

How I became a BookTuber: digital (auto) ethnography, literary prosumption, and sociality on YouTube.

Cómo me hice *BookTuber*: (auto)etnografía digital, prosumo literario y sociabilidad en YouTube

Como me tornei um BookTuber: (auto)etnografia digital, prosumpção literária e socialidade

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ABSTRACT | This article is a methodological reflection on a digital ethnography among Spanish-language BookTubers conducted between 2017 and 2020. It presents a review of the main ways of understanding the ethnographic paradigm in the digital context, specifically on YouTube, and raises methodological reflections around five topics: 1) the field as a construct of open participation, 2) the role of affect in digital ethnography, 3) the construction of social ties from affinity, 4) the datification of practices and social relations, and 5) the implications of the public exposure of the researcher. The aim is to contribute to the understanding of the forms of literary prosumption on YouTube, to the practices of digital ethnography and auto-ethnography on digital platforms, and to the methodological debates on the study of content creators on digital platforms.

KEYWORDS: YouTube; BookTubers; digital ethnography; literary prosumption; affinity spaces.

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RESUMEN | *En este artículo se presenta una reflexión metodológica sobre una etnografía digital entre BookTubers en lengua española realizada entre 2017 y 2020. A partir de esta experiencia, el artículo presenta un repaso de las principales formas de entender el paradigma etnográfico en el contexto digital, específicamente en YouTube, y plantea una reflexión metodológica alrededor de cinco aspectos: 1) el campo como un constructo de participación abierta, 2) el rol de los afectos en la etnografía digital, 3) la construcción de vínculos sociales a partir de la afinidad, 4) la datificación de las prácticas y las relaciones sociales, y 5) las implicancias de la exposición pública del investigador. Con ello, se busca contribuir a la comprensión de las formas de prosumo literario en YouTube, a la práctica de etnografías digitales y auto-etnografías en plataformas digitales y a los debates metodológicos sobre el estudio de creadores de contenido en plataformas digitales.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *YouTube; BookTubers; etnografía digital; prosumo literario; espacios de afinidad.*

RESUMO | Este artigo apresenta uma reflexão metodológica sobre uma etnografia digital entre BookTubers de língua espanhola, realizada entre 2017 e 2020.. O artigo apresenta uma revisão das principais formas de compreender o paradigma etnográfico no contexto digital, particularmente no YouTube, e a partir da própria prática, propõe uma reflexão metodológica em torno de cinco aspectos: 1) o campo como uma construção de participação aberta, 2) o papel do afecto na etnografia digital, 3) a construção de laços sociais baseados na afinidade, 4) a datificação de práticas e relações sociais, e 5) as implicações da exposição pública do investigador. O objectivo é contribuir para a compreensão das formas de prosumpção literária no YouTube, para à prática de etnografias e autoetnografias digitais em plataformas e para os debates metodológicos sobre o estudo dos criadores de conteúdos em plataformas digitais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *YouTube; BookTubers; etnografia digital; prosumpção literária; espaços de afinidade.*

INTRODUCTION

This article is the result of an ethnographic study carried out between 2017 and 2020 as part of a doctoral thesis in communication among Spanish-speaking BookTubers. The aim of the research was to understand the communicative practices of BookTubers, their roles and motivations, the functioning of their reading and socialization processes, and the relationships and exchanges they maintain with both the YouTube ecosystem and the literary field (Scolari et al., 2021; Tomasena, 2019b, 2020, 2021a).

BookTubers became very popular since 2012, when they appropriated YouTube tools to talk about books and reading. Many of their participants came from other experiences with networked reading socialization, such as online forums, virtual portals for young adult literature or literary blogs (Lluch, 2014, 2017). These forms of literary participation and circulation have previously been analyzed as forms of literary prosumption (Bruns, 2008; Toffler, 1980) by blurring the boundaries between media consumption and the production of new content (Albarello et al., 2020; Guerrero-Pico, 2019). Most BookTubers' videos replicate the basic characteristics of other YouTubers, such as shots of people speaking directly to the camera in private spaces and calls for interaction with their audience in the comments section or on other platforms (Scolari & Fraticelli, 2017).

Since the early days of the phenomenon, there has been some interest in the social worlds constructed on BookTube. Sorensen and Mara (2013) examined BookTubers as a networked knowledge community in which their members learned through socialization with shared rules, hierarchies, values, and genres. Jeffman (2017) did the same with the concept of participatory culture, which was popularized by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins et al., 2009) and was very influential during the first studies on YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009). In this context, production on BookTubers has focused on: the study of the audiovisual genres used by BookTubers (Lluch, 2017; Sued, 2016) and their pedagogical potential to promote reading among young people in a school context (García-Roca, 2021; Torralba Miralles, 2018; Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2019). This article does not intend to deal in depth with the phenomenon of BookTubers; for this, we recommend the systematic review published by Paladines-Paredes and Aliagas Marín (2021) and the dissertation to which we will constantly refer (Tomasena, 2020). This paper proposes a methodological reflection on the results, challenges, problems and limitations of conducting digital ethnographies on YouTube, based on my research experience. In this sense, it aims to contribute to the methodological debate on how to study digital groups and cultures (Flores-Márquez & González Reyes, 2021; Sued & Lugo, 2022) and to be useful for researchers who want to

ethnographically study other content creators on YouTube who represent what Cunningham and Craig have labeled social media entertainment (2021, 2019).

This article is divided into five parts. The first part explains what we mean by digital ethnography by exploring key ways of understanding ethnography's adaptation to the digital world. The second part applies these tendencies to the case of YouTube. The third section is dedicated to explaining the methodological design I used to conduct my ethnographic research among BookTubers and outlining its main stages. In the fourth section, I offer a series of reflections on digital ethnographies on YouTube based on my experience and related to five themes: 1) the field as a construct of open participation, 2) the role of affect in digital ethnography, 3) the construction of social ties based on affinity, 4) the datification of social practices and relationships, and 5) the impact of the researcher's public exposure during the ethnographic process.

THE MULTIPLE ADJECTIVES FOR ETHNOGRAPHIES OF THE DIGITAL.

The ethnographic method was defined by O'Reilly as:

Iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods ... that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject' (2005, p. 3).

This definition recognizes the dialectical relationship between theory and analysis, the design and conduct of research, its inductive nature, the role of the researcher's knowledge in the production of knowledge, and the intersubjective nature of ethnographic research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The use of this approach to study the Internet has led to important debates, as the interactions mediated by digital technologies disrupt the traditional meaning of some central concepts of ethnography such as space, field, observation or identity. Certain features remain: an epistemology based on intersubjectivity, which seeks a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomena studied, which seeks to understand rather than determine causes and effects, and which understands the subjectivity of the researcher not as an obstacle to knowledge but as its possibility. In this context, nuances emerge when the word ethnography is accompanied by various adjectives: virtual, connective, multisituated, digital, etc. As Abidin and de Seta (2020) say, one of the first tasks of researchers who want to apply the ethnographic method to digital media is terminological: "What is the difference between cyber anthropology, virtual ethnography and netnography? Is digital

ethnography better than Internet anthropology? Does collecting Facebook posts count as online ethnography or web archaeology?” (p. 6).

Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz (2014) have made a historical review to understand how these conceptualizations have evolved with the development of the Internet. In the early years of the Internet, characterized by concepts such as cyberspace or virtual communities (Rheingold, 1994), work was developed on the social and cultural dynamics in chat rooms or electronic forums (Markham, 2004; Reid, 1994), which were understood as autonomous spaces in which people developed an alternative identity to their real identity. This was followed by connective ethnographies or online/offline ethnographies, which questioned the idea of the Internet as a place that is independent of the social and cultural conditions of its users. According to Abidin and de Seta (2020), the works of this period can be placed in a spectrum defined by two poles: on the one hand, studies located in specific material, economic and political conditions (Miller & Slater, 2000); on the other hand, virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), which proposes to study the Internet as a place of interaction with its own rules that enable forms of socialization characterized by new concepts such as mobility, flow or partial participation. Thus, online ethnography (Marshall, 2010) or cyberethnography (Keeley-Browne, 2011) emerge, sharing with Hine (2000) the proposal to go beyond traditional ethnography and pay attention to the rhetoric of virtual places, online interactions and Internet cultures. In the same vein, Kozinets' (2010) netnography proposes a purely online approach to understanding consumers from a market research perspective.

Following the chronology of Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz (2014), there is a third moment that corresponds to the emergence of digital social networks, cell phones with 3G, online video games and a growing number of devices and networked objects: the online/offline dichotomy is broken and we seek to study how digital connectivity technologies function in our everyday lives. In media anthropology, we seek to move beyond the application of ethnographic methods to digital media to understand the role they play in contemporary societies (Coman & Rothenbuhler, 2005; Postill, 2009). In communication studies, studies of media reception, fandom and creative practices on the Internet are very popular (Murphy, 2011).

In this context, the most widely used formulation is digital ethnography, which I have adopted in my study on BookTubers, as it seems most appropriate for the object of study and the research questions. This proposal limited attention to digital media and technologies such as YouTube, but overcame the online/offline dichotomy to include other key practices mediated by analog technologies, such

as reading on paper, attending literary events, or relationships of affinity and friendship that go beyond online interaction.

Christine Hine, for her part, published an update of her methodological proposal in 2015, in which she proposes the term Internet E3 –embedded, embodied, everyday– to conceptualize the complexity of the increasingly fragmented, individualized and diverse experiences of what we now call the Internet.

We need to move away from thinking of the “being there” that characterizes ethnography as requiring a located form of presence (Beaulieu 2010), in order to focus more clearly on experiential aspects of the methodology, where “experience” may be construed in multiple ways, including within its remit various mediated forms of experience (Hine 2015, p. 21).

How can one ethnographically examine a transnational group like the BookTubers, who develop their activities in different territories, platforms, public and private spaces?

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIES ON YOUTUBE

The number of research papers that have used ethnographic methods to analyze YouTube is as large as the platform itself, which currently has 2.5 billion users and whose advertising network reaches one in three people on the planet, according to the industry report *Digital Overview Report* (Data Reportal, 2022). There is work on music learning communities (Waldron, 2013), transgender individuals (Raun, 2015; Tompkins, 2014), videogames (Guarriello, 2019; Pellicone & Ahn, 2018; Ruffino, 2022), ASMR videos (Maddox, 2021), beauty vloggers (Bishop, 2019; Garcia-Rapp, 2019), school vlogs (Snelson, 2015; Wang & Picone, 2022) and a very long etcetera.

However, some ethnographic research has gone a step further by using the format of the YouTube video blog not only as an object of study, but also as a channel for interaction and a space for reflection and dissemination of findings. Like other digital ethnographers who have used strategies for sharing practices, communication and presence on blogs (<https://johnpostill.wordpress.com>), in social photo networks (Gómez-Cruz, 2012), in virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012) or in chat rooms (Coleman, 2015), these researchers have adopted forms of auto-ethnographic participation on YouTube. Michael Wesch (2008) developed one of the first anthropological research projects on YouTube cultures, integrating the posting of videos as a form of intervention, analysis, communication and dissemination of results. Another pioneer, Patricia Lange (2007, 2014), started a video blog called AnthroVlog as a central part of her field research on American

teenagers posting videos on YouTube. Hector Postigo did the same in his work on video game commentators on YouTube (Postigo, 2021). Jie Gu (2014) conducted an 18-month ethnography among Australian YouTubers to investigate how posting their videos relates to other social practices. More recently, Zoe Glatt (2019, 2022) has also integrated this auto-ethnographic dimension into her study of the influencer industry in the UK and the US.

Direct experience allows for a very deep knowledge of some aspects of the practice that one could not understand “unless you tried to start a channel and think strategically about how to build an initial following” (Postigo, 2021, p.129). At the same time, however, it presents a particular challenge as it places the researcher in a position of doubt, questions and uncertainties that need to be substantiated, as Abidin and de Seta (2020) did in the special issue they edited on digital ethnographies.

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN AND RESEARCH PHASES

The general aim of the doctoral research in which this paper is embedded was to describe and understand the communicative practices of BookTubers in Spanish. The paradigm of practices (Braeuchler & Postill, 2010; Couldry, 2004; Scolari, 2018) proposes to treat "media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media". (Couldry, 2004, p. 117). the research thus had two central aims:

1. Describe and understand the practices of BookTubers, their motivations and meanings, and the relationships they build with each other.
2. To analyze the power relations that BookTubers establish with other players in the literary field and with the YouTube ecosystem.

The main methodological decision to achieve these research goals was to adopt an ethnographic perspective that would allow me to build meaningful relationships with the group from the inside. To this end, I decided to open my own YouTube channel (Booktube Observatory, n.d.) and become a BookTuber. This decision was motivated by Christine Hine’s aforementioned guidance to engage in “various mediated forms of experience” (2015, p. 21) and by the tradition of other ethnographers on YouTube.

STATISTICS DESCRIPTIVE (DIGITAL METHODS)	Distant gaze: sociodemographic characteristics.
PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION	Practices, culture.
AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY	Experiences, affections.
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS	Motivations, discourses and imaginaries.
SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF VIDEOS	Enunciation strategies, audiovisual genres, reading contracts.

Figure 1. Methods and techniques used during doctoral research

Source: Own elaboration.

In addition to digital ethnography, I used other research methods and techniques, such as descriptive statistics, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and semiotic video analysis (Figure 1).

Details of this design and its findings can be found in the full research report (Tomasena, 2020). For the purposes of this article, I focus solely on digital autoethnography to highlight research findings that could not have been achieved using other methods.

All documentation of the process followed the principle of reflexivity in order to epistemologically control my research conditions (Bourdieu et al., 2002). The information came from four different sources: a) interview transcripts, b) video fragments, c) screenshots of activities in different social networks or comments and d) my field diary.

These data were processed in NVivo using a mixed deductive and inductive approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In a first round, we categorized the content that thematically matched the research questions: a) audiovisual discourse, b) motivations, c) relations to YouTube, and d) relations to the literary field. In a second round of categorization, we proceeded inductively to allow the

categories of fine-grained analysis to emerge from the granularity of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

As for the phases of the research process, it is difficult to delineate them linearly, because learning is a back and forth between theory, observations, interviews, analysis, and new questions. However, we can say that the ethnographic process had four main phases:

In an initial phase of entering the field, which lasted about three months, I experienced a lot of embarrassment and fear of publicity. I began to familiarize myself with the content production processes, set up various channel features and learned the ins and outs of video editing. Once I was more comfortable and overcame my fear, I started thinking about strategies to share the videos, both in public (Facebook, Twitter) and through private channels (WhatsApp and direct messages).

Then came a second phase of crisis, triggered when I realized that the people who were watching my videos, subscribing and commenting on my channel were not BookTubers, but people I already knew from other networks, or strangers who had discovered my channel via YouTube. I took two actions during this phase. First, I read and posted videos about *Harry Potter* because I knew BookTubers liked them, and immediately I had a lot more visits and affinity comments, “Welcome to the Potter world” style¹. Second: I posted a video in which I openly stated my doubts. A stranger replied that it did not make sense for me to make the same kind of videos as other BookTubers because then I would be seen as “a bit of a weird guy imitating them”; on the contrary, if I wanted to learn how to create links on YouTube, I would have to “learn by analogy”: create a community myself by making videos about the books I like.

The third phase was characterized by building meaningful relationships. I redoubled my efforts as an ethnographer for the kinds of books I was reading for my dissertation or for pleasure. I experienced a sense of euphoria when, a few days after posting a book tag² and two Mexican BookTubers, I received the news that

1. In order to protect the privacy of commenters who have expressed themselves in a different communication context, we have decided to reproduce fragments of their comments without identifying them, following the ethical recommendations of the International Association of Internet Researchers (AloR) (Frankze et al., 2020) <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>.

2. A booktag is a video in which the speaker responds on camera to a series of questions or slogans for which they have been nominated by another content creator. The BookTuber also tags others to do the same, building a meta conversation across multiple videos.

one of them had replied. “That feeling of being known and recognized is what’s at stake here”, I wrote in my field journal. These experiences were fundamental to understanding the role of affect and affinity sociality at BookTube.

When it was time to focus on data analysis, a fourth phase of open participation began, albeit less regularly. In this phase, I continued to post videos about my literature consumption, combined with others in which I presented my observations on BookTube in relation to some of the theoretical books I was reading for my research. My channel thus became a space for experimentation, dialog and thinking out loud that is open to feedback and is still active today.

ANALYSIS

In this section I present five themes for reflection that recurred in my fieldwork. These are not conclusions or postulates, but open-ended ways of thinking about which I sometimes have more questions than answers: 1) the field as a construct of open participation, 2) the role of affect in digital ethnography, 3) sociability through affinity, 4) the datification of practices and social relations, and 5) the researcher’s public exposure on YouTube.

The field as a construct of open participation

Several authors have formulated that in digital ethnography, unlike traditional ethnography, there is no pre-existing field into which the researcher enters, but rather a multiplicity of unexpected forms of connection that the ethnographer must explore (Hine, 2015; Postill & Pink, 2012). The most commonly used formulation in this sense is the field as network (Burrell, 2009). In my case, field construction involved a period of technical learning, constant negotiation and uncertainty. I often had the feeling that I had always missed something, that maybe there was something else, that my data was not enough. De Seta (2020) has reflected that the metaphor of the field as a network has as much to do with the interviewees, videos, texts or articles we include as it does with those we exclude, to the point that the field often feels “more like a more like a crooked bonsai tree than an expanse of thick experiential wilderness” (de Seta, 2020, p. 84).

Another aspect to consider is that on YouTube, activity on one’s channel is public, exposed to the gaze of others and subject to a logic of subscriber accumulation that is encouraged by the platform’s socio-technical architecture (Postigo, 2016). I have already talked about how the expectation of communicating with other BookTubers through my channel was partially disappointed. However, what also happened was that other unknown people approached my channel and became part of my network of exchange. In fact, it was one of these people who made me realize that I could learn a lot from this complex process of building an audience.

This intersection of audiences of different backgrounds and time makes fieldwork on YouTube completely different from that of a closed platform like Facebook or WhatsApp, an online forum or a fan community. It is not possible to narrow down the scope of reception of messages, either in a synchronous sense (who watches the videos and where) or in a diachronic sense (I still receive comments on videos posted several years ago).

Another difficulty with this architecture of open participation is that it's easy to know when the field begins, but not when it ends. There are always new things, unusual aspects of practice, novelties, even if the formal deadlines of academic life have already passed.

The role of affect in digital ethnography

The experience of exposing myself publicly, building relationships through BookTubers' own rituals and genres, interacting with my followers through comments, mentions on Twitter and Instagram, with all that this entails, was a gateway to the affective experience of the field, a fundamental aspect of my ethnographic understanding that would have been impossible without this personal involvement.

During the process, I have experienced the embarrassment of public exposure, the sense of belonging when participating in the network of sharing and nominations of other BookTubers, the euphoria when a video receives many more views and comments than anticipated, the anger at comments left by malicious trolls, the disappointment when a video does not receive the expected attention, etc. In this context, Luvaas (2021) has reflected on the role of affect in auto-ethnography:

It is what lies at the heart of our research, that affective, embodied something that compels us to connect and stay connected, that keeps us glued to our phones, even when we would rather not be, tumbling the depths of Facebook's newsfeed without even realizing we are doing it (Luvaas, 2021).

However, the role of affect goes beyond the subjectivity of the researcher, as it is one of the constitutive cores of sociability on YouTube. Ehret et. al (2018) have explored how affect creates pressure within the BookTubers group to produce content that follows certain esthetic norms in terms of style and content, while encouraging creative practices that can help young people develop a unique style within these norms. Other authors have conceptualized affect as a form of labor (affective labor) to refer to the personal performance that digital content creators constantly perform by paying constant attention to what they say and what they do not say, what they reveal and what they withhold, how they build a personal brand (Berryman & Kavka, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013).

Sociability by affinity

Despite the rhetoric of YouTube and some BookTubers, who often use the word community to refer to both the followers of a channel and the group of creators (in this case, the BookTubers), my crisis during the fieldwork allowed me to understand that my connection with this imagined community called BookTube could not be universal. Some of them showed no interest in my channel despite my efforts to contact them. Although I later realized that the disinterest was mutual. That is, if I was not interested in fantasy novel sagas with angels, vampires and werewolves, nor did I connect with the personalities of some of them, why should I expect them to be interested in my exquisite essays on Ángel Rama's 1973 analysis of the economic infrastructure of Latin American literature?

Thus, I understood that the way social bonds are built on BookTube (and also on YouTube) operates according to what Gee called affinity spaces in his study of communities of video gamers (Gee, 2014; Gee & Hayes, 2012). In contrast to other common conceptualizations such as network (Castells, 2000) or community (Rheingold, 1994), affinity spaces are constructed from shared interests, but do not necessarily imply a shared identity or stable social ties. In the case of BookTubers, this affinity is created through a combination of shared preferences (e.g. through comments such as: "I like the same books as you") and personal charisma ("I like you"; "I like the way you talk") as well as through identification rituals such as nominations and comments. BookTubers are not a homogeneous group, but an association of content producers who have an interest that is as diverse as it is flexible: reading.

Over time, these affinities have evolved and deeper associations have given rise to friendships, relationships or collectives, such as Libros B4 Tipos, a collective of BookTubers and feminist bloggers, B2 Rolos, which brings together BookTubers from Bogotá, or certain channels specializing in horror literature, which organize joint readings and meetings and which share many of their subscribers.

The datification of social practices and relationships

Another line of reflection is the connection between affective pressure (Ehret et. al, 2018) and YouTube's socio-technical systems, which can be seen in the YouTube Creators Dashboard, which offers statistics, views, sound libraries and other tools. In my field diary, I recorded moments of joy and excitement when subscriber view curves went up, and anxiety and depression when a video was not indexed or did not get the attention I expected. I began to judge content and videos based on how successful they could be, how my audience would react to them, what to expect, and I learned how to optimize titles, tags, and covers to improve their performance. When I could not post videos for some reason, the

self-imposed pressure to be consistent was intense. In short, I behaved according to the standards YouTube imposes on us through its metrics and followed what van Dijck called the popularity principle: “the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you are, because the more people will think you are popular and will therefore want to engage with you” (van Dijck 2013, p. 13).

In other works (Tomasena 2019, 2021b), I have theorized about how BookTubers hoard and share this connectivity accumulated on digital platforms and transformed into commodities, and how they develop a habitus (Bourdieu, 1996) that emerges from their relationship to YouTube’s achievements, terms of use, and data systems. This practical sense is linked to a number of skills and dispositions:

1. Read YouTube analytics systems to try to predict audience demand.
2. Position videos, titles and covers in relation to algorithms, search engines and systems to monitor platforms’ terms of use (appropriate language, monetization, copyright).
3. Interact with audiences on multiple platforms to build a community of followers.
4. Affective work involving public exposure and toxic criticism.

In her work on the social construction of algorithms, Taia Bucher has insisted on the need to investigate through what she calls technographies: “the complex ways in which software intersects with sociality”, analogous to the ways in which ethnography studies relationships between people (Bucher, 2016, p. 86). The work of other researchers on the inequalities created by algorithmic culture (Bishop, 2018; Rieder et al., 2018) points to interesting avenues to explore.

Public exposure of the researcher on YouTube

Finally, I can not help but think about the consequences of building a professional image through my YouTube channel. The extensive literature on microcelebrity and the construction of authenticity on YouTube (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Duffy, 2017; Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2013) has highlighted some of the cultural implications that the processes of accumulating popularity have on the subjectivity of content creators.

This trend has not gone unnoticed by me either. Thanks to my YouTube channel, I have received attention and invitations that I would not have gotten otherwise; I have received free books from publishers and authors; I have given conferences and talks and participated as an expert on academic panels (without going further, this article is linked to the capital accumulated through this experience). In other words, my own subjectivity and public image are linked to my activity as a BookTuber. I never consciously sought this out, but it is so.

Discussing the precarity of content creators and the power imbalances BookTubers face in the publishing industry (Tomasena, 2019) has shown me similarities between the dating pressures on YouTube and those in academia. In her essay *El entusiasmo* (2017), Remedios Zafra problematized the effects that flexible and precarious work structures have on those of us who do creative work. This is not only typical for BookTubers or digital content creators, but also for me as a writer and academic. Where does this pressure to publish, to be cited, to appear in print come from? How do the reward structures for academic merit relate to this ethos of individual work so typical of YouTube? How are strategies of mutual support developed and negotiated in order to become more visible? What lies behind the fear of being irrelevant?

This is another unexpected fruit of my digital ethnography: not only have I developed an understanding of the culture of others, but many cultural patterns of my own that I could not see have become clear.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article was to provide a methodological reflection based on my ethnographic fieldwork on Spanish-speaking BookTubers.

I presented a synthesis of the main theoretical-methodological paradigms for adapting the ethnographic method to different digital objects of study and argued why I chose the formulation digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2016) as a guide: It was an inductive, flexible and inclusive process that understands digital practices as a continuum between the offline mode (posting videos, interacting on networks, etc.) and the online mode (reading, putting one's body in front of the camera, socializing at book fairs). Like other digital ethnographers on YouTube, I decided to open a channel on this platform to get an insider's perspective, which has allowed me to develop an understanding of the phenomenon that I would not have been able to achieve otherwise.

In this article, I have developed five methodological insights about my digital autoethnography: First, the conceptualization of the field as networks or relationships (Burrell, 2009; Postill & Pink, 2012), which is particularly complicated in the open environment of YouTube, where it is not possible to delineate with whom one interacts and when. Secondly, however, it was this very openness that allowed me to understand how the sociability of BookTubers is structured on the basis of affinity relationships (Gee & Hayes, 2012) based on a shared taste in literature or personal liking.

Third, I have focused on the role of affect both in the auto-ethnographic process and in its relationship to the datified systems of YouTube. In other works, I have shown how BookTubers - like other content creators on platforms - develop a specific habitus related to the ability to read their audience's demand through YouTube's statistical systems (Tomasena, 2021b).

Fourth, I have outlined how I have learned from the intersection between software and sociability (Bucher, 2016). Without my auto-ethnographic engagement in this area, I would not have been able to understand how performance metrics create and evoke emotional states (excitement, disappointment, anticipation, confusion) that encourage or discourage participation.

Finally, in this article I have also reflected on the impact of my own exhibition during the research process. Authors such as Marwick (2013), Duffy (2017) and Cunningham and Craig (2017) have explored processes of microglorification or the construction of authenticity of digital content creators. I am no stranger to these processes.

These findings are based on numerous crises and frustrations. The aim of this article is to contribute to other reflective works that attempt to demystify ethnographic work in digital environments by highlighting the difficulties, limitations and unanswered questions (Abidin & de Seta, 2020; de Seta, 2020). Acknowledging this process, which, as I said earlier, often entails more questions than certainties, also aims to show how digital ethnography, as a flexible, open and creative paradigm, is a privileged way to understand complex objects of study, such as the cultures of content creators on YouTube.

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