Maurion Williams-Jack
March 10,2026
Analysis Paper

In recent years, social media has increasingly become a space where debates about

professionalism, gender, and race unfold publicly. Viral videos allow everyday workplace

conflicts to become cultural controversies, often inviting millions of viewers to judge individuals

they do not personally know. One example is the viral TikTok video of an African American

teacher who received disciplinary backlash from her school for the outfits she wore while

teaching. Although dress codes are often framed as neutral professional guidelines, public

reactions to this video suggest that expectations of professionalism may be shaped by deeper

racialized and gendered assumptions.

This paper analyzes the viral TikTok video and a related YouTube commentary video discussing

the controversy surrounding the teacher's clothing. Using qualitative discourse analysis and an

intersectional framework, this paper examines how both the visual presentation of the teacher

and the public commentary surrounding the video reveal patterns of surveillance and judgment

directed at Black women's bodies. Drawing on the theoretical work of Kimberlé Crenshaw,

Patricia Hill Collins, Moya Bailey, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, I argue that the backlash

against the teacher demonstrates how modern ideas of professionalism remain influenced by

historical stereotypes and respectability politics surrounding Black women.

More specifically, the analysis explores how online audiences interpret the teacher's body as

"distracting," "unprofessional," or "inappropriate," even when her clothing appears similar to that

worn by many educators. These reactions illustrate how intersectional discrimination operates not only within institutions like schools but also through public discourse on social media platforms. By closely analyzing the visual framing of the video and the patterns present in comment sections, this study shows how contemporary digital culture reproduces long-standing forms of racialized scrutiny directed at Black women's bodies.

The primary research object for this analysis is a viral TikTok video featuring an African American teacher who faced criticism and disciplinary action because of her outfits while teaching. The video gained widespread attention on social media platforms, where viewers debated whether her clothing was appropriate for a professional educational setting. A secondary research object is a YouTube video that discusses the controversy and compiles public reactions to the incident.

This study uses qualitative discourse analysis to examine how meaning is created through language, visual framing, and public commentary surrounding the teacher's case. Rather than measuring the frequency of comments, the analysis focuses on recurring themes and patterns that appear across discussions. These patterns include accusations of unprofessionalism, comments about the teacher's body shape, arguments defending the teacher, and debates about appropriate behavior for educators.

The analysis is guided by intersectionality, a framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which explains how race and gender interact to produce unique experiences of discrimination for Black women (Crenshaw). In addition, Patricia Hill Collins' concept of controlling images helps explain how stereotypes influence perceptions of Black women's behavior and

appearance (Collins). These theoretical frameworks allow the analysis to interpret how social media discourse surrounding the teacher reflects broader cultural narratives about Black women's bodies and professionalism.

The TikTok video itself places strong visual emphasis on the teacher's body rather than her role as an educator. In many clips, the camera is positioned at a distance that captures her full body while she walks, turns, or stands in front of a classroom setting. Although the video does not explicitly claim that the teacher's clothing violates official policy, the framing encourages viewers to focus on the shape of her body and the fit of her clothing.

This emphasis on bodily visibility creates a particular viewing experience. Rather than presenting the teacher primarily as a professional performing her job, the video invites viewers to evaluate her physical appearance. In several moments, the teacher is shown wearing fitted dresses that highlight her natural body shape. While these outfits resemble clothing commonly worn in professional environments, the video's framing encourages viewers to interpret them through a lens of spectacle.

One recurring visual pattern is the contrast between the teacher's professional environment and the focus on her body. The classroom setting suggests authority and professionalism, yet the framing shifts attention toward the teacher's physical appearance. This pattern of visual emphasis contributes to the perception that the teacher's body itself is a problem within the workplace.

Another important visual element of the TikTok video is the perspective from which the teacher is filmed. In several clips, the camera appears positioned slightly below or at mid-body level,

capturing the teacher as she walks or turns in the classroom. This perspective emphasizes the movement of her body rather than her facial expressions or instructional actions. The viewer's attention is therefore guided toward her physical form rather than her role as an educator. By structuring the visual perspective this way, the video subtly encourages viewers to evaluate the teacher's body as the central object of attention. This framing transforms an ordinary classroom moment into a spectacle that invites judgment about appearance rather than professional performance.

A close reading of the video also reveals that the controversy surrounding the teacher is not simply about the clothing itself but about how her body is interpreted while wearing it. The outfits shown in the video appear to consist of common professional attire, such as fitted dresses, sweaters, and heels—items frequently worn by educators in many school settings. However, the visual framing repeatedly emphasizes how the clothing fits the teacher's body shape. Because the camera often captures full-body shots, viewers are encouraged to focus on the outline and movement of her body rather than the clothing as an isolated object. This suggests that the perceived "problem" is not necessarily the clothing itself but the way the teacher's body is read through cultural assumptions about sexuality, professionalism, and femininity.

A closer examination of the comments reveals that many viewers focus not on the teacher's clothing itself but on the shape of her body. Several commenters argue that the clothing would be acceptable if worn by someone with a different body type. This pattern suggests that the criticism is not simply about professional dress standards but about how the teacher's body is perceived while wearing the clothing. Statements such as "that outfit would be fine on someone else" or "it's her body that makes it inappropriate" reveal an underlying assumption that certain

bodies are more acceptable in professional environments than others. This reaction demonstrates how the regulation of professionalism can become tied to bodily appearance rather than clear policy violations.

Another recurring pattern in the comment section is the frequent use of the word "professional." Many viewers claim that the teacher's appearance is "not professional" or "unbecoming of a teacher." However, these statements often lack a clear explanation of which specific rule or policy has been violated. Instead, the term "professional" functions as a vague moral category that allows commenters to express disapproval without citing concrete standards. Scholars have argued that professionalism often reflects dominant cultural expectations rather than neutral workplace guidelines (Ladson-Billings). In this case, the repeated invocation of professionalism suggests that commenters are relying on socially constructed ideas about what teachers should look like rather than objective dress code policies.

Many comments also reflect strong expectations about how female teachers should present themselves. Some commenters argue that teachers, particularly women, should dress modestly in order to serve as appropriate role models for students. These comments often frame the teacher's appearance as a potential threat to the moral environment of the classroom. This pattern highlights how female educators are frequently expected to embody ideals of modesty, restraint, and respectability. These expectations place additional scrutiny on women's clothing choices, particularly when their bodies are perceived as drawing attention.

Another noticeable theme in the comments involves comparisons between the teacher in the video and other educators. Some viewers argue that White teachers frequently wear similar

outfits without facing the same level of criticism. These comparisons suggest that viewers recognize possible racial double standards in how professionalism is enforced. The presence of these comments reflects what Kimberlé Crenshaw describes as intersectionality, where race and gender combine to produce unique experiences of discrimination (Crenshaw). In this context, the teacher's identity as a Black woman may contribute to the heightened scrutiny directed at her appearance.

The structure of social media platforms also plays a role in amplifying criticism. TikTok and YouTube comment sections allow thousands of viewers to publicly evaluate the teacher's appearance, creating a collective environment of judgment. As more users contribute similar criticisms, these ideas become normalized within the discussion. Moya Bailey's concept of misogynoir helps explain how online spaces often intensify hostility toward Black women, particularly when their bodies or behavior become the focus of viral attention (Bailey). In this case, the comment section becomes a space where racialized and gendered critiques are repeated, reinforced, and circulated to wider audiences.

While much of the commentary focuses on criticism, another important pattern involves comments defending the teacher. Supportive viewers argue that the teacher is being unfairly targeted and that her clothing does not violate any clear professional standards. Some commenters emphasize that the criticism reflects deeper biases about Black women's bodies rather than legitimate workplace concerns. These counter-narratives challenge the dominant framing of the teacher as unprofessional and highlight the presence of competing interpretations within the online discussion. The existence of these responses demonstrates that social media debates are not one-sided but involve multiple perspectives that negotiate the meaning of professionalism and respectability.

One of the most common patterns in the comments is the claim that the teacher's body or clothing is "distracting" to students. Many commenters argue that even if the clothing technically follows dress code guidelines, the teacher's body shape makes the outfits inappropriate.

These statements reveal how professional standards are often applied differently depending on the person wearing the clothing. The argument that the teacher's body is inherently distracting suggests that the responsibility for maintaining professionalism is placed on the teacher's body itself rather than on institutional policies or student behavior.

Another recurring theme involves moral criticism. Some commenters frame the teacher's clothing as evidence of poor character or inappropriate intentions. In these comments, the teacher is not only criticized for her appearance but also accused of seeking attention.

This pattern of moral judgment reflects what Patricia Hill Collins describes as controlling images that shape perceptions of Black women (Collins). Historically, stereotypes such as the "Jezebel" portrayed Black women as overly sexual or provocative. Even when not explicitly referenced, these stereotypes continue to influence how Black women's bodies are interpreted in public spaces.

Not all comments criticize the teacher. Many viewers defend her and argue that the backlash reflects racial bias. These commenters often point out that White teachers frequently wear similar clothing without receiving the same level of criticism.

These responses highlight the role of intersectionality in shaping public perception. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, discrimination against Black women cannot be understood by examining race or gender separately (Crenshaw). Instead, the overlapping effects of racism and sexism create unique forms of scrutiny that target Black women specifically.

This expectation reflects a broader cultural belief that women in positions of authority must carefully manage how their bodies are perceived in public spaces. Female teachers are often expected to balance professionalism with modesty, ensuring that their appearance does not attract attention or disrupt the classroom environment. In the comment section, this expectation appears in arguments that the teacher's clothing could "distract students" or create an inappropriate atmosphere in the classroom. These claims place responsibility on the teacher's body rather than addressing how students themselves are expected to behave or interpret what they see.

The emphasis on distraction also reveals how female bodies are frequently positioned as potential sources of disruption in professional spaces. Rather than focusing on the teacher's instructional role or qualifications, commenters interpret her body as something that must be controlled or minimized in order to maintain authority. This dynamic reflects long-standing gender norms in which women are expected to regulate their appearance to prevent others from responding in ways that might be considered inappropriate.

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As a result, the debate about the teacher's clothing becomes less about formal dress codes and more about broader cultural expectations surrounding femininity, modesty, and authority. Female teachers are expected to embody a particular image of discipline and restraint, and when their bodies do not conform to these expectations, they may become the subject of public criticism. The comments in this case demonstrate how these gendered expectations operate in online spaces, where large audiences collectively evaluate whether a woman's body fits within socially accepted definitions of professionalism.

Taken together, these patterns reveal how the teacher's body becomes the central focus of the controversy rather than the actual content of her teaching or professional performance. The discussion rarely addresses her teaching abilities, classroom management, or educational outcomes. Instead, the conversation revolves around her physical appearance and how others perceive it.

This shift reflects broader historical patterns of surveillance directed at Black women's bodies. Scholars have shown that Black women have long been subjected to forms of hypervisibility in which their bodies are treated as objects of scrutiny and judgment. The historical example of Sarah Baartman, who was exhibited in Europe during the nineteenth century as the "Hottentot Venus," illustrates how Black women's bodies have historically been framed as spectacles for public viewing.

Although modern educational institutions are vastly different from nineteenth-century exhibitions, similar patterns of bodily scrutiny persist. In this case, social media functions as a new space in which the public collectively observes and evaluates the teacher's body.

The controversy surrounding the teacher's clothing also reflects the influence of respectability politics in modern professional environments. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham describes respectability politics as a social strategy that encouraged Black communities to adopt behaviors and appearances that aligned with dominant cultural norms in order to counter racist stereotypes (Higginbotham).

While this strategy historically served as a form of resistance, it also created strict expectations about how Black individuals—especially women—should present themselves in public. In the context of this viral video, these expectations appear in the form of debates about whether the teacher's clothing reflects appropriate professionalism.

The repeated claim that the teacher's body is "too distracting" suggests that professionalism is not defined solely by clothing rules but also by racialized assumptions about which bodies are considered appropriate in professional spaces. In other words, the controversy reveals that professionalism is not a neutral standard but a socially constructed concept shaped by race, gender, and historical stereotypes.

The reactions to the teacher's clothing show how respectability politics still influences how Black women are judged in professional spaces. Respectability politics refers to the pressure for Black people to behave and present themselves in ways that match dominant cultural expectations in order to challenge racist stereotypes. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explains that this idea developed in Black communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when many people believed that appearing respectable could help fight discrimination (Higginbotham). While this strategy helped communities respond to racism, it also created strict

expectations about how Black individuals—especially women—should dress and behave in public. In the TikTok controversy, many commenters appear to judge the teacher according to these expectations, suggesting that her appearance does not match their idea of what a "proper" teacher should look like.

The online debate about the teacher's clothing also shows how respectability politics can work as a form of social control. Many commenters position themselves as defenders of professional standards by criticizing the teacher's appearance. By doing this, they try to decide what counts as acceptable behavior for teachers. These judgments are often based on personal opinions rather than official dress code rules. Even when viewers admit that the teacher's clothing might technically follow school guidelines, they argue that she should still dress differently because of how her body looks in the clothing. This reaction shows that professionalism is often judged through social expectations instead of written policies. As a result, audiences online participate in deciding which appearances are considered appropriate for educators.

The reactions to the viral video also suggest that professionalism is not completely neutral. Schools often present dress codes as rules that apply equally to all teachers. However, the way these rules are interpreted can depend on cultural expectations about race and gender. In the comment section, viewers repeatedly argue that the teacher should change how she dresses in order to look more professional. At the same time, similar clothing worn by other educators may not receive the same criticism. This difference suggests that ideas about professionalism are shaped by social norms rather than objective rules. Many scholars argue that professional

standards in workplaces often reflect white, middle-class cultural expectations while appearing to be universal guidelines.

Social media platforms make these judgments even more visible. When the TikTok video became viral, thousands of viewers were able to share their opinions about the teacher's appearance. This turned a workplace issue into a large public debate. Instead of being judged only by school administrators, the teacher's appearance became the subject of discussion for a wide online audience. Scholar Moya Bailey describes how online spaces can increase hostility toward Black women, especially when their images become widely shared on social media (Bailey). In this situation, the viral video created an environment where viewers felt free to openly criticize and evaluate the teacher's body and clothing.

Overall, the reactions to the TikTok video show that the controversy is about more than just dress code rules. The debate reflects deeper cultural expectations about how Black women should present themselves in professional settings. Respectability politics encourages Black women to follow strict standards of modesty and behavior, while historical stereotypes make their bodies more likely to be judged as inappropriate. When these ideas appear in social media discussions, they show how older stereotypes continue to influence modern ideas about professionalism. The viral video therefore reveals how Black women educators can still face intense scrutiny over their appearance in ways that are shaped by both history and culture.

The analysis of this viral TikTok controversy demonstrates how social media discussions about professionalism can reproduce long-standing patterns of racialized and gendered scrutiny

directed at Black women. Through visual framing, public commentary, and moral judgments about appearance, the teacher's body becomes the primary focus of debate, overshadowing her professional role as an educator.

Using intersectionality and Black feminist theory as analytical frameworks, this paper shows that the backlash against the teacher cannot be understood simply as a disagreement about dress code policies. Instead, it reflects broader cultural narratives about Black women's bodies, professionalism, and respectability. The patterns identified in the video and its comment sections illustrate how digital platforms can amplify these narratives, allowing large audiences to participate in the policing of Black women's bodies.

Ultimately, this case demonstrates that discussions of professionalism in education remain deeply connected to historical ideas about race and gender. As social media continues to shape public discourse, these debates will likely continue to reveal how old stereotypes persist in new digital forms.