Meeting change with creativity

Interview with Kirsten Drotner

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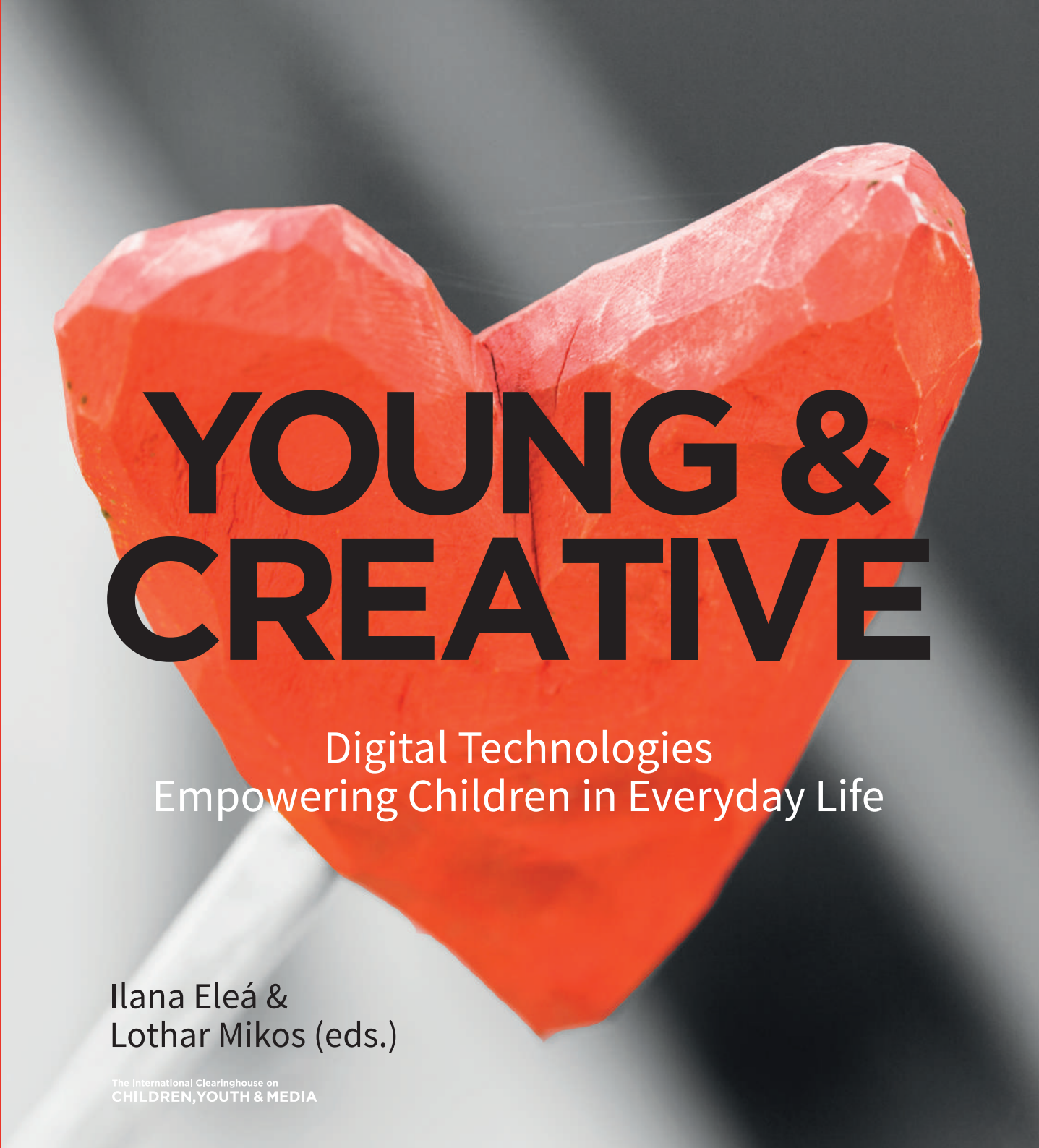

YOUNG & CREATIVE

Digital Technologies Empowering Children in Everyday Life

Ilana Eleá &
Lothar Mikos (eds.)

The International Clearinghouse on
CHILDREN, YOUTH & MEDIA

The International Clearinghouse on
CHILDREN, YOUTH & MEDIA

A UNESCO Initiative 1997

In 1997, the Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research (Nordicom), University of Gothenburg, Sweden, began establishment of the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media. The overall point of departure for the Clearinghouse's efforts with respect to children, youth and media is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The aim of the Clearinghouse is to increase awareness and knowledge about children, youth and media, thereby providing a basis for relevant policy-making, contributing to a constructive public debate, and enhancing children's and young people's media literacy and media competence. Moreover, it is hoped that the Clearinghouse's work will stimulate further research on children, youth and media.

The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media informs various groups of users – researchers, policy-makers, media professionals, voluntary organisations, teachers, students and interested individuals – about

- research on children, young people and media, with special attention to media violence,
- research and practices regarding media education and children's/young people's participation in the media, and
- measures, activities and research concerning children's and young people's media environment.

Fundamental to the work of the Clearinghouse is the creation of a global *network.* The Clearinghouse publishes a *yearbook* and *reports.* Several *bibliographies* and a worldwide *register of organisations* concerned with children and media have been compiled. This and other information is available on the Clearinghouse's *web site*:

www.nordicom.gu.se/clearinghouse

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The Clearinghouse is located at Nordicom

Nordicom is an organ of co-operation between the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The overriding goal and purpose is to make the media and communication efforts undertaken in the Nordic countries known, both throughout and far beyond our part of the world.

Nordicom uses a variety of chan-nels – newsletters, journals, books, databases – to reach researchers, students, decision-makers, media practitioners, journalists, teachers and interested members of the general public.

Nordicom works to establish and strengthen links between the Nordic research community and colleagues in all parts of the world, both by means of unilateral flows and by linking individ-ual researchers, research groups and institutions.

Nordicom also documents media trends in the Nordic countries. The joint Nordic information addresses users in Europe and further afield. The production of comparative media statistics forms the core of this service.

Nordicom is funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

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Preface

Today´s digital technology provides opportunities to create and reach out to a wide range of users. Different platforms, in particular online platforms, has enabled anyone with access to the tools not only to be a consumer of media content, but also a producer. This opportunity is something many young people have grasped in order to express themselves and to share their own creativity.

All books published by the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media aim to shed light on different themes concerning children, youth and media, hopefully raising knowledge and awareness on current aspects of young people's media use and consumption and hopefully serve as inspiration to further research and exploration.

The point of departure for the Clearinghouse's efforts is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, among other stating the child's right to freedom of expression. Thus, a publication on creativity with digital media where this freedom can be exercised is well within the aim of the Clearinghouse. And considering the vast popularity among young people to watch, share and find inspiration in peer produced content we found it highly relevant to address this theme.

We are deeply grateful to the editors of this book, Ilana Eleá and Lothar Mikos, who have managed to gather a diversity of examples from scholars and practitioners in how young people's creativity can be expressed in different ways and in different parts of the world.

Göteborg, December 2017

Catharina Bucht
Information co-ordinator

Ingela Wadbring
Director, Nordicom

5
Top Girls on YouTube

Identity, Participation, and Consumption

Lidia Marôpo, Inês Vitorino Sampaio & Nut Pereira de Miranda

Bel Cerer (8 years old), Juliana Baltar (9 years old), Manoela Antelo (10 years old) and Júlia Silva (11 years old)[1] are prominent representatives of a phenomenon that has recently become widespread in the Brazilian context as well as internationally: child YouTube stars. Besides the fact that they author original content, these girls share characteristics that distinguish them from millions of other "video author" children (Yarosh et al., 2016) on YouTube – the second most visited website in the world after Google (Alexa, 2016). The four girls have their own YouTube channels, are very popular among peers, challenge the boundaries between amateurishness and professionalism, and make a profit from the videos they star in.

In December 2016, Júlia and Manoela exceeded a million subscribers to their YouTube channels, while Juliana had more than two million and Bel nearly three million. They became popular by posting similar content in which marketing communication is often present – toys and children's product reviews, unboxing, challenges among peers and adults, and web series. Today, they are also the most popular among hundreds of YouTuber girls who have attained public recognition. The four of them are seen as celebrities in Brazil, attract thousands of fans at meetings organized by sponsor companies, and appear on lists (disclosed by the media) of the most influential children in the nation.

Marôpo, Lidia; Vitorino Sampaio, Inês & de Miranda, Nut Pereira (2017). Top Girls on YouTube. Identity, Participation, and Consumption in Ilana Eleá and Lothar Mikos (Eds.) *Young & Creative. Digital Technologies Empowering Children in Everyday Life.* Gothenburg: Nordicom

What kinds of content do these children author and share on YouTube? What are the specific characteristics of their online performances? What are their similarities and differences? What identities do they reproduce and/or re-signify about what it means to be a child and a girl? In what ways is marketing communication present in their YouTube videos?

Taking into account the fast expansion of the Internet as a "space" for children to "learn, participate, play and socialise" (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014), we will discuss these questions based on an exploratory study. The corpus analyzed consists of the channels maintained by the four YouTuber girls with higher numbers of subscribers in Brazil, considering only those aged under 12, according to data available on YouTube in 2016. Forty-eight videos posted in 2016 were selected, chosen through the method of random sampling, in alternate weeks. Observation of their formats and content was employed. Among these videos, the four most viewed from each YouTuber in each trimester – which totals 16 videos – was examined in more detail. The analysis focused on the following aspects: formats, themes, performances, communication strategies (types, forms of address, interactivity, etc.) and modes of participation.

Children on YouTube: Uses and participation

In 2015, eight in ten children and adolescents (aged 9 to 17) were Internet users in Brazil (CGI, 2016). On average, they were connected 4 hours and 59 minutes a day during the course of a week, an amount that surpasses the time spent watching television (Secom, 2015). On YouTube, specifically, the engagement of children and teenagers is highly significant, as either authors or audiences. The results from a survey conducted by the American investment bank Piper Jaffray in 2016 with more than ten thousand teenagers in the US indicate that teens spend more time watching YouTube videos than cable television (Ferreras, 2016). Another recent survey on YouTube's young Brazilian audience (aged 0 to 12) shows that, among the 230 channels analyzed in the survey, the majority of views are of YouTube's own videos – 44,266 billion versus 7.898 billion views of YouTube channels originating in television programming (Silva, 2016).

These channels were classified into seven categories indicating the types of content consumed (and authored) by children on YouTube: Mi-

necraft and others (games and vlogs of games); TV (from broadcast and cable television); Non-TV (created for YouTube); Unboxing (children or adults opening boxes or toys' wrapping papers); Teen YouTubers (people over 12 years of age); Child YouTubers (0-12 years old); and Educational. *Minecraft and others* is the most popular category with 52 per cent of total views, whereas *Child YouTubers* was the second most popular, but had more audience growth between 2015 and 2016 (564 per cent) – the first in this category being *Unboxing*, with 975 per cent growth.

In this context of intense connectivity (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014), answering questions like "who am I?", "what could I be?", "who do I want to be?" is strongly influenced by media pervasiveness (Woodward, 1997:14). The digital media, especially social networking sites, is seen as a powerful tool for the youngest to express themselves, to interact, and to negotiate collective and individual identities (Drotner, 1992; Buckingham, 2008; Buckingham & Willett, 2006; Livingstone & Bulger, 2014).

From this perspective, the YouTuber girls' channels may be seen as a means of self-representation and dissemination of their points of view, ideas and creativity in the public space. Conducting ethnographic research on the uses of YouTube by children and teenagers (aged 10-18) in America, Lange (2014:68) noted several ways that girls participate in the production of videos for this platform. Video blogging, sketch comedy, lip-synching, personal event videos, and hanging-out-at-home videos are the most popular. The participants in the study discussed numerous themes, such as reflections about their school, challenges they face, music, pets, and so forth. For the author, video-blogs promote the expression of girls' voices, and often allow the disclosure of issues relevant for their lives.

On the other hand, Dantas and Godoy (2016:98) assert that in some cases, children's channels might be considered a (semi) professional activity conditioned to the marketing interests of the brands that sponsor them. From this perspective, they raise problematic issues for the young video authors, such as exploitation of child labor. The activity, according to Dantas and Godoy (2016:98), "demands a schedule of appointments, a duty to be regular with their video-posting, an obligation to disclose the products received from the brands, among other responsibilities". Furthermore, it might expose the child audience to improper marketing content and stimulate consumerism, among other problems (Postman, 1994).

Rebekah Willett (2008) asserts that children and teenagers are not being encouraged to exercise self-expression; rather, they are constructing identities aligned with a consumer culture. Nonetheless, she recognizes that children and teenagers play an active role in their engagement with the Internet, even in such an intense commercial context. The author then launches a challenge: to analyze the online content authored by children, taking into account the power and influence of the market, but without neglecting children's agency. Willet (2008:53) brings in the concept of "bricolage", from Lévi-Strauss, to analyze how child YouTubers use varied resources while transforming and re-contextualizing different cultural products to create a new self-image or identity.

The child YouTubers have their own "channels" on YouTube, similar to an online profile on other social networking sites, containing a list of subscribers, information such as the number of "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" they have received, and statistics on views. Some of them reach significant popularity as video authors by broadcasting information about their identities, crafting videos with appealing content, and publicly and intensively promoting and disseminating their videos (Lange, 2008).

According to Félix (2016: 02), "being a YouTuber is more than simply sitting in front of a camera once a week to record a 15-minute video with apparently improvised content". This task, according to the author, demands strategies such as finding a target audience, mastering technological tools to monitor competitors, interpreting *Google Trends* to identify keywords to describe the video and facilitate its delivery to the target audience, and possessing skills in the production and post-production of audiovisual language. Besides interacting with the audience on YouTube and other social media, their investment also includes participating in offline activities, such as book-launching parties and advertising campaign events. The YouTubers' strategies also include knowing which mechanisms generate more advertising revenue. The channels' owners must join the YouTube Partner Program and sign a contract that enables brand advertisement on their videos and thus the monetization of their content.

Omar Ricón (as cited in Félix 2016:02) highlights six common YouTuber strategies for achieving popularity: Narrative – talking directly to the camera, aiming to break the formality of television; Aesthetic –

using irony, cynicism, and irreverence to make people laugh; Language – using slang, seeking grotesque and emotional appeal through swear words; Youthfulness - taking youths' attitudes and manners seriously, which are also the basis for their comments on life; Pop savvy – their references are rooted on pop music, best-sellers and fast food; and Adult world – regarding it as corrupt and inept (politicians), incompetent (parents), or outdated (teachers). The youths use their witty humor as a tactic to express disappointment with adults.

In her ethnographic study, Lange (2014:16) defines YouTube as a "personally expressive media", i.e., "any mediated artifact or set of media that enables a creator to communicate aspects of the self". According to her, regular YouTube video authors perform technical affiliations while showing through words or actions their beliefs, values or practices, which connect them with particular technical-cultural groups. In this sense they form communities of practice, which include routines, conventions, and shared histories. The researcher also highlights the diverse interests between child YouTubers, who have different "mediated centers of gravity" (Lange, 2014:41); i.e., their preferences manifest themselves in visible inclinations to certain content, abilities and media tools.

Although she criticizes the lack of transparency in YouTube's advertising policy, Lange (2014: 134) maintains that commercialization is not incompatible with either genuine family affection – present in many YouTube videos – or learning processes among those who author content. In her research, children and young adults assert that they have developed technical knowledge for making videos and have improved their self-confidence and capability for self-presentation to a wider audience. On the other hand, some of them reveal feelings of social exclusion due to the time they dedicate to the activity, which distances them from their peers.

Top girls on YouTube: Identity negotiations in the network

We can look at the four girls under analysis as a "community of practice" (Lange, 2014) that shares numerous common features. Bel, Juliana, Manoela and Júlia maintain their YouTube channel pages on a regular basis, posting videos daily (Bel), three times a week (Júlia) or once a week (Manoela and Juliana). All of them are present on various social

networking sites (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and/or Twitter), which they use intensively to promote not only their YouTube channels but also their activities in many offline spaces such as meetings with fans, book-launching events, and television programs.

The YouTubers' performances on the Internet show a careful management of their public images. The opening logos in their YouTube videos and the profile pictures on their social media sites indicate an attentive production aimed at creating a visual identity. Júlia Silva's page on Facebook, for instance, is managed by an advertising agency, which is also responsible for the social media sites of numerous Brazilian television and Internet celebrities.

The popularity of these four YouTuber girls on the Internet also means visibility in traditional media. All of them have been interviewed on news programs and participated in other popular television programs. This legitimates their roles as opinion makers among their peers.

Their families receive revenue from the ads broadcasted on YouTube. Moreover, the girls earn toys and other products merchandised in the videos, not to mention the indirect gains through trips and hotel stays. In this sense, we call attention to the considerable time the girls dedicate to YouTuber activities and the demands related to the popularity they have achieved and want to promote.

The analysis demonstrates a limited variety of formats in the videos made by the four YouTubers, which include "vlogs", "fiction", "commercial", "challenges" and "tutorials". Among these, the most common and with the most views is "fiction". This is comprised of "web series", in many cases revealing creativity in improvised scenarios and stories (such videos are apparently elaborated by the YouTubers themselves, except for Bel, who explicitly has her mother's help). On the other hand, some of the videos give rise to a questioning of gender or social class stereotypes, as well as ways of dealing with environmental issues.

The "challenges" are another popular format among the YouTubers. Manoela Antelo and her Uncle Bibi (Luan Novit, also a YouTuber), for example, propose to each other mutual challenges which may include dancing in the street, taking selfies with strangers, eating a garlic clove, or performing kick-ups with a ball. The competition seems to be less important than having fun. The games appear to reproduce television formats without including any intellectual challenge.

Shopping, reviews or unboxing toys, included in the "commercial" category, are also popular formats among the YouTubers. Here, the marketing communication appears in explicit ways.

In "tutorial" videos, the YouTubers give instructions for building toys or playing games, whereas in the "vlog" format they record different life experiences, either alone or with friends and family, such as hanging out or taking trips. References to brands are also common in the aforementioned two formats.

The concept of "community of practice" (Lange, 2014) is also useful for describing the similarities between their online performances. All four girls have a role model with whom they regularly perform – mother (Bel), sister (Juliana), uncle (Manoela), and father (Júlia); they all use particular forms of greetings (e.g. "hello everyone") and farewells (e.g. "strawberry/chocolate sweet little kisses") to communicate with the audience; they continuously ask for the public's approval and attention (by asking for "thumbs up" and subscriptions); and they use their own home spaces as scenarios for most of their videos.

We can also identify the adaptation of some of the strategies mentioned earlier (Rincón cited in Félix, 2016:02) that the YouTubers use to become popular. The four girls talk directly to the camera and, sometimes, make use of irony and irreverence to provoke laughter; in some cases, they appeal to the grotesque (especially in fictional content or challenges); they cultivate pop-culture savvy (with references to music and celebrities); and they are attentive to peers' attitudes and behaviors.

However, if we think of YouTube as a "personally expressive media" (Lange, 2014), through a more careful analysis of the girls' performances we can identify different forms of communication that reveal diverse "mediated centers of gravity" (Lange, 2014: 41).

Bel is the youngest and the one who shows the least autonomy, almost always appearing accompanied by her mother, Fran Cerer. Fran, for the most part, assumes the protagonist role in the videos, performing, playing, and guiding her daughter in a cooperative manner, and also, sometimes, in a professorial way toward the audience. Their most popular videos have six million views. Most of these are web series with the format of "cautionary tales" (on themes such as jealousy between siblings, disliking bath time, loss of baby teeth, bullying, first day of school, tantrums, etc.). Mother and daughter also propose challenges

to each other and switch roles. The marketing communication appears in some content, such as when Fran publicized the work of a tourism agency that organizes trips to Disney.

Juliana Baltar is the protagonist of the two most viewed videos among the four YouTubers, namely "Baby Alive has an accident in the Tyrolean traverse" and "Baby Alive is admitted to the Hospital!" (translations from Portuguese). The videos have 53 million and 48 million views, respectively (February 2016), and both privilege fictional narratives in improvised and creative scenarios, in which the doll is the protagonist. As a common strategy among the child YouTube stars, the commercial names of the dolls are identified in the titles of the videos, a tactic that seems to have strongly contributed to this impressive popularity. Besides exploring formats such as "challenges" and "life experiences", Juliana uses the tag #jujuresponde (#jujuanswers) to talk to the audience in a confessional manner about varied aspects of her life (her relationship with her parents and sister Rafaella Baltar, also a YouTuber, with whom she frequently performs in the videos; her dream of being a YouTuber, etc.). The marketing communication arises mainly in the videos tagged as "shopping" and "received", in which she shows objects she has bought or received.

Manoela Antelo often performs with her Uncle Bibi in videos in which challenges, humor, and mockery are common. They have fun and play together in equal positions while interacting with each other. Manoela also makes regular videos about her daily life, in which familial relationships are exposed in apparently spontaneous contexts. The marketing communication appears mainly in her videos about hanging out and taking sponsored trips.

Júlia Silva has a more moderate style, and distinguishes herself through refined scenarios; better quality of image, edition and audiovisual effects; life experiences connected to a higher level of income (such as international trips and expensive brands); and access to celebrities from television, whom she interviews on her channel. She mainly performs with her "Dad Silva" in challenges and games. She also makes web series and tutorials about handicraft, makeup, recipes, and fashion tips. The marketing communication is present in toy reviews, games and apps, as well as in sponsored trips and hanging out. It also appears in her vlogs, such as in the video "Getting braces put on! Does it hurt??? Julia Silva" (translated from Portuguese), in which she dis-

closes the name of the dental clinic she attended. Besides this channel she also maintains another, "Júlia Silva TV", dedicated exclusively to the "commercial" format.

Discussion and conclusion

Considering the set of elements presented up to this point, we can say that the identities created by the four YouTubers, as a "narrative of the self" (Giddens, 2002), become immediately singular in relation to other numerous anonymous children. Their identities are not only being redefined in their spontaneous relationships with their relatives and friends, but are managed with the aim of achieving public recognition measured by the number of views, comments, and "thumbs up".

We are facing a game of forces, in which the YouTubers' participation, creativity and spontaneity are juxtaposed with the pressures of a planned professional management of their public images, in which the goal is obtaining popularity and financial profit.

On the one hand the channels are a potential space for the expression of children's identities and cultures, in which the girls play and talk about subjects of common interest among their peers (toys, hanging out, relationship with family and friends, school, and relevant experiences in the child universe, such as the first day of school, loss of baby teeth, arrival of a new sibling, etc.). Through this content, they achieve great visibility for their points of view.

From this perspective, it is important to highlight the children's creative potential, which manifests itself in narratives, improvisation of scenarios, re-signification of objects, etc. The protagonist role they play in the videos and the more egalitarian position they assume in relation to the adults with whom they perform might be understood as possibilities of empowerment, which distance them from the role of fragile and helpless children. In addition, their participation in videos and other numerous online and offline activities may be seen as an opportunity to improve their skills of self-presentation and help them develop technical capabilities for audiovisual production. Their public activities also provide them with life experience and access to places they likely would not have visited otherwise.

On the other hand, the analyzed YouTubers show a strong influence from marketing communication and mainstream media formats,

evidenced in the exaltation of consumer habits connected to brands, seen in formats (challenges and series); in the "making of" at the end of some videos; in sound and visual professional effects; in the use of jargon and standardized gestures to demonstrate affection; and in appeals to build a loyal audience.

The act of playing, in this context of intense commodification of the content they author, is easily transformed into an "obligation" due to the demands for frequency in video-sharing, commitments to sponsors, and a busy schedule. The time they apparently dedicate to the activity, the financial profit generated from different marketing communication strategies, and the professionalism in the management of their actions indicate that this activity could be characterized as child labor. There are also signs that the child and female identity they promote builds strong connections to a consumer culture, related not only to toys and children's products but also to beauty products and other adult-related manufactured goods. Moreover, having popularity as one of their main goals in authoring content (as demonstrated in their insistent appeals to their audiences) might make them overestimate fame and success as their goal for the present and future, promoting a narcissist identity.

Our analysis reveals a confluence of the YouTubers' singular and individual characteristics with performances collectively originated and managed as a community of practice (Lange, 2014), which are translated into formats, content, and common strategies, in a process of bricolage (Willet, 2008) profoundly influenced by a consumer culture. The four channels can also be seen as spaces broadcasting models of thinking and acting to the wider public of children and teenagers who accompany them regularly.

Note

1. Ages in December 2016.

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This book ***YOUNG & CREATIVE – Digital Technologies Empowering Children in Everyday Life*** aims to catch different examples where children and youth have been active and creative by their own initiative, driven by intrinsic motivation, personal interests and peer relations. We want to show the opportunities of digital technologies for creative processes of children and young people. The access to digital technology and its growing convergence has allowed young people to experiment active roles as cultural producers. Participation becomes a keyword when "consumers take media into their own hands". Digital technologies offer the potential of different forms of participatory media culture, and finally creative practices.

YOUNG and CREATIVE is a mix of research articles, interviews and case studies. The target audience of this book is students, professionals and researchers working in the field of education, communication, children and youth studies, new literacy studies and media and information literacy.

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