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YouTubers and Urban Everyday Narratives in Havana

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the first academic exploration of the Cuban YouTubesphere. It addresses the surge and momentum of digital content production publicly distributed through the YouTube platform, focusing on Havana-based creators engaging in mobile practices. These media agents feature landmarks, attractions, and quotidian itinerances portraying the city and the changes occurring within and on its representations. By juxtaposing the analysis of a large corpus of videos produced between 2017 and 2022 with netnographic and mobile ethnography observations, the article contextualizes Cuba's YouTuber boom within the larger framework of the state-led Digital Revolution. Then, it reflects briefly on the implications of YouTubers' (g)local narratives as 1) objects of affection for the digital diaspora and people interested in Cuba, 2) a form of public space intervention, 3) a digital repository portraying the urban quotidian amidst societal transformations.

RESUMEN

Este artículo constituye la primera exploración académica de la YouTubósfera cubana. Aborda en concreto el surgimiento y auge de contenidos digitales distribuidos a través de YouTube, concentrándose en creadores digitales que presentan sitios de interés, atracciones turísticas y rutas e itinerancias cotidianas. En sus desplazamientos, dejan entrever las transformaciones ocurridas en la ciudad y en sus representaciones. Yuxtaponiendo el análisis de un amplio corpus de videos producidos entre 2017 y 2022 a observaciones netnográficas y de etnografía móvil, el artículo contextualiza el boom de YouTubers cubanos dentro del marco de la Revolución Digital impulsada desde la oficialidad. En seguida, reflexiona brevemente en torno a las implicaciones de dichas narrativas (g)locales en tanto: 1) objetos de afecto para la diáspora digital y el público interesado en Cuba; 2) intervenciones en el espacio público; 3) repositorio digital de representaciones urbanas en un contexto dominado por transformaciones sociales.

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INTRODUCTION

On August 12, 2017, a group of youngsters gathered in a park at Paseo de los Presidentes, a popular avenue in the upscale Vedado neighborhood in Havana. They were attending Cuba's YouTubers' first meetup following a call that Dina Fernández, founder of the channel *Dina Stars*, attributed to Michel Boutic, a digital content distributor who later turned into a reggaeton music producer (*DinaStars* 2017; López 2019). The attendees were moved by a desire shared by young people elsewhere: to be seen and become famous. Their goal seemed unreachable, pursued in a country with one of the lowest connectivity rates in the Western Hemisphere (Grandinetti & Eszenyi 2018). The *informatización de la Sociedad*, Cuba's state-oriented, organized, and massive expansion of information technologies launched in 2015 (Consejo de Estado 2019), had not yet materialized into broad public access to the internet. In addition to networking and meeting with their followers, some participants expected to learn how to earn money from what others, mainly their parents or older people, perceived as trivial.

Facing the challenges of high connectivity costs and constrained access to technologies while circumventing the U.S. economic sanctions on Cuba, some attendees eventually established sustainable livelihoods through content production. Moving across platforms, primarily YouTube and Instagram, gradually allowed them to generate revenue and secure sponsorships while cultivating an online community that often functioned as a support network. 'Social media employment' broadened their prospects for socio-economic mobility, offering, in numerous instances, a pathway to migrate abroad amidst the island's most severe economic downturn in the last three decades. By 2020, being a YouTuber had emerged as a conspicuous and viable way to climb the social ladder, with dozens of people emulating the most successful formula I identified during the research: narrating the quotidian in Havana and other Cuban provinces to combat their own precarity. Although public access to the internet came to Cuba only in 2015, and the island can be considered the last bastion of the 'socialism from above model,' the gradual economic reforms that included the expansion of communication technologies propelled changes akin to those brought by the internet in other latitudes. These included the emergence of new actors within the public sphere and the birth of glocalized digital economies.

This paper presents the first scholarly inquiry into the Cuban YouTubesphere. It delves into the platform's role as a technological affordance that facilitated the global visibility of local narratives -glocal narratives- authored and curated by ordinary internet users, ultimately propelling them to attain a microcelebrity status. Drawing on recent literature addressing the reconfiguration of the Cuban public sphere in the last few years (Cearns 2021a; Duong 2013; García & Henken 2021), the first part of the article contextualizes the YouTuber boom within the larger framework of the so-called Digital Revolution, characterized amongst other things, by the emergence of 'new media agents' (Duong 2021: 306), and identifies two cohorts of digital content creators. Borrowing key concepts on microcelebrity, internet fame, and social media influencing (Abidin 2018; Marwick 2015), the second part reflects on the implications of these glocal narratives as 1) an object of affection for both the digital diaspora and people interested in all things Cuban, 2) as a form of public space intervention, and 3) as a digital repository portraying the urban quotidian amidst societal transformations. I conclude by addressing self-censorship and censorship as phenomena that followed patterns similar to those identified by scholars specializing in the Cuban public sphere.

The research presented here juxtaposes the textual and visual examination of videos with netnographic and fieldwork observations. The former included analyzing approximately 500 YouTube videos produced by 26 people between 2017 and 2022, placed in the platform's *People*, *Entertainment,* or *Travel* categories listed in Table 1. The main criterion for selecting content creators was their featuring of landmarks, attractions, and quotidian itinerances portraying Havana and the changes occurring within it and its representations through mobility practices (Cresswell 2010). Those changes included infrastructural developments, leisure space relocations, and questioning the generalized stereotypes of the island as a place frozen in time. The number of channels analyzed grew as new creators appeared or gained visibility. Because the curation of digital content was not exclusive to the capital city and comprised categories beyond my main selection criterion, three non-Havana-based channels (*Anita Mateu, Malia Llovet,* and *Mari and Yoel*) and two dedicated mainly to beauty and fashion (*Emma Style* & *Dina Stars*) were also included to identify whether specific patterns were situational, or part of a general trend related to the characteristics of microcelebrity cultures.

Following Kozinets, who proposed netnography as an approach to human experience from online social interaction that does not exclude the use of other research methods (2015), I conducted a cross-platform netnographic analysis on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter from April 2019 to November 2022. The research included ephemeral formats such as the 'stories' feature on Instagram and live transmissions on YouTube that are no longer visible. Sometimes, creators erased content following audience backlash or because of self-censorship. Participation of audiences in live transmissions often brought contentious issues related to their ideological positioning to the fore. The observations included interactions on social media and informed online private conversations with eight YouTubers recorded on

fieldnotes. Initially, I recurred to netnography to better understand how YouTubers constructed their public personas across different digital platforms. However, the method became the most valuable research resource when the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prevented further fieldwork.

The first fieldwork period was in the Summer of 2015, in the aftermath of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the U.S., just before the first WiFi parks began functioning. It consisted of team and individual mobile ethnography, encompassing multi-sited participative observation, walks and displacements using public and privately operated transportation, and informal conversations. Extensive photography was employed to capture visual communiqués and everyday settings, complemented by detailed field notes. The second fieldwork period was conducted as part of the larger research project *Cubaflux: Visualizing Urban Transformation in Havana*. This time, using WiFi spots was also part of the participatory observations.

Additionally, I meticulously identified sites and trajectories marked in the videos I had analyzed in 2019 and engaged in informal brief encounters with four content creators. The utilization of mobile team ethnography allowed for comparing preliminary and subsequent data gathered from secondary sources, facilitating critical reflection on how researchers see and 'unsee' places, spaces, and urban transformation, influenced by their backgrounds. Contrasting such reflections with the video materials brought more clarity to the resources used by digital creators in the construction of their public personas.

1. THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION AND THE YOUTUBER PHENOMENON

My exploration of the Cuban YouTubesphere started accidentally when, back in January 2019, I began researching the forms in which the public image of Havana had changed after the normalization of Cuba–U.S. relations in December 2014. Tourist flows to the island sustained their ascending trajectory, and images of cruises and celebrities arriving at Havana started circulating in global media. Officials, particularly the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana established in 1938 to protect heritage, were devoting significant resources to *Habana 500*, a campaign to celebrate the city's 500th anniversary. Official political propaganda was replaced in various sites by touristic and cultural advertising. When watching a documentary on YouTube featuring the office's head, Eusebio Leal, as part of my background research, the platform's algorithmic system recommended a video by habanero teenager Frank Camallerys, the creator of *Camallerys Vlogs*, a channel with 18,000 subscribers. My research took an unexpected turn, and I became invested in examining how Cuba's nascent internet culture allowed people like Frank Camallerys to showcase images of the metropolis outside official channels. Did they present counter-narratives, sustain official visions, or forge their own paths amidst competing political visions?

In 2013, Cuba's state-owned telecommunications company ETECSA opened its firsts navigation centers' across the island (Henken & Voort 2014), making the internet technically accessible to Cubans for the first time. Previously, usage was limited to select groups like officials, academics, graduate students, and visitors. Cubans with resources to get into WiFi-equipped hotels and resorts could also connect, but the service was pricey and unstable. As I witnessed during fieldwork in 2015, people not fitting into a stereotypical tourist profile, mainly non-white and informally dressed, were often requested to leave such venues. Two decades earlier, Cubans were not even allowed near tourist attractions, as I learned during a study trip in 1999. Late in the Summer of 2015, after our first fieldwork period ended, ETECSA installed WiFi spots in several public spaces, mainly in Havana, initiating the de facto public internet expansion. Still, a one-hour prepaid internet card for WiFi cost about 5 USD, a significant portion of the average monthly salary of 30 USD. Despite the cost barrier, internet usage rose, evidenced by the sizable gatherings at WiFi parks and spots, where people primarily connected via cell phones (Editorial Board 2015).

In 2016, ETECSA launched Nauta Hogar, enabling home connectivity but with evident geographic coverage limitations (Fernández 2017). Thus, WiFi spots in public spaces remained central for online activity. In December 2018, a pivotal shift occurred with the introduction of 3G mobile connections, notwithstanding coverage, stability, and cost challenges. This advancement facilitated convenient access at home and mobile, leading to increased and more cost-effective use of social networks and platforms. Official estimates on internet access in Cuba vary, indicating 74% accessibility in 2020, a substantial increase from 21% in 2013. Alternative calculations suggest a more conservative 38% figure for intranet connections and occasional users (Concepción 2020a).

Globally, the arrival of the Internet in Cuba sparked hope for societal change (Editorial Board 2015). Indeed, during the second fieldwork period, several interlocutors pointed out an inevitable opening brought by the arrival of online information and their own possibility to 'be seen' by the world. Internet access provided many Cubans with new information and alternative communications (Lima 2021: 51). Most importantly for this article's purposes, it bolstered the production of local imagery of Cubans and their nation outside official state media channels and beyond the 'exoticizing foreign gaze' (Duong 2021: 306). In other words, it allowed many to be in the spotlight, enabling them to showcase their experiences regularly to global audiences. Although the history of those (g)local narratives dates back to the appearance of the 'contentious Cuban blogosphere,'

with the subsequent growth of 'citizen journalism' and the later blooming of digital news platforms in the early 2010s (Henken 2021: 2–3; García 2021), they reached new proportions during the public internet expansion.

The small group of primarily young internet users turned into YouTubers that I follow in this article started to showcase their (g)local narratives while situating themselves outside the officiality, often interplaying with the foreign gaze while vindicating a sense of authenticity, that they obtained by posing as 'the ordinary Cuban.' When the production of narratives turned into a source of income, they became 'digital entrepreneurs' akin to those mentioned by Cearns, who has studied how Havana's 'digital millennials' use digital media networks to forge and further their career paths without explicit political agendas or claims for global visibility (2021b). While the YouTubers I concentrate on did not push for political agendas identified in the binary officiality/dissidence either, at least in most cases and while they lived in Cuba, their main aspiration was precisely to attract a wide audience beyond the island. On the one hand, due to connectivity prices, YouTubers did not expect to have a large audience in their own country; even those earning substantial income at some point acknowledged not watching videos online and not being 'consumers.' On the other hand, not all views are worth the same: revenue depends on the advertisement costs set by YouTube at specific national locations. When planning their content, creators tended to concentrate on those national segment audiences that gave them more earnings.

THE SURGE OF THE CUBAN YOUTUBER

When Google signed an agreement with ETECSA in 2016 to improve Cuban users' experiences with Google products such as YouTube (Croak 2016), Cubans consumed the platform's videos mostly offline via *el paquete semanal*. A digital file-sharing network and the primary source of information and entertainment for most Cubans, *el paquete* is distributed hand-to-hand across the island through memory sticks and hard drives at different prices (Cearns 2021a). It includes international T.V. shows, magazines, sports happenings, music, publicity, and YouTube videos, amongst other content (Domínguez and Calás 2021). Although most of the materials are copyright-protected, the *paqueteros*, meaning sellers and distributors, operate in legal terms under self-employment licenses or are tolerated by the authorities if contentious materials are left out. *El paquete* also features local content that ranges from video blogs to alternative music and local businesses' advertisements.

For the first cohort of Cuban YouTubers, those who began uploading content to the platform regularly in 2017 and 2018, the inspiration to launch their channels came mainly from Latin American microcelebrities like *Luisito Comunica, alanxelmundo,* and *HolaSoyGerman*. Marwick defines microcelebrity as a 'self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others, use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans' (2015: 333). She adds that such practitioners may have few followers but can 'inhabit the celebrity subject position using the same social technologies' employed by celebrities, even when they may remain unknown to most (2015: 334).

The road to becoming a microcelebrity was rather bumpy in Cuba due to high connectivity costs and technological limitations. People on the island were allowed to own cell phones only in 2008, and since then, their acquisition has been subjected to a combination of factors: state restrictions, availability in the black market, and having relatives or friends abroad willing to procure one and even pay for connections. Going online was and still is a privilege in Cuba. At first, most videos were shot with low-end phones and digital cameras and uploaded unedited using public WiFi spots. A few creators prioritized navigation centers, like the *Centro de Negocios*, business center, in the Miramar district, located 10 kilometers from the city's central area and not easily accessible by public transportation. There, the upload speed was generally faster than in other places.

As most YouTubers were supported by their parents, their interest in the platform was constantly scrutinized and criticized. One of them declared that her family thought she was fooling around on the platform, *estaba en la bobería*, wasting the money perhaps procured by her mother, who sometimes worked abroad. However, their opinion slightly changed when she received her first 'YouTube salary.' For *Anita con Swing*, the 'YouTube obsession' ended several times with a phone curfew because her parents deemed the excessive interest in social media distracting. At the same time, her high school classmates mocked her, making jokes about 'la influencer' (*Anita* 2019). Such attitudes constitute a form of skepticism towards technological change not exclusive to the island (boyd 2014). However, in Cuba they can also be related to the subversive potential attributed to social media in the traditional state-controlled media, as demonstrated in the post-July 11 legislation.

By 2018, independent news outlets in Cuba started featuring YouTubers, the 'celebrities with no budget' connecting with 'the global reality of people their age, despite the country's difficulties' (De la Cantera 2018). The interest in these 'new media agents' usually came from young journalists. International news agencies and websites in the Spanish-speaking world started replicating the fascination with Cuba's late digital revolution. Internationally, public attention was directed to how Cubans were 'catching up' from their island 'stuck in time,' but the implications of the new tonalities they brought to the Cuban mediascape were often missing. In that sense, Paloma Duong underscored how, at the time preceding the public internet, a group of actors who portrayed themselves as ordinary citizens used unauthorized internet points

to blog, looking to engage in discussions with prominent Cuban actors in the cultural and official fields. She found that bloggers managed their entrance into the public sphere by contesting the meaning of public, 'claiming a right to political autonomy as reasoning individuals with private interests and independently formed opinions' (2013:385), distancing themselves from binary politics. In contraposition, young YouTubers accessing the internet from authorized points avoided discussions with those prominent actors, searching for interlocutors beyond national boundaries. For instance, Frank Camallerys, one of the first YouTubers to gain microcelebrity, claimed:

> I searched for content about Cuba and realized that almost all had been created by foreigners, not by us. From then on, I traced my road. Initially, my strategy was to create content for Cuban émigrés, those who have not been here in a while and experience a feeling of longing, but people from other countries became interested, and I drifted to tourism (Roque 2019).

Camallerys' declarations vindicate, even if only as a business strategy, the right to have a say in how non-Cubans depicted the country. They also contained the formula for his and other YouTubers' ulterior success. Videos on landmarks, attractions, and everyday life gained popularity and views because they functioned as a device of affection for the digital diaspora, Cubans keeping their links to the island by digital means, and for random non-Cuban viewers, as evidenced by the comments to the videos on the platform. Simultaneous to the agency vindication, the videos showcased examples of urban transformation, from the boom of non-state workers, *cuentapropistas*, and entrepreneurs, to the infrastructural changes denoting the flow of transnational investments. According to Zurbano, the sites denoting these transformations reproduce the structures of the plantation economy and are usually occupied by non-black bodies (2023), including those of digital creators, of which only a minority are non-white.

The agentic vindication in producing narratives, claims the right to tell the subject's experience without obligation to discuss politics. Most YouTubers based in Cuba contextualized their voicing of views as a non-political endeavor, again defining politics as a binary model. With his section '100 cubanos responden' (100 Cubans reply), *Pedrito el Paketero* represents an excellent example of how the 'avoidance' of politics operates:

> I go around with a microphone in hand, and when I approach people, many run away to avoid being filmed, but those are occupational hazards. In the end, each one decides whether to participate in my program or not. I do not ask about critical issues. I am not interested in discussing politics. I can say that those refusing to talk are not concerned about the topics. They fear being on camera at the sight of my followers (Zaldívar 2019).

Politics is displayed in this context as partisan politics, and its avoidance is a choice of distancing oneself from both the narratives defending or opposing the Cuban regime, and yet teases the one voicing opinions to silence views on contentious issues. Not discussing politics became a distinctive mark of emergent microcelebrities, allowing them to perform as *cubano de a pie*. The concept, which translates as 'Cuban on foot,' describes people with no privileges who do not belong to the country's political and economic elites. The limits are often blurred in a country like Cuba, with an emergent middle class. Islanders also experience the trope as applying to those who endure 'multilayered precarity,' the various forms in which precarity manifests in people's everyday lives (De Ferrari 2021). For some others, being a *cubano de a pie* implies moving across urban or rural spaces by walking, public transportation, or other creative means. In the case of YouTubers, the concept defines the performative act by which they present themselves as non-privileged people moving across the city, portraying either the quotidian or exceptional occurrences as lived by them, personifying ordinary Cubans. Whereas owning a mobile phone and regular internet access are signs of economic privilege, content production's ordeals helped YouTubers claim a place in the *cubano de a pie* hierarchy.

In addition to facing the same difficulties as aspirational YouTubers worldwide and bearing the burden of high connectivity prices, technological disadvantages, social judging, and political constraints related to latent censorship, as we will see later, Cuban YouTubers had to overcome other challenges. Initially, most were generally aware that including ads in their videos could generate income. Still, two factors played against them: the virtual inexistence of an advertisement industry following the nationalization of private media in 1960 and the elimination of publicity in 1961 (Muñiz 2003), and the U.S. economic sanctions against the island commonly known as the U.S. embargo or *el bloqueo*.

Camallerys' career illustrates the potential for YouTubers to monetize their content through sponsorships. He initiated this by offering to feature a restaurant in one of his videos in exchange for payment and received 6 USD and a free meal. The success of this partnership led to more business owners approaching him, prompting him to define a brand (De la Cantera 2020). This case also exemplifies the resurgence of commercial advertising in Cuba.

Because the internet exists alongside offline forms of communication, many first-cohort YouTubers in Cuba utilized *el paquete*. Being featured on it meant gaining visibility in and beyond the island because the diaspora also consumes it, as Cearns has proved (2019). The

technicalities of the process were challenging: saving videos to memory sticks, working with distributors to get recordings to distribution centers, and paying distributor fees. Allegedly, local YouTubers' materials were eventually excluded from *el paquete* after an incident involving drug-related content (Roque 2019).

One of the reasons behind YouTubers' gatherings, like the one in Vedado, was to share experiences and insights into content monetization. They had some understanding of sponsorships but were not always familiar with 'monetization.' The YouTube Partner Program enables creators to earn revenue from ads shown during their videos. To qualify, they need to meet specific criteria, including having 1000 subscribers, more than 4000 public watch hours in 12 months, an AdSense account linked to a bank account for payments, adherence to YouTube community regulations, and residing in a country where the Partner Program is available.

With Cuba being on the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) Sanctions List, the country is not included in the YouTube Partner Program. Cuban bank accounts cannot be linked to AdSense for the same reason. This limitation had direct implications for YouTubers like *Anita con Swing*. Her first channel, *Baby con Swing*, registered as based in Cuba, was ineligible for monetization despite having a following of 8000 subscribers in 2018, a notable achievement at the time. Additionally, she faced challenges related to copyright law infringements, unknowingly featuring protected music, which resulted in removing videos (Concepción 2020b).

To circumvent the U.S. sanctions, YouTubers need a frontperson, usually a friend or relative residing abroad, who becomes the official 'owner' of the Google AdSense account or 'loans' her bank information to get the generated revenue (De la Cantera 2020). The process ends once the earnings arrive in Cuba as remittances or cash brought by mules. This demonstrates how, in addition to access inequalities determined by the internet costs, being a YouTuber requires contacts abroad, which not all Cubans have. In that sense, becoming a YouTuber reflects social and economic privilege. Digital creators may not belong to economic or political elites but are not usually on the margins of society.

THE YOUTUBER BOOM

By 2019, some YouTubers were making substantial income and had gained public recognition (Pérez 2019). In addition to media reports documenting their financial success, advertisement inserts in videos or posts on Instagram evidenced that they had become sponsorship targets. For instance, as noted in his video descriptions, *Pedrito el Paketero* counted a cosmetic surgery clinic, a realtor, and a boutique in Miami among his sponsors.

Most YouTubers initially used Facebook and Instagram as a complement to YouTube. *Camallerys* and *Anita* repeatedly claimed to study the functioning of different platforms systematically and talked about audience segmentation. Different platforms meant different publics. Facebook allowed for interactions with older followers, many of whom were Cuban, as it remains the island's most used social media platform. In contrast, Instagram's 'vintage and retro photographic aesthetics' (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin 2020:192) connected them with a younger public and allowed them to take advantage of the stereotypical nostalgic allure of Havana's streets. In addition, platform crossovers gave room to display different media personas. For example, *stories*, Instagram's feature displayed for 24-hour lapses that allows sharing ephemeral pictures and short videos was used to play with the notion of intimacy, giving audiences a chance to sneak in their quotidian lives, revealing the 'private persona' vis-à-vis the public one.

The turning point in Cuba's internet expansion, which occurred in December 2018 with ETECSA's launch of the 3G mobile network, marked a clear advance in the internet's gradual growth and a dramatic change in use patterns and meanings: 3G connections enabled people to be online in domestic spaces and on the move instead of depending on public WiFi access points. As observed during the second fieldwork period, mobile phone connections were quickly transformed into hotspots, reaching a more significant number of users that either shared their connection based on reciprocity or for a fraction of the official retail price. This affordance became crucial for YouTubers, allowing them to explore or intensify diverse forms of content creation that appealed to larger audiences.

Table 1 shows that over half of the analyzed YouTube accounts opened after 2018. During the research, I noticed that channels created before that year increased their activity in 2019. The reasons are manifold beyond the rolling out of mobile internet. First, the cheapening of connectivity resulted in cross-platform content creation, with posts on Instagram and Facebook attracting more video viewers to YouTube. Second, the increasing offer of services targeting the diaspora with Cuba-based relatives, such as remote mobile phone top-ups and online supermarkets, allowed them to find sponsors. The concrete outcome was getting payments in cash or products in exchange for publicity and increased interactions with followers. Profits brought, in turn, the possibility to better develop publishing strategies like programming videos on specific days of the week to increase audience engagement. Finally, the steady growth of tourism flows, at least until mid-2019 when the Trump administration banned cruises to the island and restricted flights to the provinces, turned YouTubers' videos into unofficial touristic guides to Cuba.

Channels *Pedrito el Paketero*, *Camallerys Vlogs*, and *Anita con Swing* were the first within the research scope to obtain large numbers of subscribers, people who get new content displayed after subscribing to a specific channel while logged on to YouTube. They became role

models that legitimized being a YouTuber as a lucrative career within the Cuban context. Table 1 shows the estimated monthly revenue obtained by all of them by January 2023, as reported by *SocialBlade*, a social media analytics website. It is worth noticing that the figures were different in 2021 when they were first obtained as part of the research. Annual revenue was estimated between 5,300 and 84,500 euros for *Pedrito el Paketero*, 818 and 13,100 euros for *Anita con Swing*, and 655 to 10,500 euros for *Camallerys*. Although the amounts provided by *SocialBlade* are only estimates, most content creators have confirmed at some point that income is closer to the upper figure and does not include paid collaborations or 'mention' posts that reference services or brands.

A well-differentiated second cohort of YouTubers emerged in 2020. They raised their follower base more rapidly than the first, getting income sooner. Two notable examples are the channels *The Spartan Vlog* and *Yoliene*. The reasons behind this are again multifarious. First, pioneer YouTubers legitimized the activity as a 'job.' Second, their narratives became a popular commodity during the 2019 crisis, when commentary on economic scarcity became inevitable, even for those who had explicitly avoided dealing with contentious societal issues.

In April 2019, the secretary of the Cuban Communist Party, Raúl Castro, announced the imminency of a new period of scarcity (Vicent 2019), which became evident during the second part of the year. Long queues in gas stations and supermarkets, empty grocery shop shelves, and state-managed stores operating in foreign currency were showcased across social media platforms. Traditional media outside Cuba also borrowed and reproduced many of those images. The following year, when the global pandemic exacerbated the economic

CHANNEL	ACCOUNT OPENING YEAR	SUBSCRIBERS	UPLOADS	VIEWS	ESTIMATED MONTHLY REVENUE
Dina Stars	2015	73,700	405	5,760,925	€28–€447
Yoel and Mari	2016	117,000	129	28,842,620	€92–€1,500
Emma Style	2016	36,100	91	1,435,088	€7–€113
Pedrito el Paketero	2016	265,000	284	59,193,223	€34–€548
Frank el Makina	2016	63,800	232	9,095,350	€281–€4,500
Camallerys Vlogs	2017	220,000	390	34,572,226	€322–€5,200
Anita con Swing	2017	135,000	185	14,292,820	€243–€3,900
Juanmy Records	2017	115,000	828	26,861,634	€188–€3,000
Lisa Garci	2018	64,900	198	7,547,859	€100–€1,600
Clau Tropiezos	2018	39,800	172	3,071,123	€103–€1,600
Cuba Indriany Vlogs	2018	124,000	149	25,205,060	€171–€2,700
Anita Mateu	2018	347,000	126	26,559,608	€371–€5,900
Grethel Space	2019	57,900	224	7,046,111	€65–€1000
Jonix Dose	2019	11,100	391	1,748,697	€97–€1,600
Alita's World	2019	46,000	131	4,833,218	€135–€2,200
The Spartan Vlog	2020	208,000	289	47,281,206	€736–€11,800
Soy Klaudia	2020	126,000	126	10,367,376	€152–€2,400
Nanditta	2020	52,500	139	4,292,714	€136–€2,200
Picante Cubano	2020	8,340	149	1,422,541	€4–€70
Clauthentic Chic	2020	50,000	380	4,656,454	€70–€1,300
Yusi Vlogs Cuba	2020	12,400	236	1,428,373	€6–€103
Vámonos con Juanka	2020	61,500	405	14,138,747	€205–€3,300
Yoliene	2020	138,000	176	13,603,373	€434–€6,900
Victor G	2021	32,300	71	2,841,442	€82–€1,300
Malia Llovet	2021	83,400	112	8,408,877	€176–€2,800

Table 1 YouTube Channels Statistics as of January 2023.
Source: *SocialBlade*.

crisis and the Cuban authorities' responses to the sanitary emergency included harsh mobility restrictions, the reports provided by YouTubers gained greater visibility. As we know, people turned to YouTube and other social media platforms not only to look for information about the pandemic but also to get a sense of how others were experiencing it. This phenomenon boosted the visibility of digital content creators and encouraged others to either start their YouTube channels or dedicate more time to an activity that had been only a side hustle.

In addition, the creators of *Camallerys Vlogs* and *Anita con Swing* left Cuba in 2020 and 2021, respectively, and *Pedrito el Paketero* stopped producing videos. Whereas loyal viewers followed the earlier two creators on their journeys abroad, those longing for Cuba-made content turned their eyes to emergent microcelebrities who took advantage of new affordances: making live transmissions on the move, getting regular income from paid subscriptions, and the Cuban adaptation of unboxing videos, featuring presents from by lavish donors. Simultaneously, the discussion of their right to portray everydayness became also crucial.

2. URBAN EVERYDAY NARRATIVES: AFFECTION, PUBLIC INTERVENTIONS, AND THE DIGITAL REPOSITORY

I have previously identified YouTube videos as glocal narratives that, in the cases here studied, showcase itinerances through Havana. Their novelty stems from being presented mainly by younger generations, who chose to perform as *cubanos de a pie*, individuals free from political agendas that appeal to global audiences. By situating these narratives in a liminal space that rejects binary political engagements, the content creators I focused on reproduced the common rhetorical device of not discussing politics, a *de facto* self-censorship mechanism, to bypass state censorship. Everydayness functioned as well as a quality for internet celebrity by means of curating mundane and ordinary aspects to create a sense of community and trust (Abidin 2018: 31–33).

When Anabelle Vigo published the first video on her Channel *Anita con Swing*, it featured the supermarket 3ra. y 70, as part of a viral trend challenging people to present shops and products acquired. *Anita's* second-most-watched piece is divided into three moments: the walk to the supermarket, the showcase of the alleys, and the description of the purchased goods (Anita 2018). Nothing is seemingly remarkable in the video, but it offers a site-bounded experience perceived as 'exotic' by escaping the culturally normal. It is a sneak peek into consumption practices in a post-socialist Cuba marked by scarcity. This resource crosscuts the content of most YouTubers, even beyond Havana, as *Anita Mateu's* video of a supermarket in Matanzas demonstrates (2022).

In a sort of spin-off, YouTubers who have left Cuba return consistently to the supermarket trope, reenacting what dozens of video commentators consider one of the most traumatic experiences of Cuban émigrés: finding oneself able to have what those left behind cannot. Simultaneously, the non-Cuban public cannot avoid expressing the perceived privileges of 'capitalist societies'. The videos featured in *Yoel and Mari*, in which a Cuban and a Cuban American document the former's 'migrant journey' experience, present good examples of the appeal of Cubans' discovery of the 'capitalist world' (2021). Whereas these videos are not exclusive to Cubans, we can observe how they trigger emotional responses from the Cuban diaspora and people interested in Cuba and its inhabitants. These emotional responses, often reproducing binary political rhetoric reminiscent of the Cold War era, eclipse the already dark logic of the Cuban market economy, in which consumers are forced to buy essential goods in foreign currencies or the black market.

Solutions to chronic scarcity by informal means, *resolver*, are a conspicuous element in the narratives of the everyday in the urban context exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. When officials limited access to public and commercial venues, regulated mobility to restricted zones, and suspended public transportation services at times, YouTubers were forced to leave behind the videos of landmarks and attractions. They resorted to content produced in domestic spaces or to filming videos while running errands. The latter formula proved extremely attractive to viewers and initiated the habit of visiting neighborhoods during live streams. The channels *Nanditta* and *Grethel Space* often featured such itinerances, often suggested in real time by diaspora spectators wishing to visit their old neighborhoods virtually (2020).

What I will call 'the mobile genre,' which features live mobile displacements, became popular during the pandemic as a way of virtual tourism. Around the same time, most creators started to offer memberships. The feature launched by the YouTube Partnership Program in 2018 grants perks to payees: private chat groups in which the creator discloses her private phone number, exclusive content, greetings, or the right to suggest video themes. For Google Inc., which owns YouTube, this feature generates more interactions translated into revenue through direct donations, advertising, and more intensive data extraction. For YouTubers, however, the program was an opportunity to obtain more income and to weave digital networks of care and support (Baldassar & Wilding 2020) cultivated in everyday interactions inside and outside the platform, which proved indispensable during the pandemic.

A way in which these networks become visible is through the publication of unboxing videos. An integral part of the broader YouTube economy, these videos can also reflect a pattern of caregiving through a transnational cycle of

gift exchange (Mowlabocus 2020; Lima-Becker 2021). They consist of opening packages sent by 'subscribers,' 'followers,' or 'members,' usually containing scarce goods like toothpaste, soap, aspirins, or 'capitalist delicacies' such as candy and beauty products. In return for their sometimes anonymous generosity, donors see videos with joyful reactions and expressions of gratitude.

As an urban space intervention, everydayness refers to irruptions in public space that reveal social, economic, and political power relations embedded in quotidian or trivial interactions. Again, *Pedrito el Paketero* illustrates this matter well by showcasing videos in which he presents nuanced questions to passersby, asking individuals their opinions about 'people from Miami' (2019). The question is sufficiently open to avoid controversial responses endangering the interviewee, but it teases prospective audiences to expect mentions of segments of the Miami diaspora opposing the Cuban regime. *Pedrito el Paketero* based its popularity on public space disruptions through rogue inquiries, albeit receiving accusations of being an *agente de la Seguridad del Estado*, an intelligence and counterintelligence officer, the manifestation of an oppressive political structure.

Positioning himself as a vernacular pundit, *Pedrito* leveraged conversations to provoke discussions about his own presence in public spaces and online. During the pandemic, along with *Juanmy* and *Frank el Mákina*, he created the *escuadrón de la verdad*, truth's squad, which broadcasted live discussions. In June 2020, they invited Adrián, the lawyer behind the channel *Picante Cubano*, to discuss internet legislation and privacy. The conversation stemmed from an incident in which a police officer confronted *Pedrito* during a livestream in Centro Habana for accidentally filming a police car. While the discussion concentrated on legal technicalities, we can also interpret it as a conversation on police brutality, repression tactics, freedom of expression, and the presence of transnational publics as witnesses of such incidents (Juanmy Records 2020).

In a more superfluous manner, public space dissensus appeared occasionally as the protagonist of the videos of creators that tended to avoid social commentary. For instance, in 2019, Frank Camallerys dealt with the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Havana's foundation. The shots display the street renovations as a cosmetic make-over that, while visible, is interpreted as a resource to eclipse the metropole's problems (Camallerys 2019). In previous content, Camallerys had dedicated his time to showcase those precise infrastructural changes using the trope of Havana as a city 'frozen in time' as an allure and not as a form of critique. Beyond the election of sites and words used to describe changes and the conveyed intention, the video showcases radical transformations in the urban landscape while presenting them as a site of dissensus. As observed during fieldwork, the idea of 'Havana is falling down, but *they* build hotels' is recurrent.

That same dissensus is presented in the video documenting *Anita con Swing*'s return to Cuba. An articulated account of the implications of returning to the island that starts with shopping for essentials for her family before leaving Madrid, the video features borrowed footage from the July 11 protests and the explosion of the Saratoga hotel in 2021. As the sequence progresses, the YouTuber walks the emblematic Prado, approaching the seafront avenue Malecón while discussing the value of the city's architectural heritage contrasting with its continuous decadence. Calling attention to the emptiness of the streets, she finds her immigrant-self questioning issues not commonly present in the content she has long assumed as 'a performance.' At some point, she adds: 'How painful it is, as a Cuban, to see your city falling apart while hotels are built in the corners of strategic zones. How rapidly can a hotel be rebuilt while there are people who never get their homes repaired?' (2023) The video is simultaneously a carefully crafted visual summary of the places she featured while living in Cuba, a testimonial of the perceived transformations and reminiscences of the post-pandemic city, and an allusion to the journey that about 300,000 Cubans have experienced in what is considered one of the most significant exodus from the island in the last 40 years.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

On July 11, 2021, the #SOSCuba hashtag became a global social media trend. Images of people taking to Havana streets demanding food and freedom circulated worldwide. In the aftermath of the protests, some YouTubers informed having joined the demonstrations in situ and online, while others remained voluntarily silent. In the days that followed the most significant wave of protests since the triumph of the Revolution, reports of police brutality and apprehensions abounded, too. The YouTuber *DinaStars* was arrested during a live interview with international media, an apprehension some social media users suspected to be a fabrication. Real or not, it was showcased as an exemplary punishment that, along with the systematic digital blackout imposed by the authorities, instigated fear in many YouTubers. When the government enacted new internet-use regulations after July 11 (Committee 2021), the resort to the non-politics card lost momentum.

By October 2023, only 9 of the 26 YouTubers whose videos were analyzed for this article remained on the island. Most of them migrated for economic reasons, reportedly thanks to the income obtained from YouTube or using the networks of care and solidarity they had forged. After leaving, some of them publicly admitted being intimidated by the intelligence police, stating it was one of the reasons for leaving Cuba. Usually, those who no longer have close family members on the island

are open in their critiques of censorship mechanisms and current events. For instance, Frank Camallerys maintains the channel *CamallerysXCuba*, using a correspondent and focusing on societal problems. A third cohort of post-pandemic content creators that identified content production as an instrument to leave the island has also emerged, and we can find cases not studied here in which irregular border crossings are well documented.

Humphreys identifies the presence of 'cautious hopes for change' in the context of the U.S.-Cuba rapprochement, which she saw soon overshadowed by state-censorship scandals like the one involving the film *Return to Ithaca* from 2015 and the apprehension of artist Tania Bruguera (2019: 210–218). Indeed, our collaborators and interlocutors in intellectual and artistic circles disagreed with the optimistic views expressed by most of the YouTubers studied. A recent case involved the Ministry of Culture and the prohibition of the screening of a film selection at a cultural forum. The list included Juan Pin's *La Habana de Fito* and *Existen. Resistencia del Arte Urbano en Cuba*, directed by Fernando Fraguela and Yulier Rodríguez (2022). *Existen* charts the history of graffiti in Havana and was born by the initiative of Rodríguez, one of Cuba's most prominent street artists, and collaborator of the *Cubaflux* project. Rodríguez made the documentary publicly available on YouTube on November 30, 2022. He did so hoping to avoid jail time, anticipating the enforcement of the new penal code on December 1, which criminalized the receipt of funds aimed at 'subverting the constitutional order' in Cuba. Rodríguez had received a personal grant from our project, part of which he used to finance the post-production of the documentary.

Further research on the configuration of Cuba's post-digital diaspora(s) may shed light on how censorship and self-censorship shape everyday narratives in microcelebrity cultures, online cultural communities, and for people without social media visibility. For researchers, studying Cuba still risks falling into binary visions of Cuban phenomena that operate in a Cold War-like setting despite the island's global interconnectedness.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The project's online visual archive is available at https://cubaflux.utu.fi.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

The research for this article was conducted within the project *Cubaflux* approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the University of Turku (Statement 55/2019). No formal interviews were conducted for this article. YouTubers' identifiable personal information comes exclusively from public sources. For ethical reasons, private interactions here referred have been anonymized and were registered in netnographic or fieldwork notes in possession of the author.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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