

Jing Zeng

#LearnOnTikTok Serendipitously, #LearnOnTikTok Seriously

Show me the life hack that you randomly saw one day that is now an unconscious standard practice in your life. I'll go first ...

If you are on TikTok, chances are high that you have come across videos featuring this audio template originally created by Kelly Hurst (@thelifebath), a TikToker from Newcastle, United Kingdom.¹ Hurst's video led to a life hack sensation on TikTok during the pandemic and has inspired the creation of hundreds of thousands of life hack meme videos, which range from tips on how to effortlessly separate egg yolks using garlic to threading needles with a toothbrush.² The #LifeHacks memes are just one example of the increasingly popular trend of casual and playful knowledge sharing on TikTok that proliferated during the pandemic. Lockdowns worldwide resulted in a surge in the use of social media to share learning materials, especially on TikTok. Sports and food influencers have used TikTok to demonstrate workouts and cooking tutorials, helping people stay fit and fed, and #MomsOnTikTok and #DadsOfTikTok have relied on the platform to collect and share tips on how to keep kids busy during the lockdown. Science educators are also important contributors to the trend of teaching through TikTok. With the closure of schools due to COVID-19, they turned to TikTok to deliver educational

1 Kelly Hurst (@thelifebath), TikTok, <https://www.tiktok.com/@thelifebath>.

2 Callum (@callum0g), "#fyp," TikTok video, January 23, 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@callum0g/video/6920971270834130177>; and Tommy (@viajante_mundo), "The easiest way to thread the needle," TikTok video, March 28, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@viajante_mundo/video/6944756830614605062.

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materials. Public health practitioners followed suit, creating short videos to disseminate health information.³

Aside from these individual-level initiatives, TikTok itself has played a crucial role in amplifying and incentivizing the creation of learning materials on its platform. The pandemic fostered the rapid explosion of TikTok's popularity.⁴ Furthermore, it provided an opportunity for TikTok to showcase its potential as a learning platform, as opposed to merely a place for jokes and triviality, as many perceived it to be. For instance, TikTok introduced #LearnOnTikTok, a campaign aimed at promoting educational materials on the platform. Through this campaign, TikTok partnered with hundreds of media and educational institutions, as well as individual influencers and experts, to produce professional learning materials.⁵ Curated content included home improvement tutorials, meditation and yoga tips, lessons from psychologists on how to alleviate stress and anxiety during the lockdowns, and science classes given by celebrity scientists (e.g., Bill Nye) or leading institutions (e.g., Cambridge University). Although the practice of using short videos for educational purposes existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok's #LearnOnTikTok campaign catalyzed the professionalization of knowledge creation on TikTok.

As life gradually returned to normal in most parts of the world, the hype of the official #LearnOnTikTok campaign may have faded away, but in general educational content on the platform continues to become more prevalent and diverse. When I first started to research learning materials on TikTok in 2018 and 2019, educational content was predominantly STEM related. Examples of popular content included fun science facts; entertaining chemical reactions (e.g., elephant paste demonstrations); and biologists introducing rare animals, plants, or fungi.⁶ During the pandemic, some emerging educational video topics caught my attention. For instance, female and queer creator-led sex education communities emerged, with a focus on sex positivity and women's health. Another favorite of mine was the #BookTok community, wherein (mostly female Gen Z) booklovers recreated video memes in which they shared and joked about books they had read.⁷ Since the pandemic, this community has grown into one of the most popular sub-Toks, with related videos amassing almost eighty billion accumulated views at the time of this article's writing. Recommendations made by this TikTok community have become so influential that some book retailers now

3 Clare Southerton, "Lip-Syncing and Saving Lives: Healthcare Workers on TikTok," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 3248–3268.

4 Jing Zeng, Crystal Abidin, and Mike S. Schäfer, "Research Perspectives on TikTok and Its Legacy Apps—Introduction," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 3164–3172.

5 Bryan Thoensen, "Investing to help our community #LearnOnTikTok," TikTok Newsroom, May 28, 2020, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/investing-to-help-our-community-learn-on-tiktok>.

6 Jing Zeng, Mike S. Schäfer, and Joachim Allgaier, "Reposting 'Till Albert Einstein Is TikTok Famous': The Memetic Construction of Science on TikTok," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 3216–3247.

7 TikTok, "TikTok made me read it: #BookTok," TikTok Newsroom, November 11, 2021, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktok-made-me-read-it-booktok>.

even have a designated section for #BookTok recommendations.⁸ Furthermore, subjects from the humanities, especially history, are now receiving more attention and even viral status on the platform. For instance, Mary McGillivray (@theiconoclass) and Evan Pridmore (@evan.hart) are popular #ArtHistoriansOfTikTok with hundreds of thousands of followers.⁹ In their fifteen- to sixty-second-long micro lectures, the two creators share fun facts about artists and behind-the-scenes histories of their works, garnering millions of likes.

While the platform is known for lighthearted, humorous videos, historical education on TikTok does not always take on a lighthearted edutainment format. There are increasing numbers of educational videos that constitute what Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Tom Divon describe as “serious TikTok,” summarizing, unpacking, and contextualizing complex sociopolitical affairs.¹⁰ Some TikTokers have created video memes to address the history and legacy of the Holocaust. Other examples include the #BlackHistory and #AAPIHistory challenges, in which TikTokers produced bite-sized anti-racism lectures that recounted the histories behind influential figures and events. The popularity of history-related content on TikTok is not incidental. Visual texts are an effective conduit for storytelling. As Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon point out, the memetic and communicative features of TikTok permit “the experience of (hi)story-telling to be much more autodidactic, intuitive, and engaging than on any other visual platform.”¹¹ For instance, affective history education is delivered by combining first-person narratives, emotionally charged narration, music, images, and text captions. From a pedagogy perspective, such multimodality reflects the potential of short videos in promoting multiliteracy learning.¹² Moreover, thanks to the platform’s easy-to-(re)use visual and sound templates, TikTokers can imitate, develop, and react to one another’s stories. Such synchronized yet personalized (hi)story narration forms TikTok’s unique potential for memeified collective history learning.

Although “bring[ing] joy” is at the center of TikTok’s official mission, the rise of serious TikTok also raises the possibility that grief and anger could also be parts of the platform’s sentimentality.¹³ As we have seen in recent years, video memes are now an important weapon in Gen Z’s discursive activism arsenal when fighting for different causes that are close to their

8 Stephanie Merry, “Six TikTok Stars Share Their Favorite Books of 2022,” *Washington Post*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2022/11/17/booktok-tiktok-books-bestsellers/>.

9 Mary McGillivray (@_theiconoclass), TikTok, https://www.tiktok.com/@_theiconoclass; and Evan Pridmore (@evan.hart), TikTok, <https://www.tiktok.com/@evan.hart>.

10 Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Tom Divon, “Serious TikTok: Can You Learn about the Holocaust in 60 Seconds?,” *Digital Holocaust Memory*, March 24, 2022, <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/digitalholocaustmemory/2022/03/24/can-you-learn-about-the-holocaust-in-60-seconds-on-tiktok/>.

11 Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon, 13.

12 Jennifer Rowsell and Maureen Walsh, “Rethinking Literacy Education in New Times: Multimodality, Multiliteracies, & New Literacies,” *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice* 21, no. 1 (2011): 53–62.

13 TikTok, “Our Mission,” November 1, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/about>.

hearts, such as climate justice and racial equality.¹⁴ Following the recent developments in the abortion debate in the United States, TikTokers also initiated several campaigns to educate others about reproductive justice. Videos related to #RoeVWade, which mostly feature young women sharing information, commentary, and touching personal stories about reproductive rights, have amassed over five billion views. For example, a Tennessee-based TikToker tearfully told her own stories about her chronic disease, due to which she relies on special birth control. However, she could no longer access this birth control because of the tightened abortion restrictions in her state. This video has been liked more than 1.2 million times, and among its 38,000 comments, many more women have shared similar experiences to educate others about the vital role played by birth control in maintaining many women's health. Other users have shown support for this TikToker by offering company and accommodation in case she needs to travel to other regions to get the needed medication.

One important characteristic of TikTok as a learning platform is what Samantha Hautea and colleagues describe as “algorithmic serendipity.”¹⁵ Most users' encounters with knowledge on TikTok are not intentional but occur while they are aimlessly scrolling through their For You Page (FYP)—the app's landing page where algorithmically curated videos are shown. The algorithm behind the FYP does not only recommend videos based on a user's interests; it also appeals to users' demand for novelty by exposing them to unfamiliar content.¹⁶ Educational videos on the FYP are also organized following the same algorithmic logic. Research has shown that serendipitous learning is triggered by unexpected internal or external stimuli and can be highly effective in boosting critical thinking and transforming previous assumptions.¹⁷ When taking place on TikTok, serendipitous learning can also be an act of sociality, as afforded by the platform's engagement and responding features (e.g., Stitch, duet, share, like, and comment). In particular, the meme-creating culture of TikTok may turn passive learning into creative peer teaching.

Despite TikTok's potential as a serendipitous learning platform, producing TikTok-famous content can be challenging. Although there is no singular template for viral educational short videos, creativity and platform-specific knowledge are key. Creating popular educational videos for TikTok takes

14 Jing Zeng and Crystal Abidin, “#Okboomer, Time to Meet the Zoomers’: Studying the Memeification of Intergenerational Politics on TikTok,” *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 16 (2021): 2459–2481, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1961007>; and Moa Eriksson Krutrök and Mathilda Åkerlund, “Through a White Lens: Black Victimhood, Visibility, and Whiteness in the Black Lives Matter Movement on TikTok,” *Information, Communication & Society* (2022): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2065211>.

15 Samantha Hautea et al., “Showing They Care (Or Don't): Affective Publics and Ambivalent Climate Activism on TikTok,” *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F20563051211012344>.

16 Min Zhang and Yiqun Liu, “A Commentary of TikTok Recommendation Algorithms in MIT Technology Review 2021,” *Fundamental Research* 1, no. 6 (2021): 846–847, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fmre.2021.11.015>.

17 Ilona Buchem, “Serendipitous Learning: Recognizing and Fostering the Potential of Microblogging,” *Form@re-Open Journal per la formazione in rete* 11, no. 74 (2011): 7–16, <https://doi.org/10.13128/formare-12559>.

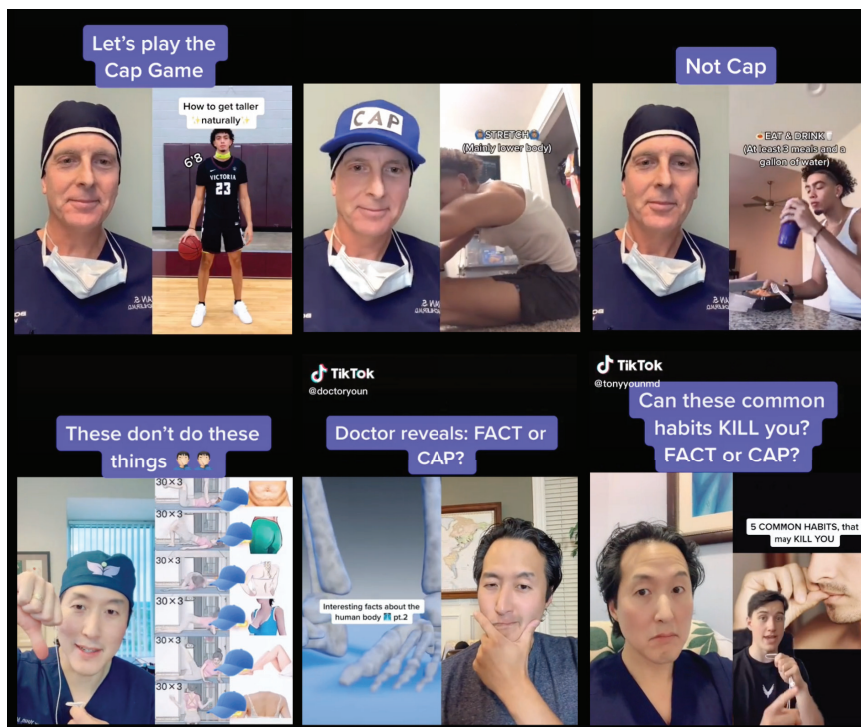


Figure 1. Screenshots of examples of Anthony Youn's (@doctoryoun) and Brian Boxer Wachler's (@brianboxerwachlermd) #FactOrCap videos. Screenshots by author.

more than simply extracting a sixty-second clip from TED Talks or splicing together excerpts from the History Channel. It requires the content creator to be well versed in meme trends and the fast-evolving features and functions of the platform. For instance, viral fact-checking videos made by two doctor influencers on the platform—Anthony Youn (@doctoryoun) and Brian Boxer Wachler (@brianboxerwachlermd)—can be a positive case in point. Followed by over ten million people collectively, the two doctors are mostly known for their #FactOrCap meme videos. As a (US) Gen Z slang term, *cap* refers to lies, and on TikTok, the blue cap emoji has been used to symbolize falsehood. #FactOrCap is a memetic trend wherein TikTokers refute fake life hacks and supposed facts posted by others. Employing this meme format, @doctoryoun and @brianboxerwachlermd have directly debunked viral TikTok videos containing pseudoscientific claims using a cap emoji or an emoji-like cap (see Figure 1).

To a large extent, to be a *TikTok educator*, one's professional credentials come second to one's knowledge of the platform's culture and vernacular; for those who know how to do (hi)story-telling on TikTok, it does not matter if they are history professors or teenagers reciting from Wikipedia. There is no lack of TikTokers who have relevant educational credentials but can produce highly successful videos. For example, some of the most viral and interesting science videos I have come across recently were made by Adrian

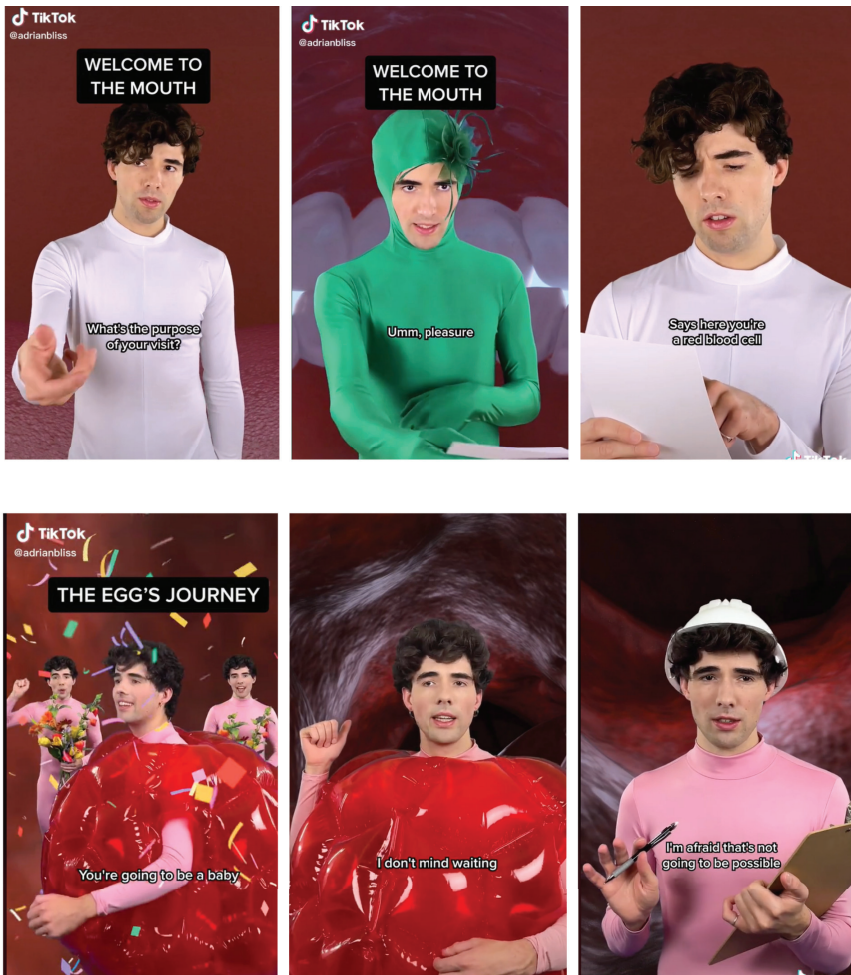


Figure 2. Screenshots of Adrian Bliss's (@adrianbliss) videos about the white blood cell encountering a virus and the female monthly ovulation cycle. Screenshots by author.

Bliss (@adrianbliss), a YouTuber-turned-TikToker from the United Kingdom. Bliss has garnered TikTok fame by creating funny sketches in which he wears various costumes and reenacts historical events or demonstrates scientific phenomena. Figure 2 shows two examples: in the first, Bliss acts out a scene in which a white blood cell is encountering a virus that is attempting to enter the human mouth; in the second sketch, the monthly ovulation cycle of a female is explained.¹⁸ With the help of the flamboyant costumes, Bliss's original acting style, and plot design, these two videos have received over seventy million views. Blurring the border between jokes and education,

18 Adrian Bliss (@adrianbliss), "Welcome to the mouth," TikTok video, January 5, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@adrianbliss/video/7049825833531477253>; and Adrian Bliss (@adrianbliss), "The Egg's journey," TikTok video, August 27, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@adrianbliss/video/7136592235092512005>.

and therefore comedy and science, these videos' success has useful implications for how to enhance seemingly mundane subjects through the short video format.

As the examples mentioned above illustrate, knowledge sharing and building on TikTok come in many forms. For most educators and academics, engaging with the younger generation on TikTok requires a lot of learning about the platform and its specific culture, and one should not assume that a traditional lecture format will result in receptivity. Without the correct visual and audio grammar, even an educational video with a high production value can be fifteen seconds too long. It is important to note that, despite the expanding user base, which has extended to include older generations (i.e., millennials, Gen X, and even boomers), TikTok is still largely a Gen Z app, in a cultural sense. The youth, as the early adapters and initial target group of the platform, are the creativity engine and the standard setters regarding the norms, practices, and culture of TikTok. This may change one day, just as the older generation turned Facebook into a "Boomerbook."¹⁹ However, for now, we thirty-something users are the *guests*, and we can be a bit too shy to post videos, are sometimes lost amid all the functions, or are occasionally confused by the language (e.g., TikTok slang of the youth). Before we formulate plans to harness TikTok for education, it may be worth "wasting" some time scrolling our own FYPs to discern the platform's stylistic conventions, to see how TikTok influencers (re)create video memes, and to reverse-engineer viral content to imagine how we might produce such work. Who knows? We may subliminally start to #LearnOnTikTok about how knowledge can be creatively shared through short videos.

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19 Helen Lewis, "What Happened When Facebook Became Boomerbook," *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/facebook-midlife-crisis-boomerbook/620307/>.