# 10

## Catalan Teenagers' Identity, Literacy and Language Practices on YouTube

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## Introduction

This chapter addresses the interconnection between identity building and the use and learning of language and literacy online. We will do so through a case study that investigates the specifics of three Catalan teenage language users and learners who use YouTube as a multimodal space of confluence for making meaning. We will particularly address three research questions:

1. How do teenage language users and learners in Catalonia appropriate YouTube?

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2. What means of performing identity do teenagers in Catalonia employ on YouTube?
3. How do teenagers in Catalonia as youtubers develop such means of identity representation and performance in relation to language and literacy practices?

## Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretically, our study draws on (1) the concept of the 'participatory culture' as a contextual framework, (2) *New Literacy Studies* (NLS) as a flexible and comprising theory for (digital) literacy and language learning, (3) the work on identity by Gee (2000) and (4) the empirical study on identity and language learning by Thorne and Black (2011). These theoretical perspectives allow us to pin down the identity traits of language learners when using digital technologies and spaces, as in the case of Catalan youtubers.

## The Participatory Culture

Opposed to the consumer culture with static and compartmental roles of active authorship and passive readership, the participatory culture enables participants to adopt and adapt ways of artistic and cultural expression and civic engagement, as well as opportunities to create and share such creations and some sort of mentorship scheme where knowledge is transferred horizontally among participants (Buckingham, 2011; Jenkins, 1992). With roles of authors and readers blurred, the participatory culture thrives under the umbrella of the internet, amplifying its capabilities (Jenkins, Mizujko, & Boyd, 2015). This applies directly to language learning online, as it becomes increasingly necessary to develop skills to contribute to, create and curate texts online in the language that is the medium of communication (Godwin-Jones, 2015).

## New Literacy Studies

New ways of participating online inextricably open up spaces and opportunities for expressing the 'self' in multiple new ways, with new literacy

practices and language encounters. These new literacy practices coexist—or even collide—with school practices because often they are not "recognised as valid or valuable by dominant institutions of society" (Barton & Papen, 2010, p. 10). *New Literacy Studies* (NLS) cover both dominant and vernacular literacy practices, with a conceptualization of reading and writing as socially and culturally embedded practices with social purposes (Barton, 2007). In parallel to NLS, we converge with the study of *digital literacy practices* (also known as *new literacies*), which are social interactions mediated by written texts—in a broad, multimodal sense of *written*, or 'wrighting' (as Ivanič (2006) has termed it)—generated and/or distributed on the Web (Barton & Lee, 2013; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Additionally, such literacy practices found online often use English as the lingua franca. Sauro (2017) suggests that practices such as fanfiction or amateur translation and subtitling offer teachers avenues to incorporate fannish activities in the language classroom.

## Gee's Conceptualization of Identity

Catalan youtubers are at an intersection between a multilingual context and the superdiversity of the internet. While the Catalan part can be more of an essential marker provided by each individual's sociocultural background, the 'youtuber' self is socially negotiated: "the identity of the fan is constructed through interpersonal relations and feelings" (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 31). To explore this intersection, we chose Gee's conceptualization of identity (Gee, 2000). The 'virtually' natural trait of being a youtuber can, according to Gee, show markers tending to different types of identification: (1) affinity identity, experiences shared in the practice of affinity groups; (2) discourse identity, traits recognized in the discourse of or dialogue with rational individuals; and (3) institution identity, a position authorized by authorities within institutions. In the case of YouTube, these identification practices occur in a 'semiotic social space' (Gee, 2005). People access YouTube as a portal where signs and meaning are generated by content produced and consumed by people who engage in literate practices, with the contents and with other people. Acknowledging the fact that identity and language learning cannot be

separated, Thorne and Black (2011) offered an empirical study on Nanako, an English as a foreign language (EFL) learner in Canada who, thanks to participating in fanfiction sites, developed her English skills. Fanfiction sites are parallel to YouTube in that they create a space for affinity and identification, while YouTube favors multimodal meaning making rather than written production.

# Methodology

This is a qualitative-interpretative, multiple-case study (Yin, 2003) focusing on three Catalan teenage youtubers. We follow the principles of digital ethnography (Hine, 2015), in a hybrid manner. We have face-to-face access to informants through interviews while also observing and capturing their activities online.

## Participants

From previous studies in formal educational settings (Author 1), some students stood out as active users of Web 2.0 (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, blogs, forums) prompted by fan activities (sports, fashion, anime, manga, gaming). We focus on three of those users who upload content on YouTube.

These three uploaders belong to a group of friends of five boys residing in Barcelona and having Catalan and Spanish as their first language (L1). All of them used YouTube, but our three participants use it in a productive way. The participants are (with pseudonyms) presented in Table 10.1.

## Instruments and Corpus

### Interview

We conducted a semi-structured interview in Catalan covering the informants' sociolinguistic background, fan practices, literacy and technological habits, perceptions about which activities they do online, and how

**Table 10.1** Participants (own creation)

| Name | Age | Birthplace | Residence | First language(s) and contexts ofusage | Foreign language and context of usage of self-reported Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level (used in schools and familiar to students) (Councilof Europe, 2001) |
|------|-----|-----------|-----------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| *Jova* | 14–16 | Catalonia | Barcelona | CAT: Home, school, friends SPA: School, some family | ENG (B1): Videogames, music, films, family travels abroad, school |
| *Sema* | 14–16 | Argentina | Barcelona | SPA: Home, school CAT: School, friends | ENG (B1): Videogames, music, films, school |
| *Marse* | 13–15 | Catalonia | Barcelona | SPA: Home, school, friends CAT: School, some family | ENG (A2): Videogames, YouTube tutorials about technology, music, school |

and why they do them. After the online observation, we conducted a second interview for validation and further in-depth exploration. The quotes used in this chapter are translated into English for easy reference.

## Observation

We conducted non-participant observation of their activities online, by keeping a diary with field notes and screenshots. The observation took place at various times over a year (2017–2018).

## Videos

During the observation, we have also considered the YouTube videos themselves and eventually included them as part of the data corpus for

analysis. The data in this corpus highlight the discursive genre of the video (gameplay, enactment of self-created fictional drama, vlogs on trips, tutorials), the type of participation (individual, collaborative), and the technical and linguistic features used.

Overall, the corpus of data is composed of six interviews of about 45 minutes each, 200 screenshots from the online observation and 159 videos uploaded on YouTube by the observed participants. The data allowed us to triangulate participants' discourses, perspectives and practices. We conducted content analysis (Kohlbacher, 2006) to unearth recurrent trends and topics, and establish possible relationships between them and our research questions. We triangulated data by obtaining information through various instruments and internally confirming our analysis, which was conducted by two researchers.

Inspired by *New Literacy Studies* (Barton, 2007), we reduced the complexity of data by analyzing three categories: (1) roles and functions, (2) norms and behaviors, and (3) production practices, because these three provide more explicit cues and markers of identity building and performance. Throughout the findings, we signal some events of translanguaged practice and language use that show the value of affinity spaces and social semiotic spaces such as YouTube for engaged language practice.

## Ethics

In keeping with the standards laid out by the international Association of Internet Researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), our study follows updated protocols of internet research and was approved by the Ethics Committee at Pompeu Fabra University, where the study originated. The servers of the said institution properly store all data, including participants' consent forms. However, concerns with copyright issues led us to exclude some figures containing screenshots from YouTube from the text body of this chapter. To remedy any loss of information, we have agreed to provide access to a Dataset folder containing contextualized, anonymized figures relevant for the proper reading of the chapter (files are Dataset A to Dataset J, and a Read Me document). The link to this Dataset folder is http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10. Throughout the 'Findings'

section, we refer to this link and specific files within the Dataset folder. The Dataset folder with the ten files features a DOI number and is usable under a CC-By.4.0 license. The Read Me document provides a recommended reference for the Dataset folder, also present in the bibliography section at the end of the chapter.

# Findings

## Roles and Functions

Multiple roles and functions emerged from our participants' discourses and practices (Fig. 10.1). Namely, we found that participants can act as watchers, followers, commentators and youtubers. Within the youtubers group, we identity tutors and gamers. And within gamers, we identified the beta-testers. We can locate these roles along two axes: (1) the degree of engagement in the social network and (2) the level of specialization (Fig. 10.1).
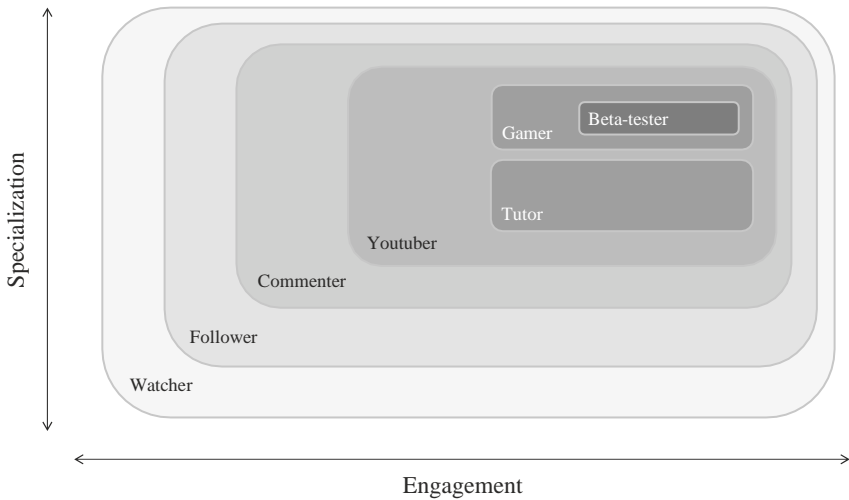


**Fig. 10.1** Participants' roles and functions on YouTube (own creation)

First, along the engagement axis, we see how a particular role comprises more production-oriented or consumption- and curation-oriented practices. Second, on the specialization axis, we look at how these roles are thematically produced by and targeted at specialized users or not. These roles and the corresponding functions are not static and separate. They are a continuum of social and linguistic engagement on the internet. This means that one user can perform multiple roles and functions concomitantly. For instance, users can watch, like and comment on a video that tutors them on how to edit a second video to publish later. More specifically, we infer the following tentative definitions of predominant roles and specializations based on our observation. More specialized and engaged roles incorporate less specialized and engaged ones:

- *Watchers* watch videos of all kinds and genres and for any or no purpose and leave no intended trace (though the visit count increases with their visits)
- *Followers* watch videos of all kinds and genres but follow contents of their liking (music, sports, news, games). Following is enacted by liking and/or subscribing. Liking endorses the adequacy of a video in relation to its function, and subscribing shows interest in or endorses the quality of a particular channel. While liking is less engaging than subscribing, the two tend to appear together as a conjoint performative act and are called upon by youtubers who want more followers in the manner of 'like & subscribe' users or the local language variants (e.g., 'm'agrada i subscriu-te,' 'me gusta y suscríbete,' or even 'translanguaged' versions such as 'like y suscríbete'). For an example on Jova's video disposition and petition for likes, see Dataset A here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.
- *Commenters* watch videos of all kinds and genres from channels that they may or may not follow and like, but the video motivates them to leave a comment. Comments can either be positive or negative, highlighting features of the youtuber or the contents of the video. They can also point out new lines of discussion in relation to some of those features. Other commenters can like, dislike and reply to ear-lier comments.

- *Youtubers* upload videos of all kinds and genres to the channels they have created. As seen in the literature review, youtubers can be categorized according to their celebrity status or professional outlook (more amateur/more professional), as well as their level of engagement (former youtuber/active youtuber).
- *Gamers* mostly upload content pertaining to gaming. If youtubers are strongly affiliated to the gaming affinity space, they may choose to use YouTube as a conduit to express such an affiliation. Beta-testers are gamers, who occasionally are also youtubers, who are contacted by gaming companies to test games prior to commercialization in a quasi-professional experience.
- *Tutors*, in like manner, mostly upload how-to tutorials. They teach or tutor users on the procedures to do a task or activity of any sort.

In consideration of membership in these categories, Jova would be a youtuber and a gamer, Sema would be exclusively a gamer and Marse mostly a tutor, while his beginnings on YouTube deal with games and gaming.

Let us address now how these distinct levels of engagement and specialization translate into different ways of self-representation and performance online.


## Norms and Behaviors

Being part of YouTube becomes a social practice among the group of boys. To participate in YouTube, there is no requirement other than having internet access and navigating the site. However, all participants report that they set up an account on YouTube with several decisions to make. Users must provide an e-mail, choose a username and a profile picture, and potentially configure details of the channel background and layout. This is interesting, as it shows a clear disposition of being part of sites online. Even if it means being simply a watcher, it is an 'active' watcher who is a member of the community.

All informants try to separate their formal and academic lives from their vernacular counterpart, and that is relevant because it shows an

awareness between two different social spheres requiring different practices, such as setting different e-mail accounts: one for school and a second one for social media and games.

Informants also choose nicknames for their channels. In creating them, our youtubers exhibit multiple linguistic strategies, with varying degrees in separating personal from digital identities. For anonymization purposes, we cannot show their real names or nicknames, but, using the Catalan name Antoni Gaudí, we supply consistent examples of how participants linguistically think up nicknames.

Table 10.2 shows a direct correlation between literacy and language practices and the awareness of separate identities online and offline. The more sophisticated literacy practices are (including complex word-formation strategies, creativity and translanguaging), the more separate the digital identity from the offline counterpart. Through language

**Table 10.2** Participants' strategies for choosing usernames on YouTube (owncreation)

| | Strategy | Informant | Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| Less separate | [real name+series of numbers]: | Marse | Fictitious real name: *Antoni Gaudí* Fictitious YouTube nickname: *Gaudí123* |
| | [initial letter(s)+real name]: | [seen in informants' friends] | Fictitious real name: *Antoni Gaudí* Fictitious YouTube nickname: *agaudí (A(ntoni)+Gaudí)* |
| Digital name *vs.* real name | [apocopes from real names+blending]: | [seen in informants' friends] | Fictitious real name: *Antoni Gaudí* Fictitious YouTube nickname: *Antandy (Ant(oni)+candy* |
| | [identity trait as hypocorism or hypocorism+identity trait including words in English, e.g., player or gamer]: | Jova (production channel for gaming) | Fictitious real name: *Antoni Gaudí* Fictitious YouTube nickname: *TheGamer_AG* or *Toni_TheGamer* |
| | ['translanguaged' creative respelling, anglicized version of real name]: | Jova (production channel) | Fictitious real name: *Antoni Gaudí* Fictitious YouTube nickname: *Anthony Gaudious* |
| More separate | [novel creations with hypocorism]: | Sema | Fictitious real name: *Antoni Gaudí* Fictitious YouTube nickname: *Gauton (Gau(dí)+(An)ton(i))* |

use, participants are putting into practice the figures of speech that they learn in the language classroom.

Similarly, in order to identify and be identified as users of YouTube, they need to choose and customize profile pictures and background pictures. Personalization and self-identification on this multimodal level also encompasses an awareness of separating the digital and the offline selves. The profile picture of their online persona or avatar, and its colors and shapes contain important psychological cues (Liu, Preot, & Ungar, 2016) and in our view, social and playful identity making, too (Table 10.3).

Marse does not create an online persona different to his real self. His avatar coincides with his nickname, and his nickname coincides with his real name. He does not separate his online and offline identities at all. However, Jova's and Sema's sophisticated choices regarding avatars and nicknames project numerous cues on how they construe YouTube as a digital environment and their activity in it. Let us examine these two special cases in detail.

## Jova's Strategy for Creating an Online Persona as a Youtuber

Jova's focus is to play and discover YouTube as a part of a process wherein he develops his IT and media skills as an 'executive director':

> I love the idea of having and developing creativity, not just searching for creativity elsewhere. So, I love putting the activities I do on my videos and see if people like it. My activity on YouTube originates, mainly, watching other people who are devoted to YouTube professionally, and since I was a child, I've liked cinema. That's why I wanted to make this project, which is sort of a task in which I am the director and executor of the idea, and that finally this idea of videos, which is a process, has a result people commenting and liking. I wanted to have this 'extra' in my life, this new leisure activity. [Jova, May 2017, quote 1]

Jova's four self-representations clearly maintain a multimodal, discursive and even stylistic coherence regarding color choice. It becomes clear that green and red are the colors Jova identifies with and wants to be identified with. The red cap and the green hoodie help him convey a

**Table 10.3** Participants' strategies for profile pictures and background pictureschoice. (For avatars, see Dataset B here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10)

| | Strategy | Informant | Avatars and background picture from channel |
|---|---|---|---|
| Less separate | [Avatar, nickname and real name coincide]: | Marse | [Blue-circled background with overwritten nickname featuring Marse's real name] |
| | [Avatar and nickname coincide, but not with real name. Avatar is accompanied with background identifiable features]: | Jova (production channel, for gaming and miscellanea) | [Green-circled background with typical character from Minecraft and red cap by Santa Cruz™] |
| | [Extra avatar in background picture of channel]: | Jova (production channel, for games and miscellanea) | [Cartoon-like version of Jova in green background] |
| | [Avatar is a fictional persona from games, replicating physical appearance and image as a youtuber] | Jova (production channel for gaming exclusively) | [Minecraft-like version of Jova in green hoodie and red cap, and in green-and-red-striped background] |
| | [Avatar is a fictional persona from games, unrelated to the real person]: | Sema | [Minecraft character used by Sema when playing. Character is an older male character than a teenager, wears a moustache and, in the shot, playfully shows his tongue while lying in bed to the camera, which takes the photo from the ceiling] |
| | [Avatar acts as a real person in background channel]: | Jova (production channel for gaming exclusively) | [Minecraft-like version of Jova in green hoodie and red cap that looks to the horizon while holding a sword, in a cosmic, sci-fi, outer-space-like background] |
| More separate | | Sema | [Translucid Minecraft character used by Sema when playing that looks to the horizon against sunlight and is flanked from behind by a horde of characters from the game Paladins in position of defense. There is also a petition to subscribe to the channel and links to Sema's social network sites] |

*Online persona or avatar vs. real person*

*Dataset*

message as the persona he becomes when participating on YouTube. To examine how Jova coherently creates his online persona multimodally, see Dataset C here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.

This online persona is enacted, too, by portraying a real-life image of 'Jova as a youtuber,' which is consistent with Jova's color and outfit choices. Interestingly, Dataset C features Jova wearing his red Santa Cruz™ cap and his green hoodie. He appears before his computer, surprised by the notification of having reached 'this many' subscribers (40) and commenting on it in this video targeted at curating his own channel. Interestingly, we know this video was filmed before choosing all the profile pictures and background pictures we were able to see later on and present here. Therefore, this strategy of choosing colors and features for nicknames, avatars and profile pictures was part of a deliberate, conscious, long-term strategy. From our online exploration, we learn that Jova would previously have a selfie as the profile picture and a sunset scene as the background picture. To cross-check how Jova celebrates his reaching to 40 subscribers and how his YouTube channel background looked like back then, see Dataset D here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.

Jova is quite conscious of this deliberate construction of his online persona covering iconography, language choice and style, to name a few aspects. He does not report any critical moment, but a progression. During the interviews, he reports:

> There're a lot of people who tell me that Jova, the real person, and Jova, the YouTube Jova, are two different individuals. It is as if I had created a character, an avatar of myself but different from me. On my videos, I try to convey happiness, even though it's a gloomy day and I am sad. And as for the cap, it is like a trait of myself I have, always wearing a cap, to signpost exactly that I am Jova, the youtuber, and not Jova (real name). In the beginnings of my channel, I uploaded videos as Jova the real person, and I was shyer, more introverted. So Jova the youtuber, the character, originated gradually by wearing my cap, wearing my hoodies, which is also a classic part of me. Then I decide to make a video, and I feel more self-assured with my character. That means that when I make a video, I put on my cap, I put on my hoody, and I am ready to start recording. When I am on the street, I do not wear a cap!! So, it is like sensing my character as a youtuber, and I have the capacity of dividing between Jova, the real person, and Jova, the

youtuber. There are people who only know Jova, the youtuber, for example if I go to football lessons (extracurricular activity); there are people who know me only from my videos and not in person, and they call me by my nickname on YouTube. But in this context, I like being Jova, the real person (he emphasizes his real name) and tell them: 'Please, now I am Jova (he emphasizes his real name), and on the videos, I am Jova, the youtuber (he emphasizes his nickname on YouTube).' [Jova, May 2017, quote 2]

## Sema's Affinity-Focused Strategy to Create an Online Persona as a Gamer

Sema wants to be a gamer. His activity online revolves around games and gaming, and YouTube is another venue where he can express this passion of his. He arrives to a level where companies contact him to be a beta-tester (of the games Paladins and Smite), where he drafts a report in English of the 'map making', 'playability' and other mistakes and bugs in the games he is invited to play (see 'Production Practices'). To see Sema's affinity-focused strategy for creating an online persona as a gamer, see Dataset E here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.

Sema's idea of an avatar is also purposeful. He decides to join YouTube because of Jova, who drives the group of friends into joining in and participating:

Jova gave me the idea of opening a YouTube channel, he convinced me, and I liked it. Jova explains how to do things with the videos, I have learnt lots from him. [Sema, May 2017, quote 3]

In time, the initial avatar takes on identity traits because of his activity online: the personification is obvious in the profile picture, the background picture and the snapshots presenting the last gameplays published, which present Sema's avatar accompanied by Jova's avatar, acting in particular ways, such as taking a selfie together (Dataset E). This is interesting because in the initial gameplays, the presentation snapshots are of the game itself, but not the avatar. There is a dialogic, reflective learning relationship between Sema and his avatar:

When I decided to start uploading videos, I was searching for a character different from those avatars I saw, and I thought about it for some days, and since green is my favorite color, that's why my avatar has green eyes. In the beginning, the avatar of Sema was very similar and like me, but not now. Sema, the avatar, makes up words, sometimes speaks weird and is very unlucky playing video games. But he laughs at it all. Even if many times he endures patches of bad luck in the games, like the internet getting cut off, he puts a lot of emotion into it, that is, he lives it!! Sema, the real person, would not be the same if Sema the avatar hadn't existed. Sema, the real person, has also changed because of the avatar. Sema has learned from his avatar to put more emotion into the things he does, not only in video games. [Sema, May 2017, quote 4]

We have seen that teenage youtubers construct identity by means of nicknames, avatars and personas, with a multimodal consciousness of the self that expands monomodal conceptualizations of literacy and text. A main finding is that the more separate the digital identity traits from the real one, the more conscious and sophisticated literacy practices we encounter. This reflects what happens in the videos teenage youtubers upload, too. Let us explore video production practices next.

## Production Practices

Jova, Sema and Marse are uploaders. They started off their experience as productive youtubers with gaming, but they followed different paths of appropriating YouTube and using language on it. They capitalize on different affordances of YouTube as a 'social semiotic space' (Gee, 2005), along the lines of the different levels of specialization (Fig. 10.1).

### Jova and YouTube as a Space for 'Mainstream' Socialization and Training of IT and Cinematographic Skills

Jova uploads videos that cover miscellanea with a comical, just-for-fun, socializing purpose: vlogs on travels or trips, self-directed drama series (tragicomedies where Jova and his friends [or even relatives] play out

characters like spies from a spy agency trying to solve a crime) or challenges like Dataset F. To see how Jova and his friends record and enact a 'challenge' video, see Dataset F here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.

Jova plays 'the executive director' role in making videos and pulls all of the friends together. He is the generator of collective content (Gee, 2005) in the group of friends and their fandom, and replicates ideas for videos of celebrity youtubers with a lot of care and planning as to the story line, video editing and sequencing, as well as the language employed. He uses Catalan, although he is well aware that with Spanish or English, he could possibly have more success. Interestingly, the social and cultural capital of his family (technologically rich environment, technology-savvy parents, liking for cultural production and cinema, intercultural experiences with trips abroad) has been transferred to him and has an effect on him, partly explaining why Jova is, in fact, the generator of content in his group of friends:

> There are many people who think that using YouTube can be boiled down to recording a video and uploading it, but no, it is more of a process. You make a video, not when you record it, but when you edit it. It is actually more complex to edit it than to record it, and it is a task you have to conduct when you are truly aware of what you are doing, and when you are calm and focused. The resources I use to edit videos are iMovie, which is already good, but also a microphone I bought to record myself, and play with friends also, and also my family's video camera. My father has taught me to edit videos: after every summer trip, he edits a video of our holiday photos and videos, and I have learnt in this way with him. On my channel, you can see how my editing skills have changed over the years, and also my voice!! [Jova, May 2017, quote 5]

To see how Jova and his friends record and enact a 'comedy' series as fictional spies, see Dataset G here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.

On a linguistic level, it is interesting to see how Jova's written text is full of translanguaging instances. These come from the lexicon in YouTube in film and video editing, in which he is interested, or from an informal variety of urban Catalan that mixes Catalan wording and grammar with words from Spanish Castilian. In Dataset F, for instance, Jova uses English extensively while communicating in Catalan: abbreviations like 'w/' (with), 'challenge' as a YouTube genre, his nickname is anglicized (see the

word-formation strategy '"translanguaged" creative respelling' in Table 10.2) or the introductory sentence for the video mixing Catalan, Spanish and English (*Madremia com patirem! Like si a la intro estavem molt sexys*). *Madremia* is 'madremía' (my goodness) in Spanish or 'like' as a verb; 'intro' and 'sexy' are loanwords from English that he chooses to incorporate in his informal Catalan to appear cooler. None of these loanwords is accepted in the normative *Dicctionari de la llengua Catalana*.

Also, among the many activities on YouTube, Jova celebrates different milestones in his channel, such as reaching a certain number of subscribers (40 subscribers, 100 subscribers, etc.). In his '100 subscribers' commemoration video, Jova, along with a friend, decided to take a challenge that consisted of chatting with random internet users and persuading them to utter or write the phrase 'Jova one hundred subscribers.' In this brief linguistic exchange, Jova uses English orally and in written form, in order to introduce himself as a youtuber from Spain and to ask people to complete the challenge for him as a way of celebrating the evolution of his channel. He talks to boys and girls his age from Albania, Finland, Chile or Andalusia, using basic English language skills and confronting different dialects and accents both in English and in Spanish. For instance, when introducing himself to a chat buddy from Finland he utters: "Hello, man, hello, yeah? Can you listen? Can you repeat Jova… Tell this: 'Jova, one hundred subscribers.'"

To see an instance of a virtual exchange where Jova and a friend chat with and video call random users online, using English as a lingua franca, see Dataset H here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.

While these exchanges are simple and informal, they promote the notion that virtual exchanges and telecollaboration are a nice way of engaging young language learners in meaningful, situated communicative contexts because, actually, they themselves are using these channels of communication constantly and for their own vernacular purposes.

## Sema and YouTube as an Affinity Space for Gaming

Coherent with his initial choices of an avatar, Sema starts and continues on the gaming theme for his YouTube channel. He starts off with collaborative videos with Jova (series of Minecraft) and then gradually goes on

to discovering new online, multiplayer games like Paladins or Smite. He only produces gameplays. He is a beta-tester of games, meaning he gains exclusive access to pre-commercial versions of the games in exchange for short reports for the company to improve the games.

As a passionate fan of games, Sema participates in online communities of gamers, in a give-take relationship. Gaming and producing gameplays on YouTube have benefited Sema in two ways: (1) he reports learning and (2) he was able to know and join the community Gaming.cat. Catalan gamers whom he knows virtually or personally are as advanced players as he is and can play in Catalan, too (his language of choice and schooling). His remarks on the learning identity processes related to the YouTube context (language, coding, teamwork formation or second chances in life) are remarkably specialized, and we would argue that his profound discursive knowledge of and engagement in details reflect deeper learning processes:

> With Mario Bros, I have learned that when you ought to walk a certain direction to arrive at a destination, maybe you tumble and fall or you get killed, but you get another chance; you can go on; you can jump off the obstacles and continue until arriving at the destination. Doing reports as a beta-tester, I have learned vocab in English, that I look up on Google Translate, although I am not so good at talking. You have to master 'commands and codes' too, to manipulate the game. In Paladins and Smite, it is important to have a good team, and you have to choose the right team, each member of the team must complete their own task and do their part, or else it won't work, and you'll lose. [Sema, May 2017, quote 6]

To see how Sema's uploaded gameplays look like, see Dataset I here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.

He tries other games, too, but when he does not like them so much, he does not create a 'series' of the game (marked with '#'). Interestingly, the voice of Sema is more present in his critical comments (Dataset I: "Creia que era més bo… / WarThunder" > "I [Sema as a gamer] thought it was a better game"). The voice of his avatars and characters take on more of a protagonist role in the series of gameplays of the games he loves. In those, he talks about "Un nan dins un robot" (A boy [Sema] inside a robot [his

gaming character]) or when his Minecraft avatar is "atrapat al nether" ([Sema as a gaming character and online persona is] stuck in the nether). Note here too the ever-present translanguaging and appropriation of the specific and distinct discursive features of the games: nether, for instance, which Sema knows refers to "some place beneath the surface" in the game. This supports the notion that gaming and the metalanguage in gaming supply a fruitful source for language learning. The word 'nether' that Sema uses in Dataset I is an uncommon English word for a foreign language learner and user such as him to know.

Besides these translanguaging instances that are commonplace among our participants, as noted before, Sema also produces reviews and critiques as a beta-tester of games. These are written in English and consist of grading the playability of the game and commenting on playability issues that need fixing by the developers. In Fig. 10.2, there is an excerpt of how the reviews look. They are normally a form to fill out that is embedded in the game and pops out when a match is over. This is Sema's job as repayment for gaining access to games prior to their commercialization.
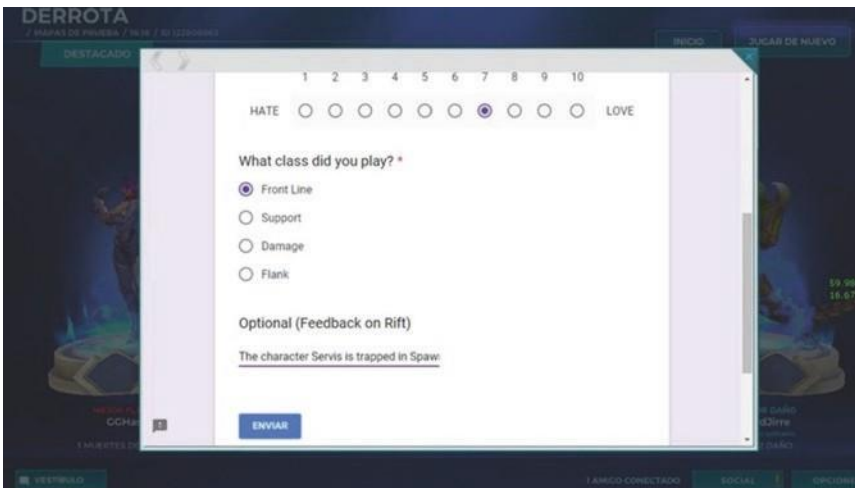


**Fig. 10.2** Sema drafting a review of a game as a beta-tester (screenshot providedby Sema)

In Fig. 10.2, Sema was playing Smite, a multiplayer online battle arena game where gamers control mythical figures and fight in teams. While playing, Sema skillfully detected a playability error with a playable character on Smite that would not regenerate or 'respawn' if dead in battle. This, together with the chats online conducted by Jova, reinforces the idea that foreign language use and code switching are very common among young people, who are very active online, using words that are common in the metalanguage of games but that might be advanced for the average 12-year-old learner in Catalonia. Using 'nether' as a common word or phrases like "the character Servis is trapped in spawning" as Sema does is an illustrative instance of how teenage youtubers develop language in an implicit but meaningful and situated manner, prompted by their affinity to games and their knowledge of their internal formulaic expressions and lexicon, or what Gee (2005) tags 'internal grammar'.

## Marse and YouTube as a Self-directed Teaching and Learning Environment

Finally, we have the case of Marse. First, Marse consistently uses Spanish in his videos (it is his main language of communication). Second, while he starts off with gameplays, he soon covers tutorials to solve doubts with hardware or software. For instance, in his last tutorial he explains how to delete some credit card information from a given website. Similarly, when he has some doubt and searches for tutorials on the Web, he realizes that there might be tutorials in English but not in Spanish, and that is when he decides to make his version in Spanish. To see Marse's uploaded tutorials on YouTube, see Dataset J here: http://bit.ly/Dataset_Ch10.

Marse sees himself as a proud youtuber and would not mind becoming a professional youtuber one day. We can check that on his Facebook initial profile, where he leaves traces of this vocational aspiration (Fig. 10.3):

Marse checks out the analytics of his channel, where he becomes aware that his tutorials reach thousands of viewers from Latin America. Thanks to this, he receives money for some of his videos from YouTube. YouTube as an institution is authorizing and backing Marse's activity.
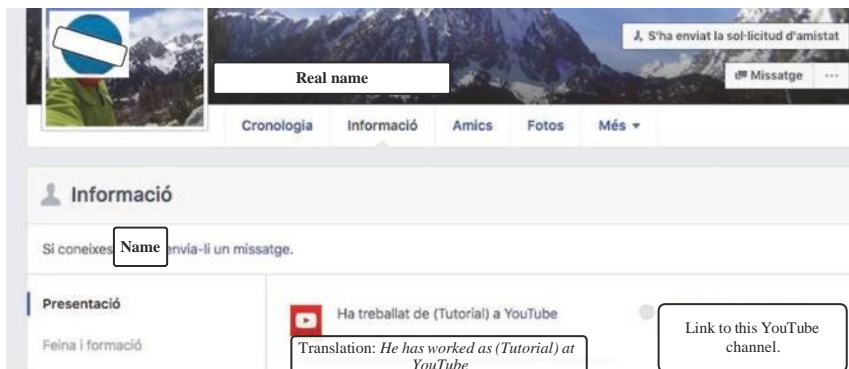
**Fig. 10.3**  Marse's Facebook presentation site (screenshot taken by researchers)

However, most videos are not so well received, with only a few dozen visits, like in the case of Sema and Jova. Marse reports that making videos is 'easy'; he thinks about what he is going to utter during the video, but does not prepare much more than that, unlike Sema and Jova. This implies that he is less aware of the work behind youtubing. In contrast with Jova, Marse does not do any sort of video editing or formal linguistic preparation for the videos.

Regarding his identity, Marse mixes academic and vernacular practices in the same space provided by his channel. His nickname is transparent regarding his real identity (Table 10.2). Viewers of his channel can easily access his name, family names and the name of his school. "I have not learnt anything; without YouTube I'd be the same person," declares Marse.

The tutorials Marse produces are normally doubts he had and could solve watching videos in English but could not find in Spanish. He consumes therefore English as a means of instructing himself in becoming a better user of technologies, but besides that, he finds the lack of videos in Spanish as an informational void he can fill. In this sense, we cannot extrapolate findings on a linguistic level but on a communicative one, as he acts as a (very informal) informational broker between the videos he sees in English and the videos he produces in Spanish. We can highlight Marse's sense of audience that allows him to reach wider audiences. His

tutorials are fairly simple, but he is aware that his audience is not interested in quality, entertainment or wit, but in practically solving a problem or doubt about how a piece of software or hardware is used. He is good at tagging his videos so that viewers or watchers of YouTube can easily find his tutorials. Finding a void of information on YouTube in Spanish and filling it is the foundation for his success. The fact that Marse's Spanish-speaking tutorials on technology reach a global audience and the reinforcement he receives from YouTube are key factors influencing his identity. In contrast, regarding the Catalan-speaking uploaders, the gameplays in Catalan of Sema or the socializing videos in Catalan for the teenage friends of Jova, Sema and Jova receive no backing or support other than from their friends.

## Discussion

The pursuit of different identities on YouTube depends on multiple factors, intrinsic to the individuals' 'personal interest' (Ting, 2010), 'affiliations' (Gee, 2005) and 'language identity' (Baxter, 2016), and extrinsic to them, like 'the (lack of) institutional backing' (Gee, 2000).

Following Ito et al.'s (2010) classification between interest-driven and friendship-driven practices, gaming as a friendship-driven practice initially unites our group of friends and motivates all of them to join YouTube as another space for socialization, an affinity space in Gee's terms. However, from that point onward, each boy is engaged on YouTube in diverse ways, reflecting multiple identification processes, forms of engagement and taking and acting upon the various semiotic resources YouTube has to offer.

Following Gee's analytical categories of identities (natural, discursive, affinity, institutional) (Gee, 2000), we argue that the 'naturally digital' trait of being a youtuber materializes in three different ways of becoming a youtuber and performing the roles and functions it entails (Research Question 1). First, Marse predominantly develops an institutionally backed identity of youtuber, receiving money and thousands of views, yet little feedback on his videos because they are not meant for discussion or interaction, but for solving a particular problem. Second, Jova clearly

exhibits more of a discourse identity, being aware of the limits of his channel, the language he chooses and the purpose for which he conceives his online activity (fun, friendship). Third, Sema exhibits more of an affinity identity, with his mono-thematic channel for gaming, beta-testing other games and searching for gamers who can match up to his high-level gaming skills.

In addition, following Thorne and Black (2011), we were able to identify some identity markers to pin down Gee's predominant identities in a digital environment (Research Question 2). These included (1) indexical linkages to macro-level categories (such as being more or less Catalanist); (2) functionally defined subject positioning (watcher, follower, commenter, youtuber, gamer, beta-tester, tutorial producer); (3) fluid shifts in video production; (4) conscious language choice on the part of the Catalan-speaking participants to the detriment of more viewers or publicity, (5) more or less conscious literacy practices concerning nicknames, avatars and online personas, and thus a digital identity which can be more or less separate from the real one; and (6) language practices that are, at least, good practice for our participants to deploy their linguistic skills in their foreign language and in their first language(s), being that Catalonia represents a naturally multilingual society.

The institutional backing from YouTube may reinforce self-identifying processes as a youtuber. However, negotiation of meaning (team work in Jova's and Sema's channels), training and feedback from parents (Jova) and peers (Jova, Sema) and strong allegiances to language (Jova, Sema) or fan practices (gaming, the technical aspects of cinema and video editing) provide more solid grounds for greater sophistication of digital literacy practices, both textually (oral, written) and through multimodal forms of making meaning (Research Question 3). Teenagers employ instruments such as creativity for nicknaming, with complex and sophisticated word-formation strategies, dissociating the real self and the online persona by means of multimodal, personified avatars or characters that allow them to explore and acquire new skills and practices, at several levels: emotional (more resilience), social (less shyness, team work), communicative (better public speaking skills, L1 and second language [L2] language development), digital (video editing, marketing oneself online) and symbolic—co-constructing what Kramsch (2009) has termed 'a signifying self' in intercultural, translocal and networked settings.

This emerging classification from our findings reveals two developing arguments in informal language learning. First, our participants can engage in "communicative activities in authentic and meaningful contexts, supplying both more volume and more variety than is the case in instructed language learning. In this way, language is learned through meaningful experiences, and language structures emerge from repeated use" (Godwin-Jones, 2018, p. 11). In a similar fashion to previous studies on fan translation (Vazquez-Calvo, Zhang, Pascual & Cassany, 2019), in the present study we have found examples of language being learned, such as the chats of Jova or the game critiques of Sema, but the focus is not on explicit language learning events but rather, as Godwin-Jones suggests, on language development in a fluid manner. Second, this fluidity is represented by a context online that favors superdiversity (including multilingual and multicultural practices, translanguaging, etc.) (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) and multimodality. The avatars, nicknames and translanguaging instances discussed display the characteristics of communicating online, which, in our opinion, problematize clear-cut epistemological and disciplinary boundaries between informal and formal learning, as well as between language learning, use and development (Godwin-Jones, 2018). However, our study supports the notion that mostly in informal language learning contexts, the identity dimension shifts "the individual from L2 learner to L2 user, as learners gain both proficiency and confidence" (Godwin-Jones, 2018, p. 13). This shift through the lens of identity is a source of exploration for teachers and scholars in formal language education for future pedagogical guidance and classroom-based research that merge language learning and identity, with some theoretical proposals worth noting (cf. Fisher, Evans, Forbes, Gayton, & Liu, 2018).

Our study manifests that some young people "know how to build their online presence through social networking sites, avatars, audio/video casts, mash-ups, and/or by taking part in online gaming" (Kurek & Hauck, 2014, p. 123). However, not every user is an active uploader, or if they upload content, this content and the literacy practices attached may be disregarded and tagged as 'popular culture', and thus deemed not valid for instructional purposes (Barton & Papen, 2010). This has implications for language, literacy and IT education, because some users might remain outside the more active and performative roles of engagement that we have described. Teachers need to acknowledge this new reality of

social and communicative engagement in the form of instructional scaffolding so that every student has equal opportunities for communication and language development in the spaces where communication actually occurs. As Jova says, "what happens in the schools goes in another direction," discounting new ways of being, doing and communicating, and opportunities for critical (language) learning (Godwin-Jones, 2015).

Our study also has several limitations. Methodologically, this a case study depicting in-depth uses and experiences of a group of teenage friends from Catalonia. It is not representative of every teenager or YouTube user in any way, but it is valuable in the process of gaining knowledge of a particular situation and phenomenon, and might help "cut a path toward scientific innovation" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 227). It is a good starting point to understand how young people appropriate YouTube and other multimodally intensive social networks, in our case using Catalan (a lesser spoken language), Spanish and English. It highlights the 'qualified or limited' nature of the participatory culture when speaking a minority language, as it will not reach global scale or receive institutional support from YouTube. Catalan-speaking communities online mostly rely on their vigorous endeavors to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage online, which may be particularly true in relation to off-stream or socially disregarded practices like gaming or other popu-lar culture practices and products. Furthermore, our participants are all teenagers and boys. It would be positive to supplement this study with a more diverse age population and incorporate the gender dimension, as well as participants from culturally and socially diverse backgrounds.

With these caveats in mind, it is important to remember that language and literacy development, including learning second languages integrally, involves a learner's identity, and this identity cannot be created solely in computer labs or via teacher effort. In this study, we took a snapshot of three young boys regarding their own thoughts about first and second languages and how they effectively appropriate language in their own personal spaces to meet their own needs. To begin to grasp a deeper understanding about this intersection of psychology and language learning highlights just how important language learner identity is—for readers, for researchers and, of course, for teachers.

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