# IMMIGRANT TIKTOKERS DECOLONIZING ALGORITHMIC VISIBILITY

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## Introduction

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. In this sense, Appadurai (2019) described the difficulties faced by immigrants and their narratives to fit mainstream expectations set by modern nation-states.  It is possible to extrapolate these societal requirements to the digital space of social media platforms, where a combination of human and algorithmic moderation systems 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.

## Theoretical Framework

In this case, decolonial practices are reflected when "historically marginalized groups produce and curate their knowledges online" (Acey et al., 2021, p. 2).  For the purposes of the present study, this refers to the narrative and platformed agentic practices of Latin American immigrant content creators countering traditional colonial expectations related to their representation, life experiences and interests. It also refers to their explicit negotiations with the platform and its moderation practices (Gillespie, 2018).

The concept of algorithmic (in)visibility (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022) serves as the basis for this paper. It refers to the creative practices deployed by immigrant creators —and possibly by other marginalized groups— though their platformed narratives, to negotiate its conspicuousness.  They do this using specific affordances and platform vernaculars

(Gibbs et al., 2015; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) to negotiate their visibility within TikTok's algorithmic structures.

TikTok has been explained as a structurally mimetic platform (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) that promotes imitation through its affordances and creative configurations.  The (re)use of popular audio tracks, visual configurations and humorous narratives have become part of TikTok's vernacular and have been related to a higher possibility of visibility and virality.

**Method**

In this case, the study reports interim findings from a larger study of 53 immigrant tiktokers, their profiles and videos. In this case the study focuses on a twofold sample that includes (1) content that is successful and becomes highly visible regardless of its level of controversy; and (2) content that depicts creators' descriptions of eliminated videos or blocked profiles. For this, a critical multimodal content analysis of videos and posts by immigrant content creators, identified through a 16-month long digital ethnography was carried out. The analysis includes their content on Instagram and secondary TikTok accounts in the cases where their main profiles have been momentarily or completely blocked by TikTok. The key findings include illustrative examples of these two types of videos.

**Key Findings**

*(In)visible content:*
This type of content refers to videos where immigrant creators' comment on the possibility of it to be eliminated by the platform.
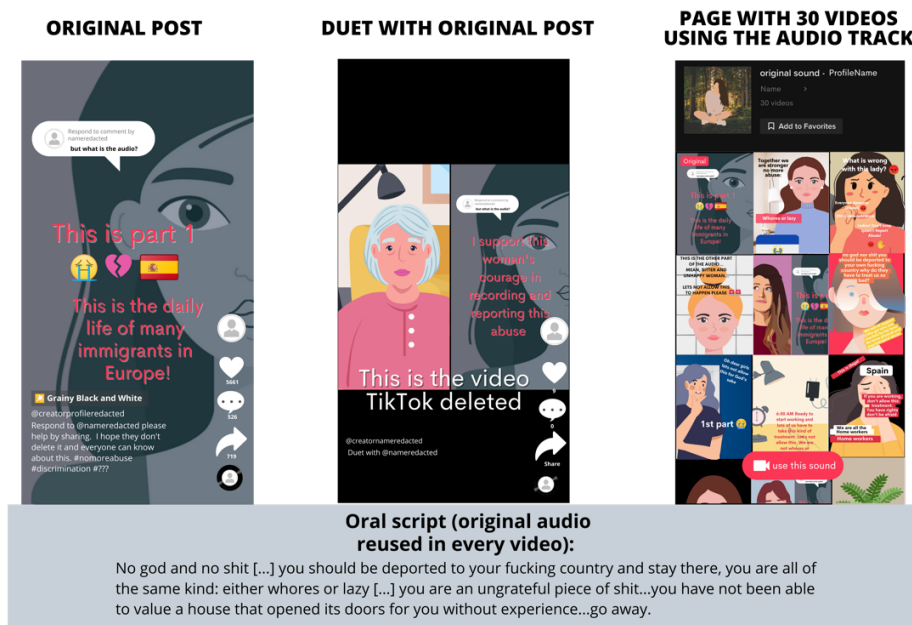


Figure 1. Renderings of (in)visible content made visible through reuse of audio. Created by the Author

An example of this is the recorded audio of an immigrant worker who was verbally abused by her employer and whose recording was used by several creators who expressed their support and empathy using the captions and overlaid text. They also commented on their own experiences of abuse and the parts of the audio that are especially shocking. Figure 1 reflects two examples of creators who commented on (1) this being the type of video TikTok eliminates or (2) the fact that this video had already been eliminated and the existing video being a repost. 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. The possibility to reuse the audio track, which is one of TikTok's main features, is instrumentalized for visibility and protest in the face of the TikTok community, society in general, and the algorithm.

*Vernacular visibility: 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. This includes the use of the "answer comment" affordance and sarcastic humor. In this example, the creator also 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 but 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.
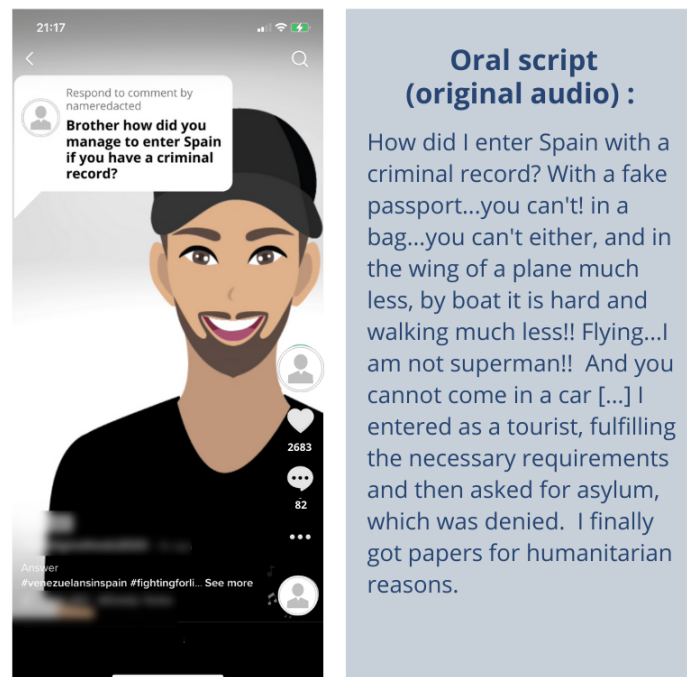


Figure 2. Rendering of controversial visibility through humor and sarcasm. Created by the Author

*(In)visible activism: indefensible vulnerability*

The elimination of content related to immigrant rights for going against the platform's guidelines reflects colonial moderation practices. An example of this is an immigrant creator who supports other immigrants and their rights and has achieved more than 2 million followers.  In this case the creator has been forced to create and promote alternative channels such as his Instagram account which suggests ta crossmedia negotiation of visibility across different platform's moderation processes. His strategy is threefold and can be seen in Figure 3.
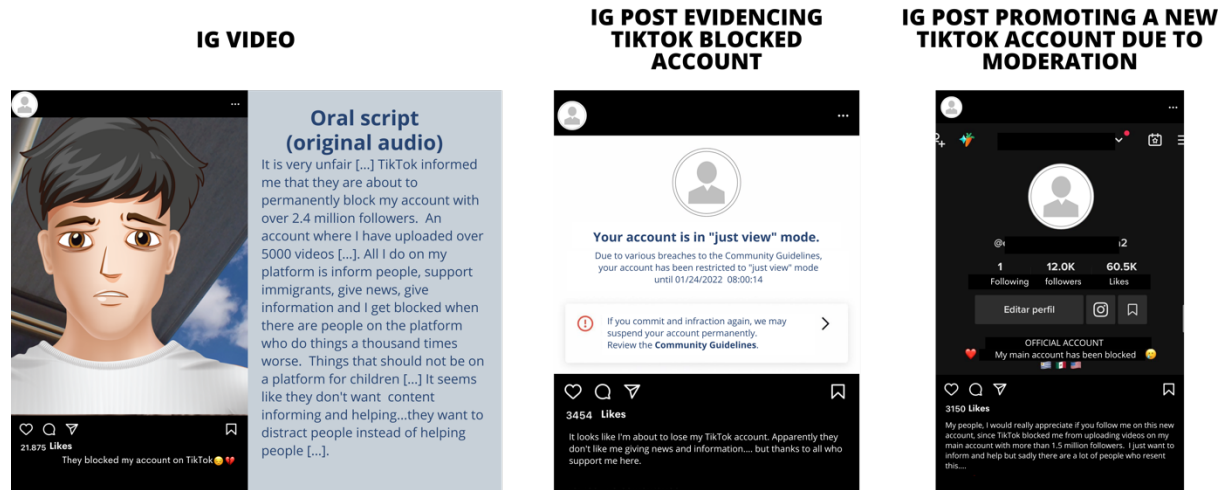


Figure 3. Rendering of threefold strategy to maintain visibility and interaction from followers. Created by the Author.

## Conclusions

Immigrant tiktokers deploy a series of strategies to bypass moderation processes and negotiate the visibility of their contents in the face of algorithmic systems that reflect colonial structures.  These strategies include (1) the use (and reuse) of platform affordances such as audio tracks; (2) the use of humor and sarcasm (which are part of TikTok's vernacular) to convey controversial information; (3) partial deplatforming to guide users to the channels where content can become visible and accessible when their profiles are blocked by TikTok. 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.

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