Main Characters in Search of an Audience: How Institutions Used #Learnontiktok to Perform Authenticity

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Abstract
#LearnOnTikTok was a 2020 initiative from the social media company which invited accounts to facilitate audience education during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. As previous digital marketing and storytelling strategies can rarely be successfully transposed from other social media platforms to TikTok, organisations must create (and recreate) their own form of entertaining education. TikTok may become a classroom, but that does not guarantee there will be students. A new form of pedagogy must encompass the affordances, technological and cultural specificities of TikTok to reach, and then retain, the desired audience. Drawing from my own professional experience as a social media manager, I will examine how the materiality of TikTok videos shape a performance-based memetic culture, and how this in turn, transforms the pedagogic relationship between the institution and the audience. Using examples from DuoLingo and Planet Money, I will show how engaging in TikTok's culture in a manner that is read as "authentic" by potential students is fundamental to an institution's performance as "the Main Character", which is essential to their capacity to educate on the social media platform.

Keywords: affordances; autoethnography; branding; memes; pedagogy; social media; TikTok.

Introduction: Social Media Managers and TikTok

Despite persistent jokes about interns running the show, since the mid-00s social media manager roles (and their corresponding teams) have been formalised and standardised. Content does not just appear online. It is created with strategic aims and corresponding key performance indicators. By the time TikTok gained traction in Europe and North America in 2019, social media teams were firmly established within corporate structures.

TikTok began life in China as Musical.ly, a lip-syncing app, in 2014, before being bought by ByteDance and rebranded in 2018 (Leskin, 2020). During that same period social media platforms such as YikYak, kik, Vine, and even the mighty Google+, withered away after being hailed as "the next big thing". Social media managers must choose wisely which platforms are worth investing their time and resources in, especially as the appeal of an emerging app is partially based on a lack of corporate content – including overt advertising, institutional accounts, and sponsored posts. If their audience are using this platform now, are they likely to continue using it in the future? And if they are, do the social media team understand the digital language of the platform – its tone, values, in-jokes, and nuances – to adapt their communications to it?

It is these strategic decisions made by social media managers that structure this ethnographic examination of two institutional accounts which participated in #LearnOnTikTok. #LearnOnTikTok was a $50million fund in the US (and €13 million in Europe) to help facilitate learning during the early wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (TikTok, 2020). TikTok partnered with 800 public figures, NGOs and institutions who were affected by the pandemic. In the UK partners included Cambridge University, English Heritage and Times Higher Education (*ibid.*).

Drawing on my academic background in visual anthropology, I will begin with an anthropological discussion of my professional experience as a social media manager who created informative content for online audiences, and how the dialogical nature of TikTok forced institutions to reconceptualise their approach to branding and education. Using the metaphor of TikTok's "For You Page" as a potential classroom, I will examine materiality of three design features that fundamentally shape TikTok content, thereby creating a culture where not just the

authority but the very ability to teach is preconditioned on viewers (or students) accepting your performance as the teacher (who can also be seen as the "Main Character"). I then explore two #LearnOnTikTok examples of organisations which succeed in this performance, as implied by the high numbers of "likes" and "reach" their content received. Both examples used the shared digital culture between them and their audience to position themselves as the "Main Character" in a manner which was accepted as being "authentic", thereby allowing them to successfully "teach". Finally, I shift from an ethnographic exploration to the pedagogic theories of Freire and hooks, to see what TikTok's affordances can teach us about teaching. It is tempting to suggest the active participation of students/viewers and teacher/institution within TikTok's metaphorical classroom, reconciles Freire's "teacher-student contradiction", where both parties are "simultaneously teachers *and* students" (2014, p.72). However, applying pedagogic theory uncritically to social media platforms ignores the economic reality these digital classrooms are founded on, and in the final section I will examine how the dichotomy of teacher/student is shaped both through the design of TikTok as a potential classroom, and by the overarching capitalist structures which control the platform. Here both students and teachers are TikTok users, and while users make the social media app what it, is they ultimately remain at the disposal of the corporation itself.

A Postcard from My Previous Life, or Seven Years in The Field

From 2014 to 2021 I worked in digital communications for national and international non-profits. For five of those years, I was a social media manager and, at the apex, accountable for an institution's collective online audience of 11 million followers. A large part of my team's role was to create educational content for social media platforms. This content had to be interesting enough to retain people's attention, as well as designed to encourage interaction, which was measured through engagement (Ross, 2019). "Engagement" here is being used as a technical term, defined by social media companies to measure how much time people spend on their platforms interacting with online content via metrics including "comments", "shares", and "likes" (Williams, 2018).

I joined TikTok personally in 2019, and gradually saw institutional accounts appear. TikTok's popularity surged after the COVID-19 pandemic began, with 315 million downloads in Q1 2020 (Leskin, 2020), and from then on I would occasionally be asked by colleagues why I was slow to commit our institution to the platform. In short, I was reluctant because I could not figure out what we could do which would respect both our institutional identity and the cultural norms of the digital space we wished to enter. Being perceived as "authentic" by our online audience was foundational to any attempt to engage in online discourse (as we will see in discussions of meme culture or the trope of being the "Main Character" later in the article). If people felt our content was inauthentic, they would simply not watch or engage with it.

To be considered "authentic" on social media, including and also beyond TikTok, is for your online performance to externally judged as such (Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Cunningham and Charles, 2017; Hendry, Hartung and Welch, 2022; Kreling, Meier and Reinecke, 2022). What's considered authentic is not always an accurate depiction of one's "true" self, "but this doesn't make [it] any less real" (Ross, 2019 p.370). Instead, its performance is based on strategies regarding the specific affordances of social media platforms (Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Gershon, 2010, 2014; Alang, 2016; Ross, 2019), the context and culture of online audience (Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Gershon, 2014; Alang, 2016; Hendry, Hartung and Welch, 2022), and the self-awareness of the person or account posting (Kreling, Meier and Reinecke, 2022). As such, "authenticity" on social media is complex, dynamic, and socially constructed. It changes between platforms and within platforms, based on who is posting, to whom, and to what ends (Gershon, 2014; Ross, 2019). On YouTube, authenticity can be tested in real-time through online interactions in a dialogic relationship between creator and fan base (Cunningham and Charles, 2017). Instagram's emphasis on visual perfection led to some users creating secondary accounts – "finstas" or "fake Instagram" – where a less curated self-presentation was considered more "authentic" in contrast to their primary accounts (Ross, 2019). Some social media professionals, whether influencers or institutions, deliberately shoot amateur-style media to give an impression of spontaneity or rawness that aligns with an external expectation of what "authentic" content looks like, despite the professional work and budget behind it (Hendry, Hartung and Welch, 2022). On TikTok, "authenticity" is a normative standard, promoting self-expression that is read as genuine, original, and coherent with one's identity (Barta and Andalibi, 2021). As on Youtube, users can use the comment section to express disapproval if content is perceived as fake, stolen, or incoherent (*ibid.*).

This article is an autoethnography written not as a content creator or a TikToker, but from the position of a social media strategist: someone who worked in beige conference rooms, agonising over the user journey. I have

explained why a meme is funny to tables full of blank expressions; sat hunched over a corporate iPhone deciding if a heart emoji would suit our tone of voice; hours of my life were spent scrolling through different celebrity profiles debating if they would make a good ambassador. To manage social media for organisations, especially long-established institutions founded in the 19th century as mine was, is to act as a cultural mediator. You must understand the biography of your employer, how their history shaped their current identity, but also where the organisation is headed and who they want with them for the journey. Then you must navigate different levels of institutional sign-off, to interpret that knowledge into something relevant for the internet – and because the internet is so vast and multifaceted, you must understand the precise version of the internet your target audience use, which is often very different to your own version of the internet. I continue my role as a cultural mediator here, as I attempt to translate how TikTok functions as a mechanism for education in the context of institutional communications strategies into an anthropological analysis.

Traditionally, organisations, educational and professional bodies have relatively tight controls on what they can and cannot say. Especially in my old world of non-profits, there are pre-agreed lines and controlled messages from which the social media team is tied, with greater or lesser degrees of sign-off. Due to the strategy that underpins an institution's decision to make educational content, such videos can also be considered branding exercises, and one #LearnOnTikTok post can fulfil these dual purposes simultaneously. Although it is outside the scope of this article to outline the post-structuralist view of branding, previous discussions of characterised it as a one-way process (Baudrillard, 1981), with the those working in advertising acting as cultural brokers, who chose, digest then reinterpret and resell commodity images to construct an audience's desire to buy a particular product or lifestyle (Mazzarella, 2008). The success of this process of translation rests on the ability for these commodity images to resonate with a wider social or affective associations, which are relevant to the audience. In turn the audience's role is limited to whether they buy the product financially, corresponding to if they've conceptually bought into the performance of the commodity images through their branding and advertising (*ibid.*). Social media disrupts this to an extent, broadening the focus from the product and opening a two-way conversation between brands and consumers (Lim, Chung and Weaver, 2012). This conversation exists in a forum separate to the focus groups and market research that advertising agencies would have previously relied on to qualitatively gauge the success of their brand's performance. Now the audience can shape branding in real-time, independent of the brand's involvement, thereby occupying a more complex role (Cunningham and Charles, 2017; Barta and Andalibi, 2021).

I am interested in how this dialogically authored process not only affects how a social media manager approaches branding, via their educational content, but how the mutual reciprocity inherent in the socio-technological materiality of TikTok as a platform reconceptualises what it means to teach, as it transforms the entire relationship between teacher/institution and student/viewer. On TikTok, the student-teacher relationship must be mutually created through engagement goals and measured by pre-defined metrics (Williams, 2018). Success rests on understanding how TikTok's affordances, by which I mean the relational quality of TikTok as an environment that both shapes and restricts users (Bareither, 2019), inform its performative norms, and how to self-present as "the Main Character" in a manner considered "authentic" by the audience of potential students.

#FYP (For You Page): The Technological and Design Factors That Shape TikTok

Design choices are rarely accidental, and as the world of tech start-ups centres on user-experience, no feature makes it to the app without being tested first. TikTok is unique to each user based on their personalised algorithm. Users scroll through a seemingly infinite feed of content, with the choice to watch, engage, or to pass their attention to the next post. This is typical of all social media platforms, yet there are technological factors and affordances inherent in the design of TikTok which inform content and create an immersive environment distinct from other social media platforms. As Foucault (1991) traced how the design of a classroom influenced the people who sat within it, I am curious how the specific design choices interplay with notions of the individual, to shape users on TikTok. I am interested in how these design choices grant the viewer/student the agency to reject the lesson being offered by the content institution/teacher.

A widely discussed feature TikTok is its newsfeed (Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Schellewald, 2021; Smith 2021). In complete contrast to other social media platforms, TikTok does not rely on the user making any active decision to follow an institution's profile to receive their content. Instead, the "For You Page" (or FYP) presents individualised recommended content, based on algorithmically-generated profiles of interest which use data to reinforce existing viewing habits (Schellewald, 2021). There is not space to examine how and why The Algorithm (which I've capitalised to reflect the almost mythic, omnipotent persona it's taken on in the imagination of

TikTok users) makes these decisions, but it's worth noting that it relies on the user's interaction with previous videos, as well as information about their device and location, in addition to how other users have already responded to the same video (Smith, 2021). Videos themselves can be optimised to reach more people, based on factors like the use of hashtags or explicitly asking for likes, and they can be financially promoted to appear on the FYP. But the old assumption that the number of followers an account has directly translates to the amount of people reached does not apply on TikTok (Hootsuite Labs, 2023). Therefore, some traditional digital marketing techniques – such as buying followers or inflating the number of views – no longer work (*ibid.*), forcing accounts with promotional budgets to more "authentic" way to reach their audience through a nuanced understanding of how content works as part of a dialogically-authored process.

Secondly, it's worth noting that Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and LinkedIn are all social networks designed for a computer desktop and adapted for mobile use. Even Instagram, which relies on the ability to shoot footage using your phone, initially forced images to be in a square 4x4 dimension within the rectangular screen of one's smartphone. This allows space for the caption, user handle and other aspects of the newsfeed to appear outside the content itself. It was not until Snapchat that content was formatted to take up the entire screen of a smartphone (Laurent, 2016). This feature was adopted by many as an additional way to view content (for example, Instagram and Facebook's "Stories" feature), but is inherent in the primary experience of watching TikToks. The shape of a TikTok is important as it forces interaction with every single post, even if it's to skip.

The format of how one watches videos on the FYP is significant as one affordance which plays into the notion of community within TikTok – for the duration that video plays, your screen is immersed in the world that video presents. You are unable to see competing content above or below (as you can on Twitter or Facebook's newsfeeds), or recommended videos to the side as you can on YouTube, enabling user multiple cultures which have emerged through interacting with this limit of TikTok (Hutchby, 2001; Bareither, 2019). This immersion is mirrored in the language creators can use to welcome you to their videos, with the trend "you have now reached ___ TikTok". The blank space could be filled with anything from "cottage core TikTok" (predominantly white women enacting their fantasies of rural life), "leftist TikTok" or "rat synth TikTok" (both being exactly as you would imagine; discussions of left-wing political theory and animated rats playing synthesisers, respectively).

Here I would like to contrast with the fabled reaction to Lumiere brothers' 1895 documentary *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, which showed footage of the train driving towards a camera. The audience, quite understandably considering this was one of the first films ever made, supposedly panicked believing the train would physically drive out from the screen and into them (Loiperdinger and Elzer, 2004). There's some dispute over the truth behind this story, but the prevalence of the myth is the thing of interest here (*ibid.*). I'm not suggesting this confusion is shared by TikTok users, but the irony inherent in the tone of any content creator who welcomes you to a video as if it were a physical one could rest on over 120 years of rapid technological development of moving images and how we consume, understand, and relate them to our embodied experience of living in the physical world. Viewed through this lens, scrolling through your FYP becomes an immersive journey. You can decide to accept an invitation, taking a content creator's welcome seriously, and spend the length of their video in their world. Or you can refuse their invitation, with one swipe up and skip to the next immersive invitation.

For organisations looking to educate via TikTok, these two technological factors should inform their approach. If they choose to make TikTok their classroom, they must acknowledge students are not guaranteed. Instead of relying on traditional marketing techniques, and budget, social media managers begin by creating content people choose to spend their time on.

It is the audio-visual nature of TikToks which is the third important design factor: specifically, the auto-playing of video sound, making audio as important as image. This is (or rather, was) unusual for a mobile app. The proliferation of video content on social media began in earnest with Facebook's "pivot to video" in 2016/17, where the company claimed video content was prioritised in the newsfeed's algorithm (Owen, 2018). This led to complete restructuring of media newsrooms to produce more video content to capitalise on both the algorithmically-ranked publication preferences of the platform and the corresponding advertising investment, with advertisers bidding on video content online as opposed to link-based adverts with text and a photograph

(*ibid.*).[1] However, videos on Facebook and Instagram were automatically muted and relied on subtitles, whereas on TikTok videos automatically play with the sound on (with subtitles used to make them more accessible). This carves out of a more complex aural landscape, creating greater audio-visual immersion. It is also through audio that many trends spread (Shane, 2022). This could be a clip of someone talking or a song – for instance Lil Nas X, Doja Cat and Megan Thee Stallion all gained popularity as a result of their music being discovered on TikTok (Rough Trade, 2022) – but the majority of TikTok's memetic content relies on the ability to quickly reuse, recontextualise and reinterpret sound.

By definition memes are a creative and relational process, rather than a digital product. The first use of the term 'meme' was by Richard Dawkins, who stressed the role of "transmission analogous to genes, spread from person to person by copying or imitation" (Shifman, 2013, p. 363). Success, or virality, hinges on recognition and relevance within a specific online community, in order to warrant creative engagement (Yogarajah, 2022). However, in exclusively visual memes (which could be image, text, or images with text on it) users are able to hide behind their creations. In the anonymous world of cryptocurrency, Yogarajah explores how users on 4chan and Reddit use memetic storytelling to make the digital space inhabitable, to the extent that to reveal someone's identity might have you derided as a "*namefag*" (2022). Even in mainstream social media platforms such as Twitter, users' faces are contained to their small avatar (if they choose to upload a picture of their face at all) and their ability to join a meme is based on their creative re-working of pre-existing text. They do not have to reveal their physical appearance – or the gender identity, age, race or ethnicity, disabilities, a physical form implies. As TikTok's memes are filmic in nature there is "a much stronger emphasis on the embodied and performative aspects of communication" (Schellewald, 2021, p.1447). In order to participate users must reveal part of themselves – and because presenting yourself to the camera is the norm on TikTok, remaining out of view becomes a revealing choice, complicating anonymity and any expectations remaining anonymous affords the user (Barta and Andalibi, 2021). Unlike on other social media platforms, on TikTok to meme is to make editorial decisions about how to present ourselves in public. Some are the routine decisions Goffman (1990) describes in his "dramaturgical model of social life" – like actors preparing for a performance, we all make decisions about how we present ourselves as part of everyday life, via what we wear, how we style and how carry ourselves. In addition to this prerequisite of self-presentation, TikTok also introduces another set of decisions previously reserved for the film director, for instance where to film (in your home or another location?), how to light it (rely on natural light or invest in a ring light?), where to place the camera (hand-held or tripod? Close up? Which angle? To use the front or back camera on your smartphone?). It is because the memetic content is audio-based, to participate the user is cast into the active roles of both creative director and performer. As with visual memes, audio-based memes opens the door for creative participation, with users adapting, recreating and rearranging the originals (Phillips and Milner, 2017; Yogarajah, 2022). This could be remixing the audio – for instance 2021's many interpretations of the Berries and Cream jingle – or a joining an audio trend by adding your own visual content (Shane, 2022). The latter is the ur-content of Tiktok: taking part in a dance trend; lip-syncing; or overlaying an audio a clip with videos from your life to create a montage sequence (*ibid.*).

This experience is distinct from the more passive role of viewer, as might be presumed on YouTube and Facebook videos, to an immersed and active audience member and potential co-creator on TikTok. Of course, users also upload their own videos on YouTube and Facebook, but the ability to do so is not inherent in every design of how content is viewed on these platforms. In contrast, TikTok features the title and artist listing along the bottom of the phone's screen while a video plays. Clicking on this takes you to a page collating all other TikToks using the same sound, and prominently features a button to allow you to create your own content with this audio track (*ibid.*). Whereas the buttons on YouTube and Facebook videos limits the viewer to liking, sharing, commenting, or skipping to the next post.

The emphasis on the embodied aspects of memetic communication (which spreads through audio tracks) joins the previous two design choices in creating unique challenges for the social media manager trying to make TikTok their organisation's classroom. Like all other creators, they must self-present, a very literal interpretation of how teaching is a performative act (hooks, 2014). In self-presenting they are positioned in the role of the Main Character. The Main Character is a trope of TikTok, encompassing the presentation, language and attitude of someone who believes their life forms a central narrative arc for others to either observe or interact with (both as a viewer through the digital interface of TikTok, or as a supporting cast member, such as a friend, bystander or

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[1] It was later revealed that the metric Facebook used to estimate video engagement massively overestimated the amount of time spent watching videos, by up to 900%. The company paid $400 million to settle a lawsuit with advertisers in 2019, however the cuts to editorial jobs had already been made.

parent, in the physical world). Some psychologists suggest this derives from an innately human desire for recognition and validation, which combined with technological evolution, allows for "immediate and wide-spread self-promotion" (Ramirez, 2022), and so such performances can be seen as an inevitable by-product of engaging with a camera to an audience. Yet, it can also be self-conscious and deliberate, for instance joining the trend in which people dramatically walk through their neighbourhoods (to, and I quote, "remind everyone in this neighbourhood, that I'm the main character in this neighbourhood"). Even if this is being done ironically, Main Character culture is so pervasive on TikTok the hashtag #MainCharacter had over 7.6 billion views by the end of 2022 – roughly the equivalent of every active TikTok account viewing it seven times.

It is not enough to understand TikTok's affordances theoretically. To compete for attention in an endless stream of Main Characters the social media manager must have a way to transform themselves (or a colleague, or, as we shall see, a mascot) into another Main Character.[2] On TikTok "authenticity" is key in the act of online self-presentation, and its performance is socially constructed to the specific norms of the platform (Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Gilpin, Palazzolo and Brody, 2010). A performance rests on the audience's recognition and evaluation of its authenticity, which in turn informs how an authentic self is performed online. Where the collaborative nature of self-presentation goes beyond Goffman's idea of everyday "impression management" (1990), which we use to navigate various social settings or interactions in a generally accepted way, or previous sociological theories of symbolic interactionism (Marwick and boyd, 2011), is that online the success of your performance can be explicitly measured. Comments, likes, views and translated into key performance indicators (no pun intended). These metrics have algorithmic consequences, affecting how many people see your content which directly impact a potential teacher's ability to connect with their potential students. The less successful your performance is, the less likes, comments and shares your content will receive (Ross, 2019), and the greater the chances of The Algorithm prioritising other videos on the FYP at your expense. This is the dialogical process of successful branding playing out in real time. To put it another way: to be authentic you must be recognised as being authentic, and to be seen on the FYP, amongst the many other Main Characters, you must be authentic.

With these socio-technological factors in mind, we will now examine how two #LearnOnTikTok partners DuoLingo and Planet Money managed to translate their institution's personas into successful performances of Main Characters, in a way that was widely viewed as being authentic, as measured in mass-reach and engagement with their videos.

## DuoLingo's Owl as The Main Character: Lean into The Meme

DuoLingo's ability to perform authenticity effectively relies on something outside the control of their social media team: their mascot became a meme before TikTok even existed. DuoLingo is a free language learning app which aims to give "everyone access to a private tutor experience" through gamification (DuoLingo, 2022). Their TikTok account initially began as a #LearnOnTikTok partner, and posted videos based on teaching slang and vocabulary in various languages. Engagement on the account was respectable – with TikToks garnering between 30,000 and 300,000 views. From mid 2021 there was a change in tone in the TikToks: content was produced in-house, mainly by Zaria Parvez their Social Media Co-ordinator, and featured their mascot, a green owl called Duo (Gahan, 2021; Haasch, 2021; McCoy, 2021). The first video in this new style, showing Duo menacingly looming over an employee who lip-syncs to the popular audio "how am I supposed to live, laugh, love in these conditions?", has been viewed over 3.4 million times. Other popular TikToks include Duo twerking on a desk (8 million views), Duo walking down some stairs a cheering crowd with the text "when all you can say in French is bonjour" (11 million views) and Duo sliding down sadly behind a glass door with the text "when you use Google Translate instead of actually learning a language" (over 20 million views).

By positioning their mascot as the star of their TikToks, DuoLingo moved away from self-presenting with the purpose of educating in an entertaining way, towards performing for the sake of demonstrating you understand TikTok's norms and culture. Here Parvez has been able to achieve a seemingly contradictory feat: performing as a corporate account she has been able to join memetic culture, a culture which "avoid[s] institutional conversation" (Yogarajah, 2022), in a way which is read as authentic by its audience. Parvez's success relies on the specific history of the Duo the owl and its digital persona. Often popping up with notifications for users to do their language practice, Duo was memed in 2017 with a gun in its hand. Variations of this slightly menacing

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[2] If that isn't possible, an alternative career plan is to quit the industry altogether and write obscure academic articles analysing this phenomenon.

or disproportionately aggressive education advocate have continued for years (Haasch, 2021), putting DuoLingo in an unusual situation for a company: their mascot's cultural cachet rests on a personality which was created informally, outside of their branding guidelines or corporate brainstorming. By leaning into the meme and through reinterpreting trending audio sounds with Duo as the Main Character, Pavrez reinvents and updates this collaboratively created persona in a format specific to TikTok. It is no coincidence Duo is often seen chasing staff around the office; in battles with the legal team and declaring themselves CEO. In emphasising Duo's disregard for rules and capacity for excess, Duo is being performed authentically, as defined by the anonymous digital community that created Duo's persona before TikTok even launched. The contradiction of a corporation making a performance of such unruliness is negated, because Duo's identity does not belong exclusively to DuoLingo. Here the mascot becomes the message. Duo is shared, a memetic "cultural unit" (Dawkins, cited in Schifman, 2013) which exists because it spreads from person to person, via collaboration and expansion on a shared understanding of a concept.
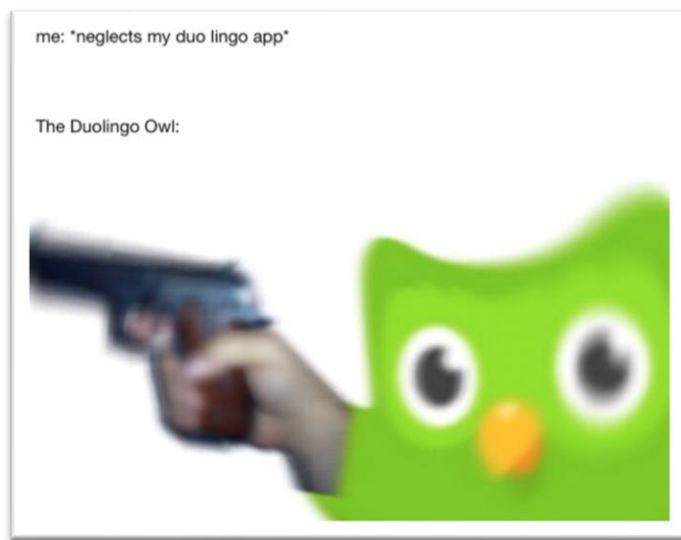
Image 1: Duolingo meme. Caption reads 'me: *neglects my duo lingo app*. The Duolingo Owl:' followed by image of Duolingo Owl holding a gun (knightcore, 2017).

Rather than seeing this as a failure in using TikTok as a mechanism to educate, it might be worth taking a step back and seeing how TikTok fits in DuoLingo's broader digital strategy. In making sure their videos "aren't to sell anything" (Parvez, 2021), DuoLingo maintain the balancing act of being read as an authentic corporation in a culture which "avoid[s] institutional conversation" (Yogarajah, 2022) while simultaneously piquing interest with their target audience. DuoLingo's TikToks are communicative forms, memetic cultural units and one part of a marketing funnel which directs their Gen Z audience towards the product. By not trying to sell DuoLingo explicitly, but in repeatedly performing and reinventing a connection potential students affirm as authentic, "people become curious on their own about who you are and what you offer" (Parvez, 2021).

Balancing the Main Character with The Message: Planet Money

Unlike DuoLingo, Planet Money did not have an easily recognisable and chaotic memetic cultural unit that they could hinge their TikTok content on, instead they had to create a Main Character whose performance continued to centre their educational content.

Planet Money is an NPR podcast which aims to "find creative, entertaining ways to make sense of the big, complicated forces that move our economy" (Planet Money, 2010). In May 2020 they were approach by TikTok and given a grant to enable them to make content as part of their #LearnOnTikTok initiative. They hired Jack Corbett, a video production assistant to work on TikTok full time (Holtermann, 2022). Corbett's TikTok strategy began with research, scrolling "from midnight until 5am" to build an authentic understanding of how TikTok functions as "it's not [like] other platforms" (Corbett, 2020). This has informed his approach to creating video content, and Corbett claims "respect[ing] the platform" is the key to his success (*ibid.*). Their TikTok account is an extension of Planet Money's mission to educate through entertainment, albeit now using a distinct visual style. Some of their most popular videos include explainers on inflation (over 1.7 million views), the impacts of legalising marijuana (over 2 million views) and NFTs (over 3 million views).

As the main presenter Corbett is the face of Planet Money – Main Character-ising himself to the extent that the *New York Times* did a piece on him personally, rather than Planet Money (Holtermann, 2022). Corbett's

performances are dry, ironic, and often in contrast to the absurdist turns the explainers take. However, unlike DuoLingo, Corbett remains the messenger rather than the message itself. Videos employ strategies more typical of the teaching as a performative act described by bell hooks, being inventive with TikTok's form to meet the shifting needs of the "audience" (2014, p.11), mutually learning from them to encourage their investment in education. Corbett informs adapts TikToks to the "particularity and uniqueness of whom we are speaking to and with" (p.8), keeping the tone is distinctly TikTokian but the content focuses on the pedagogical subject of the video rather than subjectivity of the Main Character. Corbett may break the fourth wall and refer to the platform itself, in a manner typical of a TikTok "meta" communicative form (Schellewald, 2021), yet does not create content about the fact he is creating content. Instead, Corbett uses meta internet commentary and memetic associations in a subtle way, through editing, animation and tone, to demonstrate the Planet Money TikTok account understands what it is to perform authenticity online. Rather than using trending audio tracks, Corbett joins a self-referential online conversation by taking a longer view of the internet – through his use of stylistic choices which invoke Microsoft Paint, Minecraft and other staples of 1990s computer culture.

These visuals seem deliberately nostalgic for a Gen Z/millennial audience, the backdrops reminiscent of stock footage you may find in karaoke videos. For instance, in Planet Money's first TikTok, Corbett used low-fi Microsoft Paint-style graphics, as well as backdrops of waterfalls and horses running on a beach to explain the stock market's built-in circuit breaks. Beyond an aesthetic choice, these 1990s clichés evoke a specific internet cultural reference: an mid-00s meme which centres on a t shirt featuring three wolves howling at the moon (Phillips and Milner, 2017). The visuals and modality differ, but the association is presented, incidentally and without comment, creating both a general atmosphere and a specific reference for those who wish to over-analyse it. This editorial approach creates a tone has been described as "wacky", "off-the-wall" and "chaotic" (Holtermann, 2022; Liedermann, 2020), but I argue it's more than being offbeat for the sake of it. The deliberate juxtaposition of earlier technological "communicative forms" (Schellewald, 2021) and by hinting at cultural events which only have meaning on the online – albeit an earlier version of the web, very different to the place which TikTok lives – Corbett is remixing and reinterpreting the internet itself, taking the logic and culture of memes and applying it to the technology which hosts them. As memes are creative and relational, this postmodern take can be seen to be completely in keeping with the spirit of what it is to meme. It's Corbett's "respect" for both TikTok and the longer history of internet culture it emerged from, which keeps his recreations of internet culture authentic.

What Does This Teach Us About Teaching?

So far, I have examined how the specificities of TikTok influence how social media managers strategically approach using it as a forum for education. Until this point I have focused on this as a branding exercise or memetic exchange, both of which rely on an accepted performance of authenticity as explored in the examples from DuoLingo and Planet Money. I would now like to extend this to the student-teacher dynamic, to see what #LearnOnTikTok can teach us about teaching itself, as a mutually affirming, creative dialogue, in the tradition of hooks and Freire.

The specific ways content video functions on the app can deconstruct what hooks (2014) describes as the traditional notion the professor is solely responsible for classroom dynamics. As we have seen, the volume of engagement with a TikTok account's content influences The Algorithm's prioritisation of future content, thereby impacting a teacher's/institution's capacity to reach potential students/viewers. Therefore, to teach on TikTok, one must begin by abandoning any presumption that your identity of a "teacher" automatically grants you authority. Instead, you must compete for attention as a Main Character, performing within an infinite newsfeed of other Main Characters.

Furthermore, successful use of memetic content requires mutual creation and re-creation by both the teacher/institution and the student/viewer. This upends the status quo of who is automatically imbued with the authority to be heard, and thus the platform could be viewed as a fertile meeting ground where pedagogy is "*with*, and not *for*, the oppressed" (Freire, 2014, p. 30).

Re-examining Freire's teacher-student dichotomy within this light reveals the active participation of both parties in this pedagogic relationship, but this should not be confused with a liberation he describes as "people teach[ing] each other, mediated by the world, by cognizable objects" (2014, p.80). To end analysis there would naïvely neglect the role of TikTok itself in a pedagogic relationship – not simply as the virtual venue where learning occurs, but as a profit-making corporation. TikTok has a vested financial interest to keep as many

people as possible on the app for as long as possible, and profits from "people teach[ing] each other". The world it's "mediated by" is controlled by the app, and the "cognizable objects" are owned neither by teacher nor student, but are ultimately dependent on the social media platform itself. This is where we hit the limits of hooks' notion of teaching as a performative act on TikTok (2014). While institutions can be active, dynamic, and reciprocal in their educational strategies and challenge the power dynamics between teacher/student, they are ultimately confined by overarching power dynamics of TikTok itself. Using TikTok as a teaching mechanism depends on TikTok as a company to allow you to teach at all. Barta and Andalibi note that social media is "inherently political" and can perpetuate marginalisation of communities (2021, p.3). Perhaps The Algorithm will "shadow-ban" you and restrict your content unfairly, an accusation which usually implies some form of identity or political bias against the TikToker. Or perhaps your posts will be overtly censored by the app, as happened when a make-up TikToker had her post deleted once she began discussing genocide of Uighurs in China. There is a risk that everything – every Main Character's performance, every memetic audio track – "is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal" (Freire, 2014, p.40). This could be for political reasons as well as economic ones, India has banned the app and President Trump threatened to in 2020 (Smith-Galer et al., 2020). I remember when Vine, an app with 6-second looping video content which was in many ways a precursor to TikTok, was discontinued in 2016. Vine stars were not only effectively fired, but they lost their entire industry overnight.

To be successful on TikTok is to understand the affordances and to integrate into the culture of TikTok – that is to fit the structures that demand you spend time on the app. If we follow Freire that "the educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better "fit" for the world" (p. 76), then TikTok is educating all its users to adapt and to fit into the world of TikTok – in the act (and I mean "act" both as a verb and suggestion of a performance) of educating, where both teachers and students have the potential to perform as the Main Character.

Conclusion

Basing this ethnographic account in part on an anthropological re-examination of my professional experience as a social media manager, we can see how successful teaching on TikTok relies on a nuanced understanding of how the dialogically authored nature of branding plays out specifically on this platform. How The Algorithm suggests content to a user on their FYP; the immersive nature of full-screen videos and the auto-playing of sound and three subtle design choices unique to TikTok which shape how individuals must perform in order to join the dominant culture of the app. These performances must be recognised as authentic, otherwise the potential to be seen by other users is limited by TikTok itself.

I suggest these considerations are fundamental for institutions, including universities, looking to use TikTok for educational purposes, and with the appropriate investment in knowledge, time, and resources, large audiences can be reached. Yet before doing so, and this might reflect my background as a strategist rather than educator, it may be pertinent to ask how and where TikTok fits into their teaching? If, like DuoLingo, content is to pique interest in knowledge held outside of TikTok, how can you prevent the classroom from solely becoming a theatre for performing TikTok culture? Or if, like Planet Money, lessons are self-contained on the platform, then can you keep the integrity of knowledge, which is both impacted by TikTok's affordances and (once uploaded) owned by the corporation? TikTok as a corporation pervades all attempts at education, performance and collaboration on the app, and all users, regardless of whether they are teachers/institutions or students/viewers, are both at the mercy of the company and ultimately learning how to excel on TikTok itself. Much like seating arrangements in Foucault's classroom, TikTok's design decisions consolidate their power. There are no students and no teachers on TikTok, only Main Characters in search of an audience.

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