Teachers of TikTok: Glimpses and gestures in the performance of professional identity

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Abstract:
During a tumultuous period marked by a global pandemic, forced lockdowns, and educational institutions going ‘digital by default’, TikTok has emerged as a key platform for teachers to connect and share their experiences. These digital practices have been widely celebrated for providing teachers with an outlet during a challenging time, though little is known about the particulars of TikTok’s appeal among teachers and their followers. This article focuses on a teacher from South Australia, ‘Mr Luke’, whose upbeat TikTok videos capturing ‘#teacherlife’ have seen him grow a significant following. Drawing on interviews with Mr Luke and an Australian pre-service teacher who follows him, we consider their thoughts on TikTok and its relationship to professional practice. We identify key factors that have enabled TikTok’s popularity among educators, with implications for both teacher education and social media scholarship.

Keywords: teacher practice, TikTok, social media, teacherpreneurs, professional identity, influencers
Introduction

“I got into TikTok originally from my teenage cousin, who I think wanted me to do a dance or something, and I was like ‘what is this TikTok business, what are you talking about?’ and she showed me and I was like ‘ok – I kind of understand how this could be like a good little timewaster’, so I downloaded it with no real intent to create anything, just … thought like I’m gonna log in but not post and just watch. But then watching I suddenly thought ‘actually, this looks kind of fun, why not? Like what’s the worst that could happen? Someone says “you’re too old for this, get off!”’? And I was like “yeah, maybe!”. So I tried it and really enjoyed it, still really enjoy, and so those relationships and everything that’s happened from there have just happened by themselves and I’m just super thankful” (Mr Luke, interview, 18/3/2021)

TikTok’s growing popularity during the global pandemic is no more evident than in its enthusiastic uptake among teachers, many of whom were forced online as their main mode of teaching and connecting. Teachers of TikTok (using hashtags such as #teachertiktok, #teachersoftiktok, #teachertok, #teacherlife, #teacherproblems) received significant media attention which celebrated the innovative ways that teachers were ‘making do’, giving the public insights into the previously closed-off world of the classroom (Nierenberg and Pasick, 2020; [redacted], 2020). However, scholars working at the intersection of social media and education are yet to examine the specifics and nuances of the teaching identities and practices that are crafted on TikTok. As such, this article focuses on the perspectives of and reception to TikTok teacher, ‘Mr Luke’, a 30-year-old primary school teacher from South Australia who has regularly utilised TikTok’s capabilities since late-2019. Most of Mr Luke’s TikTok videos are recorded in his classroom (sans students) and often involve him excitedly sharing an anecdote from a conversation with a student or his reflections on what it means to be a teacher. As an early adopter of the platform, he has accrued over 600,000 followers and over

1 TikTok handle: @iam.mrluke
2 A selection of Mr Luke’s TikTok videos can be viewed on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEHpoShiZM0
16 million likes for his verified\(^3\) account and short clips, as well as an invited appearance on Australian network television (*Studio Ten*, 19 March 2021). Most of his posted videos, which typically receive anywhere between a few thousand likes to hundreds of thousands of likes, are set to TikTok-trending pop music and audio clips and involve him enthusiastically dancing and jumping around his empty classroom. Mr Luke also reposts his TikTok videos on his Instagram account (@iam.mrluke) to over 13,000 followers, reinforcing his status as a TikTok creator even on a different platform.

In this article we draw on qualitative data from interviews with Mr Luke about his use of TikTok, as well as an interview with ‘Jess’, an Australian pre-service\(^4\) teacher who has followed Mr Luke’s growth on TikTok since early 2020. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger ongoing study focused on teachers’ emerging cultural practices on TikTok. Of course, TikTok is not the first social media app to appeal to teachers like Mr Luke and Jess. Teacher TikTok reflects a broader growth in the number of teachers using social media platforms (Greenhow et al, 2020) as well as websites including Teachers Pay Teachers, to enhance their professional work and reach. Known as ‘teacher influencers’, ‘teacherpreneurs’ or ‘edupreneurs’, these teachers use social media to craft and promote a particular professional identity, often teaming up with companies to support their work, starting their own education resource businesses, and accruing a significant following of fellow teachers, students, and members of the public (Carpenter et al., 2020; Shelton and Archambault, 2019). While some view the increased visibility of teachers online as a form of innovative leadership built on mutually-beneficial commercial relationships (Shelton and Archambault, 2019), others contend that such practices may intensify neoliberal competition

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\(^3\) A verified TikTok account is marked by a badge, a blue circle with a white tick next to a creator’s name, and confirms the authenticity of a user’s identity, akin to Twitter verification.

\(^4\) In Australia, a ‘pre-service’ teacher (PST) is training to become a qualified teacher and undertakes university study and ‘on the job’ school-based training with supervision from experienced teachers.
between educators who have the means to create a marketable image and are able to navigate personal and professional boundaries online (Pittard, 2017).

This article is not concerned with placing judgement on TikTok as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for teachers. Instead, we position our analysis within the growing interest in the evolving relationship between teachers and social media, shedding light on the unique dimensions and elements of TikTok that have enabled its rising popularity among current and aspiring teachers. We are interested in how the platform practices, possibilities, and cultures shape and make visible particular versions of the teaching profession. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of TikTok for the professional identity and practices of teachers.

**Review of relevant literature**

Informing this article are three key bodies of literature: education technology literature on teachers’ use of social media and digital communities; the emerging digital media literature on TikTok’s unique features, users, and cultures; and the literature on social media influencers and content producers and notions of ‘authenticity’, ‘relatability’, and ‘intimacy’.

**Teachers’ use of social media**

The literature on teachers’ use of social media tends to focus on Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest, acknowledging that the use of each platform, and online interaction more broadly creates both benefits and challenges. Much of this English-language literature focuses on teacher experiences in the Global North. This reflects not only popularised ideas about teacher identities and expectations (often in US and UK contexts), but also evolving concerns about the nature and purpose of education and schooling in the twenty-first century and the changing role of digital and media technologies both in and outside of the classroom (Selwyn and Heffernan, 2021). Emphasis is often placed on how social media platforms afford
teachers ever-evolving opportunities to build identities and communities (Kimmons and Veletsianos, 2014; Lundin et al., 2017; Rosell-Aquilar, 2018; Brickner, 2016; Won Hur and Brush, 2014). Brickner (2016), for example, notes that social media affords opportunities for the development of identities that teachers’ day-to-day roles may not traditionally provide space for, such as the teacher as an activist or political agent.

Many authors also discuss the tensions that arise for teachers when navigating the development and maintenance of both personal and professional identities online (Carpenter et al., 2019; Fox and Bird, 2015; Hart and Steinbrecher, 2011; Thunman and Persson, 2017). Fox and Bird (2015) note that teachers occupy a unique space in that their use of social media is often subject to public critique, yet they also face pressure from colleagues to connect online. Perhaps for this reason, Carpenter and colleagues (2019) found that teachers’ Twitter accounts had a largely professional focus, with very little disclosure of personal information. Teachers’ awareness of this tension is captured by the concept of “imagined surveillance”, where Duffy and Chan (2019) found that the perception of current or future surveillance led university students to ‘filter’ how they portrayed themselves online. For teachers, this surveillance might not be so imagined, with schools often enforcing social media policies that fail to acknowledge teachers’ rights to a personal life, and Australian privacy and freedom of speech laws offering little protection (Noakes and Hook, 2020).

Despite these challenges, teachers continue to cultivate identities online, in part due to the resulting membership in digital communities that benefit both pre-service and experienced teachers (Carpenter et al., 2020; Carpenter and Krutka, 2014; Franks and Krause, 2017; Hart and Steinbrecher, 2011; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). Won Hur and Brush (2014) elucidate five reasons for K-12 teachers’ participation in online communities: sharing emotions, utilising the advantage of online environments (such as raising issues teachers felt unsafe
raising in their schools), combating teacher isolation, exploring new ideas, and experiencing a sense of camaraderie. Similarly, Carpenter and colleagues (2020) found that education-related Twitter hashtags facilitated connections between teachers with shared interests who, owing to geographical location, may have never met in person.

Due to its relatively recent emergence, TikTok’s affordances are yet to be examined in the literature on education and social media use, except for recent pieces on student engagement via TikTok (Pavlik, 2020, Literat, 2021). Literat (2021) drew on a large-scale thematic analysis of TikTok videos from March 2020 to examine how young people experienced the shift to online learning during the pandemic. She found that in addition to students portraying online learning as overwhelming and demotivating, their videos communicated a desire for more support, empathy, and authenticity from teachers. Literat identified a recurring theme among young people’s TikTok videos that highlighted the disconnect between teachers’ rhetoric about care and concern for student wellbeing and a perceived increase in academic expectations. As the text overlaid on one young person’s TikTok dance video declared: “teachers after saying ‘i know this is a stressful time’ eventhough [sic] THEY are the stress”.

**TikTok cultures and affordances**

The emerging scholarship on TikTok examines the platform from a variety of angles, including a focus on the behaviour, motivations, and personality traits of TikTok users (Omar and Wang, 2020; Kumar and Prabha, 2019: Wang, 2020); TikTok’s role in disseminating scientific and public health messaging (Hayes et al., 2020; Basch et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2021), and the growth of (sub)cultures and celebrities on TikTok (Abidin, 2021; Mackenzie and Nicholas, 2020; Kennedy, 2020; Su et al., 2020). As with other social media platforms, TikTok has become a space where new understandings of professional communication are shaped and contested (Allgaier 2013).
TikTok’s communicative affordances (and growing popularity) have gained increased scholarly attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in an ethnographic study of health professionals’ use of TikTok, Southerton (2021) explores the ways that medical workers create a sense of ‘closeness’ with their audiences. In her analyses of posts ranging from practical medical tips, to dark humor, to reflections of everyday life on COVID wards, Southerton observes the ways that medical workers deploy TikTok’s generic tropes to generate a sense of professional identity grounded in shared affect and experience.

Abidin (2021) observes that unlike Instagram and YouTube, which favour influencers with what Abidin terms a ‘coherent persona’ or personal brand, TikTok’s algorithmic curation practices promote a different approach. Consequently, Abidin suggests that “most TikTok users strive to have individual posts accumulate ‘engagements’ in the form of views, comments, and shares, as encouraged by TikTok’s culture of aiming to be picked up for and catalogued by the For You Page” (2021, np). The ‘Follow’ tab allows users to search and follow specific accounts, but also invites them to discover new content via curated lists of trending hashtags (such as #HomeCook), encouraging TikTok influencers to adopt memes or trends, or deploy trending hashtags to court algorithmic popularity. These features mean that TikTok can be seen to privilege ‘post-based virality’ over persona-based fame; with audio and editing preferred over images and text (Abidin 2021).

Drawing on Goldhaber (1997, 2006), Abidin highlights TikTok’s key attention economies in terms of “new realities of information overload” (Abidin, 2021) that involve “paying, receiving, and seeking … the attention of other human beings” (Goldhaber, 2006, cited in Abidin, 2021). In online environments, users are presented with excessive volumes of information so those who generate and circulate online information cannot presume to attract the attention of their desired audiences. In information-rich environments such as TikTok,
attention has become a ‘scarce resource’. Consequently, Goldhaber argues, those seeking to generate economic or reputational value in online environments must first understand how to attract (and retain) attention. Importantly, Goldhaber emphasises that attention should not be understood simply as a conduit to generating ‘real’ wealth but as having value in and of itself.

TikTok’s algorithms (and the short duration of TikTok clips, with some only lasting a few seconds) privilege those who can gain attention through visual performance and gesture. This is unsurprising, given that TikTok draws on the cultures of use and design features of two other apps – Musical.ly and Douyin – which initially rose to popularity as ‘creative platforms’ for creating and sharing highly gestural dance and lip-sync performances (Rettberg, 2017, Savic and Albury, 2019). Abidin’s (2016, 2021) concept of ‘visibility labour’ is useful here, as it describes the sort of “self-posturing and the curation of self-presentations to be ‘noticeable and positively prominent’ among viewers” (2021: 85) that is central to the algorithmic success of TikTok teachers.

**Social media authenticity and relatability**

Building on our research examining the social media practices of health influencers ([redacted] 2021), it is useful to recognise social media research that explores the cultivation of perceived ‘authenticity’ and how this produces relatability and directs attention on and between platforms. Gaining attention within ‘attention economies’ partly relies on influencers, entrepreneurs, educators and other users generating authenticity through their media practices, or rather a *perception* of authenticity (Abidin, 2017, King-O’Riain, 2016). Authenticity is produced through different strategies and, in turn, followers make judgments about how successful these mediated practices are in cultivating, or performing, authenticity (Tolson, 2010). As one example of a strategy, amateurism and producing less-than-perfect or unprofessional media content conveys a *sense* of unfiltered and in-the-moment authenticity;
what Abidin (2017: 1) describes as a form of “calibrated amateurism” that is “a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur”. This does not suggest that gaining attention on social media requires lies and falsification, just that the question of whether a short ‘amateur’ video is professionally created is irrelevant; authenticity is rather “more of a performative ecology and parasocial strategy with its own bona fide genre and self-presentation elements” (Abidin, 2018: 91).

Not only do influencers and other creators direct attention towards commercial, cultural or social goals (e.g. promoting a product or changing discourse about social problems), they potentially serve a pedagogical role (e.g. Byron, 2021). Elsewhere, we have described this “influencer pedagogy” and explained how authenticity underpins users’ capacity as popular educators ([redacted], 2021). Teacher content creators and influencers on social media doubly demonstrate the “authenticity binds” that Duffy and Hund (2019: 4996) describe of social media influencers and other women who must negotiate normative ideas of gender and accusations of “too real,” and, alternatively, as being “not real enough.” For teachers, the “authenticity bind” is not only a challenge for their social media engagement but reflected in their classroom practice where being authentic requires balancing ‘being themselves’ while also modifying or hiding aspects of their identity that put student or community engagement at risk or may not be personally desired (e.g. calls for queer teachers to ‘come out’; Russell, 2010).

Most recently, the global impact of COVID-19 has also informed the practices of social media influencers, whereby many influencers have strategically ‘pivoted’ to respond to uncertain times and the changing priorities of their followers (Archer et al., 2021). Through the lens of ‘disaster capitalism’, Archer and colleagues (2021: 108) argue that influencers
have “demonstrated their ability to exploit the public’s disorientation by offering a much-needed source of escapism”, from content designed to entertain to content designed to provide (mis)information.

**Background to the study: teaching (and TikToking) in Australia**

Having informally followed various teachers’ accounts and teaching related hashtags on TikTok in 2019, we observed the growing number of related media reports celebrating teachers on the platform ([redacted], 2020) and discussing the relationship between TikTok and education (e.g. Iqbal, 2020, ABC News, 2020, Moore, 2020). We recognised TikTok as likely affording teachers the opportunity to capture and playfully reflect on the frustrations, excitement, and even monotony of their teaching practices; work that is often otherwise ‘invisible’ and unglorified. We also wondered whether TikTok and its platform affordances might in turn be shaping practice and fostering new teaching cultures/subcultures. As news reporting on TikTok teachers during the pandemic intensified, we became more curious about whether the platform might also be changing and possibly improving public perceptions of the profession.

As researchers who teach in or have contributed to initial teacher education (ITE) programs in Australia, we have long grappled with the role of formal teacher education and its relationship with other sources of professional knowledge. Pre-service and in-service teachers have expressed to us the lack of ‘on the job skills’, often drawing a binary between what they see as valuable ‘real world’ professional experience and the seemingly inconsequential or purely ‘theoretical’ knowledge emphasised at university. This mirrors debates in the literature (e.g. Hodson, Smith and Brown, 2012) and national ministerial concern (AITSL, 2014) about the purposes of ITE and school-based experience, with ITE framed as favouring ‘episteme’ (theoretical knowledge) over ‘phronesis’ (practical knowledge). Although we maintain the
need to move beyond a false dichotomy of theory/practice, we also do not wish to dismiss these criticisms of ITE and how informal professional networks often fill a gap in sharing advice and resources from/for those at the ‘chalk face’ (Greenhow and Lewin, 2016).

Debates about ITE and teacher readiness tend to emphasise the role of professional placement in ITE, models of ‘on the job’ training, or successful university-school partnerships. These debates rarely engage with the aforementioned literature on the role of formal/informal teacher learning on social media (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018).

Subsequently, our article considers how TikTok mediates informal learning of teaching knowledge, skills, and perceptions of the profession. This is particularly pertinent in the current Australian context where there are increasing concerns about the recruitment and retention of teachers, as well as teacher burnout and growing teacher shortages (Rajendran, Watt and Richardson, 2020).

**Research questions, participants, and methods**

Informed by the literature and context above, the research questions guiding our study were:

a) What sort of teacher-related content do pre-service and in-service teachers create and/or engage with on TikTok?

b) What is the specific appeal of TikTok among teachers in terms of the platform’s alignments with professional practices, identities, and cultures?

c) What are the effects of these engagements with TikTok in terms of perceptions of the profession and the implications for initial teacher education?

Exploring these questions, this article focuses on two TikTok users from Australia who speak to related but different examples of teacher engagement on TikTok: Mr Luke, a practising primary school teacher and energetic TikTok content creator, and Jess, a pre-service teacher...
who primarily uses social media such as TikTok to gain insights into the profession from others, including Mr Luke.

We first came across Mr Luke via his profile on TikTok in 2019 when exploring the hashtag #teaching in search of ‘teacher influencers’. As mentioned in the introduction, Mr Luke was somewhat of an obvious choice as a potential participant for this study, as one of the first Australian teacher content creators with a substantial following and, as of 2021, remains the Australian teacher with the greatest number of followers and engagements on TikTok. In 2019 he also appeared in a short interview as part of a YouTube teacher interview series, ‘Real Talks’, created by PSTs at one of the authors’ institutions and speaking to their desire for practical insights from ‘real’ teachers, especially as many of their professional placements moved online due to the pandemic.

The PST who interviewed Mr Luke for the YouTube series, Jess, also happened to be a former student of the first author. Noting Jess’ clear interest in Mr Luke and the role of social media in the teaching profession more generally, she appeared to the authors as a clear potential interviewee for this study. When approached for an interview, Jess was beginning her final year of a teacher education course at [redacted]. In addition to her formal training and recent interest in TikTok, she participated in several online spaces to connect with pre-service and practising teachers, sharing resources on everything from behaviour management strategies to teacher wellbeing and mental health advice. These spaces included teaching communities on Facebook, Twitter, and reddit (specifically a subreddit called ‘Teachers in Australia’) and she followed several teachers on Instagram. Somewhat ironically, the only major social media platform she was not using for professional development was the intentionally ‘professional’ platform, LinkedIn, because she didn’t see herself as a “proper
teacher yet”. Though Jess followed ‘teacher influencer’ types across social media, she described Mr Luke as “definitely the most prominent one in Australia”.

Following ethics approval for a larger project to examine pre-service teachers and teachers' use of TikTok, we sought to interview both Mr Luke and Jess for a more in-depth examination of teachers’ use of TikTok that would account for both those teachers primarily creating content and those engaging with the content. We invited Mr Luke and Jess to take part in separate semi-structured interviews that went for an hour and took place over recorded Zoom meetings in early 2021. Audio recordings were then transcribed and de-identified by one of the authors. Both were asked questions about their experiences of TikTok, what appealed to them about the platform, and what they saw as the potential affects, as well as general questions about their thoughts on the teaching profession.

The transcripts were coded for recurring themes that resonated, extended upon, or even challenged existing prominent discussions and concepts in the literature, as well as highlighting moments where Mr Luke and Jess had similar or differing thoughts on the same phenomenon. We also drew on examples of content from Mr Luke’s TikTok account to further understand the platform affordances as well as teaching themes and tensions.

**Findings**

“I wasn’t on TikTok before the pandemic. I really only got into it after that. I saw a lot more TikToks on Facebook and stuff, and Twitter, and going around where there’s a kind of ecosystem to the internet with the trickle-down effect of videos … TikTok has kind of taken the top spot, where all the TikToks are trickling down to Facebook, Instagram, reddit … It’s kind of the content king at the moment” (Jess, interview, 23/2/2021)

Our analysis begins by examining what content is shared by teachers in TikTok videos, especially the performance of teaching skills and strategies, and why their practices appeal to
aspiring teachers like Jess. We then explore the notion of attention economies as they relate to how the practices circulate. Finally, we explore the potential effects of these online communities and the role of these relationships on teachers’ professional identities and teacher education more broadly.

**Teaching (and TikTok) as a performance**

“I think education itself, and teachers, we are constant performers, that’s our job, to perform in front of kids. We obviously teach them, but we are actors in a way, because we do want to engage our kids. No one wants to, gone are the days where you literally just stand at the front of the classroom talking, no one likes that. So yeah, I think we are entertainers in a way, so I guess that transference over to TikTok is pretty similar” (Mr Luke, interview, 18/3/2021)

For Mr Luke and Jess, the notion of teachers as performers – involving their expressions, gestures and strong voices – was central to their framing of teachers on TikTok and beyond. Both emphasised teachers sharing positivity with their students (and followers), providing fun, light relief and entertainment through in-the-moment teaching gestures and roleplaying imagined or recent conversations with students and colleagues.

Teachers captured and shared smaller actions and feelings of everyday practice on TikTok. As Jess explained:

“a primary school teacher will have their phone next to their laptop like this [shows] with their Zoom class on and they’ll show you how they use their hands or what voices they use or the gestures they use to help the kids on the screen understand and interact with the teacher cos obviously being at home it’s not as exciting as being in the classroom so those kind of little gestures and actions of how you teach and how you communicate are definitely part of TikTok.”

In relation to Mr Luke, Jess was particularly taken with his positive, energetic performance:
“He has this very punchy voice, big smile, a lot of energy, and that’s what comes across the most in his videos and I think that it’s almost like a boyish excitement so you can definitely see him as a primary school teacher and getting along with kids and I think it is like the personality and like almost the edutainment, like education and entertainment, factor of it.”

Likewise, Mr Luke understood that people followed him on TikTok because he performed being a teacher. TikTok provided him with “like an online version of placement” for pre-service teachers; “they’re getting that kind of eye into a classroom, which again, when I was at uni [that] was the most valuable thing from my study that I took into a classroom.” His performances often provided aspiring teachers with new ideas for their own practice, with many, he explained, sending him comments and messages in gratitude. This was especially welcome for Jess, as “it’s really interesting to see all the comments under these videos of like, ‘I would never have thought to be that clear or use my hands or oh it’s so cool that you think like this’.”

These aspects of teacher preparation were lost in the pandemic as schools moved online, not only for their students but their PSTs too. As Jess shared, TikTok videos were informing her (future) teaching practice and complicating simple calls that digital technology marks the ‘loss’ of the embodied teacher. This view is especially striking given the ‘youthful’ nature of how TikTok is popularly positioned in Australia (i.e. that it is a platform for school kids and not professionals). Jess also saw this as particularly useful for pre-service teachers:

“when you’re a pre-service teacher you’re like, I guess you’re imagining what you’re going to be like in the classroom, its probably been a few years since you were in high school, so you might be going to a different environment, you might have some dissatisfaction, you might not know what you’re doing. I think having visible representation of teachers in their classrooms at this moment, so you have ideas of what to do so you can feel comfortable” (Jess, interview, 23/2/2021)
Further highlighting this sort of professional reassurance that TikTok provided, Jess spoke about TikTok as offering opportunities for “cross-sharing information about how to be better teachers” and she clustered the TikTok teacher videos into two kinds: those meant for fellow teachers and those meant for the general public.

TikTok enables teachers to share their teaching philosophies through short snippets of their everyday moments and interactions. Mr Luke and Jess both described various instances of the way that their teaching philosophy manifests in everyday actions and this is ultimately what they saw as making TikTok videos powerful. TikTok ‘brought to life’ pedagogy in a way that was not perceived as being achieved through formal teacher education. As we will discuss, both were acutely aware of public perceptions of teaching and TikTok’s role in potentially challenging negative ideas about teachers or the profession more broadly.

Tapping into the importance of performance, Jess felt strongly about the need for her teaching philosophy to go beyond rhetoric, arguing “you can’t just get your pedagogical ethos in words”. She distinguished Mr Luke’s TikTok videos from what might be considered appropriate among teaching professionals, saying his videos appealed more to the general public and were “definitely not for teachers”, primarily because the videos were “pretty simple” and didn’t use “teacher jargon”. And yet Jess also recognised his and other TikTok teachers’ videos as offering a certain comfort, reassurance, and relatability for aspiring teachers, stating: “if they [teachers on TikTok] express their fears or the mistakes they’ve made, you can hopefully not make the same mistakes”. Mr Luke’s professional values and willingness to share clearly resonated with Jess’ own philosophy of teaching, suggesting a certain relatability that made him worth following.

“He portrays himself as the primary school teacher everyone always wanted and it’s really cool cos every year, you know, this year he started off with his new class, he showed us him decorating his classroom, he bought everyone these little bumblebee
pins to put on in the classroom and just like sharing his experiences with his students and what they say to him, how he treats them, his philosophies and kind of his pedagogical outlook to education comes through in a lot of those things” (Jess, interview, 23/2/2021)

Mr Luke’s TikTok videos regularly involve his reflections on his teaching philosophy and beliefs. For example, in a video from November 13, 2020, he described his love for his job and students, and how this manifests in his farewell to students at the end of each day:

[Upbeat acoustic guitar pop music playing in background: Rusted Root’s Send Me on My Way] “Hello… so my name is Luke and I teach like little kids [shrugs his shoulders and pinches his fingers bringing his hands close into his body], and like I really love my job, like a lot. And at the end of every day without fail I tell my kids three things, “See you”, “love ya” “bye” … hehe. I recently had someone say: “hey Luke, why do you tell your kids you love them” [with a facial expression of disbelief at being asked the question]. I do this for one reason, because when I was studying to be a teacher at university I had a lecturer tell me that “you know what, you could be the only person on any given day that tells a particular kid that they’re loved and that they are capable”. I mean I think it’s that simple, I want my kids to know that they are loved, I want my kids to know that they’re capable, I want them to know that I’m in their corner, so with that “see you, love you, bye”.

These moments of reflection and insight into practice go beyond the gestures or teaching performances even though, as we explore next, TikTok’s value is often attributed to its attention-grabbing brevity. The capacity for teachers' videos to enable reflexive practice is not undermined, but instead, supported by TikTok’s functionality as users can post a series of videos unpacking a practice or post commentaries on their own and others’ videos (often directly as ‘duets’).
TikTok attention economies: ‘keep it fun, keep it bitey’

TikTok’s user cultures and design features that privilege visual and audio performance expertise, such as short grabs, audio sounds, and repetitive or familiar gestures, neatly align with the desires of PSTs to watch and listen to other teachers’ gestures, voice, tone, language, movement, and presentation to direct student attention and learning. When asked what made TikTok uniquely appealing compared to other social media platforms, Mr Luke highlighted how TikTok’s emphasis on videos, and ‘easability’ with regard to creating videos on the platform, made it far more interactive and engaging than Instagram which was predominantly pictures. He has described his use of social media as a “juggling game” and TikTok in particular as a “really cool”, “engaging”, and “fun” platform. He linked this with perceived wider societal changes in information consumption, stating “these days, we all have a somewhat lower attention span because so much information is coming at us at once so we can’t hold that information for very long”. Such sentiment resonates strongly with Goldhaber’s (1997, 2006) concept of ‘attention economies’.

Throughout Jess’ interview, she stressed the value of watching the minutiae of everyday teaching practice. Prompted by the isolation of the pandemic, she explained social media was “for a lot of us … our only window outside our own homes and into a sort of community”, with TikTok especially “perfect” for teachers due to its “60 second short clips, really ‘bitey’, get a snippet”. These glimpses and good stories were especially welcome during COVID-19:

“TikTok is perfect for [doomscrolling] because you keep scrolling and there’s more content, more content, and I think we were all kind of starved for those kind of feel

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5 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piJkJGFqWeU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piJkJGFqWeU)

6 ‘Doomscrolling’ is typically understood as the practice of scrolling through negative news stories online, even though it results in furthering negative emotions in the reader.
Hartung et al. 2022. Teachers of TikTok. *Media International Australia.*

“Good stories and I feel like those teacher TikToks, all those glimpses into like how teachers were making students’ lives brighter even in such dark times kind of hit home” (Jess, interview, 23/2/2021)

Jess’ desire for glimpses of good teaching, especially during the “dark times” of the pandemic, speak to a broader navigation of the ‘attention economy’ where popular TikTok teachers like Mr Luke can generate content that captures the attention of time-poor teachers looking for ideas and others. Mr Luke’s ability to capture and retain attention is not primarily about generating ‘real’ wealth, though his videos are occasionally sponsored by particular businesses, but rather that the positivity he captures so efficiently has value in and of itself.

*Producing new relationships and communities*

What Mr Luke found most appealing about TikTok, unlike other social media platforms, was how it enabled him to “hold or create new relationships with students” at his school:

“Relationships for me as a teacher are one of my top things that I search for with all my students, so if making funny videos and hoping that people get a laugh every now and then will be able to help kind of build those relationships or sustain them for a longer time rather than just that year when it is that close relationship when they’re in my classroom, then why not?!” (Mr Luke, interview, 18/3/2021)

Mr Luke saw his classroom experiences and interactions with students as providing abundant, often humorous content for TikTok. Even though he recognised his followers were a varied group, he emphasised how TikTok allowed him to build relationships with students, followed by building a network of fellow teachers or trainee teachers. Indeed, at the time of our interview and based on Mr Luke’s review of his own analytical profile, 42% of his followers were from Australia, 23% from the United States, 14% from the United Kingdom, plus a few from Canada and New Zealand. 86% of his followers were female. In addition to current and future teachers, Mr Luke’s followers include many non-teachers and students, the majority of whom he estimated via interview to be in their 20s and 30s.
As an Australian woman in her 20s, Jess aligns with Mr Luke’s most common demographic. She also saw TikTok as helping to foster a sense of community for PSTs where it can otherwise feel like teachers are “just in their own classrooms,” these online communities “kind of makes you feel closer to the profession before you’re even in it”. She saw TikTok’s algorithm as key to fostering this community, where the platform would offer other teaching or education videos to those who had liked or interacted with other teaching content, for instance. By contrast, she saw other social media platforms as requiring much more from the person in order to connect (e.g., knowing the right keywords or names of groups). Ultimately, these TikTok teacher networks provided an easily accessible and engaging form of professional reassurance for both Mr Luke and Jess.

**Teacher production, boundaries and romanticising the labour**

The above analysis suggests teachers’ TikTok videos are understood as reassuring and realistic but also as performances that emphasise particular gestures or affects for TikTok value creation and point to the performative aspect of teacher work. The performative role of the TikTok teacher in Mr Luke and Jess’ accounts is an embodied, relational and ‘authentic’ figure whose physicality is central to their teaching practice. And yet, their practices and engagement with TikTok also involved significant hidden (or potentially romanticised) labour – labour related to maintaining professional/personal boundaries and content production, as well as the less ‘glamorous’ labour of the actual profession.

Both Mr Luke and Jess spoke of the importance of boundaries and the risks involved with being a teacher on TikTok. Mr Luke was quick to mention that he has guidelines for using TikTok in terms of his choice of language and music, aware that his videos are viewed by his students and their parents. Similarly, when asked about the limitations of TikTok, Jess highlighted potential dangers with regards to privacy and maintaining boundaries, “it’s
instilled in all of us from the very start of pre-service teaching, ‘don’t use social media … it’s a bad idea, you’ll lose your job’”.

In terms of the labour involved in his content creation, Mr Luke posts videos (between three and 60 seconds long) several times a week and indicated that in an average week he was spending more than six hours a week recording, editing and uploading the clips and responding to comments. All of the work is completed outside of work time, something which he discussed with his school principal. While Mr Luke explained that he was still quite mystified by the popularity of some of his posts over others, he wanted to post positive and energetic videos that were “interesting” and would “resonate” with people. Consequently, he was selective about the sort of content he shared about teaching. As he put it, “because like how can you make marking twenty-odd maths books into a funny TikTok, I mean what can you do here? What am I working with?” His content production explicitly navigated the tensions between his professional boundaries, making engaging content and working with multiple constraints (e.g., videos after work hours).

When prompted about how TikTok represented the profession, both Mr Luke and Jess acknowledged the potential for TikTok to romanticise the work of teachers, reinforcing stereotypes of the perfect teacher (who is likely white and American, based on the teachers currently gaining a following on TikTok). And yet, while they were both aware of the algorithmic recommendations and potential rabbit holes on TikTok, as well as not fully embracing the notion of being a teacher ‘influencer’, it was ultimately the genuine relationships and communities that they valued the most, partly made possible by tuning in to the algorithmic processes of the platform.

This tension, between videos being authentic but also selective in their representation of teaching, was especially important for Jess. In her view, teacher’s TikTok videos potentially
romanticised the teaching profession at times, comparing it to interior design students watching *The Block* (a home renovation show) and thinking that is what a job in interior design will be like:

“If a lot of people watch TikToks and just see the fun, ‘bitey’ bits of teaching, not the hours of marking or bureaucracy or personal development days or the bad things it might draw a lot of people who might not like it to the career” (Jess, interview, 23/2/2021)

Jess acknowledged that the “hours of marking or bureaucracy or personal development days or the bad things” are often absent from the representation of teaching on TikTok and that this might give a false impression of the profession.

Ultimately, however, TikTok provided both Mr Luke and Jess with a sense of hope and positivity, something that was perhaps not satiated through their formal teacher training or in public perceptions of teaching. As Mr Luke states: “showing everyone that being a teacher actually is wickedly enjoyable and you can have a lot of fun with it and still teach, and still do your job, and your job can be fun and enjoyable. Maybe that’s something that resonates.”

**TikTok teachers: implications and concluding thoughts**

Our purpose in this article has been to highlight the complexities of TikTok and its uptake among current and aspiring teachers. Formally accredited teacher education programs rely on a certain institutional and vocational seriousness which at times creates a distance between what is learnt at university as perceived to be theoretical and distinct from what is practiced and embodied in classrooms. TikTok, unencumbered by the strictures of formal training, has the potential to capture ‘glimpses and gestures’ of a different side to the teaching profession – fun, funny, playful, entertaining, expressive, contagious, dynamic, affecting, etc. TikTok satiates a desire among pre-service teachers to learn directly from observing the minutiae of a
teacher’s ‘authentic’ classroom practice and to occupy a space in which professional frustrations and stuff-ups are not just allowed but are the basis of learning relevance, relatability and entertainment.

The appeal of TikTok among teachers during the current pandemic is significant and there is good reason to believe its popularity will continue beyond the widespread shift to online learning that has resulted from the pandemic. TikTok is simultaneously sharing teachers’ professional practices and shaping them, with potential impacts on the perceptions of the profession, as indicated by Jess and Mr Luke, that deserve closer scrutiny. This scrutiny also needs to consider the accounts of those at the receiving end of teachers’ digital performances: the students. As Literat’s (2021) research suggests, students’ depictions are not always in conversation with the TikTok teachers’ portrayal of their own work. There remain important questions about the role of TikTok in teachers’ professional practice and the future of initial teacher education in an increasingly digital learning landscape.

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