain, difficulty, and gratefulness involving people who helped these immigrants to cross safely through the US-Mexico border and obtain documentation. This is considered controversial for many reasons but one of them is the fact that they are publicly announcing that they crossed the border. Moreover, two of them refer to situations of abuse *en route* and the involvement of coyotes, while one of them discusses marrying to gain documented status. The other two texts refer to ICE agents who helped these immigrants cross, and this is very relevant because there is very little content that mentions ICE agents as possible allies for immigrants, which is rare within immigrant narratives which often present ICE agents as abusive and deceiving (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022). These narratives are disruptive and unexpected, and they are presented using TikTok vernacular logics, accompanied by a culturally relevant music genre, which derives from Huapango (a traditional Mexican genre) with lyrics from a song that refers to identity through the metaphor of roots and the ways in which memories become an integral part of who we are. These immigrant creators are positioning these characters in their immigration story as key in their current lives and identities, as well as their possibilities to be part of their new country. This very short video —which lasts only nine seconds— is a powerful example of the way in which this community of creators followed the imitational nature of TikTok to convey their most intimate stories of gratefulness and migratory resilience through overlaid text connected by a short musical clip. In this sense the controversial content becomes visible through a connective audio track, but it is concealed by the use of overlaid text —in Spanish— which

enables creators to customize their narrative. It is possible to argue that this content is (in)visible and it successfully bypasses moderation systems due to its alignment with TikTok's vernacular.

6.3.   Partial deplatforming for renewed visibility

The elimination of content related to immigrant rights for going against the platform's guidelines reflects colonial moderation practices. In this context, Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022) describe how an immigrant activist got his Facebook account banned due to its mentions of white supremacists and MAGA supporters. In the present study an example of this was found in an immigrant creator who supports other immigrants and their rights and has achieved more than 2 million followers. In this case the creator had turned to his alternate social media profiles to explain what happened on TikTok and to promote alternative channels such as his Instagram account. His strategy is threefold and can be seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Rendering of threefold strategy to maintain visibility and interaction from followers. Created and translated from Spanish by the author.

This resembles digital methods expert Richard Rogers' (2020) analysis of *deplatforming* practices by extreme internet celebrities who flee to alternative social media platforms to continue sharing their content in as a response to moderation by mainstream platforms. In the case of this creator, he engages in partial deplatforming, as he creates an alternative profile on TikTok alongside his Instagram account and expresses hope about his original TikTok profile which was repeatedly blocked before being completely banned citing his engagement in unlawful activities in content that fundraised to help undocumented individuals in the United States. His detailed description of the moderation process through an Instagram video and his

negotiation with TikTok illustrate the obscurity and cluelessness that prompts the emergence of folk moderation theories that attempt to make sense of these processes with no clear pathway to figure out why some content is moderated while other — seemingly more damaging— content remains on the platform (Myers West, 2018).

7.   CONCLUSIONS

This paper provides insights about the strategies that immigrant tiktokers deploy to bypass moderation processes and negotiate the visibility of their contents in the face of algorithmic systems that reflect biased structures for minority creators. These strategies include (1) content reuse and re-upload (2) vernacular visibility and (3) partial deplatforming to guide users to the channels where content can become visible and accessible when TikTok profiles are banned. It is important to note that the goal of this study was not to generalize across creators on the platform but to identify instances of controversial content by immigrants on the platform and inquire about the possible aspects of the content that make it more likely to remain visible regardless of its level of controversy. These practices provide insights as to the difficulties faced by immigrants in some platforms and their attempts to make their content visible through subversive narratives and platformed strategies.

The strategic concealment of aspects of the narrative behind overlaid text and popular audio tracks is relevant to the need of minorities to model and shape their narratives to their context due to their difficulty to fit (Appadurai, 2019). This translates into the algorithmic aspect of the narrative, i.e. ensuring its presence and visibility within the platform. In this sense, one more analytical dimension is added to the mix of digital borders (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019) faced by immigrants in user-generated-content contexts: the algorithmic visibility border. It is noteworthy that, although traditional indicators of success such as the number of views or likes are mentioned in this analysis, the goal was not to ascertain whether this content is highly visible but how it has remained present on the platform. In many cases, it is possible to suggest that tactics such as re-uploading audio have a twofold consequence, which includes limiting the video's visibility, while minimizing the possibility that it will be flagged or banned.

This paper's limitations include the non-participant ethnographic approach and content analysis, which are limited by the lack of engagement with creators. It is important to note that TikTok makes it very difficult to contact creators directly which limits the feasibility of engaging directly with them. Future research could use quantitative methods to assess moderation experiences by immigrant creators through surveys and reach results that are more applicable to the general population of creators rather than the qualitative, unique observations made in the present study.

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