Language Play as a Marker of Authenticity in Platform-Mediated Communication

Svitlana Shurma
Tomas Bata University in Zlín / Štefánikova 5670, 760 01 Zlín, Czechia
shurma@utb.cz

Abstract

This presentation looks at language play through the prism of platform-mediated communication. A small case study analyzes the content of three micro-celebrities on TikTok engaged in language play that functions as a marker of their algorithmic identities. The results show that formal and verbal-level language play easily engages the audience to continue playing. When language play is realized at the level of discourse, the audience tends to focus more on the content of the narrative, rather than engage in the play. Overall, language play indexes the authenticity of micro-celebrities.

Keywords: language play 1, platform-mediated communication 2, micro-celebrities 3

1 Introduction

Social media platforms have long been recognized to play an important role in shaping knowledge production, everyday experiences, and "collective imaginaries" (*sensu* Bouchard, 2017). As data-driven infrastructures powered by algorithms and interfaces, platforms organize large amounts of data and reshape cultural production through systems of search, engagement, and recommendation (Yuan, 2025; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). These algorithmic processes restructure ("de-intermediate") value chains, alter cultural commodities, and lead to content producer dependence on platforms, thereby conditioning mediated practices, social action, and "structural conditioning" (Laaksonen et al., 2024). For example, algorithmic amplification, or the process by which platforms selectively increase visibility of specific content based on predicted engagement, relevance for the users, or other goals, often political or commercial (Whittaker et al., 2021), has led to the rise of the so-called micro-celebrities.

Micro-celebrity is a term that emerged to explain the new forms of fame created on social networking platforms (e.g., Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016; Dunn and Falkof, 2021). It is usually connected to the notion of the "algorithmic self" (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Masiero, 2023; Joseph, 2025), which refers to the form of identity that is shaped, represented, and negotiated through interactions with digital platforms and algorithms (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Micro-celebrities have been studied from the perspectives of self-branding and identity construction (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013), influencer culture and digital labor (Abidin, 2016b; Duffy, 2017), or authenticity (e.g., Abidin, 2015; Khamis et al., 2017; Dunn and Falkof, 2021; Arriagada and Bishop, 2021). Moreover, the language of micro-celebrities has been examined from discourse-analytic and sociolinguistic perspectives (e.g., Jha et al., 2026; Beneš Kovácová, 2022; Feng et al., 2023; Rao and Dixit, 2026). However, research into humor and, more specifically, language play as strategies of indexing authenticity is still lacking (cf. Steinfeld et al., 2025; Pande, 2018; Cao et al., 2025). Thus, the case study aims to look at the role of language play in the construction of authenticity in micro-celebrities' posts on TikTok.

2 Micro-celebrities, Authenticity and Playfulness

On social media platforms, self-presentation occurs through shared media products, such as short videos on TikTok and Instagram, that perform and reconstruct the self, making it a key practice of digital identity formation (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). Data-driven social media platform algorithms encourage the construction of an "algorithmic self" rooted more in algorithmic

Proceedings of the 38th Conference on Computational Linguistics and Speech Processing (ROCLING 2026), pages 407–418
November 6-7, 2026 ©2026 Association for Computational Linguistics

feedback than in social connection (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022).

Behind the "algorithmic self" that users of social media face stand content creators rising to the level of (micro)celebrities. They become visible on social media platforms by engaging audiences through online activity and influencing public attitudes, preferences, and especially consumption practices, which are then transformed into economic value through monetization (Abidin, 2016a; Conde and Casais, 2023; Droz-dit-Busset, 2022). Micro-celebrity is a term coined by Senft (2008) that refers to a set of practices helping people create online identities, which allow them to maximize visibility in the attention economy of platforms (Xu et al., 2025). Micro-celebrity's creative work, online labor, and cultural communication are also embedded within broader platform economies shaped by infrastructure, market forces, and regulatory systems, with variations occurring across different sociopolitical contexts (Xu et al., 2025; Poell et al., 2022). Micro-celebrities act as opinion leaders, exploiting parasocial relationships to build trust and influence consumer behaviour (in the most general sense of the word), often through textual and visual narratives (Benevento et al., 2025; Conde and Casais, 2023; Ki and Kim, 2019). Georgakopoulou (2025) defines these narratives as multimodal "formatted stories" that are "recognizable, normative, typified, sought after, and replicable", aimed to create a "sharing-life-in-the-moment" effect that is linked to perceived authenticity and further relatability (see Khamis et al., 2017; Liao and Chen, 2024; Zhao and Machin, 2026).

In psychology, the term 'authenticity' refers to "who a person is, how they perceive themselves, and how they operate on those perceptions" (Barnett and Deutsch, 2016). In other words, authenticity reflects how people experience their true selves, understand these experiences, and express them through their feelings and actions (Barnett and Deutsch, 2016). Within micro-celebrity practices, individuals perform authenticity by strategizing their self-presentation to appear genuine and relatable so as to manipulate the algorithms and cater to the preferences of the audiences (Xiao and Yan, 2026; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Online, authenticity is often achieved through a form of role-play in which online personas are enacted in everyday offline interactions, producing a sense of consistency between the public image and offline identity (Abidin and Thompson, 2012). This performed authenticity is the result of a series of communicative practices and performative strategies (see Jerslev, 2016).

In general, authentic living is known to be positively associated with affiliative and self-enhancing humor (Barnett and Deutsch, 2016). Prior research has also connected micro-celebrity authenticity with perceived playfulness and humor (Barnett and Deutsch, 2016; Kim and Baek, 2025). In fact, Kim and Baek (2025) tie playfulness to the hedonistic value of an online persona. Playfulness, in its turn, forms the basis for a sense of humor, though not all play is humorous (Ruch et al., 2019; Proyer, 2018). Barnett (2007) defines playfulness as "the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment". In addition, playfulness is associated with interest (Proyer, 2018) and could serve as one of the mechanisms of ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2011). Playfulness and humor on social media function as tools of self-presentation (Rodríguez-Ardura and Meseguer-Artola, 2018), and micro-celebrities use both to construct engaging personas and strengthen social relationships through jokes, storytelling, and other light-hearted content while also indexing authenticity and relatability. This, in turn, allows the viewers to self-identify with this authenticity, engage in communication with the creator, and connect on an emotional level (Lee and Eastin, 2021).

3 Language Play and Micro-celebrities

As any human play, micro-celebrity role-playing could inadvertently lead to language play (similarly to Crystal, 2010, Ch. 31). Adults are generally known for using language "for enjoyment, for the self, for its own sake" (Cook, 1997). Following Sicart (2017), I understand play as an autotelic activity of being in and engaging with the world through creative, expressive, and contextual activities that allow individuals to make sense of themselves, others, and the world. One important aspect of play is a meta-message "this is play" (Bateson, 1987). Language play, thus, is a form of communicative activity, which "occurs when people manipulate the forms and functions of language as a source of fun for themselves and/or for the people they are with" (Crystal, 1996).

Crystal (1996) differentiates between phonetic, phonological, morphological play, and verbal play, focusing on the deviations from language norms or use of normal forms in unexpected contexts. Cook (1997) includes in language play formal level changes (such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, parallelisms, or other grammatical patterns, which are consistent with Crystal's phonetic, phonological, and morphological play) and semantic changes "which create worlds which do not exist: fictions" (consistent with Crystal's verbal play).

Since language play presupposes "fun", humor is often based on it. In fact, several humor theories interpret humor as play (see Attardo, 2020), or a variant of play (McGee, 1999 quoted in Proyer, 2018). While it is true that "if the hearer does not play along, he/she locks him/herself out of the fun" (Attardo, 2020), not all language play is humorous. For example, defining wordplay as a creative exploitation of formal and semantic properties of lexical items, Knospe et al. (2016) point out that while it might produce humorous effects, it also can serve rhetorical, pragmatic, and communicative functions. It should also be noted that it is often hard to separate wordplay from non-wordplay (see Knospe, 2016). Knospe (2016) suggests that one such criterion should be communicative cooperation and common ground between the producer and recipient, so that the latter could interpret and recognize a ludic (playful) meaning intended.

Language play used for humorous effect relies on context for its ambiguity (Chiaro, 2023). Verbal humor based on the play requires the speaker to be linguistically inventive in distorting linguistic norms and manipulating the language (Chiaro, 2023). As humor can be used to enhance the self or one's relationships with others (Martin et al., 2003), it can also be used as a marker of authenticity (Barnett and Deutsch, 2016). For example, Xu et al. (2025) associate subtexting the self, or a "tactic of intersubjectivity that prefers self-deprecative or sarcastic performative style in a humorous, critical, or exaggerated manner to parody ideologies", with humorous manifestations. Moreover, authenticity functions as a positive cue in humor appreciation, and audiences tend to value humor that appears personally meaningful and connected to the identity of the speaker (Gorenz and Schwarz, 2025). At the same time, content creators are known for using humor to achieve prominence on social media platforms (Steinfeld et al., 2025; Barta et al., 2023; Li and Zhou, 2024). Below, I will look at how language play used for humorous effects helps three micro-celebrities index authenticity.

4 Materials and Methods

The presentation is a small-scale case study of the use of language play in 15 videos of 3 micro-celebrities (5 videos each) working in different social media genres. The three micro-celebrities represent a convenience sample (Creswell, 2009) as they were selected based on the author's familiarity with them across the three platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These creators were considered suitable because their content consistently engages instances of language play (as defined above); and all three micro-celebrities have garnered popularity and engagement through a projected authentic, playful persona.

The first micro-celebrity is Our Filipino Grandma, a so-called "grandfluencer" (*sensu* Ng and Indran, 2022), whose content specializes in "rizz" pick-up lines, cultural skits and bloopers, with 1.8M followers on TikTok, 788K on Instagram, and 14K on Facebook. The second creator is comedian Alex Falcone (hereinafter, Alex), specializing in fun facts and scam hunting, with 720.8K followers on TikTok, 872K on Instagram, and 177K on Facebook. The third one is the artist Matthew Olivier (hereinafter, Matthew), who specializes in storytelling about art and paintings, with 394.9K followers on TikTok, 1M on Instagram, and 562K on Facebook. As the three micro-celebrities work in different social media genres, they also attract different kinds of audiences, and their popularity across the platforms varies: e.g., Our Filipino Grandma is more popular on TikTok, while Matthew is more popular on Instagram.

As the micro-celebrities are public personas (Alex Falcone even has his own Wikipedia page), in line with the recommendations of the Association of Internet Research (Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002), the short videos of the creators were treated as artefacts. The videos were accessed on 23 June 2026 through TikTok, as it offers a presentation of content based on popularity. The first five most popular videos were accessed and manually transcribed. These videos were selected without a prior assessment of whether there were identifiable instances of

language play in them. Short videos are treated herein as multisemiotic artefacts (Bateman, 2021) that consist of a video along with the captions and hashtags. The lengths of the videos ranged from 2:57 (matthewolivierx, 2025b) to 0:08 (ourfilipinograndma, 2022), and the linguistic data collected amounted to 4,142 words (including hashtags). Due to TikTok copyright policy, one Our Filipino Grandma's video was uploaded twice in the account and is marked 1a (without the sound) and 1b (with the sound).

The metadata related to videos is summarized in Table 1. The videos are numbered in the order they appear in TikTok 'popular' tab (with the exception of video 1b). The data reflects the success of individual videos among the users of TikTok. Due to the limited space and differences in the usability of the apps, Facebook and Instagram metadata were not included.

The 5 most popular content categories on TikTok are entertainment, dance, comedy, education, and fashion (Lee and Elad, 2026). Alex's and Matthew's content borders on entertainment, comedy, and education, while Our Filipino Grandma's content borders on entertainment and comedy.

Influencer	Videos	No. views	No. likes	No. comments
Our Filipino Grandma	1a	38.5M	7.9M	54K
	1b	19.1M	2.8M	10.6K
	2	29.6M	7M	109.3K
	3	34.4M	5.4M	58.6K
	4	12.4M	3.3M	45.5K
	5	15.5M	2.4M	11.3K
Alex	1	5.6M	1.4M	20.1K
	2	9M	987.4K	20.4K
	3	5M	870.9K	3167
	4	4.2M	854.8K	3499
	5	8.8M	826.6K	14.7K
Matthew	1	5.1M	587.1K	2048
	2	2.2M	393.9K	512
	3	2.2M	371.3K	686
	4	2.1M	352.6K	1842
	5	2M	307.9K	550

Table 1: TikTok metadata for analyzed videos.

The analysis of the language play in the selected videos is conducted using a qualitative discourse-analytical perspective (Fairclough, 2004; van Leeuwen, 2008; Scollon, 2001; Jones, 2014). The analysis focuses on the linguistic strategies that create language play in relation to the linguistic structures and communicative functions in platform-mediated communication. Selected comments from the viewers, containing language play as a reaction to the play in the video are quoted to exemplify the response to the play following recommendations (Tagg and Spilioti, 2022).

The analysis considered language play occurring at different levels of language (but also in relation to visual cues), including phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic phenomena, and code-switching (Crystal, 1996; De León, 2007; Knospe, 2016; Ahn, 2016), when these were used playfully. The transcripts were examined for instances of language play that were coded by the author. Future research should include intercoder reliability testing, and the author is aware of the limitations of the present approach to data. Instances of language play were considered in relation to both linguistic form and audiovisual context (paralanguage, body language, and visual cues) in which they occurred. The instances were categorized according to the linguistic resources involved (formal and semantic level changes (Cook, 1997)). Since some examples involved more than one linguistic mechanism, several categories overlapped. The analysis considered how the language play was constructed, what knowledge it required to interpret, what communicative functions it performed, and how viewers engaged with it. Functions relevant to social media discourse, such as humor and identity construction (including indexing of authenticity), were also assessed. The analysis was interpretative and could serve as the basis for further, more detailed investigation involving mixed methods.

5 Language Play in Micro-celebrity Content

The analysis shows that, to various degrees, micro-celebrities engage in both formal (phonetic and grammatical level) and semantic types of language play (Cook, 1997) that the viewers find fun and engaging. At the same time, the three content creators in question each use different playful strategies that help them construct a unique, authentic persona (*sensu* Lee and Eastin, 2021): (1) Our Filipino Grandma builds her playful persona around light humor, where puns and phonological wordplay, along with visual cues, serve as playful sources of incongruity. (2) Alex indexes authenticity and playfulness with the help of

metalinguistic play, lexical creativity, parallelism, repetition as well as figurative language that accompany an enacted game or are part of playful exaggeration. (3) Matthew appears on TikTok as a playful persona through his "algorithmic essays" of *Codex Algorithm*: short videos or writings "formatted for distribution on the algorithmic feed" (Olivier, 2026). The artist "addresses" the audiences "that feed actually reaches" (Olivier, 2026) with, apart from other algorithm-manipulating strategies, the help of playful uses of discourse in which code-switching (e.g., uses of expletives or interjections in otherwise "serious" art commentary) acts as a type of violation that underlies what Attardo (2020) calls "register humor".

Below I look at each micro-celebrity's use of language play in more detail.

5.1 Our Filipino Grandma

One of Our Filipino Grandma's grandsons is known as "the creative mind" behind her account (Ramirez, 2023). While not visible in the analyzed videos, the grandson's role as the co-creator is linguistically evident in the accompanying captions. In several post captions and hashtags, the origo is located with the grandson rather than with the featured grandmother: e.g., *Idk what Mama expected* (ourfilipinograndma, 2021a) or #*GrannyGotGame* (ourfilipinograndma, 2021c). The choice of kinship terms *Mama* or *Granny* positions the speaker as someone of kin who anchors the discourse. The post captions function as paratexts (Mosebo Simonsen, 2014) that, through hashtags as social metadata (Zappavigna, 2015) and verbal comments, communicate with the algorithm of the platform, invite audiences to interact (cf. Hadi and Putri Ramadhani, 2022) with the video, and add to the entertaining function of the content in its entirety. The play with the audience, thus, rests upon light humor that acts as a hook or comment on the content. For example, one of the comments functions as a pseudo-disclaimer: *There were no babies harmed in the making of this video* 😅 (ourfilipinograndma, 2021d). While the form of the message mimics the American Humane Society "no animals were harmed" disclaimer often appearing in movies, the grinning face with sweat emoji signals the intended playfulness and guides interpretation.

The videos themselves rely heavily on the exploitation of incongruity (Attardo, 2020) as a means of generating humor and reinforcing the playful persona of the micro-celebrity. In videos 1a-b, the language play is accompanied by the visual presentation of temporary confusion between two entities appearing in the same situational role. For example, chicken and baby: *When you are babysitting your grandchild and you start cooking chicken in the oven* (ourfilipinograndma, 2021d; ourfilipinograndma, 2022). The all-caps panicked question on the screen *WHERE'S THE BABY?!* along with the panicked expression of the micro-celebrity allows the audience to fill the lacuna created by the verbal form by recognizing that the initially plausible interpretation is suddenly replaced by an unexpected and incompatible one, which acts as "the humorous stimulus" (Attardo, 2020). The viewers pick up the game, participating in the imaginary scenarios: e.g., *Smother in gravy. No one will notice* or *just lil burnt*.

Similarly, a response to the trendy filter *This filter is supposed to show you how people really see you…*(ourfilipinograndma, 2021a) creates an incongruity between what the viewers see – a woman of an Asian descent – and the person's surprised reaction *Oh, my God, I'm Asian*, that, in fact, confirms what the viewers see. Here, the interplay of the affordances of the filter, audience expectations, and the speaker's unexpected interpretation results in a play. The humor arises from the fact that the revealed characteristic is neither surprising nor newly discovered, which creates an irony of a sort that comes from a "relevant and inappropriate" contrast (Attardo, 2020), which is, in turn, funny. Interestingly, some viewers participate in the play by repeating the line: e.g., *oh my ghawwd I'm Asian*.

In three of the videos (2-4), puns and phonological wordplay serve as signals of cheekiness typical for pickup. Pick-up lines are associated with flirtations and often convey sexual interest with humor (Senko and Fyffe, 2010). Though old age is stereotypically associated with asexuality in many cultures (McHugh and Interligi, 2015), social media is challenging these stereotypes (see Gehrmann, 2023). The language play typically associated with flirtation, visually hooked to Our Filipino Grandma as a grandfluencer, surprises and entices the audience as it breaks the stereotype (similarly to Gehrmann, 2023). As the online persona is consistent, the content appeals to the audience as authentic. The

puns typical of pick-up lines contribute to the viewers' positive comments and likes. For example, the wordplay in video 2 creates a humorous effect via phonetic similarity that allows the coexistence of two interpretations: *You wanna know my favorite tea? You, shawTEA* (ourfilipinograndma, 2021b). Deliberate capitalization of TEA foregrounds linguistic manipulation and invites the audience to appreciate the creative form of the utterance.

Semantic ambiguity underlies two other pick-up lines: *Did it hurt when you fell from the vending machine? Cause you're looking like a snack* (ourfilipinograndma, 2021e) or *Help! I'VE FALLEN!!! For you!* (ourfilipinograndma, 2021c). The effectiveness of the jokes depends on the ability of the viewers to recognize the dual meaning of *snack* as a food item and an attractive person, or a physical fall vs. an expression *fall for somebody*. The setup-incongruity-resolution pattern underlines a playful interpretation of the messages as flirtatious compliments. Additionally, the pretend seriousness of the creator at the beginning of the videos is broken with her signature gesture (where the thumb and index finger are held at the level of the chin) that acts as a key to playful mode (Attardo, 2020). The audience also participates in the game, for example, by constructing similar puns or reacting to the original one: e.g., *u wanna know my favorite tea, u hawtea* in the reaction to video 2; *ohhh I'm fallen for you tooooo!!!* as a reaction to video 3; or *oh yes thanks but I'm a whole damn meal* in response to video 4.

5.2 Alex

Language play constitutes a defining feature of Alex's content that drives both the interpretation of his online persona and audience engagement. Rather than relying on conventional punchlines, Alex seems to build on unexpected and absurd interpretations. Similarly to Our Filipino Grandma, he builds upon a disruption of audience expectations and the juxtaposition of incompatible frames of reference. At the same time, the creator steps away from mere joke-telling and instead deliberately manipulates linguistic forms and meanings to foreground language as an object of attention. Unlike Our Filipino Grandma's humor, which works best in conjunction with a visual message, in Alex's content, language plays the first fiddle.

One of the salient features of Alex's discourse is his playful manipulation of semantic meanings. In his video 1 (alex_falcone, 2022), the opening statement, *I have nothing to hide, which is a shame because I love hiding stuff*, activates a whole narrative frame based on the interaction between idiomatic (e.g., referring to secrets) and literal meaning (e.g., physical act of concealing something). The play continues along a similar opposition: for example, *I don't do drugs*, and the allergy medicine hidden in various unexpected places, shown to the viewers; or the title of the book *Inside Baseball* and the real miniature baseball stored inside the physical book: *which is a perfect place I figured out to hide my tiny baseball*. A more intricate intellectual play involves Shakespeare, peaches, rock, and a key, *perfect for opening the dictionary*, all hidden inside each other. This fun intellectual game of words and physical revelations is made more exciting by using intonation and stress to build suspense before revealing the unexpected hidden object with a childish ta-da moment. Interestingly, here the viewers react less to the language play and more to the hide-and-seek game, though they do sometimes respond with the language play, too: e.g., *This is my new favorite TikTok!! If only I had a place to hide it…*

The narratives also contain several examples of metalinguistic play (De León, 2007; Poveda, 2022), or conscious manipulation of language stemming from metalinguistic awareness, or the ability to think about language as an object of reflection. One such example is Alex's comments on the phrase *spider scientist* (alex_falcone, 2024a): *And I know that that is ambiguous as to whether that was a scientist who studies spiders or a spider who went to college, but it was the former*. The humor arises from the recognition of structural ambiguity within the compound noun. Alex reflects on the multiple interpretative possibilities embedded within the language.

Another strategy is lexical creativity through the formation of nonce words and innovative expressions. The phrases *unfun facts* (alex_falcone, 2025), *cuddlage*, *cuddle rot* (alex_falcone, 2023) are coined by Alex, yet, they remain comprehensible because they exploit productive morphological structures: derivation. Here, the language play relies on the implicit knowledge of lexical formation rules, allowing new words to be generated and understood despite

their novelty (Dal and Namer, 2018). These "ludic innovations" (Winter-Froemel, 2016) are coined not just with humorous intention, but as part of linguistic playfulness. They work with other elements of verbal play that involve parallelism and repetition (De León, 2007): e.g., *I'm not a spider. I'm not on spider's side. I hate them. I think they are the devil* (alex_falcone, 2024a). In fact, parallelism and repetition is traced in all analyzed videos: e.g., *to eat every day, multiple times a day, every day for the rest of your life* (alex_falcone, 2024b) or *I like fun facts, but I love unfun facts* (alex_falcone, 2025). The viewers react to the play and extend it further: e.g., *"I'm not a spider." Now that definitely sounds like something a spider would say*…; or notice the coinages and repeat them: e.g., *Cuddle rot* 😂😂😂.

Another aspect of Alex's wordplay is the use of figurative language, which includes metaphors (e.g., *the other person reverts to being a trash goblin* (alex_falcone, 2024b)), similes (e.g., *then your arm falls off like a Doberman's tail* (alex_falcone, 2023)), hyperboles (e.g., *it* [NASA plan] *might cause it* [super volcano in the Yellowstone National Park] *to erupt, which is a heck of a roll of the dice* (alex_falcone, 2025)), puns (e.g. *So here's the secret sauce, ketchup, and mayonnaise mixed together* (alex_falcone, 2023)), and zeugmas (e.g., *I don't do drugs, but I do take Flonase* (alex_falcone, 2022)). In Alex's videos, figurative language allows him to extend, reinterpret, and exaggerate conventional forms through foregrounding the linguistic form. For example, hyperboles allow Alex to represent everyday situations, such as eating or sleeping together (videos 4, 5), through exaggerated descriptions that transform minor inconveniences into dramatic narratives. This helps him to frame the discourse via the tension between everyday reality and linguistically amplified representation. Metaphorical scenarios, such as spiders taking over houses and raising people's children (video 2), or getting a time machine to stop Thomas Midgley from dangerous inventions and to test NASA's plan to prevent volcano eruption (video 3), allow Alex to build alternative conceptual worlds that the viewers are encouraged to temporarily accept. Personifications are used to attribute agency to non-human entities and abstract phenomena, e.g., volcanoes can be taught to play the guitar (video 3), spiders become responsible parents (video 2), and an arm has a life of its own (video 4). Alex deliberately extends these mappings into absurdity as a form of language play. Humor emerges from both an interplay of what is being described and how linguistic resources are manipulated, which encourages the viewers to oscillate between literal and figurative interpretations, which they find fun. The viewers thus engage in the play by responding to such humor and taking it further: e.g., *Am I the only one who laughed and the ketchup and mayonnaise? Like … the secret sauce*, or *We have our trash goblin phases together while fresh food dies in the fridge*.

5.3 Matthew

Matthew's content, unlike that of Our Filipino Grandma and Alex, is more homogeneous: he offers educational comments on famous pieces of art. At the same time, unlike typical commentaries of that sort, for example, in museums, they are light, colloquial, witty, and humorous, which makes them fun. The language play here is incorporated into the way the narratives – in his own words, "composed *for* that feed" (Olivier, 2026), – are built. Matthew admits, though, that the "narrative is a constructed voice", even if the reading and writing are the artist's (Olivier, 2026). Matthew, similar to Alex in a way, structures his narratives as a process of shared discovery, where he recreates the experience of noticing the details of the artwork: e.g., *But did you notice …?* […] *No. Try again. Look very carefully. Still nothing. All right? Well, after I show …* (matthewolivierx, 2025a). These "delayed revelations" (Adam, 2021) create suspense through information management in the narrative. Imperatives (e.g., *look*, *watch this*, *focus your attention*) and rhetorical questions (*what happens if …*? *So who are they then*?) prompt the viewers to revise their initial perception. Thus, each new observation serves as evidence for a more complex interpretation, where the shifts in cognitive frames (Coulson, 2001) change the perception of literal reading of the details in the painting to symbolic readings. The discourse structure thus participates in the play by following a pattern: initial perception – something feels odd – new evidence – reinterpretation – another reinterpretation – larger symbolic meaning.

Moreover, Matthew constantly constructs an imaginary dialogue with the audience through deictic "you" and "we", self-reference in the third person, and invented audience responses and

dialogues with the characters of the paintings: e.g., *Adam, is that you? It is* (matthewolivierx, 2025b), *If you are not prepared for this, it may shock you* (matthewolivierx, 2025a), or *Matthew, something odd is going on here, but I can't quite put my finger on it* (matthewolivierx, 2025c). Here, language play extends beyond isolated wordplay to encompass playful uses of discourse, which brings intellectual enjoyment.

Light humor is evoked through register incongruity and deadpan delivery (Attardo, 2020). Matthew relies extensively on evaluative language, even inserting expletives (e.g., *Peter Bruegel was a *** lunatic* (matthewolivierx, 2024)), that seem to deliberately blur the boundary between the expectation from the genre and subjective interpretation. Potentially comic propositions are presented as though they are entirely serious. The interpretative inferences, such as *the face of pure evil* (matthewolivierx, 2025a), bear an epistemic modality that reframes interpretative inferences into apparent certainty. Insertions of interjections, such as *Yum* (matthewolivierx, 2024); *but also a symbol in art for a decapitated head. Ouch* (matthewolivierx, 2025c), also carries interactional significance (Norrick, 2009) for the play. Evaluative vocabulary, such as *And this marriage is as good as done. Even Cupid thinks so* (matthewolivierx, 2026); *and when they did, it would be crazy* (matthewolivierx, 2025b), also signals the stance by telling the audience how they should interpret what they see. In this way, Matthew linguistically frames the viewers' emotional and cognitive responses through the recontextualization. There is a temporal mismatch, though: people in historically distant paintings seem to have recognizably 21st-century problems within the feed as a modern medium. This is what, I claim, gives a flare of light humor to Matthew's "essays".

Unlike the two other creators, whose language play frequently foregrounds lexical ambiguity and phonological/morphological creativity, Matthew's videos rarely manipulate individual words or forms. Instead, the playful dimension resides primarily at the discourse and pragmatic levels. Since the language play is of a different type than that of Alex or Our Pilipino Grandma, the replies of the viewers also differ. They react to the painting and engage in the discussion of art, but do not engage in the linguistic play as much or as often as in the case of the other creators' videos. If Matthew's aim was to engage the audience in the appreciation of art, then his method of telling does work with the audience that gets to watch his videos: e.g., *this is so good that my brain hurts* or *i feel like we need this type of commentary for each piece of art because sometimes i just don't understand whats goin on*.

6 Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis shows that the linguistic play in platform-mediated communication functions similarly to children's engagement with linguistic play – it is "pleasurable, socially bonding, and affective" (Cook, 1997). At the same time, unlike prelinguistic babies, micro-celebrities strategically use linguistic play "as a way of doing things and making meaning" (Cook, 1997) as part of the digital labor they are engaged in. Matthew, for example, "treats the algorithmic feed itself as both venue and medium" (Olivier, 2026) for his own creativity.

Across all three accounts, language play is a mechanism for enticing audiences as it works as part of the algorithmic identity construction. It indexes authenticity, since it helps to project visibility, expertise, and uniqueness (*sensu* Lee and Eastin, 2021) of each individual creator. Moreover, we see that language play assumes different forms depending on the creator's communicative goals and the type of persona they aim to project. In fact, they themselves engage in a "play" with the algorithm.

Our Filipino Grandma's account creates authenticity through the performance of a playful, flirtatious persona that challenges conventional stereotypes of ageing. The language play complements the identity performed for the viewers and contributes to the coherence of the image. The viewers easily engage in the linguistic play they notice and react with their views and likes. The simplicity of the play may be argued to result in higher appeal to the audience, if compared to the other two creators.

The analysis reveals that language play in Alex's videos is strongly linked to the construction of an intellectual comedic persona that the viewers react to. Shot from the comfort of his home, his videos, based on the light language play, invite the audience to perceive him as "genuine". The audience notices linguistic structures, alternative meanings, and unexpected semantic connections, and further reinterpret and disambiguate them,

making the language play exploratory and engaging.

Matthew, in turn, constructs authenticity through expertise combined with conversational accessibility of the "serious" content. His content is perceived as approachable and enjoyable. The play makes specialized discourse appear fun and appealing. But, as his play resides at the discourse and pragmatic level, the viewers notice the fun but do not take it further.

As platform-mediated communication encourages the creators to produce highly interactive discourse, language play is one way that allows creators to invite audiences to participate in playful meaning-making. The videos, therefore, illustrate how digital content creators can exploit the inherent flexibility of language to create entertainment, foreground linguistic form, and construct a distinctive communicative style of authenticity.

To my knowledge, prior research on performed authenticity has not taken into account how different degrees of stylization could also serve as indices of authenticity in platform-mediated and algorithm-driven communication. What is more, two implications of the findings for studies of micro-celebrities and platform-mediated language play could be mentioned: (1) the analysis shows that in this new medium, language play often shifts into multimodal play, where the humorous keying and contextualization cues (Attardo, 2020) are scattered across different modes; (2) it is possible to argue that platform affordances have now become conditions of linguistic production as the creators actually anticipate what will retain attention and what the recommendation system may distribute. Future research could, thus, focus on the "linguistic branding" of micro-celebrities.

References

Crystal Abidin. 2015. Communicative ❤️ Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 8:1–16.

Crystal Abidin. 2016a. "Aren't These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?": Influencer Selfies as Subversive Frivolity. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2):2056305116641342.

Crystal Abidin. 2016b. Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1):86–100.

Crystal Abidin and Eric C. Thompson. 2012. Buymylife.com: Cyber-femininities and commercial intimacy in blogshops. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 35(6):467–477.

Naomi Adam. 2021. 'Your duplicitous point of view': Delayed revelations of hypothetical focalisation in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and *Sweet Tooth*. *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics*, 30(2):174–199.

So-Yeon Ahn. 2016. Bridging notions of language play and language awareness. *HUMOR*, 29(4):539–554.

alex_falcone. 2022. I have nothing to hide.*TikTok*.

alex_falcone. 2023. how to spoon. *TikTok*.

alex_falcone. 2024a. I was right about spiders... *TikTok*.

alex_falcone. 2024b. #stitch with ... *TikTok*.

alex_falcone. 2025. Unfun Facts Ep 23. *TikTok*.

Arturo Arriagada and Sophie Bishop. 2021. Between Commerciality and Authenticity: The Imaginary of Social Media Influencers in the Platform Economy. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 14(4):568–586.

Salvatore Attardo. 2020. *The Linguistics of Humor*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

L.A. Barnett. 2007. The nature of playfulness in young adults. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 43(4):949–958.

Michael D. Barnett and Jeremy T. Deutsch. 2016. Humanism, authenticity, and humor: Being, being real, and being funny. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 91:107–112.

Sergio Barta, Daniel Belanche, Ana Fernández, and Marta Flavián. 2023. Influencer marketing on TikTok: The effectiveness of humor and followers' hedonic experience. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 70:103149.

John A. Bateman. 2021. Multisemiotic artifacts between modes and media. *Revista signos*, 54(107):842–866.

Dana Beneš Kovácová. 2022. *The self-presentation of Instagram influencers and the construction of social media celebrity*. Dissertation, Masaryk University, Brno.

Elisabetta Benevento, Davide Aloini, Paolo Roma, and Davide Bellino. 2025. The impact of influencers on brand social network growth: Insights from new product launch events on Twitter. *Journal of Business Research*, 189:115123.

Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo. 2022. Why's Everyone on TikTok Now? The Algorithmized Self

and the Future of Self-Making on Social Media. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1):20563051221086241.

Gérard Bouchard. 2017. *Social myths and collective imaginaries*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto/Buffalo/London.

Yi Cao, Hao Li, Tonglin Jiang, Junhua Dang, and Yubo Hou. 2025. Laughing off cyber spoofing: the role of self-deprecating humor in enhancing celebrities' interpersonal likeability. *BMC Psychology*, 13(1):501.

John Cheney-Lippold. 2017. *We are data: algorithms and the making of our digital selves*. New York University Press, New York.

Delia Chiaro. 2023. Linguistic Creativity and Humor in Context. In Jesús Romero-Trillo, editor, *The Cambridge Handbook of Language in Context*, pages 353–370. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Rita Conde and Beatriz Casais. 2023. Micro, macro and mega-influencers on instagram: The power of persuasion via the parasocial relationship. *Journal of Business Research*, 158:113708.

Guy Cook. 1997. Language play, language learning. *ELT Journal*, 51(3):224–231.

Seana Coulson. 2001. *Semantic leaps: frame-shifting and conceptual blending in meaning construction*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

John W. Creswell. 2009. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

David Crystal. 1996. Language play and linguistic intervention. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 12(3):328–344.

David Crystal. 2010. *A Little Book of Language*. Little Histories. Yale University Press, New Haven.

Georgette Dal and Fiammetta Namer. 2018. Playful nonce-formations in French: Creativity and productivity. In Sabine Arndt-Lappe, Angelika Braun, Claudine Moulin, and Esme Winter-Froemel, editors, *Expanding the Lexicon*, pages 203–228. De Gruyter.

Lourdes De León. 2007. Parallelism, metalinguistic play, and the interactive emergence of Zinacantec Mayan siblings' culture. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 40(4):405–436.

Olivia Droz-dit-Busset. 2022. "So-called influencers": Stancetaking and (de)legitimation in mediatized discourse about social media influencers. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 49:100629.

Brooke Erin Duffy. 2017. *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. Yale University Press, 1st ed.

Callan Dunn and Nicky Falkof. 2021. You've got to be real: authenticity, performativity and micro-celebrity in South Africa. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6:652485.

Charles Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee. 2002. Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the aoir ethics working committee.

Norman Fairclough. 2004. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. Routledge, New York.

Wenting Feng, Dihui Chang, and Hongjie Sun. 2023. The impact of social media influencers' bragging language styles on consumers' attitudes toward luxury brands: The dual mediation of envy and trustworthiness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13:1113655.

Ruth Gehrmann. 2023. The digital granny: Staging grandparents on social media. *Gender Forum*, 22(2):59–83.

Alexandra Georgakopoulou. 2025. From "being real" to "relatable tales": Formatted authenticity and stories in TikTok short form videos. *Narrative Works*, 13(2):11–34.

Drew Gorenz and Norbert Schwarz. 2025. Does authenticity matter in humor appreciation? *PsyArXiv.*

Setiawan Hadi and Paquita Putri Ramadhani. 2022. Text classification on the Instagram caption using support vector machine. In Ciza Thomas, editor, *Data Mining - Concepts and Applications*, volume 8. IntechOpen, London.

Anne Jerslev. 2016. In the time of the microcelebrity: Celebrification and the YouTuber Zoella. *International Journal of Communication*, 10:5233–5251.

Abhishek Kumar Jha, Ronak Singhania, and Samrat Bagchi. 2026. Stop sabotaging your influencers: How language formality undermines engagement in sponsored content. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 88:104480.

Rodney H. Jones. 2014. 6. Mediated discourse analysis. In Sigrid Norris and Carmen Daniela Maier, editors, *Interactions, Images and Texts: A Reader in Multimodality*, pages 39–52. De Gruyter, Berlin.

Jeena Joseph. 2025. The algorithmic self: How AI is reshaping human identity, introspection, and agency. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16:1645795.

Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling. 2017. Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2):191–208.

Chung-Wha ‘Chloe’ Ki and Youn-Kyung Kim. 2019. The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers’ desire to mimic. *Psychology & Marketing*, 36(10):905–922.

Minseong Kim and Tae Hyun Baek. 2025. Expertise and playfulness of social media influencers. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 46(1):19–39.

Sebastian Knospe. 2016. Discursive dimensions of wordplay. In Sebastian Knospe, Alexander Onysko and Maik Goth, editors, *Crossing Languages to Play with Words: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 79–94. De Gruyter, Berlin.

Sebastian Knospe, Alexander Onysko, and Maik Goth. 2016. Crossing Languages to Play with Words – An Introduction. In Sebastian Knospe, Alexander Onysko, and Maik Goth, editors, *Crossing Languages to Play with Words: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 1–7. De Gruyter, Berlin.

Salla-Maaria Laaksonen, Minna Koivula, and Mikko Villi. 2024. Mediated by the giants: Tracing practices, discourses, and mediators of platform isomorphism in a media organization. *New Media & Society*, 26(8):4317–4335.

Jung Ah Lee and Matthew S. Eastin. 2021. Perceived authenticity of social media influencers: scale development and validation. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 15(4):822–841.

Robert A. Lee and Barry Elad. 2026. TikTok Usage Statistics 2026: User growth, engagement, and more. *SQ Magazine*.

Fangxuan (Sam) Li and Zhiqun Zhou. 2024. How does travel social media influencer humour influence viewers’ visit intention? *Current Issues in Tourism*, 27(23):4148–4164.

Junyun Liao and Jiada Chen. 2024. The authenticity advantage: How influencer authenticity management strategies shape digital engagement with sponsored videos. *Journal of Business Research*, 185:114937.

Rod A. Martin, Patricia Puhlik-Doris, Gwen Larsen, Jeanette Gray, and Kelly Weir. 2003. Individual differences in uses of humor and their relation to psychological well-being: Development of the humor styles questionnaire. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(1):48–75.

Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd. 2011. To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 17(2):139–158.

Alice E. Marwick. 2015. You may know me from YouTube: (Micro-)celebrity in social media. In P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond, editors, *A Companion to Celebrity*, pages 333–350. Wiley, London.

Alice Emily Marwick. 2013. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. Yale University Press, New Haven.

Silvia Masiero. 2023. Digital identity as platform-mediated surveillance. *Big Data & Society*, 10(1):20539517221135176.

matthewolivierx. 2024. FIND ME A BETTER PAINTER...*TikTok*.

matthewolivierx. 2025a. Hang on to your seats. *TikTok*.

matthewolivierx. 2025b. Jan van Eyck is the King of detail... *TikTok*.

matthewolivierx. 2025c. Let’s see Lorenzo...*TikTok*.

matthewolivierx. 2026. I guess the grass is always greener... *TikTok*.

Maureen C. McHugh and Camille Interligi. 2015. Sexuality and older women: Desirability and desire. In Varda Muhlbauer, Joan C. Chrisler, and Florence L. Denmark, editors, *Women and Aging*, pages 89–116. Springer International Publishing, Cham.

Thomas Mosebo Simonsen. 2014. The functionality of paratexts on YouTube. In Nadine Desrochers and Daniel Apollon, editors, *Examining Paratextual Theory and its Applications in Digital Culture:*, Advances in Human and Social Aspects of Technology, pages 209–234. IGI Global.

Reuben Ng and Nicole Indran. 2022. Not too old for TikTok: How older adults are reframing aging. *The Gerontologist*, 62(8):1207–1216.

David B Nieborg and Thomas Poell. 2018. The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society*, 20(11):4275–4292.

Neal R. Norrick. 2009. Interjections as pragmatic markers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(5):866–891.

Matthew Olivier. 2026. On the algorithmic feed as a medium.

ourfilipinograndma. 2021a. Idk what Mama expected...*TikTok*.

ourfilipinograndma. 2021b. Reply to... *TikTok*.

ourfilipinograndma. 2021c. Reply to ... send this to the cutest person you know. *TikTok*.

ourfilipinograndma. 2021d. There were no babies harmed in the making of this video... *TikTok*.

ourfilipinograndma. 2021e. Why haven’t you sent... *TikTok*.

ourfilipinograndma. 2022. Pls let us use this sound... *TikTok*.

Rukmini Pande. 2018. It's Just a Joke! The Payoffs and Perils of Microcelebrity in India. In Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown, editors, *Microcelebrity Around the Globe*, pages 145–160. Emerald Publishing, Leeds.

Thomas Poell, David B. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy. 2022. *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Polity Press, Cambridge/Medford.

David Poveda. 2022. Metalinguistic activity, humor and social competence in classroom discourse. *Pragmatics. Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)*:89–107.

René T. Proyer. 2018. Playfulness and humor in psychology: An overview and update. *HUMOR*, 31(2):259–271.

Joanne Rae M. Ramirez. 2023. The Pinoy grandma that ticks on TikTok. *Philstar Life*.

Kunal Rao and Gaurav Dixit. 2026. Does language of posting in social media shape influencers and users' participation?: analysing conversational consistency using a computational social science approach. *Journal of Decision Systems*, 35(1):2658198.

Inma Rodríguez-Ardura and Antoni Meseguer-Artola. 2018. The playfulness of Facebook – Shaped by underlying psychological drivers and gender differences. *Telematics and Informatics*, 35(8):2254–2269.

Willibald Ruch, Tracey Platt, René T. Proyer, and Hsueh-Chih Chen. 2019. Editorial: Humor and laughter, playfulness and cheerfulness: upsides and downsides to a life of lightness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10:730.

Ronald Scollon. 2001. *Mediated Discourse: The Nexus of Practice*. Routledge, London/New York.

Theresa M. Senft. 2008. *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks*. Peter Lang, New York.

Theresa M. Senft. 2013. Microcelebrity and the branded self. In John Hartley, Jean Burgess, and Axel Bruns, editors, *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, pages 346–354. Wiley, 1st ed.

Corwin Senko and Viviana Fyffe. 2010. An evolutionary perspective on effective vs. ineffective pick-up lines. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 150(6):648–667.

Miguel Sicart. 2014. *Play Matters*. The MIT Press, Cambridge/London.

Nili Steinfeld, Hananel Rosenberg, and Michal Mahat-Shamir. 2025. TikTok war humor: Social and psychological functions of humor videos by micro-influencers and ordinary users during conflict. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16:1637194.

Caroline Tagg and Tereza Spilioti. 2022. Research ethics. In Camilla Vásquez, editor, *Research Methods for Digital Discourse Analysis*, pages 91–113. Bloomsbury, London.

Theo van Leeuwen. 2008. *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Analysis*. Oxford Academic Books, Oxford.

Joe Whittaker, Seán Looney, Alastair Reed, and Fabio Votta. 2021. Recommender systems and the amplification of extremist content. *Internet Policy Review*, 10(2).

Esme Winter-Froemel. 2016. Approaching wordplay. In Sebastian Knospe, Alexander Onysko, and Maik Goth, editors, *Crossing Languages to Play with Words: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, pages 11–46. De Gruyter, Berlin.

Allen Hai Xiao and Qingyi Yan. 2026. The spatiality of performative authenticity on social media: A geographical understanding of young African fashion microcelebrities. *Geographical Research*, 64(1):e70061.

Huimin Xu, Csilla Weninger, and Der-Thanq Victor Chen. 2025. Microcelebrities' identity construction on social media: A systematic review and synthesis. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 28(2):493–518.

Jingyan Elaine Yuan. 2025. Making virtual celebrity: Platformization and intermediation in digital cultural production. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 28(1):316–331.

Michele Zappavigna. 2011. Ambient affiliation: A linguistic perspective on Twitter. *New Media & Society*, 13(5):788–806.

Michele Zappavigna. 2015. Searchable talk: The linguistic functions of hashtags. *Social Semiotics*, 25(3):274–291.

Wenting Zhao and David Machin. 2026. How health influencers use algorithms to create discourses: Distorting medical information for niche marketing groups. *Discourse & Society*:09579265261422767.