

# From teachers to influencers: Exploring edu-influencers' social media practices through uses and gratification theory

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## ABSTRACT

The popularity of social-media platforms has led to the emergence of edu-influencers: teachers who actively cultivate large audiences of social-media users and, in many cases, monetize their engagement. However, there has been relatively little empirical investigation of either their motivation or the outcomes of their content-sharing practices, especially in Asian contexts. Understanding Asian edu-influencers' experiences can therefore be expected to yield fresh perspectives on a range of topics. Accordingly, drawing on uses and gratifications theory, this study recruited 12 edu-influencers specialized in teaching Chinese as a foreign language who had an average of 4835 followers on Xiaohongshu (小红书, "RedNote"), one of China's largest social-media platforms. Through content analysis of their posts and thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data, this study explores the content they shared and the gratifications they sought and obtained. The results indicated that these Chinese edu-influencers primarily shared teaching-support, career-related support, and personal content. The chief gratifications they sought were filling in information gaps, self-documentation/self-expression, and attaining social recognition or a sense of fulfillment. They also reported that the experience of sharing enhanced their self-efficacy, professional growth, resources, skills, and emotional support, while also shaping their professional and personal goals. Additionally, we identified edu-influencers' challenges, notably involving algorithms, censorship, and monetization. As well as yielding new understandings of the use of social media in education in an Asian context, these findings have important practical implications for teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers.

## 1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of education, the advent of social-media platforms has transformed the way educators engage in professional learning and development by enabling them to take more ownership of their learning and continuously improve their teaching practice (Trust et al., 2016). Educators can engage in self-directed professional learning anywhere, share their ideas with a global audience, and easily connect with like-minded professionals and a wealth of resources (Carpenter & Staudt Willet, 2021). They can also create and curate their own personal-learning networks, which can help them stay up to date with their fields' latest trends and best practices (Staudt Willet, 2024).

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Among those educators who take advantage of these benefits, some have emerged as edu-influencers: active social-media users who cultivate large audiences of educators and generally monetize their engagement (Carpenter et al., 2023). They exert influence primarily through their content-sharing practices, which can involve education-related resource dissemination, professional networking, and/or personal brand-building (Carpenter et al., 2023; Davis & Yi, 2022; Shelton et al., 2022). As well as boosting their own influence, edu-influencers' content-sharing processes have been found to offer various benefits to those who follow them. They facilitate networking, collaboration, knowledge exchange and advice-seeking within educators' communities by connecting individuals with like-minded peers in comment sections, group chats, and live Q&A sessions, while also providing access to a wide range of professional-development opportunities (Carpenter, Shelton, et al., 2021; Tellez, 2024). Additionally, some edu-influencers streamline resource-sharing; engage in informal sharing of digital teaching materials such as lesson plans, slides, or instructional videos; and gradually standardize and professionalize their content for broader distribution, which can eventually lead to its commodification and monetization (Davis and Yi, 2022). Some edu-influencers have also used social media to define or redefine their professional identities, notably as teacher educators (Carpenter et al., 2019).

Although a considerable body of research has explored this topic in recent years (Carpenter et al., 2023), most of it has focused on Western contexts (e.g., Shelton et al., 2020; Tellez, 2024; Torphy et al., 2020). China's social-media landscape differs markedly from that of the West, with Chinese users primarily using domestic platforms such as Xiaohongshu (小红书, "RedNote") and WeChat in preference to Western ones such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Xue et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). All platforms' unique affordances and user cultures are deeply influenced by broader factors such as cultural norms and governmental regulations (Richter et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2021). Therefore, Chinese edu-influencers are likely to navigate distinctive digital ecosystems that shape their content-sharing experiences in unique ways (Kirk et al., 2020). For example, Confucian-based values in China promote collectivism, modesty, and education as a moral contribution to society rather than a commercial pursuit, and these factors may discourage overt self-promotion and politicized content (Sun & Ding, 2024). Western edu-influencers, in contrast, are more likely to foreground social justice or politics in their content (Shelton et al., 2020) and to seek monetization through affiliate links or sponsorships as a matter of course (Carpenter et al., 2023). Platform-specific algorithms and censorship, meanwhile, could further mediate edu-influencers' strategies for increasing their visibility and the reach of their content.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to fill the above-noted gaps in the literature by exploring the content-sharing practices of prominent edu-influencers on one highly ranked Chinese social-media platform, where a larger and denser audience, along with platform-specific affordances, may shape such practices in ways that diverge from previous studies' findings (Carpenter, Shelton, et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2024). Specifically, its objectives are to understand: 1) the sampled edu-influencers' content-sharing practices; 2) the sought gratifications that drove them to engage with professional-learning communities on social media; 3) the gratifications they actually obtained from sharing, whether involving their own professional development or that of their peers; and 4) the challenges they encountered during or as a result of content-sharing.

By achieving those objectives, this research can be expected to provide important insights into how edu-influencers contribute to both knowledge dissemination and the development of professional-learning communities on social media, and thus inform teachers about effective ways to utilize the affordances of social media for diverse forms of professional learning. Moreover, by contributing to a clarification of the practices and strategies of key edu-influencers in specific fields and non-Western locales, the present work may help institutions make better-informed policy decisions about professional learning and development in digital spaces.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Defining Edu-influencers

Edu-influencers, who are sometimes referred to as Edu-KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders; Zhang et al., 2021) or teacher influencers (Tellez, 2024), are individuals with expertise in education who engage audiences on social media, generally monetizing such engagement (Carpenter et al., 2023). They include education experts, academics, and schoolteachers, among other key figures in the education sector (Carpenter et al., 2023). There is no universally accepted follower threshold for distinguishing edu-influencers from other educators who happen to have social-media followings. For example, studies by Shelton et al. (2020) and Schroeder et al. (2024) classed as edu-influencers people with Instagram followings ranging from 100 to 200 to the hundreds of thousands. This reflects prior scholars' view that such figures' influence is not solely determined by follower count, but also by engagement and content impact.

Recent research has covered various aspects of edu-influencers' activities, including the type of content they share (e.g., Shelton et al., 2020), their motivations (e.g., Carpenter & Shelton, 2021), and their entrepreneurial strategies, e.g., how they monetize their content (e.g., Davis & Yi, 2022). These studies highlight edu-influencers' potential to reshape educational discourse, teachers' professional identities, and other aspects of the educational landscape (e.g., Carpenter, Shelton, et al., 2021).

### 2.2. Edu-influencers' content-sharing practices

Edu-influencers have been found to play a pivotal role in shaping education discourse (Schmeichel et al., 2022), notably by inspiring their audiences with their teaching experiences and ideas (Carpenter et al., 2022). They also express their emotions, reflect on their challenges and successes, and foster a sense of belonging among the teachers who follow them, creating a supportive environment in which educators can relate, learn, and grow together (Carpenter et al., 2023; Shelton et al., 2020).

Multiple studies have delved into teachers and edu-influencers' content-sharing practices on social media (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2023; Schroeder et al., 2024; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023). Among studies of the types of content they share (e.g., Carpenter, Trust,

et al., 2021; Tellez, 2024), a typical example was provided by Shelton et al. (2020), who analyzed publicly available Instagram posts and stories by 18 edu-influencers and identified four primary themes: self-promotion and product endorsement, teacher motivation, engagement solicitation, and advocacy for classroom practices. Such findings highlight the multifaceted nature of edu-influencers' content-sharing practices, and in particular, how they serve multiple purposes ranging from knowledge dissemination to personal branding. Other research has explored edu-influencers' motivations for sharing content (e.g., Carpenter & Shelton, 2021; Marcelo et al., 2023), which range from professional networking and pedagogical knowledge-sharing to desires for professional visibility, e.g., as "inspirational experts" (Aslan, 2024, p. 3) and financial gain (Carpenter & Shelton, 2021).

However, while the existing research has yielded a range of valuable insights into content trends, it has primarily relied on analyzing publicly available posts rather than on direct outreach to edu-influencers, e.g., through semi-structured interviews (e.g., Schroeder et al., 2024; Shelton et al., 2020; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023). This has restricted the scope of insights into these figures' subjective perceptions and experiences of their content-sharing behavior. Addressing this gap can be expected to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of edu-influencers' evolving roles and the broader implications of their work for education both locally and globally.

### 2.3. Challenges faced by Edu-influencers

Edu-influencers have previously been reported to face multiple challenges when navigating social-media platforms (Carpenter, Shelton, et al., 2021). Notably, they must adapt to shifts in learning and teaching, the fragmentation of context boundaries in platform and interface use, and the new meaning and momentum that these technologies bring to emerging educational paradigms (Greenhow et al., 2024). Algorithmic constraints often limit the visibility of content, and algorithmic biases may both reflect and reproduce other biases (Carpenter et al., 2023). Additionally, edu-influencers' success depends in part on their ability to strike a balance between their professional and personal identities in online spaces, i.e., to maintain both credibility and authenticity (Carpenter & Harvey, 2019). One challenge of monetization is that shifting to a consumerist mindset can lead to homogenization among edu-influencers' offerings (Schroeder et al., 2024); and culture- and platform-specific censorship and content restrictions can limit the discussion of certain topics (Semiz & Kılıç, 2023). The complexity of these challenges highlights the need for further research into platform-specific constraints, audience dynamics, and the evolving nature of digital educational influence across various contexts.

### 2.4. Uses and gratifications theory

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) explores how individuals purposely adopt behaviors that they think will fulfill various specific desires and needs, leading to a sense of gratification (Katz et al., 1973). UGT has been widely adopted in studies that highlight social-media users' active roles in determining how to utilize such media to seek gratification rather than merely being passive recipients of its content (e.g., Dolan et al., 2016; Falgoust et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025). Gratifications can be subdivided into those sought and those actually obtained. In our case, the former are the anticipated advantages or gains that a person expects to derive from using media, while the latter are the actual benefits or gains they derive.

Some recent studies have used UGT as a framework for describing teachers-as-users' motivation for using social media for educational purposes (e.g., Gruzdt et al., 2018; Menon & Meghana, 2021). Here, we adopt it to frame edu-influencers' content-sharing experiences, on the grounds that its emphasis on people's active need-fulfillment could help provide a more nuanced understanding of this group, in line with our study's objectives.

### 2.5. Purpose and research questions

Despite growing scholarly interest in edu-influencers' content-sharing behavior, most research to date has focused on the use of Western platforms such as Twitter and Instagram in Western cultural contexts (e.g., Shelton et al., 2020), with relatively few studies examining Asian contexts, and none or almost none focused on Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) teachers. Notably, Xiaohongshu, a rapidly growing platform that is widely used by Chinese-speaking educators, has been almost entirely overlooked in existing research.

Methodologically, meanwhile, previous research on edu-influencers' content-sharing practices has predominantly employed content analysis of posts or hashtags (e.g., Carpenter, Trust, et al., 2021; Shelton et al., 2020). As such, there is a need for more qualitative exploration of culturally diverse edu-influencers' subjective experiences, perceptions, motivations, and challenges. The present study seeks to help fill these gaps based on qualitative data from 12 Xiaohongshu-using CFL edu-influencers, guided by the UGT framework and the following three research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What do the sampled edu-influencers share on social media?

RQ2. What are the perceived gratifications (a) sought and (b) obtained by these edu-influencers through sharing content on social media?

RQ3. What challenges did they encounter during or because of the content-sharing process?

## 3. Methods

We adopted a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews, as this allows deep exploration and rich portrayal of individuals' experiences, thoughts, emotions, and perspectives (Patton, 1980). By contextualizing edu-influencers' experiences within

their personal, professional, and social contexts in this way, we hope to paint a more comprehensive picture of the factors that shape their experiences and perspectives.

### 3.1. Context

The present study was conducted on Xiaohongshu (小红书, “RedNote”). With more than 300 million registered users and around 85 million monthly active users as of 2023, Xiaohongshu provides a platform on which influencers and others can post, share, and discover product reviews (Wikipedia, 2024). Not only influential domestically, Xiaohongshu is also gradually becoming a popular tool for discussing life events and experiences among overseas Chinese communities and users from other cultural backgrounds globally (Liu et al., 2025). In particular, after a U. S. court ruling halted the local operation of TikTok in January 2025, many American TikTok users flocked to Xiaohongshu, referring to themselves as “TikTok refugees”; and this surge in new users temporarily propelled Xiaohongshu to the top of the free-app download rankings in multiple regions worldwide (Liu et al., 2025).

Xiaohongshu combines elements of Instagram and Pinterest, featuring a distinctive red and white interface where users share lifestyle content through photos, videos, and text posts. It has a two-column feed of recommended posts that users can scroll through and click on for details (Wan et al., 2025). For educators, the platform offers several unique affordances that make it particularly supportive for sharing teaching reflections and professional development content (Fig. 1).

The platform’s visual-first design encourages edu-influencers to present their expertise through aesthetically curated posts that blend personal lifestyle content with professional insights. Unlike traditional academic platforms, Xiaohongshu’s interface resembles a digital magazine where educational content appears alongside fashion, travel, and lifestyle posts, creating an approachable environment for sharing teaching experiences. Edu-influencers can organize their content into “collections” or thematic folders that function as categorized portfolios, allowing followers to easily browse specific topics, such as daily-life vlogs, lesson planning strategies, or career advice (see Fig. 2). This organizational

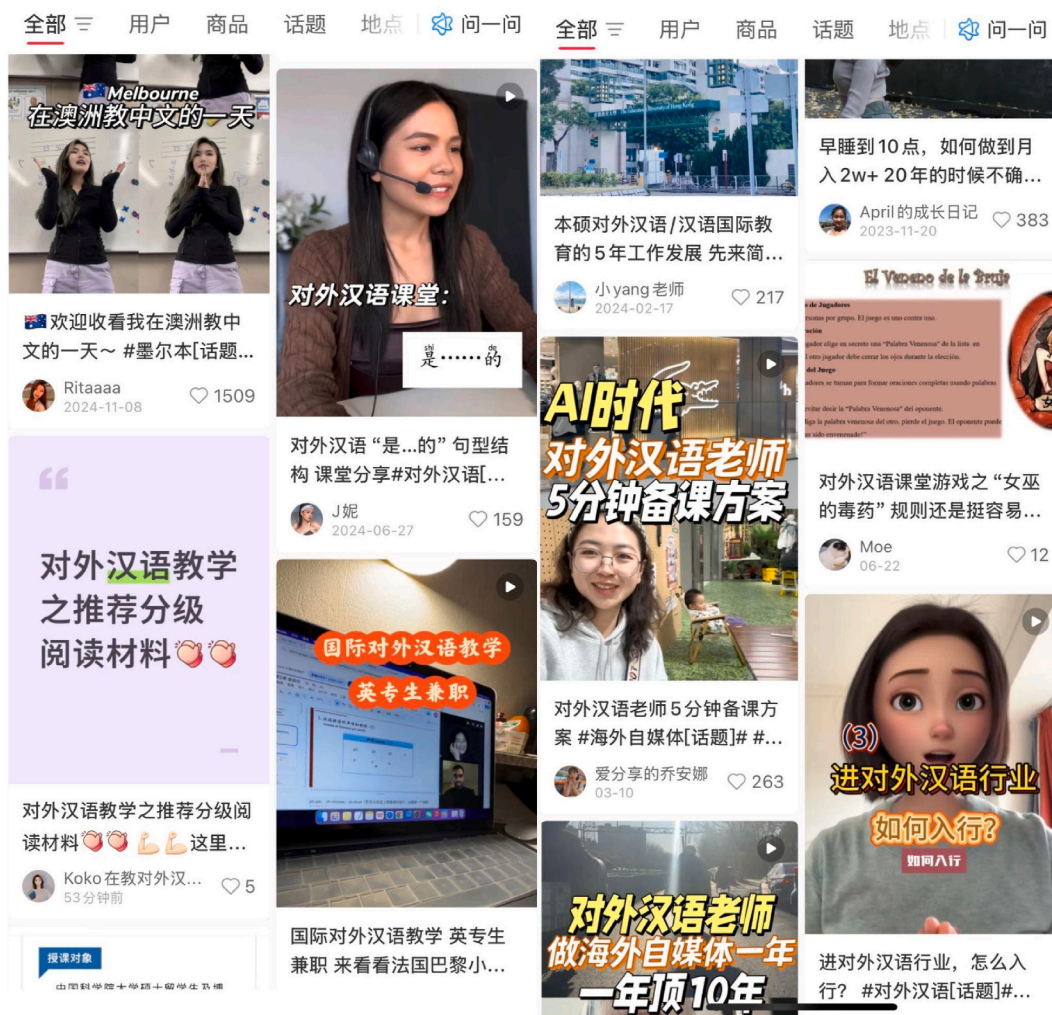


Fig. 1. The interface of Xiaohongshu.



feature helps edu-influencers maintain a coherent professional identity while making their expertise more accessible to novice teachers seeking targeted resources.

Beyond content-sharing, Xiaohongshu provides integrated monetization features that enable edu-influencers to commercialize their expertise directly within the platform. Users can open personal storefronts on their profile pages, creating seamless pathways to sell digital teaching materials, physical resources, or curated online lessons (Fig. 3). The platform also supports interactive engagement through livestreaming and group chat functions, fostering two-way communication between educators and their audiences (Fig. 4). These features facilitate informal peer support networks and community building, making Xiaohongshu a dynamic space for professional collaboration and mentorship among Chinese educators.

### 3.2. Participants

We used purposive sampling in January 2024 to filter participants from among all the edu-influencers who used Xiaohongshu, according to the following inclusion criteria: 1) they were CFL teachers; 2) they had been active on the platform for the preceding two months, and for more than six months in total; and 3) they had more than 1,000 followers. This follower-numbers criterion is considerably higher than the lowest threshold in some others (e.g., Schroeder et al., 2024; Shelton et al., 2020). Additional considerations were 1) that CFL is relatively niche compared to broader educational content areas, making it reasonable to expect that edu-influencers in this domain will have smaller follower counts than those in more mainstream subjects; and 2) that individuals with relatively few followers can exert disproportionate influence due to their high levels of activity, interactivity, and/or content virality (e.g., Shelton et al., 2020). Of the 95 edu-influencers who met the above inclusion criteria, 12 agreed to participate. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the first author's institution's Human Research Ethics Committee, and consent forms were also read and signed by every participant. Table 1 presents key characteristics of the participants and their Xiaohongshu's profiles.

### 3.3. Data collection

To answer RQ1, we collected all participants' Xiaohongshu posts through systematic manual retrieval. This process involved capturing each post's title and creating a brief textual description of it.

Our semi-structured interviews explored what the participants shared, the gratifications they sought and obtained through such sharing, and the challenges they encountered. The questions were initially drafted by the lead author based on an extensive literature review coupled with their previous direct experience of using social media for professional learning. Then, the draft questions were reviewed by the rest of the research team, and revisions were made to ensure their reliability (see Appendix). The interviews, each lasting around 30 min, were conducted via Zoom in Chinese, the participants' native language. All were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim by the research team.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, following the six steps set forth by Braun and Clarke (2012): i.e., familiarization with data, coding, theme development, review, definition, and final reporting. After multiple readings of the transcripts by the lead author, who was already familiar with the interview data, initial codes were generated and discussed weekly with the research team. Next, based on such discussions, data themes were defined and iteratively refined. The remaining interview data were then coded into the refined themes, a codebook was generated, and results were recorded.



Fig. 2. Screenshot of an edu-influencer's post collections.



Fig. 3. Screenshot of an edu-influencer's self-run shop.

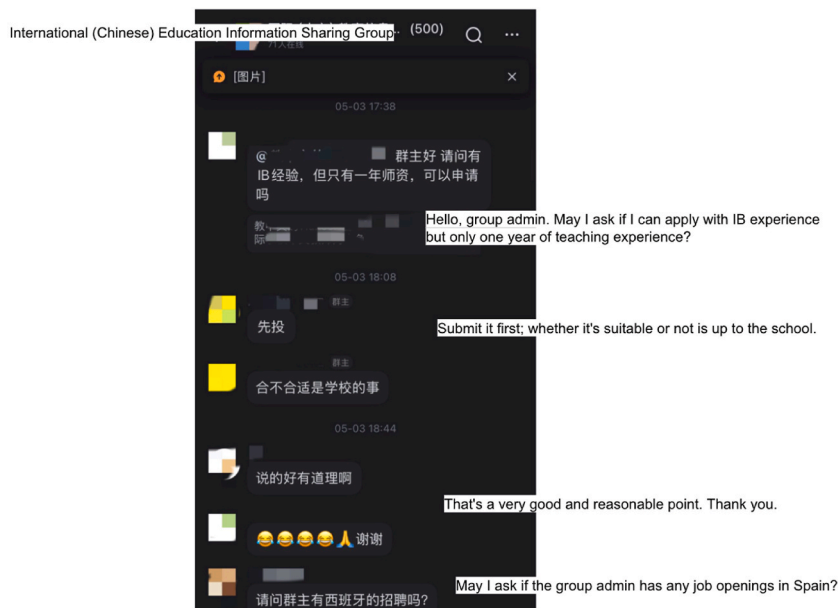


Fig. 4. A screenshot of a group chat with 500 members, hosted by an edu-influencer for CFL teachers.

Then, content analysis (Krippendorff, 1989) was applied to the participants' post content. All posts were examined together using a deductive approach. Specifically, themes that had emerged from the interview data informed part of the content-analysis framework, and new themes that arose from the content analysis were cross-checked against the interview data to refine our interpretations. The lead author conducted the initial coding, which was then reviewed by two others to ensure reliability, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Across both analyses, six themes and 667 codes were identified.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. RQ1: What edu-influencers shared

Three major themes emerged from the participants' posts and semi-structured interview data. These were teaching-support

**Table 1**  
Interviewees' background characteristics.

Interviewee	Higher Education	Years of Teaching	Location of Teaching	Number of Followers
A	English (B.A.)	2.5	Online	5,380
B	Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (B.A., M.A.)	4	Spain	1,437
C	Japanese (B.A.)	10	China	2,401
D	Economics (B.A.), Secondary Education (M.A.)	6	Online	3,440
E	Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (B.A., M.A.)	4	Thailand	2,105
F	Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (B.A., M.A.)	8	Indonesia	2,409
G	Accountancy and English (B.A.)	5.5	Online	6,509
H	Chinese Language and Literature (B.A.)	23	Canada	2,993
I	Chinese Language and Literature (B.A.)	6.5	UK	2,342
J	Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (B.A., M.A.)	3	Russia	1,885
K	Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (B.A., M.A.)	3	UK	3,318
L	Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (B.A., M.A.)	6	China	23,800

content, career-related support content, and personal content. Each of those three thematic categories includes at least one subtheme, as shown in Fig. 5.

#### 4.1.1. Teaching-support content

All participants shared content related to their teaching experiences and career experiences, as well as teaching resources. Each of those three content categories is described in turn below.

All participants ( $n = 12$ ) shared their teaching experiences as practical references for peers' future teaching (Fig. 6). In particular, they shared success stories, effective teaching strategies, and/or positive experiences, on the grounds that seeing the impact of one's own teaching on students and hearing about fellow educators' achievements can rejuvenate teachers and energize their teaching.

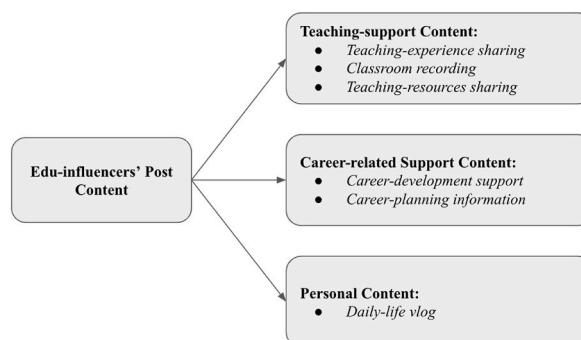
Five participants also shared video recordings of their classroom teaching. All five noted that their aims in making them included self-review and allowing other teachers to view authentic instructional practices. The videos primarily focused on the teachers' instructional strategies: e.g., lesson delivery, questioning techniques, and classroom management. While students were present in the recordings, their visibility and participation varied. In some cases, students appeared as part of whole-class discussions or small-group activities, while in others, they were featured minimally, with the camera primarily centered on the teacher. According to the participants, engagement with the videos enabled them and their followers to obtain constructive feedback and experience-based insights from their peers and discuss alternative strategies (Fig. 7). Interviewee H explained that she would “directly take a complete original classroom video of how I guide [... my students’] process of repetition or rephrasing, and then how I correct and encourage them.”

Half the participants ( $n = 6$ ) also shared practical instructional resources such as websites, books, technological tools, and/or slides on their own pages, to inspire their followers with new ideas for CFL teaching content and activities and to save them time and effort in lesson planning (Fig. 8). For instance, Interviewee F shared that because

*[i]t consumed plenty of time and energy when I did my own course-planning, I can share something that may help other teachers save some time; and I also shared some good websites with content such as graded-reading materials, in-class interactive games, or free resources.*

#### 4.1.2. Career-related support content

Many participants also shared content pertinent to teachers' career development, such as information about job hunting and recruitment, as well as lectures, seminars, or professional-development programs in the CFL field. More than half ( $n = 7$ ) shared various types of information related to the certification examination in teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages (TCSOL); preparation experiences; pathways to further education; and other career-relevant resources (Fig. 9). They also shared “information



**Fig. 5.** Categories of the sampled edu-influencers' post content.



Fig. 6. Examples of edu-influencers sharing their teaching experiences.

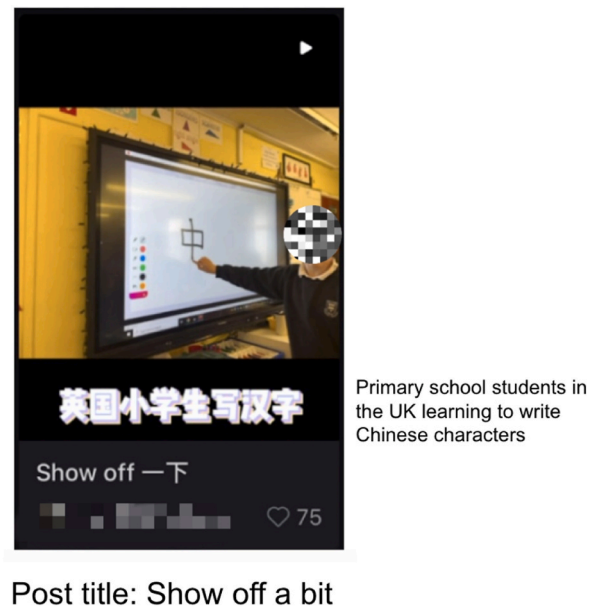


Fig. 7. Example of an edu-influencer's shared classroom recording.

about the [TCSOL] exam schedules and registration processes [...] exam preparation, experiences, and tips, [...] and] study materials and reference books.” (Interviewee L)

A third of the participants ( $n = 4$ ) shared job information, interviewing and interview-preparation tips and experiences, and information about educational institutions' recruitment processes (Fig. 10). Some even designed paid services such as one-to-one consultation aimed at providing support during the job-seeking process. Interviewee L shared a desire “to utilize this platform to offer course training. I have a strong interest in content creation, so I intend to develop various courses based on students' needs.”

#### 4.1.3. Personal content

Half the interviewees ( $n = 6$ ) used vlogs to illustrate their day-to-day experiences as CFL teachers and to share their perspectives about “the current state of the industry, including some of their own experiences, and issues within the workplace” (Interviewee C). Their vlogs also offered unique glimpses into the living conditions, cultures, education systems, and specific challenges that confront CFL educators in various countries (Fig. 11). For example, Interviewee J shared that





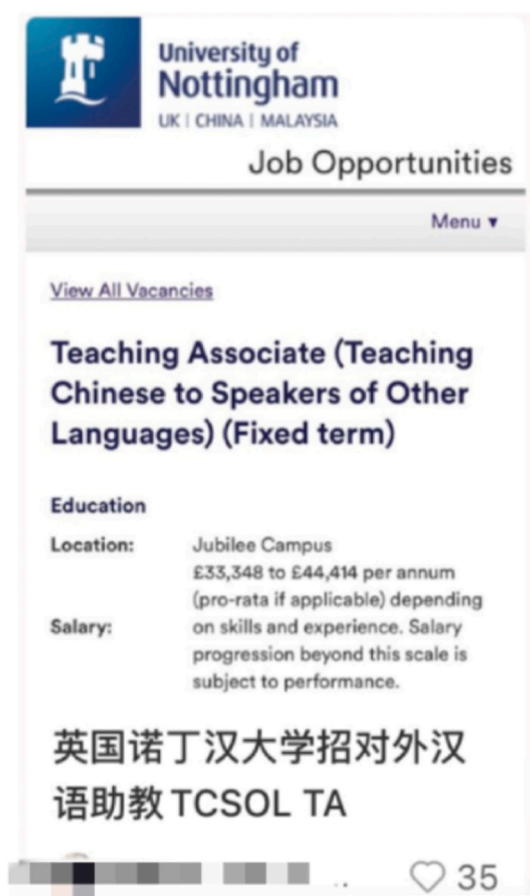
Post title: How to Create a PowerPoint Ancient-Style Timer by Teachers

Fig. 8. Example of an edu-influencer sharing a teaching resource.



Post Title: Free Registration! 2023 Chinese Immersion Teaching Training Program in the United States

Fig. 9. Example of an edu-influencer sharing information about professional-development seminars for teachers.



Post title: The University of Nottingham in the UK is recruiting CSL Teaching Assistants

Fig. 10. Example of an edu-influencer sharing career-planning information.

*I let everyone see the culture in Russia and the development of Chinese-language teaching. [...] It's [also] about life in Russia, like me in Saint Petersburg, there are polar days and polar nights. [...] Teachers may experience Seasonal Affective Disorder. [...] So I have also been sharing some content about paying attention to one's mental health.*

#### 4.2. RQ2(a): Edu-influencers' gratifications sought from content sharing

##### 4.2.1. Filling information gaps

Several participants ( $n = 4$ ) indicated that their reason for starting to post was that they wanted to seek industry information and/or allow the teachers who followed them to expand their understanding of the CFL field, because relevant information was misleading – especially in the case of recruitment agencies' pitches – or simply scarce. Interviewee C, for instance, told us that

*videos from organizations [...] produced] in the hope that people will purchase their teacher-training courses [...] are biased towards getting people to see the good and more desirable side of this industry. I just hope to show people something more realistic[.]*

A non-overlapping subgroup of participants ( $n = 4$ ) told us that they shared to address matters that professional-development programs overlooked or handled poorly. In particular, they intended to redress these drawbacks by portraying the complexity or diversity of real teaching. Interviewee A explained:

*In training, [s]ometimes even the teacher educator who told us may not fully understand why it should be done that way, as they were simply following their own teacher's instructions [...]. I hope to share these insights with others so that they no longer feel confused or overlook certain issues.*



Post title: How do abroad CFL teachers spend their free time? For details, please refer to the VCR.

Fig. 11. Example of an edu-influencer sharing daily-life events.

Three participants connected with peers by organizing live streaming or live online seminars in which teachers exchanged ideas and shared their experiences. Interviewee D organized several such seminars and invited CFL experts as well as other teachers to join them. She said she had realized that

*many university professors in this field have valuable insights and experiences to share, but may lack the channels or opportunities to do so. From that point on, I started reaching out to other channels in the CFL field [...]. I made an effort to discover and uncover their knowledge and perspectives.*

#### 4.2.2. Self-documentation and self-expression

Some participants ( $n = 3$ ) chose to share files, links, or documents that could be accessed, downloaded, and utilized by other educators. In effect, these activities transformed their Xiaohongshu pages into digital portfolios, unconstrained by geographical barriers, that could be used as evidence of teaching effectiveness for professional-development purposes.

Nearly half the interviewees ( $n = 5$ ) mentioned that their motivation for sharing was to record their own growth as CSL teachers, inspire their peers, and promote their own professional progress. Interviewee D explained that when starting to post, “*I considered myself a novice teacher [...] and I believed that my growth as a novice was my own journey. So when other novice teachers see my posts, they can relate to my feelings and experiences.*”

#### 4.2.3. Attaining social recognition and a sense of fulfillment

A third of the participants ( $n = 4$ ) mentioned that they were initially inspired and motivated by their peers and by the success of other edu-influencers on various social-media platforms, and hoped to become renowned edu-influencers themselves. For example, Interviewee D told us:

*There are two YouTubers who’ve had a tremendous impact on me. Their content is highly appealing, and during the initial stages of my teaching journey [...] I began to wonder if I could also share my knowledge and experiences. I wanted to embark on this journey as well.*

The members of the same subgroup also told us that their sharing was influenced by receiving private messages and comments from peers inquiring about various aspects of teaching:

*Because many people have started consulting me about teaching-related questions, I increasingly feel like a true edu-influencer. To avoid letting them down and to contribute to the field, I’m motivated to help teachers who may have just entered the field with new teaching methods. (Interviewee K)*

Gaining recognition for their expertise and contributions to the educational community also reinforced their sense of fulfillment. “*I share because I want to offer help*” (Interviewee B).

However, two participants told us that they experienced negative emotions arising from social comparison. That is, when exposed to online content that portrayed 'perfect' teachers, they felt pressured to meet audience expectations. Sometimes, they were also frustrated at not receiving few positive feedback. Interviewee A noted, *"I'm doing all this alone, I really need everyone to provide different ideas [...] Our thoughts and perspectives are very limited, and we don't know what others want to see, or what they are interested in."*

#### 4.3. RQ2(b): Edu-influencers' gratifications obtained from content sharing

##### 4.3.1. Enhancing self-efficacy

Sharing their expertise and insights about CFL teaching enhanced five of the sampled edu-influencers' sense of self-efficacy, both in their teaching and generally, due to the recognition and appreciation they received from others. As Interviewee H noted, *"if I receive feedback from the audience indicating that a certain approach benefits them [...] it can reinforce my determination to continue in this profession."* Similarly, Interviewee G told us about becoming more motivated due to unexpected viral success:

*[O]n the day I created my first online teacher community, it exploded with people, and I felt overwhelmed because I hadn't planned out how to attract and engage them [...]. It was like being forced to take the plunge and figure things out as I went along.*

Interviewee I shared that

*[w]hen I posted a video, initially I had concerns about whether people would like it or not. However, to my surprise, there were people who enjoyed watching it. This made me more willing to share and sparked my interest, leading me to make my classroom more engaging.*

##### 4.3.2. Fostering professional growth

Sharing also prompted two-thirds of the participants ( $n = 8$ ) to reflect on their roles as teachers and/or teacher educators, to monitor their current teaching practices, and to select appropriate strategies for improving their teaching. Some of these interviewees suggested that, via sharing, they could evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching methods, strategies, and content and seek opportunities for improvement. This process could involve looking back through their old posts and/or receiving feedback from the audience through comments or direct messages. As Interviewee B explained,

*It's beneficial to revisit those posts from time to time, and I can even reuse them in my teaching. For instance, a teaching method I shared might be used four to five times in a week, and with each iteration, I fine-tune and clarify it.*

Additionally, this subgroup told us that sharing-facilitated reflection on their roles – whether as teacher educators, edu-influencers, or "cyber mentors" – contributed to their professional growth. Often, as Interviewee C noted, this was by enabling them to "appropriately align" their content to their followers' diverse needs.

Half of this same subgroup ( $n = 4$ ) said they had begun reflecting on better ways to convey content. Interviewee H, for instance, highlighted that *"[u]nderstanding something yourself, and being able to articulate it clearly in a way that novice teachers can comprehend, are two different concepts. I'm currently undergoing this transition."*

##### 4.3.3. Acquiring knowledge and developing skills

Sharing content also created opportunities for most ( $n = 7$ ) the sampled edu-influencers to reflect deeply on their own learning, solidify their understanding of unfamiliar topics, reinforce what they had already learned, and articulate their thoughts. This, in turn, led them to deeper comprehension of pedagogical knowledge. Also, as Interviewee D explained,

*[w]hat everyone sees is just the tip of the iceberg [...]. However, when editing content, I make sure to review literature and reference materials. I look at both Chinese and English sources to ensure [...] my content is] comprehensive. Through doing this, the underlying knowledge system becomes more refined, and my understanding of the subject matter expands.*

A few participants ( $n = 3$ ) also reported that they gained new skills, such as digital literacy, in the course of brainstorming, editing, and posting content. Three others said they had acquired pedagogical content knowledge because sharing had prompted them to seek more resources. As Interviewee F explained, *"Sometimes if I want to share and realize that I lack knowledge in a certain area, I push myself to learn or absorb new things. By doing so, I acquire and accumulate new knowledge through my own efforts."*

##### 4.3.4. Gaining emotional support and building community

Half the participants said that sharing content provided them with emotional support in the form of encouragement from their followers (including family members in some cases), as well as a new channel through which to express their emotions. Interviewee G told us that initially, her parents

*didn't support my decision to pursue being a media-creator or work as a freelancer. They held more traditional views and believed that girls should seek stable jobs in schools or government institutions [...]. However, once I actually started and they saw the stability and growth in my work every month, they stopped voicing their concerns and instead became supportive.*

Additionally, the feedback, encouragement, and empathy they received in the wake of sharing reportedly reduced participants' feelings of isolation. As Interviewee D noted, *"I don't want to be just a tool. After sharing, my only requirement is to receive feedback. [...] I don't want to be solely an output provider, I also need some input."* Sharing also fostered these edu-influencers' sense of belonging to the educator community and provided opportunities for mutual support, which also enhanced their well-being. More specifically, it



created a space for open dialogue not only about the practical aspects of teaching, but also about the emotional and personal sides of their journeys. Interviewee G said: “Sharing [...] provides an opportunity for us to come together and grow as a community. In the future, we’ll keep in touch and learn from one another.”

#### 4.3.5. Shaping professional and personal goals

Finally, the act of content-sharing had a range of impacts on some of the participants’ (n = 5) pursuit of various goals, whether related to teaching practices, personal growth, professional development, or the roles they wanted to play on social media. Interviewee E told us,

*I now consider myself a niche content-creator in a niche field, more like a sharer. [...] Now my role in Xiaohongshu is like a “cyber teacher”. When they encounter problems, they can come to me and ask questions without any fear.*

A minority of the interviewees (n = 2) mentioned wanting to become freelance influencers: designing their own curricula and earning profits from them. Interviewee G told us that

*I gradually found my direction, and then I started creating explanatory videos, feeling that I could assist both novice and experienced teachers, which motivated me greatly. [...] I began developing my own training courses. From that point on, monetization became possible[.]*

### 4.4. RQ3: Challenges edu-influencers encountered during content sharing

#### 4.4.1. Algorithms

Four interviewees said social-media algorithms had influenced them to share more systematically. That is, when they started sharing their experiences and insights on social media, algorithms promoting new content fostered initial bursts of popularity, manifested as more “likes,” comments, and/or shares. For Interviewee F, this phenomenon alleviated pre-posting fears that her posts would meet with a hostile response, or even no response at all. Popularity also encouraged the sampled edu-influencers to tailor what they shared to the audience’s needs. For example, Interviewee J said that

*everyone’s searching for answers and looking for directions to emulate and learn from in life. Therefore, I have a clear target audience, people in the field of CFL, who share common feelings of confusion about their future career path and personal-growth direction [...]. I understand where their pain points lie and where their sense of confusion stems from.*

Related challenges faced by the sampled edu-influencers included uncertainty about what types of content would resonate with their audiences and frustration over the unpredictable nature of social-media engagement. At worst, this could produce feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy regarding their content’s lack of visibility or recognition. As Interviewee F put it,

*I’ve been doing it for quite a while. Some posts may get only seven likes, while others suddenly get hundreds of likes. I don’t know what people like. I’m not really concerned about what kind of content Xiaohongshu is willing to give me promotion for.*

#### 4.4.2. Censorship

The sampled edu-influencers also encountered content restrictions including but not limited to bans on sensitive topics or words, which hindered their ability to foster academic discussions. Interviewee J said: “Sometimes, you just want to share something, but you face obstacles like being unable to share documents or links. [...] I have been banned several times for seven to 14 days. This has discouraged my sharing desire.” Some (n = 4) of the sampled edu-influencers told us about persistently innovating and strategizing to overcome these barriers, for instance, by changing sensitive words or delaying the release of sensitive topics.

#### 4.4.3. Monetization

The participants’ financial returns from content sharing were often minimal. For example, Interviewee E’s income from selling teaching resources she had shared was barely a living wage, a problem that worsened when she was living abroad. This made it difficult for some participants (n = 5) to justify the effort they invested in content creation unless it could be scaled up. Interviewee B told us that the effort of independently managing all aspects of content creation and maintenance was overwhelming, further complicating the process of building a sustainable income stream.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Types of content shared by Edu-influencers

Our findings indicated that the participants’ content mainly comprised teaching support, career-related support, and personal content. The first of these types, which was also the most plentiful (reflecting the needs and interests of their respective digital communities), included practical teaching strategies and instructional resources. This finding differs from those of [Shelton et al.’s \(2022\)](#) analysis of justice-oriented edu-influencers on Western social-media platforms, whose content emphasized social justice and political consciousness. This discrepancy could have been shaped by differences in our sampled edu-influencers’ priorities; their audiences’ expectations; and/or the broader sociopolitical landscape of China, including but not limited to platform censorship and

content-moderation policies (Sun & Ding, 2024).

Our participants also shared career-related support to help their audience members navigate their professional journeys beyond the classroom. This type of content typically includes insights about job postings, preparation for teaching certifications, and strategies for applying to teaching positions. As compared to formal professional-development programs, the support offered through edu-influencers tends to be more personalized, experience-based, and situated in real-life teaching contexts (Tan et al., 2022). Importantly, beyond its overt purposes, this type of content appeared to play a key role in fostering solidarity, peer learning and mentorship, and a sense of community among educators navigating similar paths in the niche field of CFL, where formal support systems are limited.

The fact that some of our participants shared extensive personal-life content aligns with prior researchers' findings that edu-influencers often integrate personal narratives into their content to foster authenticity, relatability, and engagement (Carpenter et al., 2023). In other words, by humanizing their online personas, they make their content more accessible and appealing to fellow educators and thus build stronger connections with that audience.

In short, our findings provide valuable insights into the ways edu-influencers contribute to other educators' professional learning. By examining such contributions, this study enriches the broader discourse on how educational-content sharing on social media is shaping professional learning and ongoing professional growth, and highlights the diverse ways educators leverage social media to engage with and support aspiring teachers.

### 5.2. *Gratifications sought from content sharing*

Our data suggest that the gratifications our participants sought from sharing mainly consisted of filling information gaps, self-documentation and self-expression, and attaining social recognition and a sense of fulfillment. With regard to the first, their initial motivation stemmed from the lack of accurate, accessible, or sufficiently detailed industry information. In particular, they aimed to counteract the biases present in promotional materials produced by recruitment agencies and training organizations, which often painted overly optimistic pictures that omitted challenges such as job instability, pedagogical difficulties, and institutional constraints. These findings align with prior ones that emphasized edu-influencers' role in knowledge dissemination and professional-discourse formation (Carpenter & Shelton, 2021; Shelton et al., 2022). Our participants also noted that their concerns about the limitations of professional-development programs prompted them to serve as alternative knowledge brokers, sharing firsthand insights, real-world teaching scenarios, and strategies that were often absent from formal training. Some of them, echoing prior findings by Trust et al. (2017), were motivated by a desire to democratize access to valuable knowledge and expertise, particularly by educators who have few traditional professional-development opportunities. Our findings also align well with previous ones highlighting that edu-influencers' content sharing on social media facilitates knowledge dissemination in ways that transcend the normal constraints of time and geography (Carpenter et al., 2022; Tellez, 2024).

Another critical aspect of the sampled edu-influencers' motivation for content sharing was the desire for self-documentation and self-expression during their professional journeys. As previously noted by Ghazali et al. (2016), by sharing teaching materials such as slides, tools, and videos, edu-influencers not only provide valuable resources to their peers but also maintain their professional images. In doing so, our participants transformed their respective online presences into repositories of pedagogical resources, facilitating knowledge exchange while simultaneously building public records of their teaching effectiveness.

Lastly, the pursuit of social recognition and a sense of fulfillment emerged as a strong motivator for edu-influencers. By interacting with like-minded educators, they cultivated supportive networks, exchanged ideas, and collaborated on various projects and initiatives. Such sharing of their expertise and experiences as part of a quest for validation and for recognition from their peers as knowledgeable and influential figures within the education community echoes prior findings by Veletsianos (2016) and Oh and Syn (2015). The positive feedback and engagement they received from social-media followers affirmed and reinforced their senses that they were contributing and making an impact, which further boosted their motivation to continue sharing content. On the other hand, however, such interactions sometimes contributed to social-comparison dynamics, whereby some edu-influencers felt pressured to produce highly polished content to match others' visibility and perceived success, in line with prior findings by Carpenter et al. (2023). Our data may also suggest, in line with Shelton et al.'s (2020) results, that content sharing may create unintended tensions, potentially exacerbating feelings of inadequacy among edu-influencers who struggle to meet aspirational standards.

### 5.3. *Gratifications obtained from content sharing*

Our identification of the participants' multifaceted gratifications actually obtained from content sharing represents a small step forward in this field. They chiefly reported that this activity enhanced their self-efficacy, fostered their professional growth, developed their knowledge/skills, provided emotional support, facilitated the building of communities, and shaped their professional and personal goals.

The boost to their self-efficacy was of two kinds, general and pedagogical. That is, content sharing not only reinforced their belief in their teaching abilities, but also encouraged them to continue engaging with their professional communities online. These findings are consistent with Richter et al.'s (2022) conclusion that self-efficacy is strongly related to information sharing. However, our study differed from theirs in viewing self-efficacy as an outcome of edu-influencers' engagement in social-media content sharing rather than as a determinant of their sharing behavior. That is, by engaging with online communities and receiving and acting upon feedback about the content they share, edu-influencers may develop greater confidence in their expertise. This perspective extends the literature by demonstrating how the content-sharing process itself can serve as a form of professional development, reinforcing educators' levels

of belief in their abilities and potentially influencing their future engagement in online knowledge dissemination. Through sharing content, the sampled edu-influencers also found that they became more adept at self-monitoring their professional growth, more likely to critically reflect on their own teaching practices, and better able to articulate their thoughts and ideas as edu-influencers, which in turn made them more capable of designing high-quality content. Such processes of reflection and articulation have previously been identified as crucial to continuous professional development, and as a pathway both to more effective teaching strategies and to improved professional-development perspectives (Lu et al., 2024). In short, the act of sharing not only benefited the participants' followers, but also allowed these edu-influencers themselves to acquire new resources and develop their own skills. The resulting reciprocal learning environment, fostering a sense of self-directed professional development, echoes recent findings by Lu et al. (2024).

Our finding that sharing also provided the interviewees with emotional support from their families and followers aligns with Oh and Syn's (2015) conclusion that social media enables educators to support one another, sometimes even to a greater degree than in-person interactions do. Moreover, our study expands scholarly understanding of the types of interactions that occur among teachers on social media and the emotional impact of online educational communities on their members (Trust et al., 2017).

Lastly, our participants shaped their goals of various kinds through content sharing, connecting and interacting with other users, and controlling the usage of applications. In line with prior findings by Carpenter, Shelton, et al. (2021), this process helped them establish themselves as credible, authoritative figures in their field.

#### 5.4. Challenges

Because platforms often reward visibility and engagement metrics, edu-influencers often tailor their content to align with algorithmic preferences, such as using trending hashtags (Greenhow et al., 2024; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016). While such tactics may succeed in enhancing their visibility and reach, they strongly underscore the influence of platform dynamics on content creation and dissemination. That is, edu-influencers must navigate the tension between authentic expression and algorithmic optimization, and balance their commitment to meaningful engagement and content quality against their desire for visibility. Our results confirm this idea. Unlike previous studies, however, we also found that censorship shaped the sampled edu-influencers' content on Chinese social media. This could happen if their content was flagged as inappropriate or sensitive, limiting these edu-influencers' ability to reach their audience. Also, their content may have been de-prioritized by algorithms or even hidden from certain users without their knowledge, which could have hindered their reach and engagement within their respective communities; while, paradoxically, other content could have gained visibility due to its controversial nature. Thus, censorship adds an extra layer of complexity for edu-influencers, requiring them to navigate strict regulations and guidelines to ensure their content remains visible and accessible to their target audience (Aktay, 2018).

Our findings also highlight the challenges of content monetization. Many participants were selling digital products or services, but most who did so earned meager sums, in line with prior findings by Carpenter et al. (2022). However, unlike research focused on the monetary aspects of edu-influencer engagement (e.g., Schroeder et al., 2024), ours showed that monetization – while sometimes a motivator – was not universally seen as a central goal. Specifically, only two of our participants expressed aspirations to transition into freelance edu-influencer roles by developing and selling curricula. This, they told us, was mostly due to the complex and opaque process of earning revenue through CFL content sharing, which was influenced by factors such as algorithms, platform affordances, and teachers' workloads. In line with prior findings by Schroeder et al. (2024), monetization for those participants who engaged in it evolved organically from content creation as part of a wider process of professional development. As such, it may be useful for future researchers to explore monetization as an outcome of content sharing rather than as its initial driving force.

#### 6. Conclusion

This qualitative study explored 12 Chinese edu-influencers' content-sharing practices, including the types of content they shared (i.e., teaching-support content, career-related support content, and personal-life content), the gratifications they sought from this activity (filling information gaps, self-documentation and self-expression, and attaining social recognition and a sense of fulfillment), and the gratifications they obtained from it (i.e., enhanced self-efficacy, professional growth, knowledge and skills, emotional support and community, and the shaping of professional and personal goals). We also explored the algorithm-, censorship-, and monetization-related problems they encountered during the content-sharing process.

Our findings have important implications both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, they provide fresh perspectives on social media's affordances for teachers' establishment of personal learning environments and self-directed professional development. They also tend to support UGT-derived theories about individuals' purposive use of social media, and help explain the perceived gratifications of content-sharing. As such, they can be expected to help future researchers further expand knowledge of teachers' and teacher educators' roles as edu-influencers, and such influencers' social-media use.

Practically, we have provided rich examples of the sampled edu-influencers' usage of social media, which may render such usage more rewarding for others. Also, we hope that our results will inspire non-influencer teacher educators and professional-development program designers to effectively integrate social media into their programs, and individual teachers to informally share, collaborate, and build their personal-learning and professional-development networks via social media. Lastly, our findings can guide educational policymakers regarding the potential benefits both of social-media platforms (e.g., as a means of enhancing access to educational resources) and of collaborations with edu-influencers (e.g., as a means of increasing official programs' reach and visibility).

The current study is not without limitations, however. First, its sample size was limited; it did not take potential gender differences into consideration; and most of the participants were in-service teachers with many years of experience. Second, it only studied

Xiaohongshu, and thus could not take account of how the disparate affordances of various social-media platforms may influence the content their users share and their perceptions of such sharing. Future scholars of this topic are therefore encouraged to look into how factors such as gender and levels of teaching experience may affect edu-influencers' sharing patterns, and to conduct larger-scale quantitative studies across a range of social-media platforms using more advanced data-analysis methods such as machine learning.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Lanfang Sun:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Keyi Zhou:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation. **Lanqing Li:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation. **Wai Ming Cheung:** Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Chin-Hsi Lin:** Supervision, Project administration, Conceptualization.

### Author note

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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