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An analysis of kid YouTubers in Thailand. The case of minors as influencers for toys

Una aproximación a los niños Youtubers tailandeses. El caso de los menores como prescriptores de juguetes

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Abstract

Kid YouTube channels are a current reality in children's lives. This paper's main objectives are, first, to analyse the presence of brands and products in YouTubers' videos (YouTubers under the age of fourteen); and, second, to examine the advertising formats used in Thailand, the evidence of advertising and identification of the supposed advertising. The survey sample comprised six channels with 54 videos, of which approximately 795 minutes viewed from 2017-2018 were analysed. As regards the selection criteria, Thai YouTube channels devoted to toys and featuring a child aged under 14 years old as the main protagonist, classified with the best A classification under the Social Blade ranking (or B + with local ranking no greater than 100) were selected. The key findings reveal a gender-based correlation between the YouTubers and the type of toy shown. In addition, the presence of evidence of advertising has been detected, even though these videos are not always identified as advertising and do not always cohere with the target audience. This suggests an advertising format which is still undergoing the process of professionalisation.

Keywords

Youtuber; influencer; minors; advertising; unboxing; regulation

Resumen

Los canales de los niños YouTubers son una realidad que está presente en la vida de los menores. En este artículo se analiza la presencia de las marcas y productos en los vídeos de los YouTubers (menores de 14 años) y los formatos publicitarios utilizados en el caso de Tailandia, los indicios publicitarios y la identificación de la supuesta publicidad. La muestra han sido 6 canales de los que se analizaron 54 vídeos con 795 minutos de visionado aproximadamente durante los años 2017-2018. Se tomaron como criterios de selección de los vídeos los canales de YouTube de origen tailandés, de temática orientada a juguetes, con protagonista menor de 14 años a partir del ranking en Social Blade con mejor clasificación A (o B+ con ranking local no mayor de 100). Entre las principales conclusiones se ha constatado una relación de género entre los YouTubers y la tipología de juguetes mostrados, así como la presencia de indicios publicitarios pese a que no siempre se identifican los vídeos como publicidad y no siempre mantienen coherencia con el público objetivo. Ello sugiere un formato publicitario aún en proceso de profesionalización.

Palabras clave

Youtuber; influencer; menores; publicidad; unboxing; regulación

1. Introduction ^[1]

European studies do not tend to explore the Asian situation directly but do so instead through other research. This study has addressed the case of Thailand (convenience sampling) since it is a country, where YouTube is one of the most used social networks. The population of Thailand is almost 70 million, of which 82% have Internet access and 74% access social networks. The most accessed platform is Facebook (75%), consecutively followed by YouTube (72%). In addition, 61% of Thais watch more videos on YouTube than on the television (Marketing Oops, 2018). These results show that YouTube plays a crucial role in the lives of Thai people and demonstrate how investment in advertising is also migrating to digital media (25%) from television, which continues to be the medium receiving most advertising investment (Marketing Oops, 2018). One of the main sources of revenue of YouTube is advertising (Jorge, Marôpo & Nunes, 2018; Rao, 2016). The philosophy it promotes is that of creating credible content (Bakioglu, 2018) in order to support its market and to favour successful channels. YouTube has a specific channel called "Creator Academy" in which advice is offered to new content creators and they are taught how to manage the advertising linked to their content.

In this context, one of the most interesting target audiences for brands is that of the children who watch YouTube channels starring other kids. According to Lange, children begin to create content and upload videos as amateurs with the help of their parents merely as entertainment and as a way to express themselves with other kids. As they progressively obtain more followers, they become more professional and attract the interest of brands aimed at children (Lange, 2014:18; Turiel & Bonaga, 2016). The content created by children gives rise to a high level of engagement among their peers both because they see their peers performing and because they share the same language, interests, topics they discuss or stories they recreate (Westenberg, 2016). Children enjoy consuming this entertainment content, attribute great credibility to it and trust it (Global Web Index, 2014; Lange, 2014). This is why brands have understood that in these channels the children themselves are the best influencers for promoting their products and services and for prompting them in any subsequent shopping activities (Goldate, 1997; Hartmann, 2004; Marsh, 2016). Children are active consumers in the shopping process and participate in their parents' decisions to acquire any products or services (Raun, 2018; Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2015; Buckingham, 2011; Cook, 2010; John, 1999; Ekström, 2006). In fact, the J. Walter Thompson's Innovation Group named kid influencers, kid YouTubers, one of the trends in 2018 (Evans, Grubbs & Carpenter, 2018). The UNICEF report on kids in a digital world (UNICEF, 2017) states that one of every three kids in the world has access to the Internet and that YouTube is one of children's favourite sites because it offers them numerous, diverse entertainment content (Burgess & Green, 2009; Kress, 2009). For the first time, children prefer using the Internet over watching television (Ofcom, 2017).

Evan Snyder, better known on YouTube as EvanTubeHD, began in 2011 aged 8, demonstrating toys and at the current time has become quite the professional, with six million followers (Social Blade, with data from July 2019). He has three channels and works with Disney's Maker Studios and has made deals with numerous commercial brands such as Toys 'R' Us. He is estimated to earn one million dollar a year (CCDDCC-FC, Counsel for Center for Digital Democracy and Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, 2015; Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Díaz, 2016; Popper, 2016; The Star, 2018). However, he has been unseated by Ryan with his channel "Ryan Toys Review" (created in March 2015), who has been listed by Forbes as the highest-paid YouTuber with approximately 22 million dollars and nearly 20 million followers (Social Blade, with data from July 2019). However, Vlad & Nikita, a channel starring two brothers (also from the United States) which began in April 2018, gained 23 million subscribers in just one year (Social Blade, with data from July 2019).

This phenomenon has spread all over the world and our objective is to find out about the presence of brands and products in the most visited channels of Thai kid influencers specialising in toys and to identify the type of strategies most used in Thailand, as has been done by other studies in other cultural contexts such as analysis of children's channels and analysis of brands and products advertised in these, like those by Nicoll and Nansen (2017) and Craig and Cunningham (2017).

2. Objectives and methodology

The primary objective of this study is to observe the presence of brands and products in the videos from YouTubers (aged under 14 years old) in Thailand specialising in toys. This research had already begun in studies such as that by Araújo et al. (2017), which used an API (Application Program Interface) to quantitatively analyse different elements of kid YouTuber channels such as category of products advertised, target audience, content and whether the advertising was identified in the videos. Another work is the study by Craig and Cunningham (2014) who studied the unboxing phenomenon in kids' videos, and there is also the study by Nicoll and Nansen (2017), which analysed the presence of unboxing in videos by kid YouTubers over the Christmas period taking into account at five categories: actors; ages and gender

of the children; narration; product; and brand. Additionally, there is the study by Marsh (2016) which attempted to understand the reason why children are attracted by content from other children and particularly by the unboxing format. Other work such as that by Evans, Hoy and Childers (2018) centred on investigating whether children's parents identify the advertising strategies, such as unboxing, in the YouTube channels, since they are the ones bringing up the children and as adults they should be aware what their children are watching.

The secondary objectives are as follows:

- To describe the characteristics of the channels of the main Thai kid YouTubers specialising in toys.
- To identify the types of the toys that appear as well as other, different products.
- To determine the way in which the brands and products are present in these channels.
- To identify the main advertising strategies used.
- To verify the presence of advertising indicators.
- To examine whether the potential advertising is identifiable.

The selected period is between the years 2017-2018 (from October 2017 to January 2018). In order to determine the sample, the selection criteria consisted of YouTube channels, of Thai origin, with a toy-oriented theme, and starring children aged under 14 years old. Based on these criteria, a selection was made of the YouTubers who were ranked highest in the Social Blade ranking and classified with an A classification (or B+ with local ranking no greater than 100). These criteria led to six channels being selected, from which 54 videos with approximately 795 viewed minutes (Table 1) were analysed.

Table 1. Selection criteria and sample of kid YouTubers devoted to toys in Thailand

Selection criteria and sample	
Selection criteria	
Country of origin	Thailand
Theme of the channel	Toys
Age of the Youtubers	<14 years old
Sample	
Period analyzed	2017-2018
Channels analyzed	6
Cideos analyzed	54
Minutes viewed	795

Source: authors' compilation

The elements of the resulting sample have in common that it features children aged under 12 years old, there is a publication frequency of three videos a week and the number of subscribers exceeds 1 million.

Table 2. Main kid Youtubers devoted to toys in Thailand

Country	Youtube Channels	Classification (1)	Position in Thai ranking (1)	Position in world ranking (1)	Subscribers	Views	Launch Date	Weekly frequency of	Age at which they
Thailand	Kru Noklek	A	14	235	5,641,802	4,839,570,892	December 2009	3	9
Thailand	Lovely Kids Thailand	A	47	1,331	2,692,845	1,260,837,916	July 2015	3	3
Thailand	Brianna's Secret Club TH	A	52	773	2,455,902	905,459,130	March 2017	3	1
Thailand	Tam Story	B+	80	2,412	1,848,481	992,247,394	February 2015	3	3
Thailand	Beam Copphone	A	106	76	1,473,616	1,881,449,592	September 2012	3	6
Thailand	Yim Yam TV	A	115	319	1,476,338	1,092,035,031	July 2015	3	3

(1) Social Blade ranking. Source: authors' compilation based on data from Social Blade as at October 2018).

The content analysis was conducted through a file containing the main analysis variables: the presence of the brand or product in the videos; the product category present; types of advertising formats and other

marketing resources; and identification of advertising content (in line with Vizcaíno-Laorga, Martínez Pastor & Serrano Maíllo, 2019, Tur-Viñes, Núñez Gómez, & González- Río, 2018; Nicoll & Nansen, 2017; Craig & Cunningham 2017; Martínez Pastor & Nicolás Ojeda; 2016).

The analysis was performed based on a selection of the following variables:

- Presence of the products or brands that appear in the videos.
- Presence of brands and types of product (toys or others)
- Advertising format in which it is presented: inter-YouTuber (ongoing collaboration between several YouTubers), playing with the products, prizes/contests/prize draws, challenges, product testing (explaining the characteristics of the products), unboxing (unpacking the product) and game play (playing video games while commentating on them) (Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Díaz, 2016; CCDDCC-FC, Counsel for Center for Digital Democracy and Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, 2015; Wu, 2016; IAB, 2015). Method to identify the products in the video (IAB, 2018; Martínez-Pastor, Serrano Maíllo, Vizcaíno-Laorga & Nicolás, 2017; FFC, 2015).
- Indicators of advertising: hashtags, sponsored links, links not associated with products and others (subscribing, affiliation links, look at more products or brands, link to the product or brand website or other collaborations, etc.) (Craig & Cunningham, 2017; Wu, 2006; CCDDCC-FC, Counsel for Center for Digital Democracy and Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, 2015; IAB, 2015).
- Mode of identifying the products in the video through text or verbally (IAB, 2018; Martínez-Pastor, Serrano Maíllo, Vizcaíno-Laorga & Nicolás, 2017; FFC, 2015; Serrano Maíllo, 2013).

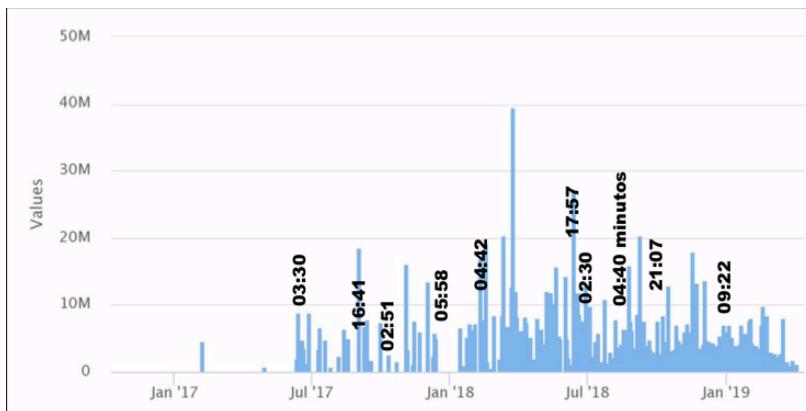
3. Results and discussion

3.1 Profile of the channels

Four of the six channels with the best ranking star girls (on Yim Yam TV, the two girls are twin sisters), only one of them stars a boy (Been Copphone) and the sixth (Lovely Kids Thailand) is a mixed channel without a specific star. The product type shown in the channels seems to be related to the stars: dolls and role play of family/profession are the favourite theme of Kry Noklek (a girl); dolls and stuffed toys are shown repetitively in Tam Story (a girl); in Yim Yam TV (girls), they showcase dolls, dressing up, large vehicles and sport toys, while in Beam Copphone (a boy), it is not unusual to see cars and guns. Brianna's Secret Club TH is a case apart, as it is a channel which focuses considerably on food products. All the channels (exceptively Kids Thailand) also have secondary channels (at least one, but up to three). Humour is a dominant element in all of the channels.

The length of the videos varies greatly (from a couple of minutes to more than 20 minutes) and this does not seem to be a determining factor in user preferences, as is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Total visitors (data in millions) and duration (minutes: seconds) of the 10 most viewed videos of the best channels in the world ranking by Social Blade (Beam Copphone, 2017-2019). The average duration of the 10 videos is 9 minutes.



Source: authors' compilation

3.2 Brands and products that appear in the videos

In the selected sample, it is common to find videos in which only one or two brands appear (N= 1, 84.35%; N=2, 13.25%) or one or two products (N=1, 61.40%; N=2, 17.55%). The maximum number of brands that appear in the videos is 5 (N=5, 1.20%) while in terms of the products, exceptionally, up to 34 different products were counted (N=34, 1.75%).

Therefore, based on the selected sample, more often than not just one brand is present in the videos of Thai kid YouTubers specialising in toys and this accounts for 84% of the cases. In order to get to a similar percentage in terms of products, we have to take into account up to three products (together these account for 86% of the videos). In other contexts (Martínez, Nicolás & Vizcaino-Laorga, 2018), similar data have been observed where indications of advertising seem proven. This could suggest that the overwhelming presence of a single brand reflects the existence of an advertising deal. In addition, the guide "An Influencer's Guide to making clear that ads are ads" (ASA, 20118) states that the presence of brands and products can be an indication of promotional activity which, in any case, must be clarified with a text indicating explicitly that it is advertising content. Furthermore, the aforementioned study demonstrates that the presence of multiple brands occurs on an exceptional basis (the Christmas period). Therefore, further studies are necessary to make it possible to interpret these results in a consistent manner. In any case, the number of brands and products seems to be a relevant indicator. Table 3 shows a full breakdown of the data.

Table 3. Brands and products in the videos of kid Youtubers specializing in toys (Thailand)

Brands		Products	
No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
1	84,35%	1	61,40%
2	13,25%	2	17,55%
3	1,20%	3	7,02%
4	0%	4	3,52%
5	1,20%	5	5,26%
		6	0%
		7	0%
		8	1,75%
		16	1,75%
		34	1,75%

Source: authors' compilation

In other words, while in the majority of the videos there may be up to three products, most of these show only one brand. The brand, therefore, is the centre of attention of the videos. As suggested in other research (Martínez Pastor & Nicolás Ojeda, 2016), this could be due to a decision being made earlier to concentrate the entire content of the videos on commercial brands, just as is done in advertisements in conventional media such as television. The remarkable peculiarity is that on YouTube the product and brand appear throughout the whole video, unlike the mere 20 seconds they appear on the television. This suggests a new form of commercial communication which is almost like a fictional series through an influencer who is the child.

3.3 Product types (toys and others)

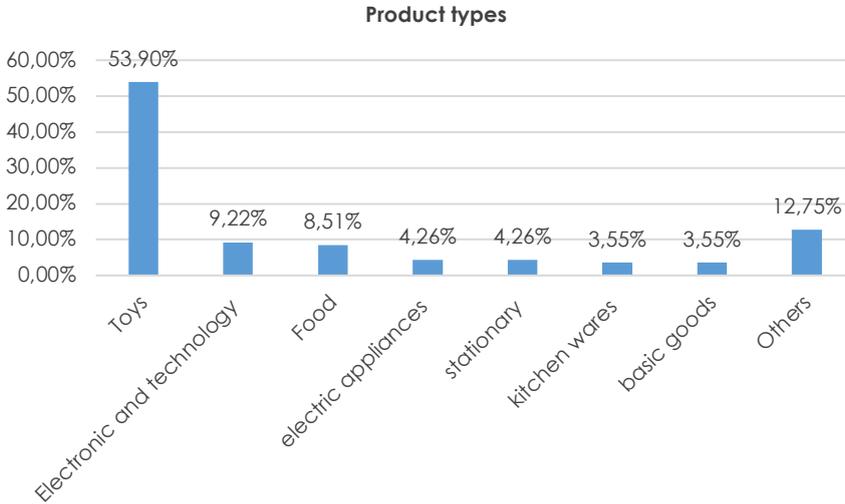
According to the sample of Thai videos, toys represent almost 54%. Dolls and stuffed toys are the most commonly present toys in Thailand. This is the star product that is most repeated on the YouTube channels of kid YouTubers. The rest of the toys consist of construction toys, handicrafts and educational toys (14.7%) and electronic toys (7%).

Although the channels star children and have toys as their theme, there is also a noteworthy presence of products for a non-child target audience, such as electronic items and technology (9.22%), food (8.51%), household appliances (4.26%), stationery (4.26%), kitchen utensils (3.55%) and basic goods (3.55%), among others (Table 4).

What can be concluded is that there are differences in terms of gender when showcasing types of toys, such as dolls, just as in other studies performed in Europe, the United States of America and Latin America (Araújo et al., 2017; Martínez Pastor, Nicolás Ojeda, 2016) where there is a notable difference. More doll toys appear in YouTube channels led by girls than in the YouTube channels of boys, in which more action toys are featured. Additionally, it is also significant that kids' channels in Thailand feature products from

outside the children's world, such as household appliances and kitchen utensils; this suggests that perhaps parents and their children watch the channels together and therefore brands have been struck by the idea of drawing the attention of the adults through products that would interest them.

Table 4. Product types in the channels of kid Youtubers specializing in toys (Thailand)



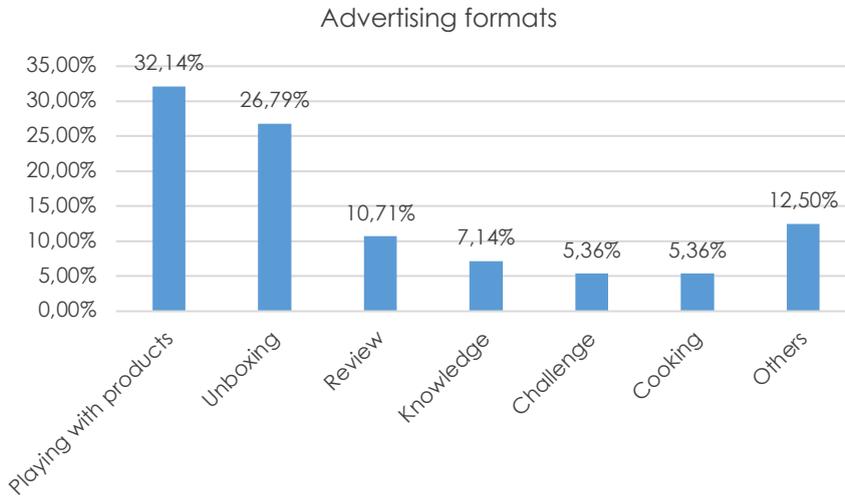
Source: authors' compilation

3.4 Advertising format

In Thailand, each video tends to offer just one format per video. The most recurrent format is playing with the product (32.14%), followed consecutively by unboxing (26.79%), as shown in Table 5. These formats are suitable for showing the product clearly and match the trend begun in other countries of exploiting this kind of social media through creating fan communities with the aim of monetising their own media brands (Craig & Cunningham, 2017). The format of unboxing, in particular, helps to maintain the excitement typical of children by creating expectation. Moreover, if the unboxer is a child, other kids can relate to them more and want what they have (The Star, 2018). Hence, toy unboxing content translates into more money for several larger corporations. Before the YouTube era, there was no way to monetise a normal kid, reaching millions of viewers each week, without some kind of formal contract with a leading broadcaster. Nowadays, an ordinary family can find itself managing an extremely lucrative business from their own home (Popper, 2016). It could be assumed that unboxing videos show the product in a favourable light and may have the same effect as advertising (The Star, 2018). According to an earlier study by Craig and Cunningham (2017)

on unwrapping toys, the phenomenon of unwrapping has fostered the concern of parents, defenders about access and participation by kids in social networks.

Table 5. Advertising formats in Spain and Thailand

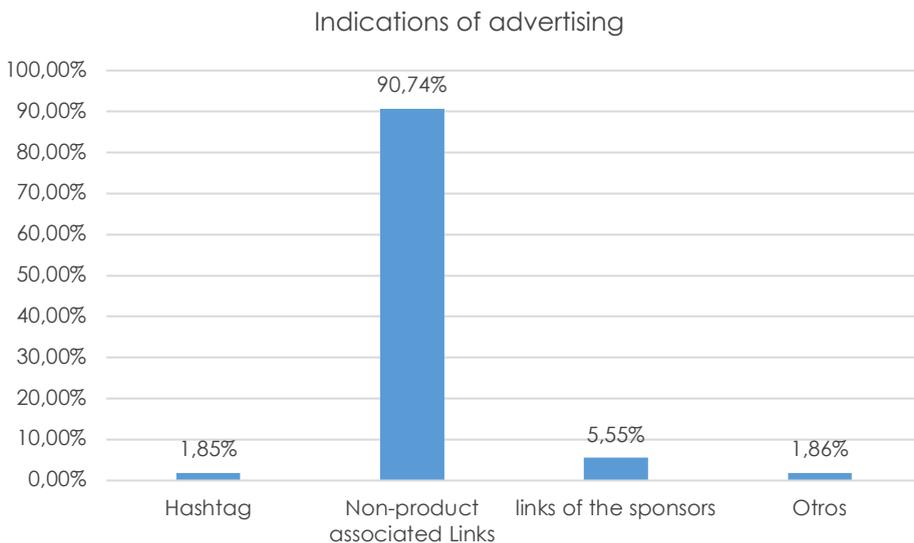


Source: authors' compilation

3.5. Indicators of advertising

In addition to that mentioned in section 3.2, in the videos of Thai kid YouTubers, brands are mentioned through hashtags and links to sponsors and links that allows the product to be purchased from online merchant platforms ("Links not associated with the product"), and other indicators. In fact, 90.74% of the analyzed indicators are not directly associated with the product and only 5.55% of the videos use links to sponsors (Table 6).

Table 6. Some advertising indicators in the Youtube Channels by kids specializing in toys (Thailand)

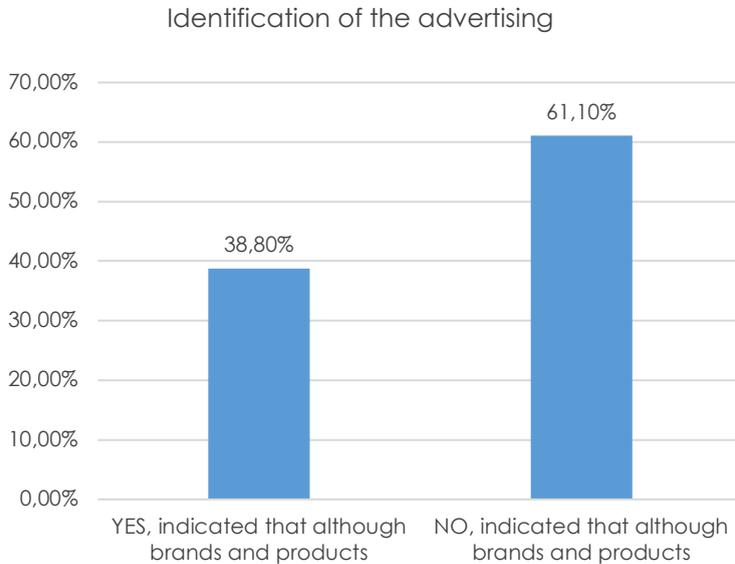


Source: authors' compilation

3.6. The identification of the brands and products in the videos

Identification of the brands and products occurs in nearly 40% of the cases. This means that although brands and products are present in all the cases studied, only some of them acknowledge it is advertising and indicate it as being such.

Table 7. Identification of the advertising in the Youtube Channels of kids specializing in toys in Thailand



Source: authors' compilation

On this aspect, numerous organisations have reported the need to indicate which content is commercial in nature and which is entertainment, especially for those targeting children. The Federal Trade Commission published guidelines entitled "Endorsement Guides. What people are asking" (2015), which indicated that influencers should clarify in the videos whether it contains advertising content or not; in the United Kingdom the Authority of Advertising Standards (ASA) published a guide entitled "An Influencer's Guide to making clear that ads are ads" (2018) in which, following the US model, it states that it must be clearly indicated whether there is advertising in the videos or not; and in Spain there is also a guide containing recommendations about this issue, entitled "Guía Legal sobre niños influencers" (2018). This demonstrates clear concern about the children in this respect and the necessity to protect children in this medium and adequately inform them about what they are watching, as well as for parents to be aware of this.

4. Conclusions and proposed future research

This analysis of Thai kid YouTubers specialising in toys shows a predominance of girls among the most successful YouTubers and a relationship between the type of product showcased and gender. Although this issue was not included as an objective of this study, this conclusion (which is coherent with the results obtained in Europe) suggests there is a need to perform a more in-depth gender-based study focussing on kid YouTubers as possible conveyers and perpetrators of stereotypes.

The overwhelming presence of just one brand per video, in conjunction with other indications of advertising being present, suggests there is possibly a commercial relationship between the channel and the brands. However, these videos are not always identified as being advertising. Regardless of any legislation that may be applicable, this practice is not ethical, especially taking into account the audience the videos are aimed at.

The status of YouTube video as an advertising format seems to be in its infancy or at the experimental stage, as considerable inconsistencies have been detected with regard to the type of product that is supposedly advertised and the target audience. This suggests a process of professionalisation which has yet to be completed. All in all, it would be an idea to consider whether this choosing of products (in short, the planning of the channel's content) is led by commercial interests or other causes. Therefore, any future

research should consider the relationship between the themes and advertising which has been identified (either explicitly or through indications of advertising).

The possible presence of advertising (assessed on the basis of different indications of advertising present in the selected sample) shows how only some of these cases are identified explicitly, which could be taken to be expected given the audience (children) these channels are aimed at.

It would be advisable to perform a comparative study that explores whether the trends and characteristics identified in the Asian case study are similar to those found in other contexts, such as in Europe or the EE.UU. The main difficulty lies in being able to conduct a systemic comparison based on similar parameters, for which ad hoc work would be required.

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Notes

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