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Who gets to teach the past? Colonial narratives, pedagogical authority, and platformized vernacular memories

Chi può insegnare il passato? Narrazioni coloniali, autorità pedagogica e memorie vernacolari piattaformazzate

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Abstract. This exploratory article examines how Italian colonialism is narrated through short-form vernaculars on TikTok and argues that these narratives intervene in public memory and identity formation by making visible what has been institutionally stabilized, downplayed, or left unsaid in Italy's dominant historical grammars. Situating the Italian case within the broader European imperial project and its afterlives, the article links contemporary platform discourse to longer trajectories of selective remembrance and to the marginalization of colonialism in educational transmission. Methodologically, it draws on a qualitative content analysis of forty TikTok videos to reconstruct the interpretive repertoires through which the nexus between colonialism and schooling becomes speakable in everyday digital publics. Two recurrent tendencies structure this contested field: first, a critical current that challenges curricular silences and the sanitization of colonial violence in school teaching and public institutions, thereby questioning the pedagogical authority of Italian educational systems; and second, an ongoing symbolic struggle over the cultural and historical borders that define Italian identity. The article argues that short-form platforms operate as arenas of mnemonic dispute in which historical authority, national identity, and educational legitimacy are negotiated in real time. Tracing how critique and denial circulate within the same media ecology shows how platformed publics reshape understandings of Italian colonial pasts and their contemporary ramifications.

Keywords: education, collective memory, identity, italian colonialism, platform society.

Riassunto. Questo studio esplorativo analizza le modalità attraverso cui il colonialismo italiano viene narrato su TikTok attraverso video brevi e forme vernacolari, sostenendo che tali narrazioni intervengano nei processi di costruzione della memoria pubblica e dell'identità, rendendo visibile ciò che nelle grammatiche storiche dominanti in Italia è stato istituzionalmente stabilizzato, ridimensionato o lasciato ai margini del discorso pubblico mainstream. Collocando il caso italiano nel quadro più ampio del progetto

imperiale europeo e delle sue persistenti eredità, il contributo mette in relazione il ruolo contemporaneo delle piattaforme digitali con le più lunghe traiettorie di memoria selettiva e marginalizzazione del colonialismo in processi e programmi educativi. Sul piano metodologico, l'articolo si fonda su un'analisi qualitativa di contenuto di quaranta video TikTok e relativi commenti maggiormente indicizzati, finalizzata a ricostruire i repertori interpretativi attraverso cui il nesso tra colonialismo e scuola si articola nel discorso pubblico piattaforma. Due tendenze ricorrenti strutturano questo campo discorsivo conteso: da un lato, una corrente critica che problematizza i silenzi curriculari e la rappresentazione edulcorata della violenza coloniale nell'insegnamento scolastico e nelle istituzioni pubbliche, mettendo così in discussione l'autorità pedagogica del sistema educativo italiano; dall'altro, una persistente lotta simbolica attorno ai confini culturali e storici attraverso cui viene definita l'identità italiana. L'articolo sostiene che le piattaforme, in questo senso, costituiscano arene di contesa mnemonica nelle quali autorità storica, identità nazionale e legittimità educativa possono essere negoziate in tempo reale. Analizzare il modo in cui critica e negazione circolano all'interno della stessa ecologia mediale consente di mostrare come i pubblici piattaforma contribuiscano a ridefinire le interpretazioni del passato coloniale italiano e delle sue implicazioni nel presente.

Parole chiave: educazione, memoria collettiva, identità, colonialismo italiano, platform society.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how the Italian colonial debate mobilizes short-form platform vernaculars on TikTok to confront, negotiate, and contest what is perceived as the marginalization of Italy in public memory and formal education. In contemporary digital environments, public memory no longer circulates exclusively through institutional infrastructures such as curricula, museums, and commemorative rituals. Platformed publics increasingly function as arenas in which historical narratives are produced, reframed, and legitimized in real time (Hoskins, 2017; van Dijck, 2013; Erll, 2011; Bartoletti, 2011). However, digital contestation and recontextualization do not occur in a vacuum. It intervenes in pre-existing regimes of remembrance through which political communities authorize certain pasts while marginalizing others. As Halbwachs argued, collective memory is not a spontaneous inheritance but a socially organized framework that renders certain narratives intelligible and durable (Halbwachs, 1950/2024). Nora further showed that modern states stabilize identity by crystallizing selective pasts into symbolic 'sites of memory', condensing meaning into authoritative narratives that arrest forgetting and anchor national continuity (Nora, 1984/1989). As Migliorati emphasizes, collective memory is embedded in public and political practices through which groups appropriate and reinterpret the past to act in the present and shape the future (Migliorati, 2012, 2023).

Against this theoretical backdrop, the post-Cold War period witnessed the consolidation of a relatively unified supranational public memory across Europe, grounded in the institutional centrality of Holocaust remembrance and in the condemnation of totalitarian regimes (Judt, 2005; Assmann, 2013; Focardi, 2020; Pisanty, 2012). The institutionalization of Holocaust memory did not dissolve national frameworks; rather, national memory cultures were rearticulated within a shared vocabulary of democracy and rupture, while strategies of omission and selective narration persisted about each country's specific historical responsibilities, particularly concerning collaboration and complicity with Nazi Germany in the persecution and deportation of Jews (Focardi, 2020). In this context, as Pisanty argues, the institutional centrality of the Holocaust effectively contributed to structuring a field of recognition marked by contested memories and hierarchies of legibility, within which other histories of violence, especially colonial violence, remained comparatively less recognized and less institutionally consolidated (Pisanty, 2012).

It is within this institutionalized European memory regime that a structural tension becomes visible: colonialism is constitutive of European modernity (Said, 1978, 1993; Gilroy, 1987, 1993) yet remains marginal in the dominant moral and educational grammars through which Europe narrates itself. This asymmetry is not uniform across Europe. The degree to which colonial histories have entered public memory varies significantly from country to country. However, the Italian case presents a particularly pronounced configuration of delay and selective integration. In Italy, scholarship has shown that colonial history occupies a marginal position in both national narratives and school curricula (Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2005; Taddia, 2005). This marginalization is not uncontested. In recent years, decolonial campaigns, anti-racist

This article is the result of a sustained collaboration and ongoing dialogue between the authors. Nevertheless, for the purposes of authorship attribution, Micol Meghnagi was primarily responsible for the Theoretical Background, while Camilla Folena led the drafting of the Findings section. The Introduction, Methodology, Discussion, and Conclusion were jointly conceived, developed, and written by both authors.

mobilizations, and diasporic formations have challenged inherited hierarchies of recognition and foregrounded the colonial genealogy of contemporary inequalities. Education has emerged as a central site of dispute.

School curricula and textbooks are increasingly framed not as neutral repositories of knowledge but as infrastructures of selective stabilization that canonize certain pasts while marginalizing others (Assmann, 2013). In the Italian context, scholars have documented the compression and euphemization of colonial violence within educational narratives (Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2005). Media platforms have become a crucial terrain in this contestation. Whereas institutional memory operates through relatively slow infrastructures such as curricula, textbooks, museums, and commemorative rituals, platformed environments accelerate narration and enable the circulation of counter-archives beyond traditional gatekeeping structures (Hoskins, 2017; van Dijck, 2013; Erll, 2011; Bartoletti, 2011). These digital publics function as spaces of counter-archiving and connective action in which historical narratives are reinterpreted, contested, and affectively amplified (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Within these environments, colonialism emerges as a contested narrative, and its repercussions over collective identity are structured around both critique and denial: some users denounce curricular marginalization and connect colonial history to racialized continuities in the present, while others minimize or reject colonial responsibility. A recurring empirical pattern in this digital discourse is the explicit critique of school textbooks and curricular framings. Platform public debate, of which the younger generation constitutes a significant segment, stages colonialism as a pedagogical omission and turns the school canon itself into an object of contestation in short-form audiovisual culture. In doing so, they challenge not only specific historical interpretations but also the institutional infrastructures through which colonial memory has been stabilized and transmitted, ultimately critically questioning the formation of 'national' cultural identity. By situating these digital practices within Italian and memory politics, the article analyzes how historical authority and educational legitimacy are renegotiated in platformed publics. The article proceeds as follows. It first develops a theoretical framework that conceptualizes colonialism as a cultural formation within European historiography, situating the Italian case within a configuration marked by delayed mnemonic integration and the persistent mythologization of collective identity through the rhetoric of *Italiani brava gente* (often translated as "Italians, the good people"). It then turns to the contemporary platformed media environment, where contested memories intersect

with questions of pedagogical authority and platform-mediated visibility. Against this backdrop, the study examines how TikTok vernacular practices not only circulate colonial memory but also reconfigure the conditions under which historical knowledge is produced, performed, and recognized. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of 40 videos, the article argues that platforms serve as arenas of mnemonic and pedagogical struggle in which historical authority is redistributed, even as platform affordances privilege rapid, affective sense-making over multilayered reflection. Colonial memory thus emerges less as a representation of the past than as a shared discursive resource through which users negotiate authority, belonging, and the cultural boundaries of Italian identity.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Colonialism as cultural formation: European historiography and the Italian delay

Over the past four decades, European colonial historiography has undergone a profound epistemological transformation. The emergence of postcolonial and cultural studies did not simply expand the empirical archive of imperial history; it fundamentally redefined the analytical status of empire itself (Fanon, 1961/2007; Said, 1978, 1993; Gilroy, 1987). Fanon exposed colonial domination as a regime of psychic, cultural, and epistemic violence that structured subjectivity itself (Fanon, 1961/2007). Said (1993) demonstrated that imperial expansion relied upon systems of representation that naturalized European superiority and rendered colonial rule intelligible and legitimate. Empire, in this account, was sustained not only by military force and economic extraction but by cultural forms, educational practices, literary production, and everyday imaginaries. The incorporation of culture into imperial analysis revealed that colonialism reshaped both colonized and colonizing societies, affecting the formation of collective identity. Colonialism, in this sense, cannot be understood as a peripheral episode of European expansion but rather as a cultural and epistemic formation that shapes national identities, systems of representation, and regimes of knowledge transmission. As Gilroy (1987) points out, European national identities were constituted through imperial circuits of exchange, racial formation, and transnational mobility. On this account, colonialism cannot be adequately conceptualized as a geographically external or temporally bounded episode of overseas administration; rather, it operated as a *longue durée* structure that sedimented racialized imaginaries, cul-

tural hierarchies, and self-understandings within European modernity.

However, historiographical transformation did not unfold evenly across Europe. While in countries such as Britain and France postcolonial perspectives entered academic and public debate earlier, partly as a consequence of prolonged and conflictual decolonization processes, the Italian case followed a different trajectory. Italian historiography long interpreted the empire primarily as a political-administrative experience rather than as a cultural and epistemic formation shaping national identity (Deplano & Pes, 2014). As Calchi Novati (2011) argues through the notion of “failed decolonization”, the absence of a prolonged and publicly visible imperial rupture after 1945 limited collective confrontation with colonial responsibility. In this context, public reflection on Fascism and on Italian complicity in wartime violence, including the persecution of Jews, developed unevenly, contributing to a delayed integration of colonial history into broader cultural and educational frameworks (Focardi, 2020). Only from the late 1990s onward did scholarship begin systematically addressing the cultural afterlives of Italian colonialism and their connections to contemporary racialization and migration regimes. Notably, early critical reinterpretations of Italian colonialism developed significantly within Italian Studies departments in the United Kingdom and the United States, where postcolonial theory and cultural studies were institutionalized earlier, fostering transnational interpretive frameworks that later circulated beyond academia. This historiographical delay is reflected in the ways colonialism entered Italy’s public and collective memory, remaining comparatively weakly institutionalized within educational and commemorative infrastructure.

2.2 *The myth of the Italiani brava gente and colonial innocence in the Italian public memory*

Collective memory, as Halbwachs (1950/2024) argued, is socially framed within institutional structures; historiography, therefore, cannot be reduced to an academic domain alone, but must also be understood as shaping public remembrance and national identity, even as prevailing memory regimes in turn condition its questions, silences, and priorities. In Italy, the marginalization of colonial responsibility cannot be understood without examining the persistence of a powerful cultural myth: the rhetorical figure of the *Italiani brava gente*. As Del Boca points out, the image of Italians as fundamentally humane, tolerant, and moderate did not originate under Fascism. It circulated already in liberal Italy, where colonial expansion was framed as a civiliz-

ing mission carried out with restraint and humanity, implicitly contrasted with the alleged brutality of British or French imperialism. This self-representation acquired renewed political significance during the postwar peace negotiations, when Italian elites attempted to retain colonial possessions by presenting Italian rule as comparatively benign. Although the diplomatic objective failed, the narrative survived in the cultural sphere. This memory echoed Mussolini’s 1936 proclamation of an “Empire of peace” and “civilization” in Ethiopia, and it persisted through gradual processes of revision, selective forgetting, and the displacement of colonial responsibility from the public debate (Labanca, 2002; Del Boca, 2005). The absence of a dramatic and clearly demarcated decolonization moment produced what Del Boca calls a diversification of memory times: without a collective and critical reckoning, colonial memories could survive in fragmented, individualized, and often nostalgic forms. This configuration must be situated within the broader post-1945 memory settlement. Rather than developing a robust public language of responsibility for crimes committed in the colonies or in the persecution of Jews, postwar Italy stabilized a mnemonic equilibrium structured around two moves: the externalization of guilt onto Nazi Germany and the elevation of the Resistance as a unifying moral narrative (Consonni, 2015; Focardi, 2020). Within this framework, Italians appeared primarily as victims, liberators, or rescuers; forms of Italian violence, racial segregation, and concentrationary practices were relegated to the margins of collective consciousness (Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2005).

The postwar settlement began to transform in the 1990s. The collapse of the First Republic and the weakening of antifascist political forces destabilized the institutional centrality of the Resistance narrative, while new right-wing coalitions increasingly contested its symbolic authority (Consonni, 2015; Focardi, 2020). Following the institutionalization of Italy’s annual Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2000, Law 92/2004 introduced a National Day of Remembrance dedicated to the Foibe killings and the Istrian and Dalmatian exodus. Its approval unfolded within a political climate increasingly marked by calls for mnemonic “rebalancing” and by a renewed emphasis on Italian victimhood in the public sphere. While Holocaust remembrance was rapidly infrastructured, especially through educational programs, Italian responsibilities, including state complicity and antisemitic legislation, were often less systematically confronted (Consonni, 2015). It is precisely in this context of expanded commemorative institutionalization that the absence of colonial recognition becomes particularly visible. The two parliamentary initiatives introduced in 2006, one

proposing a national day for victims of the Italian colonial occupation and another for victims of Fascism, did not result in durable legislation, and the subsequent political realignment after 2008 further narrowed the space for such reforms (Focardi, 2020).

2.3 Platformization, pedagogical authority, and negotiation of memory

As scholarship on public memory has emphasized, legislative acts, ministerial directives, and state-sponsored commemorative frameworks are key mechanisms through which societies stabilize curricular priorities and distribute pedagogical attention (Halbwachs, 1950/2024; Nora, 1984/1989; Migliorati, 2023; Assmann, 2013). What is formalized in commemorative calendars and translated into public policy tends to acquire infrastructural reinforcement within the school system, through guidelines, funding streams, teacher training, and routinized pedagogical formats. By contrast, historical fields lacking comparable legislative anchoring remain largely contingent on local experimentation and individual initiative, producing uneven and often fragile forms of transmission. In the Italian case, the weak institutionalization of colonial memory is mirrored in its educational treatment. Foundational works on Italian colonialism have long demonstrated the persistence of the myth of colonial benevolence and the structural marginalization of imperial violence in national narrative (Del Boca, 2005; Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2005; Andall & Duncan, 2005). Studies on the representation of colonialism in Italian textbooks have repeatedly documented patterns of compression, euphemization, and narrative displacement, with colonial violence and racial regimes reframed as secondary episodes of overseas administration, detached from longer continuities of racism, citizenship regimes, and postcolonial inequalities (Taddia, 2005; Jedlowski, 2009; Leone, 2023). At the same time, colonial memory has not been absent from the public sphere. Especially from the 2010s onward, grassroots mobilizations, including second and third-generation Italians with familial ties to former colonies, anti-racist collectives, and networks influenced by transnational movements – such as Black Lives Matter – have increasingly contested the persistence of colonial silences and the symbolic economy of institutional commemoration (Pesarini & Panico, 2021). Public controversies over monuments, street names, museum displays, and school materials have reopened debates about imperial responsibility and historical continuity (Grechi, 2021; Wurzer, 2023). However, these bottom-up pressures have not, so

far, translated into durable legislative recognition or systematic curricular reform.

Crucially, these struggles increasingly unfold within platformed media infrastructures. From a mediatization perspective, memory cannot be understood independently from the media environments through which it circulates and acquires social relevance (Boccia Artieri, 2025). Platform-based publics act as arenas of informal civic education, where, especially among younger generations, counter-archives are produced, vernacular historiographies circulate, and interpretive frames are articulated that exceed the boundaries of formal schooling (Hoskins, 2017; Erll, 2011; van Dijck, 2013). As Bartoletti illustrates, memory in digital environments should be understood as a practice that emerges through situated interaction, in which remembering processes are produced within communicative exchanges rather than through institutional transmission (2011). In digital environments, expertise is not exclusively tied to institutional certification but is frequently performed through aesthetic cues, narrative coherence, affective intensity, and community recognition (van Dijck, 2013; Hoskins, 2017). In this sense, mnemonic visibility is shaped not only by participation but by algorithmic selection processes that privilege engagement, circulation, and connectivity. The emergence of creators who self-identify as “prof.” or “dr.” alongside explicitly activist accounts signals a reconfiguration of epistemic hierarchies: authority becomes visible, contestable, and engagement-dependent rather than solely grounded in institutional mandate. Platform affordances further hybridize temporal and contextual conditions of remembrance, enabling the segmentation and decontextualization of past fragments, which are continuously recombined through algorithmic exposure. Comment sections transform individual videos into deliberative arenas in which users validate, reinterpret, challenge, or radicalize historical claims. This dynamic intensifies the conflictual character of historical discourse: critique and denial coexist within the same media ecology, amplified by algorithmic logics that privilege affect, moral polarization, and narrative clarity (van Dijck, 2013). Considering this, digital memory practices emerge through ongoing negotiation between users, platform logics, and algorithmic mediation (Boccia Artieri & Bartoletti, 2023). As Zurovac (2023) suggests through the analysis of TikTok memory practices, platform environments enable processes of reframing and reinterpretation in which historical narratives are continuously rearticulated through participatory and vernacular forms of engagement. Platforms can therefore be understood as connective mnemonic infrastructures that influence and reorganize visibility and affective resonance, shaping how colonial history

becomes narratable, pedagogically consequential, and politically charged. In contexts where formal curricular anchoring remains weak, these environments become privileged arenas for disputes over recognition, responsibility, and historical legitimacy.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how colonial histories and memories intersect with education and are negotiated within platformed environments through short-form video content. The analysis focuses on TikTok videos addressing Italian colonialism and related debates, through two main research questions:

RQ1 – How is Italian colonial history narrated within TikTok videos addressing education and historical memory?

RQ2 – How do platform vernacular practices frame pedagogical authority and historical and colonial Italian memory?

Following a qualitative approach to digital content analysis and recent platform-centered research (Vázquez-Herrero & Neigreira Rey, 2025), TikTok was explored not merely as a repository of content but as a mediated environment whose affordances shape both production and interpretation (Schellewald, 2021; Zurovac, 2025).

Videos were identified through keyword-based searches in the platform's search engine. The initial exploratory queries combined Italian terms related to colonial history and education: “colonialismo” AND “scuola”. Keywords served as entry points into the platform environment, expanding hashtag navigation when relevant to the study object. Towards debates addressing Italian colonial history, the trope of *Italiani brava gente* emerged and finally led to content discussing the cultural collective Italian identity. This procedure mimics the platform's inhabitation, through which content discovery unfolds on TikTok (Zurovac et al., 2023). The dataset was structured around the following analytical fields (Table 1), collecting structural data such as date, URL, username, accounts, languages, and keywords, as well as discursive data such as title, captions, comments, and video transcripts.

Data collection was conducted through manual browser access. Textual transcriptions of spoken content and the first six visible comments for each post were included in the dataset to support qualitative analysis at both the discursive and narrative levels. To ensure an intersubjective and shared interpretation of each campaign, the individual analyses conducted by different authors were cross-checked through a joint visual analysis of the video contents. The coding process identified at least three main communicative functions in the materials analyzed: informative and in-depth, awareness-raising/activist, and entertainment-oriented. In several cases, these functions were not mutually exclusive, and the analytical categories that emerged will be further developed in the findings and discussion sections. Rather than conducting a systematic qualitative coding of user comments, posts and comments were analyzed together to capture the broader communicative environment, thus enriching the analysis of audience perspectives and interactional and negotiation dynamics.

The final corpus consists of 40 TikTok videos and 178 comments. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the selection followed a qualitative logic oriented toward exploratory interpretive depth. For the analysis, preliminary categories were independently tested on a shared subset of videos. Coding decisions were then discussed collectively, allowing disagreements to be negotiated and category definitions progressively refined. An inductive coding process was then developed through repeated observation of the material, following the logic of interpretative agreement, in which analytical coherence was achieved through discussion, comparison of interpretations, and continuous adjustment of the analytical category. The codebook was progressively constructed to classify both dominant discursive frames and secondary sub-codes, capturing overlaps between categories and discursive configurations. Given the multilingual nature of the corpus, video excerpts and comments originally produced in Italian, English, French, or Portuguese were translated into English by the authors to ensure analytical consistency across the corpus. Translations aimed to preserve semantic meaning and pragmatic tone rather than literal equivalence, especially in cases involving satire, slang, or culturally specific references.

Table 1. Dataset systematization.

keyword	video data	account	captions	video transcript	URL	comments 1-6	languages	code
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4. FINDINGS

The analysis of forty TikTok videos addressing the intersection of colonialism and education reveals not a homogeneous narrative field but a fragmented and contested mnemonic environment in which popular culture, historical knowledge, and political positioning converge and remix. Rather than functioning merely as a channel for historical dissemination, the platform operates as a vernacular space where colonial memories are actively negotiated through multiple discursive registers, including pedagogical explanation, satirical performance, imperial or defensive stances, and decolonial critique. Across the dataset, colonial history emerges as an ongoing problem of recognition, frequently articulated through references to generational transmission and perceived curricular omissions. Meaning-making processes do not reside solely in the videos themselves: the analysis of user comments shows how audiences co-participate in framing interpretation, transforming individual contents into interactive arenas where national identity, historical authority, and moral responsibility are collectively debated. The following sections present the main empirical findings, moving from a mapping of colonial issues and emergent frames to the negotiation of Italian colonial memory, and finally to the re-scaling of these discussions within a broader global discursive ecology.

4.1 Mapping the field: the colonial and identitarian issues

Across the selected corpus, colonial history emerges as a multilayered object of reflection and negotiation that intertwines a wide range of geographical references and discursive entry points. The TikTok videos primarily address Italian colonialism in Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, both highlighting the occupation and violence enacted by the colonizer and the cultural and physical resistance of the colonized populations. A smaller but symbolically significant set of videos proposes a counter-frame of the Southern Question as a form of internal colonialism in Italian national history and a debate over the authority to define Italian culture and identity. The dataset also involves or cites many shades of European colonialism, including Belgium, the British and French Empires, US imperialism, and the Puerto Rico issue. The convergence of colonial topics and identity issues occurs across diverse formats, including historical explanations, musical performances, satirical sketches, and commentary on contemporary discourses. These insights indicate that colonial memories tend to circulate across social media platforms such as TikTok through heterogeneous communicative practices rather

than through standardized historical narration, functioning – on a wider level – as a pivotal entry point for restructuring and redistributing epistemic authority over history and identity. First, a brief overview of the dataset's linguistic composition appears highly relevant, given the Italian keywords and hashtags on which the corpus harvesting is grounded. Despite this, only 55% of the corpus is Italian-based, while 40% is in English. Additionally, we found a marginal but interesting presence of French and Portuguese content. Looking specifically at the qualitative coding process, three dominant categories structure the exploratory corpus.

- Decolonial claim-making: A first configuration consists of what we named “decolonial claim-making”, a set of contents that blends a popularizing outlook with memory activism. Here, creators explicitly challenge national narratives, framing colonialism as an unresolved moral, ethical, and political issue, and denouncing educational curricular omissions. Within this segment of the corpus, decolonial claim-making appears to branch into both academically oriented and pop-culture versions.
- Educational contents: A second configuration focuses on educational content that adopts a quasi-pedagogical register, often produced by accounts that name themselves as “prof.” and/or “dr.” This segment aims at clarifying historical events, frequently reproducing the format of simplified historical explanations or even recording sections of real-time lectures in high-school contexts.

A recurrent distinction emerges in how decolonial claim-making and educational content position historical knowledge differently. Educational videos more frequently adopt explanatory registers and reference historical contextualization; decolonial claim-making tends to foreground moral positioning and denunciatory rhetoric, with limited explicit engagement with historiographical plurality, theoretical grounding, or source citation. In this configuration, history is mobilized less as an object of observation and problematization and more as an ethical-political dispositif through which identitarian counter-narratives are articulated. However, it is important to note that during coding, the authors acknowledged the complexity and hybridity of these materials. Categories are therefore not completely mutually exclusive and may overlap if secondary sub-codes are considered.

- Satirical contents: A third group of videos employs irony, humor, and parody to rework shared cultural memories and identities, with the potential goal of

destabilizing mnemonic rhetorics. The satirical element is often linked to satirizing the school context, where colonial history is under-narrated or obscured.

A common element in all three dominant categories across the corpus is the re-enactment of institutional pedagogy itself, albeit in different registers – activist, pedagogical, or satirical. The figure of the teacher is mobilized as a recognizable discursive device. Creators frequently stage classroom settings, adopt pedagogical tones, or explicitly position themselves as correctors of school knowledge, while users' comments often refer back to personal educational experiences. These recurring configurations indicate that colonial history is often discussed through references to school-based learning environments, where educational authority becomes an explicit object of negotiation within platform interactions.

Alongside the dominant categories, smaller yet relevant conflictual configurations also emerge. A limited number of videos mobilize religious references, particularly centered on Islam and Judaism, through rhetorical discourses aimed at politicizing religious identity and polarizing publics. Reframing colonial history through contemporary geopolitical and ethnoreligious struggles often becomes the stage to explicit racial tendencies that trigger islamophobia and antisemitism. Other videos articulate Eurocentric or imperial-defensive interpretations that attempt to relativize colonial violence, often starting from the reaffirmation of narratives of Italian benevolence. Table 2 summarizes the quali-quantitative findings outlined above.

4.2 The case of Italiani brava gente

Across eurocentric, defensive, satirical, and decolonial narratives, the recurrent issue of *Italiani brava gente* emerges as a resonant reference. As previously discussed,

within the Italian memorial regime, the benevolence trait of Italian colonialism has functioned as a mechanism for symbolic stabilization and the rewriting of the past, shaping how national colonial history and collective identity have been remembered and displaced. Interestingly, on TikTok, this trope appears as a flexible and adaptive narrative, showing how, within these vernacular practices, Italian memory and identity are reworked through recurring platform formats that remain open to both confirmation and disputation of the trope.

The *Italiani brava gente* myth emerges prominently across a segment of the corpus (N=6), but appears particularly through a cluster of content produced around 2022 by Alo Official [Alessandro Casini] (N=5). The artist and content creator mobilizes this national discursive claim through a set of short satirical performances often delivered via musical productions. Colonial memory and the structure of Italian benevolence identity, described as a population with clumsy traits – which ultimately never embraced or perpetrated the levels of violence seen in other European populations and armies – is introduced not through an in-depth explanation, but through ironic interaction aimed at stimulating reflection. Firstly, the videos frequently stage a satirical version of a school environment. Here, the historical narrative is repeatedly presented by a teacher through the lens of Italian colonialism, casting it as a source of infrastructural achievement. At the same time, students challenge this account by invoking colonial violence and controversial historical figures. Through exaggeration and repetition, the performance highlights the tension between institutional narratives and contested decolonial historical interpretations:

Teacher: Yes, regarding Italian colonialism, Italians built many roads and infrastructures in Ethiopia for the local populations

Student: What are you saying? Didn't they kill many people with weapons?

Table 2. coding distribution for categories and languages.

Categories	It	En	Fr	Pt	Tot	%
Decolonial memory activism	5	7	1	0	13	32.5%
Educational content	7	4	0	1	12	30%
Satirical content	5	2	0	0	7	17.5%
Eurocentric-Imperial defense	1	1	0	0	2	5%
Religious discourse	2	0	0	0	2	5%
Promotional content	0	2	0	0	2	5%
Event-based content	1	0	0	0	1	2.5%
War and Military Discourse	1	0	0	0	1	2.5%
Tot	22	16	1	1	40	100%
%	55.0%	40.0%	2.5%	2.5%	100%	

Teacher: “Roads, infrastructures for the inhabitants – roads. Here is what the textbook says, roads and infrastructures. Yes... That’s what it says (V8)

On this occasion, the artist-creator explicitly refers in the comment section to *Italiani brava gente* by Del Boca, recommending the book to a user who asked for references. Considering this contested and national narrative, blended with the pop culture inhabiting the platform, emerges the production of the song *Italiani brava gente* by Alo Official, which transforms historical debate into relatable and shareable content. The videos differ in format – from TikTok choreography to ironic classroom staging or close-up shots of the artist – but are all linked by his pop-urban musical piece, through which satire becomes embedded in platform-specific communicative practices. The lyrics present a sharp counter-narrative to the *Italiani brava gente* myth, exposing contradictions within institutional representations of Italian historical identity by blending colonial references, war involvement, popular cultural figures, major Italian singers, and mafia history.

Siamo stati in albergo
Abbiamo fatto danni
Andati in Etiopia
Abbiamo fatto danni
Pure in Afghanistan
A fare danni
Facciamo danni
160 anni
[...]
E c’abbiamo avuto Pino
E c’abbiamo avuto Mina
Italiani brava gente
Tutta gente canterina
E c’abbiamo avuto Rino
Abbiamo avuto Totò Riina
Italiani brava gente
Tutta gente per benino

User comments further show how the *Italiani brava gente* trope becomes an object of active discussion and symbolic struggle rather than shared consensus. Some viewers align with the critical frame, linking colonial history to broader reflections on Italian identity and racial self-perception, as one user notes that to gain “a place in the sun, Italy changed how we were perceived – before Fascism it was not taken for granted that Italian meant white” (V6). Others explicitly reassert benevolent narratives, reproducing the idea that “having said that, we still brought progress to them” (V36). Several comments reconnect the performances to personal educational experiences, for instance, stating “my history

teacher, fortunately, was very objective about this topic” (V8). At the same time, some users misinterpret the hybrid satirical register, directly challenging the creator: “The fact that you talk about Afghanistan as colonialism shows how little you know” (V9). Alongside debate, affective engagement also emerges through reactions such as “brilliant” (V9) and “you are my spirit guide” (V35), highlighting recognition and emotional participation typical of platform interaction. Taken together, these responses show how the videos open a space where competing interpretations of national memory and identity coexist and collide.

4.3 From the Southern Question as internal colonialism

A limited but qualitatively significant cluster of content extends colonial discussion beyond the overseas empire and into Italian issues, introducing the Southern Question as a possible case of internal colonialism. Although numerically limited within the corpus, these videos generate disproportionately extensive interaction and discursive expansion, shifting the debate from colonial history toward broader negotiations of identity and belonging. Notably, this debate emerges primarily in non-native language content (namely English and French), where Italian history is reframed through transnational vocabularies of race and domination. One creator – defining herself as an Italian descendant – explicitly links migration, colonial hierarchies, and current geopolitical issues to the Southern Question: “Why do you think my family left Italy to come here? (...) You support Palestine, but you deny the colonization of Sicily and the South” (V22). The video continues by describing post-unification Italy as a system of extraction and racialization, claiming that Southerners were stigmatized as “melanzane, eggplants, because they weren’t white enough” (V22), and that an asymmetrical order comparable to other colonial “caste hierarchies” was established.

This interpretation immediately generates negotiation. Two out of six comments analyzed suggest that “most southerners are closely related to Greeks”. An Italian creator responds in English, rejecting the colonial analogy and emphasizing participation in the unification process: “there was no colonial war, and there was no white man from the North against a darker one from the South (...) thousands of Sicilians joined Garibaldi” (V25). Some users explicitly accept his perspective, arguing that calling the unification of Italy colonialism “is at best a misrepresentation”. Others, partially deny the critics of colonial framing while mitigating its implications, “denying the colonial connotations of the subsequent process of ‘Piedmontization’ is problematic”. On

this occasion, the creator himself negotiates his point of view, slightly contradicting his initial claim, concurrently warning against what he labels as revisionist narratives: “You are absolutely right that Piedmontization had authoritarian and colonial traits. The South was more assimilated than integrated (...), but history should not be used as propaganda”.

4.4 ...to disputed Italian identity

As debates move away from historical events themselves, questions of authority over defining Italian culture and identity increasingly come to the foreground. Discussions – that keep being linguistically transnational – gradually shift the focus on contemporary issues such as citizenship by descent and the definition of Italian culture itself, revealing how colonial discourse becomes intertwined with present negotiations over who is nowadays Italian and if an Italian-specific cultural identity exists. For instance, a video addressing recent restrictions on citizenship acquisition illustrates how these debates carry within themselves implicit hierarchies of value and power asymmetries. Framed as an explanatory intervention, the creator, who is selling an assistance service for citizenship acquisition in the US, argues that policy changes were introduced to prevent “millions and millions” of descendants “flooding the system and not investing anything in the country” (V38). Interestingly, the creator provides the following explanation, simultaneously distinguishing North American descendants’ “proximity to their ancestors” from other applicants.

The Italian government realized that Italian Argentinians, who were very far removed from their Italian ancestors, were going through the Italian citizenship process and moving to Spain. The Italian Brazilians, who were very far removed from their Italian ancestor, were acquiring their Italian citizenship and moving to Portugal. (V38)

The argument culminates in the statement “to put it frankly, we’re the ones with the money”, explicitly linking cultural legitimacy to economic capital. Although presented as an explanatory commentary, the video promotes consultancy services, unveiling how platformed discussions over histories, memories, and identities keep intersecting with market-oriented dynamics. User responses further complicate the controversial stance: “not even Italians born and raised in Italy are staying there”, shifting the perspective toward structurally deficient national conditions.

A parallel dispute emerges in a video questioning whether Italian culture exists as a coherent entity. The

creator initially performs an intentionally provocative claim – that Italian culture does not exist because it is historically hybrid – only to subsequently reveal the argument as deliberately essentialist, using Italy as an example to expose similar contradictions affecting the debate over American culture. Users’ discussion focuses on reaffirming essentialist or defensive positions, ranging from claims that “Italian pasta isn’t even real Italian” (V39) to others react affectively, stating “I feel offended, and I am not even Italian”, until counter-assertions defending Italian cultural borders “the fact that you can clearly distinguish Italian culture from others means that it exists and is well defined”. Rather than following the proposed reversal of argument, interactions tend to re-anchor the discussion in immediate identity claims, thereby misreading the complexity of the creator’s reflection.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The findings suggest that the platformed negotiation of colonial memory on TikTok concerns not only how colonial memory circulates, but how it emerges through pedagogical performance. In this process, school-based pedagogical authority is reconfigured and publicly challenged. From this perspective, the colonial historical debate is mediated through school references and satirical portrayals of teachers who fail in the pedagogical mission of problematizing history, flattening knowledge and its dissemination into an acritical transmission of historical events structured within hegemonic approaches to public memory, which consequently invisibilize subaltern and colonized positions. When classroom dynamics function as a cultural script, the platformed arena – which increasingly challenges institutional expertise across domains of knowledge (Boccia Artieri, 2025) – operates, together with its algorithmic infrastructure and grassroots publics, as a re-enactment of educational processes. Educational authority is not displaced but performed under new communicative conditions. At the same time, TikTok findings show that colonial memorial debates remain anchored in institutional education even when criticizing it. From a postcolonial perspective that embeds cultural formation within hierarchical systems of knowledge transmission (Said, 1978, 1993; Gilroy, 1993), disputes over the past unfold digitally as disputes over who is entitled to teach it. The emerging question raised by this exploratory study, therefore, concerns whether and to what extent a platform such as TikTok signals a shift in pedagogical and epistemic authority, in which colonial memory is no longer explained in classroom lectures but staged through performative practices.

This dynamic becomes visible through three recurring pedagogical figures that organize vernacular negotiations of the past. The institutional teacher appears to be associated with omission and simplification, often evoked through references to textbooks that reproduce misrepresentations and identitarian narratives, as well as curricular silences surrounding colonial violence (Del Boca, 2005; Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2005). The platform educator – including self-branded “prof.” and “dr.” accounts and explainer creators – performs epistemic legitimacy through contextualization, citation, and corrective explanation: memory emerging through communicative practice rather than institutional transmission alone. Lastly, the counter-teacher emerges through ironic and performative inversions, as exemplified by Alo’s school parody, in which students symbolically correct institutional knowledge through alternative experiential and cultural positioning. These figures do not simply describe recurring roles but articulate distinct modes through which epistemic authority is claimed, contested, and redistributed. Rather than signaling the disappearance of schooling, these configurations demonstrate its persistence as a normative epistemic reference: even in critique, institutional pedagogy remains the horizon through which historical truth is evaluated.

Within the platformized media ecosystem, collective and grassroots learning practices operate as informal sites of civic education (Hoskins, 2017; Erll, 2011), enabling the circulation of marginalized or subaltern versions of colonial histories that remain weakly institutionalized within Italian curricula (Focardi, 2020; Deplano & Pes, 2014). At the same time, platformed publics engage with vernacular content formats that privilege brevity, affective resonance, and recognizability (Abidin, 2025; Papacharissi, 2015), favoring forms of knowledge performance over extended, theoretically grounded explanations. Historical learning, therefore, occurs less through linear exposition than through recognition, alignment, and affective participation.

The reception of Alo’s ironic reference to Afghanistan, as well as videos provocatively questioning cultural essentialism, illustrates a structural tension within platformed pedagogy. When creators introduce layered or metadiscursive critiques, collective interpretation frequently shifts toward literal and simplified readings. Complex irony or reflexive commentary tends to be re-anchored within immediate identity boundaries, suggesting how algorithmically mediated attention reshapes the interpretation of cognitive complexity. Platformed pedagogy, therefore, operates within a paradox: it opens spaces for bottom-up epistemic correction and the emergence of silenced memories while simultaneously con-

straining abstraction through repetition and context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011), driven by visibility-oriented circulation. Simplification does not originate exclusively within institutional education but is reproduced across communicative environments: school simplifies, satire simplifies, and the platform re-simplifies through its attention economy. Ambiguity is stabilized through collective interpretation, transforming reflexive critique into identity positioning.

As pedagogical disputes intensify, they progressively shift from historical correction toward boundary-making around identity and belonging. The findings redirect attention toward a broader transformation in how colonial memory operates at a global scale. While the study initially examines how TikTok may intervene to correct historical narratives, empirical evidence shows a shift toward disputes over belonging, whiteness, and national identity, particularly in multilingual exchanges. As discourse moves beyond Italian-language contexts, colonial history becomes less an object of clarification and more a resource for negotiating inclusion within transnational publics. This confirms how digital memory operates within connective mnemonic environments (Hoskins, 2017), where local pasts are continuously reframed through globally circulating interpretive frameworks.

What this study shows, therefore, is that platform environments do not merely host vernacular memory practices but actively reorganize the pedagogical conditions under which historical authority is produced and recognized. By identifying recurring pedagogical figures and demonstrating how users collectively reenact, contest, and redistribute educational authority, the article advances an understanding of platformed content production as a form of platformized pedagogy – a process through which the authority to interpret national history shifts from institutional certification toward performative and participatory legitimacy. What is ultimately disputed is not only the meaning of colonial history but the authority to interpret and teach national memory itself. The case of Italian colonial memory illuminates a broader transformation within contemporary media ecologies: historical knowledge increasingly emerges at the intersection of institutional absence and platform visibility, where authority is no longer assumed through institutional position but continuously enacted through participation.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that TikTok should be approached not only as a space where colonial memory circulates, but as a platformed pedagogical infrastruc-

ture in which the authority to narrate the past is publicly produced, tested, and disputed. As an exploratory qualitative study, it does not aim to generalize statistically; rather, it offers an empirically grounded mapping of how colonialism becomes narratable through recurring references to schooling and through interactive reception in comment sections, where historical claims are validated, challenged, or reoriented. This emphasizes how the current struggle over Italian colonial memory is simultaneously a struggle over educational legitimacy: what is at stake is not merely “what happened”, but who is entitled to teach it and under which criteria of credibility.

Future research should extend this analysis comparatively across European contexts to test whether “platformized pedagogy” and the school-centered framing of colonial memory travel beyond the Italian case, and how they vary under different colonial histories (i.e., British, French, Belgian, German, Portuguese) and different trajectories of decolonization and public reckoning. In addition, further work should examine more directly the relationship between colonial memory and racialization: when, if, how, and by whom colonial pasts are connected to contemporary racism, migration, citizenship, and whiteness, and when they are actively disconnected or neutralized through denial, euphemization, or “benevolent empire” narratives. This would strengthen the link between platform vernaculars and the cultural-studies insight that colonialism operates as a long *durée* cultural formation shaping European identity.

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