Original Article

Playing YouTube: How the Nancy YouTuber doll and app position children as aspiring YouTube influencers

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Abstract

This article analyzes Nancy YouTuber, a popular doll and companion app that is part of a growing trend of children's toys modeled on YouTube influencers. Nancy YouTuber's app is one of the first to provide a fictitious YouTube channel, introducing children to YouTube's affordances. We investigate how the doll and app socialize YouTuber practices, and to what extent the combination of both deepens the commodification of childhood. We use the walkthrough method to analyze the app, and a semiotic approach to study the doll, its accessories and surrounding materials to map the manufacturer's intended use through these discourses. Our research uncovers how children are encouraged to recreate product reviews and internalize commercial digital identity performances. We use Spain, where the doll originates, to contextualize these findings. The article considers how influencer-aspirant toys position children as promotional intermediaries and normalize children's YouTuber aspirations.

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Introduction

In 2016, an *L.A. Times* journalist reported that his 5-and 6-year-old children aspired to be YouTubers (Pierson, 2016); they 'broadcast' their lives to an imaginary YouTube channel, discussed their viewer numbers, repeated iconic YouTube phrases 'Don't forget to subscribe', and recreated 'unboxing' videos with their own toys. With child YouTube stars drawing in audiences in the millions, it comes as no surprise that children imitate YouTubers.

YouTube currently takes the lion's share of the time children 0 to 10 years old spend watching digital media and is considered this generation's television (Coughlan, 2016). New career preferences, such as influencers or YouTubers, are replacing traditional options as reported by a landmark study of children's career aspirations conducted worldwide by Education and Employers (a UK-based charity) with 20,000 participants ranging from 7 to 11 years old (Chambers et al., 2018). Moreover, children under 10 years old, desire their own channels to share content (Marsh, 2015).

In this study, we examine Nancy YouTuber, a doll paired with a companion app that promises 'to help girls make their dream of being a real YouTuber come true' (Amazon.es, 2018). Nancy dolls were first launched in Spain in 1968 and quickly became popular (Famosa, 2019a). Throughout time, they evolved in terms of fashion and career looks, including the roles of a teacher, nurse, flight attendant, etc. The Nancy YouTuber is a new version that demarcates the doll's evolution to represent today's role models. Even the new tagline, simply updates the doll's original tagline 'to represent every girl's dream of becoming a woman' (Famosa, 2019a).

Toys are important objects of study as they reveal changes in society (Edwards, 2013). Nancy YouTuber is part of a growing trend of toys and apps that tap into the centrality of YouTube in young people's lives and their desire to imitate their role models. Similar toys include the JoJo Siwa doll (TTPM, n.d.), and the DreamWorks Troll Selfie Star Video recording microphone (Dibartolo, 2016), all of which offer video creation and simple editing tools in companion apps. Nancy YouTuber belongs to a new generation of hybrid toys that integrate material and digital elements designed to provide a more immersive play experience (Mascheroni and Holloway, 2019). Nancy YouTuber was selected for this study because to the best of our knowledge, its app is the first to include a fictitious YouTube channel and a tutorial that introduces YouTube affordances to children under 10 years old.

Toys have long influenced children's imaginaries and aspirations. Contemporary updates such as Nancy YouTuber that integrate play-based apps deserve scholarly attention since 'apps are a powerful part of emerging media ecologies' (Burroughs, 2017: 2). According to digital literacy scholars Marsh et al. (2018), previous studies on apps for young children have focused their attention on educational apps, leaving apps designed for play largely underexplored.

Our main aim is to investigate how the YouTuber experience is recreated by this particular toy and to analyze the features and discursive narratives evoked by the

manufacturer in the design of Nancy YouTuber. We examine the symbolic dimension of YouTube affordances reimagined in the companion app and ask to what extent this toy and app normalize societal acceptance of young children's active participation in digital ecologies driven by commercial interests. The research questions guiding this paper are:

RQ1: Does the Nancy YouTuber doll and app situate children as a particular kind of YouTuber through their design?

RQ2: To what extent does the combination of a doll and companion app, rather than just one or the other, shape play and the commodification of children as promotional intermediaries for marketing campaigns?

We use the walkthrough method proposed by media studies scholars Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2018) to critically analyze the symbolic meanings and cultural discourses embedded in the features of the toy's paired app and its tutorial. In addition, we conduct semiotic analysis to examine the physical doll, accessories, packaging, and promotional materials to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the messages conveyed across all its elements. This study is informed by literature on young children's use of apps to assess features. This article also draws on past studies on the practices used by successful YouTubers to offer a contextualized discussion of the significance of the behaviors that the toy and app help emulate.

This study examines the Spanish context of the Nancy YouTuber doll because the toy was first launched in Spain, although findings have a broader relevance as it is sold internationally. We use Spain to situate this toy in a specific socio-cultural context that exemplifies the powerful marketing apparatus surrounding the commodification of children in digital spaces. Spain has received little attention from scholars studying children in digital media, even though it has an unusually high concentration of child YouTube stars that are followed by millions of Spanish-speaking children globally (Vizcaíno-Laorga et al., 2019).

This article begins with a brief historical context of the toy in this study. It continues by reviewing relevant literature regarding apps for young children; the practices used by successful YouTubers to understand the features and rhetoric present in the app; and the phenomenon of child YouTubers. Next, the article presents a walkthrough of the paired app and a semiotic analysis of the toy and promotional elements. We discuss the toy's significance in terms of inviting children to take the subject position of a professional YouTuber, and how this is situated within broader considerations of the commercialization of childhood. Finally, we recommend additional research on play-based apps that recreate YouTube affordances targeting young children.

Background

Historical precedents of the Nancy doll

The history of the Nancy YouTuber doll can be traced to Marisol, the most famous child movie star of the 1960s in Spain. Marisol attracted an enthusiastic following thanks to her

angelic looks and her roles in popular films with storylines that represented societal ideals of the time (Triana-Toribio, 2003). Many Marisol tie-in products were created, including an iconic doll made in her likeness which became the most desired toy of the time (Triana-Toribio, 2003).

Nancy YouTuber was launched in September 2018 by Famosa (Famosa, 2019b), the same toy brand that created Marisol's doll. Popular child YouTube stars, Arantxa Parreño and Clodett (@elmundodeclodett) became brand ambassadors, sporting bespoke dolls in their own likeness. The fact that the same manufacturer is behind Marisol (Figure 1) and Nancy YouTuber doll (Figure 2) explains why they look very similar.

Playing with apps

Children's play is shaped by the socio-cultural environment, media, toy marketing campaigns, and the toys children enjoy (Bergen, 2014). Hence, play can be malleable and preferences change as technology and trends evolve (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Toys are filled with potential meanings. As anthropologists Pearson and Mullins (1999) argue, while Barbie and other famous dolls reflect more than one idea or cultural norm at a time, they are nevertheless products of their time and 'represent only select possibilities at various historical moments' (1999: 256). That said, toys, and dolls in particular, are

Figure 1. [Marisol and her Famosa doll ca. 1962].
Source: Private collection of Marisol memorabilia.

Figure 2. Nancy YouTuber doll.
Source: Amazon.es, 2018.

never played with only in the ways manufacturers intend or imagine (Rogers, 1999), yet everything, from advertising to packaging and accessories, provides children with an initial imaginary framework for play, even as that framework is contextualized in the specificities of their own everyday lives. Likewise, even though children may imitate YouTubers after repeated viewings, meaning-making is co-constructed by a wide range of multimodal elements (Willett et al., 2013).

In 1993, play theorist Kline introduced the concept of 'play scripts', arguing that 'children are taught to internalize narrative themes and values into their own scripts' by assigning specific rules and thematic conventions to licensed toys (cited in Grimes, 2010: 15). Children's media scholar Grimes (2010) acknowledges that this concept is contentious, running contrary to prevailing play theories that confer on children the freedom to discover and appropriate new forms of play. Grimes (2010) reinterprets play scripts from the original articulation, turning it into a flexible analytic tool to examine play technologies and the underlying sets of rules of video games. Grimes (2010) further contends that play scripts remain a valid concept in digital games to understand the effects of the implicit set of parameters devised by game producers on player

activity. Together, the design, the narrative, and the rules construct powerful play scripts that shape digital play (Grimes, 2010: 196). Cassell and Jenkins (2000) agree that video games and other forms of play using technology must be played according to specifications and features designed by adults. Even children's apps that foster creativity are constrained by their design (Marsh et al., 2018). Thus, understanding the manufacturer's vision of apps designed for children becomes particularly important.

In one of the most relevant papers for this study regarding the use of apps by young children, Marsh et al. (2018) note that children's apps must incorporate appropriate scaffolding features into their design to guide children on the intended play. Slightly older children, who can read, also require scaffolding features such as onboarding tutorials, which guide users on intended use (Ux Planet, 2017). Young children must be inducted into the use of devices and digital play by others (Marsh et al., 2018). This role is usually played by parents of children aged 0–5 who must also learn the workings of the apps. Although a majority of preschoolers and toddlers are able to use touchscreen tablets to watch YouTube alone (Nicoll and Nansen, 2018), this does not mean that children have an intuitive grasp of the functions in children's apps. Accordingly, as children become active producers of content in digital spaces, they must acquire new skills and practices, and learn to use different affordances to create and upload content even in apps designed as child-friendly spaces (Grimes and Fields, 2015). Children who aspire to emulate other child YouTubers must also learn the practices associated with professional content creators.

YouTubers and the practices that allow monetization

Influencers, regardless of platform, are 'internet celebrities' who make a living thanks to 'their ability to attract and sustain a sizable following' through 'highly engaging and personalized content production' (Abidin, 2018: 71). YouTube has become mainstream media, attracting users of all ages (Burgess and Green, 2018), potentially opening up a 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2013). However, becoming a successful YouTuber is a different story. Sharing content alone does not guarantee an audience and monetization.

Becoming a successful YouTuber requires a range of self-presentation practices and skills (Marwick, 2015) that include having discursive competence, content production skills, and the ability to engage audiences through creativity and affectivity (Hou, 2018). Content creators must build and nourish social relationships to create a sense of friendship with the audience (Baym, 2015). This *relational labor* is 'integral to their economic viability' as it helps them appear to be socializing rather than being overtly promotional (Baym, 2015: 18).

Digital studies scholars (Duffy and Pooley, 2017; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016) agree that self-branding is central to cultivating a network. Self-branding in digital media refers to building an online presence by offering a distinctive unique selling proposition through content and delivery (Khamis et al., 2017). This includes a conscious strategy to build a digital identity by creating a distinctive name, selecting images, visual codes (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016), and a narrative to attract and maintain the attention of a target audience (Khamis et al., 2017).

To build the kind of social capital that can be monetized on YouTube, content creators need a consistent professional approach to evolve from amateur content creators to digital entrepreneurs (Hou, 2018). This involves additional skills and business practices, such as uploading content regularly, choosing keywords for visibility (Bishop, 2020), engaging with followers, as well as checking metrics and platform analytics to shape content strategies (Hou, 2018). In essence, professional YouTubers achieve their status by keeping audiences engaged through a set of practices, skills, and the effective use of technical affordances. This also applies to child YouTubers, even if they are assisted by parents or intermediaries. Even though social media has created the perception that influencer status and the rewards associated with them are largely attainable to ordinary people (Turner, 2006), only high-profile YouTubers with millions of subscribers become top-earning stars& nbsp;(Ruiz-Gomez, 2019).

Children on YouTube

Children's increased access to digital technology allows them to become contributors in social media participatory culture at a younger age and even become YouTube stars (Lange, 2014). Child YouTubers are highly sought after by brands to deliver curated audiences of other children, because children's channels that ostensibly appear child-led are among the most-watched in the world. According to a 2019 study by Pew Research (van Kessel et al., 2019), content for young children that features children under the age of 13 receives three times more views than other content intended for children on YouTube.

The most popular content categories where children participate are family vlogs that document family life much like reality TV (see Abidin, 2017; Lichtenstein et al., 2017) and toy unboxing videos, where children unpack and comment on toys as they play (see Craig and Cunningham, 2017; Jaakkola, 2020; Marsh, 2015; Nicoll and Nansen, 2018). In these videos, children's play is commodified and captured as a productive act of content creation (Banet-Wiser, 2012).

In this context, broader questions about digital childhood are circulating, including: to what extent parents need to act as gatekeepers for children's content online; and at what age children's digital footprints should begin (Leaver, 2015). Parents sharing their children's lives as social media content raises a number of privacy concerns, in particular for parents turning this content into a source of revenue (Leaver, 2020) and turning children into digital labor.

Research on Spanish child-led YouTube channels shows that covert forms of advertisement play a predominant role in the content (see Tur-Viñes et al., 2018). Hence, child YouTubers become promotional intermediaries that attract the attention of their peers through videos that mediatize children's play and present promotional content as entertainment (Jaakkola, 2020). This is significant because decades of research show that young children find it difficult to differentiate commercial content from regular content (Kinsey, 1987). Influencer marketing using peers is considered to be more effective than traditional advertising as child YouTubers are relatable influencers impacting the consumption decisions of other children (De Veirman et al., 2019).

As YouTube continues its global growth, children's channels are expanding to reach different markets by creating multiple language versions. This makes content more

accessible and engaging for non-English-speaking audiences and, more importantly, it increases revenue opportunities. Spanish-speaking children represent a considerable target audience as Spanish is the second most spoken language after Chinese (Centro Virtual Cervantes, 2020).

Leading child YouTube channels such as *Kids Diana Show* (85.1 M) or *Like Nastya* (78.2 M) utilize multiple channels to reach other markets. In both cases, their fastest-growing channels are in Spanish (*Like Nastya ESP* 31.2 M and *Diana and Roma* 22.5 M). Arguably, reaching new audiences may have helped grow their main channels, as they have quickly surpassed the highest-earning child YouTube star Ryan Kaji from *Ryan's World* (30.8 M) in terms of subscribers (SocialBlade, 2021). Significantly, Ryan's first channel in another language was in Spanish (1.45 M). The top Spanish-native child YouTubers are sisters Gisela and Claudia, known as '*Las Ratitas*' (23.9 M). From a marketing perspective, Spanish-native channels offer the advantage of being able to customize content to appeal to local markets and promote local brands more directly than international child YouTubers.

Channels featuring young children are typically managed by parents, who coach their kids, as well as record or edit the videos (Nicoll and Nansen, 2018). In Spain, child YouTubers, such as Las Ratitas, are often managed by marketing-savvy parents who are also successful influencers. Parents, however, are not the only ones deciding the content, as brand collaborations and agencies often place specific demands on YouTubers (Abidin, 2020; Hutchinson, 2021).

Spain has a powerful influencer marketing industry with agencies specialized in managing child YouTubers for the Spanish-speaking market (Aznar Díaz et al., 2019). To illustrate the extent of commercial interests surrounding child YouTube stars in Spain, it is worth noting that two agencies – LaRezeta and 2bTube – manage the majority of top children's channels to offer brands for influencer marketing campaigns (Aznar Díaz et al., 2019). To identify new children to recruit, LaRezeta organizes contests, where children are sent toys and a script to perform (Jané, 2017). This is parallel to how celebrities were fabricated by the movie industry (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016). Like the movie industry, YouTube also requires a constant flow of new talent given the short number of years a child can promote toys and other products to other children.

In addition to mediating collaborations with brands, these intermediaries offer professional services for families who want their children to be YouTubers, such as digital media production, coaching children's performance, or account management. Using professional management means a more deliberate commodification of children, and an important shift from parental mediation to entrepreneurial calculation where content is designed to meet commercial interests. Additionally, it explains cookie-cutter content strategies and similar self-presentation behavior found across different children's channels according to a study comparing YouTube channels of minors in Spain and the USA (López-Villafranca and Olmedo-Salar, 2019).

Given the demand for Spanish-speaking child content creators as valuable producers of content for peer-to-peer marketing and the financial rewards associated with successful child YouTubers, it is not surprising that children are socially and culturally encouraged to participate in what media scholars Craig and Cunningham (2017: 5) have labelled the 'proto-industry of social media entertainment'. Toy unboxing is a lucrative genre that

generates profit for brands, intermediaries and parents (De Veirman et al., 2019). Toy manufacturers are important stakeholders as their marketing strategy relies heavily on using child YouTubers to promote their products to other children (De Veirman et al., 2019). Toys such as the Nancy YouTuber reify and capitalize on the existing desire to imitate child YouTubers. We thus seek to examine how the Nancy YouTuber is part of the child influencer marketing industry.

Methodology

Nancy YouTuber consists of a doll and a paired mobile app that uses touchscreen technology. To examine the manufacturer's intended modes of use and the narrative discourse designed to help children play along the lines of YouTube affordances and behaviors, we analyze the doll and its companion app in tandem, hypothesizing that the combination of these two elements provides a stronger framework and messaging than either element on its own.

To perform a critical analysis of the Nancy YouTuber app, we adapt the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018). According to children's media scholars Mascheroni and Holloway (2019: 266), the walkthrough is a 'research method within the digital ethnographic toolkit' recommended to study hybrid toys such as the Nancy YouTuber. This method is designed to provide 'insights into how app producers (owners, designers, developers) expect users to appropriate technology and assimilate it with their own expectations and cultural values' (Mascheroni and Holloway, 2019: 270).

The walkthrough method allows apps to be studied systematically by carrying out 'a step-by-step observation and documentation of an app's screens, features, and flows of activity' (Light et al., 2018: 882). Detailed notes, screenshots and video recordings (using a screen-recording app) were made of all functionalities and messages in December 2019. Field notes were taken in sequential order, documenting all interface elements (e.g. screens, menus, features and flows). We carefully examined the app's screens, in-app messages and accompanying tutorials to critically examine the workings of the app and whether culturally specific discourses are present to provide insights into the producer's vision of the app.

Direct observations of children playing with the toy and app are not part of this study as we focus on the manufacturer's intended use and the discourses present in all the elements of the toy and app and what these might reveal.

To investigate the manufacturer's intended use, we identified 13 Nancy YouTuber promotional videos shared on YouTube by the manufacturer's channels and toy retailers, plus paid-for videos created by the child YouTubers hired as brand ambassadors. Each brand ambassador created at least one video providing a demonstration of how to use the app together with the doll. To test the app, we replicated the suggested play of these videos and followed all the steps in the in-app tutorial instructions.

Although this study focuses primarily on the companion app, we also analyze the doll, accessories, packaging, and product descriptions on the manufacturer's website and Amazon to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the expected use. We use a semiotics approach as this method is often used by researchers (see Almeida, 2021; Thibault, 2016) to analyze the multimodal properties and cultural values embedded in toys, the accompanying elements and the videos. Semiotic analysis helps decode the visual and

symbolic language of gender and other embedded messages in the different elements of the physical toy and app and the advertising language and message of promotional materials.

Analyzing Nancy YouTuber

The Nancy YouTuber doll comes in a box with illustrations depicting various usage scenarios. The box includes instructions to download the app and a QR code. The official YouTube logo appears on the box, although being officially endorsed by YouTube is unlikely. The doll has a sparkly pink tulle skirt, pink slip-on shoes, and a t-shirt displaying an icon similar to the YouTube logo. Accessories come predominantly in shades of pink. These include a tripod, cardboard boxes in different sizes (with pink flamingoes, tiny hearts, and a perfume box), and small toys (a comb, brush, mirror, and fragrance). Figure 3 shows the Nancy YouTuber doll and its accessories (Amazon.es, 2018).

The companion app must be downloaded to a smartphone at no additional cost and is free of advertisements (Famosa, 2019b). Parental mediation is required to provide access to a device, download the app, and assist during the setup process. The tutorial uses a representation of the Nancy YouTuber doll and text messages to guide users (Figure 4). The speech is clearly gendered, evoking a young girl as the expected user. This speech also enables children who can read to use the app alone after a parent has completed the setup. The first text message says 'Hello, I'm Nancy. If you want to be the best YouTuber with my super app, I'll explain how to start'.

Creating a digital identity

The setup process involves creating a fictitious channel stored within the app. This fictitious channel is emphasized in the product description and promotional

Nancy Youtuber

1

Nancy, the YouTuber Doll
Nancy YouTuber, the doll for girls to play being a real YouTuber. With its different accessories, tripod and its App, this doll will make girls' dreams of being YouTubers come true with their own fictitious channel.

2

Accessories and tripod for all your unboxings
It includes many accessories to play unboxing and show all the products.

3

It includes an App that is 100% safe
It also includes a safe app that does not require internet connection, so girls can create their own fictitious channel and upload videos that will receive fictitious likes and views.

4

Start you own tutorials!
What are you waiting for to start your tutorials? With Nancy you can become the coolest YouTuber. Put your smartphone on the included tripod and let the action begin.

Figure 3. Main features of the Nancy YouTuber doll.
Source: Amazon.es, 2018.

Figure 4. The setup process.
Source: Nancy YouTuber App (Famosa, 2019b). Screengrab by authors.

materials. During the first step, users are prompted to take a selfie for their profile image. At this point, the Nancy doll in the app suggests: 'make yourself very pretty and fashionable with the accessories' (Figure 4). Then, Nancy recommends choosing a 'cool name'. Next, users must create a headline image for their channel (choosing background pastel colours, fonts, adding emoji stickers, and music), all of which are heavily gendered female. The following step is to 'create an intro for the start and an outro for the end of the videos. Like real YouTubers' (Figure 4).

Creating content

Once the headline is created, users must scan the QR code to activate the creation of videos and other features. At this point, the tutorial suggests: 'Now, let's make some cool videos. How about unboxing or whatever you want! We have lots of effects and filters to make it look great' (Figure 5). Users can record single videos or create sequences that can be customized further by adding filters, stickers, animated texts, or background music. Once videos are added to the simulated account, clapping sounds and little red hearts (symbolizing 'likes') appear, directly associating success with online metrics, with the tutorial displaying a message saying: 'See all the likes, subscribers, and views that you are getting!' (Figure 5).

Saving videos and receiving simulated audience response

Videos are stored and can only be viewed within the app (although this could be circumvented by screen recording). A message encourages users to 'create cool videos' because

Figure 5. Video creation tutorial.
Source: Nancy YouTuber App (Famosa, 2019b). Screengrab by authors.

'the more you share videos, the more likes you will get' and 'visit the app often to earn likes and increase your subscribers count' (Figure 5). Every time a user checks their profile, the number of likes, subscribers, and views increases, simulating engagement from an imaginary audience. Table 1 summarizes key features.

Table 1. Summary of Nancy YouTuber's key features.

Manufacturer's sales pitch	'Nancy YouTuber doll will make girls' dreams of being YouTubers come true with their own fictitious channel and accessories to practice unboxing, make tutorials, and review products.'
Manufacturer's recommended age	Doll: 3 years old and up (from the doll's packaging).
	App: 6 years and up (from Google Play Store).
What comes in the box?	Doll, tripod, accessories, QR code
How does the app address parents' safety concerns?	The app is promoted as 100% kid-safe.
	Internet is only required to download the app.
	It does not require or give direct access to the internet.
Key app features	20 filters, stickers, music, and sounds.
	Fictitious profile with heading, intro and outro sequences.
	Simulated views and likes (recreated with visual and sound effects).
	Tutorials: an image of the doll guides users step by step.

Discussion

This discussion presents an analysis of the symbolic meanings and cultural discourses embedded in features of the toy and app and their significance. We assess the app's affordances under the lens of studies of children's apps and draw from past studies on the practices used by commercial YouTubers to weigh in on the debate about young children being commodified on YouTube.

The manufacturer's intended use

To analyze the discursive narratives devised by the manufacturer to help children assimilate YouTube affordances and behaviors, we begin with an analysis of the app and its tutorial. We argue that the app's tutorial is more than just a guide to present its features. Playing with the doll alone is closer to free play, however, the tutorial directs the child's actions more purposefully, thus playing with the doll and app fall along the spectrum toward guided play (Grimes, 2010). We consider the tutorial as a key element to understand the manufacturer's intended play and discourse.

In-app onboarding tutorials are an essential part of the adoption of any app as they are designed to familiarize users with basic features during the first interaction (Ux Planet, 2017). In sharp contrast with in-app tutorials for adults, where users only watch the tutorial during the initial setup process or can even skip the tutorial, the Nancy YouTuber tutorial accompanies children every time the app is used. The tutorial does more than just introduce technical affordances. The tutorial uses the familiarity of the Nancy doll within the app to make suggestions of expected play. It provides contextual learning by drawing attention to features, giving specific instructions, and rewarding actions when the app is used as intended by the manufacturer. In addition to the tutorial's scaffolding, digital play is bound by interface elements and design considerations envisioned by a manufacturer (Cassell and Jenkins, 2000).

According to Marsh et al. (2015), children's apps must provide positive feedback and rewards to promote actions, reinforce behaviors and reward progress by using badges, cheering, and clapping (2018: 36–7). This is exactly what we see when the Nancy YouTuber app 'rewards' users for uploading content, checking metrics in the fictitious profile, or when using the app repeatedly. These rewards increase exponentially as users spend more time playing. The app simulates cheers, views, and likes from an imaginary audience with clapping sounds and hearts flying through the screen. These rewards represent the 'popularity markers' (García-Rapp, 2017: 1) needed by influencers to build social capital that is used as leverage to monetize via advertorials or ad revenue (Hou, 2018). The simulation of audience engagement through views and likes further signals that creating content is not just about self-expression and creativity, but about obtaining social metrics and validation from viewers. This reinforces the idea that success is measured in terms of subscribers and video views (Burgess and Green, 2018).

Manufacturer scenarios of use are further established in the different elements surrounding the doll: pictures of the doll unboxing in the packaging, the doll's outfit and accessories, and the promotional videos created by the manufacturer and the child

YouTubers. All of these work together to suggest play possibilities to conform to the scenarios anticipated by the manufacturer. For instance, the videos created by child YouTubers hired to promote the doll and app almost replicate the same manufacturer messages. In Arantxa's video (Parreño, 2018), she appears to be coached as she repeats the script of the in-app tutorial almost exactly. Her video is heavily edited, evident by bloopers at the end of the video. Furthermore, she indicates that the app is a safe place without an internet connection. This message appears in the box and the website description, but it is not a message one would expect from a child. It is directed towards parents, as toy marketing strategies often aim to appeal to parents and children alike (Seiter, 1995). At the end of her video, Arantxa shares her tips to be successful with other girls slightly younger (6–7 years old). She tells them they must upload videos 'at least once a week', have multiple channels, and have a unique style to differentiate from others. She ends by saying 'don't forget to like and subscribe!' Through these promotional videos, child brand ambassadors induct other children into the manufacturer's intended use by reinforcing the same discourse.

Past studies show that children integrate television shows into their play by trying to match play behavior modeled for them, even if they adjust play to their norms and competence (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 154). Similarly, children reproduce the narratives and behavior of YouTubers into their play. In Spain, for example, over 67% of Spanish children mimic YouTuber unboxing videos according to a survey of 600 Spanish families (Instituto Tecnológico de Producto Infantil y Ocio, 2019). Creating a promotional campaign using admired, yet relatable child YouTubers is the very essence of influencer marketing targeting children (De Veirman et al., 2019). Children connect with YouTubers at a more personal level than with other media entertainers, developing strong parasocial relationships with other children YouTubers that resemble their friends (Dezuanni, 2020: 62).

It is interesting to note that Nancy YouTuber's promotional campaigns in other Spanish-speaking countries use local ambassadors, such as TvAna Emilia for Mexico. Not only is she more popular in Latin America than the Spanish girls, but her expressions like 'Que padre' (so cool) are easily understood, while Arantxa's 'Que guay' (so cool) is only understood in Spain. This illustrates how influencer marketing targeting children is fine-tuning to take into account different dialects to engage different demographics.

> RQ1: Does the Nancy YouTuber doll and app situate children as a particular kind of YouTuber through their design?

The companion app guides children to adopt specific YouTuber practices and integrate media practices through play. As media studies scholars Burgess and Green (2018: 24) note, YouTube stars 'carefully cultivate their brand identities'. During the setup process, the tutorial provides a step-by-step lesson in self-branding. Children learn to choose a 'cool name' for their channel, 'look pretty' for the avatar, and create intro and outro sequences for future videos. These actions help mimic self-branding practices used by professional content creators to distinguish themselves and package their content for public consumption (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017). Children are invited to portray a heavily gendered subject position that follows the norms of girl

culture when creating a digital identity, using images, audio, pastel visual codes, and creating a memorable name for audience appeal.

The participation of children in digital spaces has been framed as an opportunity for children to acquire new digital literacies that prepare them for a world in which they socialize, learn and play online (Palfrey and Gasser, 2016). However, digital media literacy discourses distinguish technical skills like video editing and programming from other capabilities needed to navigate, critically evaluate, and contribute to 'the fabric and culture of contemporary society' (Grimes and Fields, 2015: 144). The Nancy YouTuber app includes functionalities to create and edit videos, but what sets this toy apart is the fictitious channel and the informal learning provided by the tutorial. Messages centralize the importance of self-branding practices and suggest recreating product review videos designed for audience approval.

> RQ2: To what extent does the combination of a doll and companion app, rather than just one or the other, shape play and the commodification of children as promotional intermediaries for marketing campaigns?

We argue that even if the doll and app together are part of a digital playground for playful and creative practices, the gendered cultural discourses embedded in their features contribute to normalizing the acceptance of children as self-brands and producers of commercial content in the guise of entertainment. The companion app plays an active role in helping children integrate and mimic YouTube affordances and perform specific behaviors. The tutorial suggests specific forms of play by saying 'how about unboxing?' It then provides tips to create beauty tutorials and unbox products 'like real YouTubers', suggesting that creating this type of advertorial is what real YouTubers do. No other content options are suggested. Cultural discourses can be observed in the accessories that represent commercial beauty products and boxes to practise unboxing. App features include spotlights and zoom effects designed to highlight products. All the elements encourage children to create content drawn from a commercialized context. Promotional content, such as toy reviewing, has become an acceptable component of children's media culture, where children become powerful mediators of commercial messages (Jaakkola, 2020). Nancy YouTuber contributes to normalizing the idea of children as consumers and producers of content that mediatizes play to showcase products using covert forms of advertisement in what Jaakkola (2020) calls the 'mash-up genre' that blurs product promotion and entertainment.

Marketers have a long history of utilizing children as 'vehicles' to sell to other children (Kinsey, 1987). Similarly, social media entertainment industries also consider children as a key demographic as both consumers and producers of content (Craig and Cunningham, 2017). These toys and apps are significant because they contribute to children's, and, more broadly, society's, acceptance of children as creators of commercial content. Furthermore, the doll and app, as an assemblage, not only impact a child's social, educational, and cultural development but also have a meaningful influence on their understanding of everyday behavior and rituals (Sutton-Smith, 1992). Even though a broader discussion of the implications these apps may have on the development of young children in their formative years is beyond the scope of this

article, there is clearly a critical need for parents to guide children as they initiate their digital lives in terms of appropriate self-representation and expressions of creativity.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the Nancy YouTuber, a toy that promises to make 'kids' dreams of being a YouTuber come true' (aimed at girls, given the highly gendered content). The doll and app contribute to the normalization of children's commodification by providing a space, tutorials, and tools for young children to emulate the practices of professional YouTubers. Notably, the doll and app frame children's aspirations to become YouTubers as both desirable and easily attainable. These toys are cultural artifacts that reveal deeply entrenched aspirations of fame and widespread acceptance of children as marketers in society. Of course, resistant play practices also take place, and children are by no means simply passive recipients of the framework and messaging provided by this toy. Play theorist Buckingham (2011) proposes finding a middle ground between children being considered as either vulnerable passive exploited victims, empowered savvy consumers, or participants of social media, by emphasizing the need to negotiate consumer culture within a context of family relationships where parents guide children more closely in their use of technology.

Play-based apps can also be considered a digital playground that enhances digital literacies, facilitating creativity, and creative digital skills. However, the features and narratives of this app provide informal learning to perform as promotional intermediaries. It encourages children to play and practise creating unboxing advertorial videos over other forms of creative content.

In the digital era, toys and new forms of play using technology are important (Jaakkola, 2020). As children's usage of digital devices increases, developers are designing more apps for children that provide opportunities for both learning and playing (Burroughs, 2017). This highlights the need for scholars to continue studying physical toys that relate to play-based apps since they seamlessly bridge the digital and physical worlds through the realm of play.

This study contributes to emerging research on play-based apps for children and the existing debate on the connections between play, childhood, and the commodification of childhood by using Spain, a country with a high number of child YouTubers and a long history of child-star celebrities, as an example to contextualize findings. We examine the Spanish context of this toy and the increasing demand for Spanish-speaking children content creators on YouTube. This has created an industry of intermediaries that produce child YouTubers to market goods to a young generation watching YouTube. Considering the growing demand of children as producers of content outside the English-speaking world, additional research is required regarding other markets and how children are being commodified globally.

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