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The fandom of microcelebrities: the case of AuronPlay

El fenómeno fan de las microcelebridades: el caso de AuronPlay

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Abstract

Although there is abundant work on fan communities and, to a lesser extent, on microcelebrities, the relationship between the two has only been superficially addressed. This work therefore aims to study the adaptation of the fandom to the online environment and microcelebrities. AuronPlay is one of the most relevant youtubers on the national and international scene, with 24.5 million subscribers. This work is an exploratory-descriptive research of a qualitative nature. Structured online interviews (44 interviews were held with Spanish AuronPlay fans) and discourse analysis are used. The aim is to address the relevance of the youtuber in a specific social and communication context and the perceptions and behaviour of their fans as a community of followers of a microcelebrity. The success of AuronPlay seems to be related to a close and constant communication with the community through digital platforms. Identification and projection processes coexist. The fans themselves are aware of the influence the youtuber has on them in the way of speaking, the consumption of content or the perception of reality. The community is constituted as a support for the microcelebrity and an expansion of his imaginary. Despite everything, the relationship between microcelebrity and community has a parasocial character.

Keywords

Social media; Instagram; online hate speech; digital campaigning; political communication

Resumen

Aunque existen abundantes trabajos sobre las comunidades de fans y, en menor medida, sobre las microcelebridades, la relación entre ambos ha sido solo superficialmente abordada. Este trabajo persigue, pues, estudiar la adaptación del fenómeno fan al entorno online y las microcelebridades. AuronPlay es uno de los youtubers más relevantes del panorama nacional e internacional, con 24,5 millones de suscriptores. Este trabajo parte de un diseño de investigación exploratorio-descriptivo de carácter cualitativo. Se emplean la entrevista estructurada en línea —con 44 entrevistas a fans españoles de AuronPlay— y el análisis del discurso. Se pretende así abordar la relevancia del youtuber en un determinado contexto social/comunicacional y las percepciones y el comportamiento de sus fans como comunidad de seguidores de una microcelebridad. El éxito de AuronPlay parece relacionarse con una comunicación cercana y constante con la comunidad mediante plataformas digitales. Coexisten procesos de identificación y proyección. Los propios fans son conscientes de la influencia del youtuber sobre ellos en la manera de hablar, el consumo de contenidos o la percepción de la realidad. La comunidad se constituye como un apoyo a la microcelebridad y una expansión de su imaginario. Pese a todo, la relación entre microcelebridad y comunidad tiene un carácter parasocial.

Palabras clave

AuronPlay; comunicación digital; fans; marca personal; microcelebridad; youtubers

1. Introduction

In a new media and cultural panorama where fame is something which is practised (Marwick, 2010; Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Turner, 2013) and the figure of the gatekeeper has become less important, microcelebrities have emerged (Senft, 2008; 2012) as ordinary people who create new means of cultural production and online communicative strategies away from the industry whose key to success are fan communities. *The Youtuber, AuronPlay*, with the arrival of the YouTube platform, not only created his own personal brand by being a microcelebrity, but also a far more committed community of close fans than with traditional stardom on account of the new common production space (Turner, 2013). This way he has managed to create a community of 28 million subscribers on YouTube which together work with him on the brand.

Despite the great significance of the relationship between microcelebrity and fans community in the new cultural panorama, there is no research which combines both elements unlike the abundance of national and international studies on the fan phenomena (Bajtín, 1981; Becker, 1982; De Certeau, 1999; Jenkins, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2019; Lévy, 2004; McCormick, 2018; Medeiros and Polivanov, 2019; Rivière, 2009; Thompson, 1998; Zubernis and Larsen, 2012) and to a far lesser extent, about microcelebrities (Abidin, 2015, 2018; Braga, 2010; Caro, 2017; Gamson, 2011; Giles, 2018; Marôpo, Jorge and Tomaz, 2020; Marwick, 2010, 2015, 2019; Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Page, 2012; Senft, 2008, 2012; Turner, 2013).

Having reviewed the bibliography, no works have been found on the fans communities of the microcelebrities, and, in particular, those of AuronPlay. Studies such as that by Busquet (2012) or Jenkins (2009; 2019) draw fans closer to the online setting and suggest there is a community of active producers. Senft (2008; 2012), Marwick (2010), Page (2012), Marôpo, Jorge and Tomaz (2020), Marwick and Boyd (2011), Caro (2015; 2017) or Abidin (2018), among others, worked on the concept of microcelebrities and their followers. However, they made no in-depth study on the relationship between both of these. Thus, seeing as there is a dearth of specific academic works on this topic, there is a field of work which has not been studied yet and which this paper aims to cover. Specifically, this research concerns how the fan phenomena has shifted online and the rise of microcelebrities and, in particular, the remarkable case of AuronPlay.

Celebrities are figures who are created and promoted by professionals from the traditional culture industry (Abidin, 2018) by means of a planned and conscious strategy whose purpose is to achieve fame and success. Their fans are truly committed and are fascinated by their content and brands, but are also frustrated by their inability to influence production decisions (Jenkins, 2010) given the layers of social limits there are (Marwick, 2015). In the new cultural participative panorama with the development of the Internet and social media, the ordinary user creates contents, has access to communication techniques and can practice microcelebrity. Indeed, fame is something that can be created by working on it given that it is not an innate quality (Marwick, 2015; Turner, 2013).

With this change in popular culture, micro-celebrities, who appear to be ordinary people, have arisen. That is, they are not traditional celebrities, who strategically use social media to create content and a personal brand, and, as a result, gain recognition from a niche audience away from the cultural industry. In this context, fans can act and participate in creating content and the brand as a result of being closer to it and they can access the same tools as they are ordinary people.

1.1. Micro-celebrities

In the logic of mass self communication (Castells, 2009), media exposure (Rivière, 2009) and the new filters (Anderson, 2004; 2009) the micro-celebrity phenomena arose (Senft, 2008), in which they create and manage their own brand by means of practical *Do It Yourself* apart from the cultural industry, but using their own strategies. Senft defined it as "a new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity over the web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites" (2008: 25). Marwick gave nuances to the notions by Senft, adding that the micro-celebrity is "a way of thinking about the self as a persona presented to an audience of fans" (2010: 219). Micro-celebrities appear as ordinary people who strategically use different social media to create content. As Braga puts it (2010: 43) that it ends up standing out from other creators by its content, obtaining great projection while also gaining legitimacy. Therefore, it concerns individuals with certain skills in projecting by the number of contributions made, by the degree to which they have a following, their knowledge shown in their contents and by their capacity to dynamise space (Gómez, 2013). Therefore, the prefix "micro" has been added to the term "celebrity" to refer to fame which develops around micro-celebrities on social media platforms (Braga, 2010; Senft, 2008) and not by their number of followers (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr, 2010). In this way, micro-celebrities hope that their work will have a symbolic value of a social nature and will translate into status and social distinction and, as a result, financial gain (Hearn, 2008; Marshall, 2010).

One of the types of micro-celebrities which have most influence today are Youtubers. That is, people who create audiovisual contents for the YouTube platform—albeit their online activity covers other spaces such as Twitter or Instagram, amongst other ones. Jerslev (2016) explains that Youtubers appear to be the archetypal example of the practice of micro-celebrity given their impact and development. Nowadays, YouTube ranks as one of the most important digital platforms which provide creating and developing tools and resources for content creators. In this way, Youtuber stars are perceived as a source of information and learning on account of their online fame (Marôpo, Jorge and Tomaz, 2020). Senff (2008; 2012) indicates that they arose as a result of the rise of broadband and the emergence of various digital social networks and make up a second generation of *camgirls*—the first internet micro-celebrities in the nineties— on the LiveJournal platform.

Micro-celebrities, according to Marwick, have come about as a result of the constant changes in mass culture. At least, this is how the author sees it, as a social practice which, as the phenomena developed and became successful, eventually turned into a way of working (Marwick, 2019). Therefore, micro-celebrities strategically use intimacy and emotions to attract followers by telling everyday stories (Caro, 2017). That way, they create a persona who is accessible and a brand that can be consumed by their audience (Giles, 2018; Marwick, 2015; 2019). Giles (2018) adds that Youtubers, as a *basis for creating their brands* will use their authenticity as a tool for creating intimacy in order to attract their niche audience. As a result, from the emergence of the attention economy (Abidin, 2018) arose the same struggle on the digital platforms and this is why they appear as optimal self-promoting spaces for working on personal brand and microcelebrity (Marôpo, Jorge and Tomaz, 2020).

As Busquet (2012) explains, the changes in celebrity culture began with theatre icons followed by the *star system* in the American cinematography industry. Then their strategies spread to other sectors such as the music industry, thereby providing them with more human idols, such as The Beatles. Finally, came the rise of the Internet and social media, with new *marketing* and communication techniques and the practice of micro-celebrities. This way, "a demotic turn" or one towards the down-to-earth due to the microcelebrity phenomena is not restricted to elites, but rather extends to people outside the industry (Turner, 2013). It is at this point when "celebrification" (Rojek, 2001) occurs which is "a process that spreads across culture, and in so doing not only reproduces but also produces celebrity and may transform bloggers, YouTube-vídeo performers and users on social networking sites into celebrities" (Jerslev, 2014: 173). It should be remembered that the celebrities phenomena remains a hierarchical and exclusive one (Turner, 2013). However, it has been decentralised and made more democratic and accessible to more people, albeit not under the same conditions.

The process for creating micro-celebrities, according to Abidin (2015), is organic (with a fuzzy structure or a phase previous to microcelebrity) one that is consciously carried out with techniques and elements that are inherent to the industry (the systematic structure). The fuzzy structure is the phase in which fame is created in a more chaotic way and depends on the capacity to attract the attention of the users. The systematic structure is constructed by the media for creating and sharing content (social media), brands, which attempt to associate micro-celebrity brands to them by means of different techniques and to give greater exposure to their product or service, communication agencies which act as talent agencies in *castings* (but which are specialised in social media), and conventional media (which enter the industry by taking advantage of their influence over young audiences which have left these media for platforms such as YouTube or Netflix).

1.2. Fans in the new cultural panorama

A group of fans is understood to be a collection of active producers inside the media audience which makes up a community which enriches the contents of the dominant culture of the industry from the sidelines (Busquet, 2012; Jenkins, 2010). Their access to the entertainment industry is obstructed by economic and social barriers imposed by popular culture. De Certeau (1999) calls them "text pirates" who choose the contents which are most interesting in order to reread and reinterpret them, thus providing value to the community, to the content itself and the social experience. In this setting, contents flow by means of different platforms and technologies, consumers fully participate in the culture and the industry feels the need to cooperate and work with popular culture, shifting to their space. McCormick (2018) explains that with the arrival of digital platforms, fans became sources of power capable of unseating the media industry.

1.2.1. Fans group as a community: structure and creation

A fans community is understood to be a network of interconnected links with a cultural and social identity which gives a more intense sensation of communalism and the sense of belonging (Castells, 2009)^[1]. The quantity of information the group creates is the greatest value it can have. According to Lévy (2004), there are two levels of knowledge: shared knowledge—information shared by the whole group—and collective intelligence—knowledge at the disposal of any group member. One illustration

of shared knowledge in the fans community is “social stenography” (Boyd and Marwick, 2011), by which the community publically exposes a language that can only be decoded by those who know its true meaning, and this way the group bonds more. As collective consciousness rises, a series of rules and ways of interpreting are created either consciously or unconsciously due to the coexistence of the group and by sharing contents (Jenkins, 2010).

Fan activity before the dawn of the Internet era in the nineties would not have any great social and cultural effect but would pave the way for online communities (Busquet, 2012). Popular communication on the red, according to Lévy (2004:171), constitutes: the ordinary way of working in the new media system where the fan finds “ unauthorized and unforeseen ways of interacting with media contents” (Jenkins, 2008: 137-139) by means of a post, a video, an editing programme, a videogame, or a platform such as YouTube, etc. In this new scenario, has arisen what Hills (2002) calls “the just in time world of fans”, given the higher speed of communication with the community. This happens during or after watching content on social media in order to demonstrate their connection, following and position as a fan to the community, and, luckily, to the content broadcaster.

As for social interaction on the Internet, there is a nerve centre who acts as a moderator and is considered as the opinion leader within the group. These people, according to Larsen and Zubernis (2012: 30-122), are the *Big Name Fans* (BNF). They explain that they stand out within the community by the information they have and their capacity to control information flows, which approximately amounts to prestige, reputation and power (Jenkins, 2009). According to their network management skills, the content they create and the knowledge they have, the fans themselves may become micro-celebrities, whether this is within the existing network or on their own one, in which they have their own contents and objectives.

1.2.2. The relationship of celebrity and micro-celebrity with fans

There is greater feedback between micro-celebrities and fans when communicating or creating contents and even in the composition of the microcelebrities themselves (Gamson, 2011). As explained by Medeiros and Polivanov (2019) micro-celebrities build an identity which may be presented and be coherent with themselves and, in turn, this identity will always be built between themselves and their audience. Although celebrities keep greater distance given the layers of social limits there are (Marwick, 2010), the fan hopes to make contact with them online. These relationships could be termed as parasocial. That is, they create a false sensation of intimacy between them given that this relationship does not actually exist (Horton and Wohl, 1956). According to Caro (2015), in traditional mass media the notion of a parasocial relationship stemmed from the technical incapacity of the media to provide reciprocal interaction between both parties. However, on the social networks such interaction between celebrity and fan can happen by means of likes, tweets or comments, amongst other things, thereby providing new parasocial relationships. The author states that the communication there is in parasocial relationships is asymmetrical. That is, it is simulated. This is achieved by means of friendly language and some gestures, intonation and an orientation which simulates the features of face-to-face communication (Hartmann, 2008; Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton and Wohl, 1956; Martín-Barbero, 2010).

Abidin (2015) stresses that micro-celebrities are perceived as thought leaders or influential figures for people aged 13 to 35 whose key attraction is their lifestyle. They create contents which reflect aspects of their life, showing part of their private life by means of characters who have been created and are being controlled. In this way, in this audience there is a sensation of familiarity with the micro-celebrity and this leads to greater engagement. Moreover, the fact that the fan makes a different connection to the micro-celebrity is also partly due to the processes of identification and projection. Macé (1997) sets out these processes by means of television programmes. In “game shows” —such as *Saber y Ganar* (Know and Win)—, the contestants are different to the audience as the former have knowledge the audience does not have. The contestants will be admired for having this knowledge and so the spectator will not identify with them as the latter do not feel the former represent them. The contestants project their desires, prejudices, attitudes, etc, thereby sharing their journey throughout the competition. However, on “reality Tv” —such as *Big Brother*— contestants and spectators are very similar. This is reflected in the contestant as if it were a mirror. Macé declares that spectators see in the contestants similar traits to their own personalities. This process becomes, just as indicated by the author, a means of integrating the spectator. The same processes occur between the micro-celebrity and fans. The latter feel identified with the former on finding they are similar to them and so there is a direct connection between both parties. Also, fans might admire the micro-celebrities for their knowledge, for the situation they are in, etc. In any case, the most common mechanism between the microcelebrity and fan is the identification process, since both are ordinary people. Moreover, fans usually engage with someone they feel is similar to them and who even seems like another member of their inner circle of friends.

2. Objectives and methodology

The general aim set in this research is to analyse how the fan phenomena has adapted to the online world of the micro-celebrities themselves by means of a case study of the Youtuber, AuronPlay. This is broken down into two specific points to address certain factors in-depth in relation to AuronPlay: (1) to cover the significance of the Youtuber, AuronPlay, in a determined social, communicational and digital context; (2) to examine the perceptions and behaviour of the AuronPlay fans as a community of followers of a micro-celebrity.

As regards the first specific objective, the aim is to analyse the characteristics and special features of the AuronPlay brand and its relationship with building the fans community, with the understanding that it may represent a behaviour model that is capable of influencing. As for the second objective, the perceptions and behaviour of the community will be analysed by studying their activity as a group of fans, the tendency to be part of other groups of fans, the relationship they have with the Youtuber, whether there are meetups or events, the meaning they ascribe to the AuronPlay brand, etc. All of this will enable us to tackle the general objective, which will shed some light on the fan phenomena on the Internet and in terms of microcelebrities, which is the subject matter of this study. Moreover, so far this has only been glanced at in the literature. In this way, AuronPlay was selected since he ranks as one of the most significant national and international Spanish Youtubers in terms of engaging with the audience and by the interest he creates in his brand. From his beginning on digital platforms in 2006 he has obtained 28 million subscribers on YouTube, 15.4 on Instagram and 8.5 on Twitch, among others. This way, AuronPlay, is a great example of a successful micro-celebrity who manages his professional career himself and who has managed to create a large community of quality fans since 2006. Also, he can obtain highly profitable and interesting results given his long track record on digital platforms and brand management.

As for the methodology, this research has an exploratory-descriptive design of a qualitative nature. The structured online interview is used for discourse analysis. Although AuronPlay has followers from all over the world, especially in Spanish-speaking countries, this study focuses on Spain, and special note must be taken into account here as this micro-celebrity is Spanish, that his contents refer to a range of national issues, and that most of his fans are Spanish.

As regards the structured online interviews, qualitative research was used to gain an in-depth insight into the AuronPlay community of fans. In this way, 44 people were chosen from the communities of AuronPlay fans to be interviewed. Several criteria were used to select them: to be between 13 and 25 years old, residing in Spain, and fans of AuronPlay and/or members of some of the fans communities. That is, they transcended the barrier of mere followers. They were, likewise, digital natives, who were active on different digital social networks who followed the activity and contents of AuronPlay and were part of the YouTube culture, whether this was in creating contents or frequently consuming them. This age range was selected since the target for this type of *Youtubers* —El Rubius, YellowMellow, AuronPlay, Mangel, etc.— ranged between 12 and 25 years old (Collera, 2015). AuronPlay himself indicated in an interview that his target was those between 13 and 24 years old (Apple Tree Communications, 2015) — although in one of his shows in Málaga he stated that his *core target* was between 17 and 24 years old.

The aim of the research was that, among the interviewees there were both fans who were part of specific communities of the Youtuber on a range of platforms and fans who were not. The sample has a balanced distribution in terms of sex and represents different age ranges and the interviewees belonged to 12 Spanish autonomous communities. Among the interviewees were two Youtubers, a photography journalist, an advertising agent and students at different levels of education. Apart from one of the Youtubers and the owners of three accounts of fan clubs on Instagram, these people had ordinary popularity rates on their digital social networks, with an average of between 100 and 500 followers. In order to locate them, the different contents uploaded by AuronPlay were searched on a daily basis: people who had repeatedly commented on his photos and videos, who had responded to his tweets, which had contents associated with the Youtuber, etc.

In short, there was an intentional criterion for choosing the interviewees which had certain common features that were deemed appropriate for the research for the previously stated reasons —within a certain age range, residing in Spain, followers of AuronPlay, interacting with the contents of the Youtuber, etc.— and other more heterogeneous ones —autonomous community, gender, age, whether they belonged to fan clubs or not, etc.—. This selection initially gave rise to a corpus of 50 interviewees, out of which 44 were valid, the rest had technical problems (responded erroneously to the interview or disclosed data which did not fulfil some of the previously stated criteria, such as residence in Spain).

The set of questions was made up of seven questions grouped into four blocks: a) the meaning of the AuronPlay brand for the fan and the meanings and values they associated it with; b) the relationship of the fans community with the Youtuber; c) the fan activity within the context of the AuronPlay community of followers; and d) the capacity the Youtuber has as an influencer for his fans.

In view of the interview, fans were contacted by Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. These unorthodox means of contact were used as this was a young audience which used the social networks highly frequently, far more than email, and due to ease of access. The interviews were carried out between the 5th and 15th of May 2019. The questions were responded in blocks of open text by means of the Google Forms tool. At all times, the interviewees remained anonymous in order to gain their trust when they gave their opinions.

As regards the discourse analysis, a qualitative technique was used in which the researcher observed and interpreted the contents created by AuronPlay. The qualitative and interpretative nature of this technique is, therefore, more aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the subject matter of the study than at drawing any wide-reaching conclusions. In particular, a great deal of attention has been given to current strategies in the discourse by AuronPlay, especially in terms of creating contents and in interactions with the audience, to put the information obtained by means of the interviews into a context.

3. Results

In response to the first specific objective, the AuronPlay brand was analysed as well as the perception the fans community had about it and how influential the micro-celebrity was on them. To respond to the general objective and the second specific objective, the relationship there was between AuronPlay and his fans community was researched. Likewise, in the section on results, the data obtained will be shown as well as a supplementary explanation and to a lesser extent this is explored in the discussion section. In this way, the data displayed is organised according to blocks of questions asked to the interviewees, so after an approximation to AuronPlay as a personal brand, there will be a focus on how AuronPlay is perceived by his fans, his ability to influence, the structure his community has and how it works and the relationship the YouTuber has with them.

3.1. AuronPlay as a personal brand

The basis for AuronPlay is his online searches for contents - video images, websites, events, etc - transforming them and imbuing them with a totally different meaning with a humorous analysis. His main work is supplemented with platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, or Twitch. The micro-celebrity records his videos himself with a *webcam* and uses a simple editing programme to put them together, so he doesn't undertake laborious production projects. Moreover, he himself manages the contents created and communication on social networks, unlike what usually occurs with celebrities. The venue for recording is not a fitted-out set, but rather he dedicates a room in his house for such a purpose. He just needs a desk and a chair for recording, so the aesthetics are fairly low-key. He only talks with a medium shot of himself, sitting down while talking to the camera. The room is decorated with gifts from fans or lights which define the aesthetics of the AuronPlay brand. The fact that the aesthetics are not attractive shifts the focus to the key feature of his brand: the language used. This is based on the notion of expressing his ideas with fun euphemisms or using fillers and set phrases which do not make sense, but which are catchy to the spectator. Indeed, one of the most characteristic features of the AuronPlay brand are the catchphrases he uses to introduce the videos- "Hey!" "What's up guys? Is everything Ok? Is everything all right? And I'm glad!"— or the *jingle* heard at the end of every video.

Previously, he toured theatres across Spain with a *stand-up comedy* act where he conveyed the sensation of video to the physical world. Fans had the chance to speak to him individually and in a group with him. His shows acted as extensions of the brand, with which he broke the communication barrier of the online world and made face-to-face connections. However, he decided to discontinue these shows since they affected the quality of the content on his main platform.

3.2. Perception of the AuronPlay brand inside his fans community

From creating this brand and the connection he has with his niche audience, the AuronPlay fan phenomena arose. From the responses to the question "What does AuronPlay mean to you?" -whose aim was to find out whether the brand really engaged with the audience and what perception they had of it, the brand was seen to be associated with fun, entertainment and humour- most people described it as "very funny", "entertaining", "fun", "leisure", "unforgettable moments", "joy", etc. For other interviewees, AuronPlay even represented a bit of escapism from everyday problems, it made them feel as if they were in another dimension and acted as a therapy for coping with difficult times. One fan indicated that "it makes a lot of people keep going thanks to him [...], when I see his videos it is as if I was whisked away to a world in which I just laugh and have a good time" (E-12); and another one even describes him as someone magical (E-7). In one of his videos, AuronPlay himself talks about a person who had written to him to tell him that a friend of his son was recovering from a serious illness thanks to his videos (AuronPlay, 2016). Another of his interviewees states that he manages "to see the reality from another point of view, since he usually takes videos which are not funny for a normal person, but on commenting on them he turns them around completely" (E-26).

It should be stressed that 19 responses associated AuronPlay with being an idol, a hero, a saviour or everything, but always with a more human and intimate dimension. All the while he was perceived as an ordinary person. Two of the interviewees responded that "he is everything" (E-9)^[2] and that "AuronPlay for me is another idol, truth be told, he means a lot" (E-13). This idol figure primarily comes from a process in which the fan identifies with AuronPlay. Moreover, the interviewee adds that "he is someone like me who has tastes which are really like mine, even the clothes we wear are similar very often. His gestures, his ideas [...] He is basically just like all of us. That's why I like him" (E-35). Also, in the same interviewee the projection process can be seen by which he states that "I hope I manage to achieve what he has done" (E-35).

3.3. The influence of AuronPlay on the fan

The features which characterise and differentiate the AuronPlay community is given by the inherent features of the *Youtuber*, albeit they are not imposed by the micro-celebrity but, rather, are created with his consensus and that of the community. In this respect, 39 of the interviewees stated that he had great influence over them.

The first influencing factor was the way the micro-celebrity talked, which was one of the strongest points of the brand. In 27 of the responses they mention that the way he expresses himself influences the way fans talk. The language is based on the use of witty phrases used by the *Youtuber* or expressions that he likes and, therefore they are used both by him and the community. The fans state that they use them because they are fun and because they are also used in their milieu (E-38; E-11; E-10)^[3]. One interviewee even stated that "Apart from the terms he uses, he also includes sounds, gestures, etc. He is so charismatic and powerful that he ends up overwhelming you" (E-15). Therefore, the depth of the phenomena is seen to affect kinesics, as also indicated by other interviewees (E-5; E-35; E-36).

Another factor was their perception of reality. This way, his fans state that "when you watch an AuronPlay video, you automatically end up thinking like him" (E-15); that they think like him about many things (E-2; E-5) although they keep their own criteria (E-6; E-16; E-28). One interviewee stated that "as soon as I finish watching one of his videos, I think just like him" (E-28). Once again, the philosophy of the AuronPlay brand can be seen. That is, to observe and transform reality with humour so that it ends up taking on a new meaning.

The third factor indicated was the influence about the consumption of contents of the fan. This is mostly seen in the video viewing of YouTube, video games or series, just as indicated by the community. One fan explains that "my consumption of contents has changed because of him. For example, I watch YouTube videos which was impossible before knowing him (Wismichu, Tiparraco, Mister Jagger, etc)" (E-15). And another one states: "I've started watching Game of Thrones and Narcos because he recommended them, as well as other Youtubers" (E-28). These series are content the micro-celebrity consumes and recommends. Furthermore, in his room he has several posters of these series or films. Also, on his digital platforms he makes continuous *spoilers* by commenting on what he thinks about the video games he plays and even plays them live or by means of Twitch. Also, it is seen how the fan consumes the contents of other Youtubers which the micro-celebrity is linked to, thereby providing an exchange of subscribers and fans. Lastly, two of the fans stated how he had influenced the clothes they wear or their purchases as they put it: "He is someone like me who has very similar tastes, even the clothes we wear are similar very often" (E-35) or that "we buy things he has, his clothes..." (E-12).

3.4. Structure and how the fan phenomena of the micro-celebrity works

The fan phenomena which is created around AuronPlay has a clear and main delineation. Firstly, people who are fans and belong to a club or specific community about the *Youtuber* by means of a social network or something similar; and secondly, people who are fans but do not belong to any specific club or community for different reasons. In order to obtain a range of responses fans from both groups were questioned. Out of the 44 interviewees, 24 people did not belong to any fan club, while 20 did.

The specific clubs or communities are mostly found on the social network, Instagram. Moreover, one of them claimed to belong to a club on Facebook (E-5) and another on Tumblr and Twitter (E-12). However, 8 of the 17 interviewees indicated that they belonged to fan clubs on WhatsApp, and even some of them belonged to several different groups. This way, the communities on these spaces would help the fans themselves to broaden the network of followers of the *Youtuber* and to share all kinds of information (E-12) by means of "photos, news and things" (E-6) about him. Therefore, the communities are a point of contact with the *Youtuber*. Several of the interviewees (E-2; E-31; E-7) have created different communities. They stated they did so, firstly, to share information about AuronPlay and, secondly to appreciate and reward the work he has carried out. One interviewee insists that his account was the first one on Instagram that was dedicated to AuronPlay (E-7) and another explains that his account is the leading one on the platform (E-31).

The group of fans which are not linked to any AuronPlay community do not feel any less passionate about the micro-celebrity. Actually, in several cases, the responses from these people were stronger, the best example of which is the following:

AuronPlay is one of the things that makes me most emotional nowadays. [...] I've had unforgettable moments with him. I can't wait for him to upload a video, and when he does I get very excited. In short, he is one of the greatest brand discoveries I have made in my life and I hope he carries on for a long time because my life has really changed because of it[...]. It is one of the most important things for me (E-15).

These people — over half the interviewees— demonstrate that the contents the Youtuber shares — nerve centre of the network and who drives a large amount of activity— is enough to participate in the community dynamics in equal conditions. Interviewee 3 was even completely unaware of these communities and, yet, was a very active fan for the Youtuber. However, as for the events or meetups, only two of them said they participated in them (E-12 and E-36) and another claimed to be unable to attend on account of living far from the venue for holding it—which is normally Barcelona— (E-43). The events and meetups are not, therefore, a key tool for participating in the AuronPlay world, but merely something supplementary^[4].

As for belonging to fans communities which are not related to the micro-celebrity, twenty-seven belonged to other communities, out of which twenty belonged to fan clubs for other Youtubers, with the most mentioned ones being Wismichu —precisely one of the *Youtubers* who has most collaborated with AuronPlay— and El Rubius. Nine interviewees belonged to clubs for bands or artists such as The Beatles, Pablo Alborán or John Newman; two football clubs and one for actor fans. Since no interviewee agrees on any artist or band, it was deduced that AuronPlay did not have much influence on this factor, despite it being the second most mentioned group.

Also, the fact there are people who are not members of AuronPlay fan clubs, but do belong to other ones may be due to the great work the Youtuber does in terms of managing information flows and constantly creating contents. It should be stressed that members of the AuronPlay club typically belonged to the youngest age bracket of his target, between 13 and 18. Therefore, it is logical that older fans were not attracted to the type of content created for these clubs and are content to watch that published by the microcelebrity himself and other users at specific moments.

3.5. The relationship of the micro-celebrity with the fans community

On asking whether the fans had tried to contact AuronPlay and what had happened, it was seen that most had tried to do so —30 people—. The fans who had not done so was because they did not usually "contact any "celebrity" (E-43) for different reasons or because they believed it would not work (E-19) given how saturated the communication channels of the Youtuber. As for the group of people who tried, a typical pattern was seen. That is to address the person on Twitter and, to a far lesser extent, Instagram and YouTube, and occasionally the fans contacted him via different channels at the same time (E-15; E-5) or had managed to speak to him face-to-face (E-11). Twitter —with 10.3 million followers— was the most demanded online channel for daily contact with the fans to give them the latest news and contents, show his everyday life, his relationship with other micro-celebrities, celebrities or other famous people or use the language established in the community amongst other things. One interviewee declared that " You can contact him on Twitter, it's really good to be honest, he's always so attentive to his fans" (E-2). The procedure for making contact is to mention him with a tweet or respond to a tweet posted by AuronPlay. From this, three responses from the *Youtuber* might be expected: that he responds to the tweet from the fan —the most important one-, he retweets it, or gives it a like. The 12 interviewees who used Twitter as a communication channel with AuronPlay all received a response except for one of them, with the like and retweet being the options mentioned.

Instagram is the second digital social network —with 15.4 million followers— with which he is most active. The trend on Instagram is to show photography and videos with an attractive and polished appearance as it is the most consumed space for creating a more idealised "me" and a more sophisticated façade in the sense stated by Goffman (2006). Also, the *stories* on Instagram enable one to make short ephemeral clips, which are immediate and low-key. They last for 24 hours —although they may be saved on folders on one's profile—, which the Youtuber uses to supplement his daily communication with the fan. Although he has more fans on Instagram, Twitter, unlike the former, has proved to be a space which is easier to receive a response from micro-celebrities. In this respect, it was seen that AuronPlay does not usually respond to comments or private messages on this channel, but he does so on Twitter as it is a less saturated space and one that is more orientated towards public debate than is Instagram. Although the option of direct messaging is the most complex one, given the restrictions options in the settings the Youtuber has, one interviewee stated: "I contacted him directly on Instagram. We talked and all that. He told me that my AuronPlays account is great and one day he would follow me" (E-31).

AuronPlay has been seen to show an interest in responding to the messages that he receives from his fans, given the lines of communication he provides them. However, out of the interviewees who contacted him, exactly half obtained a response while the other half did not. Even so, they themselves stated " he must have a thousand suggestions every hour" (E-27) or that " he receives many notifications and it would be like finding a needle in a haystack" (E-16). It is understandable that with the millions of followers that AuronPlay has on all his digital social networks which are typified by intense interaction, it is difficult for him to respond to all his messages.

4. Discussion

It was seen that AuronPlay has created a well-defined brand with his own features which sets him apart from others who are on the YouTube platform. The values AuronPlay has are humour, intimacy or simplicity, ones which encourage his audience to engage with him. Likewise, colloquial language and intimacy are used to make spectators feel closer to the Youtuber as if he was just another friend in their circle and who can enjoy spending time with him for a while. Moreover, this intimacy and naturality was physically seen with the shows for a while, whereby he broke the communication barrier of the online world and made face-to-face connections.

Also, the work by AuronPlay is understood by his fans as a mindset for perceiving reality from the viewpoint of simplicity or humour. According to the opinion of one interviewee, he manages to " see reality from another point of view, since he usually collects videos which an ordinary person does not find funny and on commenting on them turns them around completely. (E-26). Moreover, in the eyes of his fans he is a more human idol. This phenomenon occurs by an identification process. Fans see that the *Youtuber* has certain traits that are similar to them —tastes, point of view or ways of being and behaving—. As a result, fans feel that the micro-celebrity is the same as them and that he might even pass as just another friend in their closest circle. Interviewee 35 recalls having had the chance to speak to him and described how he was treated like an equal when appearing on one of his shows. However, projection was also observed as the micro-celebrity is admired for what he does and the fans aspire to be like him. Interviewee 35 states to have an admiration for AuronPlay for achieving something that seems fascinating. That is, for seeing in him something that the fans themselves want to be or to have. The micro-celebrity in this way ranks as a source of inspiration or a reference, as explained by several interviewees.

AuronPlay was seen to influence his fans mostly with his language, providing the group with his own way of speaking. In this way, they create a language that is open to the public, but only the fans and the micro-celebrity are able to decode it, thereby nurturing bonding within the group. Secondly, he had a great influence on how his audience perceived reality. Fans tend to think in the same way as AuronPlay, given his capacity to engage with them. He presents himself as someone similar to the community with his capacity for expression and his skills of persuasion, always referring to the contents of the videos and not to his ideas, values and thoughts. Once again the philosophy of the AuronPlay brand was seen. That is, to observe and transform reality from humour so that it takes on a whole new meaning. Thirdly, it was seen how this influenced consumption of contents. He acts as a prescriber for contents indirectly since he simply expresses his interests and ideas on his digital spaces. In this way, he ranks as an opinion leader within a large network of contacts. The fan ends up loving that which AuronPlay loves and what he relates to in order to cover every space of the brand. Therefore, it is no surprise to see that AuronPlay fans consume the contents of other *Youtubers* linked to micro-celebrities, with which there is an exchange of subscribers and fans.

As for the structure and the way the community of fans work, a clear division was seen between people belonging to specific communities about AuronPlay and those which did not. It is interesting to note that due to the large amount of contents the micro-celebrity creates it is not necessary to be part of a specific community. Therefore, these clubs are mere supplements and supports that expand the space of the brand by means of analysis and sharing contents. Hence, they are not necessary in order to enjoy the AuronPlay phenomena. Also, it must be stressed that the clubs are made up of the youngest age range of his target —between 13 and 18 years old— and this means the more adult part of his audience does not feel attracted to this content. However, it is striking that fan groups are created with Whatsapp instant messaging. This way, the user can find a digital space which is more private and that is not seen in the public domain of other platforms. The *Youtuber* is observed to delve into more private areas of the users as if they were just other people in his everyday life, thereby breaking the barrier of the digital platforms. This may be on account of the greater intimacy there is between both of them and the thought that he is an ordinary person or another close friend in the group. That is, he identifies with his fans who feel the same as the *Youtuber*.

This way, as a result of these communities, fans help to enlarge the network of followers of the *Youtuber* and to share all kinds of information (E-12) by means of "photos, news and things" (E-6), thereby nurturing the collective intelligence of the group (Lévy, 2004). Likewise, it is hoped that the micro-celebrity rewards

the work of his fans with a like, comment, by following their accounts or providing exposure for them as well as the added value it gives them on account of their relationship with the micro-celebrity. It is hinted in the responses from the owners of fan accounts (E-7; E-31) the fact that knowing something before makes fans feel superior to the rest of the community (Jenkins, 2009, 2019; Lévy, 2004).

As for belonging to other communities other than that for the micro-celebrity, it is interesting to note how they usually belong to ones of other related Youtubers. Youtuber culture is seen as trendy as they are considered as idols or role models. There has been an upward trend in this respect with the exchange of subscribers motivated by covering everything related to the *Youtuber*. Therefore, as no interviewee agree on any artist or band, it may be deduced that AuronPlay does not have much influence on this factor even though it is the second most named group.

Fans communicate and receive responses mainly from Twitter and Instagram, thereby creating interaction and intimacy. Even so, this relationship is completely parasocial since it does not really produce any social relationship. AuronPlay is the nerve centre in a network of contacts in which contents are created and this gives rise to the sensation of copresence in the fan. In this respect, there is neither mutual symmetry nor knowledge in the communicative process between fans and Youtuber. This plays out on the social networks to show parts of his private and everyday life, thereby creating in the fan the sensation of intimacy with him and of participating in his life as if he were a friend. This effect is achieved thanks to certain techniques such as the creation of the AuronPlay character which was built from the traits of the person who plays him, Raúl Álvarez, but exaggerated greatly. This is only indicated by interviewee 33 on stating that AuronPlay is " a very funny character, with slightly annoying humour, but to my mind he is the best Youtuber". This character looks at the camera and addresses a large audience naturally and in a friendly style, with an expression and some gestures that the fan recognises. This way, the fans have the sensation of having a face-to-face conversation with him. However, the parasociality in the case of AuronPlay is tempered, since the *Youtuber* strives to get to know his fans by interacting with them by means of different platforms whether this be with a like, a retweet, posting the contents of the fans on his own networks, organising events such as book signing where they strike up a face-to-face contact, the shows performed, etc. Also, parasocial relationships not only occur with celebrities and microcelebrities but also with people which have the same social status as any ordinary person—such as, for example, two users who start sending messages, but who have never seen each other. In any event, even though in the case of the micro-celebrity there is greater symmetry and horizontality than with traditional celebrities and they make an effort to reveal parts of their private lives in a more natural and real fashion, these relationships remain parasocial.

5. Conclusions

It is common knowledge that the fan phenomena has moved from the traditional media to online space which has brought about different changes. Firstly, it was seen that with AuronPlay that the personal brands developed in the practice of micro-celebrity have made the stars appear more natural and closer than are traditional celebrities due to the different social layers there are. AuronPlay has created his own character which is based on humour and contents that are totally natural which manage to engage his audience. He has created higher quality bonds with them, something which is unimaginable in the world of celebrities. He presents himself in a highly natural and friendly manner, apart from working away from the cultural industry. This helps him to engage more and have greater influence on his community of fans, mainly by his way of talking, but also due to the contents and the perceptions his fans have of reality.

This influence and friendliness help him rank as an opinion leader and be the nerve centre of a network of contacts on account of the processes of identification and projection, which are seen to a lesser extent with the brands created from the cultural industry. Also, it was seen that parasocial relationships persist with micro-celebrities, albeit not in the same way as with celebrities. There is still no mutual knowledge despite this false sensation of closeness, but there is greater commitment and constancy as the micro-celebrity strives to contact and engage with his audience. This friendly, colloquial and straight forward communication is carried out by means of the digital platforms- it is on Twitter where there is greatest interaction, while YouTube, Twitch or Instagram is more orientated towards creating brand contents. In this way, the micro-celebrity provides his community with several communication channels which are fully managed by himself, giving rise to a greater compromise and interaction with it.

It can be seen that his fans keep their traditional mindsets on certain points such as creating specific communities about the *Youtuber*, a highly used route for celebrities. However, with AuronPlay it is seen that these are not really necessary in order to enjoy the experience, but are merely an expansion of the world of the micro-celebrity - this is seen in the fact that many interviewees are not part of these communities. All his fans may participate in the fan phenomena to the same degree given the

communicative management of the *Youtuber*. Moreover, with the micro-celebrity, AuronPlay, these fans communities shift to WhatsApp, the closest and most private virtual space the user has, given the way he is perceived as a friendly person who is admired. Therefore, there has been a change in the fan phenomena model and specifically in ways of doing and organising. Meanwhile, WhatsApp enables more contact with the community and unedited information to be obtained. Instagram is the platform by which photos are shared and where a public conversation takes place on a larger scale.

In short, to draw a general conclusion, there really is a fan phenomenon for the micro-celebrities and this is characterised by a network of relationships with higher quality and closer bonds than there are for traditional celebrities. These communities are more committed to the micro-celebrities and also the expectations and the relationship between both parties are different to those for celebrities since microcelebrities and fans can have a more real contact. This was patently seen with the AuronPlay brand, represented by humour, simplicity and the capacity to help people in the event of adversity. In short, he presents himself to fans as an alternative way of seeing and living reality.

6. Specific contributions of each author

Contributions	Author
Research design	Lourdes Gallardo-Hurtado y David Selva-Ruiz
Documentary search	Lourdes Gallardo-Hurtado y David Selva-Ruiz
Data collection	Lourdes Gallardo-Hurtado y David Selva-Ruiz
Critical data analysis and interpretation	Lourdes Gallardo-Hurtado y David Selva-Ruiz
Review and approval of versions	Lourdes Gallardo-Hurtado y David Selva-Ruiz

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Notes

1. According to Castells (2009), communalism is the collection of values and beliefs that place the collective good of a community above the personal satisfaction of any of its members. In this context the community is defined as being the social system that is organised around a subset of common cultural or material attributes.
2. The responses of the interviewees are shown as received. That is, they have not been changed in any way. It is performed this way in order to observe factors such as how the fans of the Youtuber write or express themselves and so as to not distort their responses.
3. Some expressions from AuronPlay have even spread outside the community, such as his initial greeting in the videos or the term "gullible", which is the subject of hundreds of memes.
4. Previously, the shows were also used for meetups of fans, although this was not their main purpose. The responses of the interviewees disclose how these shows work to bring fans together to the extent that some understand the show as a meetup.

