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Defining the ‘good’ in educational TikTok videos: Authenticity, literacies, and digital enlightenment

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Abstract

Introduction. This study examines what makes an educational TikTok video ‘good’ from the perspective of learners who actively use the platform. While prior work highlights design principles and instructional strategies, little research investigates how learners themselves define effectiveness in short-form digital video.

Method. Using grounded theory, the team conducted semi-structured Zoom interviews with 27 TikTok users who had learned something new on the platform within the past two years. Participants, recruited through snowball sampling, represented diverse demographics and topical interests. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding.

Analysis. Six interdependent domains shaped participants’ evaluations: Content and Engagement, Delivery and Pedagogy, Affective Qualities, Social and Community, Credibility and Trust, and Platform Affordances.

Results. Participants defined good educational videos as those that integrate clarity, authenticity, community interaction, and intentional use of TikTok’s features. Videos stand out when they balance entertainment with pedagogy, build trust through authentic delivery, and act as gateways to deeper exploration.

Conclusion. The study offers a sociotechnical framework that bridges cognitive, affective, social, and technological dimensions of learning, presenting implications for educators, librarians, and creators designing effective video-based instruction.

Introduction

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram reels, and YouTube shorts have reshaped how people consume, create, and share knowledge. Among these, TikTok has emerged as a cultural force with over one billion active users worldwide, setting trends across entertainment, politics, and education. For many young adults, TikTok functions not only as a site of leisure but also as a space of informal learning, where tutorials, commentary, and micro-lessons coexist with dance routines and comedic skits. Scholars have observed its accessibility and influence among college students, noting that TikTok bridges the domains of entertainment and education (David et al., 2021).

The theme of this conference, information literacies, authenticity, and use: The move towards a digitally enlightened society, provides a crucial frame for understanding TikTok as an educational platform. TikTok challenges traditional notions of information literacy by requiring users to evaluate not only the accuracy of content but also its authenticity, relational qualities, and cultural relevance. Learners are not simply determining whether information is factually correct; they are discerning whether a video feels trustworthy, empathetic, and meaningful within a digital ecosystem shaped by algorithms and communities. Understanding what makes educational videos 'good' on TikTok therefore advances the conversation about how information literacy is being redefined in the twenty-first century.

Short-form video and microlearning

Asynchronous video has become central to online education, valued for its flexibility and cost-effectiveness (Yosi et al., 2022). Students appreciate the convenience of learning remotely and accessing course materials at their own pace (Khadijah M. et al., 2020). Yet challenges remain: many learners report difficulty engaging with long-form lectures, citing 'limited attention span' as a drawback of the online format (Ling Z. et al., 2022). This has renewed interest in microlearning, a strategy that delivers knowledge in short, skill-based modules ranging from thirty seconds to fifteen minutes (Ai-Dung & Woei, 2022; Isa Jahnke et al., 2019). Research demonstrates that microlearning can improve both engagement and retention across educational and workplace contexts (De Gagne et al., 2019; Stavros, 2018; Zhang & West, 2020). TikTok exemplifies this trend, offering bite-sized content that sustains attention while exposing learners to new ideas through informal pedagogies (Fiallos et al., 2021).

Informal pedagogies and influencer production

TikTok's ecology is shaped by influencers and micro-celebrities, who employ niche expertise, humour, empathy, and affect to capture attention. Influencers who surpass ten thousand followers can monetize content and achieve 'celebrification,' leveraging personableness and audience transportability across platforms (Arriagata & Ibáñez, 2020; Brooks & Drenten, 2021). These strategies reveal pedagogical insights: effective short-form videos often rely on relatability, humour, and authenticity rather than formal authority. Extant literature argues that TikTok can motivate learning across contexts. In a business statistics course, students taught with TikTok videos outperformed those taught with teacher-led virtual instruction (Ding et al., 2023). In pharmacy education, students who created TikTok assignments reported greater comprehension and motivation (Yosi et al., 2022). Dermatologists and public health professionals have similarly used TikTok to spread reliable health information by deploying trending audio and hashtags (Fletcher et al., 2024; McCashin & Murphy, 2023).

BIPOC perspectives, health information, and algorithmic mediation

Recent work highlights how learners' experiences with TikTok are shaped by cultural and algorithmic factors. Dai et al. (2025) show how BIPOC users perceive and interact with algorithmically generated content, revealing both opportunities for connection and risks of bias or misrepresentation. Fletcher et al. (2024) examine how BIPOC college students evaluate healthcare

professionals' TikTok content, finding that qualities such as empathy, authenticity, and visual clarity shaped trust in medical information. Earlier, Booth and Trauth (2019) demonstrated that teens relied heavily on video-based cues when evaluating high-stakes health information on social media, signalling the importance of affective and visual dimensions. Together, these studies demonstrate that qualities such as authenticity, empathy, and credibility are central to how marginalized users in particular assess educational content.

Sánchez et al. (2024) further contribute a methodological framework for categorizing informal learning content on TikTok, underscoring the platform's diversity of genres and strategies. Their work highlights that while TikTok is saturated with entertainment, it also supports rich forms of microlearning that require systematic study. Building on this foundation, the present study aims to identify the qualities learners themselves perceive as defining 'good' educational videos.

TikTok in education and public discourse

Beyond formal classrooms, TikTok has become a powerful vehicle for non-traditional learning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health professionals used TikTok's memetic tropes and affective strategies to foster therapeutic engagement and challenge traditional frameworks (Avella, 2023). Other educators have integrated TikTok into curricula, using it to supplement classroom learning or introduce marginalized topics such as sex education (Fowler et al., 2022), archaeology outreach (Khan, 2022), and niche disciplinary knowledge (Lampe, 2023). Professors increasingly view TikTok not merely as supplemental but as a legitimate curricular tool (Graefen et al., 2023; Rein, 2023). Such examples illustrate TikTok's ability to amplify knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden, demonstrating its potential as both an instructional and a public communication medium.

Theoretical perspectives

To interpret these developments, multiple theoretical perspectives are relevant. Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning and Sweller's (2011) cognitive load theory emphasize the importance of minimizing distractions and guiding attention to essential content. From a social perspective, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development and Jenkins' (2006) notion of participatory culture highlight the collaborative, peer-driven aspects of TikTok learning, where comment sections and duets function as sites of co-construction. Scolar's (2018) framework of transmedia literacy explains how learners use TikTok as an entry point, moving across platforms in search of depth. Critical pedagogy adds another lens: hooks (1994) and Zembylas (2007) argue that affect, care, and authenticity are central to effective pedagogy. These perspectives converge in TikTok, where cognitive clarity, affective resonance, and participatory culture intersect with algorithmic and technological affordances.

Research question and the meaning of 'good'

This study addresses these gaps by centering the perspectives of learners who actively use TikTok for education. Using grounded theory and semi-structured interviews with 27 participants, we ask: What are the qualities that make the 'good' educational videos stand out? We are interested not only in what these qualities are, but how students may perceive and experience their interplay as parts of a larger whole.

The deliberate use of the word 'good' reflects the language participants themselves used when describing video content. Importantly, 'good' was never restricted to technical efficiency or cognitive clarity alone. Instead, it functioned as a holistic judgment that encompassed relational, affective, and ethical qualities alongside design and accuracy. This interpretation aligns with bell hooks' (1994) vision of engaged pedagogy. For hooks, good teaching is not reducible to mastery of content or formal authority; it must also be animated by care, authenticity, and love. Participants in our study echoed this ethos in digital form: they valued educational videos that demonstrated sincerity, empathy, and a genuine commitment to sharing knowledge.

By situating 'good' within this framework, we emphasize that the qualities explored in this study extend beyond a checklist of technical best practices. Instead, good captures how learners themselves synthesize cognitive design, affective resonance, social collaboration, credibility, and platform affordances in everyday practice. This framing acknowledges that the evaluation of educational video is not only a cognitive process but also an affective and ethical one.

Methods

This study employed a grounded theory approach to explore the qualities that make educational videos stand out as 'good' from the perspective of TikTok learners. Grounded theory was selected because it prioritizes theory-building from participant experiences rather than applying pre-existing frameworks, which was essential for capturing how learners themselves synthesize cognitive, affective, social, and technological dimensions of video-based education.

Institutional Review Board approval was secured prior to data collection. Recruitment was conducted through snowball sampling (Johnson, 2014), using social media networks and personal connections to identify potential participants. Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age, have a minimum of three months' experience using TikTok, and to have used the platform to learn something new within the past two years. This last criterion was particularly important: TikTok is rapidly evolving, and excluding individuals who had not engaged in learning content recently helped ensure that insights reflected current practices. Forty-eight individuals initially expressed interest; after screening, twenty-seven participants were selected for interviews.

The participant pool represented varied ethnic, socio-economic, and age backgrounds, ensuring a diversity of perspectives. On average, participants had more than two years of TikTok experience and reported using the platform five to nine hours per week. Learning interests spanned nail art, cooking, current events, hair styling, art techniques, and other areas of personal relevance, reflecting the breadth of educational content available on TikTok.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. This format allowed for both consistency and flexibility: while all participants were asked core questions, follow-up prompts encouraged elaboration and the introduction of new perspectives. Interview questions were initially shaped by a taxonomy of six qualities identified in prior work (point of view, visual aids, authenticity, humour, captions, and assumed knowledge) (Sánchez et al., 2024). However, the design also encouraged participants to discuss experiences beyond these categories. For example, participants were asked to recall a time when they learned something new on TikTok and to describe what made that video effective. This open-ended framing provided unfiltered insights into learners' criteria before introducing prompts related to the six themes.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom and Microsoft Word transcription tools, with manual cleaning for accuracy. Transcripts were analysed iteratively using grounded theory coding procedures, beginning with open coding to identify recurring ideas, followed by axial coding to group related concepts, and finally selective coding to develop core categories. This analytic process supported the emergence of six domains that together form the basis of the findings reported below.

Analysis

The grounded theory analysis produced six interrelated domains that define how learners evaluate educational videos on TikTok: Content and Engagement, Delivery and Pedagogy, Affective Qualities, Social and Community, Credibility and Trust, and Platform Affordances. These domains were not discrete; participants often described them as overlapping or reinforcing one another. Together, they form an integrated framework of how learners understand what makes educational videos stand out as 'good.'

Content and engagement

Across interviews, participants emphasized that good educational videos stand out because they capture attention quickly and sustain interest. This was not only a matter of entertainment but also a prerequisite for learning. As one participant explained, *‘They really play on people’s attention span, so they’re very quick with their verbiage... and with the editing style because they know that people’s attention span is getting shorter. So that’s one of the ways they drag you in’* [57–64]. For many, a video’s ability to hook the viewer in the first few seconds distinguished effective content from less engaging material.

Participants noted that humour, controversy, and pop culture references further enhanced engagement. One student said, *‘Controversy I feel like is a huge thing on TikTok. I feel like that really drives up engagement and comments’* [218–221]. Another described humour: *‘There’s stuff [that] is almost always like pretty darn funny, but it’s also educational... it feels more like a lesson’* [193–220]. Humor and light-heartedness helped participants remember information, while pop culture references created relatability: *‘Something that drives TikTok’s entertainment value... is just like pop culture references’* [638].

Engagement, however, was not solely about flashiness. Several participants stressed that overloaded videos could backfire. One student reflected, *‘When there aren’t like a lot of bells and whistles... sometimes words will pop up on the screen or there’ll be sound effects, and I’m like, OK, that’s too much. I can’t watch that’* [473–486]. Another echoed, *‘Anything can be good as long as it’s keeping my attention by not having like all this extra stuff... instead it makes it too overwhelming’* [492–495]. These comments illustrate the fine line between capturing attention and distracting the learner.

Participants also valued content that was practical and relatable. One noted, *‘Here’s some good cheap meals or here’s like, hey, this thing that you think is hard in cooking is actually a lot easier than you think it is. And here’s how to do it’* [388–395]. In this sense, content stood out not just because it was engaging but because it offered something actionable, relevant, and easy to integrate into daily life.

Overall, participants described ‘good’ educational videos as those that engage without overwhelming, balancing entertaining delivery with meaningful, applicable content. Engagement operated as both a hook and a filter: videos that failed to capture interest quickly were ignored, while those that overloaded attention lost credibility as learning tools.

Delivery and pedagogy

While content and engagement served as the initial draw, participants emphasized that the lasting impact of an educational video depended on delivery. Many described this in terms of pacing, clarity, and organization. For some, shorter videos were ideal because they distilled information into manageable segments. One participant explained, *‘Just that they’re shorter. Like for the tableau, for instance, I didn’t need the hour-long video essay that I could have gotten on YouTube. For in-depth I just needed bite-sized, just enough to get me going’* [68–75]. Others preferred slower, more deliberate pacing. As another reflected, *‘A slower video with more content draws my interest in, and I truly pay attention to every word rather than just waiting for the next beat’* [361–362]. These contrasting perspectives underscore the need for pacing that balances brevity with depth.

Participants also valued pedagogical scaffolding, such as step-by-step instructions, summaries, or captions. One noted, *‘Summaries at the end of the video are also really good. So, after they teach you something, like maybe go over it and then end the video on that’* [54–56]. Another described captions in cooking videos: *‘They just put all the information like in the video... but it’s helpful to have the ingredients in the caption. That way I don’t have to rewatch the video’* [45–54]. Such multimodal

supports—visual, auditory, and textual—helped participants retain information and reduced frustration.

Good delivery also meant tailoring to different learning styles. One participant said, *'I would probably say hitting like every check mark like audio, because there's different ways people learn... at least having parts to it'* [312–314]. Videos that incorporated varied modes of instruction were seen as more inclusive. At the same time, participants expressed frustration with disorganized or poorly edited content. *'Good editing helps a lot. I don't like things that are shaky... or a lot of information in one video. I like it when it's short and sweet and simple,'* explained one student [field note]. The effectiveness of delivery, then, lay not in sophisticated production values but in clear choices that reduced cognitive load.

Participants judged good delivery as a combination of pacing, structure, and accessibility. Videos that were concise but organized, and that paired verbal explanations with captions or demonstrations, stood out as pedagogically effective.

Affective qualities

Beyond content and delivery, participants emphasized that the most memorable educational videos carried a human element. Empathy, authenticity, and even vulnerability made creators feel more trustworthy and approachable. One participant reflected, *'Well, I mean, it's different than other types of educational content because I feel like with that it's easier to make it a lot more personal and empathetic, and that makes me more receptive to listen to it'* [33–38]. For this student, the quality of the information mattered less than the sense that the creator genuinely wanted to help.

Authenticity was particularly important. Several participants expressed frustration with creators whose videos felt overly commercial or motivated by sponsorships. As one explained, *'A good educational video is when someone... just wants to teach something, not like if something is sponsored. A lot of educational videos I've seen, they're sponsored by someone and then they're not really giving good advice'* [30–36]. This distinction between authentic teaching and disguised advertising shaped how participants assessed value.

Language and tone also mattered for affective engagement. One student compared videos to therapeutic encounters, noting how subtle communication choices could make a viewer feel understood or dismissed:

I feel like I've run into bad therapists... they make assumptions and talk to you like you're a problem to be solved. But with videos, the creator's language shows more understanding... they show how that person might be experiencing certain problems [42–53].

Affective resonance was linked to feeling recognized and validated.

Enjoyment also emerged as a theme. Participants gravitated toward videos where creators clearly enjoyed teaching. *'When someone else is enjoying what they're talking about, I am now enjoying what they're talking about,'* one explained, describing a foraging creator who mixed jokes and recipes to keep learning lively [217–226]. Humour and light-heartedness were not distractions but strategies that deepened engagement and made content memorable.

Good educational videos did not succeed on information alone. They stood out because they evoked emotional connection, built trust through authenticity, and conveyed care for the learner. In participants' eyes, affect was not supplemental—it was central to why some videos felt worth remembering and sharing.

Social and community

Another defining quality of ‘good’ educational videos was the sense of community they fostered. Unlike traditional one-way instruction, participants described TikTok as a space where learning felt collaborative, often through the comment section where viewers posed questions, shared experiences, or offered alternative explanations. As one participant explained,

Because when you think about it on YouTube, people really expect a response from the creator itself. But when you post a comment on TikTok... there’ll be like four other comments explaining it. So maybe there is this culture of collaboration built into TikTok educational content [242–252].

For many, comments functioned like a peer-to-peer tutoring system. One student noted, ‘*The comments can also make the video a lot better... when other people give advice and tip in, that’s also really helpful. It’s not just the creator but the creator and their community*’ [101–107]. This collective knowledge-making was especially valued for tutorials and practical skills, where multiple perspectives expanded on or clarified the video.

Some participants even used the comments as a litmus test for quality. ‘*Going into the comment section and seeing what other people think—if they felt like it was confusing, that’s probably not a good video to watch,*’ explained one viewer [59–61]. Another called the comments ‘*a thermometer for me to understand what other people are thinking*’ [75–79]. In this way, communal reactions validated or challenged the credibility of a video.

Collaboration also extended beyond threads. Participants described how creators sometimes replied directly by ‘*dragging*’ a comment into a new video [370–373], reinforcing that educational content was shaped not only by creators but also by learners.

Good educational videos were rarely experienced as isolated artifacts. They stood out because they connected learners to broader communities of inquiry, where viewers felt supported, validated, and encouraged to participate. In this domain, learning was not simply about consuming information but about joining a dynamic, interactive social process.

Credibility and trust

For participants, another essential quality of good educational videos was credibility. On a platform saturated with information, distinguishing trustworthy from unreliable content was critical. Videos stood out when creators demonstrated expertise or backed claims with evidence. Visible sources or references reassured viewers that content was accurate and worth trusting.

Confidence in delivery also signalled credibility. Learners said they trusted creators who presented with assurance and clarity:

Basically, that’s what stands out to me—people who are confident in what they’re saying. Because you know people put any type of stuff on the Internet... if a person is standing out with confidence, showing proof, then that catches my attention [95–101].

Here, confidence reflected authority rooted in knowledge rather than arrogance.

Trust, however, was closely tied to authenticity. Videos that seemed overly commercial or self-promotional were viewed with scepticism. ‘*You don’t want to go too far above the line of advertising yourself... what they should be aiming to do is seeming genuine, like they actually want to help*’ [117–122]. A lack of transparency about sponsorship undermined educational value.

Finally, credibility was relational. A creator’s reputation, prior exposure to their content, and peer validation in comments all shaped perceptions of trust. As one explained, ‘*I don’t typically fact-*

check, but if it seems reputable enough... or refers to an article or something I feel confident in, then I typically watch it' [146–152].

Credibility and trust emerged as defining qualities that determined whether educational content was taken seriously. Good videos combined confidence, evidence, and authenticity, offering viewers not just information but reassurance that the learning experience was reliable.

Platform affordances

Finally, participants emphasized that the qualities of good educational videos could not be separated from TikTok's technological environment. The platform's short-form design was both an opportunity and a limitation. Some valued brevity, explaining that it let them absorb information quickly without committing to long viewing sessions: *'In that 30 seconds to a minute... most content out there is not educational, but you get what you get and move on. That's why I like it for things I can learn real quick'* [195–226]. Others, however, cautioned that excessive brevity risked shallowness or prioritizing clicks over genuine teaching.

The algorithm was another defining feature. Its personalized feed often surfaced content directly relevant to users' interests. As one participant explained, *'The algorithm is different for everybody... as soon as something is happening, I see it instantly'* [174–176]. This immediacy made TikTok a gateway into new topics, sometimes sparking deeper exploration on other platforms. Strong creators extended this potential by linking to longer content or external resources, transforming TikTok into an entry point rather than a self-contained lesson.

Accessibility features such as captions also mattered. One participant stressed, *'Honestly, captions—if there are captions it always stands out to me... captions usually make a video stand out, so I guess accessibility'* [375–385]. Captions supported different learning needs while reducing the frustration of pausing and replaying.

Taken together, these reflections show that good educational videos stood out not only for their content or pedagogy but also for strategic use of TikTok's affordances. Brevity, algorithmic personalization, and multimodal accessibility shaped how learners discovered, consumed, and judged educational content.

Synthesis

The six domains of Content and Engagement, Delivery and Pedagogy, Affective Qualities, Social and Community, Credibility and Trust, and Platform Affordances reveal a multidimensional understanding of what makes educational videos stand out on TikTok. Participants consistently emphasized that effectiveness was never determined by a single factor but rather by the interplay of design, affect, and technology. A video might capture attention through humour or pacing, but it only retained value if the delivery was clear, the creator was authentic, and the content could be trusted. Similarly, TikTok's technological affordances shaped learning in ways that extended beyond individual videos: the algorithm directed learners toward new areas of interest, while the comment section transformed education into a social practice.

What emerges from these findings is that good educational videos are experienced as more than isolated information transfers. They are sociotechnical artifacts that combine clarity of instruction with emotional resonance, authenticity with credibility, and brevity with pathways to deeper engagement. For participants, the most effective videos were those that met them where they were, engaging their attention, respecting their time, validating their experiences, and connecting them to a community of learners.

Results and theoretical implications

The grounded theory analysis produced six interdependent domains that define how learners evaluate educational videos on TikTok: content and engagement, delivery and pedagogy, affective

qualities, social and community, credibility and trust, and platform affordances. While each domain highlights a distinct dimension of learner experience, participants emphasized that good educational videos integrated multiple qualities simultaneously. In what follows, we present these domains and situate them within relevant theoretical traditions.

Balancing engagement and pedagogy

Participants consistently noted that engagement was essential in a crowded, fast-paced feed. Videos needed to capture attention almost instantly, often through humour, controversy, or pop culture references. *'I think OK controversy... really drives up engagement and comments and all of those things'* [218–221], one participant explained. This echoed participants who talked about the entertainment value of pop culture references.

Yet participants also expressed frustration with videos that prioritized flash over substance. As one put it, *'They're quick and snappy and pop sciency... it drains me and... I stopped, like, actually really paying attention to what's going on'* [356–357]. Others praised slower, more deliberate pacing: *'As a slower video with more content, it draws my interest in and I truly pay attention to every word rather than just waiting for the next beat'* [361–362].

This tension reflects cognitive theories of multimedia learning. Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning and Sweller's (2011) cognitive load theory emphasize that educational media should reduce extraneous load and direct attention to essential material. Participants' critiques mirror these principles: fast editing and excessive effects increased strain rather than enhancing learning. At the same time, learners affirmed that without initial engagement, even well-structured pedagogy could be overlooked. Good videos, therefore, balanced the immediacy of attention-grabbing strategies with cognitive clarity, blending entertainment with effective instructional design.

Authenticity, empathy, and the meaning of 'good'

When describing what made a video good, participants consistently pointed to affective qualities. They valued authenticity, empathy, and sincerity, and distinguished between creators who genuinely wanted to teach and those primarily interested in monetization. *'A good educational video is when someone... you can tell they just want to teach something, not like if something is sponsored'* [30–36]. Another participant explained, *'It's easier to make it a lot more personal and empathetic, and that makes me more receptive to listen'* [33–38].

The use of the word good here signals more than technical effectiveness; it reflects an affective and ethical judgment. This aligns with bell hooks' (1994) vision of engaged pedagogy, where good teaching is animated by care and authenticity, not authority alone. For hooks, education is a practice of freedom when learners feel recognized as whole people. Participants echoed this perspective in digital form, equating good with sincerity and care. Similarly, Zembylas (2007) highlights how emotions shape trust and the willingness to learn. Participants' emphasis on empathy and tone reinforces his claim that pedagogy is inseparable from affective relations. In this way, the everyday vocabulary of 'good' connects directly to critical theories of care in education.

Community as collective pedagogy

Participants also emphasized the collaborative nature of TikTok learning. Comment sections functioned as spaces of validation, critique, and expansion. *'The comment section is kind of like a thermometer for me to understand, like, what other people are thinking'* [75–79], one participant explained. Others described how duets and stitched responses created dialogue across multiple creators: *'There are so many other people responding... maybe there is this way of collaboration or this culture of collaboration if you will built into TikTok educational content'* [242–252].

This sense of community resonates with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development, which emphasizes learning through social interaction, and Jenkins' (2006) notion of participatory culture, in which users actively shape cultural production. For participants, good videos were not standalone artifacts but nodes in larger conversations. The collaborative dimension of TikTok not only enhanced engagement but also built credibility through peer reinforcement. In effect, learners were not only consumers but also co-constructors of knowledge.

Credibility as trust and care

Credibility emerged as a critical domain, with participants stressing the importance of confidence, evidence, and authenticity. *'Them showing the facts, not just talking... proving on what they're saying is actually factual by showing like the book and where you can get it from'* [84–88], one participant noted. Another linked trust to confidence: *'Basically, that's what stands out to me. People who are confident in what they're saying... and then showing proof'* [95–101].

Yet credibility was not evaluated solely on epistemic grounds. Tone, authenticity, and relational cues mattered as much as citations. *'You don't want to go too far above the line of advertising yourself... you want to make it seem like they actually want to help'* [117–122], one participant emphasized. This duality reflects recent work in information science that views credibility as both informational and affective (Lloyd, 2017; Booth and Trauth, 2019). In participants' accounts, trustworthiness depended not only on what was said but on how it was said. A good video was one where knowledge and care were inseparable.

Platform affordances as gateways

Participants recognized that TikTok's technological affordances shaped their learning. The brevity of videos allowed for accessible, bite-sized lessons but often required follow-up for depth. As one participant explained, TikTok was best seen as *'a gateway toward certain topics, a gateway to certain interests'* [195–226].

Captions and algorithmic personalization also played significant roles. Subtitles enhanced accessibility, especially in cooking or technical tutorials, while algorithmic discovery made content feel timely and relevant. These observations align with Scolari's (2018) theory of transmedia literacy, in which learners navigate across platforms and media, using one context as a springboard to others. For participants, TikTok's value was less in exhaustive explanation and more in sparking curiosity and guiding them toward further exploration. Good videos leveraged these affordances strategically, blending brevity with pathways to depth.

An integrated sociotechnical pedagogy

While each domain highlights a distinct feature, participants consistently stressed their interplay. Engagement mattered only when paired with pedagogical clarity. Emotional authenticity reinforced credibility. Community interaction amplified both trust and motivation. Platform affordances shaped all of these, structuring how knowledge was encountered, shared, and extended.

Synthesizing these domains reveals that good educational videos are not reducible to isolated qualities but emerge from their integration within TikTok's sociotechnical ecology. Learners judged videos holistically, considering not only cognitive clarity but also affective tone, community validation, and technological design.

This integrated framework bridges disciplinary silos. From a cognitive perspective, it affirms Mayer and Sweller's emphasis on clarity and cognitive load management. From a social perspective, it aligns with Jenkins and Vygotsky's accounts of participatory learning and collaborative meaning-making. From an affective perspective, it underscores hooks and Zembylas' insistence that care and authenticity are central to pedagogy. And from a technological perspective, it confirms

Scolari's insight that literacy in digital contexts is inherently transmedia, requiring learners to piece together knowledge across platforms.

Taken together, these results suggest that what makes educational videos stand out as good is not a single trait but the dynamic integration of engagement, clarity, authenticity, collaboration, trust, and affordances. Participants' emphasis on the word good reinforces that quality is judged not only in technical or cognitive terms but also in affective and ethical ones. In short, good educational videos are sociotechnical artifacts that combine design, care, and community in ways that resonate with learners navigating the fast-paced ecology of TikTok.

Conclusion

This study examined the qualities that make educational videos stand out as good from the perspective of learners who actively use TikTok. Using grounded theory, we identified six interdependent domains—content and engagement, delivery and pedagogy, affective qualities, social and community, credibility and trust, and platform affordances—that together form a sociotechnical framework for short-form educational video. Across interviews, participants emphasized that good was not simply a matter of technical polish or cognitive efficiency. Instead, they described good as a holistic category encompassing authenticity, empathy, and trust.

Learners evaluated videos in ways that blurred the boundaries between pedagogy, entertainment, and social connection. Attention-grabbing techniques mattered only when paired with clarity of explanation. Authenticity, expressed through sincerity of tone and avoidance of overt commercialism, was central to credibility. Community participation transformed videos into collective learning experiences, while TikTok's affordances—captions, algorithmic distribution, and sequenced content—shaped discovery and extended engagement. Good videos balanced brevity with gateways to depth, entertainment with pedagogy, and relational trust with factual clarity.

These findings suggest that evaluating educational videos cannot be reduced to instructional design or social media strategy alone. Good videos emerge where cognitive, affective, social, and technological dimensions intersect. For educators, this means effective short-form content requires more than technical editing; it demands authenticity and care, echoing bell hooks' (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy. Students in this study were less persuaded by polished authority than by sincerity, a finding with direct implications for higher education.

For librarians and information professionals, the results highlight an expanded notion of information literacy. Traditional models emphasize authority and accuracy, but participants also judged good videos in affective and ethical terms: Was the creator genuine? Did the tone convey empathy? Did the community validate the content? In this sense, information literacy is inseparable from affective literacy, the ability to discern authenticity and care in digital communication. As algorithmic platforms mediate learning encounters, fostering this expanded literacy becomes critical.

The study also offers guidance for creators. Credibility derives not only from factual accuracy but from relational bonds with audiences. Participants valued unsponsored content, consistent voice, and humour that felt genuine, while dismissing content that seemed driven by monetization. Creators who used affordances thoughtfully—captions for accessibility, sequenced videos for depth—were seen as producing higher-quality content. These insights suggest that 'creator literacies' are as important as learner literacies in shaping digital education.

The findings speak directly to the conference theme, Information Literacies, Authenticity and Use: The Move Towards a Digitally Enlightened Society. Participants showed that information literacy on TikTok extends beyond fact-checking to interpreting sincerity, empathy, and ethical intent. Good videos fostered trust and community as much as they transmitted facts, making authenticity

a central axis of literacy. Learners' scepticism toward commercial or insincere content highlights a new evaluative practice: quality is judged not only by what is said but by how and why it is said. Together, these perspectives advance a sociotechnical model of pedagogy grounded in learners' voices.

Future research might compare learner perceptions across platforms like YouTube shorts or Instagram reels or examine how creators conceptualize good educational content. Quantitative studies could test correlations between the six domains and measurable outcomes, while longitudinal studies might track how definitions of good evolve with changing algorithms and cultural norms.

Ultimately, by foregrounding learners' perspectives, this study re-centers the meaning of good in digital pedagogy. Good, in participants' accounts, was not only about clarity of content but also about authenticity, empathy, and connection. These findings remind us that as digital education expands, quality cannot be reduced to technical or cognitive criteria alone. It must be understood as a relational and sociotechnical construct, deeply intertwined with the literacies, values, and affective experiences of learners. In aligning with the conference theme, the study demonstrates that TikTok is not merely a site of distraction or entertainment but a laboratory for new forms of information literacy and authenticity. A digitally enlightened society will depend not only on efficient transmission of facts but also on cultivating trust, empathy, and collaboration in the digital spaces where learners increasingly turn for knowledge.

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