
Centre for International
Governance Innovation

Supporting a Safer Internet Paper No. 3

Non-binary TikTokers in Latin America

Sharing Debates and Circumventing Censorship

Florencia Goldsman



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Table of Contents

vi	About the Project
vi	About the Author
1	Executive Summary
1	Introduction
2	Theoretical Considerations: The Latin American Context during COVID
3	Approaching TikTok from a Technopolitical Perspective
5	Community Guidelines Controlling the Interaction
6	Methodology and Analysis
8	Analyzing the TikTok Videos
12	Conclusion
14	Works Cited

About the Project

Supporting a Safer Internet: Global Survey of Gender-Based Violence Online is a two-year research project, in partnership with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Ipsos. This project explores the prevalence of online gender-based violence (OGBV) experienced by women and LGBTQ+ individuals in the Global South. From cyberstalking, impersonation and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, to deliberate personal attacks on communications channels, OGBV is silencing the voices of women and LGBTQ+ individuals, causing digital exclusion and propagating systemic inequalities. To address these emerging challenges, the survey and papers produced under this research initiative will help to develop policy recommendations and navigate shared governance issues that are integral to designing responses to OGBV — whether that be through the regulation of online social media platforms, educational programming or legal recourse.

About the Author

Florencia Goldsman is a cis-gender Argentinian feminist journalist who has been living and working in Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia and Argentina since 2010. For the last five years, she has also contributed to trans-feminist debates through journalistic articles (www.pikaramagazine.com/), and through podcasts (www.iwmf.org/community/marta-florencia-goldsman/).

Executive Summary

This paper presents the findings of a research project carried out focusing on the #nonbinary community on TikTok in Latin America. The project was interested in exploring how gender violence and censorship impact their content in this space. A semantic analysis of their posts seeks to establish some topics that appear to be the main issues for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and other sexualities (LGBTQ+) on this platform. The findings suggest that they use the platform in different ways to avoid censorship and reinforce the search for freedom of expression online.

Introduction

This paper considers concerns related to some aspects of the significant progress that is taking place in Latin America regarding the human rights agenda; more specifically, it looks at developments in relation to LGBTQ+¹ rights and considers how this progress is reflected in the increasingly popular social media platform TikTok. As a relatively new platform that was launched in China in 2016, not much is known about TikTok, nor is there a great deal of research on it and on its impact in Latin America.

While TikTok is oriented to a segment of the young population known as Generation Z,² people of any age and social strata can and do participate on TikTok. This poses a challenge for those who are doing research on technopolitics but who are not users of their object of study; in this case, a platform and a subject of study to which they do not necessarily belong. The research in

this specific region explores the distinctive uses of TikTok by a community that perceives itself as “#nobinario” (#nonbinary)³ and responds to a context in which the progress of LGBTQ+ and feminist human rights are at the forefront of societal debates. At the same time, a wave of online attacks directed at individuals and collectives and rollbacks of progressive policies have been observed and experienced throughout Latin America, led by conservative and ultra-right groups that express themselves with stigmatizing, discriminatory and violent discourses.

Taking an intersectional and respectful view, and with the intention of contributing to important debates on current social transformation, this paper draws on knowledge processes from netnography (virtual ethnography), which are inspired by ethnographic methods. The decision was made to carry out a non-participant observation, that is to say, to try to get to know a community from observation, interviews and deductions from some of the studied behaviours (Sánchez and Ortiz 2016; Recuero 2016). From there, the research problem was defined, the field was demarcated, documents to inform the field work on the internet were reviewed, and analysis categories were designed to produce a final report.⁴

In this process, the complexity of the phenomena studied was addressed through facts, trends or regularities in the given context and region. Since the analysis was not intended to be exhaustive, it did not cover the entire region, nor did it cover all the issues related to the object of study. It should also be mentioned that there are inherent problems with framing Latin America as a singular geopolitical area; therefore, this paper will instead point toward the ways in which embodied political practices on TikTok unfold within specific geographic and temporal characteristics.

The structure of the paper is as follows: First, basic definitions of the Latin American context during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic are provided. Second, TikTok censorship and the

1 The language used to describe LGBTQ+ people continues to evolve. Some groups prefer LGBTIQ+, with “I” representing intersex. The “+” symbol at the end is usually added to include all the groups that are not represented in the acronym. One of the groups that will be discussed in this paper, non-binary identified, would be part of the “+.” The LGBTQIA Resource Center at the University of California, Davis has an excellent online glossary of terms and definitions related to this topic, available at <https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary>.

2 “Over 60% of TikTok users are Generation Z, which refers to users born after 1996. Generation Z is one of the most diverse generations yet, with high levels of education, digital nativism, social and cultural awareness and a high propensity to be more expressive” (Forbes 2020).

3 The decision to use the hashtag #nobinario (#nonbinary) as a starting point is not intended to exclude people who do not identify themselves that way, but rather is used as an umbrella concept.

4 For the purposes of this research, four qualitative interviews were conducted with Latin American TikTokers (from Brazil, Chile, Guatemala and Mexico) to gain insights from their own perspectives and experiences on the platform. The people interviewed also provided suggestions on TikTok profiles to follow.

platform's documented censoring features are described (those that have been made public, in particular). Third, the main characteristics of the information available for users seeking to understand the company's content guidelines are explored (Myers West 2018). Fourth, the videos are explored and aligned with the initial research questions: What are the priority topics shared by people using the non-binary hashtag in the region? How do they cope with possible attacks? Do they face possible censorship of their content? After outlining the methods used for the study, the paper describes the videos that helped build the categories for the analysis. It then concludes by analyzing how this use and strategic appropriations of TikTok framed the conceptualizations of content moderation systems, and their characterization of the non-conforming profiles on this platform.

Theoretical Considerations: The Latin American Context during COVID

As a region, Latin America is currently experiencing uneven progress when it comes to the LGBTQ+ agenda. It has witnessed a regional backlash led by religious and right-wing groups (Derechos Digitales 2019), while social movements struggle to gain more rights for all members of the population. As Cole Rizki (2019, 151) highlights when referring to trans studies in particular, “*En las Américas*, a situated attention on state violence experiences is also needed, including contemporary dictatorship and genocide, which require theories that can account for the vulnerability of individuals and the urgency to address the public.”

During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, social movements, such as the feminist and LGBTQ+ groups that had taken to the streets (teleSUR 2020), had to back down due to health protection, as well as due to the increased militarization and surveillance (Pisanu and Arroyo 2021) that were enforced under the umbrella of actions from local governments during lockdown. Hence, social movements were forced to operate online.

In Argentina, a new national identity system for people who identify themselves as non-binary was introduced in July 2021. Under national law, Argentinians have the right to identify themselves as gender neutral (BBC News 2021).⁵ However, despite this effort, there was not the same level of progress across the region. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has dismantled programs that attempted to reduce stigmatization, marginalization and risk of violence due to prejudice.⁶ In Guatemala, conservative and right-wing groups promoted the “Life and Family Protection Bill 5272,” which is based on the premise that life and family would be under latent threats from minority groups that threaten the moral balance of our society, referring to the sexual and gender diversity community, as well as to women's organizations that promote greater access to information on sexual and reproductive health and comprehensive sexual education.⁷ Honduras, Peru, El Salvador and Paraguay, among others, also showed regression in public policy with regard to the progress on LGBTQ+ rights.⁸

Persistent discrimination and deep inequalities are notorious in Latin America, and researchers have a duty to expose them. Influenced by the Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel, researcher Viviane Vergueiro Simakawa (2015) points out that in Latin America, colonial heritage is still alive, and the region experiences a “colonial power matrix” that affects all dimensions of social existence, such as sexuality, authority, work and subjectivity. That is why intersectional cartographies are fundamental and necessary to catalyze and improve multiple processes of rebellion, indignation and decolonial organization.

5 At the same time, the campaign “Where is Tehuel?” (¿Dónde está Tehuel?) recalls the search over the last seven months for a young trans man who disappeared, highlighting the danger and violence experienced by individuals who do not meet binary norms and cis-sexism (see www.laizquierdadiario.com/Y-donde-esta-Tehuel-Se-cumplen-6-meses-de-su-desaparicion).

6 See, for example, Hailer (2021).

7 While this paper was being written, LGBTQ+ movements in Guatemala called out Congress for rejecting a new bill (5490) that tries to define trans children and trans teens as threats, and therefore seeks to criminalize them (Salazar 2021).

8 According to a report published by Sin Violencia (2021), a regional observatory created to analyze the situation of this community, and made up of organizations from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Peru, during quarantine, the main patterns of homicidal violence against LGBTQ+ people in the region persisted in proportions similar to previous years.



Photo: Juan Alberto Casado/Shutterstock

This paper consequently adopts an intersectional gaze as a method of observation, the starting point of a dialogue and a springboard from which to promote collective political action. This is a way of looking at inequalities and discrimination in an interrelated way, as stated by María Rodó-Zarate (2021).

Although Latin America (mainly Mexico and South America) has made some progress over the last decade in acknowledging LGBTQ+ human rights, the region is currently dealing with setbacks: in response to the progress made and in parallel with the strengthening of civil society, a conservative wave that pursues an unequal, exclusive and reactionary model of society has been gaining strength (Tessa 2021).

Social media platforms and their content moderation rules shape the production and spread of knowledge for the youngest generations. The LGBTQ+ movement is one of the most active people's movements today, and social media platforms, far more than physical spaces, are the place of choice for divergent expressions. New forms of expression and online organization should be mapped out in order to understand the role they play in political struggles. The

online gender violence that is evident in the current context should also be considered.

Approaching TikTok from a Technopolitical Perspective

TikTok is like a television that is always on, offering users non-stop streaming of their favourite profiles and tags. It also provides an interesting combination of a variety of essential functions of other popular apps such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and the not-so-well-known Vine app, explain scholars Yulun Ma and Yue Hu (2021). Owned by ByteDance, a Beijing-headquartered company that operates a suite of popular sites and social apps — a sort of Chinese analogue to Facebook — TikTok was the most popular overall app downloaded globally in 2020 with an estimated 1.1 billion active users worldwide.⁹ Although it is not easy to obtain official statistics

⁹ See <https://influencermarketinghub.com/tiktok-stats/>.

on its adoption in Latin America, it is clear that users in the region are part of this trend.¹⁰ To better understand TikTok's successful engagement model, it is helpful to consider its hyper-customized "For You"¹¹ landing page, where users can discover videos that align with their content preferences and interests based on their past activity, such as likes, comments, searches and profiles they choose to follow. The more an individual uses the app, the more accurate the "For You" page algorithm becomes, showing them the videos and accounts that they are most likely to enjoy.

In general, researchers cannot inspect the algorithm's operations. Even with access to its source code, it is unlikely that one could effectively examine all possible actions. TikTok's community policy, however, should provide some insight into the algorithm's behaviour.

Before analyzing TikTok's community guidelines, what is behind this platform should be scrutinized. TikTok gathers user contact details, content created by users, user location, credit card details, information in messages sent via the app, contact lists (if the user authorizes), information shared from third-party social network providers, and technical and behavioural information about how users navigate and use TikTok. In addition, the app shares information with service providers that work with cloud storage, analytics, search engines and other information technology, as well as with TikTok's business partners and advertisers, and, if required by law, with law enforcement agencies, public authorities and government bodies (Perera and Wijetunga 2019).¹²

TikTok's business model, which is often linked to data markets, is a black box, and there are no opportunities to try to understand the possible bias of an algorithm. Attempting to open the black box

and discuss the decisions that a corporation such as Twitter (Goldman 2018) or TikTok makes, and how it performs its role as gatekeeper, is an impossible task. The proprietary and extractivist nature of these platforms closes the door to access to the logic behind them. Nevertheless, a 2020 article published by The Intercept reported that, up until a very short time ago, the TikTok algorithm had some aesthetic (classist) objections about certain types of videos: "One moderation document outlining physical features, bodily and environmental, deemed too unattractive spells out a litany of flaws that could be grounds for invisibly barring a given clip from the 'For You' section of the app, where TikTok videos are funneled to a vast audience based on secret criteria" (Biddle, Ribeiro and Dias 2020).

Although what it takes to earn a spot on the "For You" section remains a mystery, the document reveals that it takes very little to be excluded. It is based on the premise that uploads by unattractive, poor or undesirable users could "decrease the short-term new user retention rate" (quoted in *ibid.*).¹³ An article about Instagram rules by journalist Paula Akpan (2020) asked: "What would you do if your work, your body, or your life choices were deemed to go *against community guidelines*?" TikTok's guidelines should be questioned in the same way. Akpan's question and other initial questions guided the author's research on the effort to identify how gender violence circulates online toward a specific population.

The vast majority of content created by the group that was studied is related to sexuality and identity policy. As Ari Ezra Waldman (2021, 1) affirms, "content moderation plays an increasingly important role in the creation and dissemination of expression, thought, and knowledge." Nevertheless, in the social media ecosystem, non-normative and LGBTQ+ sexual expression is taken down, restricted and banned to a significant degree (Fox 2020). There is another phenomenon, known as "shadow banning," that is interfering with freedom of expression and the transparency of community guidelines (Collins 2021). A TikTok shadow ban is when you have been banned from the platform or when your visibility has been reduced but you have not been made aware. As a result, your videos will stop appearing on TikTok's "For You" page

10 During the writing of this paper, the author tried to get more in-depth official information about TikTok through a member of a TikTok advisory council in Latin America but did not get an answer (the paper was written during a short period of time, which did not allow a lot of time for a response). Unofficial statistics can be viewed here: www.emarketer.com/content/tiktoks-corporate-focus-on-latin-america-paying-off.

11 "ParaTi" in Spanish.

12 ByteDance's core algorithms follow proper internet censorship rules issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China. In January 2019, under the command of the China Netcasting Services Association at the Chinese government's direction, the guidelines banned 100 types of inappropriate content and called on platform operators to review every piece of content that goes online (Ryan, Fritz and Impiombato 2020).

13 "More recent examples of apparent censorship—including posts tagged with #BlackLivesMatter and #GeorgeFloyd—have been explained away by TikTok as the result of a 'technical glitch'" (Biddle, Ribeiro and Dias 2020).

as frequently as they did before. It is like having the spotlight on you, then having it taken away without any warning or notice. For TikTokers, this could translate into experiencing a decrease in audience and engagements from their posts; thus, their likes, views and shares go down.

The process of content moderation is often characterized by its opacity. If we do not really understand what the rules are, how do we know when someone is violating them?

Community Guidelines Controlling the Interaction

On TikTok, there is a special section dedicated to disclosing its set of norms and common code of conduct, where it states: “We prioritize safety, diversity, inclusion, and authenticity. We encourage creators to celebrate what makes them unique, and viewers to engage in what inspires them; and we believe that a safe environment helps everyone express themselves openly.”¹⁴ Violating these guidelines means that any content — including video, audio, livestream, images, comments and text — could be automatically removed. “Individuals are notified of our decisions and can appeal if they believe no violation has occurred. We will suspend or ban accounts and/or devices that are involved in severe or repeated violations; we will consider information available on other platforms and offline in these decisions. When warranted, we will report the accounts to relevant legal authorities.”¹⁵

The topics in the crosshairs of censorship are: violent extremism; hateful behaviour; illegal activities and regulated goods; violent and graphic content; suicide, self-harm and dangerous acts; harassment and bullying; adult nudity and sexual activities; minor safety; integrity and authenticity; and platform security.¹⁶ Some authors (see Schulhof 2021; Ma and Hu 2021) argue that users play a key role in the creation of content and the selection of what is being funnelled

to the viewers; however, the metrics to fully understand content moderation as an interactive process that involves the platform’s systems and resources as well as user interaction are lacking.

Some online communities rely on the work of their users or other participants to publicize themselves, so commercial content moderation is a well-known practice carried out by employees or outsourced workers (Ribeiro 2021), who assess content published on the internet and compare it to the commercial content moderation community guidelines. These non-public guidelines indicate with inexact accuracy what is acceptable and unacceptable, giving the content moderator a vague understanding of what can and cannot be published.

Algorithms and Sexual Content Moderation

Social media platforms and their content moderation rules play critical roles in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Far more than physical spaces, social media platforms are the place for non-conforming expression today. Waldman (2021, 29) highlights that TikTok prohibits “content that explicitly or implicitly depicts sexual conduct, including *erotic kissing*, but does not explain the difference between *kissing* and *erotic kissing*.” In addition, the meaning of those actions and how they are defined may differ across regions or cultures.

Content moderation becomes an even more confusing task when we learn about the role machine-learning tools and filters play in increasing the proficiency of this process. They do this by scanning the digital fingerprint of an uploaded file to match it to copyrighted content, using filters to siphon off spam, or skin filters to identify images likely to be pornographic. Algorithms depend on proxies, heuristics and autonomous variables, and are fed with material that has been associated with content that was previously moderated with gender and heterosexual bias.

When a user gets banned, platforms rarely provide space for explanation, or for context. Filters could decontextualize things that humans could perceive as acceptable. The platform’s hidden code cannot sustain the platform’s essence without rules that are available to the public for reference at any time.

¹⁴ See www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.



Photo: Vane Nunes/Shutterstock

It is clear that nudity, sex and sexuality also face social media's algorithmic censorship — the usual bias often replicates the male view online (Are 2020). Therefore, safety tools should focus on affected women and on the LGBTQ+ community and address their specific realities. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach on how to help communities to take control of their tech uses when there is a wide range of different scenarios. Safety tools need to be contextualized and intersectional, and as inclusive as possible, to satisfy user needs, which are varied and shaped by their race, culture, language and gender, as well as, potentially, a disability and or other identities (Azelmat 2021).

Given that freedom of expression is a topic that is commonly linked directly to human rights at a general level, it is also important to be able to reflect on this from a gender perspective. Research should analyze and condemn how digital space develops under specific dynamics of oppression and invisibility of certain people and communities, such as women, activists, feminists, the LGBTQ+ community, and against content that may be related to topics such as safe abortion, gender equality, diverse bodies, equal marriage and so on (Villalobos 2019).

Research in this area is necessary in order to identify a relationship between content and its risk of being censored and the violence this censorship implies. The objectives of this kind of violence are silence, invisibility, limitation of the space and information about these non-conforming groups, hence violating their freedom of expression.

Identifying these dynamics, which can vary according to contexts and countries, can allow us to recognize the tools that contribute to silencing specific types of speech, and to identify the “strategies” that oppressing groups use to reject and eliminate targeted bodies, identities and discourses from the digital space.

Methodology and Analysis

The following questions guided the research for this paper: What are the priority topics shared by people using the non-binary hashtag in the region? Do they face possible attacks as a result

The research for this paper consisted of three components. First, in-depth interviews were carried out with TikTok users from the targeted community that is linked to the non-binary tag, which provided initial ideas about the most prominent topics for profiles from different countries. Second, videos were freely viewed in order to select those that seemed more meaningful in terms of numbers of likes (videos with more than 500 likes, on average, were chosen to be analyzed) and the number of followers of the chosen profiles (profiles with more than 6,000 followers, on average, were chosen; many of these profiles had more than 100,000 at the time of analysis). Third, once immersed in TikTok's streaming experience, the video's method of analysis, interpretation of content and tabulation were defined for a selection of 50 videos. Then the subsequent analysis and creation of categories to outline some answers to the initial questions took place.

In a previous essay about the digital traces collected on Twitter (Goldman 2018), the author took advantage of the hashtags to confirm that it is possible to link a series of individual reactions to general patterns that respond to macro-phenomena. While the data of these individual reactions cannot be of much value in themselves, with the data added by the digital traces of the reactions of many users during the same period of time, clear patterns can be shown (Jungherr 2015).

For this reason, the use of hashtags is highly relevant to analyzing the macro-phenomenon of controversies generated by positions around inclusive language or the simple fact of changing common personal pronouns such as “él” or “ella” to “elle,”¹⁷ which has occurred over the last few months in many countries in Latin America.¹⁸

Based on the previous studies that were reviewed, it seems that when users decide to include a hashtag with their video or post, they are choosing to make an opinion public. For instance, in the dynamics of Twitter, hashtags allow you to list all the reactions and opinions that a certain topic generates; this

suggests that by this usage of metadata, users decide to transcend their network of followed/followers and state a position (Goldman 2018).

Analyzing the TikTok Videos

The 50 videos analyzed were selected following the main hashtags that guided the original queries, following the memetic and performance elements that help depict the non-binary-identified (#nobinario) speech on TikTok. Research was also guided by the information provided by the interviewees, who led the way by sharing their main concerns about the experiences of the TikTok community identifying as non-binary or using the hashtag.

It is worth mentioning that not all people state their country of origin in their profiles, and, in some cases, people identify themselves as “Latinx.”¹⁹ Special care was put into identifying their accents and regional idioms in an attempt to identify their nationality with approximate accuracy. Most of the profiles targeted and analyzed were from Mexico, Guatemala, Argentina and Brazil (see Figure 2).

Special attention was also paid to how humour depicts the main Latin American²⁰ LGBTQ+ issues as personal and political questions come to the surface. Because of this, the importance of narratives in the format of memes was taken into consideration. Memes can be harmless and silly, but they can also be destructive or extremely serious. They can be all of these things at the same time.

Unlike other social networks where you only consume the material of those people who you follow, TikTok's algorithm shows you content from people who you may or may not follow. That is why the page is called “For You” — it is what the algorithm has curated for you to like. The

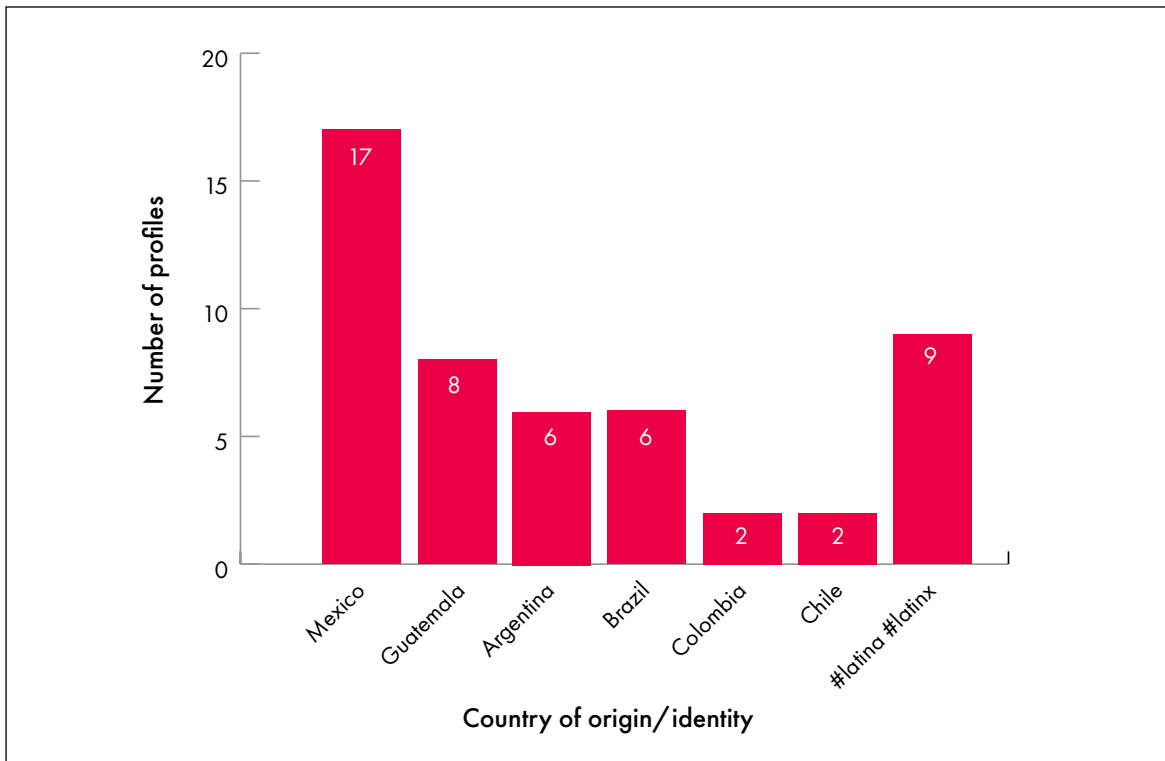
17 *Elle* is the neutral pronoun in Spanish that differs from the binary form of *ella* (her) or *él* (him).

18 A video went viral on social media when a young non-binary person expressed frustration by asking one of the people who was meeting in a virtual class to respect their chosen gender identity. “I am not your *compañera*, I am your *compañere*,” said the individual through tears. The story was covered on the news throughout the region (Expansión Política 2021).

19 “Latinx: pronounced ‘La-TEEN-ex,’ is a non-gender specific way of referring to people of Latin American descent. The term Latinx, unlike terms such as Latino/a and Latin@, does not assume a gender binary and includes non binary folks” (<https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary>).

20 This paper is not intended to be exhaustive, nor to cover the entirety of a region as vast as Latin America.

Figure 2: Countries Represented in the Profiles Identified and Analyzed



Source: Author.

Note: Not all profiles publish their place of origin.

content of a person who lives in a neighbouring country may be shown to users unexpectedly and they may choose to follow it or discard it. However, there is an alternative to transcend the boundaries of the “follower” system.

Although Twitter and TikTok’s platforms and business models are different, the analysis in this paper will make use of a form of data organization based on a previous study carried out about Twitter (Goldman 2018). The categories created are sets of units identifiable by similarity because they have some trait or traits in common. In some cases, there were videos that overlapped in more than one category since they problematize a topic, but even so, an attempt was made to identify its problem or core question in order to classify the content into categories for analysis.

Each TikTok is multi-dimensional since it presents different components that are sometimes combined, such as music, photography, drama, emojis and special effects, among other things. These components offer different semiotic levels of analysis. Therefore, the methodological decision

on the construction of categories summarizes the thematic core of each video. Criteria was followed that tries to condense the topic represented in each video with its texts, music and other resources provided by the platform.

When pertinent, the findings are also compared against the Feminist Principles of the Internet (FPIs) (Association for Progressive Communications 2016) with specific attention to FPIs on freedom of expression and online violence.

As a way of guaranteeing the privacy of the profiles analyzed, which can be vulnerable in contexts of increasing violence, as explained previously, special attention was paid to one of the biggest areas of concern when working with social media data: evaluating if such data should be considered public or private.

Because of the nature of the platform, TikTok videos are designed to be public and get greater viralization. The platform offers the option of having a private account that can’t be seen by the general public. In these cases, since the informed

consent of participants has not been obtained and there is a need to be respectful with sensitive and potentially embarrassing data, the decision was made to protect their identities by keeping their profiles anonymous. Some significant fragments of their statements and their meaningful performances on the videos were extracted.

All of the profiles analyzed are public and names and links will not be included in this paper. Some of the content and statements have been translated from Spanish or Portuguese by the author.

Categories

The categories described below were created based on the research.

Transition Rituals

This category was created to define a series of videos with content composed of multiple visual, photographic and musical resources to express the identity change in people tagging themselves as #nobinario, and especially for those who consider themselves trans people.

It is notable that out of the set of videos analyzed, more than 10 percent of the videos are in this category (six out of 50 videos). It is worth highlighting that in an analysis of trans men using Facebook in Brazil, the researcher Sérgio Rodrigo da Silva Ferreira (2020) pointed out a characteristic that could also be spotted in certain uses of TikTok. It is related to how the platform can be used to present the transition as a rite of passage from being socialized as a man or woman, to their current self-perceived identity.

Almost all of the videos that matched this category work as memes that show a chronological sequence from childhood to adulthood, which allows the viewer to see the person's identity transition. Some are accompanied by testimonies such as: "Was it a mistake or a success to have cut my hair?" "Everyone made fun of me for saying that I wanted to look like a man. Thank you!...now I don't suffer anymore" (author's translations).

Frequent Inappropriate Questions and Comments

In the videos that were analyzed from this specific TikTok community, it is possible to directly or indirectly identify a fundamental human right that is being questioned: that of living free from discrimination, a right that is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This approach based on human rights has also been adopted by Indigenous peoples and by those working to put an end to discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Statements from the United Nations promote respect for people of all ages and of all religions of the world who identify themselves as LGBTQ+; these have been incorporated into the legislation of the countries we analyzed.

For example, discriminatory questions and personal comments, such as asking a female presidential candidate about taking care of her children or her personal care, are commonly observed in traditional media, as well as on social media. These questions have nothing to do with the development of a political or professional career and are not usually asked when interviewing men.

People who identify with the #nobinario hashtag frequently experienced something similar. The rhetoric and intentionality of the inquiries is often very aggressive. In this category, a particular use of TikTok is identified to account for those inquisitive and misplaced questions that TikTokers denounce with music and dance steps. The use of humour and irony demonstrates how they either confront or try to avoid uncomfortable interrogations.

"Perhaps it is something common to all of us LGBTQ+. Opposed to cis-gender and heterosexual people, we are asked to talk about our gender and our sexuality, even in situations that often assume a confessional tone; almost like someone who admits a crime or a sin. It takes courage to speak out about your gender and sexuality in an LGBTQ+ phobic society that is in conformity with the cis-heterosexual norm," writes Da Silva (2020, 172; author's translation).

Eight out of the 50 videos selected showed examples of this, such as:

→ "Things they tell me for being a trans boy: But you have b00bs and v4gina, you can't be a man. In your ID states x so for me you are x."

- “Questions they always ask me: Are you a man or a woman? — I am a red car.”
- “Have you had your genitals operated?”
“Why are you so worried about knowing?”
“Do you play scissors with your girlfriend?” (author’s translations).

Aggressive Comments Shaping Content

Hateful behaviour on TikTok can take many forms, including comments and direct messages. This raises questions about TikTok’s ability to moderate its content. “The attacks, threats, intimidation and policing experienced by women and queers are real, harmful and alarming, and are part of the broader issue of gender-based violence. It is our collective responsibility to address and end this,” state the FPIs (Association for Progressive Communications 2016).

Direct or subtle aggression is part of everyday life on TikTok. Many of the aggressive comments question gender identities. There are insults and expressions of contempt that try to strengthen the identities assigned at birth with allusions to biological sex, statements such as “you will never be a man/woman,” as well as religious allusions that refer to offences to God.

As a result, some TikTokers’ accounts are extensively dedicated to creating content from the aggressive and hurtful comments they’ve received. Many users use well-founded explanations, but they also exploit the irony and humour that the platform offers as a meme-generating and content-viralizing machine.

Instead of propagating hate and resentment, many of these videos use counternarratives, just as feminist groups do, in humorous ways to give answers to attacks and accusations. Some examples are sarcastic and graceful answers about transphobic comments received on this and other social networks, such as a post named: “Answering hate with glitter.” Another post explores a refutation to a statement about genetics. A final example is a video promoting the importance of self-perception beyond external approval.

Only seven out of the 50 videos were selected as examples for this category; however, this category clearly overlaps with others, in terms of TikTokers responding to aggression and, at the same time, creating content and reaffirming

their freedom of opinion and expression, as part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This finding also shows that TikTok is not compliant with standards such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights for business enterprises,²¹ which points out that states should demand respect for fundamental human rights from private corporations. These corporations should respond by focusing on a real prevention of violence and the compensation to affected communities in time and form.

Usage of Inclusive Language

The use of inclusive language extends throughout Latin America. However, the resistance to change in government, in education and, especially, in the media, is still notable. Requests about respect for the chosen pronoun go hand in hand with respect for the identity and self-perception of each person.

Inclusive language aligns with a critique of the “compulsory cis-gender system” (Ferreira da Silva 2020), which demands us to be that which our gender dictates (as perceived from the materiality of our bodies).

In the major cities of Mexico and Argentina — and likely in most large Latin American cities — there are at least two uses of inclusive language: in some cases, the use of “o” as a masculine morpheme is replaced by the ending “e,” which is inclusive of all genders, for example, *les compañeras* (companions). However, in other cases, it is added to name those people with identities that do not match the traditional binary genders — female or male — such as, *compañeros, compañeras y compañeres*. This phenomenon has a long history in feminist spheres, especially in the community of sexual diversity, since it is not simply a grammatical occurrence, but was developed along with the growth in political visibility of those identities (Cardelli 2018).

During the research for this paper, an argument took place in a public university in Mexico, which first became well-known on social media, and then transcended to national and international outlets. A

²¹ The Guiding Principles “are grounded in recognition of:

- (a) States’ existing obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- (b) The role of business enterprises as specialized organs of society performing specialized functions, required to comply with all applicable laws and to respect human rights;
- (c) The need for rights and obligations to be matched to appropriate and effective remedies when breached” (United Nations 2011).

conflict referred to accepting a person's request to refer to them by their chosen gender went viral. The conflict was related to the explicit request. It was an example of a controversy that has occurred in many educational institutions in the region. Educators, institutions, as well as the community itself, do not know how to make it viable without incidences of bullying, or situations that feed aggressions based on prejudices. Because the incident took place on Zoom during a class and someone recorded it, the conflict between students became public.

The #nobinario community analyzed took advantage of the situation to raise awareness about the need to respect people and accept their self-perceived identity, as well as the preference of using the morpheme "e." In this sequence of videos, the intention is placed on the right to choose the way we want to be named, and even if officially there is no such right, this claim expressed by TikTok users can be linked to the fundamental right of free expression.

A video with clever use of humour, among many others, showed selective resistance in the use of inclusive language. Another post provides a critical analysis of the importance of inclusive language for adolescents. Video posts made by a journalist TikToker expressed her sharp points of views on how the media reacted to the *compañere* situation, making evident the outlets that respect inclusive language and the ones that do not.

Circumventing Censorship with Creativity

Following the FPIs, one of the guiding principles of this research is that the right to sexual expression is defended as a freedom of expression — an issue of no less importance than political or religious expression. "We strongly object to the efforts of state and non-state actors to control, surveil, regulate and restrict feminist and queer expression on the internet through technology, legislation or violence. We recognise this as part of the larger political project of moral policing, censorship, and hierarchisation of citizenship and rights" (Association for Progressive Communications 2016).

As mentioned before, some reports on the moderation guidelines raise doubts about TikTok's commitment to non-binary-identified populations around the world. Although it cannot be affirmed that censorship is categorical in Latin America, this paper is interested in mapping the cases in which TikTok makes

"mistakes" or the algorithm automatically censors certain words related to human anatomy.

There are, however, many videos on TikTok of trans men giving advice and sharing experiences on hormone replacement therapy. At the same time, there is a considerable number of videos showing mastectomies as well as "binders" (or tops) that help hide breasts, among other inquiries made between people who belong to the same community.

In a very short lapse of time, a case of censorship was observed for one of the videos selected. The user declares: "First of all I am a man. My video was removed from this app but I managed to recover it because TikTok recognized that I am a trans man."

On another post, there is also a complaint of censorship by TikTok made by a trans woman, after the removal of a previous video in which she states, "TikTok censors me for being a trans woman. I think you blame me for having confidence, acceptance, sexual freedom and sensuality to spare" (author's translation).

It is also very notable to see how the community modifies words considered likely to be subject to censorship by exchanging vowels for numbers. For instance, "ab0rt0" (*aborto*) instead of abortion, "pl4c3r" (*placer*) instead of pleasure, "m4sturb4ci0n" (*masturbacion*) instead of masturbation. As Waldman (2021, 43) states, "queer culture and queer language is erased or replaced with emojis or symbols because using certain sexually tinged words triggers algorithmic moderation."

As pointed out earlier, an analysis taken from the platform shows that the rights to free expression, to spread information and to be acknowledged as diverse people without receiving aggressive comments are not guaranteed by this platform, even though they are provided by legislation on universal human rights.

Conclusion

The research discussed in this paper also shows that TikTokers who identify as non-binary have been especially affected by the enforcement of social network platform rules in Latin America.

Content policies and terms of service have had a differential impact on their privacy, autonomy, freedom of expression and social, economic and reproductive rights. The full scope of the issue cannot be fully covered here. Platforms do not offer gender-disaggregated information on content moderation or takedowns. That said, many users report issues with policies about the use of real names or the removal of photos depicting nudity, or photos that show bodies that are different from a “typical” male or female body, which often have political, historical or artistic significance (Goldsmann and Venturini 2021).

Therefore, the research undertaken for this paper encountered several challenges. For one, the observation process itself. Registration and indirect involvement with a platform that was, at first, alien to the researchers, was part of the effort to show the interconnection between the platform’s features, content moderation and rules for community interaction. The opacity of algorithms that characterize digital social networks cannot be overlooked. In this context, decisions are often mediated by machines, or outsourced to employees without the cultural and political background to judge and decide whether to censor certain content or not.

In a system that is capitalist, racist, ableist, ageist, cis-heteropatriarchal²² and built on colonialism, this paper, in line with the FPIs, maintains that the safety tools provided by platforms such as TikTok, among others, must be contextualized and located intersectionally. Our online interactions take place on the basis of codes that program algorithms marked by patriarchal and misogynistic prejudices and on technological models that collaborate with the depredation of the environment. Intersectionality provides a perspective from which to think about the complexity of these aspects (Rodó-Zarate 2021), but it focuses on how inequality materializes on individuals positioned differently in these systems.

Through observing and examining some of the profiles of this vast and diverse community, attempts were made to create taxonomies to

answer why the initial research questions. This placed the research on shaky ground. “It’s supposed to illuminate something of a restless and always diverse territory from the projection of lines or areas of relevance,” states Virginia Cano (2019).

In this regard, there was an interest in reflecting on how people who perceive themselves as belonging to the #non-binary community take ownership of the possibilities that the platform offers to be able to build and spread the most important beliefs of their political and life agenda.

In each of the videos selected for the analysis, the cultural struggle of those individuals who do not identify with their assigned gender is evident, whether or not they would like to have a surgical procedure or undergo hormone treatment. In the fight for making their bodies intelligible in a context where “normality” sets two standards, male/man vs. female/woman, they propose a concept of gender that defies the naturalization of cis-sexism (Ferreira da Silva 2020), while defending their fundamental human rights.

From the brief, limited and non-exhaustive exploration discussed in this paper, digital platforms can be thought of as spaces that are used to validate personal and political experiences (transition rituals). It is evident that there is an urgency within the community to expose statements that continue to be constructed from prejudice, lack of information and the intention of harm (as discussed in the sections “Frequent Questions and Comments” and “Aggressive Comments That Shape Content”); and despite community rules, they continue to circulate and cause harm. At the same time, many battles are arising over the usage of inclusive language in Latin America.

Regarding language and its rules, the following idea is taken into consideration: “words are relationships, illusions of which this condition has been forgotten, because in their hardening and petrification they work as gears of the tacit social commitment, to keep order and a social hierarchy” (Flores 2013, 81; author’s translation). Experiencing a change in language means questioning the hierarchy and where we place ourselves as a society.

Finally, although digital social networks evidently present a series of rules for community use, they often lack transparency and may include

22 “This neologism coined by the LGBTQ+ community, aims to make visible that the world is not built solely in masculine terms, but also in terms of compulsory heterosexuality and ‘cis’ gender norms. It is a socio-political system in which the male gender and heterosexuality have supremacy over other genders and over other sexual orientations” (www.rebelionfeminista.org/2019/07/26/cisheteropatriarcado/; author’s translation).

discrimination based on class, age and gender. In the best-case scenario, they are evolving and transforming because of the appropriations made by the users in those environments. In this sense, the possibility of evading censorship (see the section “Circumventing Censorship with Creativity”), which was demonstrated effectively, continues to be one of the few gaps users can take advantage of to open up alternatives for continuing to position themselves politically on a horizon marked by attacks on social movements and users.

As digital tyranny and aggression increase in the area, understanding how the platforms we use are structured and influenced is essential, in order to build a space where LGBTQ+ and, in particular, non-binary-identified communities can express themselves, demand rights and help build a society where there is room and acceptance for all.

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