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Do You Want to Make a TikTok? Is It Time to BeReal?: Gen Z, Social Media, and Digital Literacies

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Ask any random teenager in the United States what their favorite social media apps are and you will inevitably hear the same answers: TikTok, Snapchat, and BeReal. While platforms like Instagram, Triller, Tumblr, and Dubsmash have been popular before, today's Zoomers (so-called members of Generation Z) flock to social media platforms that give the allure of authenticity and a sense of community that they can't get in "real" life or in other spaces. Whether it's TikTok videos or BeReal pictures, Zoomers use these apps as spaces to both document their lives and take a glimpse into the lives of their friends. Leaning into the "social" of social media, they view TikTok and BeReal in much of the same way that previous generations might have approached sociality at school, on sports teams, at church, or in clubs. As these social practices disseminate on social media, youth begin to establish complex systems of culture, aesthetics, ethics, and social norms that spill into offline spaces and, in the process, distill and establish generational culture. It should be no surprise that digital literacies are at the heart of this work considering how digital literacies include social interactions via a myriad of digital tools (Ito et al., 2013; Garcia, 2020).

TikTok and BeReal feature many hallmarks of digital literacies. TikTokers and those trying to BeReal navigate these spaces, create and consume digitized content, communicate with fellow app users and share media in other online and offline places.

The result is an interactive learning experience in which young people write—they create, collaborate, experiment, and take risks to forge self-reflective narratives as well as collective stories that contribute to platformic and generational cultures. In many ways, these apps promote communication. Although social media critics may claim that digital spaces only have negative effects (and, of course, negative effects do exist), social media is not an isolated act. It is an inherently social activity. These apps are participatory. They are collaborative. They are about networking. They are about expanding one's community.

Young people are already using these spaces with youth in the United States using TikTok around 82 minutes per day (Iqbal, 2022), and BeReal accumulating over 21 million downloads in 2022 alone. Given these numbers, as educators, we must consider the educational value of social media sites like TikTok and BeReal (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021). Rather than view them pessimistically, we should instead try to find the potential benefits. We should meet students where they are and embrace the platforms that they use. This collective project is two-fold. On the one hand, we must explore how these sites already operate as legitimate literacy platforms. On the other hand, we should find ways to connect these extant digital spaces into classrooms and, in doing so, acknowledge the cultural power that young people hold to collaboratively forge sophisticated

forms of digital communication.

In what follows, I argue that important literacy practices take place on TikTok and BeReal. Critics will say that these spaces are "child's play" and, as such, that they don't matter. And regarding them as important spaces for literacies? Forget about it! In spite of these critiques, digital technologies are constantly shifting, and with these shifts, new ways of communication, creating, and finding information emerge. For those who came-of-age before the Web 2.0 era, digital platforms may be daunting and downright confusing. But for youth today—so-called digital natives—social media platforms are critical spaces on which a wealth of digital literacy practices emerge, flourish, and penetrate into offline lives. To understand Gen Z, we must understand platforms like TikTok and BeReal. And to understand TikTok and BeReal, we must begin to explore how these platforms function as digital literacies themselves.

TikTok Literacies

TikTok is the international sister-app to Douyin, the immensely popular social media app that has dominated China's social media market since its 2016 debut. Owned by Chinese tech company ByteDance, TikTok became available internationally in 2017 and in North America in 2018 (For more on TikTok, see Kaye et al., 2022). The app features short videos up to 3-minutes long, but often much shorter. TikTok content is incredibly varied ranging from dancing videos and #BookTok reviews to cooking tutorials and chronicles of cute, silly animals. TikTok features a notoriously mysterious algorithm that gives each user a personally-curated and infinitely scrollable stream of content designed to entertain, provoke, and encourage more time on the app. Indeed, TikTok is one of the most addicting digital platforms today (Zeng et al., 2021).

Since its beginnings in the United States, TikTok has had a primarily young user-base, often credited to the fact that ByteDance acquired the video app Musical.ly and merged it with TikTok, folding Musical.ly creators into the newfound TikTok community. This phenomenon only continued, with TikTok quickly becoming a virtual playground for

teenagers and other members of Generation Z "to self-fashion identity, form supportive digital communities, and exert agency" (Boffone, 2021, p. 6). From August 2018 to March 2020, TikTok in the United States became the most important social media platform for Gen Z, beating out other popular apps like Instagram and Snapchat. During this time, Zoomers established the cultural norms and aesthetics of TikTok, which continue today even as the app continues to foster a user-base that spans all generations. Teenagers created the culture that continues today. TikTok experienced tremendous growth in 2020 (as the COVID-19 pandemic forced many folks in the US into lockdown and social distancing. Longing for entertainment and community, people downloaded TikTok en masse, making the platform one of the most downloaded social media apps in recent years, its popularity still increasing in 2022.

TikTok literacies can materialize in different ways. As "complex, cultural artifacts" (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1439), TikTok videos are not merely silly creations that lack meaning (in any definition of the word). Rather, these videos can tell us much about a specific person or group of people. By focusing on aesthetic trends, the choice of audio, the use of text, filming locations, style of dress, use of voiceover, etc., casual observers and researchers alike can begin to see how digital literacies function on the app. TikTok videos and trends function as "identity blueprints" (Boffone, 2022, p. 5-6). That is, by mimicking an existing TikTok trend (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), content creators quite literally try on an existing identity blueprint that becomes part of their digital and offline personalities. Whether it is recreating a dance challenge to a new song by Lizzo or Megan Thee Stallion or doing a taste test video of the weekly Crumbl cookie haul, emulating these trends is a public-facing expression of one's identity that aligns the specific TikToker to the larger group identity.

The intersections between TikTokian identity blueprints and digital literacies also materialize via TikTok subcultures. The platform notoriously features thriving sub-communities, each with their own aesthetics, set of codes, social mores, trends, and literacy practices (Boffone, 2022). While #BookTok

might promote formal reading and readerly identities (Boffone & Jerasa, 2021; Jerasa & Boffone, 2021), other communities such as #WitchTok (Barnette, 2022) and #JewTok (Divon & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022) feature identities connected to witchcraft and Jewishness, respectively. These represent just a few of the many subcultures on TikTok through which digital literacy practices materialize. The literacy approaches that work on #BookTok might not make sense on #WitchTok or #JewTok. #BookTok reviews staging conversations about trending books are distinct from the ways that baby witches try to hex the moon on #WitchTok and the ways that #JewTok creators flip antisemitic content on its head to recenter the identities of Jewish TikTokers. Indeed, although there are widespread digital literacy practices on TikTok, to generalize the app would be a mistake. TikTok cultures vary by community, geographic region, and user demographics, among other factors. As such, the literacies found in this digital space are incredibly robust and multi-faceted.

BeReal Literacies

Although BeReal first debuted in December 2019, the platform didn't catch fire within the popular culture zeitgeist until spring 2022. BeReal has a robust community of active users despite its 21 million paling in comparison to legacy platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. BeReal has become incredibly popular with Gen Z, and accordingly, this rapid growth among youth should give us pause to consider how the platform connects to larger conversations on digital literacies.

Although social media sites like TikTok are rooted in abundance and expansiveness, BeReal is all about scarcity. Users can only post once per day during a 2-minute window. The post features two pictures: one simultaneous picture from the phone's front-facing and back-facing cameras. Users can also add a caption to their post. Users can't see posts—or really engage with the platform—until they have posted themselves. Much like Snapchat, posts disappear after 24 hours, lending a certain ephemerality to the platform. Users do have a private calendar archive of their own photos (while there's a record, no one else can see it). The platform is easy to use with no bells and whistles. Just download the app, turn on notifications, and capture your BeReal during the random two-minute window.

According to BeReal, the app "is your chance to show your friends who you really are, for once" (BeReal, 2022). Given the brief window, to BeReal is to post what you look like in the moment, what you are doing, and where you are. There's no time to plan ahead. Therefore, BeReal is supposedly caked in authenticity, something Wade (2022) sees as BeReal's biggest selling point: "In an age when the Instagram algorithm requires some serious strategy to navigate, and influencer culture is dominant, some young people are searching for a different and more authentic online experience. Tired of finding the perfect light or event for an Instagram post, sharing random daily moments on BeReal can be liberating." Duffy and Gerrard (2022) question if social media users "have outgrown the culture of likes-tallying perfectionism associated with mainstream social networks." In this way, Zoomers regard BeReal as a way to (re)write and (re)inscribe authenticity as a core generational value. Lying in bed, watching television, playing video games, doing absolutely nothing at all—it's not exactly exciting, but it's authentic af. It's everyday life.

The charm of BeReal lies precisely in the mundanity of everyday life. While Zoomers may use platforms like TikTok and Instagram in far more nuanced ways, thus depicting a more complex portrait of identity and generational culture, on BeReal it's nearly impossible to approach the space with such calculation. The affordances and limitations of time and frequency make the space and use of the space particularly unique. Because BeReal only grants users a random two-minute window once per day, to BeReal is to capture life in the moment. If the notification goes off during the school day, then users' feeds will be filled with pictures of their friends (and teachers) at school. If BeReal decides that 9:30pm is indeed the time to be real then users' can see friends in their bedrooms watching tv, playing video games, or doing homework all set against the LED light backdrop that has become standard Gen Z culture.

Although casual observers may dismiss BeReal's window into reality as a digital literacy practice, a deeper look into the platform reveals how Zoomers write BeingReal into popular culture. BeReal literacies are rooted in posting a candid "status update" that shows life as it truly is, where it actually takes place. While Millennials may still use social media platforms as critical sites to post picture-perfect portrayals of a filtered reality, Gen Z values the authenticity that spaces like BeReal promotes. As such, the app demonstrates a resurgence of borderline boring content. Take, for instance, the high volume of bedroom selfies forging an archive of "girls bedroom culture" (Kennedy, 2020). These portraits transform a typically private space into something public-facing that tells us much about generational trends in fashion, interior decorating, and photography. In the case of photography, the Millennial high selfie aka the "Facebook mom selfie" is out, 0.5x pics aka "a point five" are in. Zoomers' beloved 0.5x pic distorts reality, creating a parody of the teenage experience. These pictures are funny, silly, and baked in self-deprecating humor. These pictures are less serious and, accordingly, there is less pressure on the subject of the photograph. They don't need to worry about slaying (re: perfecting their look). It's a stress-free social media alternative that lets teenagers feel comfortable in their own skin in a digital space that is home to them.

BeRe.al/dr_boffone
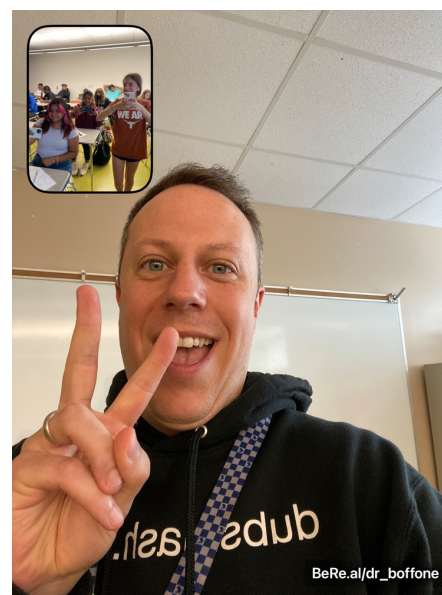
Ok, Let's BeReal and TikTalk Literacy Instruction

Aside from the value that TikTok and BeReal have as creative spaces for young people to experiment with storytelling, these platforms—especially TikTok—can be used in the classroom in formal ways, as well. In my high school and university courses, students use TikTok as a form of creative expression that intersects with the curriculum. For example, in my high school Spanish classes, my students write micro stories in Spanish. After workshopping their writing in small groups and getting feedback from me, students then create video versions of their stories complete with voice over, on-screen text, and greenscreen images on TikTok. In my university-level Intro to LGBTQ+ Studies course, students use the same resources to create videos that explain key principles and figures in queer history. These videos make use of trending sound bites and video effects to enhance the viewer's experience and to teach queer studies to TikTok's potentially viral audience. In both instances, students use traditional writing and the multimodal composition that TikTok allows to create multimodal stories with multiple layers of engagement.

BeRe.al/jadyn_ur_fav

I'm not going to lie; the students love making TikToks as part of the curriculum. Not only is it fun, but it also forces students to learn how to engage with TikTok in a more advanced way. It also reframes

content and multimodal tools that students are accustomed to using in their everyday lives as valid literacy practices worthy of a place in the context of school curriculum. Even the most addicted TikTokers in my classes will inevitably have to learn more about the platform: how to effectively include text and audio, how to manipulate lighting, how to enhance the story via images, how to fill in gaps and help the viewer better understand what they are viewing through explanatory captions, etc. Accordingly, the TikTok projects are not simply silly activities we do in class. Rather, I have my students create TikToks to engage with the course content (be it Spanish or LGBTQ+ Studies) in a more nuanced way, a way that transpires in a space that students already feel comfortable with and one that can indeed be an important space for digital literacies.

Incorporating BeReal into the curriculum poses more challenges than TikTok. But, as I have experienced this school year with my high school students, BeReal engenders conversations and community-building. BeReal is not part of my teaching toolbox; rather, I allow it to co-exist within my classroom. Pausing class for two-minutes when the notification goes off so that students can BeReal in the classroom may seem far-removed from learning Spanish (or any school subject for that matter), but giving students space to be creative, write themselves into a digital space, and engage with their in-class and online friends can completely shift a classroom community. This simple brain break can be a much-needed reset before diving back into the curriculum. In any case, it can give a teacher and their

students a commonality that unites them and forges a stronger classroom community.

Indeed, TikTok and BeReal offer a wealth of opportunities for digital literacy engagement. Whether through out-of-school or in-school practices, these social media sites—in addition to any number of platforms that are popular with Zoomers—speak to nuanced ways that young people write themselves into the narrative via a host of literacy practices. While some of these approaches may be confusing to us folks who were "born in the 1900s," this doesn't negate the power that these social media sites hold to produce culture. As educators, we should be encouraged to embrace the transformative potential of social media in formal and informal ways to engage our students in digital spaces that feel native to them. Of course, this work doesn't replace extant curricula. Rather, by bringing social media platforms like TikTok and BeReal into the classroom—even through fostering more cultural competency that allows us to have more authentic conversations with students—we can meet diverse students' learning needs, including the social and emotional. We can expand our classrooms to be more culturally relevant and at the forefront of social change. Zoomers are already doing this work, and we have as much to learn from them as they do from our classes. Why shouldn't we join them?

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