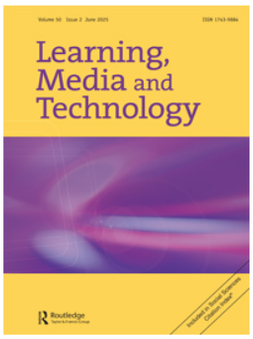

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Discursive construction of online teacher identity and legitimacy in English language teaching

Wing Yee Jenifer Ho

Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates YouTube teachers' identity construction within dominant language ideologies. Drawing on the constructs of language teacher professional identity, social media micro-celebrity persona, linguistic entrepreneurship, and raciolinguistic ideologies and online persona, the study analyses banner images, biographies, and semi-structured interviews of online teachers and provides a framework for understanding online teacher identity. The findings reveal that online teachers strategically align or distance themselves from different identity positions to foreground their identity as online English teachers. The findings point to the complex identity construction of online teachers as they navigate the complex terrain of the online English language teaching (ELT) marketplace dominated by neoliberal and raciolinguistic ideologies. The study contributes to a better understanding of the opportunities offered by technology in promoting or challenging such ideologies and calls for a recognition of the identity work online teachers put in to foreground their teacher identity.

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Online teacher identity; online teaching videos; multimodality; language ideologies

Introduction

The global popularity of YouTube has given rise to a new digital profession of online teaching, allowing professionals, semi-professionals, and laypeople to engage in knowledge construction and dissemination (Burgess and Green 2009). While both online teachers and classroom teachers see teaching as their main duty and passion, online English teachers on YouTube are uniquely placed in the ELT marketplace in the sense that they teach English to a global and public audience, thereby creating a strong need for them to market themselves as brands to differentiate themselves from other online teachers in order to attract students (Curran and Jenks 2022). Such self-branding practices require identity work from online teachers to create a persona which encompasses different aspects of what an ideal online teacher should be like. Not only do they need to demonstrate expertise and legitimacy in teaching English as in the case of classroom teachers; but online teachers also need to draw on aspects of entrepreneurialism and micro-celebrity discourses in their identity construction to keep their career sustainable.

Considerable work has been done on the pedagogic design of teaching videos on YouTube (see, e.g., Bateman and Schmidt-Borcherding 2018; Ho and Feng 2022), and how influencers make use of the affordances of the platform, such as the multimodal resources used in the videos and their interaction with the audience in the comments section for identity construction in contexts other than teaching

CONTACT Wing Yee Jenifer Ho jenifer.ho@polyu.edu.hk Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong

(Bhatia 2018; 2020). More recently, work has been done on investigating online teachers' expertise (Ho and Tai 2020) and how they create translanguaging spaces for learning and teaching to occur (Ho and Tai 2021). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research on how online teachers construct their identities within the dominant ideologies of raciolinguistics and neoliberalism in the field of ELT.

In Yung and Yuan's (2020) examination of 'star-tutor' identities in Hong Kong, they identified how the 'star-tutors' discursively construct a hybrid identity comprising of 'an authoritative exam expert', 'a popular star', and 'a well-qualified English language teacher' (p.153) in their biographies. The authors found that 'star tutors' strategically draw on discourses of the entertainment business to create visual appeal in the competitive marketplace. While this study is conducted in the sector of private tutoring conducted in face-to-face settings, this kind of teaching context shares similarities to the online ELT industry in that it too is dominated by neoliberal ideologies which compels tutors to engage in self-branding to attract students. In the context of online tutoring platforms, Curran and Jenks (2022) investigated how online teachers self-brand themselves by focusing on the dimensions of 'self-editing', 'authenticity', and 'cosmopolitanism' (p.7).

Building on these studies, this article focuses on the construction of online teachers' identities by examining the banners created by online English teachers posted on the YouTube 'Home' page, as well as their biographies posted either on YouTube, or on their website. The analysis also draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with five teachers running four different channels. The paper argues that online teacher identities are products of the intersection between online teachers' varying degrees of alignment with three different kinds of identities: the professional teacher identity, the online micro-celebrity persona, and an entrepreneurial identity. This paper situates such interlaced identities within the context of online ELT where online teacher identities are constructed under, and interpreted within, the broader context of raciolinguistic and neoliberal ideologies. This study reveals how online teachers align and distance themselves from these ideologies to foreground an online teacher identity.

This paper draws on four different constructs to develop a holistic understanding of how online teacher identity is constructed, namely language teacher professional identity, social media micro-celebrity persona, linguistic entrepreneurship, and raciolinguistic ideologies.

Literature review

Language teacher professional identity

Language teacher identity is a multi-faceted concept which has received tremendous interest in the last two decades. Farrell (2011) observes that during language teachers' careers they 'construct and reconstruct (usually tacitly) a conceptual sense of *who* they are (their self-image) and this is manifested through *what* they do (their professional role identity)' (54). Pennington and Richards (2016) see teacher identity as the 'projection of the teacher's view of the institutional role of *teacher* and in part a projection of a unique individual identity based on the teacher's autobiography' (p.7). This view acknowledges that each teacher has a personal history that they can bring to the teaching profession. Thus, teachers are said to have to find an 'effective balance between a formal teacher persona and a more personal and relatable self' (p.8). There may be situations where a formal teacher identity conflicts with the teachers' own sense of identity. Thus, identity is often negotiated and renegotiated so that teachers' personal, autobiographical identities are connected to their institutional and professional identities (Pennington and Richards 2016).

In line with the ethical turn in applied linguistics (De Costa 2016), recent teacher identity research has increasingly made use of teachers' narratives in understanding the intersection of different personal identities that make up professional teacher identity (Wolff and De Costa 2017). This line of work suggests that teacher identity is not only multifaceted, they are also fluid and dynamic that are constantly being shaped and reshaped. In their study of a non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST), Wolff and De Costa (2017) used a narrative lens to understand how the teacher negotiated with emotional challenges, and how emotions play a role in her teacher

identity development. Their study found that linguistically, NNESTs face insecurity in teaching English and that they constantly reshape their identities in response to the new demands in teaching contexts. A similar finding is echoed in Yuan (2020), in which the author found that NNESTs teaching in English-medium contexts face emotional, pedagogical, and social barriers, thus calling for a stronger focus on the affective needs of teachers.

Research into teacher identity has also expanded to educational contexts outside of the mainstream classroom. For instance, Yung and Yuan (2020) investigated the discursive construction of English language 'star-tutors' identity in Hong Kong. The authors uncovered the visual and linguistic representation of 'star-tutors' identities by examining their online biographies, and identified the hybrid identity they constructed, namely as 'an authoritative exam expert', 'a popular star', and 'a well-qualified English language teacher'. The findings indicated that the construction of this hybrid tutor identity is made possible by the tutors strategically drawing on the discourse of entertainment business, promotional discourse, and pedagogical discourse. Similarly, Curran and Jenks (2022) examined native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and NNESTs' self-introductory videos on an online tutoring platform. Examining the self-branding discourses of online teachers offering their teaching services on an online tutoring platform, the authors identified how online teachers self-branded themselves as professional, cosmopolitan, authentic, and multilingual.

Overall, it is evident that research into professional teacher identity has been dominated by a focus on (online) teachers who work within some form of institution or community. Research into the professional teacher identity of online teachers operating on a public platform such as YouTube is still limited. This kind of teaching environment imposes a different set of affordances and constraints for online teachers and shapes the kind of professional teacher identity they (can) perform. In Ho and Tai's (2020) study on the construction of expertise by online teachers, the authors found that online teachers as designers of the learning environment have to 'shape the pedagogical content using the resources available' (p.4; see also Kress and van Leeuwen 2021 , 49), and make multimodal and embodied design decisions based on the availability of the range of available designs offered by the mode (i.e., writing, image, sound, camera angle, and so on.) and the media (i.e., video). For example, online teachers have the additional resource of camera angle to communicate meaning, whereas classroom teachers do not have such kind of resource. This affordance would shape the kind of (embodied) actions that online teachers can utilise to perform their teacher identity.

Social media micro-celebrity persona

In online teaching, the hybrid and multifaceted nature of teacher identity needs to be made visible. Online teachers on YouTube have thousands, if not millions of followers online, and they can be considered public figures; some have even acquired micro-celebrity status. Senft (2008) coined the term 'micro-celebrities' to refer to 'a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social networking sites to "amp up" their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online' (p.25). The emergence of this new form of teaching creates new opportunities and challenges for online teachers to develop and perform their teacher identity, often through constructing an online persona which may be different from the teacher identity of classroom teachers and 'star-tutors'. Moore, Barbour, and Lee (2017) observe that persona is carefully designed, and they are widely distributed and performed. As the authors point out,

> [t]he public performance of the self is neither entirely "real" nor entirely "fictional". The accomplishment of performativity means that a persona connects together and meshes all the various characteristics that are staged and presented in the everyday and intended to interact with others. (p.4)

Micro-celebrities who adopt an online persona have to carefully assemble their self-presentation in public identity performance (Marwick 2016). Such public identity performance, as Page (2012)

explains, is associated with self-promotion strategies which prioritises visibility and attention. For online English teachers, not only do they have to maintain visibility and attract attention; they also have to demonstrate the kind of expertise and identities expected of a classroom teacher in the realm of pedagogic and linguistic knowledge (Ho and Tai 2020).

Situating online teachers within the online participatory culture (Burgess and Green 2009), Chao (2022) explores how online teachers on YouTube negotiate between the community of language teaching, and that of social media practitioners. Despite the importance of striking a balance between being a language teacher, and having an entertaining persona (often demanded from a social media persona), the study found that the balance is not easily attained and that there are identity conflicts between the two positions. The study also found that visibility permeates all aspects of the online teachers' teaching, thus suggesting the need for a new model in understanding online teacher identity which differs from that of classroom teachers.

While this paper does not wish to over-emphasise the dichotomy between classroom teaching and out-of-classroom teaching, it nonetheless seeks to document the unique experiential difference between teaching in the classroom and outside of the classroom in order to account for the affordances and constraints of online teachers' construction of identity. One salient difference between these two forms of teaching is that online teachers teach on a public platform to a global audience; some of these teachers have also accumulated fame in the mainstream media because of their online success.[1]

Linguistic entrepreneurship

As can be seen from the above discussions, online teachers need to brand themselves by highlighting their persona. It is also important to acknowledge the fact that language teaching operates within a neoliberal ideology which is guided by market principles and entrepreneurial attributes. As observed by Curran and Jenks (2022), technological advancements in a globalised world, in conjunction with ideologies of neoliberalism to education have compelled online teachers to become brands. However, very few studies have investigated how online teachers position themselves within the entrepreneurial discourses, such as paying attention to rating and algorithm in their business (Curran and Jenks 2022). This article draws on the notion of linguistic entrepreneurship to unpack how online teachers brand themselves within this framework. Linguistic entrepreneurship is 'an act of aligning with the moral imperative to strategically exploit language-related resources for enhancing one's worth in the world' (De Costa, Park, and Wee 2016, 695). A 'linguistic entrepreneur' is someone who demonstrates alignment with the view that multilingualism is celebrated as a fashionable, marketable commodity which is then further appropriated to define good citizenship (De Costa, Park, and Wee 2016; 2021; Kubota 2016; Gao 2018). The notion of linguistic entrepreneurship adds to the existing idea of language commodification by taking into account the processes by which learners and institutions align themselves with neoliberal ideologies, and their subjective experiences of these processes (De Costa, Park, and Wee 2021). Furthermore, linguistic entrepreneurship highlights the ethical perspective of language learning, that it is one's responsibility to expand one's human capital as a project of self-development, and to the society as a whole (De Costa, Park, and Wee 2016; 2021). Knowing multiple languages is not only beneficial to the learners, but it is also used strategically by online teachers to brand themselves as global and cosmopolitan (Curran and Jenks 2022).

In Curran and Jenks' (2022) study of online teachers' self-branding discourses, the authors revealed how online teachers are 'being forced to ceaselessly self-brand' to keep up with the ever-changing demands of working in a gig economy (p.16). The present study focuses on the identity conflicts faced by online teachers by unpacking the plethora of discourses constantly shaping and re-shaping the online teachers' persona, and how portraying themselves simultaneously as teachers, as entrepreneurs, or as micro-celebrities can result in identity conflicts. The dissonance between these identity positions may occur, as seen in Chao (2022). For example, the need to appeal to a

global audience may mean designing and delivering content in specific ways which may or may not align with the online teachers' expectations and beliefs.

Raciolinguistic ideologies

Online ELT is guided by market principles, and therefore it is not surprising that some teachers, or some varieties of English are valued over others, as seen in Curran (2021) who revealed how algorithms and ratings are new affordances in platforms which may at times disadvantage non-white, non-Anglo, or non-native teachers. Raciolinguistic ideologies refer to 'the ideological construction and value of standardized language practices … that conflate certain racialized bodies with linguistic deficiency unrelated to any objective linguistic practices' (Flores and Rosa 2015, 150). It is associated with the ingrained beliefs of monolingualism and native-speakerism (Holliday 2006). Scholars in applied linguistics have been challenging such kind of ideologies, and they argue that the assignment of legitimacy only to knowledge systems and linguistic practices stereotypically associated with the dominant group would risk rendering the potential of multilingual students invisible, and therefore efforts must be made to reject this kind of abyssal thinking (García et al. 2021). While research on raciolinguistic ideologies has mostly been focused on multilingual classroom teaching contexts where in some cases multilingual learners are seen as 'deficient' because they do not speak a dominant language (e.g., Flores and Rosa 2015; Milu 2021), few studies have explored whether or not raciolingusitic ideologies are observed in online ELT videos. Ho and Feng (2022) conducted a critical study of an online ELT video to determine the extent to which translanguaging pedagogy and raciolinguistic ideologies are found in the video. Through their analysis, they revealed that raciolinguistic ideologies are oftentimes unintentionally perpetuated in the video in focus, and they suggested how online teachers can incorporate translanguaging pedagogy to avoid further perpetuating raciolinguistic ideologies, such as including more varieties of English, and the portrayal of speakers from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds which demonstrates the use of English in lingua franca contexts.

Taken together, while the identity construction of classroom English teachers has been well researched in the literature, there is a gap in understanding how online English teachers construct their identities by drawing on a range of identities and ideologies which may or may not be in conflict with each other. The present study responds to Curran and Jenks' (2022) call to pay more empirical attention to how online teacher identities are constructed by understanding the intersection of online teachers' identities between the need to portray themselves as professional teachers, and the need to show familiarity with branding themselves as micro-celebrities and language entrepreneurs that would help them gain attention and visibility in a global platform such as YouTube. This study takes the view that these different identities cannot be examined in isolation (Block and Corona 2016), and aims to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the complex identity construction of online teachers by addressing the following two research questions: (1) How do online teachers discursively construct their online identities? (2) How do the portrayed online teacher identities interact with the ideologies of English language learning?

The study

The data reported in the study were collected as part of a larger research project which examines online English teachers' discursive construction of expertise and online persona.

There are three sources of data informing this study. The first source of data is a database of 70 banners publicly available on the 'Home' page of selected English teaching channels on YouTube. Among the 70 channels, 36 of them are English-medium channels (EMC), and 34 are bilingual channels (BC) which teach English using either Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, or Korean. The researcher and the research assistant are proficient in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. The second source of data is the biography of the online teachers hosting the 70 channels. These

biographies are collected from multiple sources, including the 'About' section of YouTube, the website, or the social media profile of the online teachers. The information written in Japanese and Korean is translated using online dictionaries. The third source of data is interview data with five teachers from four different YouTube channels. The data were collected to provide an in-depth understanding of how online teachers construct their online identities and expertise. Although these teachers have a public online presence through their channels, their names are anonymised to protect their identity.

The banners were selected from a database of online English teaching YouTube channels and collected using snowball sampling for the larger project. For EMC, channels with over 50 K subscribers were chosen for analysis. Due to the large number of BC on YouTube, a decision was made to only include channels which use Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, or Korean with over 100 subscribers in order for the number of EMC and BC to be comparable. All channels were also selected based on whether there was a strong visual presence of the teachers in the video lessons. While some studies tend to artificially divide online teachers into 'native' and 'non-native' at the very beginning, this study does not adopt this kind of dichotomy because there are cases in which NESTs teach in BC, and NNESTs teach in EMC. Therefore, the distinction between EMC and BC is made at the early stages of analysis, and the distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' is only made when it becomes relevant. The study recognises the problematic nature of the 'native' and 'non-native' dichotomy. These labels are used only to reflect the language ideologies that are prevalent in the ELT industry. They are only used when such distinctions are made relevant by the online teachers in the branding materials.

Following Benson (2017), a YouTube 'channel' is defined in this study as 'a web page, or group of pages, built around a list of videos that have something in common with each other' (p.54). This study focuses on user-generated channels, that is, the videos in the channel are uploaded by the content creators - the online teachers in the context of the present study. For every YouTube channel, there is a 'Home' page where content creators can upload a self-designed 'banner' to be placed on the top of the page. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) model of visual composition, elements placed on the top of the page represent the 'ideal'. It is therefore a prime location for content creators to use this space, which is not semiotically-regulated by YouTube, for identity construction. This is a space where promotional discourse intersects with pedagogic discourse, and at times entrepreneurial discourse is used strategically. Such intersections of a variety of discourses make this an ideal site for investigation to understand the complexity of the construction of identities for online English teachers.

The 70 banner images were downloaded and exported to MaxQDA (Verbi Software 2018) for inductive coding. They were also analysed multimodally which allows the researcher to identify how semiotic resources are orchestrated to make meaning. The linguistic content of the banners was also coded in conjunction with the multimodal content. This is to capture the meaning generated by the text-image relations, namely complementarity, concurrence, and divergence (Unsworth 2007). Biographical and interview data were analysed based on a thematic analysis procedure (Braun and Clarke 2006). The banner and the interview data were first coded by the author and a trained research assistant separately, and then differences in coding were resolved through discussions. For the coding of the banner, a second research assistant was brought in to complete another round of coding to ensure the coding scheme was applied consistently. All banners were numbered in an order based on their number of subscribers, A1 is the banner image of the EMC with the greatest number of subscribers in the dataset, and B1 is the banner image of the BC with the greatest number of subscribers. Appendix 1 shows the basic information of the channels as of July 2023.

Email invitations were sent to a list of online teachers running the channels in our database, and as of the time of reporting, five interviews were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured interviews and they were guided by some broad areas, such as the process of filming, editing, and designing video content, and the similarities and differences between online teaching and classroom teaching. Interestingly, questions on branding were originally not included in the interview

guide, but all teachers who participated in the interview brought this up as an important aspect of their work, and therefore the responses reported in this paper were minimally prompted and they were spontaneously generated by the teachers. As most of the teachers were based in different parts of the world, all interviews except one who is based in the same geographical area as the research team were conducted online. The interviews lasted for one hour.

Findings

Findings revealed that the banner images, albeit regulated in terms of size and position, are by no means semiotically-uniform. Among the EMC and BC, online teachers express their identities by mobilising a range of linguistic and semiotic resources. Table 1 shows the categories identified in the banners. The analysis also features semi-structured interviews with five teachers running four channels, together with the biographies of the online teachers posted on YouTube, their webpage, or social media platforms.

Visual description of the online teacher

The salience of the banner image in terms of visual composition affords it an important space where online teachers can visually construct their persona, as well as use it as a promotional space to attract learners to subscribe to their channels.

While the banner image is located at the top of the screen, that is, the 'ideal' position based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) visual grammar, online teachers mobilise different linguistic and multimodal resources to perform their persona. Over half of the online teachers running EMC and BC include their photos in the banner. Among the photos, demand images using a frontal camera angle and eye-level shot are the most commonly used across the two types of channels, accounting for 90% and 100% of the photos in EMC and BC respectively. The use of demand images, together with the camera angle and distance of the shot are visual resources to create interpersonal meaning. The use of photos, instead of cartoon images, also enhances the modality of the image

Table 1. Sample of themes and categories identified in the banners.

Theme	Category	No. of occurrences in EMC (out of 36)	No. of occurrences in BC (out of 34)
Basic information of the channel	Name of the online teacher	11	16
	Name of the channel	19	23
	External links	35	28
	Frequency of updates	7	4
Visual and linguistic description of the online teacher	Photo(s) of the online teacher	21	18
	Demand image*	19	18
	Offer image*	2	0
	Cartoon of the online teacher	3	1
Content of the channel	Identification of the English variety taught visually/linguistically		
	American	3	3
	British	7	0
	Canadian	1	0
	The use of signifiers associated with Inner Circle countries		
	Flags*	7	1
	Landmarks*	6	1
(Native) English as a commodity	Transformative effects of learning English (e.g., gain confidence)	8	3
	Explicit mention of 'native-speakers'	3	0

*Demand and offer images are terminologies used by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021). They describe the level of interpersonal engagement created by the image. Demand images are images in which the subject in the photo demands viewers' attention by gaze, or other visual resources, whereas offer images invite viewers to observe a narrative created by the image.

which is associated with the truthfulness and realness of the image (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021). This finding expands that identified by Curran and Jenks (2022) who found that NNESTs experience a strong(er) need to brand themselves as professionals. While it is the case that NNESTs use the linguistic mode to communicate professionalism, this study found that visual resources such as camera angle and distance of shot also play a role in constructing audience involvement. Showing a photo of the online teacher in the banner is a means to create the teacher as a brand, and to align themselves with a professional language teacher and social media micro-celebrity persona.

Varieties of English and the use of inner circle signifiers

Online ELT is dominated by language ideologies, such as raciolinguistic ideologies closely associated with the beliefs of the superiority of standard language and native-speaker norms. Following Kachru's (1992) model, countries that use English as a first language are considered the 'Inner Circle'.[2] Only 11 EMC and three BC provide indication of the variety of English taught in the channel in the banner. Among the 11 EMC that included this information in the banner, three of them specialise in American English, seven in British English, and one in Canadian English. Among the BC, three channels that included this information in the banner indicate their specialisation in teaching American English. As seen by the relatively small number of channels explicitly making the distinction between varieties of English in the banner, it can perhaps be attributed to the increased awareness of the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF), as expressed by the online teachers running A35:

> Excerpt 1
>
> It kind of makes no sense to me that you would only want to focus on one variety [of English]. It makes much more sense to me that you would want to equip them [learners] to go out and speak to the world rather than only Brits or any Americans, you know, only people who speak that variety or only people who speak this variety. (Interview, online teacher of A35)

While the varieties of English taught in the channel are sometimes not explicitly articulated in the linguistic mode in the banner, the use of Inner Circle signifiers nonetheless serve as a means to indicate the purpose of learning English, that is, to understand a particular variety, more often than not, a 'native' variety of English. These signifiers include the flags and landmarks of Inner Circle countries.

Learning English as a journey of transformation

Unlike in institutional ELT contexts where the legitimacy of teaching English comes from academic qualifications and teaching experiences, in the online ELT marketplace, the onus is on the online teachers to brand themselves as legitimate, regardless of their academic qualifications and teaching experiences. Showing linguistic expertise is one way for online teachers to legitimise themselves as credible. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the previous section, instead of using the banner space to promote the online teacher, the banner images portray the outcomes of learning English as appealing to learners' desire to be members of the imagined global multilingual community (Zheng, Lu, and Ren 2020). Such a community is often framed to be language-specific in these banners, and gaining membership in this community will help learners gain confidence in life. This could be guided by both a top-down and a bottom-up 'hierarchization of multilingualism' whereby investments in different languages are made strategically in order to maximise benefits to one's capital and esteem (Sung 2021, 16). This thinking aligns with the idea of linguistic entrepreneurship that language learning is for the enhancement of one's human capital and to be a better citizen (De Costa, Park, and Wee 2016; Gao 2018). This theme is expressed in eight EMC and three BC banners mentioning the transformation learners will experience after learning English (from their channels). The underlying discourse is that learning English (through a particular online

teacher's channel) will bring about possibilities of 'identity expansion and increased agency' (Sung 2021, 20):

- Learn Conversational English. Understand Native Speakers & Speak English Confidently! (A14)
- Speak Confident English – The confidence you want for your life and work in English (A24)
- Better English. Better Business. Better YOU! (A25)
- Say Yes! And Start Learning (B5)
- This is where you learn to use English in full colour in real life (B24)
- A new language is a new life (B29)

These taglines used in the banners perpetuate the beliefs that learning English will enable one to undergo a transformation in life, that one will gain confidence and ultimately become a better person. Some of these banners, for instance, A14, further perpetuate raciolinguisitic ideologies by leading learners to believe that confidence in speaking English comes solely from the ability to understand 'native' speakers, neglecting the use of English as a global language. As Rosa (2016, 165) observes, the ability to use standardised language, in this case, 'native' varieties of English, is seen as a means of 'societal inclusion and upward socioeconomic mobility', and the use of localised varieties of English could (mistakenly) be viewed from a deficiency lens. The taglines also assign agency to learners that it is up to them to embark on this transformation together by making the right choice, i.e., by learning with a particular online teacher.

Legitimacy in teaching English

Among the 36 EMC banners that were examined, only three banners were explicit about the goal of learning English primarily to '[understand] native speakers'. Similarly, the importance attached to 'native-speakerism' is not explicitly reflected in the biography of the online teachers. Among the 36 EMC online teachers' biographies examined, only four used the word 'native' to describe themselves. For other teachers, 'nativeness' is associated with their birthplace and/or upbringing, thereby positioning themselves as 'authentic'. This aligns with Curran and Jenks' (2022) finding that online teachers use authenticity as a way to present themselves as authentic speakers of English as a form of branding. For example:

- 'I grew up in a tiny village in the English countryside' (A1, website)
- 'I was born and raised in western Pennsylvania' (A15, website)
- 'I was born in Canada where I started my English teaching career' (A32, website)

While being 'native' has traditionally been seen as an important criterion in teacher hiring practices for reasons influenced by raciolingusitic ideologies that 'native' speakers are perceived to be better English teachers, its importance is diminishing in the online English teaching world for various reasons.[3] The advantages of being a 'non-native' teacher are being foregrounded in several teachers' descriptions of themselves in the biography. For instance, the online teacher of A28 mentioned in the 'About' section of YouTube that she is a 'non-native' speaker of English and therefore she would like to use her story to provide motivation for other English learners to follow. While this in itself does not debunk the 'native-speaker' myth, it does show in the online ELT landscape that, while 'native' speakers' status can gain currency, 'non-native' speakers' stories of learning English are also used strategically to attract learners:

- 'I'm from Ukraine and I've worked on my English and accent, for the most part, on my own, but you can find out and trace my story by watching my videos. I've been studying American pronunciation for a long time, and I still do, and I guess I always will. Learning a language, it's a lifetime journey. I know exactly what it takes to become fluent and acquire an accent in a non-English speaking country' (A13, YouTube 'About' section)

- 'Through my story as a non-native speaker, you'll be able to relate to my journey and use a lot of practical tips in your studies to become advanced in English faster' (A28, YouTube 'About' section)

Such stories can also be understood within the discourses of cosmopolitanism, a strategy which Curran and Jenks (2022) observed in their examination of online teachers' profiles based on the idea that learning English (with them) will 'unlock a world beyond that which is constructed within a student's particular national imagination' (p.8). Learners are therefore positioned as 'trapped' in their own world, and English can be a tool of liberation not only financially, but also for personal development, echoing the view of linguistic entrepreneurship. This, again, evokes the concept of the imagined global multilingual community which offers possibilities of identity expansion (Zheng, Lu, and Ren 2020; Sung 2021). The fact that NNESTs position themselves as 'saviors' can be seen as an expansion of what Jenks and Lee (2020) call 'native speaker savorism', only that the 'savior' is not native speakers anymore, but non-native speakers who spent time and effort to be 'native-like'.

Similar to other teaching contexts, legitimacy in teaching English is sometimes framed in terms of the academic qualifications attained by the online teachers, usually from prestigious universities in 'Inner Circle' countries:

- Since graduating from [name of University], I have worked as a writer, translator, and language teacher in [Location]. As a language teacher, I have used my knowledge of linguistics to transform the way my students learn a foreign language. (B23, YouTube 'About' section)
- 常春藤 (translation: Ivy League) [name of university in Chinese] [name of university in English] 主修 (translation: Major): 語言學 Linguistics (B24, personal website)

Online teachers as entrepreneurs

As observed by Curran and Jenks (2022), technological advancements in a globalised world, in conjunction with ideologies of neoliberalism to education have compelled online teachers to become brands. Within the framework of linguistic entrepreneurship, it is argued that 'entrepreneurs' should be understood in a broad sense to not only include people starting their own business; it should also encompass the fact that everyone is 'an entrepreneur of himself or herself' (Ong 2006, 14; De Costa, Park, and Wee 2016). A majority of both EMC and BC use this space to include external links to their own website or social media pages. This is to direct learners to interact with them through different social media platforms with different affordances.

In terms of impression management, online teachers have a need to present themselves as 'tech-savvy' and be able to demonstrate their understanding of the affordances and constraints of different platforms. Their entrepreneurial identity is also reinforced by the photographs shown on the banner, many of which are professional photographs. Although an examination of the biographies reveals that only three EMC teachers and one BC teacher explicitly identify themselves as entrepreneurs in their biographies, the business aspects of running an online teaching career are nevertheless an important part of an online teacher's identity, albeit not always made explicit. Many online teachers see that there is some form of dissonance between the business aspects of teaching and their professional teaching identity:

Excerpt 2

> At heart, I'm a teacher, I'm not a businessperson, so I've struggled over the years with the business aspect of it. It's hard because if you teach, you teach because you love it. And it's frustrating of course, when you feel maybe not enough people are watching your lessons … . Where're the students? And I think that's something that the online teacher has to struggle with, and the classroom teacher doesn't. We … in order for us to teach, we have to attract students, so we have to be constantly aware of what is going to appeal to an online audience (Interview, online teacher of A15)

Here, the online teacher expresses the unique challenges that online teachers face: not only do they have to be professional teachers, they also have to manage the business aspects well in order for the teaching career to be sustainable. Similar thoughts are expressed by another online teacher:

Excerpt 3

> They [YouTube] give you some money for the ads, but I really wanted to spend more time on this [making videos to teach English]. But what happened was when I was running the YouTube channel, I still had to do all my other work in order to get … just to make money but I had to do a lot for it, right? So I was thinking about how to … you know ways to really monetize it and make it into an actual business so that I could actually do this for my living (Interview, online teacher of B23)

This interview excerpt shows that however much the online teacher would like to teach online as a full-time job, they also have to take into account the financial aspects of running a channel. In addition to the actual teaching, online teachers have to show business acumen and make entrepreneurial decisions in order to make their career sustainable.

Online teachers as micro-celebrities

Different from online teachers examined in other studies in which the teaching is conducted one-to-one operating within the regulations provided by the platforms dedicated to online language learning (e.g., Curran and Jenks 2022), the online teachers in this study operate on YouTube, a social media platform that is not designed as a pedagogical platform. These online teachers enjoy global visibility and attention just like influencers. In an educational context dominated by neoliberal ideologies, it is not inconceivable that online teachers need to strategically draw on multiple discourses, including the discourse of the entertainment business, to boost their popularity (Yung and Yuan 2020). Many of the online teachers have thousands, if not millions of subscribers. Visually, many of the online teachers' banners show carefully posed photographs of themselves, and many of these banners are designed to a professional standard. The more popular online teachers take sponsorships from companies related to language teaching and insert a short advertisement within their lessons as a way to sustain the business financially (see interview excerpt 3). Nevertheless, online teachers on YouTube identify with the idea of them being micro-celebrities to varying degrees. From the semi-structured interviews, it can be seen that online teachers tend to distance themselves from what famous influencers do to attract audience and focus on how they can make use of the affordance of YouTube to reach more students:

Excerpt 4

> In terms of the presentations of the videos of the content, I think in the beginning, the conscious decision I made was that I am not there to really be a YouTuber. I want to use the platform primarily to promote my course for one, and then to share the information with everyone, so it's completely free, completely accessible and I think that would just benefit everyone in general […] So I don't try to be particularly entertaining for example, but I have gotten a lot of comments from my friends and family about how I should be more entertaining for YouTube. However, for me, I am not trying to appeal to that crowd. I just want to find students for one, and then also to benefit people who want to learn. (Interview, online teacher of B24)

Excerpt 5

> It's a lot easier for you to be famous or to be popular if you adopt certain personas, like, if your videos were all two minutes long and super funny and talking about some superficial thing or like taught people about the slang word in English forever. But that was from the start not my point, like not my philosophy or not my goal. (Interview, online teacher of B23)

A similar identity conflict was also observed in Chao (2022), in which an online teacher expressed insecurity in taking part in both the social media community and the language teacher community. Here, the teachers running B23 and B24 both attempt to negotiate their identities between being

entertaining (the social media community), and their own teaching philosophy and style (the language teacher community).

However, online teachers also understand that their being famous is a way to attract more students, as indicated by their biographies:

- Through YouTube, my classroom has now grown to millions of students around the world. (A26)
- My popular YouTube channel helps 200,000 students from around the world improve their English grammar and pronunciation with my fun, clear and easy-to-follow lessons (A31)

Hence, it can be seen that while online teachers do not wish to be identified as micro-celebrities who are famous, the visibility and attention that comes with it is nevertheless an important way for the business to be sustainable. Online teachers thus occupy a unique position in that they need to be famous for their teaching to be meaningful and far-reaching, but this seems to be in conflict with their definition of what a teacher should be like. Unlike the 'star-tutors' biographies examined by Yung and Yuan (2020) who use superfluous language to describe themselves as 'king', 'top', or 'best', such descriptions are seldom used in YouTube online teachers' self-description (B7 being the exception by describing herself as 'star lecturer'). Online teachers' biographies are mostly based on facts and their life stories, which is also observed in Curran and Jenks' (2022) work.

Discussion

The purpose of the paper was to investigate the complex identity construction of online English teachers on YouTube by drawing on the banners of their YouTube channel 'Home' page, biographies, and semi-structured interviews with five online teachers. The paper argues that online teacher identities are products of the intersection between the professional teacher identity, the entrepreneurial identity, online micro-celebrity persona operating within raciolinguistic ideologies. Operating within the online ELT marketplace dominated by raciolinguistic and neoliberal ideologies, these identities are at times in conflict with one another (Chao 2022), and online teachers employ different strategies to align or distance themselves from various identity positions in order to foreground their primary identity: English language teacher. Underlying all of this is the notion of linguistic entrepreneurship which celebrates multilingualism, or mastering English in the current context, as a means to enhance one's worth in the world (De Costa, Park, and Wee 2016). Related to this is the appeal to learners to gain membership in the imagined global multilingual community to expand ones' identity possibilities and agency (Zheng, Lu, and Ren 2020; Sung 2021).

With regard to the first research question on the construction of online teacher identity, the study found that the public and performative nature of teaching on YouTube has brought about additional demands on online teachers. Not only is the performance of a professional teacher identity important but other identities are also seen as important means to construct the entire online teacher identity. Nevertheless, the analysis reveals that despite the importance of other identities that are seen as integral to the success of one's online teaching career, such as the construction of an entrepreneurial identity and a social media micro-celebrity persona, online teachers do not necessarily identify with all these positions (Chao 2022). This study reveals that online teacher identity is multi-layered and complex, and researchers cannot adopt a 'divide-and-analyse' position (Block and Corona 2016, 509).

Regarding the second research question on how online teachers interact within linguistic entrepreneurship and raciolinguistic ideologies, it is noteworthy from the analysis that instead of feeling insecure and victimised, NNESTs are able to portray themselves as 'role models' who provide motivation for English learners. By making their private English learning journey public, NNESTs are seen as active agents who constantly reshape themselves 'in response to a different sociopolitical

and sociocultural milieu' by taking advantage of digital technology (Wolff and De Costa 2017, 85). Digital technology thus provides the affordances for NNESTs to liberate from the raciolinguistic ideologies frequently associated with ELT. However, the extent to which this is achieved remains to be seen, as indicated in the contradictions between the different identities illustrated in the findings. The stories of NNESTs' English learning journey can thus be seen as another form of 'saviorist' discourse which warrants further investigation. The findings also reveal that although raciolinguistic ideologies still abound, they are not foregrounded as the most important dimension in the construction of online teachers' identities. This could be attributed to the increased awareness in the ELT community of the detrimental effects of perpetuating such ideologies. Having said that, more work still needs to be done to enable and empower online teachers to develop translanguaging pedagogies suitable for online teaching contexts (Ho and Feng 2022).

Conclusion

Online language teachers are under constant pressure to (re-)brand in line with the changing socio-economic environment. This paper illustrated how online teachers made different identity positions relevant and irrelevant in advancing and prioritising their primary identity, that is, the professional teacher identity. The findings also uncovered how professional teacher identity, social media micro-celebrity persona, linguistic entrepreneurship, and raciolinguistic ideologies are interspersed in the way online teachers construct their online persona.

There are several limitations to this paper. Firstly, only a small number of BC are included in this study because of the linguistic proficiency of the research team. Therefore, the paper can only make preliminary comparisons between EMC and BC without the ability to produce generalisable findings. While popular Japanese and Korean bilingual channels are included in the list, the information was translated before analysis could be made, which could result in misinterpretation. Secondly, this paper only focuses on the banners, biographies, and five online teachers' interviews, and it has not included other means of identity performance such as the design of the video lessons, the interactions between online teachers and learners, and the design of their personal website. Future studies can conduct a more fine-grained analysis of a few online teachers' profiles in order to generate richer insights related to how online teachers construct their identities. Virtual ethnography can also be used to further understand life as an online teacher, many of which are hidden from the public's eye. Learners' responses can also be sought to understand the principles by which language learners select online teachers.

As observed in Curran (2021), the gig economy driven by technology has provided more opportunities for teachers from a variety of background to teach online, and technology sometimes perpetuates raciolinguistic ideologies that are influencing the industry, for instance, the use of customer-based ratings and algorithms 'compound the effects of prevalent raciolinguistic ideologies' (p.11). Despite its focus on the complex and dynamic nature of the construction of online teachers' identities, one major implication of this study is that it revealed how NNESTs can exercise their agency to start to challenge discrimination based on grounds of language ability, nationality, and ethnicity by telling their own language learning stories. It is only by collective actions that raciolinguistic ideologies can be identified and stopped in online ELT. This study also aims to raise awareness of the professionalism of online teachers on YouTube. While a lot of attention has been paid to their popularity, it is equally important to understand the unique challenges they face and to understand the complex identity work they put in to present themselves as 'successful' online English teachers.

Notes

1. A popular online English teacher was interviewed by BBC News for the success of her online teaching channel: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-39672663.

2. While this classification has been critiqued in the literature, it still plays an influential role in accounting for the spread and development of English globally. The terminologies associated with this model are still used in this article for clarity.
3. In recent years, there is a greater awareness of the raciolinguistic ideologies associated with native-speakerism among online ELT professionals. One specific incident has been particularly impactful to the industry, which led to one of the most popular online teachers on YouTube publishing an apology video for perpetuating 'accent discrimination' in her videos. In the apology video, the teacher appeals for the industry to be aware of the unintended consequences of creating videos which may perpetuate raciolinguistic ideologies.

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Appendix

Basic information on the channels as of July 2023.

Code name of the channel	Number of subscribers	Languages used in the video
A1	9.39 M	English
A2	7.55 M	
A3	5.46 M	
A4	5 M	
A5	4.84 M	
A6	2.26 M	
A7	2.11 M	
A8	1.71 M	
A9	1.55 M	
A10	1.52 M	
A11	1.43 M	

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Code name of the channel	Number of subscribers	Languages used in the video
A12	1.35 M	
A13	1.31 M	
A14	1.28 M	
A15	1.09 M	
A16	1.06 M	
A17	1 M	
A18	956 K	
A19	944 K	
A20	906 K	
A21	904 K	
A22	810 K	
A23	658 K	
A24	627 K	
A25	572 K	
A26	528 K	
A27	497 K	
A28	411 K	
A29	376 K	
A30	362 K	
A31	362 K	
A32	321 K	
A33	299 K	
A34	281 K	
A35	262 K	
A36	87.5 K	
B1	2.73 M	Mandarin and English
B2	1.35 M	Mandarin and English
B3	784 K	Mandarin and English
B4	625 K	Mandarin and English
B5	476 K	Mandarin and English
B6	449 K	Korean and English
B7	447 K	Korean and English
B8	441 K	Japanese and English
B9	425 K	English with Chinese subtitles
B10	408 K	Korean and English
B11	290 K	Cantonese and English
B12	290 K	Mandarin and English
B13	216 K	Mandarin and English
B14	210 K	Japanese and English
B15	208 K	Mandarin and English
B16	114 K	Mandarin and English
B17	86 K	Korean and English
B18	84.5 K	Mandarin and English
B19	73.6 K	Korean and English
B20	56.2 K	Korean and English
B21	49.4 K	Japanese and English
B22	41.9 K	Mandarin and English
B23	27.6 K	Cantonese and English
B24	14.8 K	Mandarin and English
B25	9.07 K	Mandarin and English
B26	8.37 K	Mandarin and English
B27	8.28 K	Japanese and English
B28	5.31 K	Japanese and English
B29	5.03 K	Mandarin and English
B30	2.87 K	Japanese and English
B31	1.72 K	Korean and English
B32	1.04 K	English with simplified Chinese subtitles
B33	1.04 K	English with Japanese explanations
B34	319	Cantonese and English