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Competing for Views and Students: The Implications of Platformization for Online Language Teaching

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Abstract

Language teachers increasingly make use of digital platforms to find students, upload teaching material, give lessons, and promote themselves. This article examines the accounts of two popular English teachers from China on the social media platform Douyin and explores similarities and differences in the two teachers' self-branding strategies. We suggest that the two teachers are emblematic of *platform language teacherpreneurs*: individuals who creatively utilize their previous experiences and self-branding skills to promote themselves as language teachers on social media platforms and online language tutoring platforms. We argue that platformization holds important implications for TESOL, including not only for how language teachers construct their identities, but also for how we understand the category of language teacher in an age of ubiquitous social media.

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Digital platforms are a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary life. People use digital platforms to look for jobs, listen to music, find romantic partners, pay bills, and do other quotidian activities—in other words, contemporary society is witnessing a "platformization of everyday life" (Fung, Ismangil, He, & Cao, 2022). Recently, scholars in TESOL have devoted increasing attention to language teachers' use of digital platforms by examining language teachers' use of online tutoring platforms (e.g., Curran & Jenks, 2023) as well as social media platforms such as YouTube (e.g., Chao, 2022; Ho, 2023) and Instagram (e.g., Aslan, 2024; Nejadghanbar, Song, & Hu, 2024). While earlier studies about digital platforms for language learning and teaching tended to focus on pedagogical implications (e.g., Chun, Kern, &

Smith, 2016; Terantino, 2011), an emerging body of research has started to focus on online teachers' professional identities (e.g., Ho, 2023; Jiang, 2022b; Nejadghanbar et al., 2024) and financial imperatives (Panaligan & Curran, 2022). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the underlying process that has facilitated the phenomenon of language teachers using online platforms. We call this underlying process *platformization of language teaching*. The term platformization of language teaching (hereinafter used interchangeably with platformization) captures the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of individuals using digital platforms to find, recruit, and instruct students, as well as upload or stream teaching materials. We argue that platformization has a variety of implications for what it means to be a language teacher by contributing to a blurring of the lines between language teacher, entrepreneur, and celebrity.

To examine the implications of platformization for TESOL, this article adopts a multimodal approach to analyze two Chinese English teachers' videos on the popular Chinese social media platform Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). Our analysis of the profiles suggests that platformization is giving rise to a new type of language teacher subjectivity: the *platform language teacherpreneur*. We first discuss the notion of platformization and situate it within the wider context of neoliberalism. Next, we review the extant literature on teachers' use of for-profit digital platforms and articulate our research questions. We then describe the multimodal approach adopted in this study, followed by a discussion of our findings. We finish by discussing the limitations and implications of our study.

Platformization

At a basic level, platformization can be understood as the rise to economic prominence—and dominance—of technology companies that act as third-party facilitators connecting different categories of users. Poell, Nieborg, and Van Dijck (2019, p. 7) explain the following:

> Traditional pre-digital market relations, with some notable exceptions, tend to be one-sided, with a company directly transacting with buyers. Conversely, platforms constitute two-sided, or increasingly, complex multi-sided markets that function as aggregators of transactions among end-users and a wide variety of third parties.

A prime example of the platformization phenomenon is YouTube, which facilitates individual content creators to upload videos and facilitates other users to watch these videos. At the same time, YouTube

facilitates advertisers to directly target users. Casilli and Posada (2019) suggest that while platforms represent a new form of digital technology, they have emerged in large part in response to existing social and economic issues that predate their appearance, including the diminishing efficiency of traditional enterprises and markets (cf. Srnicek, 2017). One advantage of platforms is that they can bypass the hierarchical nature of traditional companies because they are "predicated on promises of horizontal coordination and independent access to material and informational resources" (Casilli & Posada, 2019, p. 296). As a result of this *horizontal* rather than hierarchal coordination, all platform users (e.g., content creators) are ostensibly able to participate on an equal footing with each other. Key to the success of most platforms are complex algorithms that determine what content users will see, including both advertised and user-generated content (Bishop, 2018).

Self-Branding under Neoliberalism

Platformization is affecting language teaching in a number of ways. Two of the most evident ways are as follows: (1) the rise of online tutoring platforms (OTPs); and (2) teachers' use of social media platforms (SMPTs) to upload lessons, stream content, attract potential students, and/or sell courses. On both OTPs and SMPTs, teachers curate their publicly displayed personas to attract students (Aslan, 2024; Curran & Jenks, 2023; Ho, 2023). In other words, teachers engage in *self-branding*. While promotion and self-branding have traditionally been important in the context of offline language institutes as well (Chang, 2019; Yung & Yuan, 2020), platformization results in individual teachers assuming full responsibility for promoting themselves. The pressure on individual teachers to act as "brands" reflects not only the technological affordances of digital platforms—which allow individuals to reach enormous audiences—but also the dominance of neoliberalism more broadly. Indeed, Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2016) argue that while the precursors to the notion of self-branding can be identified in literature from the 1920s, the current relevance of self-branding is due in large part to the confluence of two concomitant factors: social media and neoliberal individualism. Likewise, Piletić (2023, p. 5) argues that the widespread success of digital platforms today should be understood as "inherently wedded to broader, neoliberal trends towards flexibilization, precaritization and casualization." In other words, the rise of digital platforms, including the popularity of content creation as a full-time job, should be understood as imbricated with broader changes to the global economy—including the decline of full-time employment over the past several decades (Kallaberg, 2011).

In addition to being a powerful economic ideology that champions the free market (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2013), neoliberalism can also be understood as a personal philosophy that affects how individuals understand themselves and how they should behave (Park, 2016). Neoliberalism encourages individuals to reconceptualize themselves as entrepreneurs of the self, leading them to internalize the idea that they must take every opportunity to exploit their human capital (Shin & Park, 2016). Neoliberalism encourages people to see this self-entrepreneurship as not merely a strategy for market success, but also a signal of their moral worth (Park, 2021). The result is that individuals increasingly see themselves as "linguistic entrepreneurs" who feel morally compelled to exploit all their linguistic resources in pursuit of market competitiveness (De Costa, Park, & Wee, 2016).

Self-Branding among Online Language Teachers

A growing body of literature recognizes the importance of self-branding for teachers who use digital platforms. For example, Curran and Jenks (2023) argue that teachers on online tutoring platforms are placed under ever-escalating pressure to self-brand in order to compete in the "gig economy." Specifically, Curran and Jenks (2023) identify a number of discursive strategies that teachers adopt to brand themselves. Likewise, Ho (2023) explores how teachers discursively construct their identities on YouTube. Ho (2023, p. 4) discusses the challenges that online language teachers face and highlights that online teachers have to "[not only] 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." Similarly, Chao (2022) explores how two language teachers construct markedly different identities from each other on their YouTube channels. Finally, both Aslan (2024) and Nejadghanbar et al. (2024) examine how English teachers on Instagram balance the imperatives of being both a brand and a teacher.

The online teachers discussed in the studies above all to various degrees cultivate microcelebrity, which Senft (2013, p. 346) defines as "the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same." Extant research has begun to recognize the multiple subjectivities and self-branding discourses that online teachers must adopt in order to succeed in the microcelebrity-rich environment of social media platforms (Aslan, 2024). However, the diversity of teachers' self-branding strategies has yet to be explored in sufficient depth. Further, much of the previous research has started from the assumption

that those teaching English online are teachers first and entrepreneurs or microcelebrities second. However, this is not necessarily the case for all online teachers. Indeed, part of the importance of platformization is that it allows anyone with access to the Internet and a social media account to present themselves as a teacher, regardless of credentials or teaching experience. Individuals have incentives to (re) brand themselves as teachers in part because average users of social media platforms can accrue large followings that they can subsequently monetize (Abidin, 2016). As a result, many popular online "teachers" are not credentialed teachers who have opened social media accounts, but rather media-savvy individuals who have successfully transitioned into teaching via self-branding. Given the low barriers to entry and the high premium on entertainment (rather than sound pedagogy), social media platforms essentially facilitate a kind of leveling of the playing field between individuals with teaching credentials and those without (Lin, Swart, & Zeng, 2023).

Because platformization enables people without language teaching credentials to successfully brand themselves as language teachers, it has the potential to influence public perceptions of what it means to be a language teacher (Curran & Jenks, 2023). There is evidence that understanding about what constitutes a language teacher may already be changing and that the traditional credentialed classroom teacher may no longer be understood as the ideal language teacher. For example, while earlier research did identify a hierarchy between traditional classroom teachers and private tutors (Trent, 2016), there is evidence that perceptions may be shifting. For example, Yung and Yuan's (2020) analysis of the online biographies of 41 private tutors finds that tutors embrace their identity as private tutors and purposefully cultivate a celebrity image. Yung and Yuan (2020) note that students may be particularly drawn to private tutors' charismatic personalities. Similarly, Xiong, Li, and Hu (2022) highlight tutors' embrace of the "salesperson" identity. These findings underscore that definitions of language teacher identity are open to contestation and change (Barkhuizen, 2017).

Thus far, most of the research on the topic of for-profit online teaching has focused on just two platforms: LanguaSpeak and You-Tube. Exploration of a wider variety of platforms is necessary because platforms vary widely in their business models and affordances, which can influence how teachers brand themselves. One notable exception to the focus on LanguaSpeak and YouTube is the work of Jiang (2022a, 2022b). Jiang's (2022b) study of Douyin reveals how one teacher uses various semiotic resources to promote himself as an "authentic" English speaker, offering fascinating insights into how language is commodified in the context of a Chinese platform.

In light of the literature reviewed above, this study proceeds from the following research questions:

RQ1: What strategies of identity construction and self-branding are adopted by English teachers on Douyin?
RQ2: What do the self-branding strategies adopted by English teachers on Douyin reflect about how platformization is complicating understandings of the category "language teacher?"

METHODOLOGY

Social media platforms facilitate purposeful and curated performances of identity (Papacharissi, 2011). Operating within a social milieu of linguistic entrepreneurship (De Costa et al., 2016), online teachers use social media platforms such as YouTube and Douyin in order to attract viewers and monetize their teaching. However, we do not take the essentialist perspective that teachers' online personas are inherently artificial, nor do we assume that these performed identities are necessarily incongruous with or less legitimate than teachers' offline performances of identities. That is, we understand identity to be negotiable, performed, and articulated through discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Therefore, we proceed from the perspective that teachers' profiles and videos reflect teachers' purposeful choices to perform and enact an outward-facing persona (Darvin, 2022) as well as the affordances of the particular platform teachers are using (Ho & Tai, 2020).

Multimodal Analysis

In analyzing the data, we adopted a multimodal approach (Jewitt, 2013). Multimodality refers to an interdisciplinary approach to understanding meaning making across multiple semiotic modes and responds to "demands to look beyond language in a rapidly changing social and technological landscape" (Jewitt, 2013, p. 253). Multimodality recognizes that meaning making rarely occurs via a single mode but instead emerges through a *multimodal ensemble* that may involve a combination of writing, speech, sound, etc. (Jewitt, 2005). Multimodal analysis is a popular method for researchers examining videos on social media platforms (e.g., Darvin, 2022; Wang & Feng, 2023).

Crucially, multimodal analysis allowed us to go beyond the analysis of written and spoken language alone and investigate aspects of the teachers' videos that might otherwise have been incorrectly coded as "non-data" (Jewitt & Jones, 2008). However, as Jewitt (2013, p. 263)

notes, multimodality is open to criticism because "it can seem rather impressionistic in its analysis." In order to mitigate potential critiques of our analysis as superficial or biased, we systematically analyzed the data multiple times.

Reflexivity

Scholars increasingly recognize the importance of practicing reflexivity in conducting research (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023). Hence, it is important to consider how the two authors' identities and experiences affected our data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Bucholtz et al., 2023). The first author is an ethnically Chinese woman who was born and raised in China. She was an avid user of Douyin for several years before starting to conduct research about the platform. The second author is a mixed White and Asian man. He has some Chinese proficiency but was born and raised outside of China. The second author has conducted extensive research on the topic of online language tutoring. Because of our different backgrounds, we were able to combine both insider and outsider perspectives (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). To synthesize our individual perspectives, we engaged in an iterative and collaborative method of data analysis that involved revisiting our data multiple times and reflexively discussing our individual interpretations in order to reach a consensus.

Profile Selection and Thematic Coding

To select profiles, we first conducted a search on Douyin using the Chinese characters for "English teachers," "English teaching," and "English vlogger." We next created a list of the 30 English teaching accounts with the highest number of followers. From these 30 English teaching accounts we then selected two accounts for detailed analysis: *English Teacher Anne* (Anne) and *Learning Spoken Language with Brian* (Brian).[1] We made the decision to select two teachers' accounts so that we could compare within and across individual cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Focusing on more than two teachers would have made it difficult to analyze each teacher's account and videos in sufficient depth to answer our research questions. Anne and Brian were purposively selected from the broader corpus because these two teachers differ across a range of variables, including gender, self-branding strategy, teaching style, and personal background.

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[1] These are pseudonyms.

The first author watched all the videos uploaded by each teacher (more than 1500 in total). Based on this initial screening, 15 videos from each account were selected for further analysis by both authors. The 15 videos were purposively selected in order to (1) represent broadly the type of content uploaded by each teacher, and (2) ensure diversity in terms of content from each account. Next, the spoken and written text from the videos was transcribed and translated by the first author. Then, both authors independently coded the 15 selected videos from each teacher's profile as well as the "pinned" videos on each teacher's profile (three for Brian and two for Anne). Pinned videos are videos that the content creator chooses to highlight to viewers and thus represent key sites of identity construction and self-branding. Each author first independently watched the 35 videos (30 non-pinned and 5 pinned videos) and individually coded them for initial themes. Next, we watched the videos together multiple times. Following Bezemer and Jewitt (2010) we alternated our attention between different modes by turning the sound on or off or watching with eyes open and closed. Through this iterative process we were able to identify how various modes functioned together to create multimodal ensembles that served specific self-branding functions.

In examining the self-branding discourses embedded in the two teachers' multimodal ensembles, we drew on the multistep procedure for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps include generating initial codes, collating codes into themes, and defining and naming themes. Rather than being a rigid set of steps that "reveal" themes, thematic analysis is in fact best conceptualized as a *process* that allows for the formulation and elucidation of themes based on reflexive engagement with the data (Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2022). In keeping with thematic analysis's concern with process, we treated discrepancies in our coding as opportunities for further discussion and refinement of our themes. Likewise, initial disagreements about themes or data analysis were resolved through a combination of repeated coding and in-depth discussion. In this way, our iterative analysis of uploaders' multimodal ensembles continued until we could confidently agree about our collective interpretation. In the findings section we include direct quotes from 11 videos: six from Anne's account and five from Brian's account. These videos ranged in length from 15 s to 2 min and 52 s.

Overview of the Study Site

Launched in September 2016, as of June 2021, Douyin is a popular short-video sharing platform in China with more than 600 million

daily active users (ByteDance, 2024a, 2024b). Douyin usage is driven by algorithms that drive user engagement and dictate both what users consume and what content creators produce (Liang, 2022). According to official statistics from Douyin, in the year 2020, more than 22 million content creators on Douyin earned a total combined revenue of roughly USD 5.83 billion (Douyin & Juliang, 2020). A small proportion of these content creators are teachers of English who earn money by selling video-recorded online courses (Jiang, 2022b).

Ethics

The teachers whose accounts we analyzed are hugely popular and have millions of followers. Due to their status as semi-public figures and the data's public nature, we felt comfortable analyzing their videos without their consent. However, based on the best practices guidelines from the Association of Internet Researchers we still decided to assign pseudonyms and blur their faces (Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, & Ess, 2019). The study received approval from a university ethics committee.

FINDINGS

In order to most clearly highlight the similarities and differences between the two cases we examine (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), we present our findings in terms of themes that are shared in both teachers' accounts and themes that are distinct. The most prominent shared themes were (1) "immersive entertainment" wherein both teachers exploited the multimodal affordances of Douyin to produce entertaining videos and (2) "standing out," wherein both teachers sought to differentiate themselves from other Douyin teachers. Themes distinct to each teacher are "credentialed professional" (Anne) and "being a maverick" (Brian).

English Teacher Anne

Anne has more than 10 million followers and close to 50 million "likes." Anne's cover photo includes the eye-catching slogan "Help every ordinary family to learn English" in bold font located at the center of the photo and a close-up photo of herself in a dress located on the right. Her profile picture is a selfie taken in an indoor environment, with her head slightly tilted to one side while she smiles winsomely at the camera. Anne's bio mentions her academic qualification, areas of expertise, live stream schedule, as well as a recruitment ad for

new employees for her education brand. Shown below the bio are the links to her video-recorded online courses and fan groups. At the time of our data collection, there were six courses on display in Anne's product window. The rest of the profile page shows the videos Anne has uploaded in reversed chronological order. As of late 2023, Anne had close to 1000 videos in total, including two pinned videos. Figure 1 displays a blurred screenshot of Anne's profile page and a brief explanation that explains the different features of Douyin profiles. According to Douyin's official certified data processing service provider, Douchacha, Anne livestreamed close to 300 times in 2023, reaching an audience of more than 30 million, and generating sales revenue of more than USD 10 million (Douchacha, 2023).

Learning Spoken Language with Brian

As of late 2023, Brian had more than 3 million followers and more than 20 million "likes." His profile picture is a headshot of himself dressed in a formal suit, smiling and pointing his index finger to one
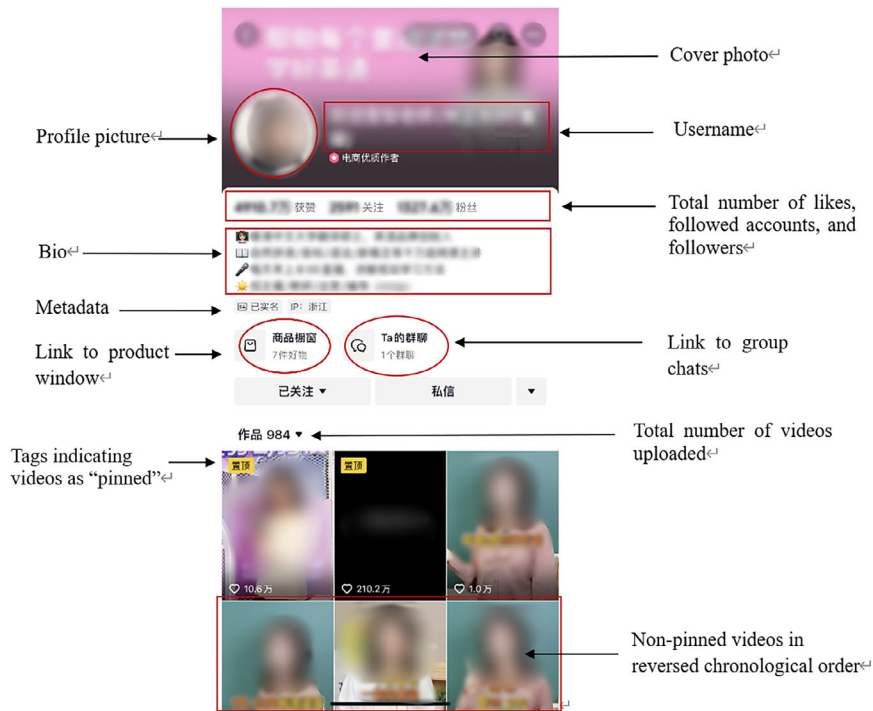

FIGURE 1. A screenshot of Anne's Douyin profile page.

side of his head. The first line of his bio prominently highlights that he is an engineer who loves traveling around the world. His profile also indicates that he offers a free live stream for IELTS classes as well as classes utilizing picture books. The rest of the profile page displays Brian's seven-hundred-plus videos, including three pinned videos. In order to demonstrate what Brian's profile page looks like, a blurred screenshot is provided with illustrations of the different functions and affordances of Douyin profiles (Figure 2). Estimating the amount of money Brian has earned from teaching on Douyin is more difficult than in the case of Anne because Brian attempts to direct viewers to buy his courses through a different social media platform.

Commonalities between Anne and Brian

Exploiting Douyin's multimodal affordances: Immersive entertainment. One thing that both Anne's and Brian's profiles have in common is the creative exploitation of Douyin's multimodal affordances. Both teachers use a variety of multimodal semiotic resources (e.g.,
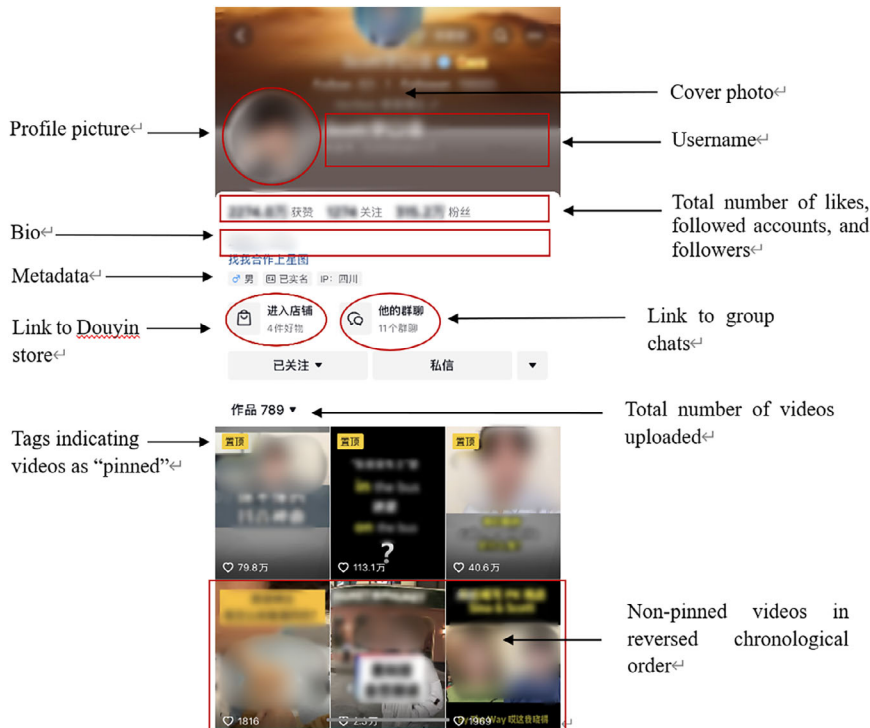

FIGURE 2. A screenshot of Brian's Douyin profile page.

text, image, sound, music, emoji, font, and layout), which results in highly entertaining and immersive videos. Both teachers also urge their viewers to make use of Douyin's affordances to like their videos, come to their live streams, and buy their courses via links on their profile pages. In their efforts to craft creative and dynamic clips that are also very short (most are 40–90 s long) both Brian and Anne were aided by Douyin's in-app editing tool, Jianyin ("剪映" in Chinese). Jianyin helps content creators to utilize a variety of multimodal resources in concert to create dynamic multimodal ensembles. That is, Douyin explicitly seeks to help content creators to combine multiple modes to create complex multimodal ensembles of text, song, image, and video. Jianyin, which is developed by Douyin's parent company, has been identified as playing a crucial role in helping content creators easily create dynamic multimodal content (Liang, 2022). Further, Douyin also runs official accounts that upload materials that explain to content creators how they can produce more sophisticated videos in order to expand their audience (Liang, 2022).

We found that Brian and Anne both are highly successful in exploiting the multimodal affordances of Douyin in order to simultaneously (1) convey pedagogical material, (2) ensure the audience sees their faces almost continuously in the videos, and (3) grab the audience's attention with music and overlaid text and graphics. Often, all three goals are accomplished in a single video. For example, both teachers often use the "split screen" function, which allows them to show themselves speaking directly to the audience while also including other important visual information below. Because they are competing against thousands of other teachers for views in an attention economy driven by algorithms (Curran, 2023), teachers have a strong incentive to ensure their profiles are recognizable and thereby increase the value of their brand. Therefore, keeping the audience's focus on their face is an important self-branding strategy that exploits the affordances of Douyin. The prominence of teachers' faces in the videos also helps explain why both Anne and Brian devote a great deal of attention to their appearance. Both teachers place heavy emphasis on their personal grooming and neither would look out of place as stars of a television drama. That is, they both *look* and *feel* like celebrities.

Crucially, the teachers do not merely use multiple modes simultaneously but orchestrate multimodal ensembles that bolster the credibility of the persona that each teacher cultivates. We discuss the important role of this multimodal branding in the section on the distinct themes that we identified in their videos.

Standing out. Because there are so many English teachers on Douyin, teachers strive to set themselves apart from other teachers.

Responding to the pressure to stand out from the sea of content creators, both teachers included material in their videos that stressed that they were different—and better—than other teachers. In many cases, these efforts at differentiation took the form of warning viewers about the ostensibly erroneous or inferior teaching techniques adopted by other teachers. For example, in one of Anne's videos, she differentiates her vocabulary teaching method from that of other teachers: "If someone tells you that you can learn English well by reading more texts and reciting more grammar, you must not believe it. They must be fooling you."

In another video, Anne goes further and makes the claim that other teachers may be trying to silence her for sharing her superior learning methods (which are essentially phonics). She explains the following:

> Two days ago, I shared an efficient way to memorize vocabulary in the live stream. So many people scolded me via direct message. Isn't it because I published some information on how to improve the English method, which closed the information gap?

Later in the video, Anne seems to imply that nefarious forces (i.e., her competitors) may even try to silence her for her efficient techniques: "This video will most likely be deleted. Be sure to click a little red heart and save it to watch again." The threat of deletion adds an element of urgency to Anne's calls for students to like and save her video and also gives viewers the sense that they need to engage with her content—before it is too late.

While Anne makes criticisms of other teachers, Brian goes even further, directly and combatively discrediting other teachers. For example, Brian has a series of videos called "The English Teaching that Cheated You on Douyin." In these videos, Brian points out the supposed incorrect or inauthentic use of English that other teachers teach in their videos. While doing so, he takes advantage of Douyin's multimodal affordances (discussed above) by interjecting other teachers' videos into his own and sometimes including screenshots of online dictionaries. In some cases, he includes video clips of so-called "native speakers" from films or television that support his argument and which ostensibly prove that other teachers are teaching incorrect or inauthentic material. In one video, he takes a pause from complaining about other teachers to direct a rhetorical question to an imagined audience of teachers: "Can you [teachers] stop teaching carelessly every day?" In another video, he responds to a teacher who has given a confusing explanation of when to use "hot water" versus "boiled water" by including in his video description: "Drink more hot water when you have nothing to do, and do not come and fool the students." Brian directly engages with other teachers' comments or videos

and seems to relish the confrontational nature of these one-sided virtual interactions. Thus, while both Anne and Brian adopt a self-branding strategy of seeking to differentiate themselves from other teachers, Brian adopts a far more combative tone. Brian's aggressive tone is somewhat surprising in that it purposefully antagonizes other Douyin English teachers. Nonetheless, his acerbic comments about other teachers reflect a sound branding strategy for two reasons. First, his combative comments about fellow teachers frame him as a tell-it-how-it-is maverick—an important aspect of his overall persona as a teacher (elaborated below). Second, given the extremely competitive nature of teaching on Douyin, speaking cordially about other teachers is neither expected nor likely to earn him any tangible benefits in terms of reciprocal actions from other teachers. In other words, Brian has little incentive to speak kindly about other teachers.

Taken as a whole, the two teachers' attempts to differentiate themselves from other Douyin English instructors reflect the competitive nature of an algorithm-driven environment such as Douyin where teachers fiercely compete with each other for viewers—and customers.

Differences between Anne and Brian

Above, we identified several similarities between Anne's and Brian's self-branding techniques. Crucially, rather than reflecting self-branding strategies distinct to these two teachers, these similarities are shared by the majority of the top 30 English teachers on Douyin. We also identified a variety of differences between Anne and Brian in terms of how they discursively construct their identities and brand themselves. For example, Anne brands herself as a highly professional and relatively *traditional* instructor while Brian explicitly boasts about his lack of formal qualifications as well as his unorthodox teaching style.

Professional, credentialed, and consistent. Anne uses her videos to present herself as quite similar to a traditional teacher of the type viewers would have encountered in a school setting or a traditional offline private institute. For example, Anne highlights that she majored in English and has previous experience teaching English in China's capital, Beijing, for more than 10 years. In both of her pinned videos, she mentions her "award-winning teaching." She also includes on-stage photos of her receiving awards and delivering public lectures. In her second pinned video, she notes with pride "Every public class is full. [I was] awarded as an outstanding teacher at the annual teachers' conference." Anne's videos reflect her purposeful effort to associate herself with a traditional teacher identity, as represented through experience and public

recognition. In another video, Anne discusses having received an award for being a top streamer in the education category at the Douyin Annual Creator Conference. In the background of the video, she conspicuously displays trophies and certificates she has won through her teaching on Douyin. Anne's highlighting of awards, achievements, and objective performance criteria reflect her attempt to substantiate her identity as a highly credentialed and professional teacher.

In bolstering her overall image as a traditionally qualified teacher, Anne mentions her elite education and previous professional experiences. For example, in many videos she introduces herself by saying "Hello, I am Teacher Anne, Master of Translation at CUHK [Chinese University of Hong Kong] and I have many years of teaching experience." In one video, she explicitly asks her audience the following rhetorical question: "If you don't learn English from a professional English teacher, who will you learn from?" This quote emphasizes Anne's branding strategy of aligning her identity with that of a traditional teacher replete with qualifications and credentials. This branding strategy helps differentiate Anne from the wide number of non-credentialed teachers on Douyin (including Brian) with whom she must compete for students.

Another way that Anne aligns her identity with that of traditional teachers is by stressing that she posts videos regularly and at the same time—traits usually associated with traditional classroom-based teaching. For example, in one video she highlights that she has been streaming at 8:00 am every day for more than a year. Another example of Anne's consistency is registered in her sartorial choices. Anne always dresses formally and over a period of more than 90 videos, Anne alternates between three similar outfits: a white blouse with a white bow, a beige blouse with a beige blouse, or a black and white dress. Anne also carefully chooses the locations in which her videos are filmed in order to maintain consistency. Each video is filmed in an indoor environment and the setting often mimics a classroom by featuring bookshelves, a blackboard, or desks. In other words, the setting and style of Anne's videos as well as her sartorial choices help align her identity with a traditional classroom-based teacher.

In some ways, Anne's decision to brand herself as a "traditional" teacher makes her seem out of place on a social media platform. However, her adoption of this branding strategy can be understood as a purposeful attempt to appeal to those Douyin users who place comparatively less emphasis on the entertainment value provided by the teacher and more emphasis on teachers' pedagogical qualifications. Anne's profile may appeal to those learners who prefer a Douyin English teacher who is similar to teachers they have encountered before in school or private institutes. Finally, by branding herself as a

traditional teacher, Anne is able to more fully exploit her own previous experiences and biography and contrast herself with the many "unqualified" teachers on social media (Nejadghanbar et al., 2024).

As mentioned above, both Brian and Anne exploit multiple modes to enhance the attractiveness of their videos. More importantly, the resulting multimodal ensembles they orchestrate help them cultivate their desired personas. For example, in the video depicted in Figure 3, Anne uses the split screen to not only ensure students see her face (top-half of the split screen) throughout the entire video but she also cultivates her image as a traditionally credentialed, professional teacher. The bottom half of the screen shows an image of a circle that gradually becomes filled with lines and text explaining the use of prepositions in English (e.g., "on" and "in"). Anne speaks animatedly to the audience while the lesson unfolds below, with the circle gradually becoming populated with figures. Meanwhile, explanatory text appears alongside the circle. Anne's hand gestures in the top half are timed to illustrate the points being enumerated in the graphic shown in the bottom half. In addition, music is overlaid. Crucially, in addition to the pedagogical content that appears in the bottom half of the split screen, a small box of text that lists her professional credentials has been inserted into the video. The overall result of Anne's combination of multiple modes in each half of the split screen is a multimodal ensemble that helps brand Anne as a reliable and professional teacher.
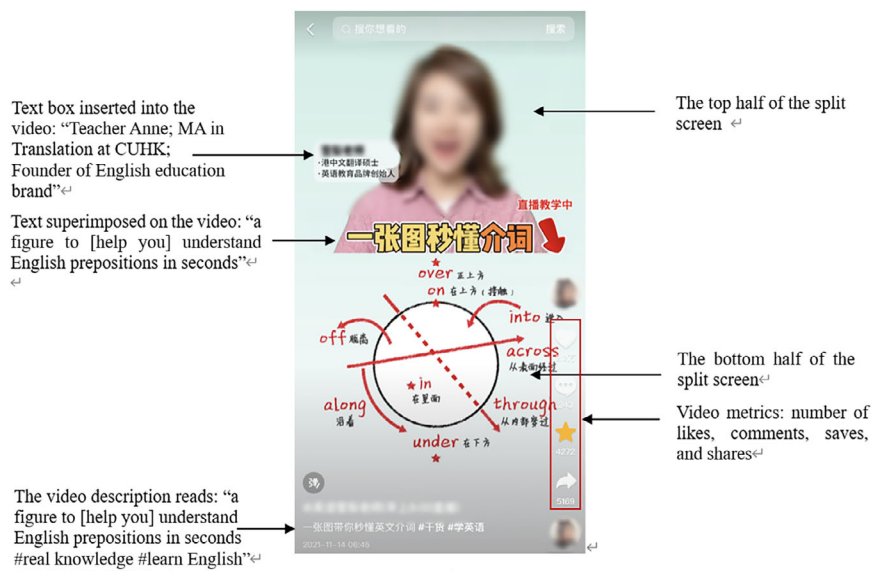

FIGURE 3. A screenshot of Anne's Douyin video using split screen mode.

Nonprofessional, non-credentialed, and inconsistent. In stark contrast to Anne, Brian purposefully constructs his identity as that of an outsider and he highlights the fact that he lacks traditional pedagogical qualifications. That is, Brian brands himself by constructing a teacher persona that is in direct opposition to professional teachers such as Anne. Key to Brian's success in crafting this identity is his self-identification as a so-called *diaosi*. The self-deprecating slang term *diaosi* is described in a 2013 article in *The Atlantic*:

> [originating] as an insult for a poor, unattractive young person who stayed at home all day playing video games, with dim prospects for the future—in other words, a loser (Zhang & Barreda, 2013).

Despite the term's negative connotations, Brian repeatedly describes himself as a *diaosi*. For example, he highlights to his viewers that unlike other prominent teachers (e.g., Anne), he graduated from a "*diaosi* university." While Anne frames her previous experiences as making her qualified to instruct students, Brian cleverly brands himself by construing his lack of both professional experience and elite education as an advantage:

> I haven't been to tutorial classes or studied abroad. [But] why can't I share my learning experience? For regular people like us, the experiences of those students from prestigious universities or who studied overseas don't have much reference value.

Contrasting "us" with "students from prestigious universities or who studied overseas" positions Brian as more relatable and likable than "elite" teachers such as Anne. In addition, it also constructs Brian and his viewers as members of an in-group that is then contrasted with an out-group made up of elites with overseas experiences that have little reference to the in-group.

Brian also challenges and vociferously criticizes many aspects of traditional schooling. For example, in one video he launches into a tirade against standard read-aloud exercises that are mandatory in public schools in China. He proclaims: "The more serious you read English in the morning reading [program] at school, the worse your English listening and speaking will be." Such statements are key to helping Brain brand himself as an "anti-teacher." Of course, Brian's "anti-teacher" persona is contrasted by his username "Learning Spoken Language with Brian" as well as the large sums of money he has made by selling English courses online.

Brian takes many opportunities to point out that he lacks a background as an English teacher. Brian proudly discusses his background as an engineer on a ship. In an obvious contrast to Anne, who stressed her consistency, Brian highlights his *lack* of consistency. For example,

he uses the hashtag "*the irregular daily routine of an English teacher*" to explicitly call attention to his unconventional style and the fact that he uploads videos sporadically. While Anne's professional videos used multiple modes to underscore her identity as a professional teacher, Brian adopts multimodal resources to convey his identity as a down-to-earth and nonprofessional teacher. For example, in a video teaching about prepositions—the same topic addressed by Anne in the video discussed above—Brian orchestrates a multimodal ensemble to bolster his overall image as a down-to-earth teacher. Unlike the highly professional graphic portrayed in Anne's video, Brian's video depicts shapes, words, and arrows crudely drawn by hand on a sheet of paper. The video alternates between showing the sheet of paper and showing Brian. Crucially, the images of Brian are filmed in selfie mode by Brian himself and the camera shakes slightly, which contributes to the video feeling homemade (Figure 4). Behind Brian's smiling face, the viewer can clearly see Brian's cat sitting next to its litterbox. Upbeat music accompanies the fast-paced explanations and explanatory text that is overlaid throughout the video and Brian's voice at the beginning of the video has been altered, which adds a comedic effect to the whole video. The resulting multimodal ensemble positions Brian as nonprofessional and down-to-earth.

Besides branding himself as down-to-earth and authentic, Brian also positions himself as qualified to teach English due to his worldly
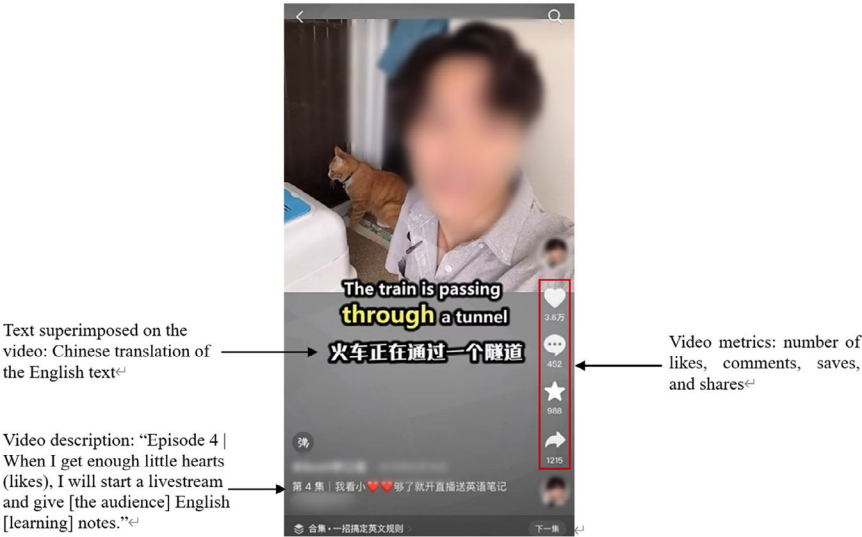

Text superimposed on the video: Chinese translation of the English text

The train is passing **through** a tunnel
火车正在通过一个隧道

Video description: "Episode 4 | When I get enough little hearts (likes), I will start a livestream and give [the audience] English [learning] notes."

第 4 集 | 我看小 ❤❤ 够了就开直播送英语笔记

Video metrics: number of likes, comments, saves, and shares

FIGURE 4. A screenshot of Brian's Douyin video of teaching about prepositions.

experiences and cosmopolitan attitude. For example, he notes in his bio that he "has circled the earth three times by the age of 20." In one illustrative example of his ostensible cosmopolitanism, Brian walks the viewer through the lyrics of the hit song "Señorita" by Shawn Mendes and Camilla Cabello. Instead of speaking English in the video, Brian speaks mostly in Spanish. While Brian's use of Spanish may seem counterintuitive given his status as an English teacher, the video serves to bolster his credibility as both fun-loving and cosmopolitan. He concludes the video by confidently confiding to his audience:

> Let me tell you quietly, Spanish-speaking places are generally very unrestrained. In Latin America, it's polite to stare at a young lady's butt when she walks by. So you can stare at her butt and say "Hola señorita, Tienes una sonrisa muy bonita. [Hello miss, you have a very beautiful smile.]" Like [the video].

(pinned video)

Brian's risqué comment in the pinned video helps establish himself as mischievous and fun-loving. Further, his claim to have cultural knowledge—especially about such a racy topic—serves to brand him as knowledgeable about the wider world. Given that learning English in China is seen as having broader connotations with globalization and cosmopolitan identities, Brian's decision to "pin" a video in which he speaks Spanish can be understood as an effective strategy for standing out from the crowd and attracting viewers.[2]

The logic of platformization facilitates the rise of teachers like Brian—individuals whose videos do not include only teaching or pedagogy-related materials, but instead serve up short, entertaining episodes that comment on myriad aspects of social life in China. For example, Brian has uploaded multiple videos that revolve primarily around him feeding cats or speaking humorously in various Chinese dialects. By explicitly positioning himself as an entertainer and a *diaosi* who lacks teaching credentials, Brian can be understood as contributing to blurring the line between teacher, micro-celebrity, and entrepreneur.

PLATFORM LANGUAGE TEACHERPRENEUR

Based on our analysis, we argue that, as a result of platformization, we are witnessing the emergence of a new type of language teacher: the *platform language teacherpreneur* (PLT). The term teacherpreneur

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[2] Brian also teaches Spanish, but Spanish makes up a very small percentage of the lessons he has taught and only a few of his videos are geared toward Spanish instruction.

was originally introduced by Shelton (2018) to refer to PreK–12 teachers who upload their original class materials to online marketplaces where other teachers can download the materials for a small fee. However, our deployment of the word "teacherpreneur" in PLT differs from Shelton's (2018) original usage. In contrast to the teachers that Shelton (2018) discussed, Anne and Brian are not teachers in brick-and-mortar schools and instead work entirely online. In addition, PLTs such as Brian and Anne are marketing themselves to (potential) language learners rather than targeting other teachers. Because they are working on social media platforms and marketing themselves to a general audience, PLTs make content that is widely accessible and entertaining to a general audience. As a result, PLTs may achieve celebrity status, as in the case of Anne and Brian. For these teachers, their status as entertaining celebrities becomes an important part of their self-branding because they are able to attract viewers who may not have been seeking out English-teaching content.

We believe that the notion of the PLT describes teachers on a wider variety of platforms and contexts. However, we admit that we have elaborated the concept based on an analysis of teachers' accounts from one platform (Douyin) in one particular local context (China). Thus, a potential criticism of our findings is that they apply only to the local context. However, we do not believe our findings are distinct to China or the Chinese context. Instead, we believe that PLTs represent a new form of teacher subjectivity and that the notion of PLT can refer to teachers on all platforms in which teachers navigate extreme competition in terms of recruiting students (often exacerbated by algorithms). Thus, our elaboration of the concept of PLT is purposefully broad so as to include not only English teachers on Douyin, but also language teachers on a wide variety of other platforms. For example, we believe that the notion of PLT applies equally well to teachers on other social media platforms, including teachers on Instagram (Nejadghanbar et al., 2024) and YouTube (Ho, 2023). In addition, the notion of PLT also applies to teachers on online tutoring platforms (OTPs) because those teachers operate under similar conditions of extreme, algorithm-driven competition and adopt similar self-branding strategies (Curran & Jenks, 2023). The discourses of professionalism and cosmopolitanism identified by Curran and Jenks (2023) in their study of OTP teachers' profiles are similarly reflected in Anne's self-branding as a "professional" teacher and Brian's embrace of a "cosmopolitan" teacher identity. In other words, rather than being specific to any one particular platform or one particular national context, we believe the emergence of the platform language teacherpreneur reflects exigencies inherent to platformization itself.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has discussed some of the effects that platformization is having on English teaching and teachers via an investigation of two highly successful English teachers on Douyin. We first identified some of the self-branding and identity construction strategies adopted by the two teachers. We found that both teachers utilized Douyin's affordances to create highly immersive and entertaining content. However, we found that the two teachers also adopted distinct strategies in constructing their identities and branding themselves. Specifically, by constructing the image of a professional, credentialed, and consistent teacher, Anne branded herself as being much like a traditional classroom teacher. In contrast, Brian explicitly embraced the image of a *diaosi* and branded himself as a non-credentialed and charismatic anti-teacher. While the popularity commanded by Brian indicates that online learners are open to learning from an unorthodox and non-credentialed teacher, Anne's immense popularity on Douyin demonstrates that many online learners still prefer a more "traditional" teacher—albeit one that produces highly entertaining and visually compelling content.

More broadly, we found that platformization is blurring the lines between the categories of language teacher, entrepreneur, and celebrity. One way that platformization is contributing to these lines becoming blurred is by facilitating the emergence of *platform language teacherpreneurs* (PLTs): individuals who creatively utilize their previous experiences and self-branding skills to promote themselves as language teachers on social media platforms and online language tutoring platforms. While the popularity of an "anti-teacher" such as Brian may reflect an ostensible democratization of TESOL whereby gatekeeping credentials (i.e., CELTA) are of lessening importance, it also raises concerns about quality instruction. Further, as Brian's risqué comments about "Spanish-speaking places" illustrate, PLTs are offering instruction not only about language but foreign cultures and people as well. Given that social media platforms' algorithms privilege contentious content (Munn, 2020), PLTs likely feel encouraged to invoke problematic and incendiary cultural stereotypes in their quest to attract viewers. This represents just one example of the potential negative consequences of the platformization of language teaching.

Our findings partly echo that of previous studies about teachers working in private tutoring. For example, the celebrity enjoyed by the two PLTs in this study is reminiscent of the "star tutors" in Yung and Yuan (2020). Likewise, the entrepreneurial acumen of the PLTs calls to mind the "salesperson" identity discussed by Xiong et al. (2022).

However, our findings also differ from those of previous studies in important ways. For example, while Trent ([2016](#)) identified barriers that made it difficult for private tutors to embrace their identities as professional teachers, Anne's self-branding is based on exploiting her image as a traditional classroom teacher. For his part, Brian purposefully and proudly highlights his *diaosi* background in order to position himself favorably vis-à-vis traditional teachers. Another difference between the two PLTs discussed in this study and the teachers discussed in most previous studies relates to the platform context. Brian and Anne both capitalize on the huge audience afforded them by social media. As a result of the wide reach they have via social media, their earnings and celebrity far outstrip that of the tutors identified in most previous studies (e.g., Xiong et al., [2022](#); Yung & Yuan, [2020](#)). However, while the monetary rewards on Douyin are high, the competition among teachers is extremely fierce. PLTs are essentially in direct competition with each other, which helps explain why Brian and Anne adopt very distinct self-branding strategies and even publicly disparage other PLTs.

Via its exploration of Douyin teachers' self-branding strategies, this study adds to the quickly growing literature on teachers' exploitation of social media platforms (e.g., Aslan, [2024](#); Ho, [2023](#); Nejadghanbar et al., [2024](#)). In addition, this study contributes to several other fields, including private tutoring and shadow education, TESOL, and technology-mediated pedagogy. We hope that our introduction of the notion of the *platform language teacherpreneur* (PLT) will prove useful to scholars examining a wide variety of topics related to language teachers' commercial use of digital platforms.

Limitations and Future Directions

This article has a number of limitations. For example, our method of conducting an in-depth analysis of just a few teacher profiles from one specific Chinese social media platform means that we cannot be certain that our findings are generalizable to teachers in other national contexts or working on other platforms. In addition, the constraints of time and word count have limited us from discussing a variety of important factors that contribute to the teachers' self-branding and success. For example, we have glossed over the topic of gender and its potential importance. The carefree and "mischievous" self-presentation style adopted by Brian might be less well received by the mainstream Chinese audience if adopted by Anne or another female teacher. In general, research on online teachers has not engaged sufficiently with the topic of gender and we encourage future

research to analyze language teachers' self-branding and identity practices with an explicit focus on gender. Future research should also examine how specific affordances of individual platforms affect teachers' practices on and across platforms. Finally, future research that incorporates interviews with teachers on Douyin can contribute important insights by revealing how individual teachers understand their self-branding practices.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Neither author has a conflict of interest to report.

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