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Constructing the ELT microcelebrity: A case study of native English teacher identity on Chinese TikTok

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Abstract

Facilitated by the robust evolution of short video social media platforms and microcelebrity economy, online commercial English Language Teaching (ELT) in mainland China has witnessed notable innovation, fostering a sizable cohort of ELT microcelebrity teachers with enduring e-fame and followers. These educational microcelebrities' online practices can challenge commonly accepted beliefs about language teacher identities in China and reveal the language ideologies underlying English learning within the current online ELT market. Grounded in the "identity" perspective, the present study examines the nuanced online portrait of Robert (pseudonym), an elite ELT microcelebrity and native English speaker on Douyin (internationally known as TikTok). Reflexive thematic analysis and social semiotic approaches both helped inductively decipher Robert's intentional self-presentations based on his profile page and videos. The findings revealed Robert's multifaceted self-images as a professional native English teacher, an individual with publicly favored personality traits, and a transnational figure from the United States. Robert's online self-persona establishment is underpinned by the Chinese ELT market's language ideologies featuring native-speakerism and implies the negotiation between English teachers' social responsibilities, the market-led nature of commercial ELT and microcelebrity economy.

Keywords: online teacher identity, native English teacher (NET), microcelebrity, online English teaching

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1. Introduction

Dubbed the “global language”, English holds an unprecedented social status in China, with over 400 million Chinese citizens—from K-12 students to working adults—engaged in learning the language (McClory, 2010). For many in China, English is regarded as valuable linguistic capital that carries significant economic benefits, enhancing employment prospects and opportunities for career advancement (Pan & Block, 2011; Gao, 2022). By 2010, China had become the largest ELT market globally (He, 2010). The proliferation of social media platforms has further expanded the commercial ELT landscape, prompting more learners to seek out online English teachers. In 2020, the market value of online K-12 English education reached $7 billion (Chinese Academy of Sciences, 2020). Another recent trend in commercial ELT is the rise of microcelebrities and the short-video economy. Some English teachers have emerged as popular ELT stars on social networking sites (SNSs), profiting from their expertise and online fame by selling English lessons, endorsing educational products, and more. Leveraging their social media influence, these ELT stars can potentially bridge various educational stakeholders and serve as knowledge brokers, creators, and curators (Carpenter et al., 2022). Their diverse online identities, strategically constructed for educational and economic purposes, reflect enduring social ideologies surrounding English learning (Pan & Zhang, 2024) and may even challenge and reshape prevailing notions of “preferred English teachers” (Zembylas, 2018). Nevertheless, the social media practices of ELT microcelebrities have received scant academic attention, which may understate their potential impact on online ELT. To address this gap, this case study employs “identity” (Gee, 2000; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2015) as an analytical lens to examine the multilayered self-presentation of an ELT microcelebrity, Robert (pseudonym), who is also a native English speaker on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). The central research question is: What online identities does Robert intentionally construct on Douyin? Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and a social semiotic approach (Kress, 2011) were adopted to identify and interpret the intricate online identities Robert strategically projects through both speech and multimodal components.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online teacher identity

Social media platforms, functioning within the realms of market dynamics, popular culture, and social networks for commercial purposes (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2015), play a pivotal role in shaping the intricate fabric of teachers’ online personas. In the field of language education, Kimmons and Veletsianos (2014) proposed acceptable identity fragments (AIFs) to help understand the multi-layered dimensions of language educators’ online identities. AIF is described as intentional and carefully constructed, incomplete and authentic, transitional, socially constructed and responsive (2014, p.16-22). Chao (2022) uncovered the critical influence of social media features, such as mediated visibility, on language teachers’ online identity construction. Extensive research has also focused on the ethical dilemma teachers face online, which can restrict their self-presentation on SNSs. Carpenter et al. (2019) suggested that teachers’ professional attributes and the social norms of being a qualified teacher could constrain their online behaviour. Concerning the risk of

"context collapse", teachers intended to separate their professional online behaviour from their personal selves to avoid any ethical conflict. Le et al. (2022) illuminated educators' preference to align their self-presentations on SNSs with social preference. Fox and Bird highlighted the risk of inappropriate social media use, given teachers' unique social status and responsibilities (2017).

Although these studies have substantially advanced our understanding of how teachers negotiate their online identities, most research to date has focused on teachers within the mainstream schooling system. Given the rapid growth and significance of the ELT market in China, where online ELT teachers play a pivotal role, there remains a paucity of research on the online engagement and discourse practices of these "unorthodox" educators in digital environments (Pan & Zhang, 2024; Xiong et al., 2022; Yung & Yuan, 2020).

2.2 Teachers within commercial ELT

The use of English as a lingua franca and its widely recognized economic value have led to the continuous development of commercial ELT industries worldwide, including in East Asia. The underpinning ideology behind its language commodification is that English is treated as a commodity and can be exchanged according to market principles (Heler, 2010; Zhang & Cheung, 2022). ELT tutors, as significant stakeholders in the process of commodifying English, capitalize on their ELT expertise and create value by providing English instruction services to satisfy customers' demand for improving their English proficiency. Thus, these English tutors' online practices and persona can creatively unveil the dynamic ecology of the commercial ELT environment, foregrounding the mainstream language ideologies within such as the emphasis of English's instrumental value, pursuit of "authentic English" and native-speakerism (Ahn, 2019; Yung & Yuan, 2020; Jiang, 2022a; Zhang & Cheung, 2022). Meanwhile, the ELT market's profit-driven ethos may influence online teachers' self-presentation and perception. Yung et al's (2020) research found that English teachers in shadow education in Hong Kong projected several identities as exam experts, popular stars, and well-qualified English language teachers. These teachers' overlapping identities implied the examination-oriented culture within educational discourse and the influence of the entertainment industry. Trent (2016) identified the constraints and challenges that PTE tutors in Hong Kong faced in constructing preferred teacher identities, including a lack of close relationships with their students and colleagues. Xiong et al (2022) suggest that adopting market logic has a detrimental effect on private tutors' self-perception as educators, leading to an identity crisis. Simpson's study shares the same insights, unveiling English language teachers' negative sense of being devalued and de-professionalized in commercial English classes (2023).

Existing research suggests that the discourse of commercial ELT intersects with other social discourses, such as those of the entertainment industry, in shaping the online behaviour of various stakeholders to achieve both educational and economic objectives (Yung & Yuan, 2020). However, limited attention has been given to the ways in which teachers intentionally construct their online personas and the potential impact of these self-presentations on social perceptions of online English teachers and the broader ELT market.

2.3 Microcelebrity in the ELT field

Microcelebrity, according to Senft, is a new style of online performance in which "people [are] 'amping up' their popularity over the web using technologies like videos, blogs and social networking sites" (2008, p. 25). Marwick (2013, p.114) explains it as "a state of being famous to a niche group of people". Web-based social media have lowered the barriers for individuals to engage in public social life, amplify their voices, and exert influence in specific domains (Carpenter et al, 2022). Marwick (2013) asserts that to become a microcelebrity requires creating a persona, producing content, and strategically appealing to online fans by being "authentic". Unlike traditional celebrities, online influencers have the advantage of direct, immediate communication with their audiences through social media, enabling them to cultivate stronger, more enduring connections. This personalized and sustained interaction is deemed essential for many microcelebrities in maintaining their online prominence (Marwick, 2013). E-fame is the key to wealth through commodifying followers' affection and likes, translating their trust and admiration into purchasing motivation (Wu et al, 2023). The financial profits generated by fans and followers drive microcelebrities to take different measures to attract their target audiences, expand their fanbases, and turn these followers into potential consumers. In this way, microcelebrities need to brand themselves. According to Khamis et al. (2017, p.191), self-branding involves individuals "developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital". Marwick explained such requirements and behaviour as "self-commodification" (2013). To niche their potential purchasers' needs, the online persona microcelebrities intentionally compose would be distinguished from their real personalities at times to highlight positive attributes while simultaneously obscuring any negative aspects.

In a market-driven English education environment, the successful micro-celebrification of an English teacher requires alignment with market expectations for English learning. For instance, teachers are expected to highlight their expertise in English instruction—such as helping learners improve communicative competence and succeed in exams—as a central selling point in online ELT (Jiang, 2022a). Beyond language proficiency, the personal conduct of online ELT microcelebrities is equally significant as they seek to increase their online visibility. These teacher-influencers often present themselves as positive role models—gentle, caring, responsible, and more—to attract and retain followers (Jiang, 2022b).

By 2025, more than 100 ELT microcelebrities are active on the Douyin platform, each boasting over one million followers. As a cohort of distinguished "star" tutors, they employ diverse teaching methods, possess unique personal appeal, and wield considerable social media influence. These "popular and well-received" representations are significant for understanding the ecology of online commercial ELT, revealing the underlying needs of online English learners, and illuminating the language ideologies held by various ELT stakeholders. The diverse online personas constructed by these star teachers also challenge conventional notions of language teacher identity and prompt reconsideration of teachers' online behaviours (Zhou et al., 2024). Despite the increasing recognition of microcelebrities' presence and influence in online educational contexts, scholarly attention to their social media practices remains limited.

3. Method

3.1 Research subject

The ELT microcelebrity examined in this study is Robert (pseudonym), a white male from the United States. By 31 December 2023, Robert had amassed nearly six million subscribers on Douyin, representing the largest fanbase among native English teachers (NETs) on this leading Chinese short-video platform. With the highest number of followers and considerable online fame, Robert's online identity aligns with the "preferred" prototype of ELT microcelebrities, as perceived by both learners (as consumers) and ELT enterprises. Furthermore, from a commercial perspective, a large and sustainable fanbase represents substantial economic value for Robert;s Douyin channel and increases his attractiveness to marketers. Robert's Douyin persona thus serves to reflect and promote prevailing values within the online commercial ELT context.

3.2 Data collection

This qualitative investigation of Robert's online self-images depends on two data sources collected from Robert's Douyin channel: 1) Robert's Douyin profile on his homepage; 2) The 321 videos uploaded by Robert on Douyin from 5 January 2020 to 31 December 2023. All the data collected is publicly accessible online. To avoid exposing the teacher without his consent and to prevent any negative impact on his career promotion, we anonymized his real name and personal information by using pseudonyms and excluding identifying data from the database.

3.3 Coding and analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) supplemented with a social semiotic approach (Kress, 2010; Kress, 2011) was employed as an analytical framework to examine how the NET made meaning of his online behaviours through both the verbal and non-verbal elements in his videos and profile. Reflexive thematic analysis emphasizes researchers' "reflective and thoughtful" engagement with the data and analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Themes are creative, interpretive narratives derived from the interaction among the researcher's theoretical assumptions, analytical resources, expertise, and the data itself. Grounded in an in-depth comprehension of existing scholarship in the field of commercial ELT and online LTI, reflexive thematic analysis enables a bottom-up exploration of the textual elements of Robert's self-presentation, facilitating the active generation of identity-related themes.

The social semiotic approach regards communication as semiotic work and as multimodal, mediated by a range of modes, such as images, writing, layout, and speech (Kress, 2010). This method directs attention to multimodal resources beyond speech and writing, which serve as a useful tool for probing Robert's intricate online self-presentation by focusing on the "combination" of his online behaviour across the profile and videos. "Combination", as Gee (2000, p. 109) articulates, refers to some specific ways of combining speaking, acting, using one's face and body, dressing, using objects, tools, or technology, and feeling.

The data analysis mainly underwent two phases. First, all of Robert's videos were

transcribed from the original language he used. Drawing on the transcriptions and the titles of these videos, a first round of coding was then conducted to classify all the videos into several thematic categories through iterative reading. For example, the hashtag "English learning" is used for videos in which Robert teaches specific English knowledge. As for those videos not obviously about English learning, three additional thematic hashtags emerged: personal life, entertainment and advertisement (Table 1).

Table 1. A selection of primary topics of Robert's Douyin videos

Primary topics	**Sub-topics**	**Number**
English learning	• Daily spoken English in certain social context; • Learning one useful English expression within 30 seconds; • Reaction to Chinese celebrities' English; • Common Chinglish mistakes; • English learning resources recommendation; • Spoken English knowledge; • American culture	210
Personal life	• New York life vlog; • Interesting experiences in his life; • Interview to family members based on particular topics; • Festival vlogs	23
Entertainment	• Tik Tok challenge; • Imitating famous movies or figures; • Reaction to interesting videos • --- (full list is available upon request)	71
Advertisement	• Advertisement about education related products; • Advertisement about non-educational products	17

The second phase of coding aimed to identify and elaborate on more themes related to the teacher's self-images. Reflexive analysis was adopted to help analyze the speech data. Firstly, the topics of each video were summarized from its title and hashtags to determine its core content. Through reiterative reading of the transcriptions, more related words and expressions concerning Robert's online identities emerged. In addition to textual elements, this study also examined other semiotic modes that Robert tactically employed to establish and enact his online persona. Based on the general thematic classification of Robert's

videos: English learning, entertainment, personal life and advertisement, three videos were selected from each category as the primary research data to examine the non-verbal semiotic aspects. The videos were chosen from Robert's most-liked list, which could reveal the parts of Robert that are most liked from the perspectives of online audiences. Drawing on Matwick and Matwick's (2017) approach of transcribing and interpreting semiotic modes in videos, the non-textual semiotic modes focused on in this study mainly contained three categories: verbal attribute (tone, intonation, accent, speaking speed, etc.), visual attribute (image, gesture, facial expression, dressing, props, captions, etc.) and sound (background music).

4. Findings

The thematic examination unveiled that Robert strategically displayed hybrid online identities on his Douyin channel. Robert portrayed himself as a professional native English teacher, an individual with publicly favoured personality traits, and a positive transnational figure from America. These multiple self-images coexisted, overlapped and collectively constructed a certain ELT microcelebrity persona to help Robert gain online fame and, in this way, achieve his educational and economic purposes.

4.1 A professional native English teacher

The primary identity portrait recognized from Robert's Douyin channel is that of a highly professional native English teacher (NET). Our analysis identified three core dimensions that the ELT expert Robert repeatedly emphasized in his profile and videos: an official teaching certificate, authentic English-language knowledge, and high ethical standards in teaching. Robert's professional identity presentation reveals a combination of language ideologies in China, among which nationality is a key factor in assessing teachers' proficiency (Ahn, 2019), and native English speakers serve as models of ideal English teachers (Clark & Paran, 2007).

4.1.1 Speech elements in the profile: A teacher with a TEFL teaching certificate

Robert's identity as a professional English teacher is first evident in his channel name on the profile page: "X 老师" (Teacher X), which explicitly highlights Robert's professional role as an educator. His profile biography further states that he holds a TEFL certificate. The TEFL programme in China is tailored for individuals seeking to teach English in mainland China, with TEFL certification officially recognized nationwide. The existing literature has documented NETs' pervasive concerns about their teaching legitimacy in foreign contexts (Choi, 2022; Guo et al., 2021; Lee & Jiang, 2023). In China, more than two-thirds of foreign teachers were employed without a legal work visa (Leonard, 2019). By including a TEFL certificate in his online brochure, Robert not only demonstrates his professionalism and qualifications to teach English but also avoids potential public doubts and validates his teaching legitimacy, which is a precondition for him to conduct English instruction through social media in China.

4.1.2 Speech elements in the videos: A teacher who can teach authentic conversational English

According to the Chinese Academy of Sciences (2020), among Chinese parents opting for online English courses, authentic pronunciation ranks as the paramount demand for online

English tutors, with a distinct preference (over 80%) for NETs from North America as the most ideal tutor choice. “Authentic English” has been taken as a yardstick for measuring an EFL teacher’s expertise and success, and teachers from the native English-speaking community, in this way, gain more preference and advantage (Holliday, 2006; Ahn, 2019).

As a native English speaker from the United States, Robert stressed his nationality by frequently adding “外国英语老师” (foreign English teacher) to the videos’ headlines or as a hashtag, thereby implying his native-speaker identity and his innate ability to speak authentic conversational English. Such emphasis aligns with the prevalent ELT myth in China that students could benefit from a native-speaking teacher with “perfect” mastery of the language and pronunciation. In addition, Robert repetitively mentioned the word “地道” (authentic), which appeared more than 26 times in his videos. Through frequently stating the significance of speaking “authentic” English, Robert catered to and reinforced the language belief that authentic English is equal to “good English”, which reveals the deeply ingrained native-speakerism ideology in the Chinese commercial ELT market (Ahn, 2019).

Another key theme that emerged from Robert’s videos is “Chinglish”, which he utilized to highlight his advantage of being a native English speaker. Robert’s second- and third-most-liked videos both introduce commonly seen Chinglish errors. Chinglish is pervasively viewed as an “object of ridicule” that Chinese learners should try to avoid, concerning the detrimental influence of mother tongue on the process of English acquisition (Eaves, 2011; Li, 2018). And Chinglish has long been considered “insufficient” due to inadequate exposure to authentic English (Wang & Wang, 2012). By drawing sharp contrasts between the “incorrect” Chinglish and his correct expressions, Robert highlighted his proficiency in providing authentic conversational English instruction to help Chinese English learners eliminate incorrect Chinglish.

The third layer of Robert’s teacher proficiency lies in the ethical domain, emphasizing that he has strong teaching ethics, which helped establish his “preferred” professional identity (Sachs & Mockler, 2012) and distinguish himself from other online NETs. For instance, he publicly challenged the erroneous teaching content of other English educators in his videos: on one occasion, he criticized several ELT microcelebrities for their incorrect and “ridiculous” explanations of the phrase “I potato you,” noting that their content was both unoriginal and factually wrong—an implicit rejection of low-quality teaching in online spaces. The video gained 375,000 likes, indicating the audience’s positive feedback on Roberts’ teaching beliefs. Accuracy, credentials, expertise, and authority have long been considered important factors in education, which can determine the legitimacy and status of a teacher (Carpenter et al., 2022). Through challenging other teachers’ mistakes and showcasing his commitment to accuracy, Robert foregrounded his competence to teach “correct” English and tactically established his credible teacher persona. And such a positive image can help him build a good online reputation, which can then translate into economic value for a digital microcelebrity.

4.1.3 Multimodal elements in the videos: A NET who can teach conversational English in communicative contexts

Multimodal cues also played a significant role in shaping Robert’s online persona and reinforcing his identity as a professional NET who can sufficiently satisfy the requirements

of the Chinese online ELT market. Robert's NET identity is first evident in his profile pictures: a white male. Both Amin (1997) and Shuck (2006) argued that the notion of native English speaker identity is frequently equated with whiteness, which is considered unmarked and normal. In China's ELT market, there is a strong preference for white English teachers, driven by native-speakerism and underlying white supremacist ideologies (Gao, 2022). Robert's white individual identity, readily apparent in his profile photos, validates his perceived "nativeness" in English, thereby capturing greater viewer attention from the moment they access his profile page.

To illustrate his teaching proficiency and ability, Robert tactically employs multimodal resources and a linguistic repertoire that are available through social media affordances. Intended for conversational English, Robert opted to create authentic daily communicative contexts with the support of multiple semiotic elements. Each video centres on a real-life theme, such as ordering food on the plane, buying clothes, or dealing with traffic tickets. Robert enhances the realism of these scenarios by donning context-appropriate attire and embodying roles like a police officer, waiter, salesperson, or interviewer. Props further enrich the authenticity of these speaking contexts: for example, he once filmed a lesson at a Starbucks location to demonstrate how to order coffee in English. By relating real speaking contexts to his use of English, Robert demonstrated the usefulness of his lessons, suggesting that audiences who learn from him will be able to apply English to achieve tangible daily goals. This focus on practical English in various daily contexts underscores the instrumental value of English as a communicative tool, aligning with Chinese online English learners' foremost need for English learning (Chinese Academy of Science, 2020). English was commodified, with linguistic value, to help learners engage in cross-cultural communication. Robert, as a NET, is commodified as well and brings value in teaching authentic conversational English.

4.2 An individual with publicly welcome personalities

Apart from showcasing his professional identity as a trustworthy NET, the videos in the entertaining and personal life sections were strategically posted to reveal non-professional aspects of Robert, projecting him as an individual with publicly favourable characteristics such as humour, creativity, and friendliness. The personal charisma and youthful demeanour that Robert exhibits helps him stand out as a more "charismatic" and distinctive figure online and amass more followers. Meanwhile, the process of self-disclosure tactically de-professionalized Robert, revealing his microcelebrity traits. Certain personal attributes diverged from Robert's teaching persona, reflecting the tension between his different identity facets in digital space.

4.2.1 Speech elements in the videos: A male with preferred personal traits

Being a microcelebrity emphasises developing a consistent persona that is recognizable and unique with favourable traits to their online followers (Das, 2022; Weninger & Li, 2023). Through a series of engaging Douyin videos, Robert gradually presented his positive traits and personal appeal, with humour standing out as an instantly recognized signature trait. He liked using humorous short plays ranging several seconds to teach English and create a relaxing and interesting communicative context. For example, in a series of videos about

Chinglish titled “say goodbye to Chinglish”, he used his humorous expressions to inform the audience that it is necessary to avoid using Chinglish. In contrast to the relatively serious and intensive offline learning, especially within the Chinese mainstream schooling system, Robert created a relaxing and engaging learning context that learners preferred. His strong, unique personal brand of humour helped him stand out from other English teachers, both online and offline. Crucially, he also monetized this humour: by framing English learning as an enjoyable, low-pressure experience under his guidance, he attracted learners who might otherwise find language study daunting.

To avoid the risk of context collapse, teachers restricted their online sharing, which conflicts with the process of microcelebrification, which requires self-presentation and the showcasing of personal lives. (Marwick, 2013; Morais et al., 2022). Microcelebrities need to create a persona by sharing personal information and constructing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness (Marwick, 2013). Robert’s practice reflects a deliberate choice to transcend traditional teacher ethics, prioritizing his microcelebrity identity instead. Beside 221 English learning videos, he shared an additional 71 comedic ones, unrelated to language instruction but designed for entertainment (Table 2). Robert liked doing light-hearted Douyin challenges, which were the videos that went viral online and were entertaining. One of his Douyin challenges sparked heated discussion among Chinese audiences regarding his awkward imitation of another microcelebrity. Nevertheless, it still received 92 thousand likes, indicating strong viewer interest. Through deep engagement with Douyin’s trending news, Robert demonstrated his attractive “cool guy” persona, aligning with the entertaining nature of social media and attracting more young viewers. Meanwhile, such “funny” videos helped Robert de-professionalize and emphasize his identity as a microcelebrity, with much lower ethical constraints online than professional teachers. Such multiple identities set the base for him to endorse non-educational products and profit from them.

In addition, Robert posted another 23 videos centred on his personal life. These offerings provided fans with curated glimpses into aspects of his life deemed appropriate for public viewing, such as childhood Halloween photos or showcasing intimate family interactions. To gain and maintain online fame, microcelebrities need to connect with online audiences, cultivating a sense of familiarity and authenticity (Marwick, 2013; Morais et al., 2022). By demonstrating a willingness to share insights into his personal life, Robert fostered an intimate bond with his audience, nurtured a sense of private closeness with viewers, and positioned himself as a relatable online friend, which helped him establish a stable fan base.

4.2.2 Multimodal elements in the profile and videos: An approachable male with physical beauty

As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) argued, how individuals look, talk and dress embodies the meanings, values and identities they are performing. Within the social media community, more attention and adoration would be given to users with conventionally good looks (Marwick, 2015). Physical appearance plays a significant role in microcelebrities’ path to influencer status. Supported by the visibility attribute of social media (Treem & Leonardi, 2013), where online viewers can “see” information, Robert’s profile imagery—two photos of him portrayed as a handsome youth—leaves a strong visual impression on

online viewers. He further accentuated his eye-catching appearance by comparing himself to Anne Hathaway, a renowned American movie star. He also posted several dressing videos to tactically reinforce his attractive, handsome persona. In this way, Robert can not only amass an online following of people in need of learning English but also attract those drawn to his physical appeal. A large number of fans indicates the economic value of his attractiveness, which helped Roberts earn more profit by endorsing non-educational products. The promotional videos featuring microcelebrities underscore their profit-driven nature (Khamis et al., 2017; Pan & Zhang, 2024), thereby challenging the prevailing notion in China that education is inherently non-commercial and non-profit-oriented.

In crafting engaging narratives, Robert adeptly used props, exaggerated expressions, body language and costumes to animate his personal stories and portray himself as a lively, creative and witty young man. Robert's Halloween vlogs are an example of him wearing different playful costumes and introducing how Americans celebrate Halloween. Employing Douyin's portrait mode, Robert sat close to the camera, minimizing his distance to the audience while maintaining eye contact. Visual perspective can influence the interpersonal relationship between the audiences and performers (Matwick & Matwick, 2017). Close shots would position viewers in "a relation of imaginary intimacy" with the people presented in the camera (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 180). Such a viewing mode helped audiences get closer to Robert and foster an intimate, familiar relationship between Robert and his viewers, which is a key to acquiring and retaining followers (Marwick, 2013). Similarly, Robert's choice of attire, predominantly choosing casual T-shirts and hoodies with plain colours, creates an atmosphere of lightness and relaxation. In contrast to Chinese school teachers who have clear dressing requirements (like "no short paints") and prefer to choose formal wear to convey expertise and trustworthiness (Yung & Yuan, 2020), Robert's informal dressing connotes a feeling of closeness to the viewers, delivered a more equal relationship between him and the audiences, and minimising the visual and professional temperament of the "teacher" role, allowing him to attract more subscribers.

Another significant element of Robert's videos is background music, which helps set the scene (Matwick & Matwick, 2017). Preferring light-hearted, popular English songs (e.g., Mood by 24KGoldn and Iann Dior), Robert employs these melodies to evoke an upbeat and positive mood in line with his lively personality, enhancing the viewing experience across all his videos. This choice of vibrant, familiar tunes contributes to a pleasant, relaxing ambiance, becoming a signature auditory motif in Robert's Douyin videos.

4.3 A positive transnational microcelebrity from the United States

As a NET online, on the one hand, Robert benefited from his native English-speaking identity and commodified it for his ELT career. On the other hand, he would face more cultural and relationship barriers that NETs commonly encounter in non-English-speaking communities (Appleby, 2013; Ishihara et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2021; Choi, 2022; Lee & Jang, 2023). Active on Douyin, Robert needs to negotiate his transnational identity cautiously to gain the trust of Chinese viewers, build a following, and gain online fame. Grounding on that, his NET identity facet can exist and further develop. Transnationals are

people who actively maintain connections between their country of origin and their country of settlement after crossing national borders (Shi et al., 2022, p. 2). Transnational identity is characterized by the simultaneous impact of both inheritances derived from home society and secondary socialization from the host community (2022). Our analysis of Robert's videos reveals how he embodies this transnational dynamic: drawing on his identity as a native New Yorker and a NET, he positioned himself as a friendly "ambassador" of American culture, introducing elements of his home culture to Chinese audiences. Meanwhile, he was also portrayed as an active and modest learner of Chinese culture, demonstrating his friendliness toward the Chinese community and seeking integration between the two cultures.

4.3.1 Speech elements in the videos: a white American who can speak highly understandable Chinese

Grounded in diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires, Robert actively served as a storyteller of American culture and a positive learner of Chinese culture. Intercultural and transcultural communication both exist in his videos. Intercultural communication for these transnational microcelebrities refers to introducing their native culture to Chinese audiences (Xu & Zhang, 2023). And the latter emphasizes their interpretation, reproduction and sharing of Chinese culture. The key to transcultural communication is localization, which helps provoke emotional resonance between the introducer and audiences (Li et al., 2020).

As a native New Yorker, Robert shared and introduced American families' life values in his videos through humorous and engaging performances. For instance, he once showcased the relationship between American parents and their children. With 530 thousand likes, this video sparked heated discussion among Chinese viewers about cross-cultural differences in the parent-child relationship. He later expanded his videos to include other culturally relevant topics, including American dating culture, Halloween customs, and the school life of American senior high school students, among others. The selected topics are close to Chinese people's daily lives, increasing the audience's willingness to watch and discuss the content. Barely or deliberately presenting comments on American or Chinese culture, Robert used a storytelling approach, sharing personal anecdotes and experiences with modesty. By adopting a relative objective narrative perspective, Robert distinguished himself from the American stories he shared to avoid potential cultural conflicts online and also reduce the risk of cultural criticism, which can damage his constructed online persona.

Meanwhile, as an active participant in the Chinese-speaking community, Robert immersed himself in local culture and grew closer to it, showcasing his linguistic proficiency and cultural adaptability. Transcultural communication was a frequent feature of his content, rooted in Robert's cultural adaptation experiences and delivered through his humorous anecdotes. For example, Robert once showcased foreign people's embarrassing feelings about their incorrect use of Chinese. The video content was inspired by Robert's daily life and presented how Robert actively accultures to Chinese culture, both offline and in the online community. Translanguaging also acted as a bridge to establish an extrinsic tie between Robert and Chinese society. Robert speaks fluent, understandable Chinese in

his videos, offering a friendly approach to reach Chinese audiences. As Shi et al. underscored, to become microcelebrities in the Chinese digital community, Chinese-speaking skills could be a crucial benchmark for inclusion, exclusion or marginalization (2022). In the videos introducing New York, Robert usually began with a Chinese greeting, "嗨大家我，我现在在 XXX" (Hi everybody! Now I'm in…), which created a sense of familiarity and intimacy with the audience. Robert seamlessly integrated prevalent internet slang, such as "兄 dei" (bro), and YYDS (greatest of all time), into his content. By incorporating Chinese internet slang and daily phrases, Robert not only demonstrates linguistic competence but also conveys his respect and affinity for Chinese culture, fostering a sense of belonging within the digital community. However, this is in contrast to formal classroom teaching, where Internet slang is considered unsuitable for teachers, given the social expectation that they use appropriate, elegant language.

4.3.2 Multimodal elements in the videos: An American from modern New York

Both visual and verbal attributes helped foreground Robert's New York native identity. In his videos, Robert occasionally shared views of New York City with audiences. Robert intentionally selected beautiful, classic scenes of New York as the backgrounds for his videos, aiming to showcase well-known, interesting American sites that are well-received by Chinese audiences, such as record stores and street art, which help him establish an emotional connection with his followers. By showcasing these recognizable New York landmarks, he transformed abstract "American culture" into tangible, visually engaging scenes—allowing viewers to feel a sense of familiarity with his hometown and, in turn, strengthening their emotional bond with him.

5. Discussion

The present study analyzed an ELT microcelebrity's online identities through his tactical multimodal representation on Douyin. Our findings reveal that Robert tactically projected three hybrid Douyin identity facets: a proficient native English teacher, a publicly favourable personality, and a positive transnational figure from America. These three identity layers are presented and woven together in the Douyin community to collectively establish a "qualified and positive ELT microcelebrity" persona—a construct calibrated to meet both the pedagogical expectations of learners and the market demands of commercial ELT.

Among various strands of Robert's online portrait, being an outstanding NET prioritizes the others, determining and constraining his social behaviour in Chinese cyberspace. This prioritization reflects the deeply entrenched native-speakerism or North-American-speakerism orientation that pervades in China's and East Asia's ELT market (Ahn, 2019; Zhang & Cheung, 2022). Nativeness, especially when tied to North American or British origins, is taken as the key marker of being a qualified online ELT (Zhang & Cheung, 2022). Such criterion for "eligibility" is further reinforced by the sheer number of white NET microcelebrities active on the platform, creating a self-perpetuating cycle: the ELT market's preference for white teachers, more white NETs from North America and Britain are employed by online ELT companies to carter for the learning demand, while learners socialised to associate whiteness with "authentic English" continue to prioritize these teachers (Gao, 2022; Zhang & Cheung, 2022). Equally notable is the primacy of

accent as a benchmark for evaluating ELT service value: Robert's teaching videos centre exclusively on restrictive English varieties in the inner English-speaking circle (American, British, Australian), sidelining the diverse range of World Englishes (e.g., Singaporean English, Indian English and Chinese English) (Kachru, 1985). This narrow framing contradicts the ethos of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)—which emphasizes communicative competence over adherence to "standard" accents—and can potentially perpetuate the myth that only "native" varieties are "valid" for learning (Gao, 2022).

Beyond his professional identity, Robert also presented his de-professionalized part to the public as just a young man with handsome looks and creative ideas. Meanwhile, his personal life fragments were exposed to the public through life vlogs—from childhood photos to family interactions—intentionally, to help enrich his online persona. Previous enquiries revealed an intention for teachers to withdraw their online sharing, such as posting information about controversial topics or their personal life, to safeguard against ethical missteps (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014; Fox & Bird, 2017; Carpenter et al., 2019; Carpenter et al., 2022; Le et al., 2022). The present study, however, finds that Robert transcends such an ethical dilemma, considering that these individual traits were intentionally presented rather than randomly disclosed, grounded in the market-driven paradigm of the microcelebrity economy, which frames online educators not just as "teachers" but as "brands". On one hand, ELT microcelebrities are required to emphasize their teaching proficiency as a core selling point to fulfill the learning needs of online viewers. On the other hand, one key factor of being a microcelebrity is the willingness to self-present to get familiar with online audiences and garner e-fame. In view of that, these online teachers' individualities and personal charms are emphasized to be unique, eye-catching, and responsive to the interests and needs of target audiences (Marwick, 2013; Khamis, 2017; Carpenter et al., 2022). Robert's physical attractiveness, as his unique part, was tactically foregrounded—for instance, through comparisons with Anne Hathaway—and directly translated into economic benefit.

At a broader level, Robert's case illuminates how the neoliberal microcelebrity economy drives the pervasive commodification of online ELT teachers. In this system, teachers are no longer just providers of educational services but are transformed into "multidimensional commodities", whose value derives from a bundle of traits: linguistic expertise (as a NET), personal charisma (humour, attractiveness), and cultural capital (transnational affinity). The proliferation of these "extra-professional" identity facets—beyond the basic "teacher" role—reflects a market demand for "relatable" educators who can simultaneously teach, entertain, and build emotional connections with learners. While this complexity may seem to "humanize" online teachers, it also risks reducing their professional worth to their marketability: Robert's success is measured not just by his ability to teach English but by his capacity to attract followers, secure endorsements, and generate revenue. This raises critical questions about the future of online ELT: Does the microcelebrity model enhance access to quality education, or does it prioritize profit over pedagogical rigour? Can online teachers balance brand building with their ethical obligations to learners? Meanwhile, the profit-focused and entertainment-oriented nature of microcelebrities can also pose ethical challenges for these online teachers in Chinese educational environments, where education is considered public and non-profit, rooted in

Confucian values of altruism and moral guidance (Gao, 2022).

In all, grounded in the neoliberal microcelebrity economy, online teachers can be further and pervasively commodified on social network environments. More identity facets are generated beyond the basic professional "teacher" identity, revealing intricate intersections and conflicts with different social discourses (educational, commercial, entertainment) that shape teachers' online practices, making teacher identities much more complex and diverse.

6. Limitation and Future Research Directions

The present study possesses several limitations. Firstly, the findings are constrained by the finite research data, limiting the ability to fully capture the experiences and educational beliefs of a broader picture of ELT microcelebrities across diverse social media platforms. Our single-case study (centred on a white American NET) does not capture the experiences of other critical groups—such as non-white NETs, non-native English-speaking ELT microcelebrities, or those who prioritize World Englishes (e.g., Singaporean English, Indian English) over "native" varieties. This gap highlights an important opportunity for us to expand our understanding. By incorporating more diverse cases in future studies, we can gain valuable insights into how marginalized groups construct their identities and navigate the market's preference for white, North American NETs. This will enrich our discussion and provide a more comprehensive view of the diverse realities within the ELT community.

The second restriction lies in the study's non-interactive nature (Kerr, 2019), primarily relying on pre-existing digital resources from Robert's Douyin channel without direct engagement with the research subject. Within the context of live streaming's significant commercial impetus and its deepening convergence with the education sector (Wang & Feng, 2022), Robert, as an online educator, utilizes this medium for real-time interaction to teach oral English and promote his courses. However, the absence of a focused investigation into this specific aspect in the present study precludes a definitive assessment of whether his live-streaming practices exert a novel influence on the construction of his multifaceted online identity. Future research endeavours could incorporate multiple data collection methods to solicit perspectives from different stakeholders within the online commercial ELT landscape, which is also a potential research direction.

Some other research implications include focalising the interplay between ELT microcelebrities and other educational stakeholders, such as their followers and MCNs. Audiences play complex roles in the microcelebrities' digital community as English learners, fans, assessors, etc. Understanding how these Internet celebrities interact with their audiences, the roles played by online viewers, and the reciprocal influence between microcelebrities and their e-fans can provide valuable insights into the evolving commercial ELT environment in China. Another avenue for exploration relates to the "for-profit motives" challenges educational microcelebrities face when creating content and display themselves online (Carpenter et al., 2022). While this study delved into Robert's complex online identities, further investigation is warranted into teachers' practices for addressing the push and pull between his different identity facets. Given the traditional view of education as non-profit-driven in China, juxtaposed with the profit-oriented nature of microcelebrity status, future inquiries could shed light on how these individuals negotiate

the trade-offs between their pedagogical values and the pursuit of greater visibility and engagement. Such research could shed new light on the ethical dilemmas and strategic decisions online English teachers face as they navigate the evolving digital landscape.

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