Youtubers' social functions and their influence on pre-adolescence

Funciones sociales de los youtubers y su influencia en la preadolescencia

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the relationship between preadolescents and youtubers, with the objective of observing how tweens integrate youtubers as referents of a teen digital culture. From a socio-psychological and communicological perspective, a mixed methodological design was applied to carry out the audience study, which was divided into two parts: A quantitative analysis of the audience via a survey administered to 1,406 eleven-twelve year old students of Catalan Secondary Schools, and a qualitative analysis of the preadolescent audience using three focus groups. The quantitative data was analysed with SPSS and the qualitative data with the help of the Atlas.ti software. The results demonstrate that tweens consider youtubers as referents for entertainment and for closeness to a teen digital culture, but not really as role models or bearers of values as influencers. Also, preadolescents show some dimensions of Media Literacy, since they recognise youtubers' commercial strategies and their role as actors and professionals. The study notes gender bias in some aspects, and it is an introduction to observation of youtubers' social functions amongst teenagers, individuals who are in the process of constructing their identity and about to become young adults.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio se centra en la relación entre preadolescentes y youtubers, con el objetivo de observar cómo los primeros integran a los youtubers como referentes de una cultura digital juvenil. Desde una perspectiva sociopsicológica y comunicativa, se aplicó un diseño metodológico mixto para llevar a cabo el estudio de audiencia, organizado en dos partes: un análisis cuantitativo de la audiencia a través de un cuestionario administrado a 1.406 estudiantes de once-doce años de institutos en Cataluña, y un análisis cualitativo de la audiencia preadolescente a partir de tres «focus group». Los datos cuantitativos se analizaron con SPSS y los cualitativos con la ayuda del programa Atlas.ti. Los resultados demuestran que los preadolescentes consideran a los youtubers como referentes para el entretenimiento y por su proximidad a una cultura digital juvenil, pero no realmente como modelos o portadores de valores en tanto que «influencers». Además, los preadolescentes muestran alguna dimensión de Alfabetización Mediática, al identificar las estrategias comerciales de los youtubers y sus roles profesionales. El estudio da cuenta de un sesgo de género en algunos aspectos, y resulta una introducción a la observación sobre las funciones sociales de los youtubers entre los adolescentes, personas que están en pleno proceso de construcción de sus identidades y a punto de convertirse en jóvenes adultos.

1. Introduction and state of art

Today's adolescents and young adults, so-called millennials (Strauss & Howe, 2000), were born and have grown up in an environment permeated by media, and so their "natural" ecosystem can be described as the 2.0 social media environment. A number of studies have highlighted the role of media in the socialisation of children and young people, although until only a few years ago this meant the so-called traditional mass media (Arnett & al., 1995). In today's media ecosystem (Jenkins, 2006), colonised by countless devices, screens, social networks and apps, young people have an increasing number of options from which to choose and they have access to them at an increasingly young age.

The complex relationship between media and young people during the last century started out life with the identification of young people as belonging to a certain market niche. This led to the establishment, or rather, the recognition of a key stage in human development. Teens, young people between 13 and 19 years of age, were originally targeted in the 1950s by cinema, radio and television (Davis & Dickinson, 2004; Ross & Stein, 2008). Tweens or preadolescents, young people between 9 and 13 years old, were then identified as a market segment in the 1980s (Ekström & Tufte, 2007).Tweens, young consumers, are neither children nor adults (Linn, 2005); they are "between human being and becoming", as pointed out by Larocca & Fedele (2017).

Psychology and sociology have taught us that adolescence is a key stage of life and development in which adolescents are in the process of constructing their idea of themselves, as they make choices related to fundamental issues (academic, gender, etc.), which will influence their future life. Hence, they are more susceptible to the influence of the environment (Bernete, 2009), and it becomes essential to understand how adolescents interact with the digital environment (Blomfield & Barber, 2014).

We also know that the interaction of children with YouTube involves a series of characteristics, such as collaboration with peers and family, interaction with viewers, learning opportunities, civic engagement and identity formation (Lange, 2014; Lenhart & al., 2015), but there is still a need for research into the way in which so-called influencers may serve as guides in the processes of socialisation and identity construction of tweens.

Also, as summarized by Fedele (2011), we know that audiences can attribute to media four main kinds of social functions: entertainment (e.g. fun, humour, spending time, avoidingboredom, escaping routine), consumption situation (e.g. ritual, structural and relational use), narrative (e.g.: bardic and storytelling functions), and socialisation functions (e.g. personal identity and community building, learning about reality, society modelling, sharing and commenting, identification and admiration, parasocial relationships). As for social functions, social networks as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube have become a relevant area of social interrelation for adolescents in the context of their identity building process (Ahn, 2011). As for YouTube, according to Pérez-Torres & al. (2018: 63), young users show a mostly passive use, a characteristic that may largely favour the role of youtubers as model references in the construction of youth identity.

From these theoretical standpoints, the overall aim of the study is to observe how tweens integrate youtubers as referents of a teen digital culture, that is to say, to discover what preadolescents are attracted to regarding youtubers, which of the mentioned social functions they attribute to youtubers, and how they integrate the models and values proposed by youtubers, in their capacity as influencers.

This study combines a set of different theoretical perspectives: a constructivist approach, the tradition of cultural studies, the theory of uses and gratifications, and a gender perspective, since previous studies pointed out that girls and boys use social media in a different way (Oberst, Chamarro, & Renau, 2016).

1.1. The emergence of youtubers as an "authentic performance" for the young

Youtuber boom really took off in 2012, with the change of the YouTube interface, and by 2016 YouTube had become the second largest social network in the world after Facebook and the first in digital content (Bonaga & Turiel, 2016: 128). As these authors point out, the platform combines the sought-after sensation of intimacy between youtubers and users with the ability to position videos on search engines (YouTube uses Big Data analysis). In addition to the economic benefits and the huge global market represented by the platform, youtubers can become commercial brands and role models at the same time (Lovelock, 2017), especially amongst the very young. The ability to improvise, to change, and to surprise is a world away from the scripted and hermetic programming of traditional media and this makes youtubers very attractive to adolescents. According to Montes-Vozmediano, García-Jiménez & Menor-Sendra (2018: 68), "videos by adolescents are watched twice as much, and those by youtubers are those with the greatest impact".

The idea of youtubers as Web 2.0 micro-celebrities is connected to Senft's definition (2012), which refers to joining together "the double aspect of 'authentic' performance of self on social media as a 'brand identity'" with "wisely managed 'authenticity' for commercial gain". As Smith (2017: 3) states, "microcelebrity is fraught with difficulties around authenticity vs. self-interested promotion (Senft, 2012) and negotiating intimacy with commercial interest (Abidin, 2015)". On the one hand a Celebrity Studies research line analyses youtubers and vloggers beyond commercial interests, framing 2.0 celebrities in "a state of 'selfhood' which allows each person equal space to consummate a unique vision of themselves" (Smith, 2016: 1). On the other, several studies point out celebrities' symbolic markers of "authenticity" as representations of the working class (Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Oliva, 2014).

Successful youtuber microcelebrities, whom Bonaga and Turiel (2016: 120) define as "creators", become influencers: "As the name indicates, influencers are those who use their ability to communicate to influence the behaviour and opinions of third parties". Jerslev (2016: 5233) also asserts that "microcelebrity strategies are especially connected with the display of accessibility, presence, and intimacy online".

Youtubers, then, are an integral part of a teen culture as influencers and protagonists who help –directly or indirectly– to initiate the adolescents into multimedia products specifically aimed at them. The fact that many successful

> Youtubers are an integral part of a teen culture as influencers and protagonists who help initiate the adolescent into multimedia products specifically aimed at them. Also, they are both commercial brands and role models at the same time, especially amongst the very young, thanks to their ability to improvise, to change, and to surprise their audiences, as well as the sense of authenticity, accessibility and intimacy they share with their followers.

youtubers are young people themselves makes it all the more valuable to analyse their relationship with adolescent internet users (Westenberg, 2016), since they may be role models through both identification and admiration mechanisms (i.e.: socialisation function).

To work as a role model (Calhoun, 2010) a person's behavior or their success can be emulated by others, especially by younger people. This notion is related to the aspirational models (real or fictional), which must be sufficiently removed to constitute an object of desire, but not so far as to be perceived as inaccessible or in such a way that all possibility of contact is lost (Massonnier, 2008: 47).

The identity building function, the manner in which characters are identified and empathised with, and even the parasocial relationships engaged in by media audiences have been documented over decades (e.g. Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Iguartua-Perosanz & Muñiz-Muriel, 2008; Livingstone, 1988). Many youtuber followers for example, especially those who have been followers for some time, expect certain familiar aspects which connect them to their youtuber, such as greetings, nicknames or "certain linguistic devices (e.g. overstressed or long vowels) (Dredge, 2016a) for comic or ludic effect, thereby inviting playful commentary and injecting gaiety into the community" (Cocker & Cronin, 2017: 8), and followers will protest when they do not appear on a regular basis.

Despite the differences in format between television and the internet, and the opportunities to interact, and despite adolescents' perception that they have greater freedom when interacting with the internet (Aranda, Roca, & Sánchez-Navarro, 2013), there are psychological mechanisms which are activated similarly by followers of television fiction and those on social media. For this reason, as it will be explained below, categories which are normally used for fictional characters will be employed in this study to analyse what tweens like of youtubers, given that so-called "influencers" are representations of real people.

2. Material and methodology

A mixed method approach (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007) was employed in this audience study, specifically a sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2014), which was divided into two phases: (1) Quantitative analysis of the

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audience via survey; (2) Qualitative analysis of the audience with focus groups. The protection of human subjects was guaranteed in the study, in accordance with protocols that were approved by the financing institution and the Research Ethics Committee at the Ramon Llull University.

2.1. Description of youtuber profiles

10 of the 20 most highly followed Spanish-language youtubers were selected (Socialblade, 2016) in order to ensure balance in terms of gender and variety in terms of YouTube channels thematic categories (videogames, music, memes/jokes, beauty/fashion, etc.). These were, in decreasing order of subscribers: ElrubiusOMG, Vegetta-777, Willyrex, ZacortGame, ElrincondeGiorgio, Wismichu, Staxx, Auronplay, ExpCaseros and YellowMellowMG.

The prominence of channels related to videogames should be pointed out (in line with the findings of Gómez-Pereda, 2014) as well as channels linked to entertainment and, in the case of ExpCaseros, self-learning experiments.

> **What preadolescents are more attracted to is entertainment and the feeling of being a part of a digital teen culture, which they can share with their peer group. Also, tweens are well acquainted with youtubers as public figures and micro-celebrities, but they admire their comic nature and their knowledge more than their look or the brand images: youtubers can be references for entertainment and sociability, but they do not create a desire in tweens to become a reflection of the so-called influencers.**

All 10 can be considered influencers as they have more than a million subscribers (Berzosa, 2017), they present themselves as creators, generally using a language based on humour and proximity, they also generally have a presence on other channels and media, as well as being the focus of a true transmedia strategy.

2.2. Analytical instruments
2.2.1. The questionnaire

Following a pilot survey (n=85) to test and validate the methodological tool in three secondary schools in Barcelona, Catalonia, a questionnaire was developed to discover what preadolescents look for in the world of youtubers and if they project themselves in any way.

A Google form entitled "Young people's preferences" was designed for the definitive survey and was administered online in the classroom in the presence of teachers. The schools were contacted via email and the teachers were instructed on how to administer the questionnaire and told specifically not to mention the word "YouTube" explicitly.

The questionnaire, written in both official languages of Catalonia (Catalan and Spanish), had two parts:

• Five questions regarding sociodemographic data (age, gender, school, etc. with a strict respect for maintaining anonymity),

• Eight questions on the subject matter of the study: one open question and the rest with closed answers (some multiple choice and others on a 5 point Likert scale).

Among other questions, respondents were asked the reasons why they were interested in the 10 youtubers of the list. The characteristics they had to evaluate were based on a typology used in analysis of fictional characters: identification with a character, admiration towards a character, coolness, characters' closeness to own interests, entertainment and socialisation functions, such as sharing with a peer group (Buckingham, 1987; Fedele, 2011; García-Muñoz & Fedele, 2011; Iguartua-Perosanz & Muñiz-Muriel, 2008; Medrano & al., 2010).

The survey was undertaken during the month of December, 2016 by pupils in the first year of ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education, 11-12 years of age) in 41 public and private secondary schools in Catalonia, yielding a total of 1406 valid responses, 716 girls (50.9%) and 690 boys (49.1%). As for age, 87.1% (n=1,224) of the participants were 12 years old, with an average age of x=12.11 (Median=12, Mode=12).

SPSS software was used to carry out the descriptive analysis and provided frequency tables and descriptive

statistics (mean, mode, median, and standard deviation) and bivariant analysis using the Chi square, Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests, depending on the type of variable (level of significance $p<0,05$).

2.2.2. Focus group interview script

The objective of the focus groups was to delve into preadolescents' feelings about, and interest in, youtubers. Moderators followed an interview script using semi-structured questions, which were grouped into 21 categories based on the variables of the quantitative phase, amongst which, for the purposes of this article, the following stand out:

• Youtubers' functions, e.g. identification, admiration, coolness, closeness, entertainment, peer-related functions.

• Media literacy, e.g. media production and dissemination processes (Ferrés & Piscitelli, 2012); the role of youtubers as actors and professionals.

The three focus groups, each of six participants (three boys and three girls), were carried out between January and March 2017. The participants from the focus groups were selected according to the following criteria: the school and the pupils' availability, being talkative, and having different levels of interest in the subject "Information technology". The focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim and analysed following the procedure of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four different researchers in pairs and an official trainer of Atlas.ti, who discussed how to categorize reponses until reaching a final consensus, carried out the coding process. The qualitative analysis was carried out with the help of Atlas.ti software.

The results of the Focus Group contributions were identified in the following way: Focus group number (FG1, FG2, FG3) + Participant (Boy/Girl) + Participant Number (in contribution order).

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Tweens' preferences related to youtubers

The youtubers from the list most recognised by tweens in the survey sample were AuronPlay (78.2%, n=1,120), ElrubiusOMG (74.1%, n=1,042), and Wismichu (66.4%, n=933). Moreover, participants could indicate other youtubers that they liked, and this was done by 55.3% (n=777), with 271 different youtubers mentioned, a fact that demonstrates a wide diversity amongst what tweens watch on YouTube. The other youtubers mentioned included DjMaRiio (2.7%, n=38) and two women, Dulceida (2,6%, n=36) and Yuya (1,2%, n=17).

3.2. Social functions attributed to youtubers

The social functions attributed by participants, varied a great deal by youtuber, as shown in Table 1, with the entertainment function being the most valued one. In particular, concerning the second most valued function, closeness to their own interests, it has to be stressed that it is most valued in the case of ExpCaseros (35.5%, n=249), the only youtuber focused on self-learning experiments. On the other hand, both coolness and socialisation functions were attributed to youtubers by more than 10% of tweens in the sample. Finally, items related to identification and admiration were valued by fewer respondents.

There are significant gender differences in the ratings of most of the proposed youtubers, which was more noticeable in the case of male youtubers (Auronplay: $p<0.001$; ElRubiusOMG: $p<0.001$; Vegetta777: $p<0.001$; Willyrex: $p=0.001$; Zacortgame: $p<0.001$) compared to the one female youtuber on the list, YellowMellowMG ($p=0.022$). In particular, boys tend to place more value on the identification function (even in the case of YellowMellow), while girls tend to place more value value on socialisation functions. Also, especially in the case of gamers' channels, boys place more value on closeness to their interests, while girls place more value on the entertainment function. Finally, as for admiration functions, boys place more value on the attributes "intelligent" and "badass" (also in the case of YellowMellowMG), while girls place more value on a male youtuber being "good-looking".

In terms of identification, it is noteworthy that 9 out of 10 of the proposed youtubers were male, which is more than probably the reason why girls did not choose this characteristic.

Once more, the case ExpCaseros is worth noticing, since no gender differences were found for this self-learning experiments Youtuber, so that both girls and boys like him for the same reasons, including the closeness to their interests.

There are differences in the open option ($p=0.001$), above all in relation to Dulceida, who was only mentioned by girls (5%, n=36) and in relation to DjMaRiio, who was only mentioned by boys (5.5%, n=38).

Table 1. YouTubers' Social Functions								
		Entertainment	Closeness to own interests	Coolness	Socialisation functions	Identification	Admiration		
YouTuber		He is funny	He talks about things which interest me	He is famous	My friends like him/her	I would like to be like him/her	He is badass	He is intelligent	He is good-looking
Auronplay	n	533	112	108	101	93	86	37	30
	%	48.5%	10.2%	9.8%	9.2%	8.5%	7.8%	3.4%	2.7%
ElrubiusOMG	n	547	69	158	124	69	40	12	22
	%	52.5%	6.6%	15.2%	11.9%	6.6%	3.8%	1.2%	2.1%
Wismichu	n	451	105	88	82	67	84	32	24
	%	48.3%	11.3%	9.4%	8.8%	7.2%	9%	3.4%	2.6%
Vegetta777	n	166	101	141	149	55	52	52	21
	%	22.5%	13.7%	19.1%	20.2%	7.5%	7.1%	7.1%	2.8%
Willyrex	n	221	85	129	127	48	57	36	28
	%	30.2%	11.6%	17.6%	17.4%	6.6%	7.8%	4.9%	3.8%
ElrincondeGiorgio	n	345	81	64	44	51	82	24	33
	%	47.7%	11.2%	8.8%	6.1%	7%	11.3%	3.3%	4.6%
ExpCaseros	n	144	249	42	34	67	36	116	14
	%	20.5%	35.5%	6%	4.8%	9.5%	5.1%	16.5%	2%
Staxx	n	199	96	96	42	60	52	37	32
	%	32.4%	15.6%	15.6%	6.8%	9.8%	8.5%	6%	5.2%
ZacortGame	n	143	90	82	54	76	76	35	23
	%	24.7%	15.6%	14.2%	9.2%	13.1%	13.1%	6.1%	4%
YellowMellowMG	n	167	90	59	45	72	41	33	23
	%	31.5%	17%	11.1%	8.5%	13.6%	7.7%	6.2%	4.5%
Average	%	35.9%	13.1%	12.7%	10.3%	8.9%	8.1%	5.8%	3.2%

Percentages calculated excluding missing values. Source: made by the authors.

The number of mentions to youtubers made in the qualitative results do coincide with the three first youtubers on the quantitative list, AuronPlay, ElRubiusOMG and Wismichu, but there are also many other comments on other youtubers, such as Dulceida and Yuya.

The characteristics mostly mentioned by participants are knowledge (admiration function) and humour (entertainment function), particularly in the case of Hamza Zaidi (though not included in the list), even if there was also evidence of the importance given to identification and closeness with some youtubers, as can be seen in the following fragment from FG3:

– FG3-Boy1: Hamza. Hamza Zaidi. He's from Morocco, but he's Spanish and speaks Spanish and everything and he's very funny.

– Moderator: And do you imitate him? Or what's funny about him?

– FG3-Girl2: No, it's that sometimes he uses expressions which we say ... [...] we don't laugh at him.

– Moderator: So you don't laugh at him, then, but he is funny.

– FG3-Boy1: No, he does it on purpose. For example, instead of saying "bed", he says "beeeeed".

– Moderator: And you say that when you are out in the playground and things?

– FG3-Boy1: Yes.

3.3. Media literacy dimensions

Both in the open questions of the survey and in the qualitative phase, several comments denote a sort of media literacy in the participants, since they are able to recognise both media production and dissemination processes, and what being a youtuber means.

First, in the survey the respondents were asked in an open question what they do not like about YouTube. Some of them indicate, in the open option, items that can be categorised as YouTube commercial mechanisms (3.5%, n=49) –as the bell, the clickbait, and overall the ads–, the lack of netiquette and rude behaviours of particular youtubers (5%, n=70), and the risks for minors (0.4%, n=6), as in the case of the protection of their identity and privacy. Also, in the qualitative phase, preadolescents have either an explicit (FG3Boy2: "Google pays for monetization on YouTube"; FG3Boy1: "And if you put ads [on your channel] you get paid more") or implicit understanding of the dynamics and commercial demands of youtubers.

This implicit understanding is connected to the reasons for liking and disliking youtubers, since participants –in particular girls– are critical of offensive comments or behaviour. For instance, the two youtubers at the top of the

ranking, AuronPlay and Wismichu, favourably rated as "badass", are also unpopular with some participants in the focus groups, while one of those most commented upon youtuber and most highly rated for authenticity, knowledge and respect for her followers is Yuya:

– FG3-Girl1: (I don't like) big-heads. That's why I like Yuya, because she has a lot of followers but she hasn't changed (...) and she respects her followers more than others.

– FG3-Boy4: She's very calm, she is. (...)

– Moderator: It's the real her? She is not fake?

– FG3-Girl1: No, she's like that.

Second, almost all the boys and girls in the focus groups recognised that there was a difference between the character on YouTube –with its pros (fame and money) and cons (loss of intimacy and anonymity, risks associated with fame)–, and the real person:

> Youtubers are incorporated into tweens' leisure time practices and that are seen more as actors of a teen digital culture, rather than as identification or admiration models as influencers, mostly given the critical attitude preadolescents have of them.

– FG1-Boy3: And a lot of youtubers also say that they often act out a character on YouTube, but that afterwards they are very different.

– Moderator: They say that?

– (Some): Yes. [...]

– FG3-Boy3: For example Wismichu said in a video that he was really funny in videos but he was more serious in real life.

– FG3-Boy2: I also saw a video with youtubers... and when you see them in that video they are really nice and friendly, but when they do their own videos they turn really badass. They say things like: "I don't like that", or "Get out of here!".

On the other hand, participants recognise the role of youtubers as professionals and workers. In the survey, 4.5% (n=63) of respondents said they would like to be a youtuber when they grow up, an option indicated more by boys (7.2%, n=50) than by girls (1.8%, n=13) (p<.0.001), while 9 participants (0.6%), 2 girls and 7 boys, indicated that they already had their own YouTube channel. In the focus groups, participants also pointed out that being a youtuber could be a profitable and enjoyable profession, although it could also be very stressful and challenging.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the study was to delve into the risks and the opportunities associated with the relation between tweens and specific social media actors, the youtubers. The quantitative and qualitative results have allowed us to respond to the overall objective.

Related to tweens' preferences and youtubers' functions in tweens' life, on the one hand, it can be stated that preadolescents are more attracted to entertainment and the feeling of being part of a digital teen culture, which they can share with their peer group. On the other hand, even if they recognise some kind of attraction of fame amongst the models embodied by youtubers, they distrust the short-term nature and the risks related to this job; they are also wary of certain attitudes and codes youtubers express which may be offensive.

With regard to the possible ability of youtubers to foster models as influencers, we have observed that the characteristics valued depend a lot on the particular youtuber. At the time this study was completed, the youtubers best-known by preadolescents were AuronPlay, ElrubiusOMG and Wismichu, who were also regarded as the funniest. But when participants were asked to mention spontaneously who they liked and why, there were many more, including women such as Dulceida and Yuya, thus representing better gender and ethnic background, as well as channel subject variety.

Preadolescents value the humour of youtubers above all else, and in a very distant second place, the proximity of youtubers to young people's interests, that is the entertainment and socialisation functions aimed at sharing the

content with their peers. It is significant that Yuya is the youtuber who received the most favourable comments and this was because of her knowledge, her good relationship with her followers and her authenticity.

Aspects such as coolness, sharing with peers, or identification are more highly rated than others such as looks, or intelligence as factors of attraction.

The participants in our study are well acquainted with youtubers as public figures and micro-celebrities, but they admire their comic nature and their knowledge more than their look or the brand images, which they may represent. They are still present as reference for entertainment and sociability, whilst not being of chief importance and without creating a desire in participants to become a reflection of the so-called influencers.

So we could say that youtubers are incorporated into tweens' leisure time practices and that are seen more as actors of a teen digital culture, rather than as identification or admiration models as influencers, mostly given the critical attitude preadolescents have of them. When preadolescents are asked what they want to be when they are older, being a youtuber is seen more as a hobby than a profession. Hence, it can be observed that YouTube still has a limited impact on young people at this stage of their identity development.

This does not diminish the fact that preadolescents know and imitate youtubers' language and expressions, or follow those they like, and even enjoy some of the "badass" youtubers, nor does it mean that that they do not recognise the risks of the loss of intimacy and the abuses which are present and may become amplified by the digital environment. The comments of our participants show they know what it is to be media literate in production and dissemination processes and, lesser, in ideology and values dimensions (Ferrés & Piscitelli, 2012): They comment on commercial strategies, they are comfortable using information terms such as monetization, and they are very critical of offensive and discriminatory attitudes.

Lastly, gender bias is clearly evident not only in the lower number of female youtubers and the social functions attributed to youtubers, but also in the fact that there are three times more boys than girls who have had a YouTube channel and there are four times more boys interested in a future as youtubers.

There is a need for more research into the role of exclusion and the function of refuge which social media might exercise over the youngest boys and girls, as noted by Michikyan and Suárez-Orozco (2016: 413): "Conscientious-ness maintained a consistently protective role over time while hostile classroom contexts increased vulnerability over time, particularly for girls". There is also room for further research to look into differences according to age group and to analyse whether social media foster the development of the new generations' individual and differentiated characteristics –in the sense of creating a mirage of social diversity and identity on the platforms, as in Jenkins (2006)– and if they do so both as consumers and prosumers. We agree with Pérez-Torres & al. (2018), when they point out that it is recommendable to increase the sample of youtubers, using selection criteria not based on the number of followers, and extend the analysis to blogs and Instagram.

Fully incorporated in the digital ecosystem as they are, it seems that preadolescents are on the point of making the leap into full adolescence. Once there, they may find themselves lacking referents. In this sense, we would argue that educommunication in schools and the idea of the prosumer should be made more of. YouTube and youtubers should not only be used as a form of animated information or as a way of identifying those guilty of performing in today's "market of the ego" (Rivière, 2009); youtubers contribute to the range of opportunities and servitudes of the neoliberal system we belong to, which includes gender stereotypes.

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