

# Programming creation? An exploration of the socio-technical field of YouTube in Chile

## ¿Programando la creación? Una exploración al campo socio-técnico de YouTube en Chile

### Programando a criação? Uma exploração do campo socio-técnico do YouTube no Chile

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#### ABSTRACT

In recent years, attention has been drawn to the influence that digital platforms would have on the creative practices of their users. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews with Chilean creators of audiovisual content on YouTube, we will show how their creative practices are situated within an emerging socio-technical field in which there is a struggle for different forms of capital. This field would present specific dynamics of distinction, recognition and consecration, which would be actively shaped by the complex algorithmic systems and metrics that configure the valorization and monetization of the contents.

**Keywords:** digital platforms; Bourdieu; YouTube; attention; fields.

#### RESUMEN

*En los últimos años, se ha prestado gran atención a la influencia que tendrían las plataformas digitales en las prácticas creativas de sus usuarios. Mediante un análisis cualitativo de entrevistas con creadoras y creadores chilenos de contenido audiovisual en YouTube, mostraremos cómo sus prácticas creativas se sitúan dentro de un emergente campo socio-técnico en el que se lucha por diferentes formas de capital. Este campo presentaría dinámicas particulares de distinción, reconocimiento y consagración, que estarían activamente moldeadas por los complejos sistemas algorítmicos y métricas que configuran la valorización y monetización de los contenidos.*

**Palabras clave:** plataformas digitales; Bourdieu; YouTube; atención; campos.

#### RESUMO

Nos últimos anos foi dada grande atenção à influência que as plataformas digitais teriam nas práticas criativas de seus usuários. Através de uma análise qualitativa de entrevistas com criadores de conteúdo audiovisual no YouTube, este artigo mostra como suas práticas estão situadas dentro de um emergente campo socio-técnico onde se luta por diferentes formas de capital. Este campo apresenta dinâmicas de distinção, reconhecimento e consagração, que estão sendo ativamente moldadas por sistemas algorítmicos complexos e métricas que configuram a valorização e a monetização dos conteúdos.

**Palavras-chave:** plataformas digitais; Bourdieu; YouTube; atenção; campos.

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly, in contemporary societies, Internet has lowered the traditional technical barriers to the creation and dissemination of content. New digital intermediaries such as YouTube, Bandcamp, Apple Music, Vimeo or Spotify, among others, have changed the way in which creators distribute and make profits with their work. Nowadays, the so-called digital platforms compete with traditional media in terms of reach, and some creators of digital content, without many technical resources, have even come to exceed the viewing number obtained by large-budget traditional media. Despite this auspicious scenario, platforms are developed by a small number of Northern countries' companies and are programmed to extract value from content in ways that are often opaque and inscrutable for creators of the Global South. This distance introduces a series of relevant dynamics to investigate that, to date, have not been studied in depth in our region.

This paper seeks to offer an analytical framework to understand how the creation of digital content is configured on digital platforms, specifically on YouTube. In recent years, this digital medium has led to a productive activity based on the generation of audiovisual content that has been celebrated as a way to democratize creation and achieve a more open and inclusive communication, as opposed to more traditional media, like television or newspapers (Campos Rodríguez, 2007; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). However, this activity has been formalized and professionalized over time, requiring specific knowledge and expertise to become viral and, thus, succeed (Andrejevic, 2009; Kim, 2012; Morreale, 2014). Only some youtubers –the colloquial name for creators who actively participate uploading videos on this platform (Lange, 2007)– have earned large-scale audience's loyalty and recognition. At the same time, companies, governments and traditional media conglomerates have been populating the platform with videos, channels and agendas that are far beyond amateur production, raising relevant questions about the increasingly commercial nature of YouTube.

Considering elements of Bourdieu's theory of "fields" of practice and approaches of the Science and Technology Studies (STS), we will argue that the creation of YouTube content in Chile is not configured under binary logics between commerce or community, professionals or amateurs –where the platform would operate as a neutral intermediary between two opposing forces–; on the contrary, the creation of content on YouTube

materializes in multiple ways within an emerging field of socio-technical relations that goes beyond the limits of the online platform and in which there is a dispute of different forms of capital and distinction. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews with Chilean YouTube content creators we will show how this field has its own dynamics of inclusion, exclusion and recognition, which would be actively mediated by algorithms and metrics defined from the outside. To obtain profits from their content on YouTube, the creators are subject to valorization processes and anticipatory controls that complexly affect their creative practices, which has an impact on which contents will be successful and which will be invisible or not profitable.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: THE INTERVENED CIRCULATION OF DIGITAL CONTENTS

The word "platform" commonly refers to an idealized collaborative and inclusive form of distribution, intermediation or enhancement of products, content or services of all kinds. The platform would be an intermediary that connects different groups of users with each other (drivers and passengers, creators of videos and audiences, house owners and tourists, etc.). When more users are generating content on the platforms, the service delivered by these is better, attracting more users (O'Reilly, 2005; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009). In this regard, the discourse around digital platforms would give us "a comforting sense of technical neutrality and progressive openness" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 360).

However, this notion of platform has been increasingly criticized: research has highlighted the fact that these would actively affect the creation and expression of its users (Andrejevic, 2009; van Dijck, 2016; Gillespie, 2010, 2015; Kim, 2012; Postigo, 2016). All technology, including YouTube, would not be a neutral intermediary, but would always have some degree of participation or commitment (Bijker & Law, 1992, p. 3), operating as an active mediator regarding the enforcement of value and normative frameworks in their uses (Grusin, 2009). For example, the Dutch academic José van Dijck has stated that "it is a common fallacy, [...] to think of platforms as merely facilitating networking activities; instead, the construction of platforms and social practices is mutually constitutive" (2016, p. 21). For Tarleton Gillespie (2010, 2015), what users do or can do within these platforms would be intervened in a certain way by the regulatory frameworks imposed by their designs, algorithms and

predetermined configurations, affecting in a profound way the self-perception of the users about their agency capacity. Likewise, these frameworks would be oriented to make the businesses of the dominant players in the industry more profitable, using logics similar to those of the traditional media (Gillespie, 2010). Therefore, the political-economic dimension or the question about who owns this or that platform is not trivial, in the understanding that the practices they enable are shaped by the interests and strategies of their owners (Andrejevic, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2016).

However, as a counterpoint, there are more optimistic authors that openly state that their designs and programming cannot completely constrain the creation of content by their users. They insist on the hybrid and participatory nature of Web 2.0, where users would not only be able to adapt and resist the policies and frameworks of these platforms, but could even twist them in their favor. As Jenkins, Ford and Green have stated: “technologies can never be designed to absolutely control how material gets deployed within a given social and cultural context. Indeed, both popular and niche uses of technology always emerge far outside anything foreseen by the designer” (2013, p. 38).

#### The ambivalence or commercialization of YouTube

YouTube is a useful case study to explore the role of digital platforms as configurators for the production and valuation of content generated by users. Since its creation in February 2005, YouTube presented itself discursively as a medium that challenged and democratized the diffusion of homemade audiovisual content, as opposed to the big television and radio networks, something that would become its iconic slogan, Broadcast Yourself. Thus, YouTube became one of the emblems of Web 2.0, where the data and content generated collaboratively by the users is promoted (O'Reilly, 2005). For example, for Campos Rodríguez (2007), YouTube would allow a broad expression of users' identities, enabling the development of communities freed from the manipulation of traditional media.

In parallel to these beneficial features of the platform, different companies and holdings of traditional media began using YouTube as an opportunity to publicize their products and attract younger audiences. This put in place a character of convergence or hybridity, between commodity and communitarianism (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Lessig, 2008). Thus, an amateur culture, bottom-up, remix or free –as understood by gift economy– would be faced, not without certain

conflicts, with the top-down advertising strategies of more traditional industries (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 91). For Snickars and Vonderau (2009), YouTube becomes the epitome of digital culture, insofar as it promises new digital marketing opportunities for companies, but also an empowerment of the amateur user: “If YouTube is anything, it is both industry and user driven” (2009, p. 11). In this same sense, Burgess and Green (2009a) speak of a double identity of YouTube, in constant tension, which combines the commercial interests of large conglomerates and cultural resources co-created by different types of users.

Faced with these discourses that exacerbate the ambivalent nature of YouTube, other authors pose that the platform has clearly turned towards professionalization and commercialization (Andrejevic, 2009; Kim, 2012; Morreale, 2014). Since it was purchased by Google in October 2006, mechanisms to make the investment more profitable have been implemented, and advertising ads became its main business model. However, advertisers would be reluctant to invest in any type of amateur video, so they gradually tended to privilege and promote high-value content that respects government and copyright policies (Andrejevic, 2009). To do so, YouTube has developed a series of guidelines and regulatory frameworks, along with algorithmic systems to achieve self-regulation and adherence to such regulations by default (Gillespie, 2010, 2015; Soha & McDowell, 2016; Postigo, 2016). Systems such as flagging, in which users and advertisers can report videos that violate the community guidelines, or Content ID, which detects and alerts about videos that include material with intellectual property –even before being published on the platform–, allow to say that YouTube is a digitally enforced legal environment. In addition, YouTube would gradually favor the contents developed by established media artists, television and media holdings, and would encourage the increasing professionalization of new creators (Kim, 2014; Morreale, 2014) through initiatives that provide information and technical tools to produce contents. Among these initiatives are YouTube Spaces and the YouTube Creator Academy, instances dedicated to fostering reflexivity in creative practices.

Thus, according to Jin Kim (2012), YouTube would replicate the history of the Internet, not by combining a gift and commodity economy, but by its gradual institutionalization or evolution from a medium of amateur content to one dominated by professionally generated commercial contents. While emerging

youtubers and amateur content would not disappear, they would have increasingly marginal positions within the platform.

Undoubtedly, YouTube has positioned itself as the largest distributor of online videos in the world. In Latin America, its use has grown rapidly, something surprising for the company's regional director, John Farrell, considering the levels of Internet access in the region (La Rotta, 2016). Although the United States is the main bastion of the company, Brazil and Mexico follow it in total YouTube hours consumption, while Colombia and Argentina are among the first 15 places. According to a previous geographical characterization (Duarte, Benevenuto, Almeida, & Almeida, 2007), there would be a large quantity of Latin American users on the platform, but they would upload few videos, which would be scarcely seen and commented on from other regions. According to Farrell, ten years ago Latin American users were mainly consumers of videos, but in the last time there has been an increase in the number of local content creators, who have great international impact. Youtubers such as the Mexican Yuya, 24 years old and with more than 20 million subscribers, or the Chilean German Garmendia, 27 years old and with more than 33 million subscribers—the second channel with the largest number of subscribers of YouTube and the first among Spanish-speakers—would become true global franchises, as Farrell calls them.

Despite this growing use of the platform in Latin America and the great global notoriety of some Latin American youtubers, so far academic literature has not paid much attention to this phenomenon. Except for some incipient studies (López, 2016; Sabich & Steinberg, 2017; Siri, 2008; Sued, 2016), there is still no empirical exploration of how the configurations established by the platform introduce and permeate the creative practices of youtubers in the region's different contexts. Moreover, the studies on digital platforms have focused on a user/platform logic, without revealing the distinctions between users, as well as the mechanisms and logics provided by the platform that help—even without a clear intention—to the co- and re-production of a certain social order within this medium (Couldry, 2003).

#### YouTube as a field

To understand how creative practices are configured on YouTube, we consider it useful to collect elements of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of field<sup>2</sup>. Starting from a relational thought, the prominent French sociologist

defined a field (*champ*) as a microcosm or a dynamic configuration of objective relationships between positions, which would be established by an asymmetric distribution of forms of power or capital. The occupants of each position (agents or groups of agents) would enter a struggle to safeguard or improve their position within the field; to do so, they will seek to differentiate themselves from each other and accumulate the most valued capitals; some would be more successful than others in positioning themselves as the legitimate authorities within the field. Each field would present a relative autonomy with its specific regularities, logics and rules of the game, its own barriers of inclusion and exclusion, as well as its mechanisms of hierarchy and recognition. Thus, the position of an actor located in a field such as cultural production would be determined by his/her ability to accumulate forms of capital, including his/her social networks, the prestige or recognition of others, and economic resources. Such a position would affect their strategies and creative practices in a complex way (Bourdieu, 1969, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Several authors have highlighted the contribution of Bourdieu's theories to media studies (Couldry, 2003) and, specifically, to digital studies (Arriagada, 2014; Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; Savage, 2013). Manuel Arriaga and Natalia Levina, for example, have developed an analytical framework based on Bourdieu's approach to understand the differences of status between the users of digital platforms (Arriaga & Levina, 2008; Levina & Arriaga, 2014). They propose to analyze what they call online cultural fields, i.e., groups of individuals that use a specific platform, share a degree of cultural affinity and that, through the production, consumption and evaluation of contents generated by the users themselves, manage to influence the behavior of others in the field. According to the authors, any platform that encourages the generation of content by its users (User Generated Content, UGC) and includes the design and programming of mechanisms to evaluate this content, would give rise to certain forms of social distinction or accumulation of status among users. Over time, the ways of categorizing and valuing content in digital platforms have diversified, ranging from highly elaborated evaluations—such as, for example, a well-founded critique of some product in Amazon— or the addition of labels to contents, to the act of visiting a website or watching a video. All these actions would provide an indicator of value on the creations of the users, and the design of interfaces where

those indicators and online metrics are visible or not, according to these authors, would define preponderant elements and relationships in the creation of contents and sociability among the users themselves, opening or limiting specific forms of distinction within each online cultural field (Levina & Arriaga, 2014, p. 478).

However, the notion of an online cultural field could be interpreted as spatiality limited exclusively to the Internet, focusing the analysis only on the contents generated by users and visible more directly within online platforms, without considering how their dynamics of creation are interrelated to interests, valuations, affections and normative frameworks that go beyond the online. As we will see, offline linking with traditional media, commercial brands or more successful user groups are relevant elements in the configuration of content creation on YouTube. This is why we suggest understanding YouTube beyond the limits of the platform, as a network of entanglements that considers multiple agencies, both human and non-human, that dispute the order and accumulation of certain forms of capital and recognition. Given the particularities of digital platforms in terms of their political-economic interests and their different socio-technical configurations (van Dijck, 2016), each of these fields will present regularities, rules and mechanisms to guarantee their respect, which affect the practices and relationships between the positions of the agents and the distribution of the capital at stake.

## METHODOLOGY

To test this analytical framework, in this research we focus on exploring the content generation practices of a group of YouTube users, both emergent and renowned. We developed a qualitative data survey that involved 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews. We sought to investigate how content creation is configured and the relations between YouTube users under the modulation of algorithmic systems and the platform's rules<sup>3</sup>. The interviewees were selected by snowball sampling, but we intentionally sought to form a group as heterogeneous as possible in terms of gender, type of content of the channel<sup>4</sup>, number of subscribers and trajectory in the platform.

The interview guide included questions about: a) the interviewee's relationship with YouTube and his/her vision of success in it, b) the motivations, beginnings and developments of the YouTube channel and the content generated by the interviewee, c) expectations

and relationships with their audiences, d) expectations, estimates and ways to obtain profits on YouTube, e) knowledge of regulatory frameworks and obtaining flags or strikes for violation of guidelines or copyright, and d) the role of the State and public policies in the creation of digital content. The interviews were conducted by the authors during 2016, mostly in public places (squares, coffee shops, university courtyards) –three interviews were conducted in the work places of the interviewees (production company and radio). Each interview was recorded, transcribed and coded in a code-sheet according to key themes. To ensure the free participation of creators and considering that we discussed topics related to their personal relationships with other youtubers, we have protected the anonymity of each one, so their name and the name of the channel they manage will not be indicated.

## RESULTS: THE VOICES OF CHILEAN YOUTUBERS

For most of the interviewees, the creation of audiovisual content on YouTube began as a hobby, a space to express an opinion or play with the camera. It did not start under what Bourdieu (1969) would call a highly thoughtful creative project, nor did it seek to develop an economically profitable activity –except for two interviewees who led digital content production companies. Rather, they started as experimentation and game, through the exercise of a (nominally) full editorial and technical freedom, favored by the platform (I1, I3, I4). For an interviewee who had worked on television, YouTube is “an opportunity to talk about what we wanted to talk about and the way we wanted to talk about it, and not the way it is done in traditional media” (I1). In such media, “there was not much space to innovate”, so YouTube is seen, at least in the first instance, as a space to try new formats and test content that would not go through the editorial control of big channels.

Nevertheless, the ability to explore in new formats and contents would have certain nuances. In the first place, the creators of already consolidated channels pointed out that the audience demands digital contents similar to what is already known, with characters already seen and with certain regularity, thus raising the costs of innovating in new contents or formats. Second, channels that had agreements with certain brands were constrained to adjust their aesthetics or editorial line, for example, avoiding addressing political or sensitive issues for certain audiences. At the same

#	Gender	Videos	Subscribers	Visualizations	Creation of the channel	Theme
I1	Man	189	1,620,133	338,606,666	May, 2011	Comedy
I2	Man	201	258,459	33,870,808	January, 2012	Comedy
I3	Man	142	123,321	13,007,648	March, 2013	Series and films critique
I4	Woman	436	108,250	9,420,982	March, 2008	Makeup tutorials
I5	Woman	230	89,258	13,231,272	September, 2007	Makeup tutorials
I6	Man	25	75,153	8,029,901	October, 2012	Comedy
I7	Man	139	53,972	7,325,788	May, 2014	Comedy
I8	Woman	127	43,221	1,492,185	March, 2011	Videogames
I9	Woman	109	22,074	2,139,085	December, 2012	Videogames
I10	Man	133	15,024	1,093,668	January, 2010	Comedy and opinion
I11	Man	31	124	42,584	April, 2015	Opinion and reviews

Table 1. Creators interviewed

Source: Own elaboration, based on the data collected from SocialBlade.com in April 2017

time, if they used too many marketing tactics such as product placement or branded content, audiences criticized them as “sold out”, so they were forced to maintain a balance (I1). Finally, it is clear from the interviews that women are strongly stigmatized to create contents linked to makeup or fashion, staying in lucrative but more closed and restrictive niches. Women who dared to upload content on other topics or under other formats, would receive threats and mistreatment by users of the platform, so some ended up self-censoring their freedom of expression. For example, a female videogame youtuber told us:

There is a lot of difference between me, who makes videogames videos, and a friend who makes makeup videos. Her environment is much friendlier, mine is much more hostile, it generates some sort of rejection: first they question if I even like videogames, as if it was something very important in life; if you are a man and you play videogames, no one is going to say ‘ah, you’re not a real gamer’ (I9).

Users who start their channel on YouTube wanting to make profits from their content right away would be a more recent phenomenon. Several interviewees suggested that there is some sort of myth of success in which, thanks to YouTube, one can acquire fame and

large sums of money. This myth would be fueled by the small number of creators who have become true celebrities, which has caused some users to contact renowned youtubers to know the formula of such success. As one interviewee pointed out: “A lot of people are starting to make videos because they want to be famous, because they think they can make a lot of money” (I4). Instead, a large part of the research participants began to create and upload contents mainly due to a ludic, expressive and experimental desire, gradually reaffirmed thanks to the positive response of the audience: “By the time of my third video, I realized that I had a good reception from people, that people liked my videos, they sent me positive comments, and that’s when I got encouraged and kept going until now, and I have not stopped” (I4).

#### WATCH, LIKE AND SUBSCRIBE: THE CAPITAL AT STAKE AND TACTICS FOR ITS ACCUMULATION

The importance assigned to the good reception of the audience shows the crucial importance of the valorization systems (from “likes” and “dislikes”, sharing or comment, to the mere fact of watching a video) and, in particular, of the YouTube Analytics web tool. Through this technology, creators obtain very detailed metrics

and profiles of their audiences (gender, age, geographic location, viewing time, among other variables), far surpassing the metrics existing in other digital platforms or traditional media. These data are represented through colorful figures and interactive visualizations, easy to understand and updated in real time.

Most of the interviewees knew exactly which audiences watched their videos and set goals regarding what niches they wanted to reach. The most revised metrics would be the number of reproductions of the videos, and even more, the number of subscribers of the channel, which would refer to a more faithful and constant audience, one that would bring higher profits. As one interviewee said: "Having people subscribed to your channel sounds super nice; I do not care that much, but it's to sell, to build a name" (12). Another creator of a consolidated producing company said that the number of reproductions and subscribers is the main argument to convince brands to provide funding: "When you are a TV producer and want to do something new, obviously there is always a risk, but it is less risky do it with someone who has a lot of followers that with a person who is just starting" (17). At times, the number of followers would become more important than the content itself, as it would indicate their level of success within YouTube: "In the end, people see numbers, because the word 'quality' is really tricky [...] In the end, the numbers are the average way of saying if something works or not" (17). Thus, the digital quantification of views and subscribers, likes and comments, differentiates certain profiles and consumption practices in the platform, which affects the development and profit expectations of the creators of digital content.

Reaching large numbers of subscribers was an arduous job for the most experienced youtubers. Some took more than seven years to achieve high visibility within this field. Others achieved it more quickly, with a video that went viral; however, they still required time to stabilize their position in the field. A certain knowledge or know-how is necessary to increase, or at least maintain, the number of views/subscribers. According to our interviewees, such knowledge would be acquired through practice and testing over time, but is also made explicit in multiple videos uploaded to the platform. This knowledge development would affect the management that youtubers exercise over their content. Several interviewees hinted that, in one way or another, they modified their creative practices to increase the number of video views or subscribers. Some of these

practices would be acquiring the discipline of uploading videos weekly, choosing titles or special keywords for a better positioning in search engines, designing eye-catching images for the diffusion of the videos, asking for subscription to the channel at the end of the video, share the videos in certain time slots and through several social networks, collaborate with other important youtubers, show products that the audience requests in the comments or create videos to reach special niches:

In order to succeed, you have to think of everything [...] The video is not only the video, the video is also the thumbnail, it is also the title, it is also how you post it on Facebook, how you post it on Twitter, how you post it on Instagram [...] it's a lot of things (12).

#### FROM ATTENTION TO PROFIT: A LAUNCH PLATFORM

In the same way that a systematic work is required to have more video views and gain subscribers, obtaining profits also involves a series of tasks. The attention accumulated can be transformed into profits through the monetization system with which YouTube pays creators for advertising viewings. This algorithmic system was opaque to the interviewees, especially regarding the exact remuneration for each visualization. As summarized by an emerging creator: "The issue of earnings on YouTube is the darkest thing that can be, because nobody knows anything" (11). Within the myth of success, some would believe that these advertising gains could be substantial; however, several interviewees pointed out that they were not and that in no case did they allow them to self-sustain in time. This suggests that there is a great distance between the large global youtubers franchises, the platform's operating modes and the more emerging and local creators.

I have a video that has about three hundred thousand reproductions on YouTube, monetized, and that paid me like two dollars and YouTube says that it pays fifty percent, but it does not tell you that a third of the world population has Ad Blocker and the whole ad must be watched to get paid. So, I believe that they are the ones who win. In the end, I had to weigh what was of interest to me, to earn two cents [...] or that people watched me for free. Then I said OK, them watching was more important than to be poorly paid; in fact, all the youtubers say that you cannot live on the ads [the earnings for advertising] unless you are Germán Garmendia (17).

In the second place, creators can obtain profits from the exploitation of copyright, as believed under the

widespread concept of creative economy (Howkins, 2001). Although the platform establishes algorithmic mechanisms for the protection of intellectual property on YouTube, the interviewees did not consider this aspect to be of great profit. On the contrary, the protection of intellectual property is seen as an impediment to experimenting with new contents and formats, and thereby attracting more audience. An interviewee from a renowned producing company told us that the copy of his contents was somehow a compliment (E1), as it was a sign of having produced a good content, which went viral. According to the interviewees, only large media companies would be concerned with defending the intellectual property of their materials, an issue that rather being a profit space would be seen as a tedious and annoying process.

Even considering these two ways of earning money through content, the interviewees suggest that the way to capitalize on their creative practices on YouTube would be to gain attention and opt for other jobs. The platform would be a trampoline towards the development of other types of remunerated activities. Thus, YouTube is understood as a platform in the most colloquial sense of the term, enabling some creators of great popularity to be noticed and work in other areas and media, such as radio, television, book publishing or animation of events. As an experienced youtuber who now works as a radio announcer told us:

If you ask me how a youtuber makes money, I would say not with YouTube precisely, YouTube gives you exposure to generate contracts with other brands, with other companies, with other jobs: in my case, I ended up working here [radio] (I8).

Thus, YouTube does not appear as a medium radically disruptive or opposed to traditional media, but in several cases the platform was used to experiment and try new content and formats, attract the attention of audiences and –thanks to the metrics provided by YouTube– to have an objective measure of the good reception of these contents, enabling them to legitimize themselves in other more traditional media. An interviewee told us: “I wanted this to be my display case to show it to a channel and say ‘[...] I want to do this, so give me some money’” (I6). The same dynamic occurs in the relationship between youtubers and commercial brands. For one interviewee, YouTube “is somehow to make you famous, so that brands pay attention to you” (I9). To be considered as an influencer or someone who knows how to “make a viral” (I1) helps these

actors to obtain commercial agreements with brands, be invited to events, promote products or work in the management of companies’ social networks (I9). However, such takeoff capacity would occur in certain niches, mainly popular vlogger channels or makeup and fashion tutorials, meaning there are distinctions in the possibilities of climbing depending on the type of content uploaded to the platform.

#### DISTINCTION AND RECOGNITION ON YOUTUBE

Through YouTube’s algorithmic systems of valorization and monetization of content, creators have an unequal distribution of attention, which leads to distinctions among them, thresholds of recognition and barriers to be overcome. The quantification of attention does not only distinguish what content is popular or what niches it manages to attract; it also ends up shaping the positions that each creator occupies within the field, dividing the content generators into two highly related forms.

On the one hand, they are distinguished according to the level of commodification of the contents. One interviewee, already renowned within the Youtubers community, told us that there is a substantive difference between the “fundamentalists” and the more “sold out” (I8). The first group would not compromise their creative guidelines nor would it focus resources towards content management seeking to reach large audiences, showing indifference to low numbers of views. They would be creators who would remain faithful to the ludic-expressive purpose with which they began their channel. The latter, on the other hand, have transformed their content to reach a greater audience and switch to other working areas, adopting the tactics mentioned above to make their videos recognizable by both the users and the algorithmic search and recommendation systems of YouTube. For some creators, such practices were considered “dirty” (I2), but equally effective in capturing the attention of the audience.

At the same time, the interviews suggest that there is a second division, at the level of social relations among Chilean youtubers, in which users with greater experience and a large number of visualizations/subscribers generate greater links among themselves and share in YouTube meetings. They forge bonds of friendship and support networks through a closed group on Facebook, articulated thanks to social gatherings that allow the transmission of knowledge and experiences on how to achieve better audience numbers. Thus, a select group is formed that would



embody a professionalization or union of the creation of digital content on YouTube. As one interviewee said:

When I started making videos, I wrote to a friend who makes YouTube videos, and he invited me to a party with him and other youtubers, and I started to get into that circle [...] and after that it is inevitable to meet more people on the Internet who share your tastes and ambitions (19).

To enter this circle, one would have to “be on the same page” (11), i.e., achieve a level of recognition within the field, mainly supported by a large number of subscribers and “continue to be someone significant” (12) by generating weekly contents, “like in any professional community” (12). For example, when asking an interviewee about how they decide to include a new member in this group, he said:

It's really like 'hey, [...] this guy is being watched by a lot of people. Should we add him to the group?' Really, the youtubers community is very good, because we are so few, so few doing good things, without wanting to sound arrogant, we are few and obviously we must help ourselves; at the end we are alone in this (16).

In this regard, collaborations are pointed out as the main practice to be managed among the youtubers community, ranging from briefly appearing in the video of another user to being part of the complete production of another channel. These collaborative practices would imply gaining access to a circle(s) of creators already renowned and achieving high prestige within the field, attracting other users to request new collaborations. As one interviewee told:

I've done [collaborations], not with kick-ass youtubers, but I have collaborated with other girls who make videos of the same topic, trying to be youtubers with a similar number of subscribers, so it also serves me well [...] If it's a totally new girl, who no one has ever heard of, and she asks me to do a collaboration and she has, I don't know, a thousand subscribers, it's not going to help me to have more subscribers in my channel, because that's the idea of collaborations, that your subscribers know mine and mine know yours” (15).

Thus, the data of subscribers and views, demographically profiled, constitute the main presentation letter of the content generators, not only to brands or traditional media but also to the community of peers, to collaborate and grow together, accumulating more audience.

Along with these forms of distinction at the level of content and creators, and considering what was seen in the previous sections, it is possible to identify three types of recognition within the field of YouTube in Chile. In the first place, there would be an authorial recognition, in which the creators of contents are recognized as such before the existence of their work. It is a level of recognition linked to the valuation of the content that comes from its own existence and the (private) satisfaction that this generates. It does not depend on the influences exerted by the audiences in terms of content or form. The main motivation of creators is to recognize themselves as content generators on YouTube.

A second type is that of social recognition, characterized by reaching a certain number of visualizations and subscribers (which changes in terms of time and context), which allows access to the group of renowned creators. Entering this circle makes it possible to obtain help and mutual support that can also lead to collaborations with other youtubers, to have more visualizations and subscribers. To achieve this level of recognition it is necessary to consider the demands of the audience. That is why strategies such as shortening the duration of the videos, starting with a funny sketch or privileging certain contents due to their viewing success begin to be more regular. Although within the group of fundamentalists there would be networks and collaborations, they would not be constituted under the logic of professionalization or an orientation towards obtaining more audience, but they would follow principles of authorial recognition, aimed at being recognized only by other creators of similar perspectives or creative projects.

A third type would be the computational recognition given by the platform and YouTube to certain content generators over others. In a depersonalized and automated way, YouTube recognizes a small number of channels according to subscriber number goals, awarding them with commemorative plaques and trips to California to acquire special training from YouTube. These recognitions, which start at 100,000 subscribers and end at one million with the Gold Play button, show the link between the platform and the content generators.

These award-winning metrics are not differentiated according to the local viewing context, omitting the disparities in access, skills and uses given to digital platforms in each country or region. Regardless of this, the importance assigned to this form of recognition

becomes such that various interviewees mentioned figures similar to the ones necessary to obtain these acknowledgments when asked when “success” is achieved on YouTube.

Finally, it should be noted that computational recognition is highly interrelated with social recognition, to the extent that creators compare themselves to others taking as reference the number computed by the platform, once again demonstrating the strongly socio-technical nature of how the YouTube field is configured in Chile.

#### **DISCUSSION: YOUTUBE IN CHILE AS A FIELD OF STRUGGLE FOR ATTENTION**

YouTube has been considered a participatory platform that would allow all its users—without distinction—the opportunity to act as transmitters of their own content. However, despite the promise of Broadcast Yourself, the platform does not distribute content in a neutral manner, but rather intervenes in a complex way in the creations and relationships of its users (Gillespie, 2010). In this work, we have proposed to conceive YouTube as a socio-technical field to achieve a better understanding of how the practices of Chilean YouTube content creators are configured. We hope that this initial approach, with a limited number of interviews, will lead to future research that will mainly investigate about the creation of content for digital platforms.

Considering the results, the great preponderance acquired by the digital quantification and valorization systems of YouTube stands out. These non-human agencies of the platform affect the creative practices, by registering and making the interactions (visualizations, likes, subscribers, comments, etc.) of each content traceable. Such interactions, in aggregate terms, shape what is popular on YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009a; Morreale, 2014; van Dijck, 2016), but they also become objective representations of the value—and eventual price—of each channel, forming the creators’ field capital. Using the concept proposed by Arriagada (2014), YouTube metrics constitute an objective measurement of the “digital capital” of youtubers, i.e., of their abilities to capture and control the attention of global and local audiences and agents of other fields of cultural production, as well as to establish economic relations with brands and media. Thus, the digital capital that each creator accumulates on YouTube defines his/her objective position within the field, affecting both his/her creative practices and

his/her aspirations for recognition and distinction vis-à-vis other actors.

Recalling the dual structure of the field of cultural production analyzed by Bourdieu (1993), it would be possible to consider YouTube as a field in which some creators are committed to a search for autonomy and greater experimentation in their creative practices, while other youtubers would try to accumulate the attention of the audiences, engaging in strategic collaborations with other users with a large number of followers, and adjusting their contents, formats, titles, durations and descriptions to the normative frameworks, both of the platform and political or cultural—for example, when verifying gender inequalities, as seen earlier.

This suggests an incipient professionalization<sup>5</sup> of a small group of Chilean creators that would capture a large number of viewings and subscribers, with more elaborated contents, suitable for advertisers, leaving a large majority of creators in less visible positions, unfavorable in terms of economic capital.

However, it is not easy to transform the digital capital of attention into an economic capital. The monetization of the videos offered by YouTube as the main source of income of the creators appears as a myth, mainly fueled by the alleged success of a small number of cases, rather than based in an effective reality for the creators interviewed. The economic gains would come from using the digital platform as a trampoline and translating the attention accumulated on YouTube as a symbolic capital in other subfields of large-scale cultural production, such as advertising agencies, producing companies and traditional media. This shows that, even though the platform has initially sought to distinguish itself from other media, there is a heteronomy or imbrication between creation on YouTube, commercial brands and traditional media (van Dijck, 2016).

Based on these findings on how content generation is configured on YouTube, interesting issues and questions arise. In the first place, it is important to note that the popularity principle, as defined by van Dijck (2016), appears as the general rule of the YouTube field in Chile. This principle, similar to the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968) identified in the sociology of scientific knowledge, points out that the most popular actors will become more popular, and those who attract more attention will attract even more. As Morreale (2014) states when reviewing the case of the YouTube channel Annoying Orange: “While theoretically anyone can ‘Broadcast Yourself’, not all content is equally visible in

the YouTube attention economy” (p. 128). By studying the practices of content generators in Chile, we observe that popularity is reinforced socio-technically, both by algorithmic systems and by the very methods of social recognition formed in the field, where those who acquire a computational recognition gain social recognition, enabling more collaborations among themselves, thus increasing their digital capital within the field. As one of our interviewees stated: “While there are many people who say it is a democratic platform, the truth is that it is not because [...] if a channel is popular, it has more probabilities to become even more popular” (13).

Second, both the YouTube company and the digital platform and its algorithms become agents of great importance, not only because they adopt a position from which the rules of the game and the mechanisms to enforce them are strongly defined, but also because they act as authorities that define the computational recognition, and with it the thresholds of consecration within the field. Systems such as the analytics of YouTube audiences become obligatory passage points (Callon, 1986) for some users to enter certain circles and obtain greater success within them. The above problematize aspects of Bourdieu fields theory regarding the implications of the emergence of non-human selection authorities, which recommend and define trends and shape the successful practices in these fields.

Third, it is necessary to recognize that the tactics to succeed on the platform do not eliminate the existence of alternative, or opposite, programs to those proposed by YouTube. This is particularly evident when observing the practices of the creators to enhance their visibility in

YouTube’s algorithms of search and recommendation of contents. Thus, there is not a program totally effective and immune to the alternative practices proposed by the human agency. Despite this, it is relevant to consider that such practices, manifested by youtubers more oriented to an authorial recognition, place these agents in increasingly marginal positions within the field of YouTube.

Finally, the configuration of the YouTube field, rather than being the result of the direct programming of a code or of a social differentiation external to any configuration of the digital medium, emerges as a momentary achievement of the relationship between sociability and technology. Although the platform, its algorithms and interfaces, are deliberately programmed by its developers under specific economic interests, certain actors renegotiate such interests and designs of the platform. Certain groups of youtubers would be more inclined to accept vertically imposed frames to obtain more digital capital, while others try to resist such frames, marginalizing themselves from certain forms of recognition. The creative practices of youtubers would constitute a series of extra-institutional knowledge (about how to please the systems of the platform, but also how to subvert them) and forms of distinction that would differ from what is explicit online. This makes it difficult to affirm that the creative practices of users are completely conditioned by the design of the platforms; in any case, this does not imply that there is a neutral relationship between two principles—commerce or gift, professionals or amateurs—equivalent in strength and capable of explaining the interactions that take place in the YouTube audiovisual creation field.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. This research was framed in a larger-scale study conducted by non-governmental organizations linked to the protection of digital rights and Internet in different countries, such as the United States, Colombia, Brazil, India and Chile. The study sought to understand the impact of foreign copyright legal frameworks in the digital economy of different countries. This paper presents some of the results of the Chilean case, but also a broader analysis.
2. In this paper, we will delve into Bourdieu's concept of field, without doing so in other key concepts of his prolific career, such as *habitus*, *illusio* or the different forms of capital.
3. For extension motives, in this article we do not analyze the significant implications of intellectual property control mechanisms –like Content ID– in the creative practices of YouTube users. Likewise, we omit the feedback or online sociability generated between the YouTube creators and their audiences through the reactions and comments that users post about videos (Lange, 2007).
4. As noted by Burgess and Green (2009b), it is difficult to distinguish strictly professional users of amateurs, so it was more feasible to categorize them considering the most common theme of the videos uploaded on each YouTube channel (humor, makeup and fashion, tutorials, reviews, political opinion, etc.).
5. This same tendency has been found in other studies, but at a discursive level. For example, Sabich and Steinberg (2017) observe an increasing professionalization when exploring the narrative structures of three channels of Latin American youtubers, as well as López (2016), when studying the statements of the Multi-Channel Networks or companies that are dedicated to advice creators of audiovisual content.

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