

YouTubers: audience identification with and reasons for liking them

YouTubers: identificación y motivos de agrado de la audiencia

YouTubers: identificação e razões para gostar da audiência

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Abstract

YouTubers today have become role models, especially for young people. This article examines the interactions of followers of successful Spanish YouTubers in terms of the commenter's topic and position, identification with the YouTuber, and reasons for liking them. Toward this end, viewer comments on videos from 10 successful Spanish YouTubers were analyzed. The comments had been selected in an exploratory study and were based on the following criteria: influencers active on YouTube and Instagram, age (18-30 years), sexual orientation, notoriety (between 200,000 and 34 million followers of the YouTube channel) and topic variety on their channel. Content analysis of the 1000 comments was used to identify the common arguments and elements indicated by followers.



The results showed identification with YouTubers to be a significant dimension, particularly wishful identification and similarity to influencers; other findings were the value given especially to the YouTuber's humor and personality, followed by their physical attractiveness, and, to a lesser extent, their intelligence and wealth/success. Further research into the formative impact of influencers on young people is of special interest, examining both the messages and representations they convey, as well as their reception and interpretation.

Keywords: YouTubers; influencers; followers; identification; audience appeal; content analysis

Resumen

Actualmente, los *YouTubers* se han convertido en modelos a seguir, especialmente, para los más jóvenes. En este artículo se analizan las interacciones de los seguidores de los *YouTubers* españoles de éxito en términos de comentario y tema, identificación y motivos de agrado. Para ello, se analizan los comentarios de la audiencia a los vídeos de 10 *YouTuber* de éxito españoles, seleccionados a partir de un estudio exploratorio atendiendo a los siguientes criterios: *influencers* presentes en YouTube e Instagram, edad (18-30 años), orientación sexual, notoriedad (entre 200.000 y 34 millones en el canal de YouTube) y variedad temática de su canal. Mediante el análisis de contenido de 1000 comentarios, se reconocen los argumentos y aspectos comunes que señalan los seguidores. Los resultados muestran, por un lado, que una categoría relevante es la identificación con los *YouTubers*, destacando la identificación aspiracional y la similitud con el *influencer*, y, por otro lado, que los seguidores valoran, especialmente, el humor y la personalidad del *YouTuber*, seguido de su atractivo físico, y, en menor medida, de su inteligencia y riqueza/éxito. Se subraya el interés de seguir ahondando en la investigación sobre el impacto de los *influencers* en la formación de los más jóvenes, tanto explorando los mensajes y representaciones que transmiten, como su recepción e interpretación.

Palabras clave: YouTuber; influencers; seguidores; identificación; motivos de agrado; análisis de contenido

Resumo

Actualmente, os *YouTubers* tornaram-se modelos a seguir, especialmente para os jovens. Neste artigo analisamos as interações dos seguidores de *YouTubers* espanhóis de sucesso em termos de comentários e tema, identificação e razões para gostar. Para tal, analisamos os comentários do público aos vídeos de 10 *YouTubers* espanhóis de sucesso, seleccionados a partir de um estudo exploratório baseado nos seguintes critérios: influenciadores presentes no YouTube e Instagram, idade (18-30 anos), orientação sexual, notoriedade (entre 200.000 e 34 milhões no canal YouTube) e variedade temática do seu canal. Através da análise do conteúdo de 1000 comentários, são identificados os argumentos e elementos comuns fornecidos pelos seguidores. Os resultados mostram, por um lado, que a identificação com os *YouTubers* emerge como uma categoria importante, destacando a identificação aspiracional e semelhança com os influenciadores, e, por outro lado, que os seguidores valorizam, especialmente, o humor e a personalidade do *YouTuber*, seguidos pela sua atracção física, e, em menor grau, a sua inteligência e riqueza/sucesso. Sublinhamos o interesse de mais investigação sobre o impacto dos influenciadores na educação dos jovens, tanto através da análise dos seus conteúdos e representações, como da sua recepção e interpretação.

Palavras-chave: YouTuber; influencers; seguidores; identificação; razões para gostar; análise de conteúdo

1. Introduction

The development of new information technologies has brought with it the creation and proliferation of online social networks, defined as communities that put people in touch over the Internet, where they interact among themselves, sharing information and interests (Morduchowicz, Marcon, Sylvestre & Ballestrini, 2010). This form of connection thus represents a modification in how people represent themselves, behave and relate to others. As Vizcaíno-Verdú, De Casas-Moreno and Aguaded (2019) point out, users share their ideas and concerns through their daily experiences on the Net, turning participatory culture into an avenue for collaboration and transforming social networks into "an instrument of dissemination, promotion, of modifying social behaviors, of defining identities, of social grouping and movement, as well as other themes" (p. 217). Social media thus take their place as an advantageous forum for social interrelation in the process of constructing one's identity (Buckingham, 2008; Cover, 2012; Aran-Ramspott, Fedele & Tarragó, 2018; Regueira, Alonso-Ferreiro & Da-Vila, 2020).

As different studies emphasize (AIMC, 2018; Kádeková y Holiencinová, 2018; Eurostat, 2020), social networks have become indispensable in everyday life, especially for young people. On these networks, new media role models have emerged and become established, the so-called influencers. In this regard, De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2016, p. 1) define influencers as "people who build a large network of followers and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches". In Spain, specifically, 85% of young people between the ages of 16 and 30 use social networks to follow influencers (IAB Spain, 2018), who can have an impact on the thinking and behavior of their followers. Kádeková and Holiencinová (2018) highlight four types of influencers, according to the content they generate and the platforms they use: the blogger, the YouTuber or vlogger, the celebrity and the Instagrammer.

In this context, the study presented here focuses on the second type of influencer, that is, YouTubers, given the importance they have acquired in recent years. Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim founded the YouTube social network in 2005 for the purpose of sharing videos online; today, it has more than two billion users (representing a third of Internet consumers), the most substantial group between the ages of 18 and 34, and is available in 80 languages (YouTube, 2021). YouTube is thus replacing the medium of television among young people, due to its interactive, audience-directed content, which is genuine and creates communities (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019).

As a social network, YouTube allows users to become creators and broadcasters of audiovisual content, i.e., YouTubers or vloggers (Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2019). However, not all YouTube users who create and broadcast content on the platform attain the same level of influence or number of followers. In this regard, Bonaga and Turiel (2016, pp. 120-121) define a YouTuber as:

Any individual who, at regular, ongoing intervals, posts content to the platform and is able to convert the number of viewings of a given file into monetary compensation. This is known in English as “monetizing visits”. In this way, only people who have managed to make YouTube not just a hobby, but their profession, would be credited as “creators”. And the most important aspect of successful YouTubers, those we have called “creators”, is their quality of becoming “influencers”.

According to Regueira et al. (2020), YouTubers are generally young people, able to draw large masses of followers who persist over time, thereby generating a community that revolves around themselves and defines identity symbols. In this line, Rego and Romero-Rodríguez (2016, p. 198) indicate that most YouTubers are “young people who are slightly older than their target audience of followers, and who deal with current topics in a colloquial way, becoming to some degree opinion leaders.”

The study of YouTube and YouTubers has thus become an area of research interest (Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2019). In the Spanish context, examples include studies on the YouTube business model (Larrañaga & Ruiz, 2009), the discursivity and language of YouTubers (Rego & Romero-Rodríguez, 2016; Sabich & Steinberg, 2017); the video content conveyed by the main YouTubers that children follow (Renés, Gozávez & Berlanga, 2020); the new professional profile of influencers, for example, the case study of Verdelliss (Elorriaga & Monge, 2018); or, from a gender perspective, the participation and representation of women in this social network (Regueira et al., 2020), or gender differences in terms of consumption, creation and dissemination of content (Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua, Lazkano-Arrillaga & Eguskiza-Sesumaga, 2018). However, there is still little research on the impact of influencers and, specifically, of YouTubers (Rego & Romero-Rodríguez, 2016; Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Elorriaga & Monge, 2018; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), or on the reception and interaction of their audience.

Therefore, in the current media context, it is important to investigate the impact of new media and their role models on young people, as in the case of YouTube and YouTubers. There is extensive research on traditional media and their influence, with several studies highlighting the socializing power of television, especially television fiction and its characters, who may seem close to the viewer’s world, prompting comparisons, and influencing the configuration of the viewer’s values or attitudes (Livingstone, 1998; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Igartua, 2010; etc.). Identification with the character is fundamental to an understanding of media effects, and is defined as a cognitive and emotional process by which the spectator puts himself or herself in the place of the protagonist and takes their perspective (Cohen, 2001; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Moyer-

Gusé, 2008; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016). There are different dimensions of identification with characters: the viewer's empathic relationship (emotional or cognitive) with characters (Cohen, 2001; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Igartua, 2010); their perceived resemblance to such characters (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016); their desire to be like that character (Cohen, 2001; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016); and finally, there is parasocial interaction (Livingstone, 1998; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016), which refers to the process of the spectator having a pseudorelationship with the character (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Just as in the case of television characters, YouTubers today have become opinion leaders and role models for young people (Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua et al., 2018). They can thus act as reference models, through the same identification and empathy mechanisms (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018), since they are "close, accessible people, who challenge the limits of intimacy and privacy" (Regueira et al., 2020, p. 63). In this regard, young people today consider YouTubers easier to identify with than traditional celebrities; they value YouTubers having character and being genuine (Defy Media, 2016). As Tolbert and Drogos (2019) point out, compared to the fantasy fictional characters in traditional media, the fact that YouTubers really exist, and started out as "normal" people making videos at home before they became celebrities, facilitates audience bonding. This study also reflects, on one hand, that young people want to be like their favorite YouTubers, who are valued for being intelligent and fun, and this wishful desire is related to perceived resemblance; on the other hand, they establish parasocial relationships with the YouTubers, and have feelings of friendship toward them.

YouTubers build their personal brand by exposing their personal lives and by proximity to their followers, through direct and creative communication, by showing authenticity and closeness to the audience, and they receive the gratitude of their followers for "making them smile" when watching their videos (Bonaga & Turiel, 2016). As Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua et al. (2018) point out, adolescents consume, create, and disseminate recreational content on the Internet. In this line, Aran-Ramspott et al. (2018) found that preadolescents are attracted to YouTubers mainly for their humor and similarity with their own interests. Other important elements of audience appeal include "coolness", the viewer identifying with a certain YouTuber, and being able to share a certain YouTuber with their peers. In addition, they admire "their comic wit and knowledge more than physical appearance or the brand image that they may represent" (p. 57). This study also indicates that preadolescents distrust the fame and risks involved in the work of YouTubers, and that they are critical of offensive and discriminatory attitudes. In this line, with regard to television characters, different studies show that adolescents value their personality, especially their friendliness and humor (Medrano, Cortés, Aierbe & Orejudo, 2010; Medrano & Martínez de Morentín, 2012; Bermejo, 2012; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016). They also value the character's social relationships, and to a lesser degree, their wealth/success and work (Korres & Elexpuru, 2016). As for the character's physical attractiveness, certain studies emphasize this as an important element (Ruiz, Conde & Torres, 2005), while

other authors indicate that this aspect is not significant (Medrano et al., 2010; Medrano & Martínez de Morentín, 2012).

As Scolari and Fraticelli (2016) indicate, the success of YouTubers seems to be based on the individualized contact that this platform allows; besides offering a subject who produces videos, “it generates an active spectator who leaves their mark on the interface and actively participates by making comments, indicating what they like and don’t like, subscribing to one channel or another, and by contacting the YouTuber through other hypermedia like Twitter” (p. 1689). It is therefore important to examine the messages that are produced in the media, given that the audience also interacts through them (De la Fuente, Lacasa & Martínez-Borda, 2019). In this way, a community with identity symbols is created around the figure of the YouTuber, where interaction is “bidirectional, male and female YouTubers appeal to their audience, who in return gives them feedback” (Regueira et al., 2020, p. 63).

The present study explores audience comments on YouTube videos, in order to examine the relationship that is established with the YouTubers. This knowledge can help facilitate the development of educational efforts to promote media literacy. As several authors indicate, it is increasingly necessary to assist in the development of media competencies, especially as they relate to the dimension of ideology and values (Díaz-Aguado & Falcón, 2013). Research from De la Fuente, Lacasa and Martínez-Borda (2019) indicates that Internet and social networks constitute an important informal context for learning, creating a space where new practices and digital discourses are created by combining real and virtual environments, and creating communities where anyone can participate. Thus, there is a continued need for research on these new media and the leading players found there, as well as to develop educational proposals that encourage a critical outlook toward them. In this regard, Renés, González and Berlanga (2020), following prior studies by Escobar-Román (2011), Callejo and Gutiérrez (2014) and Morgan and Kristjánsson (2017), offer recommendations to encourage the appropriate use of social networks among the younger audiences, for example, by promoting a reflexive, critical reading of YouTuber discourse, by generating teaching resources that analyze this type of platform at school, and by training teachers and families in digital education.

2. Material and Methods

This study forms part of a broader investigation entitled “Building gender identities, values and youth stereotypes in social media: influencers and the millennial and centennial audiences”, financed by the Centro Reina Sofía (2018 call)¹. This research has been implemented in three phases:

1) A quantitative exploratory analysis and qualitative analysis of 52 profiles of popular Spanish influencers (and 156 YouTube videos);

2) An in-depth analysis of 10 Spanish influencers (5 female and 5 male), selected from the 52 profiles in the exploratory analysis;

3) An audience analysis conducted through content analysis of 1000 comments from YouTube followers. For each of the 10 YouTube videos analyzed in phase 2, the top 100 comments (with most impact) were analyzed. The following aspects were analyzed: topic and position; identification with the YouTuber; reasons for liking them; and perceived values.

The results from phases 1 and 2, focused mainly on profile and video analysis of successful Spanish influencers, are currently awaiting publication (Fedele, Aran-Ramspott, Elexpuru & Korres, in press). The present article presents the results and conclusions of phase 3. The aim was to examine the comments and interactions of followers of 10 successful Spanish YouTubers in terms of topic and position, identification with the YouTuber, and reasons for liking them. Through content analysis, we identified common arguments and aspects that the followers expressed in their comments.

2.1. Sample selection

To select the Spanish YouTubers from which to analyze follower comments, we sought the greatest possible profile diversity, based on the following criteria: influencers who are present on YouTube and Instagram, ages 18-30, sexual orientation, notoriety (between 200,000 and 34 million YouTube channel subscribers), and topic variety on their channel. In the matter of popularity, the criterion was adjusted for male vs. female influencers, with the former having between 1 and 34 million followers and the latter between 200,000 and 2.5 million. As for topic diversity, despite the male YouTubers having a more homogeneous range of topics, certain diversity can be noted under the label of "entertainment". However, possibly due to the notoriety criterion, the sample could not incorporate racial diversity, nor could it include specialized LGBTIQ+ channels. Finally, we had to exclude channels that were exclusively for gamers, since their videos did not offer material in line with our study objectives.

Based on statistics corresponding to the period of analysis (2018-2019) of the exploratory study, we selected 5 male and 5 female profiles that would ensure the greatest variety in the sample. The male YouTubers were El Rubius, AuronPlay, Wismichu, Celopan and Jaime Altozano. The female YouTubers were Dulceida, Yellow Mellow, Paula Gonu, Herrejón and La gata de Schrödinger.

In selecting the video from each YouTuber whose follower comments were to be analyzed (Table 1), we considered time criteria --published between January 2018 and September 2019-- and topic criteria --videos of interviews and/or vlogs, according to the classification established by Scolari and Fraticelli (2016), since in both cases the influencers expose

themselves on a personal level, either by answering the audience's questions, or by expressing their opinion on a specific topic.

Table 1. YouTuber videos supplying the comments to be analyzed

El Rubius	<u>50 COSAS SOBRE MÍ 2019 [50 THINGS ABOUT ME 2019]</u> by <u>Rubius</u>	The YouTuber answers short, personal questions from the audience, such as his favorite food or favorite sport.
Auronplay	<u>CÓMO LIGAR (en la Prehistoria) [HOW TO HOOK UP (in prehistoric times)]</u>	The YouTuber makes fun of a video he has found on the Net about how to hook up.
Wismichu	<u>Respondiendo a vuestras preguntas por la calle [Answering your questions on the street]</u>	The YouTuber answers questions from his subscribers, like whether he is vegan, or what series made a mark on him in childhood.
Jaime Altozano	<u>Todo sobre mí -Especial 1 Millón de Suscriptores [All about me- 1 million subscriber special] / Jaime Altozano</u>	The YouTuber answers questions from the audience such as how much he makes or whether he has children.
Celopan	<u>PREGUNTAS QUE HE EVADIDO [QUESTIONS I HAVE EVADED] - Celopan</u>	The YouTuber answers questions posed by the audience, such as whether he wants to get married or how he met his girlfriend.
Dulceida	<u>TAG DEL YOUTUBE HIPÓCRITA [HYPOCRITE YouTube Tag] - DULCEIDA</u>	TAG where the YouTuber answers questions related to the YouTube universe, such as who she envies or admires.
Yellow Mellow	<u>¿Me ha gustado una YouTuber? TAG DEL YOUTUBER HONESTO [Did I ever like a girl YouTuber? HONEST Youtube Tag] YellowMellow</u>	TAG where the YouTuber answers questions related to the YouTube universe, such as who she envies or admires.
Paula Gonu	<u>REACCIONANDO A LO QUE SUPONÉIS SOBRE MÍ [Reacting to what you guys assume about me]/ @paulagonu</u>	TAG where the YouTuber confirms or denies audience assumptions about her, and offers personal information.
Herrejón	<u>LO QUE SUPONÉIS SOBRE MI (¿SOY BORDE? ¿SOY BISEXUAL), ETC... [What you guys assume about me (Am I rude? Am I bisexual? and so on.) / HERREJÓN</u>	TAG where the YouTuber confirms or denies audience assumptions about her, and offers personal information.
La Gata de Schrödinger	<u>¿Cómo llevo ser YouTuber? ¿Trabajo para la CIA? / PREGUNTAS Y RESPUESTAS [How do I handle being a YouTuber? Do I work for the CIA? Questions and answers]</u>	The YouTuber answers questions from the audience, such as what her favorite music group is.

Source: Prepared by the authors

In order to study the followers' comments and interactions, we analyzed the top 100 comments (in number of reactions) for each of the 10 selected YouTube videos (one video per YouTuber). In other words, we examined a total of 1000 comments.

2.2 Data collection and analysis procedure

The comments were collected during the months of January and February 2020 and were transcribed literally. The comments were then analyzed using Atlas.Ti software for content analysis, in order to identify and categorize comments that were relevant for this research study. As a starting point, we used the categories represented in prior studies related to fictional TV characters (Medrano et al., 2010; Bermejo, 2012; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016), revising them and adapting them to the context of YouTubers. First, analysis of the comments led to the definition of emerging categories, which were refined in successive readings, according to the theoretical criteria. Subsequently, these categories were grouped into significant analysis nuclei, by considering whether they shared a common essence and if they fit the content of the category. In this way, the following aspects of these comments came to be analyzed: topic and position; identification with the YouTuber, and observable elements of audience appeal (reasons the viewers like them).

Response categories with a low percentage are not included in this paper, in order to focus on the arguments most often indicated in followers' comments (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories about the YouTubers

Category	Subcategory	Definition
Topic and position	Referring to the topic or the YouTuber	The commenter refers to the topic or to the YouTuber.
	In favor / Against	The commenter positions themselves <i>in favor of</i> or <i>against</i> the topic or the YouTuber. Any comment that does not position itself <i>against</i> is considered to be <i>in favor</i> .
	Links to other Internet content	The commenter refers to other content on the Net.
	Contains emoticons and/or emojis	The commenter uses emoticons in their message.
Identification with the YouTuber.	Similarity	The commenter recognizes themselves in the YouTuber or in the YouTuber's life experiences.
	Parasocial interaction	The commenter interacts with the YouTuber as if they knew them personally. In other words, they speak to the YouTuber directly, as a peer.
	Wishfulness	The commenter indicates that they would like to be like the YouTuber, or actually be him or her.
	Empathy with the YouTuber	The commenter sympathizes with the YouTuber, putting themselves in the YouTuber's shoes, and showing concern for their future.
Elements of audience appeal	Humor/Fun	The commenter indicates that they find the YouTuber amusing and fun. Emoticons or "hahaha", within the context, have been interpreted as humor and fun.
	Wealth/success	The commenter points out the YouTuber's personal or professional success, wealth and/or material goods.
	Intelligence	The commenter shows that they like the YouTuber being intelligent, and using his or her knowledge in the best possible way.
	Physical attractiveness	The commenter emphasizes that they like the <i>YouTuber</i> for their physical looks or outward appearance.
	Personality	The commenter praises one of the YouTuber's personal traits.

Source: Prepared by the authors

3. Results

The results obtained in this study are presented below (followers' comments are transcribed verbatim).

3.1. Topic and position

Regarding the topic and the position of the comments studied, findings are shown below:

- 1) Refers to the topic or the YouTuber: a large majority of the comments analyzed refer to the video or to the YouTuber who made it (n=962, 96.2%). For example:

"THIS IS THE MOMENT; TONIGHT IS THE NIGHT. This is what I shout every time you post a video Melo ##" (Comment on YellowMellow's video).

- 2) In favor/against: most comments are in favor of the YouTuber or their video (n=945, 94.5%), while a smaller number are against (n=55, 5.5%). For example:

In favor: *"I was really looking forward to this video, and I loved it! My Wednesdays are better with your videos##"* (Comment on Dulceida's video).

Against: *"Girl, you carry on so much that in the end you said 5 things that people assume [about you], and I'm sure they sent you hundreds of them...anyway! I don't know why I keep watching your videos when they don't offer me anything anymore"* (Comment on Paula Gonu's video).

- 3) Links to other Internet content: a few users refer to other Internet content in their comments, especially to other YouTubers or influencers (n=117, 11.7%). For example:

"I met you through Calle and Poché a while back and I totally love you #" (Comment on Dulceida's video).

- 4) Contains emoticons and/or emojis: Another notable aspect is the use of emoticons in comments (n=582, 58.2%). For example:

"Ayyy Celo you are gorgeous I love you # 1ps: I maid of honor at the wedding with Coso (obviously ###) ## 2Ps: I loved the sign-off#####" (Comment on Celopan's video).

3.2. Identification with the YouTuber

Identification with YouTubers stands out as a significant category in followers' comments. Of the 1000 comments, 535 refer to identification with the YouTuber. In addition, we observe that this identification process can take place for different reasons:

- 1) Parasocial interaction: the followers relate to the YouTuber as if they were someone close to them, talking to them as a peer (n=467, 46.7%). For example:

"A question you can answer when you get the chance. What would happen if you were someone else, an example, you were me, a normal ordinary person, far from all that is Rubius???" (Comment to El Rubius's video).

We have identified certain features that specify the form of the parasocial interaction, most notably:

- Congratulations on their work (n=94, 9.4%): The follower esteems the YouTuber's profession or the video they have made. For example: *"Honestly the publication was beautiful. What good shots, and Barcelona gorgeous :3"* (Comment on Wismichu's video).
 - Love (n=85, 8.5%): The commenter expresses words/feelings with connotations of love toward the YouTuber. For example: *"The most beautiful, talented, humble, affectionate girl! You don't know how much I LOVE YOU. I would give everything to hug you <3"* (Comment on Dulceida's video).
 - Asks the YouTuber to create certain content (n=68, 6.8%): The commenter requests the YouTuber to develop content or a video on a certain topic. For example, *"Isma, you ought to do a video telling about the diet you had when you became vegetarian and the transition from vegetarian to vegan. I am very interested. Regards"* (Comment on Wismichu's video).
- 2) Similarity to the YouTuber: followers indicate that they recognize themselves in the YouTuber or in their life experiences (n=99, 9.9%). For example:
- "I totally identify with you, in your answer about being rude and in your answer about being sensitive, I am just like you"* (Comment on Herrejón's video).
- 3) Wishful identification: some users also indicate a wish to be or to be like the YouTuber (n=18, 1.8%). For example:
- "I am your fan more and more...really, YOU ARE AWESOME, what an example to follow :)"* (Comment on Herrejón's video).
- 4) Sympathizing with the YouTuber: some followers indicate that they understand and share the YouTuber's feelings (n=10, 1%). For example:
- "You look super energetic and happy and I couldn't be happier about it. thanks for the video, I missed seeing you more often around here. and by the way, you are super good-looking start believing it already. ily###"* (Comment on Celopan's video).

3.3. Elements of audience appeal

Next, we present the YouTuber's traits that were most often mentioned in followers' comments:

- 1) Humor/Fun: the followers value the YouTuber being entertaining and funny (n=100, 10%). For example:
- "You are very funny you made me laugh several times ##### hahahaha I would like to put down the minutes when you made me laugh but my comment would be too long ### PS: it's the first video of yours that I've seen and I already subscribed ;) YOU MADE MY DAY"* (Comment on Yellow Mellow's video).
- 2) Personality/Character: followers indicate prosocial or positive aspects of the YouTuber as a person, such as their effort to achieve their dreams or their altruism (n=96, 9.6%). For example:

"You are the best, you always care about all the people who follow you ## We love you ##" (Comment on Paula Gonu's video).

3) Physical attractiveness: followers also value the YouTuber's physical attractiveness or aspects of their physical appearance (clothing, hairstyle, etc.) (n=76, 7.6%). For example:

"I am fascinated by your hair color and your lips god #####" (Comment on Herrejón's video).

4) Intelligence: another trait that commentators highlight is that the YouTuber is intelligent (n=15, 1.5%). For example:

"23:14 that's what I call hunger for knowledge. Read about everything. That's the smartest way. Not lock yourself into a single topic and make light of another. More people like this, please" (Comment on Jaime Altozano's video).

5) Wealth/success: to a lesser degree, users indicated the YouTuber's personal or professional success or wealth (n=5, 0.5%). For example:

"Hey beautifullllll, that was amazing # Greetings and keep being so successful#" (Comment on Dulceida's video).

4. Discussion

This study addresses the lack of research on the impact of influencers, particularly YouTubers, on their followers (Rego & Romero-Rodríguez, 2016; Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Elorriaga & Monge, 2018; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). The results presented here give us a glimpse of these new role models from the viewpoint of their followers, and thus contribute new understanding in this area of research.

Prior studies have highlighted the socializing capacity of television and television characters (Livingstone, 1998; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Igartua, 2010; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016); it is now important to expand this research niche into new media and media role models. Social networks today, and quite notably YouTube, have become tools for entertainment, communication, and socialization in everyday life, especially for millennials and centennials (AIMC, 2018; Kádeková & Holiencinová, 2018; Eurostat, 2020). YouTubers are thus a part of life for the younger generations, influencing the development of their identity, values and attitudes (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua et al., 2018). It is therefore important to develop research such as the present study, where by analyzing the comments and interactions of followers of successful Spanish YouTubers we gain deeper understanding of YouTuber/follower relationships in terms of topic and position, identification with the YouTuber, and elements of audience appeal.

First, regarding the topic and position of the comments studied, comments refer mainly to the topic of the video or the YouTuber, and usually in favor of the content, which is consistent with the community that forms around YouTubers, generally having common interests and opinions (Regueira et al., 2020). It has also been observed that some followers

make references to other content on the network or to other YouTubers or influencers; this is consistent with how young people and other users make use of social networks: following influencers (IAB Spain, 2018). One notable aspect is the use of emoticons and/or emojis in comments, a characteristic of digital interactions, where they "have become a new form of communication that allows the projection of our feelings, emotions, moods, interests or particular perceptions of things" on virtual platforms and networks (Montenegro & Hermenegildo, 2018, p. 38). The success of emoticons and/or emojis may be because they facilitate linguistic economy and expressivity, and at the same time improve communicative clarity, given their relatively consensual use in the user community (Cantamutto & Vela, 2019).

Second, identification with YouTubers stands out as a relevant aspect in the analysis of followers' comments, concurring with previous studies on identification with fictional TV characters (Cohen, 2001; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Korres & Elempuru, 2016). This aspect should therefore be considered when examining followers' relationship to these media role models. We documented that the identification process can occur for different reasons, most notably through parasocial interaction, especially in congratulating the YouTuber on their work, displaying words/feelings with loving connotations toward the YouTuber, and/or asking him or her to develop a certain type of content or video on a certain topic. The fact that YouTubers are real people, in contrast to fictional characters in traditional media, encourages bonding from their followers (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), who perceive them as people who are close and accessible (Bonaga & Turiel, 2016; Regueira et al., 2020). Although parasocial interaction also occurs in relation to television characters (Livingstone, 1998; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Korres & Elempuru, 2016), it seems to be greater with YouTubers. This may be due to the ease of interaction offered by the YouTube platform in comparison to traditional media; in this social network the audience is not only a spectator but can actively participate and interact both with the YouTuber and with other followers (De la Fuente, Lacasa & Martínez-Borda, 2019; Scolari & Fraticelli, 2016). After parasocial interaction, the next reason is similarity to the YouTuber, a significant aspect in strengthening one's bond with this type of influencer (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019) as well as with television characters (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Korres & Elempuru, 2016). To a lesser degree, followers refer to wishful identification and to sympathizing with the YouTuber, something that has been underscored in other studies as well, whether in relation to new media role models (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019) or models in the traditional media (Cohen, 2001; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Korres & Elempuru, 2016). We thus conclude that identification mechanisms allow YouTubers to act as role models and opinion leaders, just as in the case of television characters (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Fernández-de-Arroyabe-Olaortua et al., 2018), and even to a greater extent (Defy Media, 2016).

Third, among the YouTuber traits most valued by followers are their humor and personality/character, as also seen in previous studies on both YouTubers (Bonaga & Turiel, 2016; Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019) and fictional TV characters

(Medrano et al., 2010; Medrano & Martínez de Morentín, 2012; Bermejo, 2012; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016). Another element valued by followers in their comments is the YouTuber's physical attractiveness, concurring with prior studies on this type of influencer (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018) as well as on TV characters (Ruiz, Conde & Torres, 2005; Korres & Elexpuru, 2016), though differing from other studies where this trait was not important in the feeling of attraction toward fictional TV characters (Medrano et al., 2010; Medrano & Martínez de Morentín, 2012). We conclude that while this aspect does not have the highest importance, its impact should not be overlooked in the construction of a young person's identity. To a lesser degree, followers refer to the YouTuber's intelligence and wealth/success, inasmuch as a particular YouTuber's audience values these aspects (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), just as in the case of television characters (Korres & Elexpuru, 2016). However, these two categories are not generally included in prior studies, so it would be helpful to continue exploring their importance to followers of YouTubers.

Among the limitations of this study, the analysis of static, published comments did not allow us to interact with followers for a deeper understanding of the results obtained here. One must also consider that social network profiles do not explicitly identify the followers' gender, location or age, thus limiting any analysis and interpretation of the results in relation to these variables.

For this reason, in future research, we suggest using focus groups in relation to the top YouTubers among adolescents and young people, to gain more knowledge about these YouTubers and their most characteristic traits, as well as the values perceived in them, so that we may continue to advance in our understanding of the impact that these new role models have in adolescents' process of identity development. Based on this knowledge, it will be possible to promote new educational efforts toward media literacy and a reflective, critical reading of YouTubers' discourses, especially in relation to the values that are perceived and the learning that is acquired through these new media role models.

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Notes

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