

TeachTok: Teachers of TikTok, micro-celebrification, and fun learning communities

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This study explores the subculture of teachers and teaching on TikTok, known in the vernacular as ‘TeachTok’, through a daily walkthrough method, a digital ethnography immersion, and an audio-visual content analysis to understand how teachers participate in the micro-celebrification process. By curating a framework that assesses teachers’ identities on social media, from May to July 2021 we closely monitored the accounts of 12 teachers alongside the general discourse of teaching on the platform to understand how they discussed their ‘responsibilities’, ‘commitment’, ‘authority’, and ‘recognition’ among their communities. ‘TeachTok’ was observed to adopt micro-celebrification practices through empathetic, resilient and storytelling dynamics.

Keywords

Teaching; micro-celebrity; social media; teacher identity; online learning.

1. Introduction

TikTok is a short-video application that became a popular communication tool for creating videos up to 10 minutes (increased from 3 minutes in March 2022) after its merger with 'Musical.ly' in August 2018. In 2022, the platform reached 3.5 billion all-time downloads (Sensor Tower, 2022). TikTok has evolved into a commercial landscape with the rise of micro-celebrities and advertising networks who monetize their content (Abidin, 2021), and it has also emerged as a venue to engage with entertainment and everyday life experiences, leading to the interest from scholars in the field of education.

From an educational perspective, the learning process has evolved from teachers who primarily convey information via their offline persona – thus limiting the student's involvement in learning to merely taking notes – to teachers who craft learning experiences on social media using emerging digital tools for pedagogy (De-la-Fuente-Prieto et al., 2019). The use of these digital technologies evidences trends that change education through alternative educational forms (Selwyn, 2016). For example, while Instagram was not created for educational purposes, it can positively benefit professional educators who use it to exchange knowledge (Carpenter et al., 2020). However, it has also been noted that the use of social media by teachers can have drawbacks pertaining to intrapersonal concerns where there is difficulty managing a personal and professional balance, or interpersonal concerns where teachers are perceived to be too self-promotional, and the like (Carpenter & Harvey, 2019).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students were forced to digitalise, pushing their teaching-learning activities into the digital arena (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). If we refer to statistics, from 2020 to present, the number of active users on social media has increased by 20.51% (We Are Social, 2022). This annual report also points out that TikTok has grown in popularity among young people, becoming one of the apps where they spend the most

time on average (23.6 hours/month, followed by YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp). Indeed, 60% of the platform's users are Generation Z users (Sensor Tower, 2022). In view of this generational preference and the emergence of the pandemic, teachers found TikTok a propitious scenario for engaging with students (Afrieda-Syahara et al., 2022). Especially in the face of a huge amount of misinformation triggered by this phenomenon, many teachers opted to share their knowledge from an ordinary, grassroots status, thus emerging as micro-celebrities (Abidin, 2021). In this sense, the figure of the educator micro-celebrity emerged as someone whose role goes beyond mere online branding, to cultivate audiences interested in the beliefs, knowledge, contents, and identities of teachers on digital platforms (Carpenter et al., 2021). Their practices can comprise promoting products and the teachers themselves, motivating other teachers, soliciting engagement from potential students, and advocating for various classroom approaches (Shelton et al., 2020; Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2020). Specifically, TikTok has been found to potentially enhance teachers' professional development by enabling the integration of creative, fun, and meaningful experiences in lesson planning (Hartung et al., 2022). It seems that students seek the empathy and authenticity of their teachers for emotional support, favouring contents that connect home, school, and social life (Literat, 2021). From media and educational approaches, our analysis aims to understand how teachers on TikTok practice and become micro-celebrities, and how they cultivate the subculture of 'TeachTok'.

2. Teachers as micro-celebrities

For education scholars, teachers have been engaged in reimagining teaching methods to help students better understand the learning process, and to support the exchange of feedback inside and outside the classroom (Greenhow & Askari, 2017). However, the relationship between teacher and students, as analysed from a media approach, is increasingly complex in the digital

environment. The reason for this is that social media are supported by markets, popular culture, and social networks for commercial purposes (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2015), encouraging teachers' self-promotion (Marshall, 2021).

In this sense, an internet (micro)celebrity describes individuals who manage their media portrayal purposefully to generate interest around their persona (Abidin, 2018). Accordingly, micro-celebrity teachers can positively affect the engagement and satisfaction of followers (Hartung et al., 2021). Related to this, a study on teachers who use online technologies and platforms for teaching and learning introduced four aspects which constitute their identity on social media: (1) 'responsibility', which consists of how they share educational content as a service with their students and peers. Specifically, this approach addresses the pedagogical competence of the teacher, and how he/she is charged with the duty to share knowledge with others; (2) 'commitment', which consists of how they manage their digital content to ensure ethical issues. In this case, teachers have to manage their time and planning to deal with issues that are not inherently related to subjects teaching (e.g. empathy towards students, other teachers, etc.); (3) 'authority', which consists of building a status in front of their followers. This indicator suggests that teachers should assume a model role of integrity in addition to that assumed by the students' families; and (4) 'recognition', which consists of the appreciation and complaints received by the teacher. This last aspect the authors address how teachers feel about others commenting on their professional work (Nuruddin-Hidayat et al., 2020).

A teacher's persona via social media can also help to reduce perceptions of distance or feelings of disconnection with followers, helping them to project their skills in a satisfying learning environment (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020). Specific to TikTok, an emerging group of studies have highlighted that the platform enhances positive online environments to connect with students through participatory activities, where teachers adapt the curricula using familiar

mechanics for students (Blanco-Martínez & González-Sanmamed, 2021). They also find its potential as a resource for peer-to-peer work narrowing the gap between students, family, and teachers (Literat, 2021). Given these perspectives, this paper aims to understand how teachers engage in micro-celebrification on TikTok through short, creative videos featuring memes and other unique platform affordances.

3. TikTok affordances for micro-celebrification

The interaction between users and TikTok have facilitated the micro-celebrity phenomenon through affordances, which have been discussed from a variety of media approaches. Firstly, from a pedagogical-ecological perspective, affordances consist of material artefacts that allow people to relate with a technological media (Gibson, 2015). Affordances have also been described from the field of media and human-computer interaction as the perceived properties of a thing that determine how it could be used (Norman, 1999). The concept was also linked to media technology as active properties awaiting not to be perceived, but explored (Gaver, 1996). Hence, affordances are constructed within the hardware and software of platforms, delimiting particular modes of expression or interaction (Gillespie, 2010).

In the media research trajectory, affordances on social media have been understood in terms of networked publics through ‘persistence’, ‘replicability’, ‘scalability’, and ‘searchability’ (boyd, 2011); and in the conditions facilitated by mobile devices through ‘portability’, ‘availability’, ‘locatability’, and ‘multimediality’ (Schrock, 2015). On TikTok, some studies point to its affordances on the basis of a “just be you” attitude, which emphasises authenticity and normalised self-presentation (Barta & Andalibi, 2021). TikTok’s affordances have been analysed as an extension of the features of its sister app Douyin (Song et al., 2021) through four functions such as (1) ‘livestreaming’, which is the potential to connect in real time

with other platform users; (2) ‘searching’, which is the possibility of locating content in an extensive library of audios, videos, and users; (3) ‘meta-voicing’, which is the property of reacting to the presence of others, as well as perceiving the reaction of others to themselves; and (4) ‘recommending’, which enables customising the platform’s recommendations through its algorithm-based system via hashtags, videos, and profiles. In this sense, the replicability of content facilitates the development of micro-celebrity on TikTok (Guinaudeau et al., 2021).

Considering the relationship between affordances and micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008), we understand that the construction of fame on TikTok is based on what the digital anthropologist Abidin (2015) terms ‘proximate micro-celebrity’. That is, we may find an organic accumulation of attention on specific users who utilise a platform’s unique features to leverage on the visibility and connections of the people they follow or the people who follow them, in order to generate micro-celebrity for themselves. Thus, we base our study on the need to comprehend the popular communication and education strategies employed by teachers seeking micro-celebrification on TikTok, including the affordances they rely on to reach their target audiences and improve their pedagogy online.

4. Methodology

This study was performed qualitatively using the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), an immersion in an online community through digital ethnography, and an audio-visual content analysis of observable data (Bell, 2001). Our aim was to analyse the profile of the teacher on TikTok as a micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008) to understand the dynamics between themselves and their followers on the platform due to the impact of COVID-19 on teaching-learning experiences (Abidin, 2021; Afrieda-Syahara et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The research questions driving the study were:

- RQ1: What identity elements characterise the micro-celebrification sought by teachers on TikTok?
- RQ2: What are the affordances utilised in the ‘TeachTok’ subculture, and how are they deployed?

4.1. Preliminary walkthrough method: Identification of teachers

Following the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), we proceeded to immerse ourselves in the educational contents of TikTok through an iterative process on the platform consisting of: (a) Registration and login; (b) Daily use; and (c) Suspension, closure, and leaving. For this purpose, we created a TikTok account specifically for the analysis that allowed us to navigate the content independently of preconditioned recommendations by the platform’s interaction-algorithm system.

This preliminary immersion involved identifying 12 teacher profiles on TikTok – six in English and six in Spanish, based on the authors’ combined fluency in both languages and cultures – following a systematic process. First, we started a new TikTok account to clean the digital footprint as recommended by the walkthrough method, preventing the platform’s recommendation system from being influenced by previous operations. After that, we entered ‘teacher’ and ‘profesor/profesora’ – corresponding to ‘teacher’ translated to Spanish for male/female – in the Discover tab to familiarise ourselves with the types of posts usually shared in relation to these key search terms. We spent a concerted period of 27 days reviewing these contents systematically on a daily basis, and took fieldnotes. Throughout this immersion, we identified recurring hashtags and recorded the ones which were the most used. The top two hashtags were #TeachersOfTikTok (English) and #ProfesorDeTikTok (Spanish) with more than 11.2B and 127 400 views respectively at the time of analysis in May 2021 (Figure 1).

analysis within the Spanish-English context, we considered it productive to expand the study to both languages. Our purpose was to ensure results not limited by a single contextual perspective, supporting intercultural diversity. The teachers represented countries such as Mexico, Spain, the USA, and the UK, all of whom had follower counts that exceeded 10,000. This threshold is aligned with TikTok's official European 'Fondo para Creadores' (Creators Fund, 2020), which launched a campaign on 2 September 2020 to fund the talent of TikTokers with more than 10,000 followers and 10,000 views in 30 days. Secondly, we ensured that selected profiles had explicitly self-identified as professional teachers, as indicated in their TikTok biographies (e.g. "4th grade teacher"). Thirdly, we ensured that the profiles selected had mainly uploaded (and therefore will likely continue to upload) mostly content related to teaching. This was gauged via a close scan of their posts, from the very first one to the most recent one at the time of analysis. The profiles we identified generally demonstrated a posting frequency in which 9 out of 10 videos were related to their professions as teachers. This finally resulted in the 12 shortlisted accounts (Figure 2).

The profiles targeted according to the selection criteria reflected a sample of teachers who intentionally seek visibility online, as observed via their posting strategies (Abidin, 2016). However, third parties (students, users, peers, family, etc.) were often featured in the posts. To avoid exposing these persons without their consent, we decided to anonymise the profiles of micro-celebrity practising teachers in our sample by adopting pseudonyms and excluding identifying data from the posts.

At the time of data collection, we noted the statistics for the number of followers and likes for each profile (Figure 2). We listed the username, followers, likes, and the education grade that the teacher taught as indicated in their TikTok bio. The data collection and observation period was 10 May to 5 June 2021.






 TikTok profile	 Followers	 Likes	 Language	 Education grade
teacher_1	2.7 M	81.5 M	English	Kindergarten
teacher_2	632.8 K	3.8 M	Spanish	Kindergarten
teacher_3	307 K	8.2 M	English	Primary school
teacher_4	19.7 K	281 K	English	Primary school
teacher_5	30 K	577.9 K	English	Primary school
teacher_6	295 K	7.9 M	Spanish	Secondary school
teacher_7	64.9 K	1.7 M	English	Secondary school
teacher_8	249.3 K	6 M	English	Secondary school
teacher_9	484.9 K	16.6 K	Spanish	Secondary school
teacher_10	1.1 M	15.9 M	Spanish	Secondary school
teacher_11	116.3 K	2.1 M	Spanish	Secondary school
teacher_12	39 K	935.3 K	Spanish	Secondary school / University

Figure 2. Data on profiles of teachers selected for our case studies, sorted by education grade.

4.2. Audio-visual content analysis: Identity aspects through profiles and videos

The next step of the study involved the analysis of the teachers' profiles and their videos. This kind of content facilitated the capture of media-rich data on a dynamic platform such as TikTok (Hurwitz et al., 2018). In particular, we analysed the teachers' self-presentation and their videos through audio-visual content analysis (Bell, 2001), in which we consider all the audio-visually

observable aspects. Considering the complexity of this method as a result of the wide variety of observable content, we focused the analysis on those aspects related to the teacher identity. Such aspects provided us with an insight into the ‘TeachTok’ subculture (Figura 3), and were constituted by ‘responsibility’, ‘commitment’, ‘authority’, and ‘recognition’ (Nuruddin-Hidayat et al., 2020). For each one, we considered a framework compiled from the literature and the visible features of the platform. The empirical data were translated by the first author from Spanish to English, and both authors worked on the study design and analysis.





Aspect	Elements	Source
 <p>Responsibility How teachers share content as service to their students/peers</p>	<p>Perceived power <i>Exchanging roles through personal stories.</i></p> <p>Expert-novice comprehension <i>Assuming and sharing that students may teach valuable knowledge.</i></p> <p>Grades <i>Prioritising the learning process over grades.</i></p> <p>Skills <i>Taking on new responsibilities to find knowledge and share it with the teacher.</i></p>	<p>Barber, 2014 <i>"Digital narratives can be used to create learning environments [...] In the digital world, it is imperative that teachers, regardless of academic standing, continually redefine themselves as life-long learners and model this for their students" (p. 9)</i></p>
 <p>Commitment How teachers manage their digital content to ensure ethical issues</p>	<p>Social justice <i>Demonstrating ethical care, solidarity, and critique patterns towards their students.</i></p> <p>Community network <i>Creating networks in and out the classroom.</i></p> <p>Ability to flourish <i>Telling stories of hope, growth and skills to endure teaching.</i></p> <p>Success and validation <i>Valuing the achievements of both teachers and students.</i></p>	<p>Grillo & Kier, 2021 <i>"The combined identities of the teacher as researcher and teacher for social justice are sustained by familial relationships with administrators, colleagues, and students, allowing our scholars to flourish in their [...] settings" (p. 9)</i></p>
 <p>Authority How teachers build their status in front of their followers</p>	<p>Themes <i>Topics addressed by teachers in the posts based on students' motivation, engagement, and participation.</i></p>	<p>Camas-Garrido et al., 2021 <i>"The teacher-student relationship should tend to a horizontal closeness, similar to friendship, but maintaining the vertical distance when considering ethical and responsible boundaries. [...] This perspective would result in a relationship defined by horizontality under the premise of a different symmetry (authority) in the roles of students and teachers" (p. 146)</i></p>
 <p>Recognition How teachers receive appreciation and complaints</p>	<p>TikTok affordances React: <i>selecting a user's comment on the post and replying with a video.</i> Duet: <i>building on another user's post by recording their own video alongside the original as it plays.</i> Stitch: <i>clipping and using scenes from other videos in an own TikTok post.</i> Green Screen: <i>using another image or video as the background for their own content.</i></p>	<p>Eriksson-Krutök, 2021 <i>"The technological conditions of social media platforms play an essential role in how individuals use them. However, the way in which these technological features are used and interpreted by different users on the platform is dependent on specific social norms and community practices, which, in turn, becomes rewarded with increased engagements (p. 4)</i></p>

Figure 3. Our original curation of social sciences scholarship on media and education, drawing from Nuruddin-Hidayat et al. (2020), Barber (2014), Grillo and Kier (2021), Camas-Garrido et al. (2021), and Eriksson-Krutök (2021), to study how teachers interface with social media for their teaching and micro-celebrification.

The procedure entailed visiting the profiles on a daily basis from 18 June to 9 July 2021, to watch their latest posts and record our observations on the content and engagement on the

account. This period was adapted to the user norms of TikTok, where most TikTokers tend to post at least once a day, indicating a high posting frequency compared to other social media apps (Sensor Tower, 2022). We systematised the analysis process as follows: (1) accessing each profile; (2) viewing posts in reverse chronological order; (3) reviewing the audio meme used in each post, which consists of pre-recorded songs or sounds used for changing its meaning iteratively (Abidin & Kaye, 2021); (4) reviewing the engagement of the post through likes, comments, mentions, replies, ‘Duet’, and ‘Stitch’. During this procedure, we noted and categorised frequent themes through a data collection sheet.

5. Findings

Following the RQ1, we analysed the profiles and their videos focusing on identity elements that defined TikTok in terms of ‘responsibility’, ‘commitment’, and ‘authority’.

5.1. Educational ‘responsibility’ and ‘teacher-typical’ issues

We first focused on teachers’ ‘responsibility’. TikTok’s affordances allow teachers to build their own strategies and identities to challenge the more conservative approaches of teaching that privilege a hierarchy and power imbalance between the teacher who lectures and the student who passively receives instruction (De-la-Fuente-Prieto et al., 2019).

Through social media, teachers may be asked to behave according to the legal requirements that constitute their profession (Noakes & Hook, 2021). These ethical responsibilities increase the expectation on their person, demanding them to “act as in real life” through appropriate behaviours when facing moral dilemmas (Thunman et al., 2018, p. 134).

Additionally, teachers replicate social media behaviours of micro-celebrities where their relationships are cultivated on feelings of authenticity through small talk, jokes, and experiences outside of school.

5.2. Perceived power

Moving on to the first aspect, we analysed ‘perceived power’ – which involves exchanging roles through personal stories. Teachers used roleplay to demonstrate their understanding of both teacher and student experiences in the classroom. For instance, we found stories in which the teacher performed student roles through transitions and props, and even used different coloured highlights to indicate various roles or stances – i.e. how different students would react on the last day of school (Figure 4).

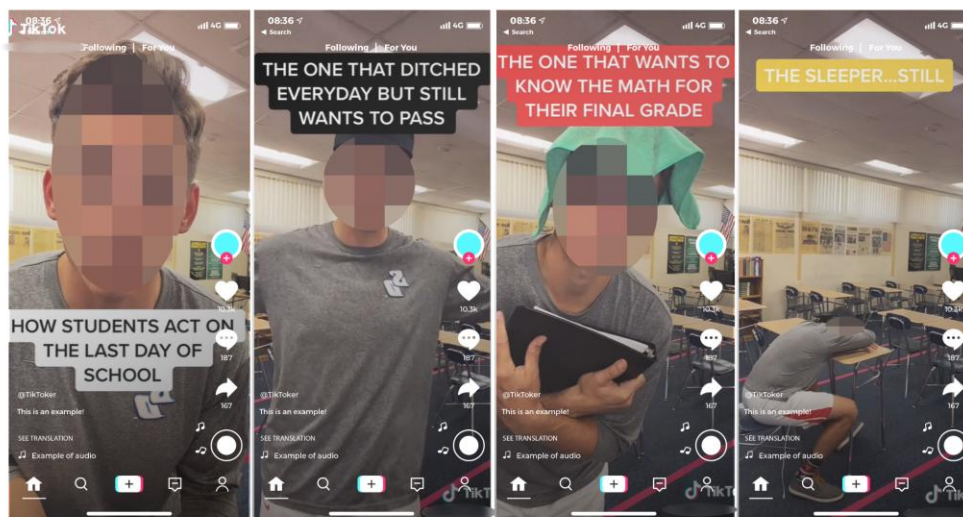


Figure 4. “teacher_8” (L-R) 4.1: post objective; 4.2: first ditched student example; 4.3: second advanced student example; 4.4: sleeper student example. Screenshot by authors.

Such role exchange is based on building trust between teacher-students and teacher-teachers (Barber, 2014). Through humour, teachers cultivate the affection of their students because they lower the regard of their traditional authority by increasing the relatability (Kanai, 2017). On

TeachTok, the perception of teachers shifts from being authoritative instructors or keepers of knowledge, to being a peer who co-contributes to the learning process and who understands the students' behaviours and trends. This immediate experiential feedback in which students identify themselves in a role, and in which teachers try to empathise with the TikToker, illustrates how the hierarchical authority held by teachers is briefly diffused via techniques of humour.

5.3. Expert and novice understanding

The third aspect is 'expert and novice understanding', which describes how the teacher understands the varying capacities of students. Here, we observed teachers participating in audio memes and dance challenges. This tendency to engage in TikTok trends and challenges echoes what Abidin (2015) noted as the construction of micro-celebrity through proximity. After the forced digitalisation of education due to COVID-19 (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), teachers have adapted to the online environment in which their students participate, and where the difference between the expert and the novice seems superfluous. We found some dancing, humorous, and experiential examples in which this practice was exchanged between the teacher and their students (Figure 5). For example, "teacher_9" performs a dance trend that her student taught her (Figure 5.1), and demonstrates how teachers might humorously react to jokes by students (Figure 5.4). These scenarios focus on teacher-student relationships that reflect a role reversal between the expert and the novice, in which the teacher is the one who learns from their students – for instance, how to perform the music challenges that are popular among young people.

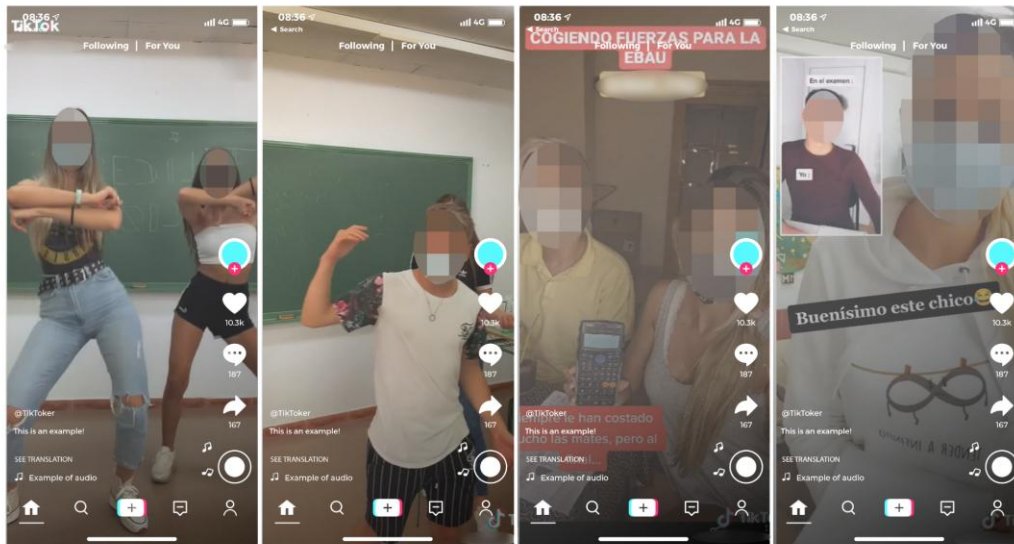


Figure 5. “teacher_9” (L-R): 5.1: student-teacher dancing a challenge; 5.2: student-teacher interchangeable holding ‘charge’; 5.3: teacher noticing her student’s success; 5.4: teacher reacting positively to a student’s situation. Screenshot by authors.

5.4. Grading

The fourth aspect, ‘grading’, prioritised the learning process over grade outcomes. Although in all cases teachers mentioned the necessity of grading at some point, some placed more emphasis on the teaching processes through the use of innovative resources. In Figure 6, a teacher is seen to adapt a snippet from the collaborative video game ‘Among Us’. His aim is to encourage and motivate students to enjoy the classroom experience through play instead of merely passing tests – i.e. prioritising motivational initiatives among students beyond the grades. In Figures 6.1 and 6.2, the teacher presents the gameplay and the final step, which consists of deciding who is the ‘fake character’. Subsequently, in Figure 6.3, the teacher is accused of being the ‘fake character’ while he defends himself claiming that they are wrong. Finally, in Figure 6.4, both the students and the teacher lose the game because the teacher really was not the fake.

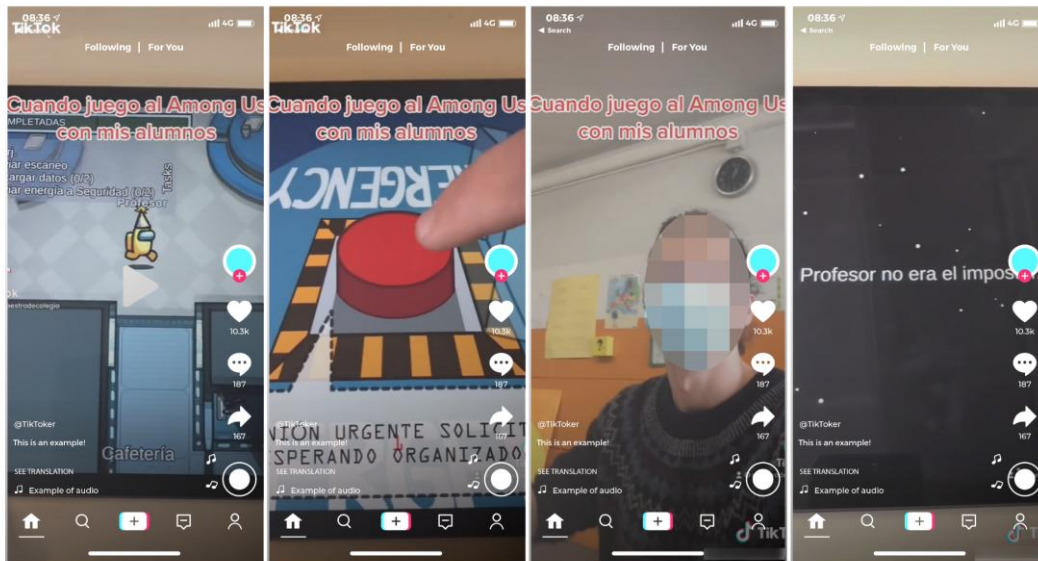


Figure 6. “teacher_10”. (L-R) 6.1: Presenting the game; 6.2: Meeting who is the ‘fake character’; 6.3: Accusing the teacher as ‘fake character’; 6.4: Losing the game. Screenshot by authors.

In contrast, another teacher shares tips and advice on how to manage one’s grades and navigate university admission processes (Figure 7.1). He explains that he created these videos to affirm students that they are ‘more than’ mere grades (Figures 7.2, 7.3 and 7.4), even if they may have failed to be accepted into the university programme of their choice. Similar to a micro-celebrity, the teachers in these posts aimed to minimise feelings of disconnection with followers, but instead worked hard to construct what they perceive to be satisfying and motivating learning in these online contexts (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020).



Figure 7. “teacher_12”. (L-R) 7.1: Looking for the entry grade; 7.2: Understanding you have not achieved the grade; 7.3: Explaining to the student that they are not numbers; 7.4: Encouraging students. Screenshot by authors.

5.5. Skills and nature of knowledge

Finally, we regard the aspect ‘skills and nature of knowledge’, whereby the learner assumes some responsibility for their own learning. In Figure 8, a teacher committed to sharing her teaching experience at kindergarten, often revealing the at-home activities led by her six-year-old son, which she supervises lightly in order to give him the space to develop his own skills such as conducting sensory activities (Figure 8.1), non-Newtonian fluid activities (Figure 8.2), literacy activities (Figure 8.3), and self-control activities (Figure 8.4). In this regard, we note that these activities for children were usually managed by parents or tutors with their own children or students. This practice involving the exposure of minors on platforms constitutes part of the phenomenon of ‘sharenting’, whereby families show their children's intimate activities on the Internet. In the case of micro-celebrities, this performative practice attempts to engage more followers (Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2022). We found that in the kindergarten cases the teachers ensured the anonymity of the children (Figure 8), while in the higher

education cases the students appeared in the videos (Figure 5). This attempt to anonymise children in comparison to the non-anonymisation of older students in higher education shows the ethical concern of teachers of TikTok about the exposure of minors on the Internet. This is different from that shown by micro-celebrities whose profiles focus on portraying the family's private life.

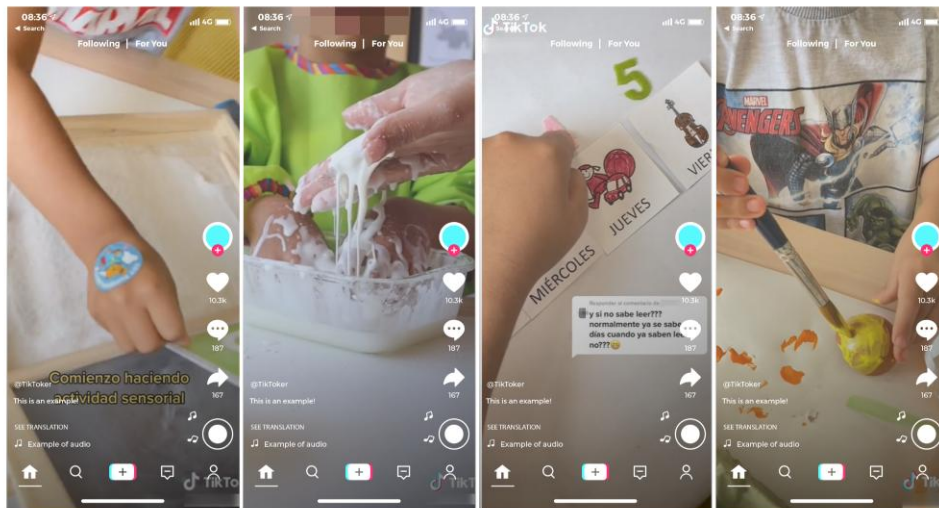


Figure 8. “teacher_2”. (L-R) 8.1: Sensory activity; 8.2: Non-Newtonian fluid activity; 8.3: Literacy activity; 8.4: Self-control activity. Screenshot by authors.

Throughout these examples we observed that teachers managed their self-presentation through storytelling and experiences related to their career, demonstrating a greater feeling of imagined authenticity, and social-legal commitment to their profession. Teachers self-promote themselves through micro-celebrity strategies such as (1) negotiating their identity to attract a large community; (2) linking with that group through the platform affordances and features such as hashtags; (3) participating in different trends and challenges unrelated to their profession; (4) and reducing the distance with their followers.

6. Educational ‘commitment’ and creative tempo

The second element analysed was ‘commitment’, which refers to how teachers manage their digital content to debate ethical concerns. Teachers are often satisfied with their job and tend to produce students who are more motivated to learn by listening to their challenges (Auletto, 2021). For the teachers in our case study, their self-presentation on TikTok reflects their attitude towards their profession and towards the support of people involved in the educational experience (Grillo & Kier, 2021).

6.1. Advocacy and social justice

We started the analysis looking for discourses on ‘advocacy and social justice’, in which teachers shared their ethical concerns in defence of both their teaching duties and their students. In Figure 9.1, we observe “teacher_9” reacting to a user’s complaint, claiming that teachers should get a pay cut if they make a mistake, for the same reason that if students make a mistake in an exam they get their grades lowered. In this case, we find that the teacher prioritises empathy towards her students, where her position takes on a defensive and justice-oriented perspective. In Figure 9.2, “teacher_11” shared a common situation among teachers when a colleague tells “teachers have to be hard on students”, explaining that they should be empathetic, respectful and tolerant with students. This example illustrates the discrepancies between teachers in their attitude towards students. Specifically, the teacher explains that teachers’ labour should be understood from a horizontal versus a vertical teaching position - i.e. without practising teacher-student power hierarchies. Meanwhile, in Figure 9.3, “teacher_4” demonstrates her classroom ethos, highlighting some of the do’s and don’ts by which she abides: calling for mutual respect between teachers and students; allowing food in the classroom; not raising her voice; being flexible in accepting late assignments; or not assigning tasks during break periods. Finally, in Figure 9.4, “teacher_5” encourages their

students to achieve all their educational goals, promoting empathy and support for their students. These cases demonstrated a sense of proximity between the teacher-student, whose relationship is strengthened by empathy. Notably, through such contents, teachers demonstrate that they prioritise a satisfying and positive learning environment (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020).

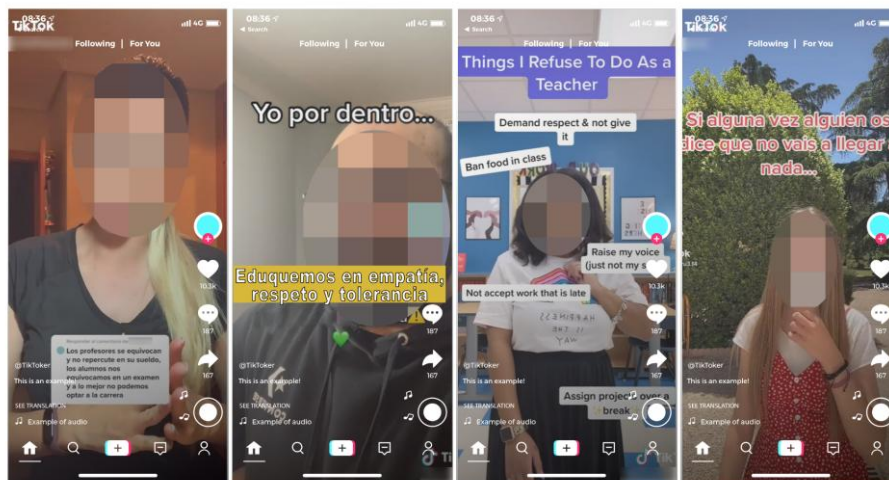


Figure 9. (L-R) 9.1: “teacher_9”; 9.2: “teacher_11”; 9.3: “teacher_4”; 9.4: “teacher_5”. Screenshot by authors.

6.2. Community network

Regarding the ‘community network’ – which refers to how teachers build a group according to their meaningful and trusting self-presentation outside the classroom – we identified how the TikTokers introduced themselves as teaching professionals. For example, we found such biographical profiles as “secondary school mathematics teacher” or “teacher looking forward to having fun on the platform”. The different profiles intentionally shaped their online presence and voicing to generate audience interest (Abidin, 2018) around a platform’s educator persona.

Teachers shared positive moments with colleagues and students, highlighting their well-being with their profession. In Figure 10.1, the teacher expresses how their students are the reason why he is passionate about their profession. In Figure 10.2, through the Latin

musical genre bachata, the teacher shares a dance with her mathematics colleagues during a school break. In Figure 10.3, the teacher shares a surprise made by his Geography students at the end of the course, expressing his gratitude and wishing them luck in life. Finally, in Figure 10.4, the teacher also shares a dance challenge involving her fellow teachers, who celebrate the end of the week. In these case studies, the teachers' joy is illustrated through dancing, smiling, sharing memorable teaching moments, and thanking their followers, who mainly comprised teachers and students.



Figure 10. (L-R) 10.1: teacher who values his students; 10.2: dancing with classmates; 10.3: students gifting the teacher; 10.4: dancing with classmates. Screenshot by authors.

6.3. Ability to flourish

We continue with the ‘ability to flourish’ aspect, which is understood by how community networks value each other (Grillo & Kier, 2021). The authors point out that the way in which a teacher influences the flourishing of their students or colleagues is critical to ensuring educational success. In this sense, we found a special emphasis on the need to share success between teachers-to-students and vice versa. In Figures 11.1 and 11.2, we found the story of

“teacher_10”, who in a post integrating his experience during a year as a tutor through transitions, expressed his gratitude for his successful teaching experience. Focused on the relationship between teachers, in Figures 11.3 and 11.4, “teacher_1” shares a reflection on how hard the pandemic period had been for them, sending them all her support. The teacher’s honesty in acknowledging the resilience of her peers demonstrated another micro-celebration strategy to connect with the community, which showed how together they all saved (made to flourish) education in a challenging period.

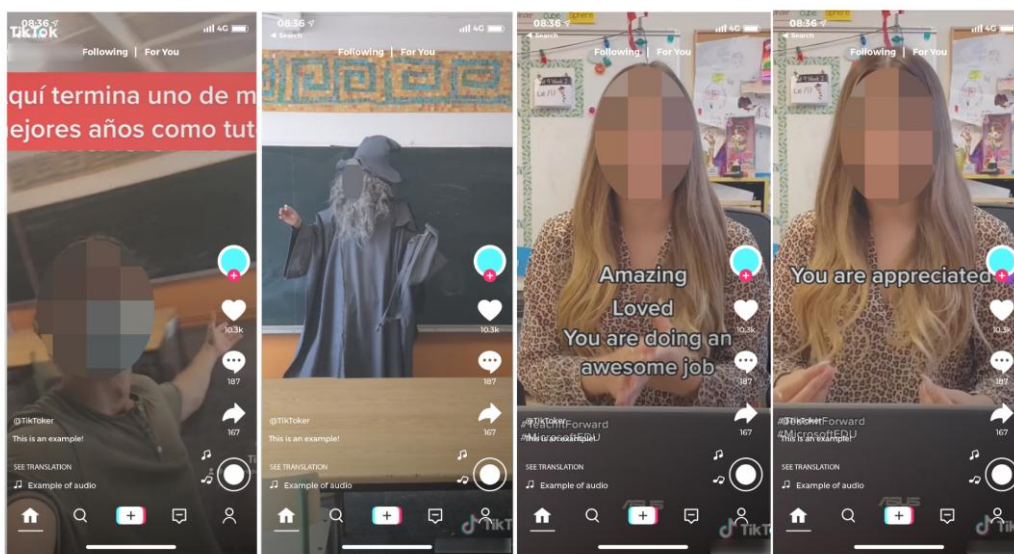


Figure 11. (L-R) 11.1 and 11.2: “teacher_10” sharing a teaching year experience; 11.3 and 11.4: “teacher_1” reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on teachers’ daily life.

6.4. Success and validation

Finally, with respect to ‘success and validation’, the teachers showed their appreciation for their students, always wishing them future success through significant audio memes detailed below. In Figure 12, the teacher was addressing the more than 400 students who started their university career, using the audio meme of ‘Never Forget You - Noisettes’ with the lyrics:

*I'll never forget you/
 they said we'd never make it/
 my sweet joy/
 always remember me/*

This particular case shows how the teacher appealed to her students through lip-sync and pre-recorded music to express how much she misses them, showcasing the more rarely seen sensitive side of her professional identity.



Figure 12. “teacher_3”.

In all profiles, ‘commitment’ to and for students, teachers and the education profession was expressed through experiences, dances, and reflections emphasised by music. Thus, ‘commitment’ seemed to be a creative musical trend of the ‘TeachTok’ subculture.

7. Educational ‘authority’ and untraditional contents

The third aspect was related to the teachers’ ‘authority’. Traditional framings of teachers as authoritarian figures and gatekeepers intended to facilitate students’ access to the adult world.

In this sense, ‘authority’ was mainly linked to punishment and the hierarchisation of teaching rules (Meza-Pardo et al., 2020).

In contemporary times, the role of institutional authoritarianism becomes senseless on TikTok, where the creative exchange of content is based on a fundamentally networked and participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2015). Therefore, we define teaching ‘authority’ as the right of teachers to shape learning and knowledge in and outside the classroom, sharing such conditions with their students. We analysed the cases of teachers who place emphasis on the exchange of knowledge, as well as on friendship through strategies of motivation, engagement and participation (Camas-Garrido et al., 2021), for the intended purposes of micro-celebrification.

In Figure 13, we propose a list of eleven themes based on our original framing of ‘authority’ on TikTok. Teachers demonstrated this characteristic as a friendly experience in which they created entertainment content. The following themes addressed by TikTok teachers are more akin to the strategies of a micro-celebrity aiming to amass online visibility and fame, rather than a teacher using the platform merely for educational purposes.


Theme	Description	Example
 Educational	Sharing knowledge on subjects of study explicitly.	<i>Explaining how to solve a maths problem; Showing how to create educational materials for different children's ages.</i>
 Experiential	Sharing stories about life events that have happened throughout their lives.	<i>Showing how they react to milestone days such as Fridays or breaks; Showing classroom talks between students and teachers.</i>
 Humorous	Sharing jokes, memes and funny situations related to school life.	<i>Showing how to hide materials from other teachers and see their reactions; Cheating students with unrealistic comments in tests.</i>
 Motivational	Sharing helpful, supportive and encouraging messages to students and teachers.	<i>Encouraging students in university entrance exams; Promoting students' abilities through games.</i>
 Entertaining	Sharing content intended to provide information about the teacher's school or personal life.	<i>Showing the teacher's reaction to the comment "the best teacher in the world"; Dancing a song with children in the classroom.</i>
 Intimate	Sharing stories from the teacher's personal life outside the classroom.	<i>Showing their dogs at home; Showing what they do on school holidays.</i>
 Emotional	Sharing feelings and emotions about what their profession entails.	<i>Explaining how they feel during a global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic; Showing how they feel when they are overworked.</i>
 Professional	Sharing content related to the physical space of their classroom and their work.	<i>Making a class tour; Showing tasks they have prepared for the students.</i>
 Reflective	Sharing reflections and thoughts on practices related to school life.	<i>Reacting to calls from student's parents; Reacting to degrading comments made about themselves or another community member.</i>
 Promotional	Sharing offers, events or brands.	<i>Explaining the upcoming event on school organisation tips for teachers; Sharing a tool for teachers sponsored by an identified brand.</i>
 Challenging	Participating with dances and audio memes in TikTok trends.	<i>Dancing popular challenges to celebrate students' understanding the idea correctly; Using an audio meme to show the types of students before the academic year ends.</i>

Figure 13. Our original framing of how teacher 'authority' is constructed via content themes on TikTok.

These eleven themes pointed to the innovative teaching experiences through which teachers create content on TikTok to express and promote themselves as micro-celebrities. These appeared recurrently in many posts and were surfaced in our analysis as performance strategies and content themes that micro-celebrity teachers on TikTok tended to draw on. Following this, we mapped the core elements of micro-celebrity subculture on 'TeachTok', based on

‘educational’ and ‘professional’ issues, ‘life’ and ‘intimate’ experiences, ‘humorous’, ‘entertaining’ and ‘promotional’ content, ‘motivational’, ‘emotional’ and ‘reflective’ ‘attitudes’, and ‘challenging’ activities. With these new modes of self-expression, teachers seem to challenge the authoritarian teacher-student hierarchy, demonstrating a more accessible attitude to themselves, and encouraging a more open learning.

8. Educational ‘recognition’ and positive thinking

Finally, in terms of ‘recognition’, we found a subculture where positivity and humour predominated as the main theme. In the post comments, we found expressions that (1) continued joking about the teachers’ content – “hahaha can you record their reaction?”; (2) supported its content – “Officially favorite TikTok page”; (3) added information – “It is spelled in the same way as the verb *hacer*”; (4) or requested more data on what they shared – “Hi, can you teach me how to make a cardboard book? Cheers”. Teachers’ reactions were particularly relevant in the ‘recognition’ case. According to our RQ2, which relates to the affordances that TikTok teachers deploy, below we analyse micro-celebrification engaging teachers’ strategies through ‘React’, ‘Duet’, ‘Green Screen’, and ‘Stitch’.

8.1. React(ing)

We started with the platform’s ‘React’ comments affordance, which involves selecting a user’s comment on the post and replying with a video. In Figure 14.1, the teacher responded to a user’s complaint which stated that accepting work from her students after the deadline would teach that their work meant nothing. She explained through a personal story that often failure to complete class assignments on time could be due to external situations that are beyond the

children’s control. In Figure 14.2, the teacher also responded to a complaint accusing him of not helping students to pass the university access test. He replied that he always tried to be as flexible as possible in grading tests, but if he received blank papers he could not pass them because of ethical issues. In Figure 14.3, the teacher appreciated the comments in which users shared wishing the TikToker would become her teacher. Finally, in Figure 14.4, the teacher showed her summer break after being asked “what teachers do when there is no school”.

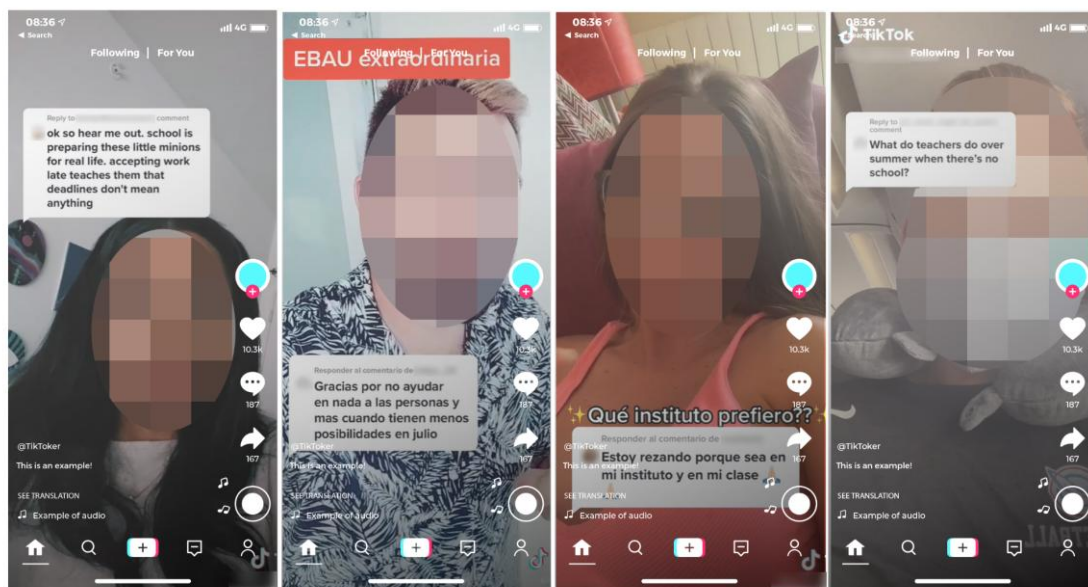


Figure 14. (L-R) 14.1 and 14.2: responding to users' complaints; 14.3: appreciating student comments; 14.4: responding to students with actions.

8.2. Duet(ing)

Another feature is the ‘Duet’, which consists of building on another user’s post by recording their own video alongside the original as it plays. In Figure 15.1, the teacher reacted sympathetically to another TikToker video that discussed typical teacher comments, reflecting the students’ discomfort in a humorous way. In Figure 15.2, teachers role-played as DJs in a musical competition sharing his youthful and friendly personality with his students. Finally, in

Figure 15.3, the teacher recorded her reaction to seeing a user's video who has created printed stickers to celebrate the teacher's TikTok achieving 1 million followers.

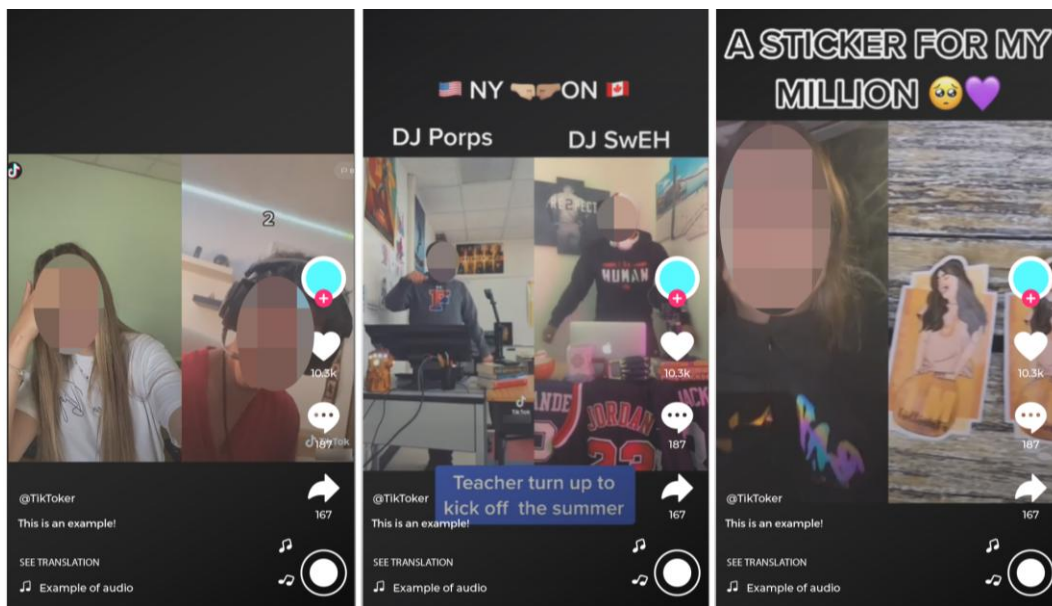


Figure 15. (L-R) 15.1: humorous teacher-student interaction; 15.2: humorous teacher-teacher interaction; 15.3: humorous teacher-follower interaction.

8.3. Green Screen(ing)

We also found different uses for the 'Green Screen' affordance, which entails using another image or video as the background for their own content. In Figure 16.1, the teacher used the resource to explain how materials for kindergarten children could be downloaded. In Figure 16.2, the teacher showed what her students thought about a particular food product. In Figure 16.3, the teacher humorously illustrated his behaviour in a class dance in response to a song that motivated him. Finally, in Figure 16.4, a teacher role-played an exaggerated version of a micro-celebrity on TikTok who was overwhelmed by fame.

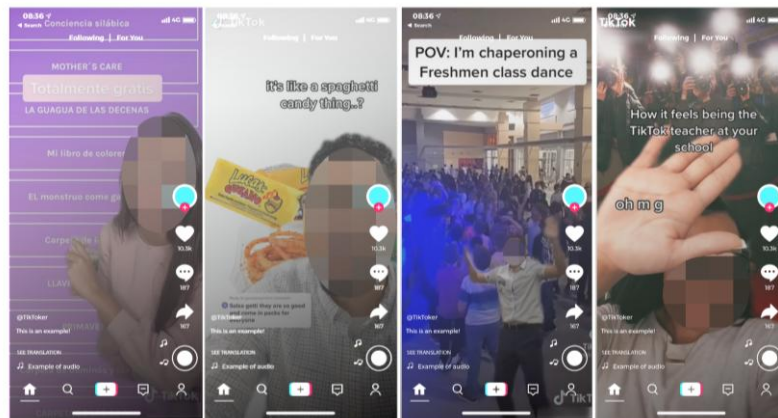


Figure 16. (L-R) 16.1: didactic material; 16.2: students' thoughts about a product; 16.3: humorous viewpoint of the teacher; 16.4: celebrity joke on TikTok.

8.4. *Stitch(ing)*

The ‘Stitch’ affordance, which is to clip and use scenes from other videos in an own TikTok post, was one of the least used. However, it was always selected for comedic purposes. In the following example, the teacher showed a student reciting a poem that mocked teachers (Figure 17.1). Then, the teacher appeared to respond to the student with another poem that humorously mocked the student back (Figure 17.2).



Figure 17. “teacher_10” (L-R): 17.1: Student mocking teachers; 17.2: Teacher mocking the student.

From these case studies, it appears that teachers on TikTok have devoted much of their content to responding to their followers to reinforce their 'recognition'. The platform's affordances helped teachers to employ micro-celebrity strategies to connect with their followers in more communicative and creative ways.

9. Conclusion: 'TeachTok' subcultures on TikTok

TikTok is an appropriate platform for the construction of the teacher micro-celebrity, whose identity is based on beliefs and practises beyond mere (self-)branding (Carpenter et al., 2021). This perception seems to be directly linked to the micro-celebrification of teachers, who are engaged in creating contents that broaden the pedagogical perspective through creative posts. As we discussed, the identity of a teacher on TikTok introduces patterns characteristic of a micro-celebrity (Abidin, 2021; Hartung et al., 2021). However, this celebrity especially resembles micro-celebrification processes under modes of interaction based on proximity (Abidin, 2015), and the reduction of distance with their followers, no matter whether they were students or not. In addition, these processes seem to embrace self-promotional templates designed to generate interest around their person (Abidin, 2018), where teachers employ common mechanics of interaction depending on the affordances of the platform.

Teachers on 'TeachTok' use the platform's affordances to construct teaching personas who attract and engage with their audiences (Song et al., 2021). This means that they explore the possibilities afforded by TikTok to turn what would have been purely educational content into self-promotional posts as well. In this sense, we observed that while kindergarten, secondary school and university teachers use teaching and grading methods, these aspects did not generate major differences between the profiles, in which challenge and daily experiences played the main role. Teachers are not just negotiating their identity online (De-la-Fuente-

Prieto et al., 2019) or improving their pedagogy methods, but also employing all possible affordances to engage the attention of users through popular communication practices such as dance challenges, audio memes, and effects. To this end, the 'TeachTok' subculture relies on 'responsibility' strategies (Barber, 2014) constituted by four main principles: (1) The exchange of perceived power, where teachers perform several roles to demonstrate their knowledge about both teachers and students' attitudes; (2) The understanding of the learners' expert/novice role, where they value and participate in the student's knowledge; (3) The prioritisation of the educational process over grades; (4) The recognition of student teaching skills.

In addition, we found that teachers expressed their 'commitment' with their teaching through content infused with vitality, reflection, positivism, and music (Auletto, 2021). These profiles advocated for social justice among students, peers and their profession, creating broad communities interested in education and focusing on the ability to flourish through personal growth, and exalting the success of their students (Grillo & Kier, 2021), who were the focus of teachers' thinking in almost all content.

'Authority' among TikTok teachers was based on the teachers-students' storytelling connection, as opposed to traditional educational assumptions concerning authoritarian hierarchies (Meza-Pardo et al., 2020). Although we noted mainly positive practices, we understand that over-entertainment may decrease the authority of teachers of TikTok, resulting in drawbacks such as those pointed out by Carpenter and Harvey (2019). In this sense, we found that contents that featured entertaining behaviours that could progressively achieve fame (Guinaudeau et al., 2021) were replicated across different profiles to allow users to experience fun in the teaching-and-learning space. In sum, the vernaculars of the 'TeachTok' subculture suggest that to challenge the teacher-student hierarchy is an attempt to recalibrate the balance of power connecting the spheres of home life, school life, and social life; demonstrate greater

accessibility and proximity to their authentic persona; and encourage an open learning experience.

By drawing on a small sample size for our in-depth qualitative study, we were able to interrogate the contents produced by ‘TeachTok’ teachers through a multi-prong approach comprising a daily walkthrough method, a digital ethnography immersion, and an audio-visual content analysis. As a result, this research provides an exploratory mode to understand the phenomenon wherein teachers on TikTok use the platform’s features to foster micro-celebrification, in a bid to enhance their teaching capacity and the learning experience of their students. We found teachers whose profiles extended beyond leading an educational community, discussing materials, or improving learning. Instead, teachers of ‘TeachTok’ were committed to sharing experiences, offering peer-to-peer advice, making jokes, dancing, expressing thoughts about the educational system, and revealing fun teaching experiences.

Regarding RQ1, for which we pondered what elements characterise the identity of a teacher on TikTok, we found three interesting aspects. Firstly, we found the break with the stereotype of the typical teacher who lectures and the typical student who receives instruction. On this platform we observed that the relationship between teachers and students was based on trends, audio memes, and jokes related to education. We identified this in cases involving teacher responsibility, whereby teachers and students share roles and stories, exchange knowledge related to the platform itself, and assume that their knowledge is equally valuable – i.e. the students' knowledge is equal with respect to the teacher's. Secondly, we identified a sort of out-of-school affective bond between teacher-student, teacher-teacher and student-student, in which peer support facilitated something akin to an online community. In addition, this network is usually constituted by teachers, students and users who did not belong to the teacher's own school, university or institution. This was illustrated through the commitment

aspect, in which teachers engaged in strategies to cultivate a network of followers by sharing their perspectives and unconditional support to students and teachers. Finally, we found that teachers are able to build friendship and edutainment environments. In these profiles teachers shared open and innovative teaching experiences derived from their authoritative skills to create content which is didactic, humorous, motivational, intimate, emotional, professional, reflective, promotional, challenging, and more.

We found truly insightful how teachers of TikTok adopt and apply the logic of micro-celebrification in the app. Following the study by the communication scholar Marwick (2018) on the social media industry in Silicon Valley, whereby business entrepreneurs adopt the strategies used by leading social media influencers to make themselves visible on the internet, we observed that the 'TeachTok' culture moves similarly. As we described above, teachers of TikTok use affordances and engagement strategies akin to those of influencers, spreading the logic and aesthetics of education into new realms. In RQ2, which aimed to identify the affordances and the modes in which they construct the 'TeachTok' subculture, we found the use of the (1) 'React' affordance to engage in feedback with followers by creating complementary information to their posts; (2) the 'Duet' to enhance teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-follower ties; (3) the 'Green Screen' to generate pedagogical and storytelling content; (4) and the 'Stitch' to produce humorous content.

These practices seem quite opposed to the theories of micro-celebrity imitation, through which anyone who is expert in a particular field of knowledge may gain popularity on social media by following a kind of 'calibrated expertise' (Maddox, 2022) or 'influencer creep' (Bishop, 2022). These scholars argue that influencers of knowledge emerge as a cultural and human movement challenging the populist mistrust of experts. They also explain that these experts creep their work onto social media to be fashionable or popularise themselves. In our

study, we found profiles that are naturally knowledgeable about a specific educational topic – e.g. mathematics, literature, literacy – but not exclusively dedicated to curating information or gaining popularity. In other words, teachers of TikTok hold work status in a globally known area such as education which does not demand attention or popularity. To this end, we need to understand micro-celebrity from earliest studies as a practice adoption (Marwick, 2018), as a logic/ethos (Abidin, 2018), and as labour (Duffy, 2016). The 'TeachTok' culture points towards the first micro-celebrification adoption strategy beyond logical creep processes or the micro-celebrity as a profession. Teachers do not appear to pursue micro-celebrity – in fact, some of them made fun of such profiles. Much of the content shared by these teachers focused on showing fun experiences, a human side and the struggles of education, challenging stereotypes that depend on the inner workings of educational institutions – e.g. teachers do not listen to students, or teachers work poorly and take too many leaves. In the examples we examined, teachers of TikTok were keen to illustrate what bureaucratic issues bothered them, what practices of other colleagues they found inappropriate or excellent, what they work with their students to ensure their future success, or what motivates them to continue teaching. This means that they use TikTok as a means of expressing their adventures and misadventures with education and all users involved. Thus, their goal does not seem to be branding or gaining popularity, but to share experiences and insider knowledge about their profession with peers, families and students from all over the world. This micro-celebrification process can influence on teachers' relationships with students. The peer-to-peer interactions we observed seem to facilitate fun educational experiences inside and outside the classroom. However, such publicly exposed practices potentially can generate negative outcomes. For instance, some teachers showed how they grade their exams using stamps. These kinds of videos were removed because the students alerted their families, and their families notified the school that the teacher was posting his or her grade on TikTok. Although the student's name did not appear, through the

handwriting they were able to identify what their exam was, often exposing failing grades that they were not proud of. Once the school received the complaint from the families, teachers were forced to restrict their activities on the platform. Other teachers mentioned that they were not allowed to show the facilities of their school, or not to mention where they worked to prevent visits from followers. Hence, we must understand that this micro-celebrity adoption can directly affect the professional development of the teacher as well as the educational progress of the students.

Notably, these practices occurred primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may be impacting teachers' work and lives, and their use of TikTok in the context where education was increasingly encroaching into personal, domestic lives through home-based learning. As a result, teachers appeared to be more willing to adopt micro-celebrification venues such as TikTok (Literat, 2021), which is a relatively easy platform to navigate, and whose affordances are not dependent on the need to have extensive knowledge of video production and editing. Nevertheless, as we have observed throughout the case studies, creativity and content management on the platform requires a significant amount of invisible labour (Abidin, 2016) to increase popularity on TikTok. This entails the fact that not all teachers who love their work (Duffy, 2016) are equally likely to access and work with the platform. Whether in a child, teenager or youth context, teachers faced an imperative educational pause, which forced them to accommodate new learning and leisure practices in digital environments. As we have discussed, they limit their activities to share experiences and insider knowledge about education instead of build fame. We found it particularly interesting that the differences between the English- and Spanish-speaking TikTokers were not significant. All case studies appeared to focus their content on timely trends that occurred natively in the platform itself, regardless of language or context. What really mattered in this 'TeachTok' subculture was the educational levels they were targeting, which usually guided the types of

content deployed in their videos. Thus, we encourage future research to draw on a deeper perspective on the teachers' motivations, who have pursued or experienced the micro-celebrification process in their foray into using digital technologies to deliver education services.

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