



Italian Brainrot and Generative Artificial Intelligence. The Hyper-Engagement of Absurdity on TikTok

Italian Brainrot e Inteligencia Artificial Generativa.
El *hiperengagement* de lo absurdo en TikTok

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study focuses on the analysis of Italian Brainrot, a universe of absurd characters created and animated using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), which emerged in mid-January 2025 and achieved unprecedented levels of notoriety, engagement, and virality among Generation Z and Generation Alpha. **Methodology:** A sample of 300 short TikTok videos was viewed, 30 for each of the 10 most popular characters (including Ballerina Cappuccina, Tralalero Tralalá, and Tung Tung Tung Sahur). Data on likes, comments, shares, and views were collected, and the Engagement Rate was estimated. Both the characters, examined from the aesthetic perspective of the absurd, and user comments were qualitatively described. **Results:** The main finding is an Engagement Rate above 25% and an emotional connection far stronger than that observed in other viral digital phenomena. **Discussion:** The exponential productivity of random meanings enabled by GenAI, together with the fascination with the absurd generated by Italian Brainrot, would explain, along with the TikTok algorithm, the high levels of emotional engagement among adolescents and preadolescents, hence the notion of hyper-engagement. **Conclusions:** The Italian Brainrot phenomenon exhibits unprecedented levels of engagement, far exceeding those of previous viral phenomena, ushering in a new era of algorithmic popular culture 100% made by GenAI.

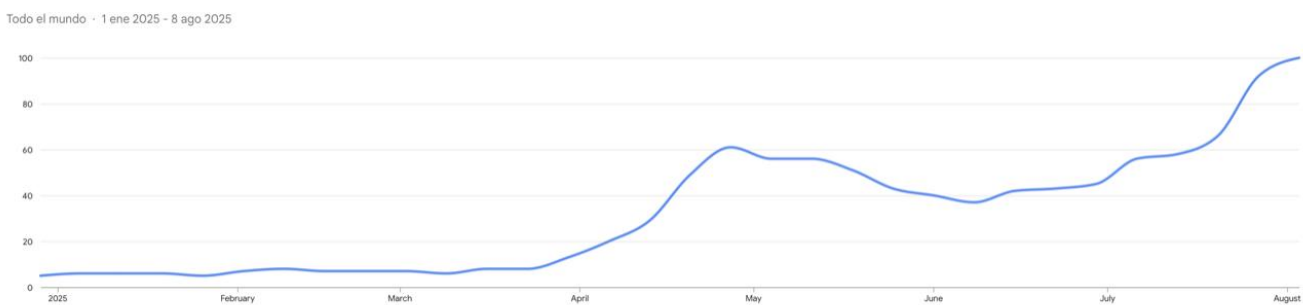
Keywords: Italian Brainrot; GenAI; engagement; Generation Alpha, Generation Z; TikTok; absurd aesthetic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since mid-January 2025, a new viral phenomenon has burst onto social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels: the Italian Brainrot is a universe of eccentric fictional characters with memetic narratives, created using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). The Italian Brainrot Characters (IBC) have not only captured the attention of a significant portion of users among younger segments, specifically Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and Generation Alpha (born between 2010 and 2025), but have also been the subject of media coverage worldwide. The Guardian, on June 25, 2025, published the article "From Chimpanzini Bananini to Ballerina Cappuccina: how Gen Alpha went wild for Italian brain rot animals" (Hunt, 2025), which points out that there has never been such an immediate and widespread reaction from both generations to emerging digital content.

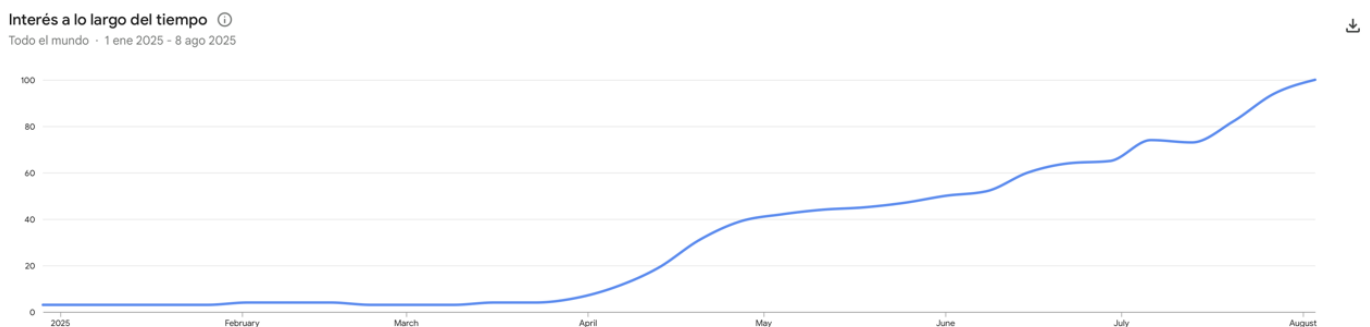
This interest is verifiable, both by looking at Google searches (Figure 1) and YouTube searches (Figure 2) using Google Trends data. From January to early August 2025, the popularity of the term "brainrot" takes off from April onwards, reaching its peak in August 2025.

Figure 1. Search Interest for the Term "Brainrot" on the Web Time Period: January 1 to August 8, 2025.
Geographic Location Defined: Worldwide



Source: Elaborated by the authors using data from Google Trends.

Figure 2. Search Interest for the Term "Brainrot" on YouTube, Time Period: January 1 to August 8, 2025.
Geographic Location Defined: Worldwide



Source: Elaborated by the authors using data from Google Trends.

The first documented IBC is Tralalero Tralalá (a great white shark strolling along the beach wearing three blue Nike sneakers), which appeared on TikTok on January 13, 2025, and reached seven million views with its first short video. The authorship of the first IBCs is unclear, although various media outlets such as *The Economic Times* (April 21, 2025) and *El País* (June 13, 2025) trace the origin of “Tralalero Tralalá” or “Ballerina Capuccina” (a ballerina with a cup of cappuccino on her head) to the @noxaasht profile.

Unlike previous viral phenomena such as Skibidi Toilet, an equally absurd 2023 creation driven by nascent Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, IBCs stand out for their greater degree of emotional involvement, co-creation, longevity, and engagement levels. They represent the first viral, decentralized, and non-linear cultural phenomenon arising exclusively from human action combined with GenAI, without mediation, scripts, or commercial or corporate strategies. This model inaugurates a new logic of cultural production based on four key elements:

- Animated characters and visuals 100% created by GenAI.
- Fascination and engagement with absurd and surreal characters and narratives—unpredictable and nonsensical—in the predominant short-form video format.
- End-to-end speed in the process, driven by AI and GenAI: creation, recreation, and viral spread.
- Decentralized and free-form narratives, with extensive spin-offs and crossovers.

The IBCs comprise a universe of fictional characters with their own personalities, using a memetic, characteristic, and distinctive audiovisual language. As such, their defining characteristics have been outlined and are presented as follows: an IBC is usually a fictional hybrid figure of animal + fruit (or vegetable) + thing + anthropomorphic or human features. There are animals (sharks, elephants, crocodiles, tigers, orcas or capybaras, among others), fruits and vegetables (bananas, coconuts, oranges, lemons, pineapples, broccoli...) and everyday objects (coffee cups, glasses, toasters, sandals, bicycles, chairs, toilets...), most of them with an anthropomorphic form (feet, hands, eyes, face or human body).

The IBC animations, with varying degrees of iconicity and realism, are generated using GenAI and 3D rendering. As of the closing date of this research, between ten and fifteen core characters, around thirty secondary characters, and more than sixty attempts at new character creations have been identified, in a constantly expanding stream. These narrative figures are reinterpreted in hundreds of thousands of home productions, many with *crossovers* that integrate pop culture icons such as *Barbie*, *Star Wars*, *Fortnite*, *Pokémon*, *Frozen*, and *Squid Game*. In parallel, numerous sounds, melodies, and musical themes specific to *Italian Brainrot* have emerged, which are present on platforms like Spotify, YouTube Music, and Apple Music. The cultural and sonic dimension of the phenomenon is amplified by the use of diverse musical genres, from rap and reggaeton to pop, with viral versions like those by *Abt melody*, which parody songs like *Barbie Girl* and *Gypsy Woman*, or the catchy melody *The Brainrot Song* by @aironicfun (April 30, 2025), which mentions six characters and is used in more than 346,000 short videos; or the melody by @realtoones (n.d.), applied to 746,000 Italian Brainrot creations.

From an aesthetic perspective, IBCs stand out for a visual atmosphere that, precisely because it is so grotesque and illogical, is highly innovative and creative. This aesthetic positions them as paradigmatic representatives of the first major algorithmic cultural movement, GenAI, especially significant for Gen Z and Gen Alpha. It is characterized by an Italianized verbal language (in names, popular expressions, tones of voice, accents, and phonetics). This characteristic refers not so much to their geographical origin as to a caricatured appropriation of Italian elements, present in names like *Trulimero Truliccina*, *Ballerina Cappuccina* or *Capuccino Assassino* and in descriptions with exclamations like “porco Dio” or “mamma mia,” along with abundant use of the endings “-ini” and “-ino” in verbal expression and in melodic and musical phrases.

References to Mediterranean environments also appear, such as family kitchens or warm climates, which contribute to a kitschy and eclectic aesthetic.

Figure 3. *Italian Brainrot Moodboard*



Source: Drawing with Arfan, 2025.

The term “brain rot” was nominated as the 2024 Word of the Year by Oxford University Press (2024). It refers to the cognitive decline resulting from the excessive consumption of unchallenging, low-quality audiovisual content via mobile screens, especially by adolescents and pre-adolescents (Yousef et al., 2025). This cognitive decline is associated with trends such as doomscrolling (Sharma et al., 2022) or zombies scrolling (Sharpe et al., 2025).

The Italian Brainrot phenomenon originated in January 2025 on TikTok, specifically in the US, with characters like Ballerina Cappuccina and Tralalero Tralalá, surpassing 45 million views and 3.8 million likes (Matozzo, 2025). Media outlets like *Aftenposten* (Norway) describe the enthusiasm of children after school for searching for and consuming brainrot content on their mobile phones (Sirevåg, 2025). The phenomenon is rapidly spreading internationally: Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, France, Spain, and Poland, where, for example, media outlets like Polskie Radio Czwórka (2025) described it as "absurdly addictive" and RFI (RadioFrance, 2025) as "slightly problematic." Novoa (2025), states in *El País*: "El humor más absurdo para huir de los problemas generacionales: se crea un espacio anestesiante".¹ In just six months, Amazon registered more than 3,000 products associated with IBC (Zhan, 2025): mugs, plush toys, notebooks, surprise figures, t-shirts, and board games. Even on the Roblox video game platform, the game *Steal a Brainrot* has emerged, where the protagonists are the IBCs, and it has already become the video game with the greatest simultaneous social reach in history.

The magnitude of the phenomenon can be summarized in the acronym ONE (Origin, Notoriety and Engagement), which was elaborated by the authors:

- **Origin:** It is the first native viral phenomenon, GenAI, created in a decentralized, collective, and spontaneous manner. Its origins are not driven by any commercial logic, marketing or advertising campaigns, or intellectual property rights.

¹ "The most absurd humor as a way to escape generational problems: the creation of a numbing space."

- **Notoriety:** There are hundreds of millions of global views in a few months (January-August 2025), with high penetration and implementation in GenZ and GenAlpha.
- **Engagement:** attachment translates into co-creation of characters and narratives, repetition and cultural reproduction (*snap-quotes, edits, fanarts, duets*).

While traditional commercial brands rarely exceed a 2% Engagement Rate (ER) on TikTok, and influencers with over one million followers hover around 10.5% (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024), IBCs would reach higher values. This behavior suggests not only quantitative virality but also remarkable affective intensity. The phenomenon redefines the boundaries of algorithmic memetic engagement, establishing a new standard for participatory, generative, and decentralized digital culture (Table 1).

Table 1. Average Engagement Rate on TikTok and Instagram

Platform	Average “normal” ER	ER in viral phenomena
TikTok	4-6%	15-50%
Instagram	1.5-3.5%	10-35%

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Influencer Marketing Hub (2024).

The emergence of IBCs as a viral youth phenomenon deserves attention from the perspective of emotional engagement, symbolic affiliation, and algorithmic co-creation. Unlike traditional viral phenomena (films, series, or campaigns with directed narratives), IBCs arise from an open, collaborative, and random environment where teenagers and pre-teens converge using GenAI tools.

Characters such as Tralalero Tralalá, Ballerina Cappuccina, and Chimpancini Bananini embody this new, disruptive aesthetic, with a distinctive audiovisual style: glitchy designs, distorted sound, and hyper-fragmented post-production that defies conventional norms. Most of IBC's characters are anthropomorphic beings, reimagined as human, animal, or object forms, resulting in a surreal and delirious effect.

In the case of IBCs (Interactive Creative Content), engagement transcends views or comments, expressing itself in an extended symbolic production: derivatives, edits, sounds, viral phrases, melodies, 3D renders, costumes, fan art, cosplay, and videos remixed by millions of users. This level of participation surpasses classic memetic virality (Shifman, 2013), giving rise to a new algorithmic virality, amplified both by the platforms themselves and by the strong emotional attachment of young people. This is not a rational adherence, but rather an “algorithmic fervor” with a compulsive emotional involvement that borders on the pathological, establishing it as the first transmedia algorithmic lovemark for Gen Z and Gen Alpha. To understand the relationship between young people and TikTok, the approach of Cortés-Quesada and Vizcaíno-Verdú (2025) is useful.

1.1. Engagement, Virality and GenAI on TikTok

The concept of engagement has received considerable attention from academic and professional circles (Bowden, 2009; Macnamara et al., 2012; Pedersen et al., 2014; Triantafillidou et al., 2018; Chan-Olmsted et al., 2020; Ballesteros, 2019). Dahlgren and Hill (2022) describe it as a subjective mental state that involves focused attention on an object, which constitutes a prerequisite for participation. The emergence of engagement as a key metric in digital environments has been widely documented in recent research. Evans (2020) focuses particularly on the concept of engagement in its connection to transmedia. Pletikosa and Michahelles (2013), for example, analyze engagement on Facebook pages. Studies such as Zannettou's et al. (2023) reveal that content that manages to capture intense emotions (enthusiasm, surprise, curiosity) achieves engagement rates of up to 40% on TikTok. Ervik (2023) analyzes how GenAI constructs what he calls

a “visual social imaginary,” and Walter and Friesike (2025) warn that creators anticipate algorithmic expectations when designing their content.

Hörauf (2025), for their part, point out that it is still too early for a utopian or dystopian stance regarding GenAI as a creative tool. While Grewal et al. (2025) believe that GenAI will revolutionize marketing and communication, Wei and Tyson (2024) compare interactions between human-generated and digitally generated content. These approaches confirm that virality is no longer solely a human phenomenon, but expands when GenAI acts as an emotional architect (Leaver & Srdarov, 2025). The Italian Brainrot would therefore represent a radically new form of engagement.

Thus, TikTok's algorithm, driven by user metrics such as hashtags and "likes," provides a succession of highly similar content (Klug et al., 2021). In this context, short video is a form of expression and socialization among users (Xu et al., 2019), being one of the preferred formats for young people.

There is consensus in the scientific and professional community (Pletikosa & Michahelles, 2013; Zannettou et al., 2023) in which, to calculate the ER in networks like TikTok, analytics tools usually apply the following formula:

$$ER = \left(\frac{Likes + Comments + Shares}{Views} \right) \times 100$$

1.2. The Virality of the Absurd, Glitch and Zany in Generation Z and Generation Alpha

The role of absurdity in young people's culture has been explored by Ngai (2005 and 2015), who introduces the concepts of “ugly feelings” and “zany” as aesthetic responses that stand in contrast to anything sublime or perfect. Carroll (1990 & 1999) linked it to grotesque fascination, as a form of social rupture. AI-generated glitch images elicit significantly higher engagement rates than primary human versions. This effect, it is believed to be amplified in IBCs by using AI as a creative engine, without narrative control and with disturbing results.

An empirical study of 298 high school students in Ohio (USA), conducted by Partlow and Talarczyk (2021), confirms a statistically significant relationship between the absurdity of memes and their perception as funny by Gen Z, directly demonstrating that absurd content fosters humor and connects emotionally with young digital creators and consumers. Meanwhile, Pallawarukka (2022) presents a qualitative analysis exploring the presence of surrealism and absurdity in Gen Z memes, highlighting how this abstract and unexpected style generates aesthetic and social resonance, reinforcing the idea that the use of the ridiculous serves a function of emotional connection and cultural acceptance among youth communities. Sanders (2023) compares humor in Gen Z to a new “Dadaist avant-garde,” noting that the audience finds solace in incoherence, nonsense, and narrative disruption. Ehrlich (2020), Shifman (2013) and Yang (2024) introduce the idea that absurd-looking memes stand out because they incorporate intertextual, humorous and visually shocking elements, creating greater emotional appeal (although not focused exclusively on Gen Z), their findings strongly support the idea that these forms of “ugly” and absurd digital humor drive engagement.

At least eight factors suggest that IBCs reach ER levels higher than 20-25%:

1. **Accessibility of GenAI Tools:** the accessibility of Gen Z and Gen Alpha to generative artificial intelligence platforms, such as Google Veo 3, Vidfly, DeeVid Ai, Kaiber.ai, Runway ML, Krikey AI, Pika Labs, and text-to-speech (TTS) tools drive the exponential creation and manipulation of visual and audio content to produce Italian Brainrot content. These tools allow the creation of animated characters in short videos from written prompts, incorporating fusion and hybridization (of beings, characters, aesthetics, worlds of inspiration, etc.), integrating unnatural movements, digital ugliness, comical deformations, flat or psychedelic textures, and an aesthetic marked by lo-fi glitch effects, sound distortions, and repetitions.
2. **Collective and Emotionally Absurd Character:** the phenomenon takes the form of a communal experience rooted in absurdity, exaggeration, and grotesqueness. This generates a high level of playback (looping) and repeated viewing, encouraged by its brief, highly musical, and addictive nature.
3. **Ultra-Short Format and Musicality:** videos between 7 and 15 seconds long feature catchy and visually saturated musical compositions, which favors automatic repetition and a high number of shares.
4. **Shared Aesthetics Without Personal Identity:** unlike accounts focused on individual figures or influencers, IBC content circulates as part of a collective and shared aesthetic language. This reduces resistance to self-exposure and enhances participation and reinterpretation.
5. **Hyperactive Prosumers:** the main audience (Gen Z and Gen Alpha) not only consumes, but also produces, edits, mixes and expands content into new versions, actively integrating themselves into the co-creation of meaning.
6. **Strong Transmedia Capacity:** the characters and their content transcend platforms (TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, Roblox) and physical places, reaching diverse audiences and forms, which will boost shares, likes and comments.
7. **Acceptance of Brainrot and Glitch Aesthetics:** the visual culture of what is absurd, what is crazy and grotesque is finding increasing acceptance as an aesthetic identity form among younger generations.
8. **High Symbolic Appropriation and Crossover Potential:** IBCs have been hybridized with multiple contemporary cultural references. Thus, figures like Ballerina Capuccina (initially the partner of Assassino Capuccino, occasionally pregnant by Tralalero) Tralalá and the partner of Tung Tung Tung Sahur or Brr Brr Patapim) are interwoven in viral videos with icons like *Barbie*, *Wednesday*, *Star Wars*, *The Squid Game*, *Pokémon*, or global football celebrities such as Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Toni Kroos, Mbappé, or Lamine Yamal. Commercial brands also seek to be part of the conversations. A notable example is the inclusion of Lidl's tricolor sneakers in Tralalero Tralalá performances. TikTok accounts, such as @Crack8029, have produced videos and voiceovers for brands like Coca-Cola or Fanta in a brainrot style, with great virality: "Nooooo, Cocacolini Viciosini, no puede estar cinco minutini sin un tragüini..." (Nooooo, Cocacolini Viciosini, he can't go five minutes without a little drink) or Cocacolini Cerini, viciosini... si le falta le da ansiedini" (Cocacolini Cerini, viciosini... if there's not enough, he gets anxious) (2025, November 27).

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective (**MO**) of this research is to analyze the IBC phenomenon on TikTok from an engagement perspective, paying special attention to its aesthetic construction based on the absurd and its natively GenAI nature, within the framework of the high digital exposure habits of Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

Specific objectives include:

- **SO1:** To estimate the ER of IBC on TikTok, framing it as a viral cultural manifestation created and disseminated entirely with GenAI and with a specific impact on young audiences.
- **SO2:** To estimate the specific ER of the ten most representative characters of the Italian Brainrot universe, in order to detect differential patterns of virality and possible factors of emotional engagement.
- **SO3:** To qualitatively analyze user comments on the most viral videos, to identify dominant emotions, emerging expressive codes and forms of interaction typical of what, in interpretive terms, can begin to be defined as the “Brainrot Generation.”

The aim is to provide some insights into how the dynamics of affection, symbolic consumption, and young people's cultural participation are changing in what would be the first viral GenAI cultural phenomenon.

2.1. Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated:

- **RQ1:** Does IBC generate exceptional levels of engagement between Gen Z and Gen Alpha?
- **RQ2:** How does it affect things that the IBCs are GenAI-created?
- **RQ3:** How does the fact that it's an absurd, glitchy and zany imaginary thing influence the success of the phenomenon?
- **RQ4:** What characteristics do the most popular, viral, and engaging characters have?
- **RQ5:** Can the semantic field “brainrot” be delimited based on the IBC phenomenon?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Materials and Methods

A combined quantitative and qualitative approach with a descriptive scope is applied. To estimate the ER of the ten most popular characters from Italian Brainrot (Figure 4 and Table 2), a sample size of 300 short videos—those with the most views available on TikTok— was determined for each of the characters chosen and identified by the team using the hashtag with their main name and related or derivative names. This is a common process for viral phenomena without an official account, as is the case here. In terms of distribution channel, after previous explorations and documentation in secondary sources, TikTok It is the dominant platform in the phenomenon under discussion, along with Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. TikTok's hegemony This would be explained by its algorithmic design and its native participation architecture (hybridizations, duets, cosplays, fanarts, sounds, filters, games...), which allows for a comprehensive analysis of phenomena such as the one under study.

Figure 4. Images of the Ten Italian Brainrot Characters Being Analyzed



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on images from Google.

Table 2. Description of the Ten IBCs Being Analyzed In Order From Left to Right as in Figure 4

No.	IBC Name	Description
1	Tralalero Tralala	Great white shark wearing 3 Nike sneakers
2	Ballerina Capuccina	Ballerina with a cup of cappuccino coffee as the head
3	Trulimero Trulichina	Cat with a fish body and four human feet
4	Bombardil Crocodilo	Crocodile with the body of a bomber plane
5	Tung Tung Tung Sahur	Humanized wooden trunk with a <i>mugdar</i> in hand
6	Brr Brr Patapim	Forest tree with a long-nosed monkey face and human feet
7	Cappuccino Assassino	Takeaway coffee cup that looks like a ninja thug
8	Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa	Bear with a sea bream as the head
9	Chimpancini Bananini	Green gorilla inside a banana peel
10	Lirilí Larilá	Elephant with a cactus body and human feet with sandals

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

3.2. Measures and Instruments

Table 3 summarizes the main methodological characteristics of the research, which focuses on the identification, description, and quantitative and qualitative analysis of IBC's emblematic figures on TikTok. It details the objectives, time frame, sample, and variables used, as well as the selection criteria and the analysis technique employed.

Table 3. Methodological Design and Variables of the Study

Element	Description
Study Name	Algorithmic engagement of Italian Brainrot characters
Main objective	To identify and describe the Italian Brainrot characters and measure their engagement on the leading social network for GenZ and GenAlpha using short videos
Digital platforms	TikTok
Time frame	January 13, 2025 - August 8, 2025
Sample size	300 short videos (30 of each of the 10 Italian Brainrot characters analyzed)
Number of Italian Brainrot Characters analyzed	10
Names of Italian Brainrot Characters analyzed	Tralalero Tralalá, Ballerina Capuccina, Trulimero Trulichina, Bombardiro Crocodilo, Tung Tung Tung Sahur, Brr Brr Patapim, Capuccino Assassino, Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa, Chimpancini Bananini and Lirilí Larilá.
Selection criteria of the characters analyzed	Ten of the most representative and popular characters have been analyzed (possibly accounting for more than 80% of the prominence and engagement figures). It is estimated that there are about 10-15 central specimens; another 25-30 secondary ones and another 60 of lesser visibility (as of August 8, 2025).
Quantitative variables	Posts, views, likes, shares, comments, engagement rate
Qualitative variables	The semantic field of absurdity and a tag cloud based on frequent comments by character and the most commonly used hashtags
Total number of publications	The total number of videos published using the hashtag
Total views	The total number of views of a video on TikTok
Total likes	The total number of "Likes" created by users by clicking on the "Heart" icon
Total comments	The total number of comments posted on a video
Total shares	Total number of times a TikTok video has been shared by clicking the video's "Share" button
Variable of the Estimated Engagement Rate	Engagement Rate (ER) = $[(\text{Likes} + \text{Comments} + \text{Shares}) / \text{Views}] \times 100$
Analysis technique	Scraping and semantic analysis with the TikTok API

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

3.3. Data Collection

- Identification and selection of relevant tags. Content is tracked using general hashtags that anchor the phenomenon, such as #brainrot or #italianbrainrot.
- Criteria for selecting the ten analyzed IBC characters: the choice was based on their popularity, taking into account mentions of their names appearing in a random sample of news about the phenomenon, in audiovisual sources and also taking into account a sample of conversations about the phenomenon, mainly on TikTok, YouTube and Instagram Reels.
- Identification and selection of specific hashtags for each of the IBC characters analyzed. Hashtags were identified for the name of each of the ten selected characters, such as: #tralalerotralala, #ballerinaCapuccina or #bombardinocrocodilo, and its main written variants; Similarly for the remaining characters analyzed.
- Acceptance and counting of specific hashtags for each of the IBC characters, with spelling or idiomatic variations. Common variations such as #tralalelotralará, #ballerinacapuccina, and

#bombardirocrodilo were incorporated, as well as for the remaining characters analyzed.

- Total post count per hashtag. Posts with each main hashtag are counted. The possibility of duplicates is assumed, since a post can include multiple hashtags.
- Analysis of a representative sample of short videos per character. Due to time and resource constraints, thirty videos were selected—the most viewed videos for each character—to collect key interactions with data accessible directly or indirectly: likes, comments, and shares. A total sample of 300 videos.
- Based on the interaction data, the average per content is estimated and the usual ER formula for TikTok is applied.
- Data collection was primarily based on a manual and systematic review of TikTok content to ensure optimal qualitative curation for gathering aesthetic details and insights into the IBC imagery. Additionally, lightweight web scraping techniques were used to extract public metadata from TikTok (views, comments, hashtags, publication date, etc.) to create a verifiable and homogeneous corpus. This methodological approach prioritizes observation and contextual interpretation while ensuring empirical traceability and basic replicability of the analysis.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

The research ensures its internal validity through the consistency between objectives, methodology, and results analysis, using a non-statistically representative sample of the most viral videos tagged with #italianbrainrot and each character on TikTok (e.g., #trulimerotrulichina). Standardized engagement criteria widely used in social media studies are applied. Reliability is ensured through the replicability of the analytical model employed and the clarity of the observed variables, allowing the study to be replicated in future research.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Videos on TikTok of Italian Brainrot Characters

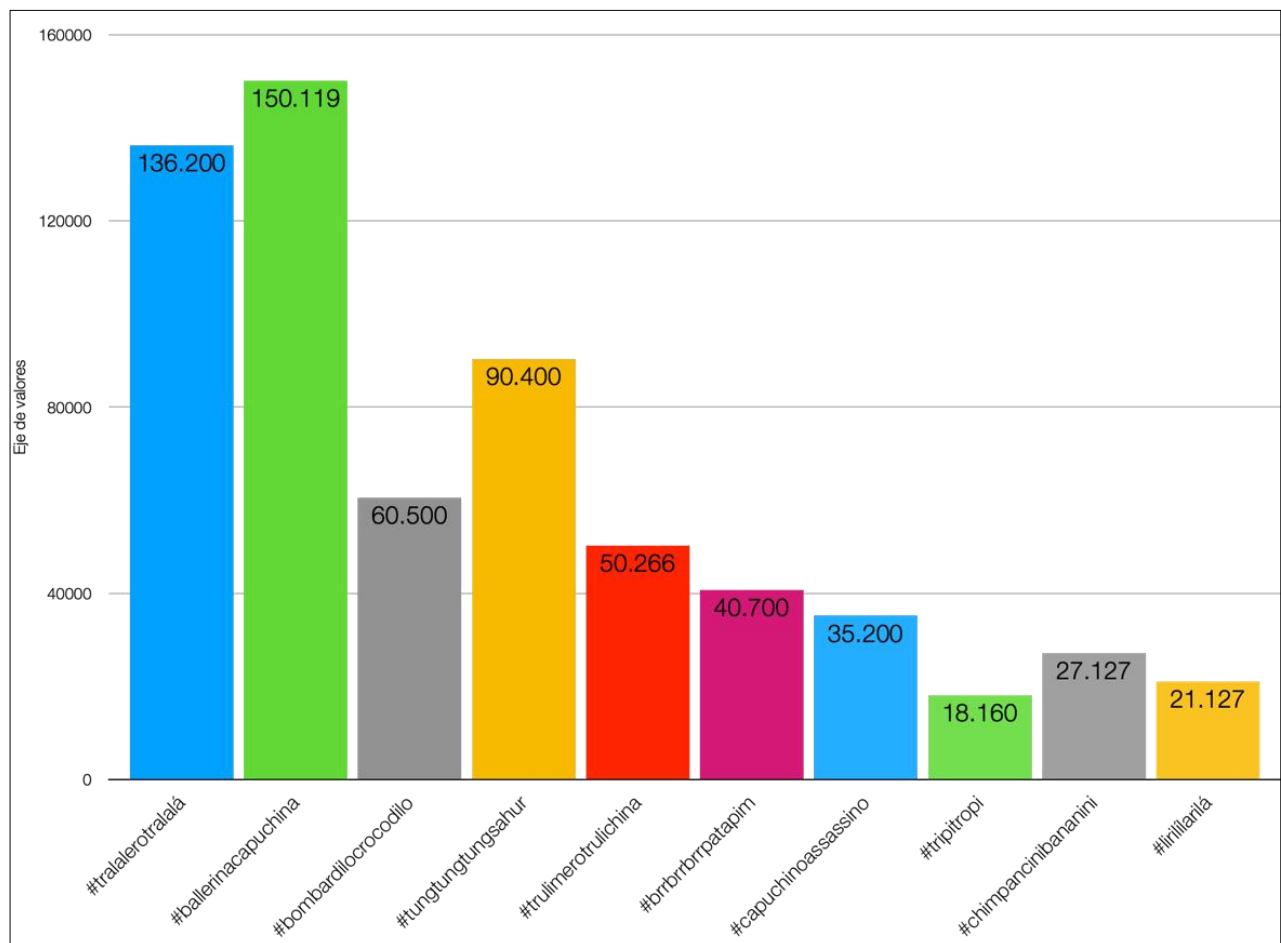
Ballerina Capuccina, she leads IBC's audiovisual production, ranking first with 150,119 videos (Figure 5). This figure not only positions her as the most produced and reproduced within the phenomenon, but also makes her one of the few cases of female characters who have dominated a predominantly androgynous or masculinized trend. She is a beautiful, perfectly sculpted dancer with a head shaped like a cappuccino cup.

Since the beginning of 2025, Ballerina Capuccina has evolved, from training alone to dancing alongside other IBCs or sports celebrities, such as Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, or political figures, such as Putin or Trump (Figure 6). She has been portrayed in more or less stable romantic relationships, such as with Capuccino Assassino (35,200 videos) or sporadic ones with other IBCs (Figure 6); she has been created as the mother of all kinds of "tralaleritos" (the name often given to the children's versions of IBCs) (Figure 6); and she has appeared in crossovers in *Frozen* and *Wednesday* (Figure 6). Ballerina has been depicted in numerous videos through processes of sensualization and hypersexualization, with erotic sequences and shots (Figure 6).

Second, Tralalero Tralalá, with 136,200 videos, is a remarkable figure that makes it one of the most recognizable icons of the phenomenon. In fact, this study has confirmed that the typical image of a Tralalá on the beach is the iconic representation of the entire IBC phenomenon, almost always used as an emblematic image by media outlets that have written news stories or reports on the subject. Its power lies in the visual impact of the humanized shark wearing blue Nikes and the absurd, melodic repetition of its name.

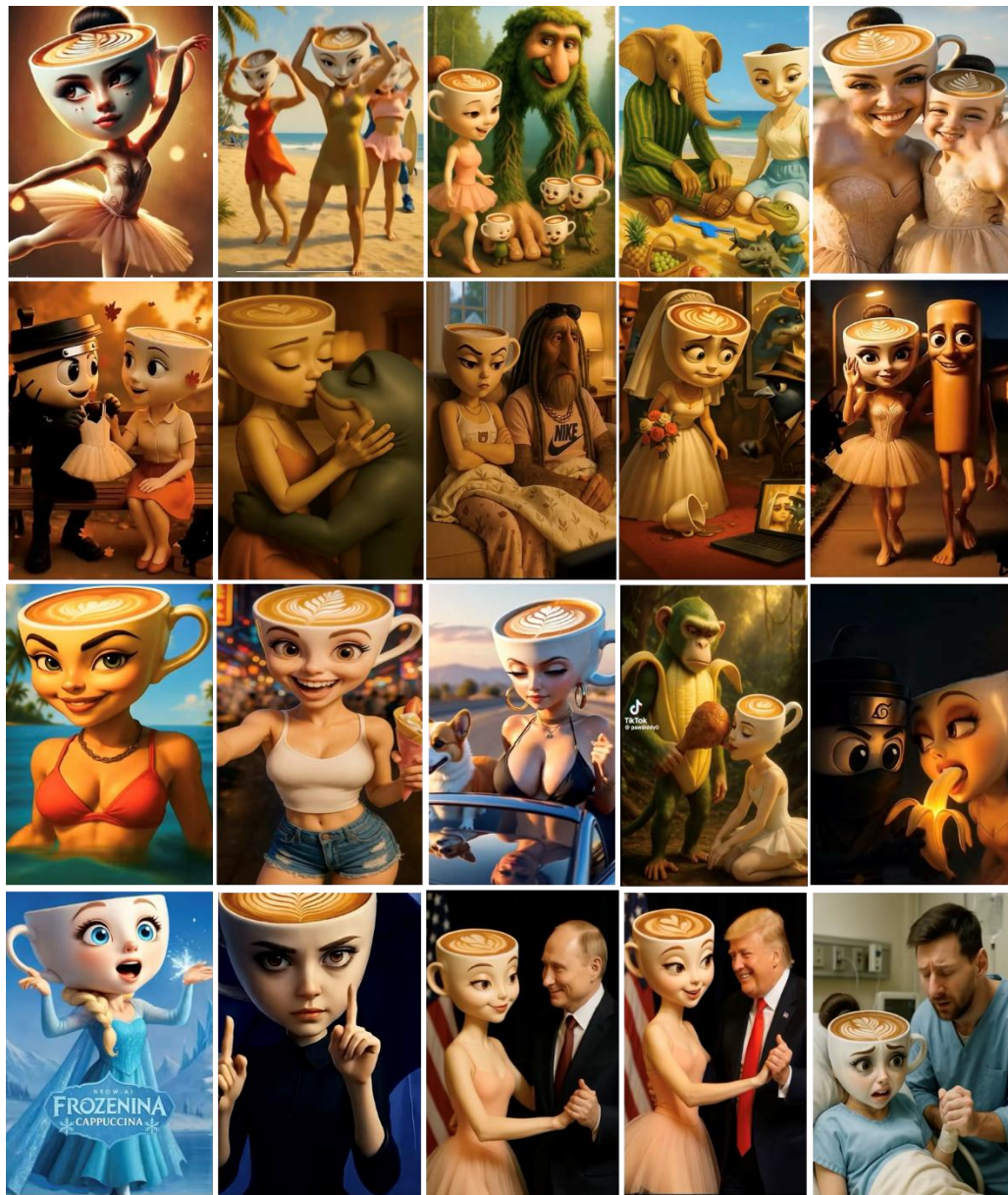
Tung Tung Tung Sahur appears in 90,400 videos. Of Indonesian origin, his inclusion in the brainrot ecosystem reveals the transnational nature of the phenomenon. Although he began as a wooden figure with a *mugdar* (a wooden tool originating in India) and a deep voice repeating “tung tung tung sahur”, it gradually gained narrative prominence, becoming progressively humanized and anthropomorphically represented. His emergence, along with that of other Indonesian characters, challenges the supposed Italian monopoly of the genre, demonstrating that the phenomenon is global. Characters like Bombardiro Crocodilo (60,500), Trulimero Truluchina (50,266) and Brr Brr Patapim (40,700) maintains a prominent presence, with musical and onomatopoeic names designed for rapid replication and collective memorization. At lower levels, labels like Chimpanchi Bananini or Lirilí Larilá still reflect the enormous creative capacity of the Italian Brainrot, even in its supposed margins.

Figure 5. Italian Brainrot Videos on TikTok



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Figure 6. *Narrative Concept of Ballerina Capuccina on TikTok*



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on screenshots from TikTok videos.

4.2. Visualizations of Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok

Several insights from the analysis of IBC visualizations on TikTok can be obtained from the data in Figure 7:

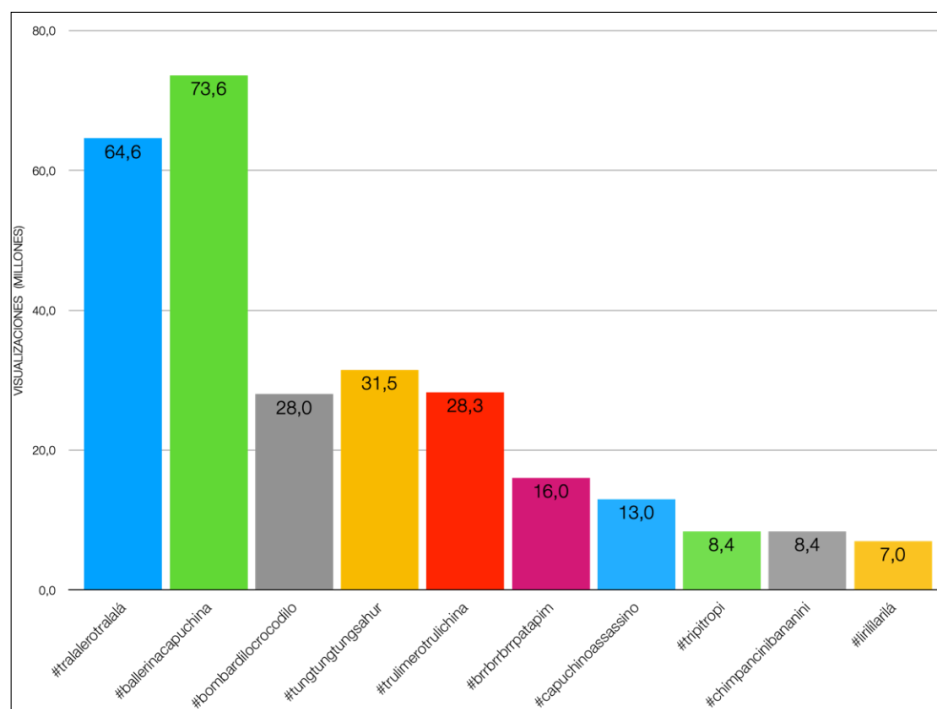
- Ballerina Cappuccina's leadership. With an estimated 73.6 million views, she is the most viewed character in the Brainrot ecosystem. Her dominance is both quantitative and qualitative, leading in likes, shares, and comments. Her description ("*E la moglie di Cappuccino Assassino, e ama la musica.....*")² and her hybrid design —childlike yet increasingly eroticized— contribute to her narrative centrality, especially regarding her alleged romantic relationship with Cappuccino Assassino and other characters.
- Tralalero Tralalá as a foundational figure. With 64.6 million views, this character occupies the second

² She's Cappuccino Assassin's wife, and she loves music.

position. It was one of the first viral brainrots, and its melodic repetition and minimalist aesthetic have already made it a cult figure.

- Consolidation of the intermediate group: Tung Tung Tung Sahur (31.5 million), Trulimero Trulichina (28.3 million) and the militarized Bombardiro Crocodilo (28 million) leads a mid-range group. Tung Tung Sahur is worth mentioning due to its Indonesian origins and success in Asia and the Middle East.
- Relevance of the lower-middle group: Brr Brr Patapim (16 million) and Capuccino Assassino (13 million) occupy lower-middle positions, but maintain an active role in shaping the brainrot ecosystem.
- Symbolic persistence of the least viewed. Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa and Chimpancini Bananini, with 8.4 million views each, and Lirilí Lirilá (7 million) closes the ranking. Although less viewed, they are still present in the Brainrot universe, especially in compilations, fan edits, and crossovers with other characters, which gives them symbolic value within the fandom.

Figure 7. Visualizations of Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

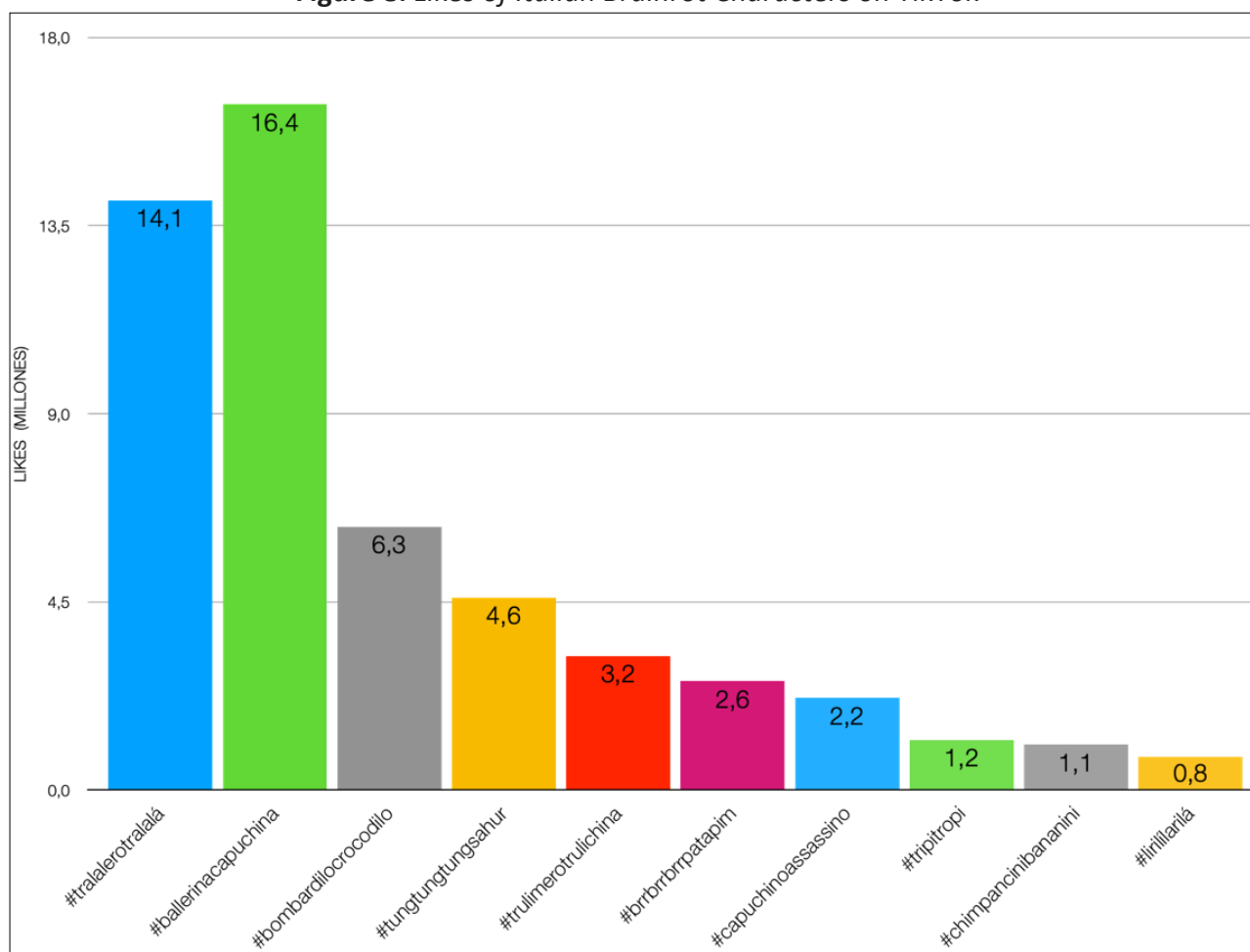
In this regard, a clear leadership dynamic is evident on the part of the two founding figures. Tralalero Tralalá and Ballerina Cappuccina lead not only in "views" but also in the resulting narratives and relevance, thanks to their positioning as symbols of the Italian Brainrot.

4.3. Likes of Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok

The study tallied the estimated likes (in millions) for the top ten IBC characters, revealing an uneven distribution but highlighting the emotional impact and virality achieved on TikTok. Ballerina Cappuccina led with 16.4 million likes, solidifying its status as an algorithmic lovemark. Her relationship with Capuccino Assassino has generated romantic subplots that further encourage likes, shares, and fan edits. Recently, a femme fatale rival, Espressona Signora, has emerged as a strong contender in the plot.

Secondly, Tralalero Tralalá reaches 14.1 million likes. Its iconic value within the brainrot makes it the second most popular figure. Bombardiro Crocodilo (6.3 million) and Tung Tung Tung Sahur (4.6 million) occupy intermediate positions. The former, for its militarized and warlike aesthetic; the latter, for its exotic sound and phonetic ambiguity. Trulimero Trulichina, with 3.2 million, stands out as an emerging figure. Brr Brr Patapim and Capuccino Assassino are in the mid-range, between 2.6 and 2 million. Assassino is gaining popularity thanks to his emotional connection with Ballerina, which has been exploited by the community with high viral potential. At the lower end of the range are Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa, Chimpancini Bananini, and Lirilí Lirilá, below 1.2 million (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Likes of Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok



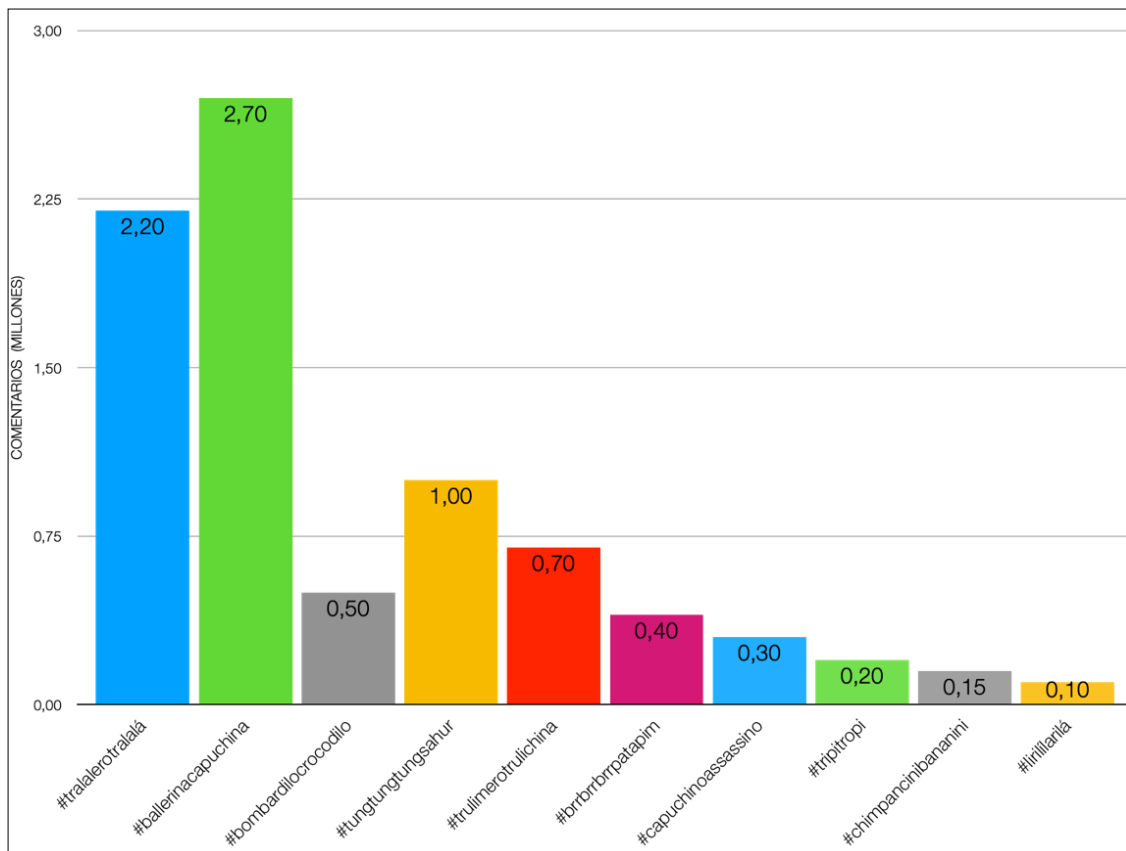
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.4. Comments on Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok

Analysis of comments provides information about the audience's emotional and discursive involvement. The distribution of estimated comments shows a moderately downward curve, with two characters clearly standing out at the beginning of the sequence: Ballerina Cappuccina and Tralalero Tralalá. Both concentrate the largest volume of comments, with figures that comfortably exceed the values of the rest of the group (Figure 9). The difference between the two is very marked, with Ballerina accumulating half a million more comments than Tralalero, which suggests a greater capacity to activate conversation, probably because she is the oldest of the characters, because of her female gender (which possibly favors greater female involvement) and because of the various affective relationships that the network has created for her.

In terms of social conversation, romantic relationships, even when absurd, have a strong potential to generate comments and opinions for and against: the relationship between Ballerina and Assassino has been a "serious" topic for TikTok users for months. As of early August 2025, videos featuring love triangles and large doses of promiscuity, infidelity, betrayal, breakups, and pregnancies are being produced, primarily involving Ballerina Capuccina or with the appearance of Espressona Signora and other IBCs.

Figure 9. Comments on Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok

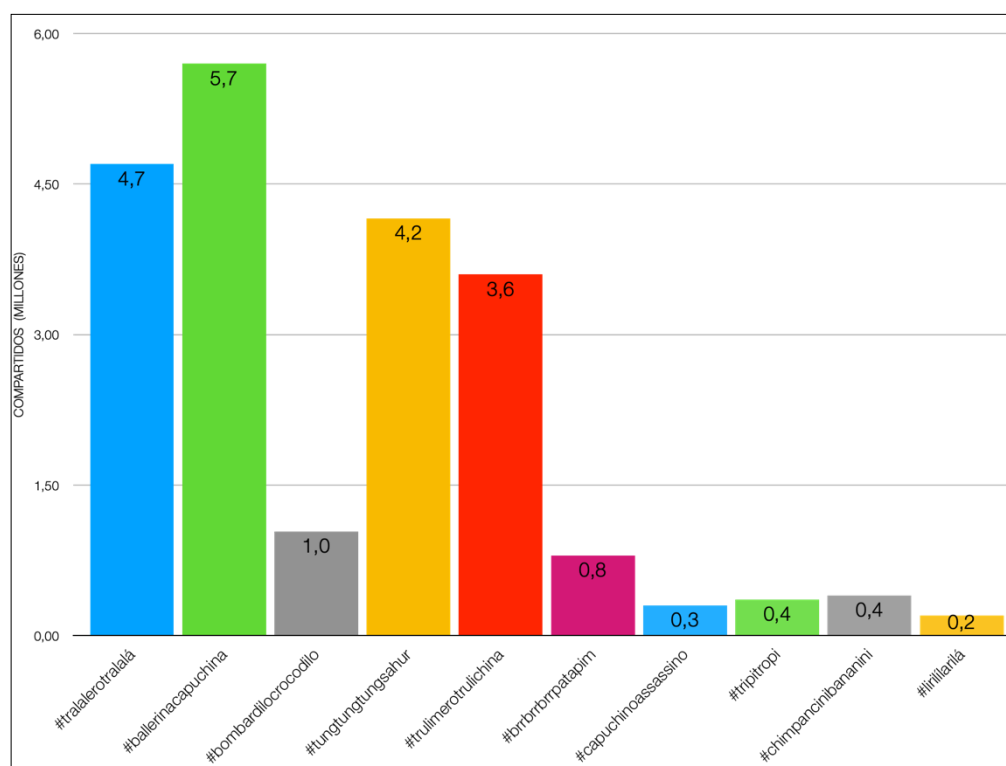


Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.5. Shares of Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok

Shares are a qualitative indicator of digital engagement. They imply not only reaction or comment, but *also* participation in the dissemination of content. By sharing, the user expresses, in a way, approval, (emotional, aesthetic, ideological) identification, and a desire for symbolic association: "this represents me." The total number of shares (in millions) has been estimated from data for the ten main characters of the Italian Brainrot phenomenon. Ballerina Cappuccina clearly leads at the top of Figure 10. She is the only female icon among the ten analyzed, which perhaps implies greater participation from the female population. Tralalero follows. Tralalá, whose reach transcends platforms: merch, stickers, YouTube Shorts loops, Instagram accounts, and parodies. Although it does not top the shares list, it maintains its place as an iconic figure of brainrot. In the lower-middle range of shares are Bombardiro Crocodilo and Brr Brr Patapim, whose presence lends coherence to the brainrot universe but does not drive high virality on their own. Capuccino, Chimpancini Bananini, Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa, and Lirilí Lirilá bring up the rear on the chart; although they have a recognizable presence, their symbolic and visual impact is less significant.

Figure 10. Shares of Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.6. Engagement Rate of Italian Brainrot Characters on TikTok

The average engagement per character within the Italian Brainrot universe reveals a content ecosystem influenced by algorithmic viral logic and emotions intensified by the aesthetics of what is absurd. Figure 11 ranks the ten main figures of the phenomenon according to their average *engagement* on TikTok.

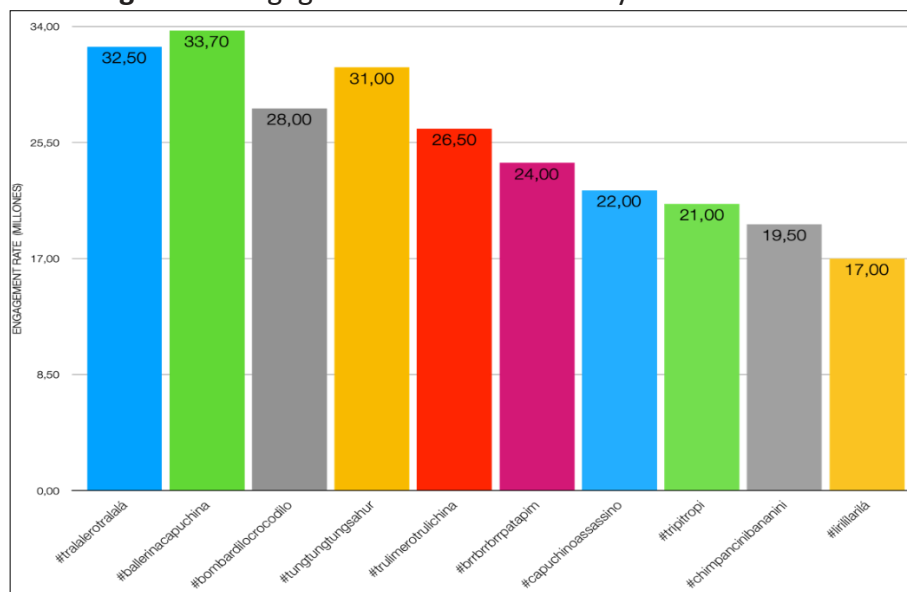
The ER is the key metric in this analysis because it allows measuring not only the visibility of content (views), but also its ability to emotionally and actively engage users through interactions such as likes, comments, and shares. Considering the average ER of the ten Italian Brainrot characters, it was possible to obtain an exceptionally high mean value of 25.52%, confirming the intensity and reach of the phenomenon. Based on these results, the characters can be grouped as follows:

- Engagement leaders (over 30%): Ballerina Cappuccina (33.7%), followed by Tralalero Tralalá (32.5%). Ballerina stands out for generating the highest active response from the audience. This means a particularly high volume of likes, shares, and comments, indicating that its content is not only viewed but also intensely circulated and discussed. Tralalero Tralalá, it retains its symbolic power. Tung Tung Tung Sahur, with 31%, with an ambiguous musicality and an exotic aesthetic, manages to be attractive through sonic and visual bewilderment, especially in Eastern and Asian communities.
- Group with high engagement (30-26%). Bombardiro Crocodile (28.0%) and Trulimero Trulichina (26.5%). These characters show very strong engagement values, demonstrating that, although their total views are lower than those of the leaders, their ability to trigger participation is equally remarkable. Trulimero Trulichina stands out for its chaotic and absurdist elements, which elicit intense reactions from an audience that values playfulness and the disconcerting. Bombardiro Crocodilo, with its militarized and ironic aesthetic, achieves a high ER thanks to its aggressiveness and ability to

generate delirious humor.

- Medium-to-high engagement levels (24-21%). Brr Brr Patapim (24.0%), Cappuccino Assassino (22.0%), and Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa (21.0%). These characters stand out for their more than acceptable interaction, especially considering that some of them operate as secondary characters within the Brainrot ecosystem. Brr Brr Patapim maintains its engagement thanks to repeated appearances in compilation videos. Cappuccino Assassino benefits from its narrative pairing with Ballerina, which has generated a large amount of fan edits and romantic content.
- Moderate engagement (less than 20%). Chimpancini Bananini with an ER of 19.5%, and Lirilí Lirilá with 17.0%. Although their response levels remain significant (close to 20%), these characters show a lower power of emotional or symbolic mobilization.

Figure 11. Engagement Rate Achieved by Italian Brainrot



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.6.1. Comparison of IBC Engagement With Other Viral Phenomena

It is relevant to compare IBCs with other recent viral phenomena on social media using integrated data on ER, date of appearance, main platform, and creative nature. In this context, two clearly differentiated groups are identified: on the one hand, IBCs as a whole; on the other, established viral phenomena such as *Barbie The Film*, *Wednesday Dance*, and *Squid. Game*, *Skibidi Toilet*, *Sonny Angels* or *Corn Kid* (table 4).

The ten characters from Italian Brainrot achieved an average engagement rate (ER) of 25.52%, an exceptional figure for digital participation. This level is three to four times higher than that of traditional viral campaigns or popular content, where rates of 8% to 15% are already considered outstanding.

Not only do they stand out individually, but as a viral ecosystem they show consistency in their response levels. This indicates that the public is not reacting solely to isolated characters, but to a shared universe. The fact that they all exceed 20% engagement reinforces the idea of hyper-participation and collective symbolic co-creation. The structural novelty of the phenomenon is the intervention of GenAI as a narrative engine.

In comparison, traditional viral phenomena exhibit a more moderate engagement:

- *Wednesday Dance* achieves a 22% ER rating, thanks to its gothic aesthetic and the replicability of the choreography based on The Cramps' *Goo Goo Muck*.
- *Barbie The Film* reaches 18%, driven by the redefinition of its image and a global activist discourse.
- *Skibidi Toilet* (16.5%), *Labubus* (14%), *Sonny Angels* (12.5%) and *Corn Kid* (13%) show remarkable figures, although below IBC.
- *The Squid Game*, despite its global success, is around 10%.

Table 4. Comparison of IBC Engagement Rate with Other Recent Viral Phenomena (2021-2025)

Character	Engagement Rate (%)	Date of appearance	Main platform	Secondary platform	Creative nature
Ballerina Cappuccina	33.7	January 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Tralalero Tralala	32.5	January 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Tung Tung Tung Sahur	31	February 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Bombardier Crocodilo	28	March 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Trulimero Trulichina	26.5	March 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Brr Brr Patapim	24	April 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Cappuccino Assassino	22	April 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Wednesday Dance	22	May 2023	Netflix/TikTok	Instagram Reels, YouTube Short	Series (fiction)
Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa	21	May 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Chimpancini Bananini	19.5	June 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Barbie The Film	18	May 2023	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, X	Film (fiction)
Lirilí Lirilá	17	June 2025	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	GenAI Absurd animation
Skibidi Toilet	16.5	November 2022	TikTok	YouTube Shorts, Roblox	Absurd animation
Labubus	14	June 2023	TikTok	Pop Mart, Instagram Reels	Kawaii / surprise doll meme
Corn Kid	13	January 2024	TikTok	YouTube Shorts	personal video
Sonny Angels	12.5	April 2023	TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	Kawaii / surprise doll meme
Binley Mega Chippy	11	May 2022	TikTok	Linkedin, YouTube, Facebook, Vice	Store video
The Squid Game	10	August 2022	Netflix/TikTok	Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts	Series (fiction)

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from The Influencer Marketing Factory (2023-2024), IQ Rival (2024) and TikTok for Business (2023).

It has been confirmed that, although viral phenomena that are not “brainrot” achieve high levels of views and mentions, their ability to generate active engagement (likes, comments, and shares) is more limited. In contrast, IBC exhibits a much higher level of engagement.

The first major wave of content that went viral purely through GenAI occurred between February and June 2025, with a sharp surge in July 2025 and a peak in early August 2025 (coinciding with young people’s summer break) as this study was being finalized. This temporal clustering suggests a turning point: the transition from traditional viral content (centered on dancing, nostalgia, or spontaneous reactions) toward algorithmically generated narratives, developed by young people using absurd prompts that advance the story and flesh out each character. In contrast, non-brainrot phenomena are spread out between 2021 and 2024, demonstrating an evolution in viral content. These range from spontaneous narrative phenomena (*Squid Game*, *Corn Kid*) to media campaigns like *Barbie*, or animated absurdities such as *Skibidi Toilet*. Only the latter originated on YouTube, though it also had a wide impact on TikTok and other social media platforms.

This new ER threshold redefines the concept of “community engagement.” TikTok, GenAI, and absurdist aesthetics form the triangle that makes it possible. Everything indicates that the future of viral content is geared towards structures like Italian Brainrot.

4.7. Formal Description and Expressions of the Absurdity of IBC on TikTok

This analysis allows linguistic, emotional, and cultural trends to be identified based on the main recurring comments and hashtags associated with the ten most representative characters of Italian Brainrot (Table 5).

From a general perspective, the collected comments reflect language patterns characterized by brief, spontaneous, and emotionally contradictory expressions. Most of the selected phrases correspond to immediate responses, typical of rapid digital interaction: “I’m dying of love,” “everything is so random,” “I can’t stop watching it,” “my head is exploding,” “this is a spell,” or “I feel weird things,” are examples of unfiltered verbalizations in response to content that triggers the absurdity, the addictiveness, the hypnotic quality, or the emotional dissonance.

The characters that rank highest in terms of engagement —such as Ballerina Cappuccina and Tralalero Tralala— draw comments that range from fascination with their aesthetic fragility to emotional disorientation. In the case of Ballerina Cappuccina, phrases like “elegant and creepy” or “I love her outfit” point to a duality between what is beautiful and disturbing, which is characteristic of a glitch aesthetic. The most used hashtags, such as #ballerinacursed or #weirdtok, reaffirm this aesthetic of the “damned beautiful” thing.

Bombardiro Crocodilo or Brr Brr Patapim incorporates a more explicit sound layer in their performance, which is directly reflected in the associated comments. The first includes comments like “boomb”, “awesome”, or “explosive”; the second: “brrr pure energy” and “patapim patapum,” where musicality, repetition, and onomatopoeia become minimal units of meme-language. In both cases, users interact through phonetic impulse. The most frequent hashtags, such as #crocodilecore and #nosense, reinforce this notion of the absurdity as a vehicle for emotional connection.

In contrast, Chimpancini Bananini and Lirilí Lirilá have a more subtle emotional response. Comments such as “he’s so silly I love him,” “banana gang,” or “adorable and wicked” indicate an affective embrace of the “adorably ridiculous,” a phenomenon also observed in hashtags like #monkecore, #cuteglitch, or #sillycore. In

these cases, visual humor and childlike phonetics serve as keys to engagement, in line with the codes of humor—equally naive and absurd—characteristic of these generations.

A singular case is Capuccino Assassino, where the predominant reactions, “this gives me anxiety and I love it,” “aesthetically criminal,” reveal an intentional aesthetic and emotional dissonance. The character seems to trigger contradictory affective responses that, far from alienating the viewer, captivate them. The fascination with the unsettling is also reflected in the hashtags used like #darktok or #absurdcore, labels that connect with darker universes or bizarre aesthetics.

The hashtag analysis reveals how the community constructs its own categories around the phenomenon. Tags like #brainrot, #wtfcore, #bizarretok, and #glitchtrip not only define the content but also inscribe it within emerging digital subcultures that privilege the aesthetics of error, nonsense, and absurd mix-ups as a form of expression. The repeated use of these tags also contributes to algorithmic virality, fostering its increasing circulation among young people. Short, phonetically appealing, and emotionally intense phrases are the most recurrent, as well as the hashtags that reinforce their belonging to the Brainrot universe.

Table 5. *Typical Expressions in Italian Brainrot Videos Analyzed on TikTok.*

Character	Associated Expressions	Hashtags
Tralalero Tralalá	“Why do I like this?” “what a glitch,” “beautiful, it’s art, hypnotic,” “I can’t stop watching it”, “But did Nike pay?”...	#brainrot #tralalero #corecore
Ballerina Cappuccina	“Elegant and creepy,” “I love the outfit,” “I feel weird things,” “damned ballerina,” “assassino’s girlfriend,” “choose any boyfriend you want”...	#ballerinacursed #weirdtok #glitch
Bombardiro Crocodilo	“Boooomb,” “he’s so ugly he’s beautiful,” “explosive,” “Help Ukraine and Palestine, please,” “fucking pimp who punishes girls”...	#bombardiro #crocodilecore #explosion
Brr Brr Brr Patapim	“Brrr, pure energy,” “my head is exploding,” “top-notch sound.” “Absurdly lovable,” “I’m dying of loooove”...	#brrbrr #patapim #nosense
Capuccino Assassino	“Algorithm killer,” “I love his no-face,” “aesthetically criminal,” “he’s a thug,” “this gives me anxiety and I love it,” “he’s got me hooked all day”...	#capuccino #capuchino #darktok #absurdcore
Chimpancini Bananini	“Adorably disturbing,” “banana gang,” “it’s so absurd I love it,” “I can’t stop dreaming about him”...	#chimpancini #bananagang #monkecore
Lirilí Lirilá	“I want to marry this,” “lirili mood,” “it gives me weird vibes,” “sweet and glitchy,” “beautiful and damned,” “what the hell is a cactus elephant doing wearing flip-flops?...”	#lirili #sillycore #cuteglitch
Trippi Troppi Troppa Trippa	“I need to unsee it,” “this is a spell,” “too much of a trip for me”...	#trippitrip #glitchtrip #bizarretok
Trulimero Trulichina	“I need more,” “truli vibes,” “trulimero, are you?”, “the song possesses me”, “who invented this?”...	#trulimero #wtfcore #glitchart
Tung Tung Tung Sahur	“He’s bland, but that’s why I love him,” “This is another level,” “ <i>tung tung brainrot</i> ,” “rhythm is pure drugs”...	#tungtung #sahurcore #looped

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

A tag cloud was created from the predominant terms in the comment threads extracted from the reviewed TikTok short videos (Figure 12). A visual scheme of the common terms associated with Italian Brainrot is also presented (Figure 13). The former allows us to draw several significant conclusions about the type of emotional and aesthetic engagement they generate in young audiences. Terms with high affective impact stand out, such as “absurd,” “glitch,” “broken code,” “glitchy,” “damaged,” “life,” “cute horror,” “nervous

laughter,” “sublime,” “totally crazy” or “completely nuts,” which demonstrate a strong emotional component linked to absurdity, the aesthetically incoherence, and a fascination with nonsense.

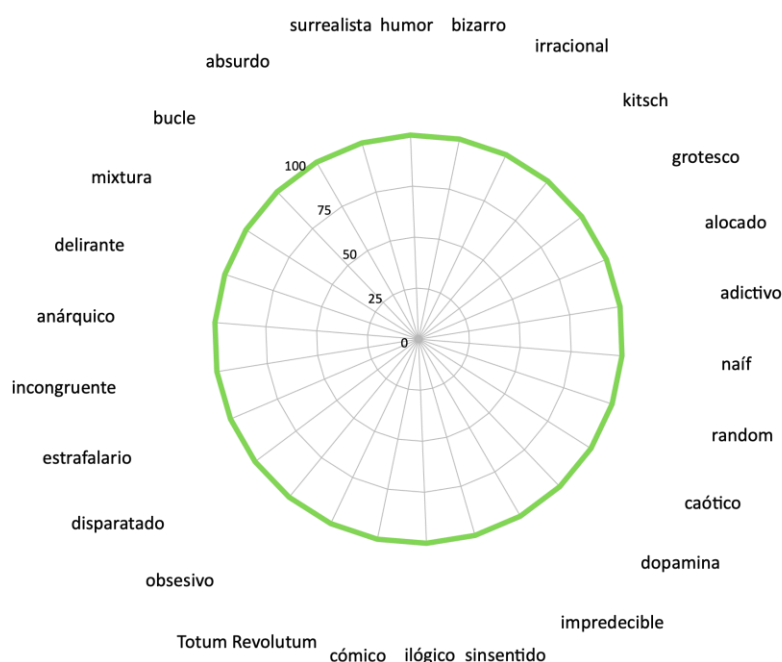
The combination of expressions like “it blows my mind,” “inexplicable,” “I want more,” “it makes sense,” and “it represents” suggests that young people not only accept the lack of a rational narrative but also find in it a form of emotional and playful identification. Expressions like “cursed,” “demented,” “hypnotic,” “I want more!” and “addictive” reinforce the idea of a very intense sensory experience, bordering on the unhealthy, due to so much algorithm-driven consumption. Likewise, the expression “Italian Brainrot” appears prominently, solidifying itself as the defining label of the phenomenon. The presence of terms like “emotional glitchy,” “ugly work,” “sublime ugliness,” and “visual drug” points to a revaluation of the aesthetically disruptive and surreal as the driving force behind the digital connection, aligned with the algorithmic visual logic of TikTok. Taken as a whole, this cloud reveals that the impact of Italian Brainrot is not only visual but also deeply emotional, with profound psychosocial and mental health implications, verging on the pathological, contradictory, and addictive.

Figure 12. Tag Cloud in Conversations of Italian Brainrot Videos Analyzed on TikTok



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Figure 13. *Semantic Field of Italian Brainrot*



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the Italian Brainrot phenomenon confirms that there is an unprecedented and exceptional form of digital engagement strongly linked to the algorithmic logic of TikTok and the growing use of GenAI tools by young users, thus answering our RQ1. The quantitative data support the initial conjectures in RQ1: with an average ER of 25.4% and peaks such as those of *Ballerina Capuccina* (33.7%) or *Tralalero Tralalá* (32.5%), IBCs far exceed TikTok's averages for highly successful, popular influencers (which can reach 10.5%, according to Influencer Marketing Hub 2024). This difference reveals a shift in viral spread, no longer driven so much by intensive marketing or advertising campaigns, but by organic content created by online user communities, which enter algorithmic loops when there is a return that compensates them. As Zannettou et al. (2023) reminds, adolescents do not seek coherence, but stimuli that activate immediate emotional responses.

Unlike recent viral phenomena such as *Wednesday Dance* or *Barbie: The Movie*, IBCs don't originate from commercial structures or corporate narratives, but rather from the free and decentralized prompt resulting from the illogical and absurd hybridization of terms. Compared to other viral phenomena, Italian Brainrot leads in ER surpassing *Skibidi Toilet*, *Barbie*, or *Wednesday Dance*. All it takes is typing two absurd words into any GenAI tool, following the typical "Italian Brainrot" style (fruit + animal + human traits + a name and an "Italian-style" phrase) to create a new Brainrot specimen. As Wei and Tyson (2024) note, human authorship loses its central role when the content is perceived as having been created by GenAI.

The Italian Brainrot phenomenon could also be understood as the first great algorithmic lovemark of global reach and decentralized nature: generated, deformed and disseminated from the everyday use of AI by young people, in a culture that embraces nonsense as an important sign of identity.

IBCs are not characters with a defined top-down narrative (but rather the opposite), nor are they closed; instead, they are horizontal and communal, arbitrary and eclectic. They are the result of illogical text prompts, processed by visual and auditory GenAI, which allows for constant creation, reinterpretation, and mutation by users. The emotional connection is reinforced by the short video format (7-15 seconds) that merges image and

sound into independent units. According to Walter and Friesike (2025), multisensory and non-rational stimuli have greater power of attraction in young communities.

The appeal of IBC lies in its absurdity and glitchiness: an aesthetic where the addictive is the additive. The fascination with the absurd acts as a catalyst for this engagement: the more absurd and silly, the better! What Ngai (2005) and Carroll (1990) called the "aesthetics of ugliness" or zany becomes an effective strategy here: visual and auditory stridency encourages imitation and the desire to replicate. The more inexplicable the character and its name, the more beloved it tends to be by the community, which generates followers, *fans*, and *cosplays* dedicated to each character. Users not only consume, but also comment, edit, draw, and merge characters with external, globally significant imaginaries such as *Fortnite*, *Barbie*, *Frozen*, *Labubu*, *Harry Potter*, or *Sony Angels*.

The engagement continues with variations and extensions, replays of sagas, and co-creations. The same audio or melodic template is applied and reinterpreted in thousands of clips that, while individually absurd, construct a powerful, decentralized narrative universe, making it recognizable and with its own distinct personality. After months of free and random contributions, a consensus narrative has emerged; character descriptions have been adopted by the community, and eclectic tribal, aesthetic, and cultural currents converge. The character of Ballerina Capuccina herself can be portrayed as innocent, candid, and naive, a housewife or mother; but she can also be seen as a femme fatale, sometimes dancing to pop, reggaeton, or trap music. She also stands out for her sentimental relationship with Assassino Capuccino, which has spawned numerous remixes, duets, spin-offs, and derivative content. The lovemark theory (Roberts, 2004; Batra et al., 2012; Thomson, 2005) suggests that love for a brand is based on rituals, mystery, and sensuality. In IBCs, the ritual lies in the repetition and continuity of the narrative; the mystery, in what is unexpected and incoherent; and the sensuality, in the fascination with the infinite "artistic" and audiovisual creations that stem from it.

Furthermore, it remains a persistent question that, to this day, the identity of the person who introduced the first prompts is unknown. There is no identified author or owner; IBCs are "open-source characters" and belong to the community: they are reinterpreted and modified, defended and attacked; ultimately, they are cherished.

Regarding the analyzed expressions, "I love him without understanding him," "the more absurd he is, the more he captivates me," "he's so silly he makes me happy," and "he's got me hooked" reflect algorithmic emotional logic. Expressions like "tralalalá non-stop," "this shark has legs," or "ballerina, my love, even if you scare me" encapsulate an affective bond based on absurdity as a shared code. IBC becomes a point of affective and identity identification, verging on the pathological for many authors. Shared nonsense as a collective experience with addictive and "dopaminergic" (from dopamine) undertones (Sharpe, 2025).

Much of the success of IBCs lies in the creative involvement of Gen Z (Turner, 2015) and in the digital consumption and viral spread of Gen Alpha. Both generations have used IBCs to create their own cultural and entertainment products. The fascination with the grotesque, glitchy, and absurd perhaps becomes an aesthetic refuge from an incomprehensible and uncertain world (Novoa, 2025). The absurd, surprising, and surreal nature of IBCs is very close to creativity, because there is a fine line between the illogical and outlandish and creativity, understood as the novel combination of existing elements. For Osborn (1953), creativity is the "aptitude to represent, foresee, and produce ideas. Conversion of known elements into something new, thanks to a powerful imagination," and for Osho (1990), "Creativity is the greatest rebellion in existence; it is the fragrance of individual freedom." Teenagers and pre-teens connected on the social network have been able to bring to life, in just a few months, an original (and absurd), authentic, and distinctive fictional narrative universe with marked hallmarks. They have done so cooperatively, in a decentralized and non-linear fashion, without planning or profit motives. The Italian Brainrot phenomenon thus embodies psychosocial characteristics typical of these

generations of young people. The IBCs possess characteristics that allow them to become a generational emblem, an important part of the identity and collective memory of Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

Unlike fictional characters and products created by entertainment industry giants like Disney, Netflix, Epic Games, EA, or Nintendo, IBCs have been created freely, using generative algorithmic applications that are virtually free for the digital community and have gone viral on platforms like TikTok. There's no focus on intellectual property or commercial exploitation; the sole intention is to test the infinite possibilities of GenAI using random prompts and expand the results with the help of this social network's algorithms. Italian Brainrot is the paradigm of what's to come: a true revolution in the ways content is created, consumed, and circulated, and in entertainment and engagement based on AI and GenAI.

5.1. Limitations of the Research

The sample of 300 videos and the set of comments analyzed on TikTok posts is considered sufficient to meet the objectives of this research and answer the research questions. This sample was not selected based on criteria of representativeness or statistical significance. Furthermore, it is limited to the period from January 13 to August 8, 2025, and to a single platform, TikTok. Data collection was performed manually to gather information on imagery, which was not provided by TikTok web scraping. This allowed for the analysis of image content, as well as the consultation of metrics visible to all users (but not the private metrics of each account, only those accessible to the account owner). It might be of interest in the future to expand the study to a representative sample of IBC and other platforms such as Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts. It might also be interesting to expand the sample of short videos analyzed, taking into account specific statistical criteria, to ensure greater consistency in the results. In this research, it was not possible to identify the age and gender of those who publish, share, or comment.

5.2. Future Lines of Research

- **Gender Perspective in IBC Content, its Production and Viral Spread:** it is necessary to delve deeper into how gender influences the creation, modification, or circulation of brainrots in these age groups. Are there relevant differences between male and female creators? Are there differences in gendered creation, by culture or geographical area? Does this coding condition the type of emotional engagement generated? Although it was not part of the objectives of this work, our observations reveal a reproduction of traditional and sexist gender patterns and stereotypes: blue for masculinity and pink for femininity; strength and power for masculinity and delicacy, tenderness, and sensuality for femininity; childcare for girls and partying, cars, and war for boys. Videos with characters with other gender identities are still practically nonexistent (we only saw one isolated short video with an affective expression between two male IBCs (Tung Tung Tung Sahur kissing Brr Brr Patatim).
- **From Digital Engagement to the Physical Realm:** another key line of inquiry would be to investigate how algorithmic passion translates into commercial actions and products, both on immersive platforms like Roblox, with the game *Steal a Brainrot*, and in the purchase of merchandise on Amazon, for example. This relationship between digital desire and real - world consumption can be approached from the psychology and sociology of consumption. The time and exposure dedicated to Italian Brainrot in recent months could be negatively impacting engagement with other products and targeted marketing campaigns from brands and influencers.
- **Intercultural and Transnational Dimension:** despite its global reach, it is advisable to conduct cross-cultural studies that identify universal patterns and differences across regional communities. It is also relevant to explore which digital spaces are replacing geographical territories in shaping the phenomenon. A kind of rivalry between brainrot is already emerging. Italians and Indonesians (with Tung

Tung Tung Sahur at the top and others like Ta Ta Ta Sahur or Karkerkar Kurkur).

- **IBCs as Brands:** the relationship between brands and the IBC universe has not yet been explored in depth. The aim is to understand the brainrot as an algorithmic, decentralized, and community-based lovemark. This opens avenues for analysis from branding, naming, verbal and visual expression, iconicity, and expressiveness. The crossover phenomenon can also be interpreted as co-branding, and it would be interesting to measure the shared values in alliances between characters and with other already established concepts.
- **New Metrics for Algorithmic Engagement and Media Treatment of the Phenomenon:** current methodologies for measuring ER precede the GenAI era. Given their influence across the entire viral content production chain, it is urgent to review and integrate new variables that adequately capture this impact. The global media coverage of the Italian Brainrot phenomenon is a topic of interest that would allow the understanding of how traditional media approach this viral phenomenon.
- **Authorship, Intellectual Property:** this research agrees with Franganillo (2023) that GenAI generates uncertainty regarding intellectual property and the creative industries. In the case of IBCs, essential questions arise: Who writes the prompts? Who decides on the aesthetics or the Italian voice? Although diffuse, authorship exists. Can a brainrot be adapted for film, video games (like *Steal a Brainrot in Roblox*), theater, or merchandising without infringing copyright and intellectual property rights? Who legally owns the rights to a character created by GenAI and shaped by the community? Could at least a moral right of authorship be recognized for these synthetic signs? Would IBCs be more accurately described as a Digital Folkloric Designation of Origin? Could IBCs one day achieve the status of Traditional Cultural Expression, and therefore enjoy intellectual property recognition?
- **Ethical Dimension and Literacy in Algorithmic Consumption:** it is necessary to take advantage of the hyper-engagement context of IBCs to advance studies on education and ethics for conscious consumption of social networks, AI and GenAI, especially among young people, so that the rights of third parties are not violated and social and environmental issues are addressed, such as the energy costs and inefficiencies associated with the waste of prompts or a banal or insubstantial viralization by viralizing brainrot content.

5.3. Professional Implications

- **For the Communications and Branding Sector:** Brands must rethink their strategies for connecting with young audiences in the digital environment, abandoning grand narratives in favor of brief, absurd, and highly hybridizable symbolic stimuli. The emotional brand of the future may lack a defined symbol or an identifiable owner, but it must be sustained by an emotional community. For these generations, the commercial brand does not occupy a central place: it does not act as a guide, either directly or indirectly, especially when there are perceived attempts to conceal the commercial nature of entertainment. Instead, the most effective strategies are based on active listening and the ability to integrate into the worlds of interest of teenagers and pre-teens.
- **Audiovisual and Creative Design:** Grotesque, imperfect, or random design is no longer a flaw, but an increasingly established and beloved aesthetic among younger generations. Creative professionals will need to integrate human/GenAI work and collaborative models to serve their clients' brand strategies.
- **Media Literacy and Mental Health Education:** Educators must recognize that the symbolic codes that mobilize younger audiences do not correspond to classical values of beauty, perfection, or coherence, but rather to new, emerging forms of meaning that must be analyzed with cultural tools, but also within the parameters of psychosocial health. There must not be normalized the mental decay,

algorithmic addiction, or compulsive scrolling or looping associated with Gen Z and Gen Alpha (these same pathologies also occur in their elders). Perhaps these adolescents and pre-adolescents, through their embrace of "brain rot," are calling for attention to be heard, understood, and integrated into family and social structures—something that could be analyzed by country and social structure.

- **Regulation and Intellectual Property:** Currently, IBCs are expanding transmedia without cost. They extend their presence without legal licensing, enabling uncontrolled commercial exploitation by third parties. This is yet another example of the existing legal vacuum regarding intellectual property rights for intangible assets such as brands, designs, and drawings created by GenAI. The creation of collective or shared signs and meanings in the digital ecosystem, such as IBCs, raises urgent dilemmas regarding the control, licensing, and commercial exploitation rights of content generated by GenAI, which is now distributed and consumed without limits across all types of media.

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