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**YouTube, a platform for (in)formation, relationship, communication, fun, and (gender) identities within the context of digital natives**

***YouTube, una plataforma para la (in)formación, relación, comunicación, diversión, y gestión de identidades (de género) en la natividad digital***

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**Abstract**

This project seeks to explore the current situation and adolescents' use of the YouTube platform by means of a qualitative methodology and gender perspective. Accordingly, six discussion groups comprising students from the first year of Secondary Education (three male groups and three female groups) in Biscay (Spain) were established. These groups made it possible to explore the most visited channels, to analyse the importance of these social and digital media, to identify the gender patterns and codes, and to become aware of the forms of macho-driven cyberviolence on YouTube. Among the most representative results, YouTube is perceived as a channel for obtaining fun, communication, learning, and for exploring alternative identities and realities. Moreover, YouTubers have become referents to be followed, listened to and to be (in)formed. The results also revealed that girls prefer and watch channels focusing on beauty and fashion, whereas boys prefer those relating to gamers. In this sense, this platform shows a variety of macho-driven cyberviolence. However, there are also alternative channels generating spaces for different gender patterns.

**Keywords**

Adolescents; gender; referents; YouTube.

**Resumen**

*El presente artículo utiliza una metodología cualitativa y perspectiva de género para explorar la realidad y el uso que realizan la natividad digital de la plataforma de YouTube. Para ello, se han realizado seis grupos de discusión con el alumnado de Bizkaia de 1º ESO (3 de chicas y 3 de chicos). Estos grupos permiten explorar los canales más visitados por chicas y chicos, analizar la importancia de este medio digital y social en su vida, identificar los esquemas y códigos de género que se reproducen; y conocer formas de ciberviolencia machistas en YouTube. Entre los resultados más representativos se pueden destacar que YouTube es percibido como un canal de diversión, de comunicación, aprendizaje, exploración de identidades y realidades. Así, las y los YouTubers se han convertido en los referentes a seguir, escuchar y por los que (in)formarse. Además, se identifica que las chicas prefieren y ven canales relacionados con la belleza y moda, mientras que los chicos prefieren aquellos que son "gamers". Asimismo, se detecta que dentro de esta plataforma se reproducen distintas formas de ciberviolencias machistas. Sin embargo, también existen canales alternativos que generan espacios de ruptura de esquemas de género.*

**Palabras clave**

Adolescentes; género; referentes; YouTube.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a key stage in the creation and exploration of identities, which, in turn, become crucial for the assimilation and externalisation of the gender schemas that are acquired in the early life stages. Therefore, this period acquires crucial importance in the understanding of gender identities. Moreover, as our sources indicate, during adolescence, the codes, norms and specific guidelines for the communication, relations and management of identities studied here are created (Tubert, 2008; Pineda & Aliño, 1999; Rovira, 2001; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002: 67; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005; Renold, 2007).

This stage constitutes a subjective process characterised by the exploration of identities and of sexual orientations that not only converge and coexist with a myriad of contradictions but also confront them. Therefore, adolescence constitutes a crucial time to confront the "ought self" and to simultaneously address individual wishes and concerns (Tubert, 2008). In this sense, the different sources consulted (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005; Renold, 2007) claim that adolescents live in the complexity of the post-modern age—that is, permeated by neoliberal interests and contradictory and ambivalent messages—and they must cope with the endless hodgepodge of interconnections generated by relational, information and communication technologies (hereafter RICT).

As Castells (2005), the Instituto de la Mujer [Institute of Women] (2008) and Zafra (2010) assert, the above-noted means of communication, information and relations have caused substantial changes in the way in which adolescents live and coexist. Their lives—and those of all humanity—have become "hooked" on these interaction tools; thus, the new generation has been named the digital nativity (Delegación del Gobierno para la Violencia de Género, 2014; Megias & Ballesteros, 2014). This means that understanding the relationships forged through these modes of communication and relational media is essential to immersion in adolescent culture.

There is no doubt that the RICT have imbued adolescence with amenities, possibilities and advancements regarding not only forms of social and political participation but also more subversive aspects such as the flexibility provided by these instruments to rebuild and modify corporalities and identities and the range allowed by these technologies to explore new spaces and to generate intercontinental connections. However, as different sources have noted, in this technological, social and cultural development, harmful and rigid mechanisms derived from traditional constraints of the "offline" world are also reproduced, as in the case of the patriarchal system and so-called macho culture (Zafra, 2005a, 2010; Wajcman, 2004; Bourdieu, 1999; García & Núñez, 2008).

In this ambivalent digital reality, adolescents use a variety of communication and relational means, including social networks and video games. However, as indicated by Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte and Staksrud (2013) and Blanco-Ruiz and Sainz-de-Baranda (2018), the emerging channel YouTube stands out. This channel, as reflected by the research, has a referential place in the information shared by adolescents and in the formation of adolescence. It is a versatile platform in which adolescents find media that even displaces representative means of transmission such as the television. However, as Blanco-Ruiz and Sainz-de-Baranda (2018) explain, while alternative spaces for sexual identities are created on such platforms, gender stereotypes are also reproduced.

Accordingly, this article analyses the importance of said digital and social medium in the lives of digital natives and explores some of the channels that are most visited by girls and boys. In addition, it defines whether gender schemes and codes are integrated in this medium and determines if there are forms of sexist cyberviolence on this platform.

Despite covering and working on these objectives, this article does not include generalisable criteria and refers to a specific context, that is, the case of three Bizkaia institutes, in first-year classrooms of ESO (Spanish acronym for compulsory secondary education)<sup>[1]</sup>. In this way, through the use of qualitative methodology and discussion groups (six groups: three female and three male), the understanding of adolescent discourse and intrasubjectivity is furthered while the study's objectives are strengthened.

To achieve the above-stated aims, and before addressing the methodology and the discourse of adolescents, this article briefly contextualises the theoretically essential aspects that explain the object of study described above, that is, the gender schemas that constitute digital nativity as well as the use of RICT from a gender perspective. Thus, this theoretical inquiry does not aim at deeply framing the use of YouTube but rather establishes the basis from which to understand the studied issues. Thus, after the methodological framework and the analysis of these six discussion groups, in addition to shedding light on the issues described, the conclusions refer to other areas of inquiry and future lines of work. This is, in fact, an exploratory work, without generalising ambitions, which provides an in-depth study of adolescent intrasubjectivity, and it attempts to understand the relationships and contents in one of the channels most used by adolescents: YouTube.

## 2. Gender schemas and codes in digital nativity

Connell (1995), Lagarde (1990) and De Beauvoir (1949) state that gender schemes must not only be studied and acknowledged in each historical, social and cultural context but also be understood in light of potential differences in the codes reproduced in every stage of life. Consequently, while the configuration of gender relations in the western system reproduces common attributes with antagonistic, imposed and opposite gender dichotomies related to women/men, nature/culture, domestic/public, feeling/reason and reproduction/production (Maquiera, 2001: 151), it is worth briefly examining the common gender codes (femininities/masculinities) of adolescence.

Buckingham and Bragg (2004) note that the internalisation of femininity begins by one's identifying with the community, by feeling and seeing oneself as "WE" rather than "I". Thus, the biases that have impregnated the construction of femininity begin to make sense, and girls begin to experience the great importance of their bodies since femininities are designed under patriarchal and capitalist auspices and are always dependent on external views to achieve self-esteem (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005: 99; De Beauvoir, 1949). Therefore, the construction of a "female object" is one of the fundamental elements of feminine norms. For this reason, girls experience this stage, in De Beauvoir's words, as "the work of adolescence" (1949).

This fact is also derived from a hyper-erotised and hypersexualised context, especially for the female body, implying that "being sexy" is highly regarded in the adolescent culture (Egan & Hawkes, 2012; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004: 103; Renold, 2007). However, such conceptualisation coexists, as Megías and Ballesteros (2014) claim, with the more archaic ought self, exploring sexuality from a place filled with silence, occultism and shyness. These ambivalent messages generate insecurity in adolescents who perceive themselves as imperfect objects, gradually taking on self-impositions and continuously seeking perfection in their bodies, as Renold and Allan (2016) propose.

In this way, girls live under constant vigilance of the patriarchal system, and their bodies and sexualities become products of oppression and restriction. Different mechanisms including stigmatisation and the use of sexist and chauvinistic vocabulary (such as "whore", "bitch" or "slut") are used to uphold this system, thus also perpetuating asymmetric powers during adolescence (Renold, 2007).

Martino and Pallota-Chiarolli (2005: 99) explain that while girls are immersed in these contradictions, different femininity archetypes are built, which classifies them as "studious, serious, stubborn, mature..." (girls who are desired and valued from the adult perspective but less desired by boys); "cool" (girls who party, drink, wear designer clothes that are considered "neat" and especially those whose bodies align with the beauty standards established and stipulated by a capitalist and heteronormative society); "girlies" (spoiled girls with a more traditional femininity who are only concerned with clothes and beauty); "bad girls" (girls who break with sexual passivity and the "goodness" of femininity); and, finally, "dominant" or "tomboy", as described by Renold (2007) (girls who take male patterns as a reference and behave as men do, i.e., those who are aggressive and harass other males who break with male norms) [2].

These archetypes facilitate the understanding of the complexity of adolescent culture and the realisation that femininity is not a monolithic and static state but rather a construct that varies depending on the system or the specific context. In short, we can say that the female body and sexuality remain oppressed territories controlled by masculinity. Normative femininities are structured around being sexually attractive to males and thus generate frustration and anxiety in girls when this goal is not achieved. For example, sexuality is a recurrent weapon used by boys to perpetuate such gender hierarchies (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005).

Conversely, boys assimilate their sexualities through free and independent categories. As long as they remain heterosexual, they are allowed a sexually open, secure and even aggressive attitude (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Megías & Ballesteros, 2014; Ruiz, 2014). As noted by De Beauvoir (1949: 437): "erotic drives only go to confirm the pride that he obtains from his body: he discovers in it the sign of transcendence and its power".

This stage represents a constant demonstration of manhood (Emakunde, 2004), which is lived in great secrecy, detachment and marked distancing from everything related with femininity (with a view of women as distant and mysterious beings) and homosexuality (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Kehily, 2009; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005; Renold, 2007). Furthermore, given the public symbolism of the construction of masculinity, validation from others is required, creating great social pressure to "belong" during this stage. This results in continuous "performing" by boys (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005), or as Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002: 75) explain, masculinities "are constructed in social interaction and achieved by other cultural resources available to particular boys and men". Thus, to show their manhood and heterosexuality, they pass photos of naked girls and continually speak of girls as objects.

Along the same lines, boys—especially at this age—refrain from expressing emotionality and externalising feelings (Renold, 2007). As Buckingham and Bragg (2004) stated, this becomes a natural state, which reinforces “unbreakable fortresses” and later causes serious deterioration in children’s cognitive development. Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002) argue that beliefs such as “boys do not have so many problems” or the sense of “false camaraderie” become widespread in male adolescent culture. The term “false” is used because there is a clear lack of emotional support and ties of understanding ties among them in their aiming and pretending to be “big” (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002: 67; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005; Renold, 2007). Thus, we find concrete attitudes such as speaking loudly in class, seeking leadership roles, taking up greater amounts of public space and being aggressive; this drive towards greatness is reflected in boys’ bodies, which are larger, stronger and more muscular than those of girls (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005).

Through these qualities, boys position themselves within and generate different masculinities (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005; Renold, 2004; 2007). Ruiz (2014) describes some of the qualities of such masculinities as follows:

The so-called “womaniser” male model, who attracts women mainly using seductive strategies rather than his physique. Girls identify them mostly as the dominant attractive model. They are difficult, passionate and exciting boys.

The so-called “invisible” male model, refers to boys who do not belong the previous models. They remain physically attractive, but do not have a dominant attitude, so they go unnoticed by girls who see them mainly as friends.

The “non-hegemonic” male model refers to boys who break with the patterns of dominant masculinity and, on many occasions, are called “wuss” (Ruiz, 2014: 28-29).

Other authors highlight the importance of considering other aspects such as sports or clothing. As Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002: 77) and Renold (1997; 2004; 2007) argue, in addition to being different from girls, having sexual and physical power, being good at sports (especially football) or dressing in a “cool” way positions them within more dominant masculinities. As Connell (1995) asserts, in this way, all boys are dominated by an hegemonic masculinity (the popular ones who possess all the above-mentioned traits), and they harm and harass those who have non-hegemonic masculinities and more flexible schemes (homosexuals, nerds, “freaks”, those with female tastes, referred to in terms of soft masculinities or as “failing boys”) (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005: 99; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Renold, 1997; 2004; 2007). In fact, as Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002) note, boys define their supremacy by subordinating these identities. According to the sources mentioned, hegemonic masculinity in adolescence operates through femophobia and homophobia.

This view supports hierarchies in which boys are considered superior to girls; that is, hegemonic masculinities (linked to strength, hardness, sport, arrogance, heterosexuality) are dominant. Moreover, such hierarchies are validated and legitimated by both boys and girls, usually expressed by girls who like “bad boys” (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005; Megías & Ballesteros, 2014). Concurrently, boys who present the traits associated with hegemonic masculinity usually attempt to perpetuate their higher status by belittling both the above-mentioned non-hegemonic masculinities and the feminine world, laughing at, exerting violence towards and/or insulting girls (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005: 99). However, as Renold (2007) asserts, phrases such as “boys will be boys” normalise such forms of macho violence and aggression. Consequently, “bullying” should be understood based on transversal and gender and sexuality readings and regarded as “normative cruelty” (Ringrose & Renold, 2010).

Renold (2002) states that within these forms of violence, specific types of violence are produced. The author defines three forms of violence:

- Heterosexual harassment: creating a space of intimidation for annoying and offensive sexual behaviour, from boys to girls. Such behaviours usually entail violent and aggressive content against girls and mask misogyny. They are a means of reformulating and maintaining patriarchal heteronomy and its status while reinforcing male superiority.
- Homophobic harassment: Any person who departs from what is imposed by heteronormativity descends the hierarchical ladder. Thus, using the word “gay” as an insult or harassing those who disregard patriarchal norms is a recurrent mode.
- Heterosexist harassment: all gender-related behaviours that establish masculinity as superior.

Adolescents need to feel that they belong to a prototype of “femininity” and “masculinity”, creating stereotyped adolescent profiles that are marked and differentiated by gender (Díaz-Aguado, 2003; Ruiz,

2014). In this way, certain aspects are normalised such as boys with low academic performance or girls who devote less time to sports such as soccer and have a more passive, docile and introverted attitude in the classroom compared to boys who are more active and protagonistic (Renold, 2002). Additionally, all these schemes neutralise the types of biased behaviours that are reproduced in the net, as we show below.

### **3. Notes on the use of RICT (specifically in the context of YouTube) by digital natives from a gender perspective**

In the above-described context, and bearing in mind that RICT are essential elements for the communication and interrelation of adolescents, it is imperative to analyse how these schemes are reproduced in a digital medium in which image and video hold special relevance and where countless extremely complex, global interconnections are hosted (Turkle 1997; Alcañiz, 2001; Boix, Fraga, & Sedón, 2001; Castaño & Caprile, 2010; Castaño, 2005, 2008; Zafra, 2005a, 2005b, 2010; Díaz, 2001; Wajzman, 2004; Instituto de la Mujer, 2008; Haraway, 1991).

In this way, the net does not escape the above-identified gender constraints. As Fernandez and Wilding (2002) and Briadotti (2002) express, visual hegemony has permeated the online world in such a way that the desired attributes imposed by gender systems are reproduced through not only language, images and/or colours but also terms of content. Video games are an example of how gender constraints operate, since, as the research indicates, in such games, it is common to find a hegemonic image of an uncooperative, aggressive masculinity that is always willing to fight. Another example are the web pages visited by adolescents (including video games) whose contents are designed based on stereotypical images. In other words, webpages and video games whose content is related to beauty, fashion, maternity or cooking are overloaded with codes, language and images aimed at females, whereas those with content related to automotive, sport or pornography use aggressive and direct language aimed at male audiences (Bonder, 2012; Larrondo, 2005; Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014; Zafra, 2005b; Gómez, 2008).

The importance of image and of the visual components supported by means such as social networks or YouTube is also worth mentioning. As noted by Zafra (2005b; 2010) and Blanco-Ruiz and Sainz-de-Baranda (2018), we witness symbolic digital violence that uses image as a coercive method as it constitutes the main means of communication and personal representation. The virtual world is a visual structure of the desired image, which is projected for other Internet users to see and appreciate. In this way, such desired images are sanctioned, designed and tightly confined by representations of socially agreed-upon values and constructions. This means that we manage our own fabricated identities, or, as the author puts it, a "second life" or "SIMs". Thus, a valuable, ideal model of one's own body is created and measured against one's own image; generating physical vulnerability by viewing one's own body as deficient and causing body inconformity. That which is identified as ideal is portrayed as representative, and that which is identified as different is portrayed as deviant or imperfect (Zafra, 2010).

Therefore, this type of violence constitutes a parallelism of the symbolic violence defined by Bourdieu (1999). Such violence is nourished by the patriarchal and capitalist system, characterised by both its symbolism and the creation of a cyber-body as a figurative and anthropomorphic image that reaffirms the identity of subject and object (Zafra, 2005). Moreover, this type of violence is normalised and may not be perceived, which, when added to the "alleged objectivity" of the net, strengthens male domination and normalises the hyper-sexualisation of male and female bodies, placing them in asymmetric positions. Because of the above, the net is loaded with hetero-directed eroticism that views the female body as an object and nurtures abusive and coercive attitudes towards women, thus restructuring male hegemony within the Internet (Mujeres en Red, 1999; Reverter, 2001; Zafra, 2010).

Zafra (2010) notes that everything on the net happens at great speed and that one is exposed to thousands of stereotypical and sexist images online. This may result in a stereotypical self-description and in the creation of stereotyped avatars, reproducing images of ourselves based on perceptions of "the other" in search for group identification. In this way, considering the importance of corporality, especially for girls; the need to "belong" during adolescence; and the burden of the stereotypes and gender schemas on which they are based, the Internet becomes a space of gender-bias that reproduces the asymmetry and dichotomy of power.

Furthermore, some studies (Castaño, Martín, & Martínez, 2009; Gobierno Vasco, 2013; Observatorio e-Igualdad, 2011) claim that adolescent relationships have become more complex and are mediated by gender codes and schemas. This generates a "third gender digital divide", understood as the different ways of using RICT according to gender schemas. Thus, in response to the proposed hypotheses, it could be argued that one of the channels through which this gender digital divide is sustained is YouTube.

Along with these forms of patriarchal hegemony, different sources suggest that adolescents (and citizenry in general) find extremely subversive spaces online such as YouTube that break with gender schemas and explore non-normative identities (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1998; Turkle, 1997; Zafra, 2005b; Blanco-Ruiz & Sainz-de-Baranda, 2018). In fact, as expressed by (cyber)feminists, the net has created space for corporeal absence and other forms of human interaction. This has given way to discourses with the potential for subversion and change in gender schemas, leaving the door open for discourse on cyborgs, post-bodies and/or subverted bodies.

From this perspective and with the awareness of the fact that virtual life is immersed in constant ambivalence, it is considered important to analyse in-depth—from a gender perspective—adolescents' use of YouTube since, as noted, it is one of the most prominent platforms in youth cultures and routines. That being said, it is important to mention that, as noted by Cabezuelo (2008); Gómez (2008); Christakis & Fowler (2010); and Zafra (2010), YouTube is understood as a podcasting site in which the main activity is the creation of sound, text and image files that are commonly distributed through RSS and are accessible to anyone. This wide coverage and polyvalence makes YouTube a rich scenario for analysis.

Additionally, as suggested by Blanco-Ruiz and Sainz-de-Baranda (2018), extremely rich spaces are created on this platform, which display sexual and identity diversity while simultaneously hosting segregated sites with gender codes and patterns that normalise feminine bodies and capitalist pressures on fashion and feminine beauty. Consequently, the question arises: do boys and girls use this channel differently? Are there traditional hegemonic spaces on YouTube where gender stereotypes are reproduced? Further, is macho cyberviolence reproduced? Or, on the contrary, as the cyber-feminists claim, are there places of subversion?

#### 4. Methodology for collecting the voices of digital nativity

In line with the above-mentioned questions, and considering this article's object of study, the analysis from a gender perspective of the use of YouTube by Bizkaia digital natives requires the use of a qualitative methodology since, as described by Taylor and Bogdan (2000:19) and Ruiz Olabuenaga (2012a: 44), it allows the subjective dimension to be studied, examining words, beliefs and opinions and unveiling the essence of the intersubjective meanings of the phenomena studied. Along these lines, this study pursues the following objectives:

- 1) To explore the most-visited YouTube channels by girls and boys from Bizkaia;
- 2) To discuss the importance of this digital and social medium in the lives of Bizkaia digital natives;
- 3) To identify the gender schemes and codes reproduced in the various channels visited by adolescents in Bizkaia;
- 4) To identify the forms of macho cyberviolence reproduced in this digital medium.

Based on these objectives, the discussion group technique is chosen, as it allows for the examination of the intrasubjectivity of the adolescents who participated in the study and an expansive and thorough exploration of the proposed questions. In this way, the technique helps create and simulate dialogue and thus becomes a stage where social ideologies are expressed and discourses are produced (Ibáñez, 2010; Gutierrez, 2008). This furthers the understanding of the cultural imaginary of the participating adolescents and of how girls and boys use YouTube while deepening the knowledge on gender schemes and codes.

The criteria to participate in this study entailed the following: 1) the adolescents must belong to one of three different institutes in Bizkaia; 2) the Institutes must be listed in the Board of the Education Department of the Basque Government<sup>[9]</sup>; 3) there is one group for girls only and another for boys only in each institute; 4) these students must have belonged to the ESO for at least one year; and 5) there must be between eight and 12 people in each group (girls and boys)<sup>[4]</sup>. Following these criteria, the discussion groups are constituted as follows<sup>[9]</sup>:

**Table 1: No. of female and male participants in each institute**

Institutes of Bizkaia	No. of Girls	No. of Boys
Institute 1	A (12)	B (9)
Institute 2	C (13)	D (9)
Institute 3	E (8)	F (12)
Total	33 girls	30 boys

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Although this is not a large sample, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) explain that interpretative techniques do not require large samples to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. Moreover, this study does not intend to incorporate generalisable results. Another limitation worth mentioning relates to group formation and organisation. Since the institutions managed the group organisation, adhering to the proposed criteria was not always easy and sometimes became quite difficult.

## **5. YouTube as a space for subversion and the reproduction of gender systems: The results of the analysis of the voices of digital natives from Bizkaia**

Studying the speech and subjectivity of the adolescents who participated in the six discussion groups allowed for the collection of valuable information on the reality of early adolescence on YouTube.

Based on the statements of the adolescents, YouTube can be understood as one of the main technological, relational and information channels used by digital natives as predicted by Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte and Staksrud (2013) and Blanco-Ruiz and Sainz-de-Baranda (2018). Adolescents explain how they enjoy videos on YouTube and describe the medium as an information, training, entertainment and exploration channel. Thus, it constitutes a multipurpose channel in which the participating adolescents find unlimited information and inexhaustible content and meet an infinity of anonymous people willing to share ideas, thoughts, opinions, realities and cultures, from different countries; and it is only a "click" away.

This format is so attractive for the studied adolescents that it displaces other information and entertainment channels including television since, according to them, the medium emits an infinity of content that other media do not provide. Such potential has not gone unnoticed by YouTube users, who use the platform to produce information on an individual basis; such users are often referred to as "YouTubers".

In this way, YouTubers are those who record themselves to address specific issues, express their views or explain gaming or makeup strategies. Consequently, all the girls and boys who participated in the discussion groups follow such content producers. Following are some examples of representative statements:

C4 (11-year-old female): YouTubers are the best, you can see anything.

A9 (11-year-old female): Between the TV and YouTube, I prefer YouTube. It is better, because you can see everything.

D7 (12-year-old male): When I get punished, and I can't use the PlayStation, I watch some YouTubers who are amazing.

F5 (11-year-old male): In the end, the good thing about YouTube is that you can see what you want, whenever and however you want. Some are very funny, others teach ...

Based on the adolescents' statements, it becomes evident that they see YouTubers as entertaining and funny characters who help them explore other realities and/or learn about topics that they find interesting. They see YouTube as an exploration channel and a way to express their views, interests and skills, so much so that several of the participants claim to be YouTubers and/or have close friends who take advantage of the platform to upload videos, as explained by some of the participant adolescents:

A4 (12-year-old female): I have some friends who are YouTubers, and they talk about their lives or take photos with music, Musicalys.

D11 (11-year-old male): I am a YouTuber, and D2 is also one.

B6 (12-year-old male): There are a lot of kids our age who upload videos of themselves playing.

F11 (12-year-old male): I upload videos of games, especially when I'm playing Fortnite with friends.

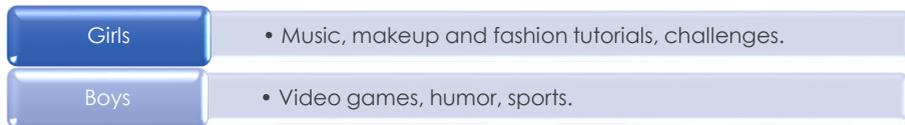
This shows that the adolescents who participated in this study coexist with the platform in a manner that unconditionally breaks the barriers of intimacy and the asymmetric hierarchy of information. For them, the platform provides a means of expressing their identities and tastes. Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the importance of YouTube's economic value: although they are 11- and 12-year-olds, the most valuable aspect of being a YouTuber is the potential to earn money. This fact leads to questions of how the capitalist system takes on relative importance in the cultural imaginaries of adolescents, where economic value is synonymous with success.

In this regard, several groups refer to the intersection of capitalism on this channel. Trademarks use these widespread platforms and characters to advertise their products. In fact, as the participants explain, the more the products advertised in their videos, the more money they earn. As a result, YouTube includes them

among the suggested videos, and they become key parts of the platform, gaining more subscribers and followers. They address the ideals of the capitalist system by becoming product-dissemination and marketing models.

If we delve into their modes of speech and explore how they use YouTube and the content they view, we find that there are differences between boys and girls. Specifically, girls and boys claim to watch the videos that appear in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Most viewed videos on YouTube, according to sex**



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Girls express that the content they watch the most refers to music, while boys mainly refer to video games. When asked about the YouTubers they follow, we find the details shown in Figure 2:

**Figure 2. YouTuber más seguidas y seguidos, según sexo**



Source: Prepared by the authors.

We find that boys and girls follow different content in the studied platform. Regarding gender schemes—included in the theoretical section—girls prefer videos related to personal care and music, while boys are especially focused on a medium that emphasises masculinity: video games. In other words, YouTube reflects a sexualised universe.

Along the same lines, the gendered differences described by the interviewed participants are not based solely on how YouTube is used but also on the uploaded content. As argued by these adolescents, content is based on a sexualised cosmology; whereas the female YouTubers upload videos on makeup, hairstyles and fashion and refer to their personal life, boys make videos in which they are more active, participating in challenges, making jokes, criticising others and, above all, as the girls and boys explain, making videos about video games. The interviewed participants assert the following:

A8 (11-year-old female): I see that what I like is not what my male classmates like. They watch videos on video games, and we prefer music or tutorials.

C3 (12-year-old female): Well, boys upload boy stuff and girls upload things for girls.

E6 (11-year-old female): Generally, female YouTubers have fewer subscribers, because they mostly upload videos on fashion and things like that. Guys do not upload this kind of video; they upload jokes, hidden cameras...

D5 (11-year-old male): I mainly go to YouTube to watch Fortnite stuff.

F5 (12-year-old male): I only watch games and sport videos.

E5 (12-year-old female): I think that girls do not upload as many video-game videos.

If we analyse what the boys say in light of the theoretical framework, an important gender restriction becomes evident. That is, while some of the girls admit following male YouTubers and watching game videos, a boy (as D5) notes that he is more amused by what “boys” make. In fact, some of the boys claim not to know any female YouTubers, and only a few mention a female “gamer” (someone who plays video games).

Their statements show that male schemes require differentiating barriers. For this reason, boys reaffirm the need to disassociate themselves from everything that is considered “feminine” (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Kehily, 2009; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2005; Renold, 2007).

It is also important to highlight the androcentrism that permeates these structures. Many girls and most boys note that the main diffusion—and viralisation—agents are boys and that boys have more “followers”, which translates into more purchasing power. In fact, it could be inferred from their statements that a glass ceiling exists for girls (although this assertion requires more and more in-depth statistical data). The adolescents put it as follows:

A8 (11-year-old female): Boys get more views.

C5 (12-year-old female): Boys earn more and girls less.

B1 (11-year-old male): Also, women who do comedy videos on YouTube are less important than boys, so they earn less.

In light of such a divide, the analysis of some girls and a boy who have more critical perspective is included. These girls believe that the YouTubers with large followings composed mainly of boys base their videos on the criticism and mockery of others. The interviewed participants dislike and reject this aspect, indicating the homophobic and chauvinistic comments that can be found in connect with these videos. The interviewed participants provided the following statements:

E2 (11-year-old female): There is a YouTuber, Dalasreview, who constantly insults girls.

A11 (11-year-old female): For example, there are YouTubers who do not get tired of insulting women on Twitter; they spend all their time belittling us, and yet they are followed, even by women...

C5 (12-year-old female): Boys mainly watch super chauvinistic videos.

Conversely, many of the boys who participate in the groups normalise these comments and define them as “humorous” or as a “simple” representation for the audience. In this sense, the boys argue that this platform requires “freedom,” and they support “free speech”, regardless of its sexist, xenophobic or racist nature. According to them, the onus is on the viewer. They explain it in the following terms:

F3 (12-year-old male): It is wrong, because it doesn't let many people see uploaded videos (when asked about the control imposed by YouTube).

D5 (12-year-old male): Also, if YouTube was created to express how you feel and such, it should not censor things.

B3 (11-year-old male): In the end, those who express such insults have black humour and gain the most views, but, well, it is their opinion.

Through their words, their perspectives on gender inequality can be analysed. In the same way, normalised gender relations in adolescent culture can be approached, in the case of “humour” as a legitimising element that reproduces hegemonic masculinity and male violence, as previously described by Martino and Pallota-Chiarolli (2005). As once occurred among the social classes, YouTubers use mockery and ridicule to sustain male superimposition, and as the interviewed girls emphasise, they become the carriers and means by which the inequality and asymmetry of power are perpetuated and normalised.

In addition, through the participants' words, we can witness what Martino and Pallota-Chiarolli (2005) referred to regarding how at these ages, macho attitudes are magnified for the purpose of belonging to a “group.” In male culture, belittling women and using sexist language are mechanisms that allow group members to identify themselves as being closer to a hegemonic masculinity.

However, aggression is not unidirectional, i.e., YouTubers against people (or women). The interviewed adolescents explain that it is common for YouTubers to be harassed and vexed. They refer to this as follows:

E4 (12-year-old female): Yes, they are often harassed for being public figures. For example, in the case of Wismichu, they broke into his house, took his dog and left it at the other end of town.

A8 (11-year-old female): I think that if you're a YouTuber with so many followers, you are taking this risk. If you're so famous, you get good things and bad things.

A7 (11-year-old female): There are many YouTubers who have had to move several times because if you even show part of your window, they already know where you live.

These aggressions are normalised, and the participants use the word “hater” (person who hates) to refer to people who bully others through this medium. This only accentuates the normalisation and disregard towards these forms of violence.

These attacks must also be analysed from a gender and intersectional perspective (Renold, 2002) since, as the interviewed adolescents observe, female YouTubers suffer sexual harassment more frequently than boys, mainly because of their physique. For example, the participants refer to the way in which the girls who retransmit international leagues through commentators of some video games suffer sexist comments and chauvinistic insults in addition to restrictive comments. Some examples are as follows:

D5 (12-year-old male): It is true that in the videos, girls are usually told to "put some clothes on! and this and that", and many macho comments.

C3 (11-year-old female): In the end, boys are bullied because they play bad, while girls, such as Dulceida, have many haters for being lesbians or because of their bodies.

F4 (12-year-old male): Especially in live streams, girls are told: "Do you want to fuck?" "You are so hot!" "Show your tits!".

It is therefore noted that female and male sexualities are given different spaces: private/public. In short, today there is a cultural-symbolic restriction of female sexuality; girls feel and become slaves of their own sexuality. This slavery is linked to hetero-directed eroticism, as stated by *Mujeres en Red* (1999); Reverter (2001); Egan and Hawkes (2012); Buckingham and Bragg (2004: 103); Renold (2007) and Zafra (2010) and reflected in the statements of adolescents who have coexisted with this type of content from a very early age.

Additionally, transphobic and homophobic attitudes on the net are worth mentioning. Because of this restraining macho culture, those who depart from the norm are socially condemned (Renold, 2007). In this sense, and as Ringrose and Renold (2010) and Renold (2007) noted, forms of harassment directed at those who break the (hetero)normative mandate are reproduced. The interviewed adolescents explain it as follows:

F8 (12-year-old male): There are many gay YouTubers and a lot of mean comments about their homosexuality, and people cross the line. I don't think they deserve it.

A9 (11-year-old female): For example, famous YouTubers like Dulceida, who is bisexual, were attacked more often in the past, but they have gone over the top with these girls.

Nonetheless, while there are oppressive reflections of a (hetero)patriarchal culture, this analysis finds YouTube's capacity for social transformation particularly interesting. As the students state, there are plenty of channels on YouTube that refer to equality and breaking with (hetero)patriarchal mechanisms. That is, the adolescents also find room to discover, invent and contribute new forms and identities in the described channels. In these places, "typing" breaks traditional dichotomous structures, as cyber-feminists have indicated (Haraway, 1991; Cabezuelo, 2008; Gómez, 2008; Christakis & Fowler, 2010; Zafra, 2005b;2010; Turkle 1997). Some of the interviewed girls refer to this as follows:

A5 (11-year-old female): For example, there is a boy called Celopan who is gay and made a video in response to haters. He searched for the word "fag" in his inbox and found that 65% of the insults he received in his channel used that word.

C5 (12-year-old female): But there are thousands of YouTubers speaking for equality or vindicating things.

C2 (12-year-old female): For example, I see YouTubers who speak about equality, and I learn a lot from them.

However, the finding that only the girls mention these more subversive spaces is of great interest. These sites are not mentioned by the interviewed boys, nor do they refer to what they see and hear from a critical standpoint. This confirms what the theory indicates: girls construct their identities, and therefore their experiences, with more flexible parameters, and their attitudes are more critical than those of boys. Moreover, boys maintain hermetic positions, given 1) their own social and male pressures and/or 2) the very sustenance of their status (male domination).

Overall, it could be stated that YouTube is a multifaceted, multipurpose and ambivalent space that informs, communicates and creates relational space for adolescents, a space to recreate identities and construct alternative models of identity. This audio-visual platform constitutes a megaphone that amplifies the offline reality, creating extremely subversive and transforming spaces and bringing together a plurality of bodies that escape the rules and established canons or garments imposed by the patriarchal system. There are YouTubers who break and violate gender rules: boys who wear makeup, girls who play video games, boys who speak about fashion. However, and at the same time, gender schemes and codes, which constitute

asymmetrical and unequal spaces sustained by the heritage and the legitimacy of the patriarchal and capitalist system, especially normalised by boys, are found on this platform.

## 6. Conclusions

The participants' accounts described an enabled examination of one of the audio-visual channels most widely used by adolescents. In fact, a deepening knowledge on the intrasubjectivity of the participants resulted in the conclusion that YouTube is part of adolescent culture and constitutes a source for role-model creation. For teenagers, it becomes a place where 'everything, imagined or not, is possible'. In this place, they can be actors and actresses in the videos that they want to present. Although this article does not aim at generalising results, it could be said that YouTube, at least for these young Bizkaitars, has become an agent and a means of socialisation.

However, this analysis has allowed us to challenge the behaviour patterns on this platform and the highly ambivalent, yet rich, realities it hosts. On the one hand, it creates a dichotomous, antagonistic universe based on gender schemas with marked capitalist interests, in this case becoming a digital medium by which the so-called third gender digital divide is sustained; on the other hand, it gives a voice to every person regardless of social class, ethnicity or country, and it creates extremely subversive spaces for adolescents to explore their identities. This platform allows diverse people to share their experiences, including their experiences of oppression, extending their personalised content to countless individuals and even finding a mass audience, or, as the case may be, normalising sexism to a great extent.

Along these lines, it should be noted that there are concrete forms of macho domination on YouTube. In this sense, the adolescents' discourse helped clarify that girls enter the space from a lower position and face the risk of being insulted and denigrated. Their bodies and sexualities are transformed into elements of slavery and oppression. In other words, life online and offline represent systems and worlds that interconnect and change structures, reflecting, enlarging and generating one another.

Moreover, the analysed discourses show how ridiculing and denigrating those who depart from heteropatriarchal normativity is normalised. In this way, people with non-normative identities<sup>[4]</sup> face an imposed social disadvantage. They face forms of harassment and normative cruelty (Ringrose & Renold, 2010) that sustain asymmetrical powers that must be made visible.

This gives rise to new questions regarding community experience and identity in adolescents. The voices of the teenagers who were interviewed allowed us to understand how they think online and how they share, see and manage information at the community level and worldwide. However, it should be born in mind that this article began with an exploratory, non-generalising interest, and due to the sample size, it has specific constraints, as mentioned above. In this sense, analysis should be furthered through new research to identify the real situation regarding differences between male and female YouTubers and to specify in greater detail the sexist and chauvinistic aggression against those who break the rules, venturing into the discourse of YouTubers and working with them as subjects of study.

Finally, the potential for the transformation of this platform, and of technological tools in general, should be highlighted. Although such platforms operate in conjunction with capitalist performance and sometimes empower more harmful and oppressive behaviours such as those mentioned in the analysis, they also fulfil an important role related to social information, communication and transformation. This cache of audio-visual data can be used for educational purposes and accommodate and create spaces in which adolescence may be changed, transformed and created from within.

## 7. References

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## Notes

1. This academic year was chosen because the students' ages range between 11 and 12 years. These ages correspond to early adolescence, when teenagers begin to explore their identities and the RICT (Tuber, 2008). Thus, exploring and analysing these first contacts with digital reality and understanding how gender schemas are reproduced in a channel used mostly by adolescents becomes extremely interesting.
2. Renold (2007) would include other femininities such as those that maintain a vindicating position and break with traditional gender patterns or those expressed by individuals such as athletes who dismiss the patriarchal constraints regarding feminine perfection.
3. To guarantee the ethical principles of this research, a document was sent to the Institute with the names of the students selected along with a "model letter" requesting authorisation and informing the legal guardians. The institute was responsible for sending the letters and for choosing the classroom and the place where the discussion groups gathered.
4. This criterion is proposed in view of the importance of identity at this stage, as stated by Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002). That is, dividing these spaces also provides us with elements of analysis on gender since, as noted by the cited authors, masculinities serve a public symbology, and, for example, in shared spaces or for boys only, they do not behave in the same way. Similarly, this asymmetry of power causes the discourse of girls to be mediated by male domination. This

was evident in the discussion groups, specifically in role-playing games regarding gender hierarchies, particularly in one of them, in which the boys had the floor and the girls demonstrated notably passive attitudes.

5. It should be noted that to safeguard anonymity, each group was assigned a code number and each participant an alphanumeric code related to the group to which they belonged. Additionally, half of the discussion groups held the meetings in the Basque language; thus, for ease of understanding, they have been translated into Spanish.

6. Non-normative identities are those that break with (hetero)patriarchal norms, either because their behaviours do not follow attributed gender mandates or because their orientation does not respond to heterosexist schemes (Valdés, 2013).

