



How TikTok Star Tefi Pessoa Gets Paid to Be Herself

She was a quirky kid who was obsessed with pop culture and learned the art of chisme from her abuela. It all prepared her to take our social media feeds by storm. Tefi shares her path from behind the scenes to the star of the show and the tricks she uses to make every performance “just a conversation.”

Alicia Menendez:

What can I say about Tefi Pessoa that she has not already said about herself, whether you watch her on YouTube or TikTok, chances are you cannot get enough of her humor or her moxie. We talk about getting paid to be herself—that was always Tefi’s dream. And she is making it come true. And setting boundaries. When you live your life on the Internet.

Tefi. [Yes.] This thing happened that happens periodically where the Zoomer my husband works with mentioned you [Stop]. Well, wait, yes, you have one Zoomer fan. And then in my girl's WhatsApp chat, all of a sudden someone dropped one of your videos and was like, we need to be friends with her. And on the same day, my niece posted one of your videos to Instagram. It's so strange how you can go from sort of like vaguely knowing someone to all of a sudden, everyone, you know is talking about the same person. It was like, you cross the chasm.

Tefi Pessoa: I can't believe that none of those people are my mom.

Menendez: You don't know that. I am very old. It is possible that one of them is your mom.

Pessoa: The Zoomers do. It's funny because there is a humor that is universal. And I feel like every generation, different humors arise, jokes, or whatever, but making fun of people that are being stupid is universal. And if somebody has to do it, I put the S on my chest and I'm here to do it. It's just so funny. There are certain people that everybody loves to hate, but then at the same time, they don't want you to be too mean. And I think that being Latina really did teach me how to be so undercover petty that only, you know, like certain people understand and the rest are just like, oh, everybody else likes it so I do too, but only Latinas really understand the things that I'm trying to say,

Menendez: Well, that's interesting too because I wonder if that is part of the success is the not being so mindful of the audience of, of being able to produce without constantly thinking about what the feedback is going to be. All I think about is the feedback. So I would find that debilitating.

Pessoa: Something that I used to do when I was doing a YouTube show—it was live. So I had to do the hello, my baby, hello, my darlin' right the first time. And if there's something that I don't do is get it right the first time. So I just had to stop. And I told myself, like, you have to stop thinking about all the people that are going to see it and going to hate it. And rather think

about the people that are going to see it and that are going to love it. Right? And some of those people, to me, they were a little bit like the paper people that you see in the background of like a baseball game now during the pandemic. They were paper people but I had to fill the seats for me mentally. And like my mom and mis tías in Colombia would watch it. I would, *que pena*, but they would. So I kind of like brought that forward to the internet at all times. Like, I'm no longer thinking about what people that are going to judge me are going to think. I'm thinking about the people that are like, oh, she gets it, she's one of me. I'm talking to the people that are like of my *raza*. Like people like the same animal that I am. You know, I didn't mean to say *raza* like that.

Menendez: Do you remember the first pop culture thing you were obsessed with?

Pessoa: Oh my God. Yes. I'm an avid, avid diary journaler because I don't know if you're into astrology, but I am a Leo moon and nothing anyone thinks is more important than what I think, okay? I posted a TikTok a while ago that was like, here's how to journal without trying to impress yourself, and it gutted me. So, I remember Mandy Moore came out with, "I'm missing you like candy," and she's in front of a yellow buggy. The way that I would buy a yellow buggy off the lot today. But I have hair that I have. But I do not have Mandy Moore's *pelos*.

Menendez: Let's just describe it just in case anyone's not familiar. It's Cher hair, Cher like Sonny and Cher, not Cher from Clueless.

Pessoa: The way that I describe it is I am never not sweating behind my neck. That is how I describe it. And it's taken me when I tell you get, years, years of blood, sweat, and tears. And it took me so long to like get a handle on it. And I'm so blessed that I do now, but at nine? No. So no, I did not know that you needed heat to style hair. Why would I? The only hair knowledge that I had was from going to the Supercuts on Le Jeune road, in my hometown. In the video, if you haven't seen it, she has a hair and it like flares out kind of like a softer version of Farrah Fawcett. Like she doesn't have the Farrah Fawcett volume. It's like one length, but it fans out. So I spent hours and hours and hours trying to brush my hair into this scoop. And I would wake up at like four in the morning. I'm serious. I would wake up at like four in the morning. Then I would turn the lights on, turn all my Furbys around because they horrified me in the nighttime. So I turned them all around and I would say, good morning. Okay. And I would start brushing my hair and I would go to school. I cannot tell you the static. I looked like I shoved a fork into the outlet. And my mother didn't tell me anything. She was just like, whatever's in style is in style. And I remember then later on being so embarrassing, like, oh my God, you need a blow dryer. And I'm telling you that this epiphany came to me like three years ago. This is not like, next year.

And then the second thing was, the VMAs were coming. I was never allowed to watch MTV and for good reason. But back then, I was like, how could you be this cruel to me? Okay. I want to know what they do in the real world. Britney Jean Spears was doing a performance with Christina Aguilera and Madonna. And I was like, mom, please. And I said, they're not going to do anything, they're just going to dance. Please let me watch the VMAs at 11. And my brother was five, next to me. Okay. And my mom's like fine, but I'm going to sit right here with you because, and she didn't think anything about Britney, but she was like that Madonna is like a little minx. So we don't know what she's going to try to pull. And I was like, "please." The intro happens, the kiss on the mouth. My mom gets up, she starts screaming. She turns off the TV. And I look at my brother and he's sobbing. And he looks at my mom verbatim and says, is it true that girls kiss each other? I was like,

Madonna ruined my life. But that was also something crazy where I was like, was it tongue? Was it gum? And they panned to Justin Timberlake. That was it. That was everything to me. That was everything.

Menendez: I've heard you say that you were really lonely as a kid. And it is hard to imagine with this sparkling personality that there weren't always people around you. What did it look like to grow up as a lonely kid?

Pessoa: I was a lonely kid because I was such a painful people-pleaser. So when I started going to school, I remember specifically not having that issue of thinking, what is everybody else thinking? All I had was like, how can I make them laugh? And the first time I felt that thing that like, oh my God, I think people don't like me. I was at a fifth grade dance. And it was the first time that you could dance with boys. It was like the first real elementary school dance.

And I'm telling you that day I thought was going to be the best day of my life. I thought I was going to get married. And my husband was going to say, is this the best day of your life? And I was going to say, almost. I thought that was going to be the best day. And I went to Limited Too, you already know, I got the body glitter with the roll. I got the smackers. I had the zigzag hairline, all of it. And I remember a song came on that I loved. It must've been like Mambo No. 5, seriously, or Asereje, like one of those that came on. And I started jumping up and down because my mom and we would have dance parties at home and we rocked that stuff. We rocked it, okay? And two girls came up to me. I remember their names to this day. And I won't say it out of respect for your respective families right now.

But I still, I remember their names. They came up to me and said, why are you dancing like that? And I said, what? It hurts my heart. Cause I was like, what do you mean? And I remember I looked behind them and the whole class was laughing. And in that moment I looked around and nobody else was dancing. I was just free. I just didn't care. And in that moment, it was kind of taken from me.

So after that, I think I started thinking being social was like a bank. You had to give, if you wanted to make money, you had to spend money. So I started getting into things like astrology. And astrology, a lot of people are like, oh, it's not real. I don't care if it's not real. It's a great way to talk about yourself in a third person or to share things.

I started taking these things that were conversation pieces because I really wanted to, I wanted to be liked. But I would be able to hold a conversation at school. But then when I would come home, the AIM messenger wasn't buzzing. It was not buzzing. So I would watch these things. Like I love the '90s, I love the '70s, I love the '80s, Behind the Music, you know, sneaking in MTV, I would watch TRL, and 106 and Park, and like all these Jerry Springer, Cristina, Laura, Caso Cerrado, like all these things. And I would be with my grandmother and my nanny who was like around my grandmother's age. And they would talk about men and dating and novelas. So I was watching Walter Mercado in the fifth grade and learning about astrology and men and dating and the things that men will do to you, and oh my god, what a dog, and pop culture and reading Hola magazine at home and trying to absorb like conversation.

Menendez: Original chisme.

Pessoa: OG chisme, OG. And I think that served me on later on in life, because I've never had like an awkward silence before, like on a date, I'm always like prepared. It just got in the way I think for me of like actual bonding and communicating.

Menendez: I would imagine that that person would see themselves as a performer or that person would see themselves as someone who straight out of school wanted to dedicate themselves to some type of pop culture beat. But that's not the direction that you went in.

Pessoa: I didn't even think that that was a possibility for me. So I always thought like background, if you wanted to go to events, I would never be the person on the red carpet, I would be working the PR or an event planner, or I would be doing hair and makeup. I thought I had like a gift to make people feel comfortable. And I thought maybe this gift was to make people in the spotlight feel really comfortable. And it wasn't until I started dating the person I'm dating today. So I remember, I would say things to him, like, I wish I could do this. And he would say the craziest things like, yeah, why don't you? And I'm like, you're a lunatic, go lie down, you know? Or he'd be like, you're so funny. Like, why don't you write jokes? Have you ever thought about stand up? And I'd be like, no. Why would I think about that? And then finally, one day when I got an acquaintance of mine to say, hey, a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend has an opportunity for TV host and you can't seem to shut up ever. Do you want to go for this? It was like a no brainer for him. He was like, so where are you going to talk about it? I'm like, I'm asking you if I should do it. And he was like, are you crazy? But it's also, he has this thing where he doesn't care about what people think. And that was so weird for me because my Latinidad is so like seeped into what people think of you.

Menendez: What will people say...

Pessoa: What will the neighborhood say? Well, what will people think about the way that you were raised when you leave this house, you represent the way that you were raised. When I got the show, I was 28. I had to call my mom and say, I got the show, and she was like, that's amazing, you know, congratulations. And I'm going to say bad words. And that was an actual conversation. I was an adult. And I would tell my friends here, that were born and raised in like the Northeast, and not from, that didn't have a Colombian Scorpio as a mother that I had to say, like, yeah. And I went over some words that I might say, and she was like, don't, try not to say the F word. It was a real conversation. After like the first few episodes, my mom was like, oh, you're absolutely meant to do this.

My mom, I think is someone who I'm very lucky to have, like, a very modern person she's within the world. She's with the times. And she sees influencer marketing as like, not something that I do. She sees me as like a freaking entertainer, which is crazy. But she sees me as like a Liza Minnelli. But I love that. I think all of a sudden I stopped trying to decode if I was capable. And I started deciding, and I saw that the world mirrored me, and that changed me in a way.

Menendez: Do you know what it was that did that for you?

Pessoa: Yeah. So during these live shows that I would do, I used to obsessive think like, what if it's bad? What if it's bad? What if it's bad? And then I know this is so corny, but I literally pretend in my mind that I'm talking to Robin Williams all the time. When he died, I felt like a family member of mine died. So when I need to go into a positive voice, my therapist would say like, dress them up. You know, like, what does your inner child look like? And I'm

in my Easter Sunday dress in '97. And when you need a pep talk, who do you go to? And for me, it's Robin Williams. In Birdcage, specifically, specifically. Who else? Who else?

Menendez: Not Mrs. Doubtfire?

Pessoa: Mrs. Doubtfire? 'Twas the drink that killed him. No, I couldn't have this Scottish old lady. I needed somebody a little bit moderno from Miami. So I'd say like, what if it's horrible? And then Robin to myself would say, well, what if it goes great? So then something happened to me where I decided every time before I meet somebody, I'm going to decide that they love me. And if they don't like me, that's not my problem. Because I showed up with love. Like I, I showed up like I'm expecting to be with somebody that likes me. And I like them. I do the same thing too. Like I think like I already liked them. I don't know them. I already like them. It makes everything so much easier. You know? And so when I do things before I post a video, I think, oh my God, everybody's gonna love it. It's just something that I do now. And it's a little delusional. And at times my best friend who does a bunch of writing with me and we plan fun things all the time. Like tomorrow, I'm going to be doing an Olivia Rodrigo music video with her, for the hell of it.

Menendez: What song are you doing?

Pessoa: Good for You.

Menendez: Yes..

Pessoa: But we're doing it for the hell of it. And she was like, is it weird that we're 30? And we're like, we've been waiting 30 years. You know?

Menendez: There are like 400 think pieces about how millennials love Olivia Rodrigo, how we're all transposing nostalgia onto Olivia Rodrigo.

Pessoa: 'Cause now we can say what we feel without hiding behind an away message. We can be like, yes. So when I talked to her and she's like, okay, I know that you've decided that everyone's going to love it. But we're going to need some structure. And I'm like, to hell with it.

Menendez: No, this is perfect though. This is, to me, this is every great creative partnership, which is you need someone who's the runaway ideas. And then you need someone who maintains the Excel spreadsheet. And these two people are equally creative, but it would not work if the two forces did not join.

Pessoa: No you need one doer, you need one doer. The two of you can be Bella and Edward, best chemistry ever but one of you needs to be a doer because how many times have we met up with somebody and we have a great idea. And then we're like, okay, yeah, let's do it next week. And then weeks go by. My best friend is not like that. My best friend is like, it is 3:59. You said you wouldn't be here at four. She is like that.

Menendez: It's funny to me. I've been reading all these profiles on you and listening to the podcast you've been on. Everyone really does laud your vulnerability, which I think in some ways says more about the society we live in and how people are taught to put up walls and show up with airs. I do wonder, is there anything for you that is off limits?

Pessoa: Absolutely. Oh my god. So let me talk to you about them. I'm just kidding. I decided, so for me, the things that don't feel vulnerable, I talk about, and it surprises me when people say that's so vulnerable. I'm like, what do you mean? I made a TikTok about don't you hate it

when the hair goes down to your butt crack and you pull it out and it feels weird. You know what I mean? Like things that are normal.

Menendez: That feel inconsequential.

Pessoa: Yeah. To talk about like food, or my body, I've never met a woman on this Earth and many men that feel like everything they're doing is to make sure they don't take up space. Maybe being smaller is more polite. You know? Like we all feel this way in certain .. or sometimes, you know, like they, it's holding onto something youth or time or not facing change. Like I'm able to talk about these things freely. Before I started making videos, I chose like five things that I was going to talk about no matter what. The way that I felt about everything, you know, like pop culture, issues, whatever it is. Being 30: alcohol, you know, self-coping mechanisms, overexercising for me was like a coping method. I'm an obsessive person. So I don't go for a jog, I'm training, I'm like Jennifer Lopez in Enough, okay? Like I'm doing it. I'm willing to talk about dating. I'm willing to talk about sex. I'm willing to talk about all these things, but I will never, ever, ever talk about actual issues in my relationship. You know, like, no, and I try to make videos where I'm like, fighting is so normal. Like when I meet a new couple and they've been together for a year, I'm like, have you had the screaming in the Uber fight where somebody leaves? Yeah? Have you had that fight yet? Isn't it fun? You know, like there are real, real issues in every, I'm not going to talk about the problems I've had between me and my mom. I don't have a relationship with my dad. And I'm not going to talk about those things in detail because it's not fair to the people who do, in my family. I'm never going to talk about ... poop. I think.

Menendez: I like that that's the one with the asterisk. It's like I could revise that.

Pessoa: I'm hearing a lot about coffee enemas. And, but if it were to affect other people that I love, I would never touch on it.

Menendez: How much of your days, of your weeks, are fun? And how much of this is work, the way that anything would be work?

Pessoa: I'm going to tell you the truth. Every day is fun. It's disgusting. It's disgusting, every day is fun.

Menendez: This is the wrong answer Tefi because now every person who listens to this is going to be like, I need to quit my job and become a TikTok.

Pessoa: Don't quit your job. Just figure out if you could just release yourself from the prison that locks from the inside that is your mind. Everything will go so much easier.

Menendez: Where's this energy coming from though? Like, is this just, are you very therapized? Is this coached?

Pessoa: I do go to therapy, but I go to therapy, not to, um, dwell on the past, it's to solve problems. I'm very much problem solved, thinking wise. I'm not going to, whatever happened, *lo que paso paso*, like what, whatever happened happened, but now going forward, how can I make sure that that doesn't happen again? I'm no longer putting up my moments for sale. They're mine to have, and they're going to be good ones. However, I have been to rehab for eating disorder, like I'm not saying that I just grew up like Thumbelina and the flower blossomed. But the biggest thing that I've done that I'm so glad I did was journaling to myself when I was a kid. Because if there's one thing, is that kid me imagined a life where I did like myself and that's the least I could do for her after everything I've put her through.

It's the least thing I could do, is to give her a life where I enjoy my own company. And I think I'm smart and I'm pretty. That's the least, bare minimum I could do. And I'm not going to hand that over anymore because people have disappointed me. So I'm reclaiming that and it's mine. So when you journal and I'm talking to her, you're talking to yourself in a gentle tone, and you're talking to yourself in an encouraging tone, because when you look at pictures of yourself, there's nothing wrong with that person. And you want her to be happy. And the thought of somebody being mean to her makes you want to murder someone.

Menendez: So what are you going to do with all of this?

Pessoa: I have no idea. So I decided one day I was just going to tell people one day I'm going to be paid to be myself and that's just, what's going to happen. And they're like, how? And I was like, I don't know. And it just did. And I just kept saying, one day people are going to pay me to be myself. But I think I don't want to be the face of self-improvement because I am going to mess up. I am starting to write a book on being professionally human. I feel like people have romanticized me and other people on the Internet to the point where if I, I don't want to be Barney, bro, I don't want to be Barney. I'm going to mess up. It's innate. And to be professionally human is what I want to be. So whether it means having a show on MTV at 4:00 PM central like where TRL used to show or something would be crazy. To have a card that says VJ would be nuts, you know, like these are all things that I manifest, but whatever it is, I hope I enjoy it. I hope I'm not like enclosed by it, you know?

Menendez: I mean I'm going to have an identity crisis now predicated on that.

Pessoa: I think the identity crisis that I have every day is, oh my god, I'm not the same person I was six months ago. And those videos are still circulating. So, but then I'm like, but she was cool. She was cool.

Menendez: She was an iteration.

Pessoa: She was cute. You know? So the identity crisis is to be celebrated, is what I'm going to journal about tonight.

Menendez: Tefi, I anticipated this being fun. I anticipated liking you, but this was even more special than I could have imagined. Thank you so much for your time.

Pessoa: I love this so much. Thank you so much for chatting with me. Thank you. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure and Paulina Velasco are our senior producers. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMs on Instagram, and tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Remember every time you share the podcast or leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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