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“JUST KIDDING... OR NOT?": AMBIGUITY, FAILURE, AND HUMOUR IN THE REPRESENTATION OF INFLUENCERS' SUCCESSFUL FEMININITY ON TIKTOK

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to better understand which role humour plays in the self-presentation of three of the top-ranked Spanish TikTok influencers: Lucía Bellido (@itsbellido), Mónica Moran (@monismurf) and Lola Moreno (@lolaloliitaaa). As young, hypervisible girls, they embody an updated version of the postfeminist ideal of a confident, empowered, and successful femininity. At the same time, they are expected to carry out a particular form of gendered emotional labour that involves being pleasant, accessible, and relatable (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]; McRobbie, 2009; Kanai, 2019a, 2019b). This study draws on a qualitative analysis of 300 videos shared by the three analysed tiktokers to explore how they incorporate humour and comedy resources encouraged by the socio-technical features from TikTok in their online self-presentations. I argue that humour is not only a way to foster authenticity and portray a more relatable self for their followers, but also an alibi to navigate gender expectations and engage with emotions that overflow the moderate femininity, such as vulnerability, sexual desire, or anger.

Keywords: social media ▪ TikTok ▪ gender ▪ femininity ▪ humour ▪ emotional labour

1. INTRODUCTION

“Self-expression on TikTok is a story best told through humour.” This is the first sentence of a post on TikTok’s official website¹ that invites users to “get fluent in the platform’s one true universal language.” This “universal language” is made of multi-layered jokes, high doses of irony, and self-mockery. Humour is a central element in TikTok cultures and has permeated the content of this platform in a transversal

1 <https://ads.tiktok.com/business/creativecenter/quicktok/online/Understanding-humor-on-TikTok/pc/en>

manner, from regular users to top-ranked profiles such as lifestyle influencers. In this sense, the typical content associated with lifestyle, fashion and beauty influencers from platforms like Instagram or YouTube, dominated by imperatives of perfection and perpetual happiness (Marwick, 2013), has evolved to a more relatable and authentic representation of the self, incorporating humour as a regular feature.

With this paper, I explore how the incorporation of humour in the content produced by some of the most popular Spanish tiktokers shape the way in which these girls portray themselves. Specifically, this research focuses on three profiles: Monismurf (Mónica Moran, @monismurf), Bellido (Lucía Bellido, @its.bellido) and Lola (Lola Moreno, @lolalolita). They have been creating and sharing content professionally on social media since they were teenagers (Monismurf started at the age of 17, and Bellido and Lola at 14). They began on Musical.ly in 2017, the same year that this application was acquired by the Chinese company ByteDance, and shortly after merged with TikTok. Currently, they hold a privileged status in the Spanish digital content creator industry². They often collaborate with globally recognized artists such as Shakira, Karol G, or Rosalía, co-creating choreographies and trends to promote their new releases. They also have partnerships with international brands such as Nike, Adidas, or Coca-Cola and attend events like Cannes Film Festival or Coachella. Like many other influencers, they cultivate profiles on Instagram, YouTube, or Twitch, but TikTok stands out as their central platform for identity-building and self-branding. TikTok is where they accrue the highest numbers of followers, and the aesthetics and narratives that define their content are inherently connected to TikTok's vernaculars: Monismurf's signature video format is the transition video, a type of content that requires technical skills to edit together short snippets of different clips, creating an illusion of continuity. Lola is famous for her choreographical videos based on synchrony, mimesis, and replicable dance steps, whereas Bellido is well known for her POVs (*point of view*) and acting videos.

Regardless of these differences and specificities, humour is a transversal expressive feature these tiktokers use to portray themselves. In most of their videos, they rely on pinches of irony and self-deprecating humour when sharing their daily lives with their audiences. In this respect, the main aim of this paper is to have a closer look at how Monismurf, Bellido, and Lola incorporate the particular TikTok's relatable and memetic humour into their content and how this shapes and affects their gendered identities.

The aim of exploring tiktokers' uses of humour is translated into three specific research questions that guided the analysis: a) Which role does humour play in representing the feminine identities of the most-followed Spanish tiktokers? b) What are the implications of TikTok's features in the proliferation of this humorous

2 Recently, Lola Moreno was recognized with the Best TikToker Ídolo Award in 2023 and shared the nomination with Lucía Bellido and Mónica Moran. These awards were created by the lifestyle influencer Dulceida and have the aim of recognizing the labour of digital content creators.

content? c) What are the opportunities, potentialities, and limitations of humour when it comes to disrupting feminine stereotypes?

I will argue that humour works as a very effective tool for these influencers to depict a more authentic and relatable self. Moreover, it also intervenes in the portrayal of their gendered identities as hypervisible young girls online, offering a space to negotiate with the values and expectations that regulate the ideal successful femininity in the current neoliberal landscape.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Influencers: Between successful femininity and authenticity

For the past decade, lifestyle influencers have emerged as mediatic figures with a privileged position within the economy of digital content creators (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016). Their content falls within the labels of lifestyle, beauty, and fashion, combining the prescription of goods and products based on their first-hand experiences with the portrayal of their intimate everyday life, which often includes attending exclusive events, fashion shows, and parties. Previous scholarship has framed them as the embodiment of an updated version of the postfeminist ideal, a kind of successful femininity that seems to “have it all,” engaging with “interrelated tropes such as predestined passionate work, glam life, and a carefully curated social sharing” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.2). Through their content, they portray fulfilling professional careers based on entrepreneurial self-branding and storytelling that renders intimacy, identity, and consumerism.

The three TikTok influencers analysed in this study are part of a larger international ecosystem of TikTok superstars such as Charli D’Amelio, Addison Rae, or Loren Gray, who share a similar pattern of self-representation. As Melanie Kennedy puts it, these girls are “not only young but female, normatively feminine, white and wealthy” (p.1070), sustaining the argument that visual social media applications tend to privilege a cast of hegemonically attractive influencers who are rewarded with metrics of popularity and public recognition (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Caldeira 2020). In their videos, these girls often feature a “happy and care-free aesthetic” (Kennedy, 2020), channelling to what Natalie Coulter (2018) frames as the “perpetual state of fun” that defines contemporary tween culture, “anchoring the activity of consumption as fun” (p.2). In this regard, female influencers are exhorted to carry on a specific form of emotional labour as a part of their job in the creative sector that consists of a continuous showcase of positive emotions and a permanent sense of accessibility for their followers (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017), even when they are exposed to online aggressions such as hate speech or harassment (Abidin, 2019).

This idea of emotional regulation as something that “comes with the job” is rooted in the framework of the feeling rules proposed by Arlie Hochschild (2003 [1983]), which refers to the social norms that stipulate the appropriate feelings to display

in a given context, both in public (emotional labour) and private spheres (emotion work or management). When considering the context of digital media, the work done by Akane Kanai (2019a, 2019b) appears as central to understanding how, under the logics of neoliberalism and postfeminism, these feeling rules shape young girls' self-presentation in digital platforms. In her analysis of Tumblr users, Kanai identifies how young girls carry on "personal negotiations of postfeminist demands" using humour to represent unpleasant feelings such as frustration, weakness, or shame to create value that can be palatable and "circulated in this feminine economy" (2019b, p. 65). As a sort of redemption for not matching the "top girl" ideal (McRobbie, 2009), these users turn their frustrations, failures, and transgressions into relatable and funny "bite-size" moments ready to be consumed by others. In the same manner, Letho (2022) has explored intimate cultures of Finnish momfluencers, and how they navigate the feeling rules to produce pleasant and agreeable selves to their audiences, reducing the tension between their felt emotions (i.e., anxiety, shame or guilt) and the cultural expectations about motherhood. Letho suggests that, although anxiety can be considered a negative side effect of stressful social media work, making it visible can also be a way to capitalize on feeling rules, if done correctly. In this regard, showing a vulnerable and flawed self can be also a source of profit that allows influencers to portray a more "real" and relatable self, in a landscape where authenticity is a central value for success (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

Popular lifestyle influencers need to curate their online personas between two apparently contradictory poles: being successful professional content creators while at the same time staying authentic, behaving as regular users who are on social media for entertainment and fun (Abidin, 2016; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Salisbury & Pooley, 2017; Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). In this regard, influencers reinforce a sense of authenticity by sharing moments of vulnerability and imperfection and also putting into practice what Crystal Abidin (2017) calls the "calibrated amateurism" a concept that frames certain practices and aesthetics used to "portray the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice" (p. 7). The visual component is central in the laborious recreation of the amateur and spontaneous look, and influencers often rely on audiovisual elements, such as shaky camera work, zooming-in, unbalanced framing or uneven lighting (Bishop, 2018; Maares et al., 2021), to achieve visual authenticity. In their effort to pass as regular users to foster an authentic and relatable self and, at the same time, the need to navigate the feeling rules that regulate which kind of emotions and behaviours are expected from young girls, TikTok influencers engage with these audiovisual elements and with a unique sense of humour that connects with TikTok's cultures, as it will be further elaborated in the following section.

2.2. TikTok, humour and gender

Humour and playfulness are central elements of TikTok's predominant aesthetics

and narratives, which deeply connect to internet meme culture for its sense of replicability, imitation, and transformation (Zeng et al., 2020; Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). On TikTok, users represent situations from their everyday lives in humorous skits that combine a sharp sense of irony and self-mockery with elements of absurdity and surrealism. Some scholars have defined this sensibility as a generational sentiment, labelling it as a distinguishing “Gen Z humour” (Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Stahl & Literat, 2022), which often implies expressing negative emotions, insecurities, and vulnerability but with a multi-layered humorous and ironical delivery.

The way in which humour is constructed on this social media platform is profoundly influenced by the socio-technical and creative features that the platform itself offers. When creating their content, tiktokers rely on “iconic and audiovisual components that come to constitute the platform’s templatability,” infusing the final result with a recognizable “TikTok vibe” (Zhao & Abidin, 2023, p. 11). In this sense, humour, and playfulness are encouraged and emphasized through the platform by offering a wide range of expressive and creative tools in its database, where audio plays a significant role. In this regard, TikTok’s memetic humour is grounded by elements such as pre-recorded dialogues, funny sound effects, or viral songs that set the narrative center of audio meme templates (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Kaye et al., 2021). Here, templates are understood as “audiovisual repertoires” that offer an “accessible, expressible, and relatable framework within which ordinary users can create” (Cervi & Divon, 2023, p. 3). In this regard, users engage with these sorts of templates by dubbing dialogues or lyrics from songs that are associated with a specific storytelling or premise. In doing so, they are able to adhere to the preexisting narrative or repurpose it, generating contradictions and adding complexity through new layers of meaning. When these audio meme templates go viral, they become an opportunity for users to connect through in-group affiliations (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022), taking part in the ongoing “conversation” that defines the process of video creation on TikTok (Bresnick, 2019, p.5).

Together with enhancing relatability and social connections, TikTok’s culture of humour emphasizes a sense of performativity and ambiguity. By dubbing a pre-recorded audio or acting in a POV (point of view), users recreate a specific scene, embodying external characters, narratives, and feelings. In these videos, the border between users’ real experiences and the acting gets blurred in a playful and ambiguous manner. This performativity and ambiguity offer a fruitful terrain for exploring how TikTok users use humour to highlight and challenge social structures of power and hegemony. In this regard, in their analysis of the parodical TikTok’s self-representations of working-from-home Chinese mothers during the Covid lockdown, Han and Kuipers (2021) examine the possibilities of the internet meme as a form of resistance, control, or expression of ambiguity. Through cartoonish and parodical videos, these mothers find a way to detach themselves from the traditional stereotypes connected to ideal motherhood and femininity, showing contradictions between gender norms and “the harsh reality.” In their analysis, the authors identify two main trends of approaching humour, which are highly influenced by

TikTok’s socio-technical features: first, a “clownish and physical form of humour” that connects with comedy traditions and genres such as slapstick and relies on body movement, facial expressions, and physical exaggeration. And second, a way of generating comedy through what they define as “intellectual techniques,” using discursive resources such as juxtaposition, irony, and self-deprecating humour. As it will be explained in the Methods section, these categories have been useful to analyse and better understand how tiktokers make use of different humorous resources.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research questions

This study aims to better understand how humour plays a role in the representation of the gendered identities of three of the most popular Spanish tiktokers. The research questions that guided the analysis are:

- Which role does humour play in representing the feminine identities of the most-followed Spanish tiktokers?
- What are the implications of TikTok’s features in the proliferation of this humorous content?
- What are the opportunities, potentialities, and limitations of humour when it comes to disrupting feminine stereotypes?

3.2. Data collection criteria

This paper is part of a larger research project which focuses on exploring and analysing influencers’ feminine identities on TikTok. For the purposes of this paper, three of the most followed Spanish tiktokers were selected intentionally, as the main aim of this research is to explore how mainstream tiktokers incorporate humorous codes in their self-presentation on social media. These three profiles hold a privileged position in the Spanish TikTok ecosystem regarding visibility. Table 1 shows the number of followers and likes of each of the three profiles:

Table 1. Profiles included in the sample.

Username	Followers	Likes	Sampled videos
@lolalolita	11.2M	856.3M	100
@its.bellido	9.8M	874.9M	100
@monismurf	9.5M	392.6M	100

Notes: Number of followers and likes as of November 6, 2023.

The final dataset comprises 300 videos, 100 per each of the three tiktokers, with a duration between 5 seconds and 1 minute, published within a timespan from

January 2020 to June 2022. This time period was defined after conducting a preliminary observation of the content and the frequency of publishing of each tiktok. Following the practice of previous TikTok analysis, a web scrapper tool was used to download a spreadsheet with metadata from all the videos published by the three tiktokers during the defined timespan. This included publishing time, views, likes, shares and comments, link to the video, hashtags used, duration, filters, and audio resources. From this preliminary crawl, the results obtained were 2.395 published by Lucía Bellido, 2.635 by Lola Moreno, and 969 by Mónica Moran, as her routines of sharing content are more unsteady, even though she has maintained sustained growth in her following and has the same numbers as the other two analysed profiles. To be able to conduct a qualitative analysis, the sample was narrowed down to the 100 most popular videos from each of the three profiles, defining popularity using a combination of the number of plays, likes, shares, and views (Hautea et al., 2021). In this regard, from the 300 videos that conform to the final data sample, the average metrics are the following: from 29.900.000 to 2.200.000 plays, 2.900.000 to 47.300 likes, 31.100 to 0 comments, and from 35.100 to 41 shares.³

After selecting the 300 videos for the final sample, clips were downloaded manually and stored in a local data server. A spreadsheet was used to collect data that has been considered for the analysis process, as it intervenes in the meaning-making process of the videos. These data consist of text description or overlay, sound and music effects, emojis, filters, and hashtags. The final dataset was accessed between the 8th and 9th of January, 2023.

3.3. Method of analysis

The unique combination of creative, technical, and social features of the platform confers to TikTok videos a highly multimodal, layered, and intertextual nature. In this regard, multimodal discourse analysis has been applied to identify the elements that intervene in the meaning-making process of the analysed videos, being that audiovisual and textual resources (spoken and written), and other relevant expressive elements in the construction of humour and comedy such as tiktokers' body language and facial expressions. Given the intertextual nature of TikTok videos, "to approach an informed meaningful reading of this platform's content requires exploration of the discursive environment in which they are produced" (Haueta et al., 2021, p. 5). In this regard, the analysed tiktokers often reference other videos made by other users (in formats such as duets or reaction videos), engage with preexisting trends and challenges, and use filters, audios and hashtags. Thus, beyond the multimodal analysis of the 300 videos from the sample, the knowledge from other intertextual references (such as viral trends or challenges, audio memes or filters) has

³ The full database, including metadata from the videos such as date of publishing, full caption text, duration, and quantitative metrics, will be available upon request.

been considered and incorporated alongside the process of analysis to better understand the tensions and contradictions of tiktokers’ self-representations.

The multimodal categories of analysis used for the study are participants, actions, processes, perspectives, settings, and compositions (Ledin & Machin, 2020; Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022). Also, a deductive and inductive approach has been applied to define a classification of humour techniques drawing on previous scholarship researching humour on TikTok with a gender perspective (Han and Kuipers, 2021). MAXQDA software has been used to qualitatively analyse the videos and extract the results according to the predefined analysis categories.

3.4. Ethical considerations

The videos that conform to the sample of this study were created by TikTok content creators who present themselves as public figures. However, following ethical guidelines and recommendations in doing internet research (Boyd & Marwick, 2011; Markham & Buchanan, 2017), I have decided not to include any screenshots of the analysed videos as this study does not have informed consent from the creators.

4. RESULTS

There is a significant predominance of playful, comical, and fun moods in the over-all analysed content. The three tiktokers explicitly engage with humour resources, combining elements from physical comedy with more intellectual techniques, such as irony or sarcasm. From the analysis, four main video categories where humour plays a central role have been identified. Table 2 presents an overview of these four categories and the intersections established with humour techniques and TikTok’s iconic and audiovisual components:

Table 2. Overview of predominant video formats connected to humour techniques and TikTok’s iconic and audiovisual components.

Video formats	Humour techniques	TikTok’s iconic and audiovisual components
a) Portrayal of failures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exaggerated physical comedy (slapstick, clumsy gestuality, facial expressions) ▪ Unexpected events ▪ Self-parody 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emphasis on body language and gestuality ▪ Unprepared and raw audiovisual aesthetic
b) Explicit contraposition to successful femininity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-parody through juxtaposition and incongruity between audio, image, and text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intertextual narrative (audio, video, and text) ▪ Audio meme templates ▪ Dubbing and lip-synching
c) Reaction to negative comments or hate speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Irony and sarcasm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Video reply to comments

d) Expression of unpleasant emotions and controversial topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Performativity, ambiguity, and irony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POV (point of view) format ▪ Audio meme templates ▪ Dubbing and lip-synching
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4.1. The portrayal of failures: authenticity and relatability

The analysed tiktokers often post what they label “failed videos,” which can be considered a TikTok video genre in itself. This kind of content is characterized by an emphasised self-parodical tone and a narrative that shows how tiktokers attempt to perform a choreography or a viral trend and, for some internal or external factor, cannot accomplish it. In these “failed videos,” tiktokers engage with practices and aesthetics that resonate with the concept of “calibrated amateurism” (Abidin, 2017) as a means to represent a sense of spontaneity, relatability, and proximity with average users, pretending to be just like any other TikTok user. However, despite the emphasis on spontaneity and unpreparedness, when representing their fails and mistakes tiktokers repeatedly rely on audiovisual and narrative elements that come to define a “failed aesthetic” sustained by humorous resources. Some of the central elements that define this aesthetic are drastic zooming-in, close-up shots of tiktokers’ facial expressions, and unbalanced or unprepared framing. Here, comedy is constructed in two different ways: a) by engaging with physical humour; or b) because of external reasons, such as interruptions or unexpected events.

Regarding the first category, Monismurf is the profile who engages more often with this kind of comical sensibility. She expresses failure in a very clownish way, relying on humorous resources that are close to the slapstick genre. She constantly falls or slips off in her videos, putting on silly faces and exaggerating parodical gestuality and clumsiness. Examples of this can be found in three clips (9 Jan. 2020, 11 Jan. 2020, and 27 Apr. 2022), in which Monismurf is reproducing a synchronized choreography with other tiktokers, but in the middle of the action, they stumble on each other and end up falling in a very exaggerated way. In the text description of the third video, the failure is foregrounded as the narrative center of the video: “This video is all about failing, so many things gone wrong in this video HAHAAH.” Lola and Bellido also have some videos in which they portray these kinds of physical mistakes. For example, in a video (25 May 2021) Lola and her boyfriend are standing side by side, and when they start dancing, Lola unintentionally punches his boyfriend’s face. Similarly, in another video (28 May 2022), Bellido is doing a choreography with a friend where they have to jump and stumble into each other by accident.

In addition to physical mistakes, sometimes videos fail because of external reasons, such as interruptions or unexpected events, giving a sense of unpreparedness and spontaneity. For example, in a clip (22 Dec. 2021), Lola is dancing in her kitchen, and suddenly her father appears carrying a basket of laundry, and the description text says, “Pov: your dad turns up, and you’re embarrassed.” Similarly, in another clip (8 Aug. 2021), Bellido lip-synchs and mimics a song while sitting in a car. After a few seconds, she stops acting and puts on an exaggerated annoyed face, while the

description text says, “they were looking at me :(.” Sometimes, these interruptions are marked by the gendered idea that being a tiktoker is a girly thing that can be a source of jokes and mockery. This is the case for Monismurf, whose social circle is composed mainly of male content creators, who are youtubers and streamers, and she usually has the role of “the girl in the guys’ gang”. Her male friends very often appear in her videos as a last-minute interruption, distracting her and making fun of the dance steps. This is shown, for example, in a clip (24 Nov. 2020) in which Monismurf starts dancing, but in the middle of the video, she stops and puts on an ashamed face, looking at the camera. Right after, her boyfriend enters the frame and makes a victory sign with his hand in a parodical manner. In the description text, Monismurf complains, saying, “I can’t like this hahahaha”. In the same vein, a clip (7 Jun. 2020) starts with Monismurf standing alone, and then four other boys, who are her friends, start crossing the frame, making silly faces to the camera. The constant performance of humorous failures has come to constitute a central aesthetic and narrative trope for tiktokers’ self-presentation. This element reinforces a strong sense of draft unpreparedness, and authenticity, as tiktokers not only show the final versions of their dances or lip-syncing, but also the process of trial and error.

4.2. Explicit contraposition to the successful femininity

In parallel to using failure and humour to build up a more authentic and relatable self, there are videos from the sample in which tiktokers engage with comedy to disrupt and contradict the model of the successful femininity, based on an empowered and confident self that connects with the postfeminist sensibility (Gill & Orgad, 2015). From the three analysed tiktokers, Monismurf is the one who engages the most with this kind of humour, relying on irony, parody and self-deprecating humour. She uses juxtaposition of mismatching elements to generate contrast between audio, image and text. This can be seen in a video from the sample (11 Jan. 2020) that falls in the definition of “failed videos” explored in the previous section. In the clip, she appears dancing with another tiktoker, performing a choreography with energetic movements, and at the end of the video, both fall. The description text that goes along with this clip says, “I wanted to look like a diva, but I fell.” In this case, the concept of “diva” connects with a powerful and glamorous femininity that Monismurf unsuccessfully tries to embody. Here, humour works as a means for Monismurf to detach herself from this empowered femininity, as she makes fun of herself when trying to perform this subjectivity. In another video (5 Jul. 2021), a sense of parody is created through the contrast between the juxtaposition of the audio and the images. We see Monismurf dubbing a pre-recorded audio in which a female voice says, “Good morning! Today I woke up feeling great! Because I can, I deserve it, I’m strong!”. While dubbing these self-affirming and enthusiastic lines, Monismurf puts on funny faces and makes uncoordinated movements with her arms while casually eating a sandwich. The evident mismatch between the message given by the audio and Monismurf’s

attitudes explicitly presents the gap between the tiktoker and the ideal successful and empowered femininity celebrated by the audio.

This paradoxical contradiction generated by juxtaposition is used in other Monismurf videos (e.g. 3 Apr. 2020). There, we see her performing complex and energetic choreography without making any mistakes. In contrast to this exhibition of skill and talent, the description text says, “today I believed I was Barbie ballerina HAHHA-HAHAH.” Here, the description text is used as a sort of final punch line, disrupting the expectations set by the video and as a form of downplaying her flawless performance. Besides disrupting the perfection of her dancing and enhancing spontaneity through capital letters, the text also serves as a way to make fun of herself when she behaves like a “Barbie ballerina.” Here, the reference to this doll, widely known to represent femininity in a very stereotypical and hegemonical way, connects once again with the ideal “top girl” (McRobbie, 2009). In these videos, Monismurf shows how she tries and even aspires to be “a diva” or a “Barbie ballerina.” But the recurrent use of self-parody and comical juxtaposition suggests that she doesn’t take these aspirations too seriously. Humour is used to make the gap between her and the successful femininity very visible and irreconcilable.

4.3 Laughing at negative comments and hate speech

As they have great exposure on social media, influencers are very exposed to toxic criticism and hate speech (Abidin 2019; Valenzuela-García et al., 2023). These comments often focus on their body appearance, the “excessive” use of makeup or their romantic relationships (Duffy et al. 2022). From the three profiles, Bellido is the one who tends to react impulsively, showing rage and anger and making response videos where she speaks directly to the camera, being carried away by emotions. On the contrary, Lola and Monismurf usually stay out of polemics and controversies, and when they answer negative comments, they always rely on humour and irony. This is the case for a video (24 Dec. 2021) in which Lola gives a public answer to a comment from an anonymous user who despises her for being “too silly to not realise that everyone has seen her underwear.” The comment refers to a video in which Lola is wearing a very tight and short dress, and while dancing, she shows her underwear by mistake. Speaking directly to the camera, Lola explains in a very ironic tone that what this user claims to have seen is not her underwear but her pyjamas panties. She even pushes her dress up to show the panties as she says, “taraaaaaan!” while she laughs loudly, changing the frame to a very close shot. Similarly, in another video (31 Jul. 2021), she answers a comment that criticizes her for wearing too much makeup, saying, “she is ridiculous, her eyelashes are gonna fall for using so much mascara.” In the video, she reproduces a simple choreography from a trending audio and, as she smiles to the camera, an overlaid text says, “yes, of course, my eyelashes are bold”. The video ends with Lola showing her middle finger to the camera, a disruptive gesture that she softens winking her eye and smiling. In a similar manner,

Monismurf reacts to a comment from a user that says, “I hate this couple, they are the worst, I hope they break up” (referring to Monismurf and her boyfriend). In the video (3 Aug. 2021), she dubs an audio meme with a very comical tone that repeatedly says, “I don’t care,” putting funny faces and moving her hips in a very comical manner.

From these examples, we can see how Monismurf and Lola use irony and sarcasm to answer to unpleasant or hateful comments from users. Here, humour appears as a means to face these kinds of messages without challenging gendered expectations of being approachable and pleasing (Kanai, 2019b). While the message they are giving is clear, and they respond directly to the users who are attacking or mocking them, the humorous delivery softens the outcome.

4.4. Showcase of unpleasant emotions and controversial topics

Connected to this idea of using humour to wrap up and soften unpleasant emotions to make them palatable enough for social media platforms, there are many videos in which tiktokers express frustrations or undesirable feelings through self-parody and performativity. This is the case for a video (1 Jul. 2021) in which Lola reacts to a challenge about comparing the size of a teddy bear to the magnitude of an infidelity. The video starts with snippets of other users’ videos in which they hold small or medium-sized teddies while a voice-over says, “bigger the teddy bear is, bigger cheater you are”. The size of the teddy bears increases as we reach the end of the video, and the last snippet shows Lola holding a huge teddy bear, which is bigger than herself, while she laughs, looking directly at the camera. In relation to this idea of confessing own’s flaws and failures through the engagement with funny and light-hearted challenges and trends, Bellido has a video (15 Jul. 2021) in which she reproduces a challenge that consists of clapping and table tapping, following a beat. She starts with a slow rhythm, and an overlaid text says, “this is how my jealousy looks from the outside”. Then, as Bellido increases the speed of the clapping, puts on an angry face, and the text changes to “this is how my jealousy really is from the inside.” Again, the humorous delivery of this video serves as an opportunity for Bellido to show a glimpse of a kind of emotion that would not be suitable in other formats. As in the abovementioned video from Lola making fun of being a cheater, the playful tone of these kind of challenges leave room for followers to interpret if the two tiktokers are confessing a personal flaw (i.e., cheating or being jealous) or if it is only a part of a performance.

Bellido very often takes advantage of this ambiguity to create content about controversial topics such as sexual desire. In this regard, from the three analysed tiktokers, she is the one who depicts a model of femininity that is closer to the Spanish *choni* stereotype. This is a mediatic figure that connects with the “chavettes” in British *chav* culture (Jones, 2011; Skeggs, 2005), which is considered to be “low-class, low-educated girls with an explicit, unbridled sexual desire” (Willem, Araña &

Tortajada, 2018, p. 538). It is a stereotype that has had an extensive presence in popular Spanish TV series and reality shows, incarnating the epitome of the unruly femininity (Oliva, 2014, 2018; Moreno-Segarra & Bernández, 2017). Bellido explicitly and proudly aligns herself with the *choni* imaginary in her videos. For example, a video (2 Jun. 2021) starts with her pretending to be worried, with a concerned expression on her face, while a superimposed text says, “they call me *choni* as an insult, but they don’t know...” and then the music changes, and another text finishes the sentence: “...✨that for me it’s a compliment✨”, and she changes her expression for a fiercer and more seductive one. Following the idea of the unruly and unfiltered femininity, Bellido uses humour to create content in which she represents herself irreverently, combining irony with a defiant and provocative tone. To do so, she uses TikTok’s performative elements such as dubbing, lip-synching or acting, fostering the performativity and ambiguity of the resultant videos.

For example, a clip (24 Oct. 2020) shows her with her parents in their family living room. Bellido dubs a pre-recorded audio that says: “I might make my parents feel embarrassed, but I would never make them grandparents because I’m a slut, but I’m cautious.” The video finishes with Bellido laughing while her parents look at her very surprised. In many other videos, she plays with this concept of “sluttiness” as an opposition to pleasant and normative femininity. An example of this can be found in a video (27 May 2021) where she dubs an audio with a high-pitched comical voice that says, “ohhhh I’m a princess, I’m a little princess... with a slut face”, while she suddenly changes her facial expression from a very exaggerated smile to a severe face. In another clip (10 Apr. 2022), she changes the context of a pre-recorded dialogue from a scene in which a male voice asks, “what is your favourite English word?” and a female voice answers laughing, “probably fuck”. Bellido alters the meaning of the original audio and sets a new narrative in which she acts as if she is flirting with someone. She adds a superimposed text with the question, “what would you give me if I win?”. In the video, she dubs the part from the original audio that says “probably fuck” as a response, implying that she would like to have a sexual relationship in this imaginary flirting situation that she represents. The description text that goes with this video says, “#humour, just kidding... or not?”, playing with the ambiguity enhanced by TikTok’s performative elements such as dubbing. With this ambiguous representation, Bellido invites the viewers to guess if what she portrays in her acting videos is connected to her real experiences and emotions, or just part of the platform game.

In contrast to this irreverent, playful, and unfiltered representation of sexuality in Bellido’s content, Monismurf uses humour to generate an effect of disruption in videos in which she appears as seductive or showing sexual desire. This happens very often in videos in which the lyrics of the songs that she dances and dubs set a sexual and seductive tone. An example of this can be found in a video (9 Dec. 2020) where Monismurf is dancing to a song that says, “*mami chula* let me grab you from your waist, the way you whisper makes me crazy, I would like to make you scream”, and the song fades out into a feminine moaning. At this point, a pair of hands holding

Monismurf's cat appears from the corner of the frame, bringing the animal to a very close shot that completely covers the image. The description text of the video says "popper [Monismurf's cat] does not approve the last dance step". Monismurf's cat interruptions as a form of last-minute censorship are a recurrent joke that is used in other videos, such as a clip (17 Aug. 2020) in which Monismurf starts dancing, moving her hips and butt, and the video ends abruptly because her cat jumps to her leg. In the description text she complains "my cat doesn't like my twerking HAHAH #humour". Through these videos, both Bellido and Monismurf navigate the idea of portraying themselves as active sexual agents. While in the case of Bellido humour is a tool for representing explicit sexual desire in a performative and playful manner, in Monismurf's videos comedy serves as a disruptive element that neutralizes the possibility of sexualization.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The content created and shared by these young hypervisible girls is shaped by the unique sense of humour that characterizes TikTok cultures, defined by a sense of performativity, replicability, and ambiguity (Zeng et al., 2020; Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The analysed videos are "infused" with the "recognizable TikTok vibe" (Zhao & Abidin, 2023) based on the main socio-technical features that tiktokers engage with, such as dubbing, lip-synching, audio meme templates, formats like POVs or overlapping of image and textual elements.

From one side, humour appears as a very effective way for tiktokers to deal with the tension of being successful content creators and, at the same time, staying relatable and authentic to their followers. While they cultivate a polished and glamorous appearance on other social media platforms, on TikTok, they showcase a much rawer aesthetic and engage with humorous techniques from physical comedy to portray a flawed and imperfect version of themselves. In their "failed videos," they openly represent themselves as "any other user" who makes mistakes and gets surprised by unexpected events. This representation of tiktokers' fallibility is built upon a constant practice of self-parody and connects and expands the concept of "calibrated amateurism" (Abidin, 2017). In this regard, the supposedly spontaneous and unpredictable component of failing is turned into a pattern of aesthetics, codes, and narratives. "Failed videos" are integrated into tiktokers' self-presentation strategies, in combination with the genres that define their content such as make-up tutorials, GRWM (get ready with me) or dance videos.

Besides fostering a more authentic and relatable self, results show how tiktokers put humour in practice to navigate gender expectations connected to the ideal of the successful femininity. Monismurf is the one who most of the times relies on irony and parody to explicitly distance herself from this ideal, by juxtaposing stereotypical representations of empowered femininity (i.e., showing self-confidence, being glamorous and passionate about their jobs) with her actual reality. She uses humour

to emphasize the incongruities between the two sides, but she does not explicitly reject or challenge the model of the successful femininity. In some cases, she even admits aspiring to embody this ideal and makes fun of her failed attempts to achieve it. In this sense, far from being the “great feminist weapon” defined by Maud Caunterick (2020), humour is a coping mechanism or a temporary relief when portraying gender-specific discontents, like Han and Kuipers (2021) sceptically define it in their analysis of humour in the representation of motherhood. In this regard, comedy and humour are a mechanism to navigate the affective dimension of the successful femininity, where young girls are expected to behave in a moderate, pleasant, and relatable manner (Kanai, 2019a). In the videos where tiktokers react to harmful and disrespectful comments, humour acts as a form of emotional labour. In these videos, irony is a way to wrap up sentiments of anger and irritation and metabolize them into little witty jokes. Even though they do not refrain from expressing their disconformity with hate speech, humour is a way to stay out of a more direct confrontation. Thus, humour and comedy are ways to individually cope with online hate speech and negative commentary. Still, there is the underlying idea that there is not much alternative to face these situations, and they must stick to forms of humour such as irony as a way of resignation and self-protection.

Finally, tiktokers take advantage of the performativity enhanced by TikTok features and genres such as POVs (point of view) and audio meme templates to portray and embody emotions that disrupt what could be expected from them under the dictate of the feeling rules (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]; Kanai 2019a, 2019b). Through irreverent humour, irony, and self-mockery, tiktokers confess flaws and frustrations, and engage with controversial topics such as having explicit sexual desire. In many of the analysed videos, tiktokers play and act, leaving the door open for their followers to interpret if the content of the videos is real or just a performance.

In conclusion, this research shed light on how TikTok is a fruitful terrain for representing values and narratives outside from the stereotypical and idealised femininity in a playful and ambiguous manner. Despite this, as hypervisible girls and dependant on the attention economy to maintain their status, the analysed tiktokers must navigate carefully within the limits of what they can and cannot show in their profiles. Humour plays a central role in this negotiation, allowing them to portray behaviours and feelings that expand the limits of the ideal successful femininity, but from an individual and depoliticized perspective that does not represent a challenge for the structural gender stereotypes that prevail in social media.

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