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Heavy viewers, few interactions: YouTubers' relevance in the lives of Portuguese teenagers

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Abstract: YouTube is one of the most popular websites amongst the Portuguese youth and their homegrown stars, the YouTubers, are beloved entertainers. This paper presents a qualitative study based on four focus groups with 36 teenagers, aged 12 to 16 years old, and it has three main objectives: to understand their motivations for using it; how this platform (and its contents and authors) interplay with their identity and socialization; and to acknowledge their perspectives on YouTube and YouTubers. It concludes that the sample is made up of very regular viewers, with critical insights on the platform and its contents and creators, but who, despite this overall popularity amidst friends and the easiness of ways to share their interests, regard YouTube and YouTubers as funny entertainers for more individual practices.

Keywords: identity; sociability; socialization; teenagers; YouTube; YouTubers

Introduction

YouTube, online since May 2005, “is one of the more impactful global phenomena that media and culture have experienced”, having more than a billion users (Henriksen & Hoelting, 2017, p. 33). It started by creating the expectation of a media revolution based on the opportunity for everyone to broadcast their own videos (Grossman, 2006).

However, the promises were mostly in the eyes of the believers as the platform was quickly incorporated into a major technology company and its commercial logics.

YouTube’s relationship with children and teenagers was also the subject of different – hopeful and fearful (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) – expectations, due to the overall popularity of video contents amidst young people and the availability of easy-to-use recording and sharing devices and websites (Buckingham, Pini, & Willett, 2009; Pereira, Pinto, & Moura, 2015b). In fact, many of the YouTube users are children and teenagers (Balleys, Millerand, Thoër, & Duque, 2020; Lange, 2014; Pires, Masanet, & Scolari, 2021) and the Portuguese case is no exception. Previous national studies have shown an extensive access to digital and online media (namely the Internet, computers and smartphones) by young people, from middle childhood to later teenage years, and watching videos online is one of their favourite practices (Delicado & Alves, 2010; Pereira et al., 2015b). Despite being a minority (Pereira, Moura, Masanet, Taddeo, & Tirocchi, 2018b), there are also young Portuguese people that have become content creators on YouTube (Marôpo, Jorge, & Tomaz, 2020), similarly to what happens in other geographies (Van Dijck, 2013).

Different studies have already been carried out focusing on the relationship between YouTube and young people – both as content creators and audiences within a particular media ecology. Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez, and Martínez-Pastor (2019) presented a systematic literature review of what has been published on this issue. The

authors identified, within 65 documents, eight recurrent research topics with several sub-dimensions. These range from the analysis of contents (the different genres available on the platform, the ones that are not appropriate for minors), their authors (especially when these are young people themselves), and the platform's commercial trait (and the legal and marketing disputes and opportunities it originates), to YouTube's effects and opportunities, the users' motivations for using it, and the relevance of mediation (namely by parents).

This paper is mostly concerned with young people's reception: from their reasons for using YouTube, to how this platform (its contents and authors) interplays with their relationship with friends, parents and teachers, and their perceptions on YouTube and YouTubers. It does so by discussing the relevance of the latter for a sample of Portuguese teenagers. Before moving on to the analysis of the empirical data mostly derived from four focus groups, a brief bibliographical framework is presented, focusing on the characterization of YouTube and YouTubers and on how media is related to teenagers' identity formation, sociability, and socialization.

YouTube and YouTubers

YouTube is a complex subject of research due to its ambiguity. The initial emancipatory promises of a supposedly grassroots community have evolved into a platform – a polysemic concept, according to Gillespie (2010), that thrives on a certain ambiguity to try to position itself as a site – where diverse actors and goals coexist. This follows YouTube's own evolution regarding how it presented itself throughout the years, especially after being purchased by Google in 2006 for \$1.65 billion (Burgess & Green 2009b), as a platform welcoming diverse purposes, values and meanings (Gillespie, 2010; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Around 15 years have passed since its acquisition

and the platform still changes its presentation in meaningful ways. In April 2017, it introduced itself¹ in a way one can still find in its current Terms of service (YouTube, 2022), as “a forum for people to connect, inform and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small”. Meanwhile, YouTube changed its About Us statement, deleting the references to advertising and advertisers and seemingly retrieving the rhetoric of user empowerment: “we believe that everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share and build community through our stories” (YouTube, n.d., para. 2).

When it comes to the expectations that surrounded YouTube’s arrival, for the most optimistic, its technical capacities – associated with the widespread availability of digital tools for recording and editing videos (Buckingham et al., 2009) – would mean the audiences' emancipation from corporate media. YouTube was supposed to be a communitarian space with a culture of its own and users willing to stand for it. However, long gone are the days when a mainstream media star (Oprah Winfrey) joined YouTube and caused turmoil within a community of users concerned with saving a “grassroots’ media platform” (Burgess & Green 2009a, p. 89). *TIME*'s cover announcing the “You” as 2006 Person of the Year – “for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game” (Grossman, 2006) – summarizes the most optimistic views. However, according to Van Dijck (2009, p. 54), “despite lingering images of self-effacing, engaged and productive cybernauts – echoing early internet frontierism – the ‘You’ lauded by *TIME* has meanwhile entered the era of commercialized user-generated content”. The same author (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 117)

notes that the platform “increasingly gravitated toward viewer-based principles and away from community-oriented social networking”.

YouTube still allows for different ways of consumption and participation, and various studies have identified diverse practices and motivations that consummate and refine the platform’s affordances (e.g., Khan, 2017; Pires et al., 2021). However, as it reached larger audiences, most YouTube users, unlike the early adopters, were more likely to watch videos or to engage in forms of implicit participation² (Schäfer, 2011; Van Dijck, 2009, 2013), than to interact with others or to upload original contents. This was equally the case for younger users such as teenagers and young adults, for instance (García Jiménez, Catalina García, & López de Ayala, 2016; Khan, 2017; Pereira et al., 2018b). Viewing turned out to be the most highlighted metrics in and by YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009b; Van Es, 2020), despite the not-so-distant expectations regarding more communal (and no longer available) categories such as “most responded” or “most discussed” (e.g.: Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 186). The central role of opaque algorithms (Andrejevic, 2011; Marwick, 2019; Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández, & Coromina, 2018), exemplified by the default search setting by “most relevant”, and the evidence of concentration of views in few channels and contents (Bärthel, 2018) reinforce the dissonance between the initial expectations and the current situation. The centrality of this kind of automated gatekeeping questions (1) the extent of the common users’ agency regarding what is watched, commented or shared, and, as a consequence, (2) the full consummation of the current About Us statement.

YouTube’s purchase by Google is a crucial landmark to contextualize the platform’s evolution: “the pre-Google era of YouTube is characterized by amateur-produced videos in an ad-free environment, the post-Google purchase stage is characterized by professionally generated videos in an ad-friendly environment” (Kim,

2012, p. 56). This turning point made YouTube another stage for traditional media debates: for instance, copyright violations within YouTube became an issue for the music industry when it grew beyond a small niche of users (Kim, 2012, p. 55). Therefore, “YouTube cannot be thought of solely as a revolutionary medium” because it is also influenced by traditional media agents, contents, and institutional logics (Kim, 2012, p. 53). As described by Burgess and Green (2009b), YouTube's value is co-created in a complex way, benefiting from contributions from different types of players: the company that owns it, the users that upload contents (which are very diverse, ranging from big corporations, independent producers, and more or less amateur content creators), and the audiences that watch and/or interact with the videos. It is a medium where TV and Internet converge and sometimes collide (Kim, 2012; Scolari & Fraticelli, 2019; Van Dijck, 2013), being a symbol (at least partially) of the convergence culture suggested by Jenkins (2008). And, as in the convergence culture, not all players have the same amount of power, nor are they immune to mutual influences.

As a space (not only, but also) for user-generated contents, YouTube paved the way for new contents and authors, among them the YouTubers, “YouTube's homegrown stars” (Burgess & Green, 2009a, p. 100). They reflect the platform's complexity, as they can be understood as “‘stars’ who, despite their carefully cultivated ‘homegrown’ brand identities, seem to be making a living via advertising revenue” (Burgess & Green, 2009b, p. 24), because they are part of the platform’s Partner Program.³ Their contents wander between cultures. Much like in previous amateur practices around webcam or home recorded videos, there is a tendency to emphasize, both in form and substance, a kind of “confessional style” – the discursive construction of authenticity, an informal, communal, non-institutional and emotional relationship between the YouTubers and the viewers (Balleys et al., 2020; Burgess & Green, 2009a;

Marôpo et al., 2020; Pereira, Moura, & Fillol, 2018a; Scolari & Fraticelli, 2019).

Contents such as vlogs, whose original point was “to have one’s own online space and the digital skills to express the self” (Lange, 2014, p. 55), are symptomatic of this. That is, many YouTubers are also young people doing something that might seem a contradiction in terms (Balleys et al., 2020): showing and sharing their intimacy while constructing a relatable and hopefully seen as authentic self (albeit through edited videos and with the audience’s monetization possibly in mind).

This search for an image of authenticity and intimacy often has fellow youngsters in mind, who greatly appreciate these (as perceived) traits that might mirror their own selves. According to Balleys et al. (2020, p. 8), “the stylistic construction of videos made for and watched by teenagers on YouTube is based on an identification principle”. This identification may rely on different strategies employed by the YouTubers: the enacting of informal talks by directly addressing the camera, the recurrence of the phatic function within their discourses, or the sharing of intimate and relatable stories and concerns are some of the most relevant strategies identified by the authors (Balleys et al., 2020). Likewise, Fägersten (2017) shows how the construction of an online persona can be made to foster an idea of intimacy between YouTubers and audiences by the former’s use of swear words that would not be acceptable in most traditional media, being instead marks of more interpersonal communication. Besides, choosing intimate or everyday settings such as bedrooms, neighbourhoods, or travel destinations, or even the presence on or off-camera of relatives and mundane incidents may also nurture the creation of what Marôpo et al. (2020, p. 22) labelled as “an aura of authenticity, proximity and self-disclosure”. This aura is achievable even when there are no interactions between YouTubers and viewers in the comment section – hence mirroring characteristics of the latter’s para-social identification with a mediated

persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956) – or when YouTubers are endorsing some brand or product.

Many YouTubers have grown their enterprise beyond the platform, developing their own transmedia brands. Nevertheless, they still need to systematically create contents within specific genres and with considerable production values, and to monetize their videos within YouTube, which implies attracting somewhat large audiences so they can be exposed to advertising on the platform. The most famous YouTubers are a different kind of professional content creators: their contents may not be the ones that could appear in broadcast television, but they are not the idyllic teenagers in their bedrooms recording informal and spontaneous videos with low-spec and cheap equipment either, nor are they necessarily microcelebrities with a narrow reach and thematic focus (Marwick, 2019; Pereira et al., 2018a). Hence, these users may simultaneously be a reflex of YouTube's former signature – “Broadcast Yourself”, abandoned in December 2011 (Van Dijck, 2013) – and another type of professional content creators and celebrities, part of an influencer industry (Marwick, 2019) whose personal brands may be associated with other brands and products and become “even more influential by collaborating with traditional media” (Holland, 2017, p. 60).

Media, identity and teenagers

Adolescence is widely recognized as a crucial time for teenagers' identity formation, and media – both digital and analogical – can play a decisive role in it (Arnett, 1995; Buckingham, 2008; Livingstone, 2008; Lüders, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). As a concept, identity is a complex construct, being used – “and perhaps overused” (Buckingham, 2008, p. 1) – in many ways and contexts, with diverse purposes. Consequently, there is no single understanding of what identity is and how it can be

relevant to making sense of adolescents' media practices. It wanders between individuality and communality. In some senses, “identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time” (Buckingham, 2008, p. 1). Within this perspective, identity is deeply distinctive. However, it may also be something we do, and not what we are (Buckingham, 2013), a situated manifestation of the self – hence varying with the contexts (Buckingham, 2008; Lüders, 2011). The concept is also used to refer to what binds us to others: “here, identity is about identification with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways” (Buckingham, 2008, p. 1).

The previous approaches are not antagonistic: “in seeking to define their identity, people attempt to assert their individuality, but also to join with others, and they work to sustain their sense of status or self-esteem in doing so” (Buckingham, 2008, p. 6). Therefore, identity is also closely linked to concepts such as socialization – one's integration into a larger culture or subcultures (Arnett, 1995) – and sociability, the interaction with others whose “main purpose is simply being together and acknowledging the other in one's life” (Lüders, 2011, p. 454).

As mentioned earlier, media have always been tightly related to these debates. According to Mesch (2013, p. 288), “not only is the adoption of specific [media] applications social in nature, but their use may also depend on the nature of existing social networks”, both in online and offline sites. Therefore, everyday social groups, such as peers – which are particularly relevant during adolescence compared to adults (Livingstone & Haddon, 2012; Nag, Ling, & Jakobsen, 2016) –, parents and teachers, are relevant agents when it comes to understanding the appeal of any media content. The emergence of digital and online media has focused the debate on the relationship

established between adolescent identity and media on social networks. These can be defined as the following:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (boyd & Ellison, 2008: 211).

Hence, social networks can be a relevant place to take some usual steps towards identity formation: the presentation of and encounter with constructed selves (by a profile or a vlog, for instance), the chances to take risks, to become more aware of who they are, and to situate themselves in relation to others, now with fewer temporal and spatial constraints (e.g., Livingstone, 2008; Papacharissi, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

An indirect consequence of the latter is the widespread availability on social networks of people and their contents from different origins, and the individualization of media accesses, which would allow for a more personal choice of what to use and with whom to share and discuss it. For instance, it would be easier to prefer to watch or gather around new types of videos whose content and performers differ from what is usual in other media and which may resonate more deeply with the audiences' own identities. This contextualizes the popularity of many YouTubers, who can also be young people themselves (of diverse ages), creating contents centred on a performance that might blur the lines between life on and off camera, between intimacy and publicness, while constructing a specific persona over time (Balleys et al., 2020). This construction may exemplify an effort towards a managed connectedness with the audience, trying to foster other younger viewers' identification with the staged self (Lange, 2014; Pérez-Torres, Pastor-Ruiz, & Ben-Boubaker, 2018), which would hopefully translate into relevant audience metrics.

Social networks (and platforms such as YouTube) “introduce an interpersonal component to a traditionally para-social form of engagement” (Leith, 2021, p. 111), as there are chances of mediated interaction between content creators and users (and, of course, among different users). This notwithstanding, the pervasiveness of viewing makes the study of para-social relationships – that is, the ones “media users perceive they are having with” the persona being presented by the contents at stake (Leith, 2021, p. 113) – of utmost importance, alongside their contextualization within broader social relations, as “teenage YouTube viewers’ practices reach beyond their online activities” (Balleys et al., p. 2). This article seeks precisely to do so and the methods adopted are presented below.

Methods

This article aims to understand the relevance of YouTube and YouTubers for a sample of Portuguese youngsters who were part of the students enrolled in the international Transmedia Literacy research project. A total of 78 youngsters, aged 12 to 16, participated in this local subset of the general research project.⁴ They were part of four classes from two different schools: one located in an urban area (Braga), the other in a mainly rural one (Montalegre), both in the North of Portugal. In each school a 7th (12-14-years old) and 10th (15-16-years old) grade class were selected.

The transnational fieldwork, based on a short-term ethnographic approach (Pink & Ardèvol, 2018), encompassed four different research moments and techniques in each class: a questionnaire, two participatory workshops – one about videogames, the other on participatory culture – and individual interviews with part of the youngsters, who also had to keep a media diary. In Portugal, during the workshops devoted to the first theme, YouTubers emerged as particularly popular references and they were brought to

the fore by the young people’s own initiative while discussing videogames. To further develop this outcome, four focus groups, enrolling the students that participated in the workshops devoted to videogames, were promoted one year after the completion of the project’s original research design. This additional group technique was chosen due to its flexibility, allowing one to listen to each student's perspectives while paying attention to the interactions and the discussion amongst the participants. Considering the objectives of the study, this qualitative data collection technique was deemed appropriate as it would allow for a discussion focused on the topic among people with some kind of similarity, in a group situation.

Therefore, this article is centred on the outcomes of the focus groups and has three main objectives:

- to understand the relevance of YouTubers in teenagers' everyday lives and their motivations to watch and follow them;
- to explore the importance of YouTubers for their socialization and identity;
- to identify their perspectives on YouTube and the YouTubers phenomenon.

A total of 36 students (M= 23; F= 13) participated in the focus groups: nine and eight from the junior classes from the urban and rural school, respectively; 11 and eight from the senior classes from each school, following the same order. The topics addressed during the focus groups are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis categories used.

Individual Self-awareness and perceptions	Social Identification, socialization and sociability
Why do they watch YouTubers	
Perceptions regarding the YouTubers’ presence in everyday life	

Youtubers' relevance in their relationship with peers
Youtubers, YouTube and adults: parents & teachers
Perspectives on YouTube and the Youtubers phenomenon

It is important to bear in mind that Table 1 presents an analytical separation: despite leaning (also graphically) towards more individual or social dimensions, every category is in dialogue with the others.

Results

Participants' media uses and YouTube practices

Considering the outcomes of the questionnaire⁵ answered during the initial fieldwork, all students that participated in the focus groups, much like the overall sample, had abundant access to media: all of them (n= 36) reported to have, at least, a TV, a laptop, a mobile phone and Wi-Fi Internet at home, which were also the most frequently used media. Every youngster had an account on YouTube and only one did not have a Facebook profile. Throughout the different research methods of the initial fieldwork, it became clear that the use of Facebook was in decline – the app Messenger was often the only used feature of this social network and the overall sample's preferred choice in the realm of instant messaging – and the subsample in analysis was no exception. In contrast, YouTube was highly popular. Amongst the 36 youngsters, watching YouTube channels was one of the most enjoyed online activities, according to both a five-point Likert scale (M= 4.36) and to the questionnaire's open questions. These data were reinforced by the subsequent research tools, where YouTube and Youtubers were often mentioned.

In the questionnaires, workshops and interviews of the subsample under analysis, a total of 30 different YouTube channels were discussed by the youngsters. Three of them were most often pointed out: the Portuguese Wuant (mainly by the junior class from the rural school), the Swede PewDiePie and the American Markiplier were brought to discussion four times each.⁶ In addition, one student from the junior class at the urban school self-identified as a YouTuber⁷ during the original fieldwork and his colleagues stated they were regular followers. One year later, in the scope of the focus groups, it was possible to better understand how widespread the YouTubers' popularity was.

The focus groups started by presenting the students with a list of the YouTubers mentioned by each class during the original fieldwork conducted the previous year, asking students to confirm if they still followed and/or usually watched them. Despite the evolution – as self-perceived – of their tastes discussed in the next section, 27 of the 30 YouTubers originally mentioned were still watched regularly by at least one person.⁸ The list presented in each class also had another task: the youngsters were challenged to list additional YouTubers that they usually watched. The numbers increased sharply, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Sum of all mentions to different YouTubers or YouTube channels in each class.

		Initial fieldwork	Focus groups
Junior class	Urban school	15	102
	Rural school	10	74
Senior class	Urban school	7	56
	Rural school	2	8
Total		34	240

Considering the numbers presented until now, it becomes clear that the students are familiar with many YouTubers. However, if some are shared by many, most (129)

were mentioned by just one person. Only three YouTubers – all of them with a considerable number of subscribers⁹ – had more than 10 self-declared regular watchers: PewDiePie (17), Wuant (12) and the also Portuguese Tiagovski (11). The first, despite being the one with more viewers, is essentially popular in the urban school: only one student from the junior year from the rural reported usually watching PewDiePie. Wuant is essentially seen by the junior classes from the rural (4) and the urban (7) school: the remaining follower is one student from the senior class from the urban school. Tiagovski, besides being popular with the junior class from the urban school (6 mentions), is also responsible for half of the eight mentions coming from the senior class from the rural school. In general, the younger elements of the sample preferred Lusophone YouTubers (Portuguese and Brazilian) and the students from the urban school were more likely to watch foreign ones,¹⁰ particularly if they were somehow related to videogames. These general trends are also visible if we list the three most mentioned YouTubers by class and school (Table 3).

Table 3. Three most mentioned YouTubers.

	Number of mentions by school grade		Number of mentions by geographical area	
	Junior classes	Senior classes	Urban school	Rural school
YouTuber #1	Wuant, (Portuguese) 11 mentions	PewDiePie (Swedish) 8 mentions	PewDiePie (Swedish) 16 mentions	Wuant (Portuguese) 4 mentions
YouTuber #2	PewDiePie (Swedish) 9 mentions	Markiplier, (American) 6 mentions	Wuant, (Portuguese)/ Markiplier (American) 8 mentions each	Tiagovski, Portuguese 4 mentions
YouTuber #3	DarkFrame, (Portuguese) 8 mentions	Tiagovski, Portuguese/ Jacksepticeye, Irish	Tiagovski, Portuguese 7 mentions	MigluSantos, Portuguese 4 mentions

		5 mentions each		
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The differences presented in Table 3, based on age and geographical origin, were reinforced by the discussions raised by the focus groups: YouTubers were more relevant to both junior classes, despite the different profiles between them, and to the senior class from the urban school. The most significant differences are between the two groups of senior students: while for the urban school group the YouTubers assume a very significant presence, for their peers from the rural school, following YouTubers is a more casual activity, as they do not give them that much importance. Among this group from the rural school, there are four students who access YouTube but do not follow YouTubers, which they explain in the following way:¹¹ “It's boring to be looking at that. It doesn't interest me at all” (girl, 15-y/o). And a classmate of hers added: “they never captivated me” (boy, 16-y/o). Apart from these students, the others watched YouTubers every day.

According to the 36 students present in the focus groups, afternoon (after school), evening and weekends are the periods most dedicated to this activity. Their viewing habits are not usually distributed throughout the day (for instance, watching a new video whenever the notification arrives on their smartphones), but concentrated in specific moments. Accessing YouTube is for them a natural media consumption habit, rooted in their daily life. As a 15-year-old boy from the urban school commented, “it's similar to how people watch television. I don't watch so much television, but I watch YouTube”. Most students reported, however, that they put studying first, so when they have a lot of subjects to study or when they have tests, they put YouTube on the back burner. As a consequence, weekends, holidays and the moments before sleep are

regularly used – in particular by the students from the junior classes – to catch up on missing videos and to watch them for a considerable length of time.

Why do they like to watch YouTubers?

In a previous article (Pereira et al., 2018a) we had the opportunity to explore the main traits of these teenagers' favourite YouTubers, by analysing a sample of videos published by them. Now we had the opportunity to hear from the young people themselves. When asked why they like YouTubers, students highlighted several aspects, some related to their daily practices, others related to the characteristics of the digital entertainers. Table 4 presents these aspects.

Table 4. Why do students like and watch YouTubers

Reasons centred on Youngsters' daily practices	Reasons centred on Youtubers' personal traits
To relax	They are funny
To escape stress	Have charisma
To unwind after a school day	For the work they do
To break their routine	For their naturalness
To lift their mood	For their originality
To occupy free time	For their personalities
For entertainment	For their sense of humour
As a source of information	The quality of their videos (image, sound, edition)
To learn about new videogames	
Having nothing else to do	The content

Their reasons to like and to watch YouTubers are a mix between what these performers provide to them and their personal traits. From the reception point of view, entertainment is undoubtedly the reason that was most spontaneously mentioned. But

many also answered “I had never thought about it” and not only for this topic. This reveals they did not have a clearly structured thought or a stable discourse about YouTubers. Nevertheless, they have well-defined expectations of what they want to find and are demanding of YouTubers. That is, to be followers they have to find some characteristics that they consider fundamental. The main one is undoubtedly their sense of humour, but they also highlighted their typical expressions and behaviours: as a student said, these “are their brands”. Much like the teenagers discussed by Balleys et al. (2020), our sample chiefly appreciate their perceived authenticity, and this is expressed, for instance, by the swear words commonly used by YouTubers, which is seen as a natural feature for communicating with audiences. This issue merited some discussion with them. They seemed to have a fairly formed opinion in this regard, stating that:

- “the use of swear words is not part of the YouTubers, it's part of humans. It's something that comes out usually in the excitement of the game, in the emotions. Games create emotions and sometimes a person can't control themselves. It's not about gaining visualization; they really are like that. It's natural” (boy, 16 y/o, urban school);
- “I think the swear words turn out to be natural. For example, a YouTuber who plays and is in the heat of the moment... saying a swear word every now and then I think it becomes natural” (girl, 15 y/o, urban school);
- “I prefer them to speak naturally. If a swear word comes up... As long as it's not an effort to say a swear word” (boy, 16 y/o, urban school);
- “We find it very common because we are the same. This filthy language is the language of everyday life” (boy, 16 y/o, rural school).

What is important for them is that YouTubers are natural and that means using swear words is normal. When this naturalness is not present, they unsubscribe.

Asked whether they were influenced by YouTubers' bad language, the senior classes answered that swear words are everywhere and that it may have some influence but not on people their age, only on younger children. In their opinion, children may want to imitate them with their friends or copy them into videos they produce. As a student (16 y/o, urban school) stated: “for the little ones, even if they don't watch bad-mouthed YouTube channels, when they get to school they learn them. That's how I learned, I didn't have the Internet”.

Younger students in this sample also considered YouTubers' swear words as natural:

- “without them [swear words] it wouldn't be funny” (boy, 12 y/o, rural school);
- “they are normal, that's how they are [in real life]” (girl, 12 y/o, urban school).

Therefore, younger student did not attach much importance to YouTubers' use of swear words either, just like older students, they considered it something natural. But contrary to what their older peers said, they do not think they are influenced by YouTubers in this regard. The only influence they admit is on gaming and the way they play videogames, which they consider positive because they improve their playing skills.

YouTubers, socialization and identity

The presence of YouTube and YouTubers in these young people's lives is remarkable, in terms of the time they devote to these activities and the way they comment on them. It is therefore curious that they say that this is a topic about which they talk very little or not at all amongst themselves – unlike what was found, for instance, by Balleys et al.

(2020). This seems to be rooted in their established habits (with and beyond media): As mentioned earlier, they watch YouTube and YouTubers mostly at home, but also while waiting and during traveling times. Which means that they rarely do it during breaks at school, for instance. On the one hand, because they do not have enough mobile data and on the other, because they say they prefer talking to friends: “Here [at school] we have other things to do”, said a 12-year-old boy from the rural school. We prefer “to take a walk!” (girl, 13 y/o, rural school) or “to be with friends” (girl, 12 y/o, rural school). The majority said they do not have the habit of chatting with schoolmates about YouTubers, although they talk a lot about video games and their gaming practices. An exception was the case of some urban school students, who said they talk about it during classes “when they are bored”, and another was a junior student from the rural school who stated he usually talks to his classmates about this subject.

If this is not a topic of frequent conversation with schoolmates or siblings, much less is it with adults, whether parents or teachers. The latter, according to the senior group from the urban school, “are from another time”, adding that “teachers sometimes don't know how to open YouTube” and that they even do not know where the video comes from. The junior students from the same school stated that “teachers only give classes”. In relation to parents, students admitted they devalue these activities or simply do not care, as evidenced by the following quotes from two 12-year-old boys from the urban school: “adults don't care”; “adults like my dad don't care. My mom doesn't care if I watch it, but my dad always says, 'Drop that crap’”.

Students' critical perspectives on YouTubers

Most students, but especially the senior group from the urban school, have shown a considerable critical thinking competence about YouTube and YouTubers. They are

very aware of how YouTubers work for audiences, stressing the way they communicate to attract audiences as something they must know how to do. They did not at all appear to be uncritical consumers of such platforms and influencers. The controversy in which Swedish YouTuber PewDiePie was involved in 2017 was a topic discussed by all student groups, except the senior class from the rural school: this YouTuber promised to close his channel if it reached 50 million subscribers, but did not do so after reaching that milestone. The students were excited and angry when they commented on the case, saying that he had misled the followers. Some subscribed to the channel just at that moment so it would reach the intended number of subscribers, as a student (boy, 16 y/o, urban school) referred: “I subscribed so that he would end the channel! I was fooled”. And another student (girl, 16 y/o, urban school) added: “and it's over. He just didn't say what it was. And he closed down the second channel. I think this is misleading”.

Students from the junior class of the rural school had the same perception: “he's already reached 50 million because of that deleted channel thing” (boy, 12 y/o); “it was just to have more subscribers” (boy, y/o). The focus group with the junior class from the urban school happened before the YouTuber could reach the milestone, but it was nevertheless mentioned: after a classmate's reference to PewDiePie's promise, two 12-year-old boys stated their disbelief based on the amount of money the YouTuber was already making. Another boy (14 y/o), the one YouTuber from the initial fieldwork, mediated the dispute by resorting to the higher symbolic capital afforded to him by his experience with the platform: on the one hand he confirmed the existence of the promise by mentioning one of PewDiePie's early videos. On the other hand, he predicted that the YouTuber would immediately start a new channel and that he would regain the viewers with little effort. It is also worth mentioning the way this 14-year-old

boy characterized his memory of the video with the promise: it was made before PewDiePie became a “rich boy” and was recorded “in a normal basement”.

Another student (girl, 15 y/o, urban school) sought to justify PewDiePie's behaviour as a way to respond to YouTube's new strategies:

“Supposedly he did it because he wanted to draw attention, especially from YouTube, to see how dissatisfied YouTubers are feeling. That was basically a joke and he just wanted to draw attention. He knows that right now what is most valued are viral videos. So he tried to make a viral video to get YouTube and people's attention. It was just a strategy. He had already created a second channel and never said which channel he was going to delete. People just thought about the initial channel”.

Another student (girl, 16 y/o, urban school) added: “This year he valued video quality more than quantity, so it was obvious he wasn't going to delete the channel after a year of working to improve video quality.”

Videos that go viral due to titles that have nothing to do with their content, which are hyped because they just want to capture views, were identified by students as a clickbait practice. Students see this practice as a result of the changes introduced by YouTube, which instead of showing the videos of the subscribed channels, presents those that are recommended by YouTube itself based on the number of views. Some of these views are caused by the video titles and not their content. PewDiePie did not like these platform changes and tried to react by making several videos about it, which for students was excessive because “no one wants to know that”. They attributed this reaction to the fall in the number of views and, consequently, to the loss of money. These (and other) changes introduced by YouTube have not been well received by these students, who consider them as a way to raise money and make a profit, making Google's purchase of YouTube lucrative.

From this discussion, we understood that some students had very accurate knowledge about the functioning of the YouTube platform and YouTubers, knowing how to dismantle some of their strategies. In any case, this knowledge is not common to all. The age of students, their social capital, but also their familiarity with YouTube and YouTubers, where the politics of the platform are also discussed and constructed by different actors (Burgess & Green, 2009b), are factors that seem to be decisive in understanding and deconstructing this phenomenon.

Discussion and final remarks

The results presented here, from a qualitative study with a group of 36 students, do not allow for the extrapolating of the data beyond this subsample. However, they give us important signs for a better interpretation of the nuances of some of the media realities of these young people as voiced by them.

One important take of this study is the undeniable role played by YouTubers in the socialization process and in the identity building of these young people. Their popularity and perceived naturalness, which makes them particularly relatable, potentially turn YouTubers into relevant sources to the development of these youngsters' civic imaginaries, providing symbolic resources to read the world (namely the mediatized one) that matters to them (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016). An example can be found in the students' critical assessment of YouTube and how PewDiePie's videos provided a frame to discuss broader issues pertaining to the platform's politics. However, these socializing agents are barely considered by the more traditional contexts of socialization, such as family and school. Young people regard this as something normal, as they see parents and teachers as being very distant from their interests. The mismatch between contexts and formal and

informal learning was analysed in a previous article (Pereira, Fillol, & Moura, 2019) that included this subsample of students. It was shown that there is a large gap between school and the informal worlds of young people, besides a relational and communicational gap between the main contexts and agents of socialization.

A second (and surprising) outcome was the minor role of YouTube-related sociability practices amidst the youngsters. Despite being – most of them, at least – heavy viewers, mixing regular consumptions with uses for long periods of time, this practice is seldom present in their everyday conversations (online or offline). This might also explain the dispersion of tastes showed in Table 2, a possible indicator of their more individual relationship with YouTube and YouTubers. Although both the online platform and the performers may be regarded as constituting a common cultural ground, which can engage youngsters in collective discussions as was the case with the focus groups, the fact is that the relevance they have in these young people's lives is more related to individual entertainment and identification, as shown by the importance they attribute to the naturalness and confessional style of the mediated personae. That is, while the Internet and its related screens and characters may bind the youngsters together in the overall picture, their everyday relationship with YouTube and YouTubers emphasizes two broad sets of motivations. On the one hand, it is still very much attached to informal and less committed practices (hence the importance of entertainment and passing the time as motivators). In fact, the one student that identified himself as a YouTuber in the initial fieldwork pointed out the excessive commitment required to run a channel and the consequent lack of fun (he felt compelled to play videogames for his viewers, and not the ones he wanted to) as the reasons for deleting it. On the other hand, the more committed practices are embodied by the relevance of an individual para-social relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Leith, 2021) with

YouTubers, which can explain the recurrent reference to the importance of their naturalness. This might also contribute to contextualizing the overall absence of online participation amongst young Portuguese people (except with their everyday peers or family in private groups regarding topics non-relatable to YouTube and YouTubers) within this project (Pereira et al., 2019, 2018b) and in larger national studies (Pereira et al., 2015b). In other words, online and digital media offer them the chance to expand their identity and socialization circles and they materialize it in small steps, either by expanding the recurrence of contacts with their everyday sociability partners, or by looking for other sources of (para-social) identification (i.e., the YouTubers) which are relatable even without real interaction. This is the case even though these content creators exist within a platform that would allow mediated interpersonal interaction with other people online (namely with other users with whom they could share their interests).

Despite being an activity that youngsters perform almost every day, YouTube and YouTubers are subjects that they think, question and talk about very sparingly. In many of the topics we presented for discussion, student responses, regardless of age and geographical location of the school, were: “I never thought about it”. That was many times the case when asked about the influence of YouTubers in their lives – although some youngsters admitted this influence especially on what and how they play, not stating the same for their behaviours and attitudes. The use of slang is an example. For these young people, the use of bad words by YouTubers is natural, it is part of their performance, just as it is natural in communicating with their peers. The naturalness with which young people face this issue and talk about it causes some surprise. The use of slang by and among young people has become an integrative element in the peer group, even for those who do not use this language in other contexts, particularly in the

family environment. They therefore know the contexts in which they can and cannot use slang and those in which it is accepted, considering YouTubers channels one of those contexts.

In the discussion with the four groups, we found no prominent differences in respect to gender, but there were some differences regarding the geographical environment of the school, which is also the environment in which students predominantly live. There were also some differences in age, which is to be expected given the levels of development that separates 12-year-olds from 16-year-olds. The biggest difference, however, was between the groups of senior students from the urban and the rural school. The senior group from the rural school was the one that identified, since the initial fieldwork, fewer YouTubers, being also the one who views and interacts least with them (remember that 4 out of 8 students in this group do not follow any YouTuber). Given their limited experience, they are less informed about this topic and therefore not able to provide significant insights. These results support one of the five key findings of the EU Kids Online project: “the more children use the Internet, the more digital skills they gain and the higher they climb the 'ladder of online opportunities' to gain benefits” (Eu Kids Online, 2014, p. 9).

The media repertoires of these students, as well as their social and cultural capital, were very distinct from their peers in the urban area. However, this difference was not found between the group of junior students from the urban school and from the rural school. These two groups were much closer, both in terms of practice and in terms of information and discussion. Based on these results, as well as those from previous studies (Pereira, Pereira, & Melro, 2015a; Pereira et al., 2015b), we are led to conclude that individual variables, as well as the contexts and the socialization agents, including peers, have a greater impact on use, consumption, and interaction with the media than

the geographical variable. The Internet and digital technologies have contributed to breaking down barriers to media access. Today the focus is less on access and more on competences for critical use, understanding, analysis and production, that is, the focus is on Media Literacy.

This work showed the importance of this type of discussion to promote young people's critical thinking and analysis skills in relation to the media and their media practices. During the focus groups, we noticed, as mentioned before, how unaccustomed they were to reflecting on the subject, but we also noticed the absence of stimuli and opportunities to talk about this specific subject and about the media in general, namely at school and in the family. However, their participation in this article showed a more complex scenario: while the youngsters are unaccustomed to discussing YouTubers, they like to debate the topic and manage to go further in analysing their media practices. An example can be found in the critical view that participants had about YouTubers, specifically about their follower-attraction strategies and their business model. Furthermore, if sometimes the first and immediate answer to some of the questions was "I don't know", when researchers provoked reflection, they ended up actively involved in the discussion, developing their perspectives on the subject. This might furnish a clue for schools, school libraries, but also families: when the opportunities for dialogue are created, when there is room for young people to be heard based on their preferences, they might be particularly willing to discuss what is already relevant to them, which presents a way to promote meaningful media literacy initiatives.

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Notes

1. In its About Us statement, which has been changed, as also mentioned in this paper.
2. That is, forms of participation, such as liking, that are primarily designed to quantify things rather than to welcome diverse and more creative expressions of the users' agency (Schäfer, 2011).
3. According to YouTube Help (<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/72851?hl=en>), to be eligible to monetize videos through the Partner Program, the channel must have more than 4,000 valid public watch hours (counted within public-listed videos) in the last 12 months, besides more than 1,000 subscribers.
4. Regarding the procedures for creating a sample consisting essentially of adolescents, it is important to state that both the youngsters and their parents/guardians had full knowledge of the different stages and purposes of the project. They all read and signed an informed consent regarding the research design – namely how the youngsters' data would be protected and its confidentiality assured – and the different activities in which the sample could be involved. The overall ethical procedures were approved and validated by the lead team's university (Clinical Research Ethics Committee, reference number 2015/6358/I) as well as by the European Commission.
5. The questionnaire and the overall fieldwork guidance is available at: <https://repositori.upf.edu/handle/10230/33909>
6. It is important to remember that the original fieldwork was not devoted to YouTubers, namely to calculate how many were followed by each student. Therefore, the mentions counted were the verbalizations that, eventually, generated discussions and reactions involving more youngsters.
7. This student had a channel devoted to videogames with around 300 subscribers at the time. He was the one that presented himself to the researchers as a YouTuber. Despite not being eligible to be part of YouTube Partner Program (see note 3), this 14-year-old boy stated that he was having some benefits from sponsors – namely easier access to videogames to be reviewed.
8. The source of one of the YouTubers whose preference was not reaffirmed was one of the students absent. Therefore, only one youngster did not reassert the watching – or, at least, the following – of a channel mentioned in the previous year. In fact, the student from the junior class from the urban school (apparently) did not even recognize the channel: when

one of her colleagues suggested that she was of the followers of that channel, she stated “I don’t know who she is”.

9. At the time of the fieldwork of the overall research project, the Swede PewDiePie had more than 56 million subscribers. Wuant had more than 2 million and Tiagovsky half a million.
10. This can be explained by the greater English proficiency of these students, especially the older ones in the urban school. In a previous work within the same project (Pereira et al., 2019), YouTubers were regarded as relevant informal learning ways to develop their knowledge of foreign languages.
11. All quotations were translated from Portuguese into English by the authors.

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