

## Representation of the family in the YouTube channels of content-creator kids. A comparative analysis of Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>

*Representaciones familiares en los canales de niños menores creadores de contenidos en YouTube. Un análisis comparado de España, Estados Unidos y Reino Unido*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2021.87750>

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The aim of this study is to analyze the type of family represented on YouTube channels starring children under 14 in Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom. A total of 450 videos from 15 channels have been randomly selected between the years 2016-2018 and a content analysis is applied. The results show that the media representation of family members continues to maintain the traditional family structure, cultural differences in how the family participates in the videos according to the country and the presence of the father or mother as a co-star.

**KEYWORDS:** Children, content creators, YouTubers, family, gender.

*El objetivo de este estudio es analizar el tipo de familia que aparece representada en los canales de YouTube protagonizados por niños menores de 14 años de España, Estados Unidos y Reino Unido. Se ha seleccionado aleatoriamente un total de 450 videos de 15 canales entre los años 2016-2018 y se aplica un análisis de contenido. Los resultados muestran que la representación mediática de los miembros de la familia sigue manteniendo la estructura de familia tradicional, diferencias culturales en cuanto a cómo la familia participa en los videos según el país y la presencia del padre o la madre como coprotagonista.*

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Niños menores, creadores de contenidos, youtubers, familia, género.

### How to cite:

Martínez Pastor, E., Blanco-Ruiz, M. & Vizcaíno Pérez, R. (2021). Representation of the family in the YouTube channels of content-creator kids. A comparative analysis of Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e7750. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2021.7750>

- <sup>1</sup> Project supported by a Project of the national plan “Social networks, adolescents and young people: media convergence and digital culture (CSO2016-74980-C2-2-R)”, and the project “New scenarios of digital vulnerability: media literacy for an inclusive society” (PROVULDIG-2-CM/ H2019/HUM5775), CAM and the European Social Fund. Work produced with the support of a 2018 Leonardo Grant for Researchers and Cultural Creators, BBVA Foundation.
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Submitted: 03/11/20. Accepted: 11/13/20. Published: 10/06/21.

## INTRODUCTION

Content creators who are children are a reality which has been growing since 2017 (Ofcom, 2019), either due to the increase in consumption of this content or due to being part of the market with a new channel. The pioneer of kid-created content was *EvanTubeHD* in 2011. He was followed by other children including Ryan, whose channel *Ryan ToysReview* was included on the Forbes list in 2018, when he was 7 years old, due to revenues of 22 million dollars (Berg, 2018). At present, he has 27 million followers and has had almost 43 billion views since he and his parents launched his main channel *Ryan ToysReview* (currently called *Ryan's World*) in March 2015 (Social Blade, 2020). This situation indicates that children consume more content on YouTube than on television and that they are spending more and more time on this platform (Smahel et al., 2020). The study conducted by Auxier et al. (2020) for the Pew Research Center on parents with children aged under 11 years old stated that 80% of children watched YouTube, of which 53% did so daily, and of this percentage 35% of children viewed it on several occasions over the course of the day. Along the same lines, Rideout and Robb (2020) hold that one third of children aged between 0 and 8 years old watch videos online. The Ofcom study (2019, p. 10) indicates, by age range, that 49% of the children aged between 12 and 15 years old prefer to watch YouTube over the television (14%), and the figures are similar for children aged between 8 and 11 (49% and 16%); this therefore confirms the trend in the preference for the Internet. In fact, consumption of YouTube content increases with age: children aged 3 to 4 years old watch instructive and play content in 15% of cases; for those aged between 5 and 7 years old, the figure increases to 35%; for those aged from 8 to 11 it rises to 40%, and for those aged 12 to 15, to 52% (Ofcom, 2019, p. 11).

This explains why in Spain there are 1 300 YouTube channels aimed at a child audience with more than 5.6 trillion views per month (Nieto Moreno & Sosa Troya, 2019). The channels featuring children who are content creators are promoted by their parents, because minors must be aged at least 13 years old to open a YouTube account and need to have support to record, edit and circulate the videos (Bergen, 2019;

Siwa, 2019). In numerous channels, parents co-star with their children appear in secondary roles, or simply provide the off-screen commentary that accompanies all the videos (Chau, 2010; Craig & Cunningham, 2017; Evans, 2020; Lange, 2014; McRoberts et al., 2016). The parents are the ones who monetize the content from these channels, through the advertising included in the YouTube formats themselves or by inserting brands into the vlogging content (Nieto Moreno & Sosa Troya, 2019).

Earlier studies have focused on brand promotion, advertising formats, content consumption, and monetization of the YouTube channels (Araújo et al., 2017; Folkvord et al., 2019; Livingstone et al., 2017; Marsh, 2016; McRoberts et al., 2016; Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016; Wa, 2016; Walczer, 2019; Westenberg, 2016; Yarosh et al., 2016, among others) but there is less research focusing on the role of the family. In the Spanish case, the research conducted by Martínez-Pastor et al. (2020) and the study by Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez and González-Río (2018) has identified the fathers' and mothers' presence linked to promotion of the product and the information about where it can be acquired. In the same vein, the work by López-Villafranca and Olmedo-Salar (2019) highlights the responsibility of the parents of content-creator kids, analyzing their presence in children's channels in Spain and the United States. These studies have taken into account variables such as the presence of the products or brands appearing in the videos, the presence of brands and the type of products (toys or others), marketing resources (hashtag, sponsored links, links not associated with products, and others) (Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood [CCFC], 2016; Committee of Advertising, Advertising Standards Authority, 2017; Craig & Cunningham, 2017; IAB Spain, 2018b, 2019; Wa, 2016), identification of products in the video through text or verbally (Committee of Advertising, Advertising Standards Authority, 2017; IAB Spain, 2018b; Martínez Pastor et al., 2017), and the presence of family members on children's channels (López Villafranca & Olmedo Salar, 2019; Tur-Viñes et al., 2018).

Other studies related to children and child YouTubers focus on the legal responsibility of the parents in the creating (Martínez-Pastor, 2019). Others, however, have focused on reporting the state of the issue with regard to kid YouTubers through a bibliographic review including

certain studies that mention the role of the family as promoters of the videos (Tur-Viñes et al., 2019; Vizcaíno-Laorga et al., 2019). Explicit previous studies include “A theoretical review of the child socialisation process in Spain” (Martínez Pastor et al., 2016). Thus, and due to the limited amount of research in this respect, this paper raises the question of how family relationships are represented in kid YouTuber channels, in order to determine if they maintain the traditional model of the family (mother, father, and children) and whether women have a predominant role.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN COMMUNICATION AIMED AT CHILDREN

The media, and particularly the fragmentation fostered by the platforms emerging from the Internet such as YouTube, have impacted the way in which family members interact with each other and, in turn, with the media. Families can sit to watch a television program together and can be sending text messages, chatting, loading content on YouTube or seeing what people are doing on the hottest social media platform (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). This media explosion has meant the family and its members have become *prosumers* (Bruns, 2014; Herrero-Diz et al., 2016; Kotler, 2010) in the more commercial and original sense of the term clarified by Aparici and García-Marín (2018). That is to say, they are producers (fundamentally) in a process geared towards commercial exploitation, and it must serve to contextualize (at least in part) the way in which the family relationships appear.

In the current media ecosystem, the bridges established between the media and audiences have been culturally appropriated by users and have shaped the way the media participate in our lives (Craig Watkins, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2015; Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2017). The rise of multimedia and digital technologies enables the “old” media to become more multifunctional, integrating information, communication, transactions, entertainment, sociability, education, and construction of identity (van Dijk, 2006).

There is some discussion in the scientific literature over whether the media can become an integral part of family life (Hoover et al., 2003;

Jordan et al., 2006; Takeuchi, 2011), but all coincide in understanding that the media certainly constitute one of the many environmental influences that affect interactions inside the family, and can even play a role in redefining family processes or becoming integrated into the established family rules or guidelines (Livingstone, 2002).

The family is one of the most significant socialization settings, as it is the initial core setting in which individuals learn and internalize the social behavioral patterns of their environment. The relevance of the family in creating social bonds, together with the role of the media as a socializing agent tasked with transmitting sociocultural learning, means that the union of the two plays a key part in building identity, in shaping a critical spirit, and in establishing personal goals (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Through the audiovisual industry, and especially the Anglo-Saxon industry due to its extensive reach, homogeneous discourses are reproduced, which are tailored to the local peculiarities of each country but homogenize life styles, ways of thinking, values, and the fostering of consumption, among other things, thereby influencing the socialization process of each society (Martínez Pastor et al., 2016). Family sagas have been one of the most popular narratives since the beginning of audiovisual fiction: *Growing Pains* (1985-1992), *Married... with Children* (Fox, 1987-1997), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *Médico de familia* (1995-1999), *Los Serrano* (2003-2008), *Modern Family* (2009-2020), and *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (2001-current) are successful television series which show how, as television series have endeavored to reflect the reality of their audience, a number of new models have been included which reflect the evolving customs of society (Lacalle & Hidalgo-Marí, 2016). However, unlike the audiovisual products of television which use the family and its conflicts to drive the plot, in the YouTube videos generated by kid YouTubers and their families the family unit acts as a frame for content creation, which could translate into representing a way of life.

The family as a “social artifact” (Bourdieu, 1996) is an ideal environment in which to analyze, for example, how during the performance of certain tasks and daily interaction men and women assume gender roles, perpetuating, through their participation in

domestic tasks and caring roles, attributes of hegemonic masculinity or femininity that serve to reaffirm their gender identity (Lucal, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). The sphere of the family and the home is a space in which gender gaps are apparent and the roles which are socially allocated to men and women according to their sex are defined (Rocha-Sánchez & Díaz-Loving, 2005). This division translates to its representation in the media, where men are less likely than women to be shown performing domestic tasks and caring for children, and when men are shown as fathers caring for their children, their relationship with them is limited to the sphere of leisure and playing (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004; Tsai, 2010), the perception of the representation of a care-giving father becoming something atypical and unusual in the advertising media (Baxter et al., 2016).

Thus, YouTube and social networks are the perfect scenario for the representation of the ideal of the “good mother”, a role which shows women who are capable of providing their child with an atmosphere of quasi-perfect satisfaction and emotional tranquility (Medina Bravo et al., 2014). In addition, participation by fathers in YouTube channels may be related to their increasing involvement in care-giving tasks, which has also been reflected in advertising products targeting children or families as a consumer group (Baxter et al., 2016). However, although the trend towards fathers taking on more responsibility in caring for their children is becoming apparent and they are more involved in the lives of their children than fathers in previous generations (Elizalde-San Miguel et al., 2019), mothers have continued to be the main carers for their children (Beaujot & Liu, 2005; Bianchi, 2000; Coltrane, 2000; Coltrane & Adams, 1997) and upon which media representations continue perpetuating their role as mothers (Lui & Choi, 2015).

Within consumer society the family has transformed from a productive unit into a consumption unit (Lee & Beatty, 2002), teaching its members—especially children—to consume according to its criteria (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). In this mediatized and hyperconnected environment, parents are putting their reticence aside and becoming aware that media literacy is not simply a question of taking part in the media but of engaging with society through the media (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2019; López de Ayala et al., 2020).

Therefore, the prosumer families who star in kid YouTuber channels play a fundamental role for younger audiences, by acting as influencers with regard to products and life styles through the Internet, a medium whose economic importance is growing year upon year (IAB Spain, 2018a).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The aim of this study is to analyze representations of the family appearing in YouTube channels starring children from Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States. This can be broken down into a number of specific aims which will guide this study:

- To analyze which family members appear in the channels and which function each person fulfils in the channel (that is, if they are the protagonists, supporting actors or playing bit parts).
- To observe possible gender-based differences between the family member characters who appear on the YouTube channels under analysis.
- To identify possible differences between the three countries.

The intention behind these is to provide an answer to the following research questions:

1. Which family figure mainly accompanies the child?
2. Which family model is represented on YouTube channels produced by children? Does the traditional family model predominate (father, mother and children) or is there room for other models (such as single-father families, single-mother families, homoparental families and blended families)?
3. Is there a gender bias in the participation of family members as supporting or bit-part characters?
4. Is the family represented homogeneously or does it differ depending on the country?

## METHODOLOGY

In order to offer empirical data about the representation of family in YouTube channels starring children, content analysis was used (Neuendorf, 2020). This analysis has focused on user-generated content (UGC) (Skalski et al., 2020, p. 210), the users in this case being kid YouTubers. The sample consists of 450 videos from 15 kid YouTuber channels over the period of 2016 to 2018, with over 6 750 minutes of viewing (with an average of 15 minutes per video). The channels in the top positions in the Social Blade ranking (2020) have been taken as a benchmark. Social Blade is a website enabling users to comb through statistics and measure the growth of different platforms such as YouTube, and contains a ranking of 5 000 YouTubers.

The sample universe consists of toy-themed YouTube channels from the United States, the United Kingdom and Spain in which the protagonist is a child aged under 14 years old. These criteria were chosen because these countries appear in the top positions of the Social Blade ranking (classified as A or B+ with a local ranking not numerically larger than ranking position 100). The study sample was divided into two groups,<sup>5</sup> based on the frequency of video uploaded to the platform, taking into account that average duration is 15 minutes and that the choice was random and based on the following criterion:

- Group 1: YouTuber channels where weekly frequency of video posted is more than 30 minutes.
- Group 2: YouTuber channels where weekly frequency of video posted is less than 30 minutes.

A total of 5 channels from each country resulted from this selection (see Table 1) (N=15). Following the recommendations of sample selection techniques for experiment design, 30 videos were viewed from each channel, selected at random during the years from 2016 to 2018 in the months of January and June. A random exploration was also performed in 2019 and 2020 which indicates a similar trend to the

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<sup>5</sup> This division was carried out to enable subsequent statistical data mining.



results obtained here. The final corpus for analysis is made up of 450 videos.

TABLE 1  
ANALYZED SAMPLE OF KID YOUTUBER CHANNELS

Groups	Kid-creator YouTube channels	Nationality	Ranking	Year created
Group 1 (>30 minutes weekly frequency of video posted)	<i>Los juguetes de Arantxa</i>	SP	B+	2015
	<i>Mikel Tube</i>	SP	A	2015
	<i>The Crazy Haacks</i>	SP	B+	2015
	<i>Emily Tube</i>	UK	A	2014
	<i>Hitzh Toys</i>	UK	B+	2014
	<i>Toys and me</i>	UK	A	2014
	<i>Naiiah And Elli Toys Show</i>	USA	B	2015
	<i>Ryan ToysReview</i>	USA	A+	2015
	<i>Hulyan Maya</i>	USA	B	2008
	Group 2 (< 30 minutes weekly frequency of video posted)	<i>Jugando con Aby</i>	SP	B+
<i>Las Ratitas</i>		USA	A	2015
<i>EvanTube HD</i>		USA	B	2011
<i>Hailey's Magical Playhouse</i>		USA	B	2015
<i>Lucky Surprise</i>		UK	B	2016
<i>ToysReview</i>				
<i>Naty TubeFun</i>		UK	A	2011

Source: The authors based on Social Blade (2020) data.

Content analysis was performed, in which the following variables were set: channel, country, date, duration, type of character (protagonist, family members as supporting characters and family members as sporadic characters). The type of character was defined in the following manner:

1. Protagonist: the child and another family member whose presence is necessary in all the videos.
2. Family members as supporting characters: these are relatives who play an important role in the videos on a repeated basis, although they may not appear in some.
3. Family members as sporadic characters: these are relatives who appear when their presence is required in making the video. They are not continually present and they play a supporting role.

The SPSS version 19 and R statistical programs were used for the statistical analysis.

## RESULTS

In order to analyze the representations of the family in content-creator kids' YouTube channels in Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom, the way in which the results are presented has been organized based on the relevance of the people on the channels (type of character), that is, by asking who the protagonists of the analyzed channels are, which family members act as supporting characters, and which family members appear as sporadic characters. Each type of character has been linked with the rest of the independent variables (such as sex, groups based on content duration and country of origin).

### *Protagonists (main actors)*

The protagonists of the videos of the analyzed channels are children aged under 14 years old, although there may be other co-starring children which tend to be siblings. Only on one occasion does a channel stars a child and a parent, which is the case of *Jugando con Aby*.

The descriptive analysis of the channels analyzed (N=15) shows that the protagonists are mainly female (57%, n=12), whereas the protagonists are male in nine cases (43%), of which only one of the cases is an adult male. When the protagonists are siblings, they tend to be of the same sex, as is the case of *Hulyan Maya*, *Las Ratitas*, and *Naiah and Eli Toys show* (two sisters), or in the *Mikel Tube* channel (two brothers). It is only in the *The Crazy Haacks* where two brothers and a sister appear as the stars of the videos.

As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 1, mothers never appear as protagonists of the videos with their children. However, their presence is always there, either as a supporting or a sporadic character.

If account is taken of weekly frequency, there are no statistically significant differences as regards co-starring with other members of the family on the channel. However, Table 2 makes it possible to observe differences by country. It is more common for the children to appear as the exclusive stars of the channel in the United Kingdom and the United States.

#### *Family members as supporting characters (supporting actors)*

In this study, “Family members as supporting characters” are deemed to be relatives who participate habitually (but not always) in the video productions and whose role would equate to that of a “supporting actor” if the video were a conventional audiovisual fictional video. We must bear in mind that, in fact, YouTube videos (except actual informational videos) are, to a greater or lesser extent, fiction (Bañuelos, 2009).

There are no significant differences regarding sex: the presence of females in supporting roles is 48% (n=12) and for males it is 52% (n=13). As regards the family role they represent, 32% (n=8) are fathers, 24% (n=6) are mothers, 20% sisters (n=5), and 20% brothers (n=5). The presence of parents in the videos shows fathers (57%) are more often present than mothers (43%). If weekly frequency is taken into account, it is observed that the group of channels with more than 30 minutes per week (Group 1) frequently have recourse to family members who accompany the child starring in the channel. By contrast, in Group 2 the use of the recourse of a relative appearing in the content does not always occur. All the mothers who appeared were in Group 1. The results are consistent also in the case of fathers, who are 75% present in Group 1 and 25% in Group 2. By country, it can be seen that using several members of the family as the recurring supporting cast on the channel is more common in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the case of Spain, it is more common for the mother and/or the father to appear, whereas by contrast in the United Kingdom the most common relatives to appear are siblings. In the United States, the most frequent case on the analyzed channels is that the father and a sibling appear.

TABLE 2  
DISTRIBUTION OF THE CHANNELS BY PROTAGONIST, SEX AND COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Group	Kid-creator YouTube channels	Nationality	Name of the protagonists*	N° people/sex of the protagonist	
				Female (n=12)	Male (n=9)
Group 1 (>30 minutes weekly frequency of video posted)	<i>Los juguetes de Arantxa</i>	SP	Arantxa (F)	1	0
	<i>Mikel Tube</i>	SP	Mikel y Leo (M+M)	0	2
	<i>The Crazy Haacks</i>	SP	Mateo, Hugo y Daniela (2 M+F)	1	2
	<i>Emily Tube</i>	UK	Emily (F)	1	0
	<i>Hitzh Toys</i>	UK	Niño (M) (name unknown)	0	1
	<i>Toys and me</i>	UK	Tiana (F)	1	0
	<i>Natah And Elli Toys Show</i>	USA	Natah y Elli (F+F)	2	0
	<i>Ryan ToysReview</i>	USA	Ryan (M)	0	1
	<i>Hulyan Maya</i>	USA	Niño (M)	0	1
Group 2 (< 30 minutes weekly frequency of video posted)	<i>Jugando con Aby</i>	SP	Alba (Aby) y Edu (F+M)	1	1
	<i>Las Raititas</i>	SP	Gisele y Claudia (F+F)	2	0
	<i>EvanTube HD</i>	USA	Evan (M)	0	1
	<i>Hailey's Magical Playhouse</i>	USA	Hailey (F)	1	0
	<i>Lucy Surprise ToysReview</i>	UK	Ishfi (F)	1	0
	<i>Naty TubeFun</i>	UK	Naty (F)	1	0

\* Female (F)/ Male (M)

Source: The authors.

TABLE 3  
DISTRIBUTION OF THE CHANNELS BY RECURRING SUPPORTING FAMILY MEMBER, SEX AND COUNTRY OF THE CHANNELS

Group	Kid-creator YouTube channels	Nationality	Protagonist*	Recurring supporting family member	No. people/sex of supporting character	
					Female (n=12)	Male (n=13)
Group 1 (> 30 minutes weekly frequency of video posted)	<i>Los juguetes de Arantxa</i>	SP	Arantxa (F)	Father and mother	1	1
	<i>Mikel Tube</i>	SP	Mikel and Leo (M+M)	Father and mother	1	1
	<i>The Crazy Haacks</i>	SP	Mateo, Hugo and Daniela (2 M + 1 F)	Mother	1	0
	<i>Emily Tube</i>	UK	Emily (F)	Sisters	2	0
	<i>Hitah Toys</i>	UK	Boy (M) (unknown name)	Brother and father	0	2
	<i>Toys and me</i>	UK	Tiana (F)	Friend (Isla), father and mother	2	1
Group 2 (< 30 minutes weekly frequency of video posted)	<i>Naiiah And Elli Toys Show</i>	USA	Naiiah and Elli (F+F)	Mother	1	0
	<i>Ryan ToysReview</i>	USA	Ryan (M)	Father and mother	1	1
	<i>Hulyan Maya</i>	USA	Boy (M)	Brother and father	0	2
	<i>Jugando con Aby</i>	SP	Alba (Aby) and Edu (F+M)	There are none	0	0
	<i>Las Raititas</i>	SP	Gisele and Claudia (F+F)	There are none	0	0
	<i>EvanTube HD</i>	USA	Evan (M)	Brother and father	1	1
	<i>Hailey's Magical Playhouse</i>	USA	Hailey (F)	Father and brother	0	2
	<i>Lucky Surprise ToysReview</i>	UK	Ishfi (F)	Siblings (F+M)	1	1
	<i>Naty TubeFun</i>	UK	Naty (F)	Siblings (M+F)	1	1

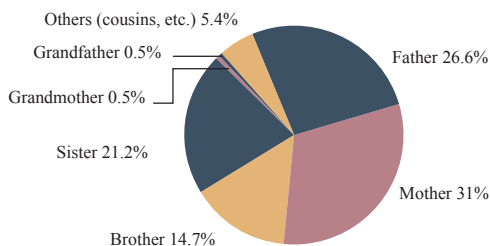
\* Female (F) / Male (M)

Source: Own compilation.

### *Family members as sporadic characters (bit parts)*

As can be seen in Figure 1, if account is taken of the family members who appear sporadically or occasionally in the analyzed videos from the kid YouTuber channels (N=450), in 31% the family member appearing is the mother, in 26.6% it is the father, in 21.2% it is the YouTuber's sister, and in 14.7% it is the brother. In 52.7% of the cases, the relative is female, which shows that the presence of females in the role of family member appearing sporadically in the kid YouTuber channels is slightly greater than that of males.

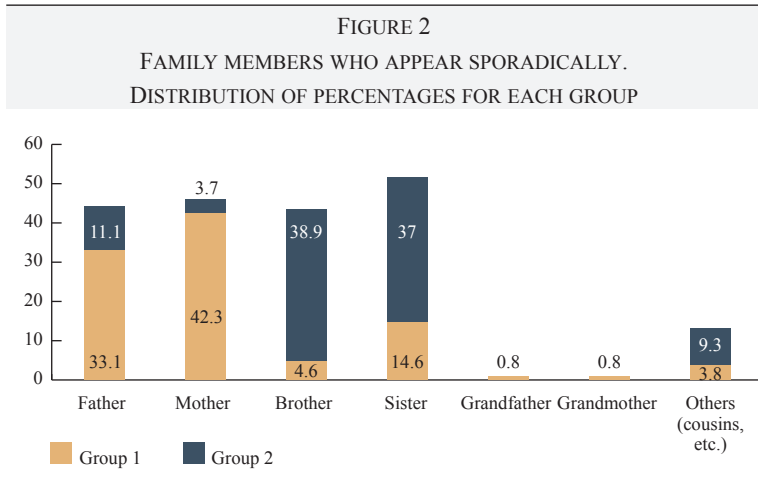
FIGURE 1  
DISTRIBUTION OF FAMILY MEMBERS WHO APPEAR SPORADICALLY



Source: The authors.

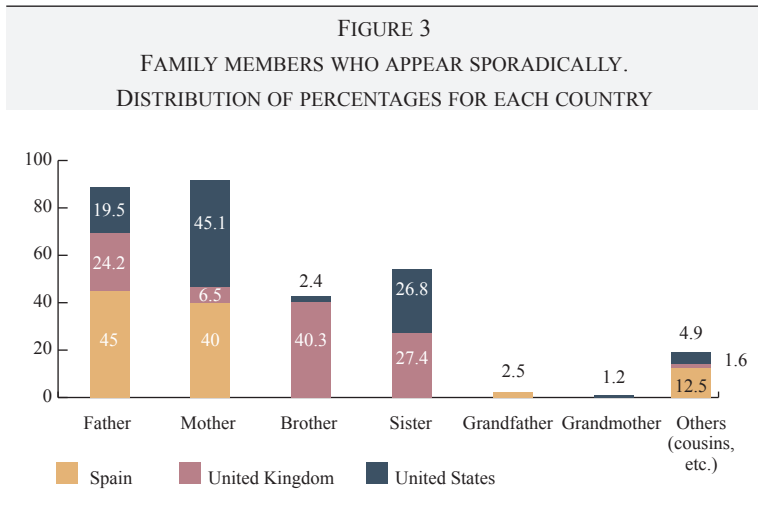
Figure 2 makes it possible to observe these family roles in depth, where significant differences ( $p < 0.001$ ) can be found according to frequency of minutes per week. The most common family members appearing sporadically are mother and father in Group 1 (channels with more than 30 minutes per week) and sister or brother in Group 2 (channels with less than 30 minutes per week). It is noteworthy that in Group 1, the family member was female in 57.7% of the cases, while in Group 2 it was in 40.7% of the cases.

In terms of the countries, as can be observed in Figure 3 there are also significant differences ( $p < 0.001$ ) according to country with regard to the most common characters with a family relationship. In Spain the percentage of cases in which the father was the sporadic character



Source: The authors.

was the greatest, followed by the mother (Spain and the United States), and by the brother (in the United Kingdom). The sporadic character was female in 40% of cases in Spain, in 33.9% of cases in the United Kingdom, and in 73.2% of the cases in the United States.



Source: The authors.

## DISCUSSION

Kid YouTubers and their families are a new type of microcelebrity. YouTube channels starring children who are content creators are popular due to the content they produce, in which they demonstrate their creative talents, show how to put toys together, and so on. The monetization of this content occurs against a background of “filler” content in which the daily routines of domestic life are shared with followers as a type of “calibrated amateurism” (Abidin, 2017).

The media representation of the family members that is shown on kid YouTube vlogger channels continues to maintain the traditional family structure: father, mother, and, in some cases, siblings and grandparents. Analyzing the results from a gender-based perspective, it is demonstrated that there is a considerable balance between male and female characters, although there is a slight prevalence of fathers as supporting actors and of mothers appearing in bit parts.

By establishing a relationship between the different results, it can be seen that boys are mostly accompanied by their fathers or mothers as supporting actors, while in the case of girls their parents are absent in 40% of cases. In addition, boys are always accompanied by their fathers (and in some cases by their mothers), while 66% of girls have their mothers playing supporting roles (and in some cases their fathers as well) and the remaining 34% are accompanied exclusively by their fathers. There are therefore differences related to the sex of the child protagonists. Boys seem to depend on their fathers and girls show themselves to be more autonomous in the videos they appear in. In other words, within the portrayal of the family in YouTube channels, men are good companions in the family and women not necessarily so. Without being conclusive, this presentation of men as good companions could be related to the representations of gender which occur in the cinema. This is specifically the case of the film subgenre of buddy movies, very common in popular films such as *Lethal Weapon* and *21 Jump Street*, in which the centerpiece of the plot focuses on the friendship and camaraderie between the male protagonists (Boyle & Berridge, 2014; DeAngelis, 2014), an archetype of characters which, by contrast, is not



common in films starring women, whose characters tend to act as solo heroines (Bernárdez Rodal, 2018; Gill, 2007).

In YouTube channels starring children, the model of a traditional family prevails, made up of the nucleus of mother, father, and YouTuber son or daughter, who are occasionally joined by siblings, grandparents, or cousins. According to Rodrigo Martín and Rodrigo Martín (2016), advertising, although it could encompass any audiovisual depiction, uses images of family life in its messages because it is aware of the role children and their families play in society. However, this stereotyped portrayal is not free from the tensions, ambiguities, and ambivalences that are found in the definition of family reflected in the media (Draper, 2014).

The results by country also show local differences in how the members of the family are represented. In the United Kingdom and Spain, participation by fathers acting as sporadic characters with a family relationship is higher than in the United States, being even higher than that of mothers in the case of the United Kingdom. This information about the United Kingdom can be linked to the results obtained by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (2015) in the United Kingdom, in which all the participants in the focus groups, of all ages and genders, stated that despite the persistence of certain gender gaps, they can see changes in the family structures represented in films in this country, seeing that the traditional family structure of a mother who stays at home and a father who works outside the home has been replaced by families with more than one parent who work, with stay-at-home dads, single-parent households, and same-sex families. However, this change in family structure cannot be observed in all the channels analyzed and, as has been noted in the analysis of the data, they continue to reproduce to a larger extent the traditional family model. The results show the ambivalence in the progress made in closing the gender gap, and are at variance with the studies which point to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in fiction (Gill, 2007; Walter, 2010) or studies on use of time in the family (Eurostat, 2015; Hook & Wolfe, 2013; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2010; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010, 2018). Accessibility to content creation by users has not entailed breaking with gender roles (Carrera et al., 2020).

Women continue to be the sporadic characters with a family connection that most appear in the YouTube channels studied, with the greatest presence being in the United States. In 73.2% of cases in the United States, the sporadic character was female, which is striking if compared to supporting characters, where it is more common for the father, together with a sibling, to appear more frequently.

The three countries for which the comparison has been performed (the United Kingdom, Spain, and the United States) are located among the countries with the highest rates of parity according to the Global Gender Gap Index from the World Economic Forum (2019).<sup>6</sup> However, despite the progress made in gender equality and joint responsibility, gender gaps continue to persist and the portrayal of the family in the kid YouTuber channels analyzed is a sign that gender presence remains unequal. As Bordieu (1996) stated, the depiction of the family is a social structure that can be used to analyze how differential socialization is perpetuated and the structures of inequality which deepen the conceptualization of women as otherness. These divisions are reflected in the YouTube channels starring children aged under 14 years old, as although they fall outside the sphere of large media conglomerates, they are not outsiders with regard to the patriarchal system and those who star in the videos are a demonstration of how the occupation of private and public space is distributed in these families. Future research should look further into “digital relationship structures also tell us about ways that people and spaces are distributed that are not without political significance” (Zafra, 2011, p. 121).

If the results obtained as regards “Protagonists” and “Family members as supporting characters” are observed together, clear differences can be observed between countries in relation to the presence of siblings. While in the Spanish case siblings share the limelight in the channels (100% of the cases), in the United Kingdom and the United States when brothers or sisters appear in the videos they only do so in a supporting or bit part role (100% of the cases).

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<sup>6</sup> In figures, in first place is the United Kingdom, with 0.774 (position 15/149), followed by Spain with 0.746 (position 29/149) and in the last place (position 51/149) is the United States with 0.720.

In the case of Spain, children who have channels in which one of the siblings is the star integrate the family into the videos as part of it and part of the group. According to Renobell Santaren (2020), Spain is a country containing larger households and more consensual family relationships, which is what Hofstede (1984) would define as a collectivist society, since its citizens form part of “in groups” in order to gain security and protection in exchange for loyalty, with Spanish society having a greater attachment to the concept of community (Lighici, 2015).

By contrast, in the United Kingdom and the United States, the protagonists of the channels, even if they have siblings in their family, do not include them in the channels and they appear only occasionally. This may be due to the fact that the latter countries are characterized as individualist societies in which relations between citizens are looser and each person looks after themselves and their family (Hofstede, 1984, 2020; Hofstede et al., 2004). The personal and individual characteristics are also a decisive element. It has been observed that the United Kingdom is a more individualistic society with a low aversion to risk, more flexible, and less conservative, although much more indulgent (Renobell Santaren, 2020). This would explain why, if one of the siblings is the person who has garnered the public’s empathy and public success, other siblings who lack this quality should not be put on view. In these cases, the values of success, competence, and autonomy prevail over those of collectivist societies, which, on the contrary, are intergroup harmony and personalized relationships.

The family and the media are mainstays of the socialization process (Walker & Barton, 2013), and therefore analyzing them and their evolution over time enables us to obtain empirical data about the people, their lives, and their settings. YouTube, as a digital communication medium in which its users produce content while interacting with it, gains a leading position in the media diet of children (YouTube, 2020) and in shaping the collective imaginary. The channels produced by children under 14 years old are offering valuable information about how YouTubers evolve and how children’s rights (Martínez Pastor & Nicolás Ojeda, 2019) are guaranteed on these transnational platforms.

## CONCLUSIONS

The family is an element of social organization which forms part of the structure of a society and is determined by it. The aim of this study is to analyze representations of the family appearing in YouTube starring children from Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. To this end, the content generated by these users (kid YouTubers) has been analyzed and a corpus for analysis of 450 videos obtained.

It is clear the family is present in the channels analyzed in a significant manner. We must take into account the question raised by this study which asks which family figure mainly accompanies the child. Although the protagonists are the children themselves (due to the configuration of the universe upon which this study is based), their parents do appear, sometimes even in the role of protagonists themselves, that is, at the same level as the child. However, it is also true that family presence does not occur in a generalized manner, as the fathers or mothers appear as protagonists or supporting actors in only half of the cases (either physically or by participating as an off-screen voice). Therefore, the child is not always explicitly accompanied by a family member in the videos.

In the case of supporting actors, the greatest presence, by a small amount, is that of the father and in the case of the bit-part actors (referring to those who only appear sporadically) the prevalent family member character is principally female, whether this is the figure of the mother or the sister.

The second question raised by this study is which family model is represented on YouTube channels produced by children. The channels analyzed show that the predominant model is the traditional family (father, mother, and children) as opposed to other possible models (such as single-parent families, homoparental families, and blended families). This is confirmed, as all the cases analyzed are of apparently nuclear families since no elements emerge that reveal an alternative family model.

The study has yielded results that go beyond representations of family roles. It has been observed that when fathers/mothers are present in supporting roles, the average weekly frequency is greater (Group 1)

than when they do not participate in the narration of the video (Group 2). Therefore, active participation in the production seems to generate the implication that consequences arise, ultimately, in the quality of the child actor, who is required to work a larger number of hours.

With regard to the third question raised in this study, as to whether there is a gender bias in the participation of family members as supporting or bit-part characters, it can be stated that gender differences have been found between the protagonists (boys or girls) and the supporting actors (fathers or mothers) who appear. In the channels analyzed in this study, the boys appear clearly linked to fathers and girls not necessarily to mothers.

In addition, it has been observed in the supporting roles that there is a reinforcement of the presence of the father in the public space: of the parents, the father plays a supporting role more frequently (32%) than the mother (24%). In the case of actors who have walk-on or bit parts, appearing sporadically in the channels, the predominant family-member character is female (sisters and mothers). These data reiterate the status quo in the roles played which are reproduced in other media spaces.

As regards the final question raised in this study, about whether the family is represented homogeneously or does it differ depending on the country, it can be seen that there are differences between countries which it would be interesting to investigate further in the future, as they seem to demonstrate that the various distributions of roles (children, siblings and parents) among the different actor levels (protagonists, supporting roles and bit-part roles) vary among countries, probably due to cultural reasons related to the individualist or collectivist profile of each society. Another aspect is the family differences according to country regarding the participation of siblings in the channels.

In the case of Spain, all the channels include siblings in the videos even though the true protagonist is only one of the siblings, whereas this does not occur in the United States and the United Kingdom. It would be interesting to study the cultural differences in future studies as regards the portrayal of family members in the channels depending on the country, given that one of the limitations of this study has been comparing just three countries and similar types of families; it would

perhaps be interesting to continue by undertaking a study comparing countries on different continents, such as Asia, or South America.

One reflection this study has led us to is that it centers on the family relationships which are established in a commodified product, which is commercially exploited, where somebody appears in front of the camera (the child, almost exclusively) and where somebody is behind the camera (the adult –father or mother– who barely interacts with the child). These visible relationships are the fruit of an artificial situation. However, it might be considered whether there is an “EMIREC” (Aparici & García-Marín, 2018; Laiglesia Maestre, 2014) side inside YouTube productions, a perspective in which the issuer and the recipient are really participants and collaborate on the same hierarchical level and with other ends, that is, no longer market-driven but more social or participative (Aparici & García-Marín, 2018; Roömer-Pieretti et al., 2020). Research into this aspect is necessary but should be based on a sample where the channels are commercially of little relevance.

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