Instagramming Their Hearts Out: What Do Edu-Influencers Share on Instagram?

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Some K-12 social media celebrities, or influencers, have begun to enact influence at a massive scale, possibly shaping the teachers who follow them, while seeking individual profit in the process. In this qualitative study, the authors explored the content edu-influencers share on Instagram, which is an understudied yet increasingly popular social media site, where influencer culture runs rampant. The authors coded publicly available Instagram posts (n = 310) and stories (n = 115) shared by 18 influencers comprising the popular and racially diverse K-12 collaborative, Teach Your Heart Out™. They observed activity across 4 weeks during the 2019 back-to-school season. Edu-influencers' content encompassed four themes: promoting products and themselves, motivating teachers, soliciting engagement, and advocating for classroom approaches. On one hand, edu-influencers sometimes facilitated teacher networking, provided motivational messages for teachers, shared resources with teachers, provided authentic examples of classroom practice, and promoted social justice orientations. However, some influencers' activity was overwhelmingly promotional, lacked thoughtful explanation, or missed an opportunity for connection to critical social issues. Findings shed light on the phenomenon of educator influencer culture, highlighting the need for critical digital literacies among teachers who use social media for professional purposes.

A *New York Times* article recently asserted, "As social media expands its cultural dominance, the people who can steer the online conversation will have the upper hand" (Roose, 2019, p. 1). The kindergarten to 12th grade (K-12) niche is no exception, with emerging "edu-influencers" steering the online conversation around teaching and learning.

Instagram has emerged as a popular social media site among teachers (Collins, 2019; Rozen, 2018), but scholarly investigation around teachers and this platform has been limited (however, see preliminary work from Carpenter et al., 2019, and Engman et al., 2019). To address this gap, the current study explored the nature of the messages K-12 influencers have shared with teacher audiences on Instagram. Findings will be useful for teacher educators and school leaders seeking to understand the social media messaging today's teachers consume and will inform opinions about Instagram's influence on teachers' professional perspectives and practices. Such knowledge will help these stakeholders understand how to support teachers' critical use of social media for professional purposes.

We define "edu-influencers" as individuals who have achieved microcelebrity status in spaces such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Pinterest, and TeachersPayTeachers.com (TpT) by promoting certain education-related products, philosophies, or practices (Engman et al., 2019; LaGarde, 2019; Roose, 2019; Rozen, 2018). Edu-influencers stand to play a fascinating role in teachers' professional learning networks (PLNs; Trust et al., 2016). On one hand, edu-influencers may share useful resources and examples of classroom practice, facilitate teacher networking, or even expose teachers to new ideas around social justice and equity. In an era of standardization and low teacher morale (Apple, 2013; Hursh, 2007; Sugrue, 2019), edu-influencers may present an opportunity to celebrate teachers' diverse stories and the fun that can happen in classrooms.

On the other hand, edu-influencers may promote products simply for the sake of sponsorship that may reinforce the status-quo, or worse, proliferate practices that are ineffective or harmful (Carpenter & Harvey, 2019). Influencers may perpetuate (or exacerbate) a culture that values individual superstars, superficiality, self-promotion, and capitalism (Stokel-Walker, 2019), ideals that may conflict with the notion of teaching as a democratic, moral, and collaborative profession (Bullough & Rosenberg, 2018; Goodlad et al., 1990).

We explored these issues qualitatively, investigating a single group of edu-influencers as an interesting case: Teach Your Heart Out™ (TYHO). Founded by two Georgia educators, TYHO was a popular, racially diverse collaborative of 20 or so edu-influencers with the expressed mission to provide professional development and inspiration for teachers (TYHO, n.d.). The collaborative hosted several conferences for teachers each year, some taking place on cruise ships, advertised as "professional development at sea" (TYHO, n.d.).

TYHO was among a growing group of educator-created professional development brands such as Get Your Teach On. Given the rising popularity of these collaboratives, and the issue that many teachers spend

personal funds on their conferences and resources, we wondered what messages these branded entities shared. We selected TYHO as a sample population because its influencers represented a popular, established, and clearly delineated group from which to draw participants, rather than cherry picking edu-influencers from Instagram at large. TYHO's influencers attracted our interest because they (a) represented a racially diverse group of educators, (b) were actively involved in K-12 schools as teachers, administrators, and professional developers, (c) were popular among teacher followers (most had amassed tens of thousands of followers on Instagram), and (d) had robust participation on the platform (Instagram, 2019). This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What do TYHO edu-influencers share on Instagram?
2. What are the implications of those messages?

Literature Review

This study was informed by literature spanning the topics of the Teacher-to-Teacher Online Marketplace of Ideas (TOMI), teacher leadership, and influencer culture.

TOMI

In recent years, teachers have begun to use online resources for classroom inspiration and professional support (Carpenter et al., 2019; Hertel & Wessman-Enzinger, 2017; Kaminsi & Sloutsky, 2020; Opfer et al., 2016; Sawyer, et al., 2019; Shapiro et al., 2019). Sawyer et al. (2019) demonstrated that preservice teachers turn to the internet for lesson planning, almost as often as they turn to a cooperating teacher and more than they consult university faculty member or friends and family.

Other evidence suggests that Instagram, in particular, has gained momentum. Kaminski and Sloutsky (2020) surveyed 413 US K-4 teachers, finding that 25% had used Instagram for teaching and 35% had not used but would consider using the platform. Moreover, Carpenter et al. (2019) surveyed over 800 teachers via social media, finding that 91% used Instagram professionally, most often to gain new ideas and to learn from educators on the site.

We introduce the term, Teacher-to-Teacher Online Marketplace of Ideas (TOMI), to describe the online spaces where teachers exchange classroom resources and ideas, including educational marketplaces such as TpT or Ignite.Amazon.com, social media sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, or YouTube, subscription sites such as Patreon, and educators' individual blogs or websites. In these spaces, content creators self-publish their ideas and materials for free or for profit. Many (but not all) of the content creators within the TOMI are current or former classroom teachers.

Barriers to join the TOMI are low (simply create a free account in most cases), so participants may bypass traditional gatekeepers, meaning there is potentially a more equitable opportunity for teachers to lead in these

spaces. However, content on the TOMI is not formally monitored through a substantive peer or expert review process (Hunter & Hall, 2018; Sawyer et al., 2019) and author credentials may be difficult to verify. Consequently, the quality of content on the TOMI may be inconsistent or unreliable. Alternatively, the lack of regulation may offer an opportunity for new, innovative ideas to be shared easily and widely. Teachers are empowered as the creators and curators of content on the TOMI, challenging existing power hierarchies limiting what is taught in classrooms today. Either way, as new generations of highly networked, online-savvy teachers join the profession and as teachers continue to connect more in online networks (Trust et al., 2016), teachers are drawn to the TOMI for classroom inspiration and support.

Other scholars have referred to the TOMI using a variety of terms, including Sites of Curriculum Sharing (Gallagher et al., 2019), the Supplemental Curriculum Bazaar (Polikoff & Dean, 2019), and Virtual Resource Pools (Hu et al., 2018). Each of these terms seems insufficient to describe what occurs on these sites. First, teachers are not exclusively "sharing" resources on these sites — they buy, sell, borrow, and share. Additionally, the curriculum found on these sites is not exclusively "supplemental." Research has shown that some teachers had assembled their entire curriculum from TOMI sites (Pittard, 2017).

Last, we identified a need for a more specific term that acknowledged the unvetted nature of these sites and its focus on teachers. Instead, TOMI conveys the largely teacher-to-teacher aspect of this new phenomenon (and thus its lack of outside expert vetting), its capitalist nature, and the acknowledgment that teachers are not purely gaining tangible materials through these sites, but also ideas and inspiration.

Teacher Leadership Goes Virtual

As the TOMI grows in scope and influence (e.g., Opfer et al., 2016), the educators who create content for this space may be emerging as teacher leaders (Shelton & Archambault, 2019, 2020). Often teacher leadership has been defined as, "teachers who maintain K–12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 7).

A recent meta-analysis concluded that teacher leaders can be effective peer coaches who (a) help their teacher peers discover and practice new strategies to benefit students and (b) guide teachers to enact curricula with fidelity (Kraft et al., 2018). Much of the discussion surrounding teacher leadership assumes that teacher leaders' provided mentorship is positive and effective. Critiques exist, however, in that it may be "presumptuous to think that teachers intuitively know how to lead their colleagues or schools without any focused support" (Wenner & Campbell, 2016, p. 3). Thus, the TOMI's teacher leaders could encourage teachers to adopt trite approaches, untrue ideas, and marginalizing practices.

Teacher leaders have found wider audiences with the advent of the TOMI (Engman et al., 2019; Shelton & Archambault, 2019, 2020; Trust et al., 2016). Since its inception in 2010, Instagram has become a popular venue

for so-called online teacherpreneurs — the individuals who market their classroom materials on virtual marketplaces like TpT (Shelton & Archambault, 2018). In recent work examining the perspectives of online teacherpreneurs (Shelton & Archambault, 2019, 2020), we found that these influencers view themselves as virtual mentors for the teachers who use their materials and ideas. Teacherpreneurs reported that they shared resources rooted in research-based practices and were intentional about designing classroom materials that supported learners of diverse linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds, although it is unclear if teachers themselves are intentional about their use of these materials to support diverse learners (Schroeder et al., 2019).

Other preliminary work by Engman et al. (2019) explored the Instagram accounts of 20 edu-influencers, each with over 50,000 followers. They found that Instagram edu-influencers depicted themselves as both designers and entrepreneurs, sharing images that showcased their ability to design learning materials and learning environments along with photos that promoted original teaching products they sold online. However, Carpenter and Harvey (2019) found that teachers reported frustration with the for-profit entities that clouded their professional social media activity. Additionally, Pittard (2017) noted that teacherpreneurs may perpetuate unrealistic or inaccurate ideals of good teaching. In sum, existing evidence suggests the participatory affordances of spaces like Instagram offer a new opportunity for teachers to amplify their voices as leaders.

Influencer Culture

While we position edu-influencers on Instagram and other sites of the TOMI as potential teacher leaders, edu-influencers can be understood as part of a larger influencer culture fueled by social media. Influencer culture can be understood, in part, as microcelebrity or social media celebrity (Hou, 2018). Microcelebrity, Marwick and boyd (2011) explained, "can be understood as a mindset and set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others" (p. 140).

Crafted by the microcelebrity or influencer, celebrity on social media is a practice that is learned (Marwick & boyd, 2011) and supported by self-branding, or the practice by which individuals create a distinct image of themselves for social and financial gains (Khamis et al., 2016). Through both self-branding and social media, individuals are able to transform themselves into "homegrown...stars" (Hou, 2018, p. 535) who avoid "the gatekeeper role of media and entertainment industries" (p. 535; see also Turner, 2014).

Indeed, the internet makes possible a larger "pool of potential celebrities" in that with "a computer and a bit of moxie...you've got a shot" (Gamson, 2011, p. 1065). With that shot, too, comes opportunities for aligning one's self-made brand to actual brands and sponsoring their products, thereby enabling influencers or social media celebrities to bring home financial gains from their social media presence.

Social media celebrity and microcelebrity have been characterized by a number of features. According to Hou (2018), social media celebrity can be defined by "Staged authenticity, managed connectedness with audience, the abundance of celebrity figures, and the cultural preoccupation with self-sufficient uniqueness" (p. 534). Microcelebrity, similarly, relies on a "performance of ordinariness, intimacy, and equality" with the audience (p. 536).

Microcelebrities, as otherwise "unexceptional people" (Gamson, 2011, p. 1062), focus on the seemingly mundane aspects of life that we all share and, in doing so, perform authenticity. This performance is necessarily a construction, as the self-branding that contributes to a microcelebrity's rise "creates a highly curated and often abridged snapshot of how they want to be seen" (Khamis et al., 2016, p. 6). Despite the highly constructed nature of their online presence, microcelebrities tend to promote a form of intimacy with their audiences in order to reap the monetary rewards of that form of sharing (Raun, 2018).

To date, empirical studies of transgender influencers (Raun, 2018), beauty-vloggers (Hou, 2018), and food-bloggers (Khamis et al., 2016) have been conducted to shed light on microcelebrity influencer culture via social media. However, limited empirical investigation of influencers within the K-12 education niche has been reported (but see Engman et al., 2019 for emerging evidence). Considering the rise of the TOMI, online teacherpreneurs, and edu-influencers, empirical study of this niche group is necessary to shed light on the content produced by teacher microcelebrities. Therefore, in the current study we pursued an initial investigation into edu-influencers, asking,what do TYHO edu-influencers share on Instagram and what are the implications of those messages?

Method

Participants

Participants included all 18 presenters listed in TYHO's most recently published conference guides (the 2019 Bahamas conference and the 2018 San Antonio conference), with publicly accessible Instagram accounts. We purposefully selected TYHO as a population for several reasons:

First, TYHO influencers appeared more diverse than the U.S. teacher population, which was 80% white and 77% female (National Council of Educational Statistics, 2016). TYHO participants included 12 women (66.7%) and six men (33.3%) and represented diverse ethnicities and races. We understood TYHO's diversity to be an asset, positioning marginalized communities and individuals as knowledgeable within the digital space (Mills et al., 2018). Second, all TYHO influencers were actively involved in K-12 schools, with roles ranging from classroom teachers, educational consultants, administrators, professional developers, and motivational speakers. Third, TYHO influencers were popular among teacher audiences. At the start of the study, participants' total number of Instagram followers ranged from 159 to 302,000, with an average of 73,996 followers and a median of 54,350 followers. Fourth, TYHO influencers' Instagram participation was robust, with many posting

to the platform daily, yielding a hearty data set. Participant characteristics were summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Participant	Number of Followers at Start of Study	Location by U.S. Census Region	Description
	Stories and Posts Participants		
1	131,000	West	Former elementary teacher, TpT seller, YouTube vlogger, TYHO co-founder
2	129,000	South	Elementary teacher, TpT seller
3	69,500	South	Elementary teacher, Scholastic blogger
4	56,100	Northeast	Elementary teacher, TpT seller
5	5,743	Midwest	Middle school teacher, motivational speaker
	Posts Participants		
6	302,000	South	Elementary administrator, YouTube vlogger
7	195,000	West	Elementary teacher, blogger, TpT seller
8	159,000	Midwest	Elementary teacher, TpT seller
9	151,000	West	Elementary teacher, TpT seller
10	63,900	South	Part-time secondary teacher, motivational speaker, "Ed-trepreneur"
11	52,600	Northeast	Elementary teacher, TpT seller
12	5,436	South	Elementary teacher, Harvard fellow
13	3,736	Midwest	Elementary teacher, Scholastic blogger
14	3,642	South	Early childhood teacher, runner-up state teacher of the year
15	2,280	South	STEM district coordinator, State teacher of the year
16	1,161	South	Instructional coach, blogger, TpT seller
17	662	South	Elementary administrator, blogger, podcaster
18	165	South	Middle school teacher, State teacher of the year

Additionally, we purposefully selected five of the 18 participants for further observation of their Instagram stories in addition to posts. We selected them using maximum variation sampling so they varied on factors including gender, ethnicity and race, geographical location, and current employment in K-12 schools. The maximum variation approach enabled us to understand how Instagram stories were used among a diverse range of TYHO influencers (as suggested by Teddlie & Tashakori, 2009). We also used intensity sampling to select individuals who had particularly robust Instagram participation. Four of the selected participants had between 56,000 and 300,000 Instagram followers and posted to the social media platform regularly.

We added a fifth participant with fewer followers because she was particularly active, posting stories on a daily basis. She also grew in followers at the highest rate across all participants over the course of the study indicating that her participation was indeed robust.

Data Sources and Collection

This qualitative study employed observational methods. Across a 4-week period during the back-to-school season in August and September 2019, we observed Instagram posts and stories shared by the 18 participants. We selected the back-to-school period because we were interested in what content influencers shared during this time when teachers set intentions and goals for the new year. Some followers had participated in TYHO's in-person professional development conferences that summer, so we were curious as to what content they continued to consume from the TYHO social media output going into the school year. Over the course of the data collection period, two participants did not share any posts or stories, so our findings apply to the 16 individuals who *did* participate during the observation period.

Posts

Instagram posts are photos or videos accompanied by a written caption shared for others to view (Instagram, 2019). Over the 4-week study, 310 posts were shared with participants, posting an average of 0.62 times per day, with a range of 0-6 posts daily. They shared an average of 17.2 posts, with a range of 0-35 posts. Our observations of posts included the visuals (static images or video) and written captions for each post.

Stories

Instagram stories are photos or videos available to view for only 24-hours. Stories do not include a written caption but may include text, stickers, or links on top of the photo or video. We followed the stories of five participants over the study, observing 115 stories in total. To ensure we captured all stories, each researcher systematically viewed stories at the same time daily.

Stories were shared over an average of 22.2 days (80% of the observation period), with a range of 15-28 days. The duration of video and amount of images shared as a story by each participant in a given day varied. Our

observations of stories included observing the visuals, reading any written content provided, and visiting any linked websites. Frequency of posts and stories by participants are included in Table 2.

Table 2
Frequency of Posts and Stories by Participants

Participant	Frequency of Posts	Frequency of Days With Stories	Average Post Frequency by Day
	Stories and Posts Participants		
1	29	21	1.0
2	29	23	1.0
3	7	15	0.3
4	33	28	1.2
5	29	24	1.0
	Posts Participants		
6	26		0.9
7	25		0.9
8	5		0.2
9	3		0.1
10	27		1.0
11	18		0.6
12	13		0.5
13	5		0.2
14	35		1.3
15	0		0
16	12		0.4
17	14		0.5
18	0		0

Qualitative Validation Strategies

Several validation strategies were used to increase the credibility of our observations. First, over the course of the study all three researchers observed TYHO participants' Instagram participation daily, in an immersive fashion, such that TYHO Instagram became a natural part of our personal social media rituals. This heightened level of engagement enabled us to gain "a credible account by building a tight and holistic case" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

As a second validation strategy, we employed collective researcher reflections. We held weekly researcher meetings where we shared, pondered, consolidated, and synthesized our observations to make sense of the data. 4 four weeks of active observations, we determined that we had reached saturation, as we were confident that we understood the messages TYHO Instagrammers shared and we were not seeing new or different concepts presented (as in Tracy, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

We followed Bruckman's (2002) ethical guidelines for data collected in human subjects research on the internet. We, along with our respective Institutional Review Boards, determined data in this study were *published* works, available in Instagram's public archive, so consent was not needed to access them. With this understanding, we opted to observe, rather than archive, participants' Instagram posts and stories, understanding these publications as TYHO influencers' intellectual property. Further, internet users who publish to public spaces should be protected, but also deserve credit for their intellectual work.

We carefully balanced risks and benefits relating to participant anonymity versus ensuring accurate reporting in the study (Bruckman, 2002). For example, we opted to identify the group TYHO, but concealed participants by numbers, not pseudonyms, presented the sample's gender demographics as an aggregate, and did not report demographics on participants' race because that would have necessitated researcher identification, which is an unethical practice (American Psychological Association, 2019).

Analysis

Once data collection concluded, we coded all 310 posts and 115 stories using first cycle and second cycle coding methods (Miles et al., 2014). Our goal was to identify concepts inductively that were conveyed in each post or story, while also considering the a priori themes of design and entrepreneurship that Engman et al. (2019) found across their exploratory analysis of edu-influencers' Instagram posts. Each author independently coded one third of the data, creating a table of potential codes, along with a definition and example post/story for each. As we coded, we considered each post or story as an entity, comprised of the image/video and caption taken together.

To illustrate, consider Participant 1's post and subsequent coding (Figure 1). In the first cycle, we labeled this post with the following codes: shout-outs, emojis, hashtags, promoting products, and advocating for curriculum/approach. In second cycle coding, we added promoting one's own product, soliciting engagement through shout-outs, and advocating for a curricular approach in the absence of a thoughtful rationale. Ultimately, this post illustrated three of the four themes discussed in the results: promotion, soliciting engagement, and advocating for a curricular approach.

Figure 1 *Participant 1's Post*

"🎃Pumpkin Patch [#redacted] 🎃[@redacted] used my bulletin board kit to create pumpkin patch in her classroom! The best part of this #bulletinboard is you can leave it up October- November. 😇🤗😊 Follow the link to see the fall bundle! [link redacted]" (September 8, 2019).

The processes of developing and refining codes and themes were continual and collaborative. After coding independently, we met to consolidate the first cycle codes into a single code book by collective consensus. We looked for relationships across the existing codes, consolidating when possible, and refining definitions. After this initial meeting, we independently read through all posts again using the consolidated codebook, identifying examples for each code, and noting questions or uncertainties. Then we met again to collectively organize codes, using second cycle coding to group the first-order codes under broader conceptual categories (as in Miles et al., 2014; Tracy, 2013).

In a series of discussions over several months, we pursued related literature around influencer culture (e.g., Hou, 2018; Khamis et al., 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Raun, 2018), addressed uncertainties in our coding, and revised code definitions iteratively through collective consensus. Ultimately, we collapsed the 19 final codes into four themes, which are discussed in the findings.

Researcher Positioning

We were mindful of how our backgrounds and positioning shaped the study and its findings. We are White female teacher educators at U.S. public universities who value teacher activism and empowerment, whether it takes place in digital or physical spaces. We also value influencer diversity as a *resource* that may enable teacher-followers to acknowledge and resist the dominant narratives in the teaching profession that reinforce systemic racism and bias (as described by Mills et al., 2018).

We brought extensive experience with Instagram and the TOMI to this work, having been active users personally, and professionally in our roles as former K-12 teachers and current educational researchers. We, nonetheless, aimed to take a critical lens throughout the study, questioning the value of Instagram in education, the motives of those who participate, and meanings of what was shared there.

Findings

We present four themes that describe what TYHO edu-influencers shared on Instagram and the implications of these messages (Figure 2). Because content within stories and posts was consistent and similar, themes address the nature of both stories and posts. To protect participant anonymity, visuals of Instagram posts/stories were not presented, and identifying information in the examples was removed. To maintain the integrity of participants' messages, all examples are presented in their entirety (i.e., quoted material has not been abridged).

Figure 2 *Themes Regarding What TYHO Edu-Influencers Share on Instagram*
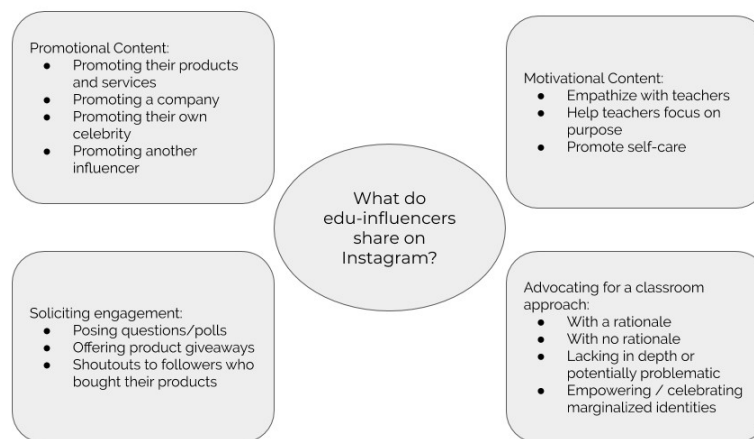
Promotional Content

The most prolific theme was the sharing of promotional content. Promotional content included promoting products or services (their own, fellow influencers', or outside companies') and their own personal successes.

All participants promoted their products or services in some way. They promoted resources in their TpT shop, announced their pending book release, or advertised their upcoming speaking events. For example, Participant 7 shared an image of a 9-11 (that is, September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the US) themed bulletin board stating,

> Next week we honor first responders and I love this banner that your students can make to nonoer [sic] and thank the men and

women who protect and serve! Tap here [Instagram handle] to grab this banner and writing craft today. bit.ly/[redacted]. (September 11, 2019)

Overtly promotional posts for print-and-go classroom resources like this, presented in a highly stylized way, were common. Such promotions were often shared just-in-time, as to align with the season, specific holidays, and even the day of the week when posted. Influencers also promoted their services, which spanned teacher-run conference presentations, webinars, and meet and greets.

Fellow influencers were also commonly promoted by tagging. Participant 13 shared, "I have a 90s party tonight with @[redacted]@[redacted] that's sure to be a blast ..... but it won't be the same without my #[redacted] crew from @teachyourheartoutcon Atlanta!!!!" (September 7, 2019). The purpose of such promotion was unclear. Was it simply to share a helpful resource with viewers, to encourage viewers to follow and purchase products, or to foster a mutually beneficial relationship with other influencers?

Promotion of outside companies through product placement (Gerhards, 2019) was also prevalent. Edu-influencers promoted school supplies (e.g., Paper Mate Flair pens), educational technologies (e.g., Coding Critters), clothing (e.g., JCPenney), and services ranging from teeth whitening, to retirement planning (e.g., TIAA), to personal fitness (e.g., Orange Theory Fitness). For example, Participant 4 posted the following advertisement on August 21, 2019:

> It's ... Back to School. As I start to make my To-Do lists, I realize that I never want to run out of these 5 things: Coffee, Flair pens, Printer ink, Children's books, and retirement income. As a teacher, we think about that feeling of running out of ALL the things in our lives, including their retirement income. Lately, I've learned about retirement planning from, @TIAA , including the simple tools available to help you figure out your retirement income. They know how important it is to never worry about running out of income in retirement. Their Personal Pension calculator is easy to use and will help ensure you #neverrunout of lifetime income. Check out the link in my bio to see how you can prepare! #sponsored#TIAA #neverrunout.

Like this example, when promoting, influencers typically made connections to how they used the product in their classroom or, in this case, how the product related to their personal life.

The last form of promotion was self-promotion. Influencers shared slice-of-life posts providing a glimpse into their worlds – including pictures of their daily meals and shots from their children's birthday parties. They also shared personal accolades (Figure 3).

Figure 3 *Example Post of Self-Promotion*

"That moment when you get on Instagram and educator, author, and illustrator @[redacted] has turned you into a beautiful drawing. 😍 I'm incredibly honored! It looks amazing! I can't wait to show my students and my Mom & Dad! 😁 ❤️"

(Participant 3, August 25, 2019).

This staged authenticity, or the public representation of the "intimate self," may be a way to show equality and commonality with fans (Hou, 2018, p. 548). Such posts may have positioned the influencer as relatable and credible; however, some of the overtly stylized and posed photos also came across as attention-seeking or even vain.

In sum, promotional posts were prolific, and they centered around promoting products and services, other influencers, product placement, and self-promotion.

Motivational Content

The next theme centered on sharing motivational content for teachers. These messages were salient at the beginning of a new school year, and often empathetic in nature. Participant 9 posted the statement in Figure 4 on August 21, 2019.

Figure 4 *Example Motivational Post*

"Teaching is hard. It's easy to get caught up in all the planning, differentiating, and assessing that we tend to lose sight of our why. I'm in my third week of school and was already feeling the pressure of everything. Then I found this note and it reminded me that I'm doing what I've always set out to do, love kids and make them love school. Never forget your why. 💛"

This motivational message to "never forget your why" became more salient when the influencer disclosed that they "already felt the pressure of everything." TYHO influencers consistently interwove messages of intimacy, a hallmark of influencers' performance (Hou, 2018), within their motivational content.

To contrast, we considered another motivational post that evoked intimacy, but also was entangled with promotion (Figure 5). She then linked her blog to the Instagram post, presumably to share some of her self-care tactics and promote her own website, where she earns profits from advertising revenue based on site viewership/engagement. This

entanglement of intimate, motivational, and promotional content was common.

Figure 5 *Example Post Entangling Intimate, Motivational, and Promotional Content*

"I absolutely LOVE being in my classroom with my students again, but that also means that it's time to remember all the things and go to all the meetings and shuttle the kids to all the things and make all the meals, am I right?! 😫 I've been a teacher for 15 years and a mom for 8 of those years, and I wish I could tell you I've achieved some sort of blissful work-life balance. I most certainly haven't. BUT I've figured out some healthy ways to let little things go and simplify our crazy lives that have made a world of difference. I've also been slowlllly [*sic*] getting better at making self-care a priority (one of the biggest ways by starting to work out again since last spring.) If you need a little pick me up, read more on the blog. 💗" (Participant 2, August 25, 2019)

At the far extreme, an overtly promotional example of motivational content came from Participant 10's posed photo of himself with the caption in Figure 6. His message that teachers touch lives came to feel disingenuous when paired with the self-promotional nature of the stylized photo and embedded advertisements for the clothing store Express Men.

Figure 6 *Example Motivational Post That Was Highly Promotional*

"Some teachers taught today... Some teachers touched a life... 🍎 #DoBoth #teachersofinstagram #purposedrivenlife #math @express @expressmen 🔝"

(September 12, 2019).

Soliciting Engagement

The third theme was soliciting engagement from followers, which involved posing questions, offering giveaways, and shouting out to followers. An illustration of posing questions came from Participant 11's video post, asking viewers, "I wanna hear your top tips for setting up a classroom! Leave a comment below + let me know what you do!" (August 27, 2019). Edu-influencers' questions appeared as genuine efforts to understand their audience and give them voice – aligning with similar marketing and sales approaches of TpT sellers (Shelton & Archambault, 2019, 2020). However, we were left wondering how the accompanying promotion of other influencers and companies might financially benefit the influencers.

Giveaways, another engagement approach, asked followers to share content on their own page to be entered to win, becoming grassroots advertisers themselves. Participant 11 posted a giveaway for a robotics gift package. All followers needed to do was the following:

> 1. Make sure you're following @hand2mindinc @educationalinsights@learningresources @redacted @redacted @redacted @redacted @redacted, 2. Like this post, 3. Tag a friend and let them know your favorite way to code, 4. For more entries, find this post on any participating page and repeat! (Participant 11, August 24, 2019)

Giveaways crossed over into the promotion of not only products, but of influencers and content-creators as well, complicating the otherwise generous offers.

Finally, influencers solicited engagement by shouting out to followers (see Figure 7 for illustration).

Figure 7 *Example Post Intending to Solicit Engagement*

"@[redacted] used my 3D lightbulb tutorial to create this hallway display! I love how she staggered the height of each bulb! 💡tutorial saved under my 3D LIGHTBULBS story highlight!" (August 19, 2019).

These shout-outs seemed to be used to establish a personal connection between influencer and follower, while also advertising the authentic use of the influencer's product. In sum, edu-influencers solicited follower engagement by posing questions, offering giveaways, and shouting out to followers.

Advocating for a Classroom Approach

The final theme attended to how some edu-influencers advocated for classroom approaches: sharing lesson content and pedagogy that may (or may not) provide detail to support implementation, that may (or may not) be an accurate or effective educational approach or that may empower or celebrate marginalized identities in the classroom.

First, we observed a number of approaches shared with detail to support implementation and justify classroom use. An example was Participant 3's activity for the book *After the Fall* shared on September 4, 2019 (Figure 8).

Figure 8 *Example Post Advocating for a Classroom Approach*

💡🖥 "Here's a quick community building activity I completed with third graders this year. After the Fall tells tells [sic] the story of what happens to Humpty Dumpty after his famous fall from the wall. We learn that Humpty has a fascination with birds and paper airplanes. This admiration leads him to face his fears and become who he was always meant to be... After sharing this book with readers, I gave them all a piece of colored paper. I then asked them to think about something they want to do/accomplish this school year that requires courage. After writing their thoughts, they created a paper airplane with the same piece of colored paper. We then traveled outside and I told my students that they were going to let go of their own fears and allow their big goals to soar! We tossed our planes into the air and watched them fly. When they crashed, because sometimes ours [*sic*] goals do, we made them fly again. Finally, we came back into the classroom and I asked the students, if they wanted, to share what they wrote inside their planes. At the end of it all, I was able to share one of my favorite stories and we all got to know each other a little better." ❤️

In this example, the influencer provided context, a clear description of the activity, and a strong rationale for this particular back-to-school activity. This post presented as honest and helpful because no one was tagged and no products were overtly promoted.

To contrast, Participant 7's post regarding a classroom approach failed to include detail to support implementation or justify use. The post included an image of a bulletin board, with the caption "I love seeing how teacher's take my decor sets and create their own unique space iwth [*sic*] it! Look how fun @[redacted] Theme Park classroom turned out! I love the ferris wheel clock idea!!" (September 4, 2019). The bulletin board design was precise, but a justification for why a teacher should invest in the approach was not present. The lack of rationale and overt promotion stood in stark contrast to Participant 3's After the Fall lesson.

> Notably, a few posts and stories advocated for curricular approaches we considered potentially problematic. To illustrate, one influencer shared a video of their math lecture which included pop culture lyrics referencing oral sex. In the video, Participant 10 was shown asking the class of primarily Black secondary students, "The square root of 49 is...? Seven. The square root of 64 is...? Eight. And Drake said the square root of 69 is what? ... Eight

somethin, right? He tryin' to figure it out." The caption read, "What if your teachers taught Math like this… Would students retain more of the concepts and be more engaged in lessons?" (September 13, 2019).

The influencer's intention to integrate culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) was obvious, yet the sexual reference of the song lyric (Genius Annotation, n.d.) was problematic. We observed only a few examples of potentially misguided, ineffective, or logically unsound pedagogies across TYHO Instagram activity. Like the problematic rap lyrics, all instances seemed to be shared with good intentions, but with a lack of understanding or foresight into the pedagogies shared.

Finally, some TYHO posts and stories advocated for approaches to empower or celebrate marginalized identities in the classroom. Much of Participant 4's Instagram shared picture book suggestions that focused on works by diverse authors and that featured diverse characters. Other influencers were less focused but included one-off posts addressing antiracism or cultural empowerment, nonetheless. Participant 17 shared a photo of a soda can with her (less commonly found) name on it (Figure 9). This influencer of color's story illustrated the power of inclusion in a personal way.

Figure 9 *Example Post Celebrating Marginalized Identities*

"To you, it may simply be a #cocacola , but to me, it was much more special than that. All my life, it has been practically impossible to find my name on ANYTHING preprinted… This made me feel #included and #important. I say this to bring up the point that small things done in your school can also make your students and staff feel #welcome #loved and #accepted 😊. It could be as simple as making sure you have a variety of students' work displayed in the hallways and around the classroom; you could switch up the types of names used in your questions and prompts; or play a variety of genres of music at your faculty meetings and make sure you smile and interact with all of your faculty! #leadership #love #inclusion#education #teachers#teachersofinstagram #acceptance#coke #name." (August 27, 2019)

Additionally, some content advocated for approaches to supporting marginalized *students*. Take Participant 16 who shared an image that read,

> Dear Educators, Do not write off parents, particularly those of color, who do not attend Open House. Many are managing multiple jobs, young children, and other obligations. Be graceful

and endeavor to build bridges, not walls. Lack of physical presence does not mean indifference." (September 13, 2019)

Some TYHO influencers powerfully used their platform to promote social justice in education. However, this antiracist and antibias work seemed to be driven by the educators of color in the sample. The vast majority of TYHO influencers who addressed empowering and celebrating marginalized identities appeared to be part of these minoritized groups themselves.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the nature of content shared by edu-influencers related to the TYHO enterprise over the 2019 back-to-school season. Many THYO influencers shared messages specifically focused on the topic of back-to-school and the preparation, both mentally and professionally, for the start of a new school year. While messages varied, they centered on four themes: the sharing of promotional content, the sharing of motivational content, soliciting engagement, and advocating for certain classroom approaches. Looking across these themes we highlight the enduring understandings gained from the study in the following section.

Like Engman et al. (2019), we found that entrepreneurship was central to Instagram edu-influencers' activity. *All* edu-influencer participants promoted their own product(s) or services in some way. Keeping in mind the power of social media influencers in creating and defining teacher culture (Mills et al., 2018; Roose, 2019), we see these posts as sending a potentially dangerous message to teachers about the need to consume constantly. We observed persistent messaging from edu-influencers that in order to be prepared for back to school, teachers need to consume, whether it be curricular materials to be bought on TpT, certain clothing brands, on-trend school supplies (e.g., Paper Mate Flair pens), or boutique conference experiences.

Additionally, beyond product promotion, the unabashed self-promotion that some influencers displayed highlights a questionable practice. If teaching and teachers come to be visualized as highly stylized, strategically posed microcelebrities with picture-perfect bulletin boards, how will an actual teacher ever measure up? More broadly speaking, edu-influencers may perpetuate a K-12 culture that values superficiality, "carefully constructed ... self-presentation" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 140), and individualistic self-branding (Khamis et al., 2016), over collective success of teachers and students (Stokel-Walker, 2019).

If Instagram is part of the new "digital teacher lounge" (Carpenter et al., 2019), we question the implications that arise when the teacher's lounge becomes a marketplace driven by entrepreneurial desires that result in individual financial gain. Indeed, we question how these online teacher leaders' identities are interwoven with an entrepreneurial spirit (Engman et al., 2019; Shelton & Archambault, 2019, 2020). Entrepreneurship may conflict with the more traditional understanding of a teacher leader as one whose role is primarily centered on supporting other teachers' instruction

for the ultimate benefit of students (Kraft et al., 2018). With corporate sponsorships, the sale of products, and influencers' own brand on the line, how can teachers be sure that the edu-influencers they follow have student learning and well-being at the forefront?

On the other hand, this study provides evidence regarding the power of Instagram as a space for teachers to connect with fellow educators for just-in-time support, inspiration, and resources. We saw that *some* useful classroom practices were being shared on Instagram, available just-in-time (see also Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017) and in a highly visual, easy to understand way. Additionally, TYHO edu-influencers were overwhelmingly positive and inspirational. They consistently shared messages of validation, fun, and motivation with the teachers who followed them. Edu-influencers may be a ray of positivity for teachers suffering low job satisfaction, even if their motivational messages are deeply entangled in promotion and consumerism.

In addition, we laud the platform for giving edu-influencers a space to share their voices, bypassing traditional gatekeepers that have historically minimized teacher voices within the profession (Apple, 2013). Indeed, Instagram is a place where we have observed edu-influencers enacting virtual teacher leadership (Wenner & Campbell, 2016) and creating public discourse (Mills et al., 2017). It was reassuring to observe that a subset of TYHO influencers demonstrated a sincere and intentional effort to promote social justice and racial equity work. These influencers suggested diverse literature and posted about classroom approaches that challenge traditionally racist educational practices.

Furthermore, it was commendable that TYHO was a platform for racially diverse edu-influencers simply to share slices of their life, potentially giving followers a window into different ways of thinking, being, and knowing, which may carry over into those teachers' classroom work. We see much value in these influencers' contributions; however, we observed that the social justice or racial equity work was overwhelmingly contributed by the edu-influencers of color within the sample. This inequitable burden was concerning.

Implications

Our findings point to the issue that teachers need support in connecting with edu-influencers who will provide examples of well-thought-out classroom practice and expose teachers to the social realities experienced by those experiencing bias and marginalization. Some of the TYHO influencers we observed are doing this, while others have room to improve. How do teachers learn which influencers to follow and which not to follow on sites like Instagram? How do teachers learn to evaluate content critically on Instagram and the TOMI generally?

Teacher educators and professional developers need to support teachers in developing critical literacy around their preferred social platforms. As a first step, teachers need to learn to select influencers critically. This discretion will ensure teachers' time spent on Instagram does not become a waste of time, or worse, a harmful pursuit. Because our study highlighted

the valuable antibias, antiracist messages of some influencers, teachers may benefit from following edu-influencers who promote a social justice and equity-orientation in the classroom (Collins, 2019).

When teachers observe and engage with antiracist and antibias messages, the challenging, confusing work of developing a social justice orientation may become easier. Furthermore, teachers need support in exploring, understanding, and critiquing edu-influencer culture generally. Teachers will need to understand platform affordances, such as how products can be indicated as "sponsored" in an Instagram post (LaGarde, 2019). Then they can move to the more challenging work of critically evaluating social media content. One approach may be for teacher teams to develop rubrics to evaluate the edu-influencers in their PLNs (Schrum, 2002). The nuanced and ever-evolving work of developing critical digital literacies is likely well suited for collaborative learning, where teachers can reflect with peers over time (Mills et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative study captured the activity of one particular collaborative group of edu-influencers, TYHO, at a particular point in time. Thus, our findings cannot be generalized to the larger edu-influencer population or used to make inferences about future behavior. Nonetheless, this work points to future research opportunities, one being to target edu-influencers beyond the TYHO umbrella. Our findings regarding edu-influencers' unique forms of activism (i.e. social justice work), suggest that future research might focus on compelling individuals in this regard, to understand their messages and how to support those doing the heavy lifting when it comes to changing the discourse around racism and bias in K-12 education today.

Additionally, we see an opportunity to explore other edu-influencer initiated collaboratives, such as Get Your Teach On, Nuts and Bolts Symposium, and Spring Teacher Retreat, among others, which like TYHO, have also become popular among teachers. Because teachers are drawn to these educator-led conference collaboratives, with many spending their personal funds to attend, we wonder what the appeal is, what is being taught, and what teacher education might learn from such entities.

A second limitation was that this study was observational in nature. We did not explore how (and if) teachers adopt, internalize, or use the content shared by the edu-influencers they follow on Instagram, nor did we interview the edu-influencers to understand their rationales for posting. Given our own previous findings that teachers *do* sometimes engage in thoughtful decision-making processes when finding and using Pinterest K-12 materials (Schroeder et al., 2019), future work investigating if and how influencers impact teachers, particularly their social justice orientations, would be useful. Additionally, investigation around edu-influencers' perspectives would add to such work, helping to paint a full picture of the agents interacting within the TOMI ecosystem. Ultimately, action-oriented research focused on developing and evaluating interventions to support teachers in developing critical skills as online content creators and consumers is needed.

Conclusion

Edu-influencers are pursuing an unprecedented opportunity to make teachers and classrooms seen and heard as never before (Engman et al., 2019). Simultaneously, they are profiting along the way. This study focused on the racially diverse and well-intentioned, yet branded Instagram influencer group, TYHO. In one of the first empirical studies of edu-influencers, we found that edu-influencers' Instagram activity may position them as peer coaches who help other teachers discover and practice new strategies to benefit students and guide teachers to enact curricula with fidelity (Kraft et al., 2018). However, edu-influencers' messages were motivational yet capitalistic, and inspiring yet self-promotional.

Given these findings, we conclude that teachers need support in connecting with edu-influencers who will provide examples of effective, well-thought-out classroom practice. They may also benefit from following influencers who can help them better understand the social realities experienced by those with different backgrounds and experiences, particularly regarding bias and marginalization. Ultimately, teachers need support in developing and enacting critical digital literacy skills, the same skills that today's K-12 students are expected to develop (International Society for Technology in Education, 2019). Teacher educators are posed to lead the charge and can do so by supporting teachers in critically developing and maintaining diverse PLNs, and by steering edu-influencers (or aspiring influencers) to beneficial pursuits as teacher leaders.

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