



The YouTube Effect on Adolescence: Exploring the Influences of Youtubers on Adolescents' Identity Construction

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Ergenlikte YouTube Etkisi: Ergenlerin Kimlik İnşasında YouTuberların Etkisini Keşfetmek

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Abstract

This qualitative research study investigated the influence of YouTubers on adolescents' identity construction by exploring interactions between YouTubers and adolescents. Towards this goal, this study intended to examine YouTubers' role in adolescents' lives in terms of mindset and daily practices. In this interpretative phenomenological study, the analyses of the data collected from 10 adolescents through semi-structured interviews revealed that YouTubers guided adolescents to become integrated into the society by noticing the similar aspects of their identities such as feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Furthermore, YouTubers have been found to assist adolescents to discover their individuality through their videos and comments of other viewers on these videos. Also, it has been observed that the exploration option and range of social interactions extended thanks to the YouTubers. However, adolescents sometimes overly identified themselves with the YouTubers, imitated them and implemented the YouTubers' recommendations without questioning.

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Ergenlikte YouTube Etkisi: Ergenlerin Kimlik İnşasında YouTuberların Etkisini Keşfetmek

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı ergenlerin kimlik inşasında YouTuberların etkisini araştırmak ve bu süreçte aralarında ne tür etkileşimler olduğunu keşfetmektir. Bu bağlamda, YouTuberların ergenlerin hayatındaki rolü, onların düşünce ve günlük pratiklerine etkilerini incelemektedir. Bu nitel çalışmada, ergenlerin kimlik deneyimleri hakkında derinlemesine bilgi toplamak için çoğunluğu İstanbul'da yaşayan 10 ergenle görüşme yapılarak veri toplanmıştır. Veriler, yorumlayıcı fenomenolojik analiz metodu kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmanın sonuçları YouTuberların ergenlere kimliklerinin duygu, düşünce ve inançlar gibi benzeşen yönlerini fark ettirerek topluma entegre olmalarına katkı sağladıklarını göstermiştir. Bunun yanı sıra, YouTuberlar hem kendi çektikleri videolar hem de bu videolara başkalarının yaptığı yorumlar aracılığıyla, ergenlerin bireyselliklerini fark etmelerinde yardımcı olmaktadır. Ayrıca, YouTuberlar sayesinde seçeneklerin araştırması imkanın ve sosyal etkileşim alanının oldukça genişlediği görülmüştür. Yine de, ergenlerin zaman zaman zaman YouTuberlarla fazla özdeşim kurdukları, onlara özendikleri ve onların önerilerini sorgulamadan uyguladıkları ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu bağlamda, ergenlerin ne derece etkilendiklerine dair farkındalıklarının düşük olduğu ve yeni medya okuryazarlığı becerilerinin yetersiz olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Sonuç olarak, ebeveynler, danışmanlar ve yetkililer için de uygulamaya dönük çıkarımlar tartışılmıştır.

Makale Bilgisi

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ergenlik dönemi, kimlik inşası, youtubers

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Introduction

YouTube has become one of the major sources of information for adolescents and one of the platforms that most adolescents spend a significant amount of their time every day. The latest research has proven that social media platforms have an undeniable influence on adolescents' social implementations, and they provide an ample space to figure out, search and express their identities (Davis, 2012). There are many popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, but YouTube has lately taken an outstanding place among other similar platforms with its rapidly increasing usage and domain (Burgess & Green, 2009). On its website, YouTube claims its mission as to give everyone a voice and show them the world. Additionally, the core values of YouTube are identified with four essential freedom versions, namely, freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of opportunity and freedom to belong (YouTube, 2019). Therefore, YouTube has become the most popular multimedia archive, video sharing, and a social network platform today (Burgess & Green, 2009).

Along with this flourishing power, individuals started to produce and broadcast their official videos and content and they are called YouTubers (Gardner & Lenhart, 2016). YouTubers are individuals coming from various social environments and backgrounds; some are amateurs and some others are professionals, who share videos and become known by a number of people even though they are not famous in society. These people can rapidly reach large groups of followers just with videos they post and gain lots of money by advertising products in those videos (Illera & Benito, 2018). In this new order, YouTubers take their place in the community as ordinary people who have gained visibility and fame through online platforms (Ando, 2016).

According to the data gathered by Defy Media, 96% of YouTube users are 13 to 24 years old. Adolescents prefer YouTube mostly because they expand their social environment by participating in video groups through YouTube, which shows them multiple ways in making friends (Lenhart et al., 2015). New paths open for them to express themselves in different ways (Eftekhar, Fullwood & Norris, 2014), and a new dimension of sociability emerge in their lives. The enormous number of videos available on YouTube from around the world with their unique themes, discourses, and formats enlarge the social circle of adolescents. This fact permits exposure to new concepts and ideas among young people at an international level, which affects the process of identity formation for adolescents in the areas of sexuality, moral values, language, diet, media, and so forth. (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011). Identity formation is a process of finding "a balance between that which is taken to be self and that considered to be the other." (Kroger, 1996, p.8).

Regarding the survey results published by Variety magazine, YouTube celebrities are found to be more popular among adolescents than traditional celebrities are (Defy media, 2015). The reason behind this fact is that sharing private matters or things with the audience and trying to maintain interaction with followers create a sense of powerful relationship (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Therefore, YouTubers have an emotional bond with teens (Meseguer, 2016). Also, research has shown that adolescents are profoundly affected by YouTubers, and they imitate their behaviors. For instance, they buy the products suggested by YouTubers and change or adapt their behaviors in the way they are affected by YouTubers, such as their way of dressing, their make-up styles, the language they use, and their sense of humor (Westenberg, 2016).

This fact enables adolescents to meet with new concepts and ideas at an international level, which affects the process of identity formation for adolescents in the areas of sexuality, moral values, language, diet, media, and so forth. (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011). Adolescents take YouTubers as role models during identity formation in many areas, such as social relationships, gender identity, vocational identity, and self-related concepts about their identity development. This situation has caused an acceleration of identification (Pérez-Torres, Pastor-Ruiz and Ben-Boubaker., 2018; Westenberg, 2016). For example, Pérez-Torres et al, (2018) proposed in their studies that YouTubers have the potential to affect the process of searching and learning during adolescence. Within the context of vocational identity, YouTubers tell their life story and how they built a career for themselves. In terms of gender identity development, YouTubers function as a guiding spirit in the exploration of gender orientation of adolescents. YouTubers tell, directly or indirectly, adolescents how they find out and manage their gender orientation personally and publicly.

Despite previous studies on YouTubers' influence on identity construction (Pérez-Torres et al., 2018), teenager behavior (Westenberg, 2016), bonding (Folkvord, 2019), gender roles (Ando, 2016), gender identity Lovelock, 2016), advertising recognition and literacy (De Jans, 2019), uncertainty still remains in terms of the extent and nature of YouTubers' impact on adolescents' identity construction in different parts of the world. Although Türkiye is one of the countries with the youngest populations in the world, the related empirical literature is limited, if not entirely nonexistent. Thus, the present study aims to explore the experiences of adolescents who follow YouTubers in terms of their identity construction. In other words, this study intends to examine how adolescents experience their identity growth as followers spending at least 30 minutes daily to watch YouTubers.

This study is guided by two questions: 1) How do YouTubers influence adolescents' identity construction processes in terms of mindset and daily practices? and 2) What kind of interactions do adolescents' engage in with YouTubers? In presenting our explorations of the influence of YouTubers on adolescents' mindset, daily practices, concrete behaviors, and attitudes, we have organized this study into three main parts. First, we review previous research on adolescents' identity formation and YouTubers and describe the study's conceptual framework drawing from Erikson's psychosocial theory (1968), Marcia's Identity status paradigm (1980), Berzonsky's identity processing styles (1990), social context influence on identity formation (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Cote, 2009). Second, we recount our methodology and use thematic analysis to present descriptive findings focused on the interactions between adolescents and the YouTubers they follow, and the role YouTubers play in adolescents' identity formation. Finally, we use our conceptual framework to interpret the data presented in our findings.

Literature Review

Identity construction in Adolescence

Adolescence is a phase of transformation during which children turn into adults' step by step through lots of visible and invisible changes (Buckingham, 2008). In the Erikson's psychosocial theory (1968), the conflict between identity and identity confusion is the core dynamic for adolescence. It is a process of finding "a balance between that which is taken to be self that considered to be the other (Kroger, 1996, p.8). One aspect of identity consists of membership in a social group or groups and the collective value mechanisms that this membership brings along (Tajfel, 1982), the other aspect of identity is finding unique and personal way of living. The achievement of both abilities in a balanced way eventually forms the notion of identity (Adams & Marshall, 1996).

This process enables individuals to form a stable, socially accepted, and meaningful identity for themselves through various explorations and searching (Erikson, 1968).

Marcia (1980) has conceptualized and functionalized Erikson's theory and introduce identity statuses paradigm that has four statuses considering two dimensions namely "exploration of options" and "inner commitments" (Marcia 1989, 1994). Exploration of options means the process through which each individual is reconsidering and questioning their beliefs, thoughts, and experiences. Inner commitment means choosing and deciding one of the options to which they develop loyalty in turn. (Marcia, 1966).

- **Achievement:** If individuals come up with inner commitments through an active exploration phase, they are supposed to reach to a successful identity status.
- **Moratorium:** some individuals go through the explorations actively and eagerly search for the options. However, they fail to decide on a particular option and to make inner commitments.
- **Foreclosure:** Individuals make inner commitments, but they do not investigate that option. They usually make choices generally based on the expectancies of other people around them, or the options on which they have made inner commitments.
- **Identity diffusion:** Individuals prefer neither to make exploration nor to make inner commitments on an option.

Berzonsky (1990) has approached the identity by considering socio-cognitive processes. He proposed three styles of identity; information-oriented, norm-oriented, and avoidance-oriented (Berzonsky, 1989; 1990; 1992; 1994). Information-oriented individuals correspond with those who have suspended identity and who are successful at identity status in Marcia's theory. A norm-oriented identity is the one where individuals form the values and expectations through their families or social environments. That is why they avoid outer information due to the possible damage these values and expectations might have. This identity style corresponds with that of Marcia's identity foreclosure. Avoidance-oriented individuals always abstain from making a decision and commitment, which corresponds with the identity diffusion of Marcia's (Berzonsky, 1992; 1999).

Adolescents' relations with YouTubers

According to a research study carried out in Canada, according to the children's statements, YouTube is in the first place for them among ten other social media platforms. Furthermore, among Spanish students aged 14 to 17, Facebook is the most popular social media platform, with YouTube coming in second (Pérez-Torres et al., 2018). According to Türkiye's YouTube user profile research in 2016, 72% of users aged 16 to 24 spend their time watching videos on YouTube. Video watching has become the most time-consuming activity following work and sleep for adolescents. Internet usage statistics in Türkiye in 2018 have shown that YouTube is the most effective social media platform with a share of 55% (Ferah, 2016).

YouTube offers teens a field where they can investigate their identities, connect with their friends, and have fun at the same time. In addition, it helps adolescents to believe that they have the feeling of contributing to the community. Beyond that, YouTubers share an extensive coverage of their life stories, hobbies, success, and failures in their videos

(Chau, 2010). This helps teens gain a perspective of life in terms of relationships, style, and design for adolescents who are stepping into life (Westenberg, 2016). As a result, we can say that beyond entertainment, YouTube acts as a source of information for adolescents (Tolson, 2010).

Chau (2010) emphasized that the sense of social connection that YouTube offers was another crucial feature for teens. One of the essential qualities that make YouTube users different from those who use other platforms is that the videos created by YouTubers have a powerful emotional function because their speech is based on the narrative style. The gestures and facial expressions they use during this process allow their followers and audience to understand what they mean and how they feel (Scolari & Fraticelli, 2017). Beyond this, YouTubers share supposedly sincere posts about their private lives, such as their relationships or bedrooms, and even their confessions of mistakes, crimes, and sins, which enables them to display their inner truth, which in turn keeps them at a closer distance to their audience (Jerslev, 2016). It provides the opportunity to get to know YouTubers better and make a stronger connection, thus arousing the sense of closeness among the followers and the YouTubers. Therefore, adolescents highly prefer YouTube platform because they regard YouTubers as their peers and fellows because most of the YouTubers are contemporaries of adolescents. It helps them consider those YouTubers as the individuals of the same generation and as the social learning theory suggests, They take YouTubers as reference people for themselves, and therefore they may imitate their actions, and identify themselves with them (Bentley, Earls & O'Brien, 2011).

According to research conducted by Google, 60% of adolescents think that YouTubers are better people than their friends (O'Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016). Teens do not equate themselves by taking Hollywood stars as examples, so they do not compare their own lives with theirs. However, it does apply with YouTubers. Unlike big stars, YouTubers are ordinary people with ordinary life stories, and they might be just anyone in our lives (Westenberg, 2016). The fans state that it feels important to realize how similar they are to YouTubers and that they like the idea of going through the same phases in life as they do. Along with these feelings, followers identify themselves through YouTubers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). They see themselves as friends with YouTubers when they have the opportunity to be involved in their lives closely (Livingston, 2012). Ultimately, being able to identify themselves with YouTubers is considered as one of the most important reasons for fans and followers to trust the suggestions that YouTubers make (Giles, 2018). being a professional and seeking for perfection are considered to discredit YouTubers (Fred, 2015). As the followers do not like egoistic behaviors in a YouTuber, they want YouTubers to remember that they have reached fame even though they were once ordinary people (Kahraman, 2016).

According to a study conducted with Spanish adolescents, participants were found to value the characteristics of YouTubers whom they take as references. Besides, adolescents have responded that a better ethnical and gender-related past and the theme diversity of YouTubers are essential elements when they were asked how they decide which YouTubers to like. The level of coolness, sharing things with peers, and the identification of followers with YouTubers are more effective than the appearance and cleverness of YouTubers (Pérez-Torres et al., 2018).

YouTubers and identity formation of adolescents

YouTubers help adolescents learn about what kind of difficulties adolescents face and how they integrate their previous self-concepts into present self-concepts in the formation of vocational and gender identity. While sharing these scenarios, they encourage teenagers to explore their own identities and experience their personal self (Pérez-Torres et al., 2018). Especially in the matter of gender identity and orientation, teenagers are able to get some answers to questions by following the videos on YouTubers' channels who are in LBGQT, such as how they have realized it, whom they have shared it with or whom they have got support from. Besides, teenagers can ask YouTubers some questions concerning their experiences, which initiates an interaction. YouTube celebrities and their gay or lesbian identities, famous gay YouTubers define themselves as role models for young gay and lesbians in their videos (Lovelock, 2016). It is not just a badge for LBGQT, the female YouTubers also have an effect on the sexual and gender identity formation of female teenagers. Thus, female YouTubers are continually rewriting the girlhood models represented (Ando, 2016; p.135).

According to the results of the study by Westenberg (2016), teenagers take YouTubers as role models and respect them. It is undeniable that YouTubers are the actors and actresses of teenagers in digital and social media platforms. However, the related research revealed that most teenagers want to become a YouTuber, but only as a hobby instead of an occupation. Despite that, Aran-Ramspott et al. (2018) have stated that even though teenagers are not planning to be YouTubers as a professional and they claim that they are not affected by them in this way, they clearly cannot stop imitating YouTubers' expressions and languages. In essence, YouTubers influence the identity construction process of adolescents due to their position as reference people.

This study aims to explore the experiences of adolescents who follow YouTubers in terms of their identity construction. Examining the influences of YouTubers on adolescents' identity construction can potentially reveal complexities and challenges adolescents go through in this significant period of life.

Method

Design

This study employed qualitative research techniques, methods, and analysis in line with the purposes of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the nature of the participants' experiences and thoughts. It was essential to allow participants to share their stories and to hear their voices. Interviews are suggested as the pre-eminent technique for the investigation of feelings, attitudes, intentions, and motivations of behaviors study (Silverman, 1985)

Participants

Participants were selected based on a snowball sampling method (Seidman, 2016). The participants were recruited through two selection criteria for the study. First, participants have to be between the ages of 14 and 18 and being a close follower of YouTubers in terms of spending at least 30 minutes daily to watch YouTubers' videos. Second, being a regular follower of particular YouTubers' videos was preferable in the process of sampling. After conducting 10 interviews with participants (five females and five males), similar expressions and topics started to repeat. The researcher considered the saturation criteria and terminated the data collection process. Based on this sampling method, eight participants were living in Istanbul, and last two participants were living in Gebze and Konya.

Procedure & Instruments

Research and publication ethics were followed. The research process was initiated with the permission of the ethics committee of Social Sciences and Humanities in Bogazici University (Date: 30 October 2019, Number: 2019-68). After permission letter was taken, all the data were collected in between January and May 2020. Before conducting the interviews, the informed consent was obtained from both the participants and their parents. This form included the information about the purpose of the study and certain explanations about confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, data retention, data security, duration of the interviews and the recordings. Besides, the necessary ethical explanations about the rights and responsibilities of the participants are included in this form. At the beginning, brief information about the study was shared and then demographic information form was distributed to the participants. Throughout the form, questions targeted to collect the information about participants' age, gender, city, and province they live in, the number of family members, birth-order, parents' graduation degree and income. In the interviewing phase, a semi-structured interview questions that was prepared in the light of previous researches and probes were used (Holholm, 2015; Westenberg, 2016). The interview protocol consisted of eight open-ended and six close-ended questions aiming to see the YouTubers through the eyes of the adolescents and exploring the influence of Youtubers on adolescents' experiences, mindset and behaviors. The interviews took approximately one hour to one hour and a half. (Seidman, 2006). All of the interviews were recorded by a voice recorder in order to transcribe and decode the data (Weiss, 1995).

Data Analysis

The interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to examine the data. It required four steps; respectively, 1) the close reading and re-reading of the transcribed text, 2) forming meaning groups by selecting the items that respond to research questions, 3) identifying clusters, and 4) tabulating appearing themes that are related to definition of the identity in the literature review and dimensions of the identity formation statues in a summary table by developing a master list and table of themes (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). After all iterative steps, the essence of the identity experiences of the adolescents who are close followers of YouTubers is explored. The responded validation method was used to ensure the validity of the data analysis. Thereby, the researcher presents the results of the data to the participants to understand the convenience of the results (Merriam, 1995).

Results

The analysis of the data in the current study led to the emergence of two main themes namely "the notion of identity" and "identity formation." These are discussed in detail below.

The Notion of Identity

When the expressions of adolescents were examined, it was found that YouTubers play a role to facilitate the feeling two opposite sides of identity. The subthemes of this question were discussed below as "integration" and "differentiation." These findings are the subheadings of the identity notion.

4.1. Integration

Integration was one of the themes that most of the participants pointed out. Eight out of 10 participants indicated the fact that YouTubers assisted them in their integration into the society. In particular, they were able to find their characteristics similar to YouTubers in a breeze. Moreover, they described YouTubers as ordinary individuals like themselves. Through videos and comments, they stated that they had an opportunity to realize that others share their thoughts and behaviors, as well. Realizing that they have similarities in terms of lifestyles, opinions, preferences, and perceptions enhances the feeling of sense of belonging and social validation by others.

The analyses of the present study revealed that the most frequently recurrent subtheme is “sense of belonging” to the same group. According to the description of sense of belonging, eight out of 10 adolescents emphasized the idea that YouTubers are ordinary people like themselves. They feel that they are in the same boat with the YouTubers. Sharing the same values, beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors with YouTubers or their fans allows the participants to feel the idea that both parties belong to the same social environment. To illustrate, Participant 4 mentioned certain behavioral similarities between herself and the YouTuber that she follows:

For example, there is a doctor who has a vlog. He lives in Canada. I realize that many YouTubers are just like me. They like studying like me. For example, I would like to go to medical school. That is why I watch this doctor’s vlogs. I can say that I am looking for people with whom I share common things. (Participant-4)

This quotation showed that noticing commonality with YouTubers creates a special bond with them, which motivates them to be a close follower of that particular YouTuber. In addition to Participant 4, other participants also showed that they enjoy following YouTubers who share the same cultural, social, and spiritual values as themselves. For example, Participant 6 mentioned that having similar religious implications, such as performing pray, is essential for him to follow a certain YouTuber. He answered the question about commonalities between him and his favorite YouTuber as “performing prayer.”

Regarding this theme, sometimes shared thoughts and behaviors become crucial for adolescents to feel their belongingness to the same group. For instance, Participant 7 stated how she kept doing something that she did not like only because the YouTubers did and praised it a lot. For the reason that she had quite an explicit concern to become one of them, so she forced herself to do the YouTuber recommended. She stated:

Well, it is going to sound funny, but... Oat videos... In the beginning, YouTubers said that oat is sweet, and you can eat it at breakfast because it keeps you warm. Then I tried it, but it was not good. Actually, it sucked. I did not feel warm or full. But I kept eating it. In some mornings, I had the breakfast my mother made and ate the oat when I got back from school. I kept eating it, and after some time, it started to taste good. I watched so many videos that I started thinking that I was the weird one because it felt awful, but everyone else was saying that it feels very good with some cinnamon on it, and it keeps you warm, and it is nutritional. But I kept watching the videos, everyone liked it and suggested it. So, I kept trying it, and in the end, it started tasting very good.

So, you kept eating it even though you did not like it?

Yes, because there were so many videos and good comments on it that I felt really weird. Everyone liked it, and they even said that it is their favorite snack.

And you kept acting like?

Like I was one of them. Maybe I kept eating it because I did not want to feel weird. I do not know if it is a psychological effect or not, but after some time, it tasted good. I like it now. I do not always eat it because I do not need to eat it since my mother cooks for breakfast, but I eat it when I have free time. (Participant-7)

These quotations above portrayed that seeking resemblance is notable for adolescents to sense their integration into society. It is crucial to understand what kind of factors support the need that adolescents have. According to the analyses of the data, the genuineness of YouTubers encourages adolescents to feel belonging to the same social group. Six out of 10 adolescents emphasized the importance of YouTubers’ sincerity directly. That is why they were asked what they mean by sincerity during the interviews. Their definitions portrayed that in the context of YouTubers, being genuine means “feeling like talking one of their friends”, “seeing them as brothers or sisters”, “being natural”, “being nice”, “speaking with a smiling face” and “speaking the daily language”. As it is observed, adolescents highly value the

feeling that YouTubers are not utopic and different from ordinary people; on the other hand, they prefer YouTubers to be like one of them.

The second theme under the context of integration is social validation. This theme refers to how YouTubers assist adolescents in meeting the need for taking consent from other members of the community to construct constant identity. By looking at the data, five out of 10 participants expressed YouTubers' social validation function. One of the social validation issues for adolescents is about following particular YouTubers and having information about the YouTubers' videos because these YouTubers and their videos had become a form of communication, which creates certain communities and discourses among adolescents. They focus on peer acceptance issues in their social life and YouTubers work up this matter via creating a subculture in young people. They feel excluded when her friends talked about specific YouTubers.

The second domain of social validation subtheme is derived from the need to feel a sense of harmony with others in the society in terms of values, beliefs, and thoughts. The data analyses indicated that all of the participants read the comments under the video they are watching. Hence, the purpose of reading the comments was to approve their own beliefs and thoughts. For example, Participant 9 stated that he read comments to compare reactions at specific moments to see if anyone could notice something like him.

I mean, I sometimes read things about which I am curious. Just to check how people react to something happening or to see whether people are thinking the same way I do. (Participant-9)

In addition to Participant 9, Participant 7 mentioned similar impulses for validating herself by looking for feedback that reassures her attention. Hence, she reads comments under the YouTubers' videos for reliving the fear of being strange.

What do you feel, what do you think are always the same?

....

Everyone has watched this video; everyone is like me. (Participant-7)

By closely examining what Participant 7 stated, it is safe to say that she reads all the comments to get knowledge about others' ideas. Thus, she tries to observe how much her responses are acceptable for society. As it is seen from all examples under this subtheme, being socially validated is quite a powerful drive for adolescents in order to become integrated people in society.

4.2 Differentiation

Differentiation was one of the dominant themes that nine out of 10 participants point out in the interviews. Although adolescents need to be coherent with the society and norms, they also need to feel their uniqueness and autonomy in their life. Almost all participants reported that they are surprised when they see many followers give a lot of attention to and love the YouTubers. Additionally, through reading comments adolescents realize that people might not always share the same reactions, feelings, and opinions, which helps to see their differentiation from others. For example, Participant 8 stated his discovery that people could think differently from him. He articulated this awareness very clearly in the interview.

I can realize that people might have different thoughts than mine, that they can think differently. (Participant-8)

In light of all these results, we can see the tremendous contribution of reading comments in sensing identity. Establishment of the unique side of self was appeared in the context of YouTubers.

Identity formation

This central theme directly refers to the process of identity construction and how an adolescent experiences this process in their personal life. From the perspective of identity formation in the literature, searching alternatives corresponds to the exploration phase, and investment to a particular decision matches up to the commitment phase (Marcia, 1989). Therefore, this central theme involves two subthemes, as "enhancement of exploration in identity construction" and "preparation for commitment to identity construction".

4.3 Enhancement of exploration in identity construction

The present study focuses on how YouTubers assist adolescents in investigating opportunities in certain domains of identity because in the adolescence period, individuals begin to question the orientation of beliefs, thoughts, and values

that they formed in their childhood. Therefore, they start a search to find other alternatives to live sincerely and consciously.

4.3.1 Testing out various alternatives in life

Interviews with adolescents indicated that YouTubers shoot quite different kinds of videos illustrating their daily life, travels, purchased products, intellectual accumulation, leisure time, and many other things. With this wide variety of contents, YouTubers demonstrate the paths they follow in their lives, lifestyles, and scenes to adolescents, which allows meeting with distinct situations, objects, and people. Nine out of 10 adolescents referred to the importance of confronting multiple alternatives when talking about their motivations to follow these people in social media.

According to the present data, YouTubers facilitate the occupational exploration phase where adolescents are in a decision-making process. For example, Participant 7 expressed how her favorite YouTubers help them get sight of their future occupations. However, she not only tested vocational alternatives, but she also examined every situation she saw in YouTubers to decide whether it is applicable to her life.

Witnessing all those different lives helps me organize and direct my future. I ask myself: Do I want to have such a life? I do, or I do not. I change my actions accordingly. (Participant-7)

As it is portrayed in the quotes, through the presentation of personal life on videos, every YouTubers' life turns into a new future alternative for adolescents. Therefore, adolescents regard their life as a possible option for their future, and they tend to test all of the opportunities to find the best fitting one. YouTubers play an indispensable role in adolescent identity development.

4.3.2 The extension of existing forms of social interaction

This subtheme signalizes how YouTubers provide social interaction for adolescents and the functions to satisfy the social needs of adolescents. Seven out of 10 adolescents mentioned that Youtubes helps them to "feel connected" and "feel participated." Results indicated that adolescents watch YouTubers' videos in order to escape or cover unpleasant feelings they have. To give an example, Participant 7 explained how she deals with loneliness by watching YouTubers' videos in her daily life because pressing the video player button creates an atmosphere that there is one of her acquaintances at home.

Unfortunately, I cannot contact them, but it feels like they are my friends.

....

How does it make you feel?

It feels like I am not alone. For example, sometimes, no one texts me when I am alone at home, and my mother's also gone to the supermarket or something. I watch a video. The girl talks about things, and it feels like one of my friends is talking. (Participant-7)

Moreover, YouTubers' responses to the comments under videos contribute to the feeling of connection in terms of two perspectives, one of which is the presence of social interaction in a virtual space. The second one is a translation of monologues into dialogues, which increases the feeling that YouTubers are real people, not a kind of software. In this context, receiving "likes" from a YouTuber makes adolescents happy. The comments appeared as the areas where the feeling of connection is felt most intensely.

As it is seen, experiencing the feeling of being connected is another matter for adolescents. When adolescents believe that they do not get enough sense of connection from a certain YouTuber, they become frustrated. being noticed by YouTubers was an essential motivation to follow them because when adolescents could not see any response, the feeling of being in connection was damaged. Although it is a virtual relationship, adolescents sense it as a real one; therefore, the impact on them becomes hard to tolerate.

Secondly the feeling of participated supported by the YouTube platform. The present study revealed that six out of 10 adolescents participate in videos through comments, so it is a crucial element for feeling involved. For example, their comments that is related to the feeling of participating. He said that his remarks include statements, such as "You might be better off if you do this. It could be more comfortable."

4.4 Preparation for commitment to identity construction

This subtheme refers to how the enhancement in exploration facilities is reflected on the commitments that adolescents make. In the present study, all adolescents mentioned how they experience personal growth in various fields of life through YouTuber. YouTubers empower adolescents by allowing perspective-taking in social or occupational issues,

providing information, teaching skills and being life coaches for them. Therefore, this subtheme is divided into three categories, as “perspective-taking”, “learning information and skills,” and “having personal life coaching”.

In terms of perspective taking, adolescents demonstrated that YouTubers help them to obtain distinct perspectives toward life. For example, YouTubers enable adolescents to get a distinct perspective toward a profession that she dreams of for the future. Some participants highlighted that they like watching travel videos because they want to travel, but they do not have a financial resource. By posting videos where YouTubers travel, they help adolescents have the chance to explore other countries, cultures, and dynamics, which is quite valuable for their personal growth.

Secondly, learning information and skills were supported by YouTubers because they shoot informative and instructive videos about what they do and how they do it as an expert in certain matters. In the present study, 7 out of 10 participants explained why they follow YouTubers as intellectual purposes. They prefer YouTubers’ videos based on their educational needs, such as receiving private tutorial for school courses, developing skills in games or musical instruments, and taking advice on their hobbies.

Thirdly, YouTubers also serve as free personal life coaches for many adolescents. They shoot several videos concerning how people perform their life better. They give advices about diet, sport, meditation, studying habits, make-up, or recipes. For instance, Participant 2 stated when he followed YouTubers’ advice about sport, his body developed much more. Also, Participants 4 shared that she had some kinds of trouble with studying habits; therefore, she had watched videos suggesting several studying methods for fruitful outcomes.

Based on to these descriptions, the current analysis in this study has shown that 7 out of 10 adolescents tend to take YouTubers as role models in their life. It appears in their daily activities, desires, and plans mostly. For instance, Participant 3 explained how she takes YouTubers as role models in her daily life activities. When her favorite YouTuber does anything, she feels like she has to do something similar.

Moreover, Participant 8 said that when he dyed his hair blue, he was actually inspired by his favorite YouTuber. In addition to this, another participant showed how much she identifies herself with YouTubers when employing her feelings and dreams. Participant 9 mentioned about how YouTubers’ income and ways of maintaining their profession encouraged him. He expressed how obsessively he wanted to be like one of them. When exploring participants’ answers, it is safe to state that YouTubers have become significant role models for youth.

Discussion

This research explored how YouTubers affect identity formation of adolescents. This main research question was supported by two further sub-research questions. These questions to be answered in the research are about what kind of roles YouTubers play in adolescents’ life, their mindset and daily practices. The second research question explored in the present research concerns adolescents’ interaction with YouTubers. How this interaction happens and how it affects the identity formation are some of the questions to be answered.

In the light of these research questions, this section provides thorough discussions based on the arguments and findings of the study. It starts with the first argument that focuses on how the notion of identity itself is affected and supported with the integration and separation dynamics. It continues with the second argument regarding how identity formation process is affected in terms of enhancement of exploration options and ways of preparation for commitment in identity construction.

Integration

The results regarding the integration role of YouTubers indicated that people’s interaction and relationship with the YouTubers whose videos they watch help them feel accepted, realize that they belong to a certain group and make others approve their existence. In this regard, it can be said that YouTubers play a critical constructive role in creating an identity notion through supporting the sense of belonging to the same group.

The current study has revealed that the sense of belonging is built mostly by sincerity because it has been observed that adolescents have emphasized “the genuineness” of YouTubers frequently. It is important for adolescents when YouTubers behave as ordinary people, which helps to build the sense of genuineness. Therefore, it can be stated that YouTubers convey to adolescents the message that they belong to the same social group by means of their sincere acts. This finding was consistent with the former research of Jerslev (2016), who presented that YouTubers have achieved a micro-celebrity status through a sense of intimacy, equality and authenticity.

It has been found that adolescents tend to follow YouTubers who adopt the same values and belief systems as they do. YouTubers serve as parents, peers or neighbors by feeding in-group favoritism of adolescents. It seems that YouTubers are supplemental sources to feel integrated to the society thanks to the shared norms. As Stald (2008) proposed social network is a crucial factor in forming a sense of belonging and recognizing one’s harmony with society’s

notions. Specially, individuals' similar tastes and other things in common with the YouTubers they follow motivate them to do so (Aukes, 2017).

In this study, social validation tendencies of adolescents were observed as the perception of positive social feedback from others, which verifies the appropriateness of behaviors, feelings, and experiences. Through collecting social validation cues, they try to become much more integrated into the society. This highlights how YouTubers function as social validation tools in assisting integration into the society. This finding is in line with Stern (2008), who explored the nature of the reward for young authors expressing themselves online, and found that the sense of validation through comments is a strong motivation in online authorship because the adolescents are curious about how their thoughts correspond to others and they need feedback from site visitors.

YouTube videos also have a second role in the social context; YouTubers create a whole different area and field of discourse in adolescents' worlds. Watching popular YouTubers' videos and having a general understanding of their lives are very important factors for adolescents in being accepted by their social circle, feeling embraced and adopted in terms of discourse. This result is similar to the findings of a research study by Pereira, Moura & Fillol (2018) who found that following the most trending YouTubers, getting their jokes and sharing them with others are considered as cool actions amongst the peer groups. However, this finding implies relatively more negative effects because adolescents who feel obliged to follow some popular YouTubers just to be accepted and approved by their social environment.

Some adolescents have been observed to follow particular YouTubers' advice just to feel like one of them while they are not comfortable with that piece of advice. The example of an adolescent who starts eating oats just to feel like one of the YouTubers even though she hates oats shows that the need of being accepted and feeling the sense of belonging can sometimes cause de-individualization. This result is significant because it especially underlines that adolescents need to appreciation for their own thoughts and emotions.

Differentiation

Contrary to the integration role of YouTubers, one of the recurrent themes in this study is that in order to build identity notion thoroughly, adolescents realize what makes them distinctive and different from others. Regarding the differentiation function that YouTubers have, adolescents realize the existence of people who can think differently and who have different mindsets through reading the comments. This can be helpful for adolescents to realize their distinct and unique self. With regard to all these data, it has been concluded that adolescents use YouTubers as a means of reaching self-knowledge. This finding is in line with the findings of Valkenburg et. al (2005) who revealed that adolescents engage in internet-based activities for identity experiment and self-exploration.

Identity formation

YouTubers enhance exploration opportunities for adolescents to test various alternatives around them through supporting the sense of connection and participation. With regard to testing out various alternatives in life, YouTubers increase the fields of inquiry and expand the area of options for adolescents. Thanks to YouTubers, adolescents can now reach different examples of identities and lifestyles from all over the world with only one click in YouTube. For example, witnessing different lifestyles and coming across with various people and objects enable them to explore a wide variety of alternatives and test whether they are suitable for them or not. Also, this is supported by Aukes' (2017), who emphasized that beauty and lifestyle YouTubers provide their followers to explore current likes and dislikes. For example, in the ideological domain of identity, it was found that following a YouTuber who is engaged in their dream profession enables them to get a general idea of the job they want and to recognize its positive and negatives sides. It is an essential source for adolescents to form their occupational identity (Perrez- Torres et al., 2018).

Beyond these, some adolescents wish to become YouTubers and do it as a profession, the underlying reason for which is explained as being tempted by easy money, the amount of traveling to make videos freely, and the sincerity of providing information to people. It is one of the noteworthy results of this study because it might signal that adolescents follow YouTubers rather than their own skills. It is in line with contributions of Holmbolm (2015) to the literature, who considers being a YouTuber as a luxury career option because according to him, it provides people with the opportunity and freedom of working at home, being the boss and escaping the unpleasant working hours, which most people find unappealing. Therefore, the findings of this study highlight that adolescents have added being a YouTuber into their occupational options.

In addition, by watching the videos of their peers who live abroad, they find an opportunity to have an idea about life in other countries, as well. As these results revealed, YouTubers offer various opportunities for adolescents' life, which might eliminate limitations for adolescents coming from various social backgrounds, allowing them to be more open-minded and aware. It is similar to the finding of Aukes (2017), who suggested that opportunities enabled by the interaction between individuals and YouTubers eliminate the class boundaries on them.

YouTubers expand the social interaction opportunities for adolescent subscribing the YouTubers channel, commenting to the video and liking the video of YouTubers. These interaction ways enhance the feeling of connectedness because YouTube enables adolescents to keep in touch with people whom they follow and take as role models. The demonstration of ordinary life and the mutual sense of sincerity on YouTube encourage adolescents to feel like they are with a friend. As Livingston (2012) proposed, the current study indicated that adolescents regard themselves as friends of YouTubers due to their involvement into the lives of YouTubers.

Regarding the reasons, adolescents watch YouTubers to get rid of the sense of loneliness, especially when they do not have anyone around them, when they are not satisfied with their interaction with their parents or friends, and when they do not have enough connection with their environment. This result is significant as it highlights one of the key functions of social media platforms because previous studies revealed that the behaviors of adolescents on social media correlated with their level of loneliness (Ledbetter, Mazer & DeGroot, 2011; Pelling & White, 2009). Therefore, it can be said that YouTubers serve as emotional pacifiers for adolescents because they have a soothing function in the case of emotional uneasiness. This can be regarded as a unique contribution of this research to the literature. This is a critical point to consider because this might prevent adolescents from developing necessary skills to cope with emotions they do not like and prevent them from living a more satisfying life.

Another factor related to the extension of social interaction possibilities was participation opportunities that YouTube provides for adolescents by commenting, rating, and subscribing. It was revealed that these engagements motivate adolescents to participate in the interactions. because they become satisfied through their contributions and feel participated in a bigger platform by providing suggestions such as giving advice to a YouTuber's game video or making suggestions to other followers. These results especially underlined that adolescents care about expressing their own thoughts and sharing their personal ideas or beliefs. In contrast to the previous study by Burgess and Green (2009), which suggested that the feeling of participation is mainly based on the adolescent's own broadcasting, none of the participants of this study take part in a community by making their own videos, but they generally feel participated through their comments on YouTubers' videos.

Preparation for commitment to identity construction

In this study, In addition to the enhancement in exploration opportunities during the identity formation process, it has been observed that YouTubers also have an impact on the commitments in the identity development. In other words, it was found that YouTubers contribute to adolescent's internal investment and they socially, physically, emotionally and cognitively empower individuals with regard to personal development. One of their main contributions to individuals is that they help their followers gain another perspective. It gives them the opportunity to realize the negative aspects of something that they have always considered positively and to gain a wider perspective on social issues. In fact, adolescents indicated that they can realize things they did not before; they can consider situations from another point of view. For example, YouTubers' traveling videos provide adolescents an opportunity to see the countries they have never been and give a general idea about different cultures. This is similar to the findings of De Jans et al. (2019), who found out that vlogs are considered as an effective source for teenagers because they create awareness in social issues as well as leading to positive behavioral changes. It might be concluded that all of these contributions might help adolescents in determining which option suits best for their internal investment.

The second contribution of Youtubers is that they help adolescents to decide and make commitments in intellectual matters. Several adolescents in this study keep up with the scientific developments according to the advice of YouTubers and aim to improve their English by downloading particular applications suggested by them. YouTubers who create tutorial videos teach adolescents many valuable matters (Tolson, 2010). This is a crucial opportunity for adolescents to develop themselves in many topics without any payment to any expert. Consequently, YouTubers offer noteworthy opportunities for adolescents in terms of creating and developing one's own identity in certain fields, such as academic, social, professional, or hobby.

The last contribution of YouTubers to adolescents' internal investment was found to be life coaching. YouTubers have a role in helping adolescents live a more "qualified" life and increase their wellbeing just like a personal life coach does. As a result of the analyses in this study, it has been observed that adolescents care and follow Youtubers' suggestions on certain issues, such as efficient sports, good nutrition and having a more organized life. In parallel with the explanation of Giles (2018) about lifestyle genres of YouTube, videos related to health, and religion themes inform adolescents on specific topics.

In this study, it was found out that YouTubers are important role models for adolescents and Youtubers influence them to make an internal investment in an option. That is, identification takes place with new role models in the identity formation process. Thus, adolescents try to act like YouTubers in everything they do. Moreover, they dream of doing what YouTubers do one day, such as producing intimate content, making easy money like them and going to the places they go Ergen (2019).

It has been observed that there are adolescents who identify with YouTubers so much that they insistently do something unpleasant just because a YouTuber does it or likes it. For example, one of the participants keeps eating oat even though she finds it disgusting because she identifies herself with the YouTubers and wants to feel like one of the them. This result calls for attention due to the extent of influence of Youtubers on adolescents.

To summarize, YouTubers are highly influential on adolescent identity formation, their behavioral patterns and mindset. These findings are valuable in that they once more emphasize the crucial role Youtubers play in the identity formation in adolescence and call for further empirical research and practice. Teachers were uniform in their perceptions of how the game integration with PCaRD affected students' motivation (Foster & Shah, 2015). Both teachers stated that they observed the game integration offered students chances to visualize themselves in the future, which boosts their motivation by helping them create a positive self-image related to their language learning identity (Dörnyei, 2009; Markus & Nurius, 1986). A similar result was noted by Denham (2019), where teachers reported high levels of engagement and motivation.

Although both teachers in this study held positive views about using digital games for language learning, they also echoed some of the concerns reported by teachers in previous related studies. For instance, the pre-service teachers in Can and Çağiltay's (2006) study were concerned with classroom management and the effectiveness of digital games in learning. Similarly, in-service Math teachers in Demirbilek and Tamer's (2010) and Watson and colleagues' (2016) studies also had some reservations about classroom management. Likewise, in Alkan and Mertol's (2019) study, pre-service teachers' responses showed that they were not feeling confident and worried about how they should incorporate games into the class. However, in this study, two in-service teachers were mainly concerned about the possibility that students could get addicted to video games. Similar concerns about the negative connotations of playing digital games were also reported by İnce and Demirbilek (2013). Teachers in that study also recognized both the negative aspects and the possible benefits of digital games for students while reflecting their perspectives.

Another issue that the teachers brought up during this study was that game-enhanced learning might be time-consuming. Some of their comments about such concerns were similar to the reflections of participant teachers reported in Denham's (2019) study, where the teachers mentioned some difficulties using PCaRD at the beginning of the intervention, which faded away with increased experience. Koh and colleagues (2012) also reported similar concerns of teachers about utilizing games in the classroom as a result of their study.

All in all, it can be stated that teachers agreed on the effectiveness of the game integration intervention designed by using the PCaRD framework for acquiring the target language. Considering students' interest in digital games and the productive use of digital games in foreign language teaching, one can conclude that pre-service and in-service teacher training on integrating games into the curriculum is necessary to address teachers' concerns and enable effective integration of digital games into the curriculum. Future studies should continue to investigate teachers' perspectives on the efficacy of game-enhanced interventions and the utility of existing frameworks such as PCaRD to integrate games into the curriculum. Describing teachers' experiences and perspectives may guide other teachers' efforts to integrate games into the curriculum successfully.

There are also some limitations to this research. First of all, only two teachers participated in the study, and one of them was also a researcher. The memos used as part of the data collection procedure were authored by the researcher, illustrating the researcher's observations and experiences. However, the researcher wrote all her assumptions and feelings about digital game enhanced language learning at the beginning of the process and had reflective conversations weekly with her colleague to be as objective as possible about the intervention. All in all, the study offers some valuable explorative insights about the teachers' perspectives on game-enhanced activities for second language learning.

Implications and Conclusions

In this section we discuss the implications of our study by addressing two questions: 1) What do adolescents' interactions with Youtubers teach us about the uses of media literacy? and 2) What does the role Youtubers play in adolescents' life suggest for the development of media literacies and for further research? The first question is theoretical. It seeks an improved understanding of conceptual foundations of dialogue as reflected in the lives of adolescents. The second question, which focuses on practical implications, is considered in terms of how adolescents can be empowered with effective critical skills to use YouTube for their benefit.

In the previous section, we described that adolescents are affected from YouTubers during their identity development in terms of both the construction process and the outcomes. Predominantly, it was seen that adolescents quite benefit from YouTubers and their videos in the identity formation process because YouTubers enhance the exploration opportunities for adolescents and expand their interaction zone. Moreover, YouTubers pave the way for personal growth for adolescents by allowing for perspective taking skills, proving information in many topics and acting like a personal life coach. All of these help adolescents explore themselves more deeply and influence their decision-

making process in real life. Furthermore, YouTubers assist adolescents to be coherently integrated into the society by helping adolescents feel like they belong to the same group, thus having some sort of a social approval. In addition, YouTubers enable adolescents to notice their unique characteristics such as having distinct reactions to YouTubers discourse or behavior. These findings indicated that YouTubers contribute to fundamental dimensions of identity notion.

However, the present study also showed that YouTubers might hinder the identity exploration process because adolescents identify themselves with YouTubers more than they should and they renounce their individuality for the sake of being like the YouTubers they follow. It was also found that adolescents' daily practices and mindsets are highly affected by YouTubers' thoughts and suggestions. One of the most striking findings of the study is that in spite of the findings mentioned above, adolescents stated that they are not affected from YouTubers, which indicates an urgent need to increase the awareness of adolescents.

Considering the second research question, adolescents engage with the YouTubers' videos through subscribing, following, watching, commenting or emailing. They find a chance to meet their social needs such as social approval, acceptance and sense of belonging by watching particular YouTubers and participating in the virtual world they have created. Moreover, adolescents also prefer to watch YouTubers' videos in order to disregard their actual needs. That is, adolescents, as the findings revealed, watch YouTubers to ignore their boredom, loneliness and frustration. Therefore, this study proposed that YouTubers take the place of "emotional pacifiers" for soothing unpleasant feelings.

This study indicated that adolescents resort to YouTubers' videos and comments in order to gain self-knowledge. They try to sort out their position among the same group and to what extent their thoughts and behaviors are coherent when compared to others. This indicates that they could not receive sufficient feedback from their immediate social environment. The findings call for further research to explore the underlying reasons of why adolescents resort to social media platforms to gain self-knowledge. Therefore, various counseling programs aiming to gain awareness on their motivations, abilities, thoughts, behaviors, feelings and attributes for parents and adolescents can be helpful to support adolescents' self-knowledge.

Regarding the third motivation for adolescents to follow YouTubers, it has been observed that many adolescents watch YouTubers in order to escape from the unpleasant feelings they experience in daily life. As it is stated in discussion section above, adolescents use YouTubers like an "emotional pacifier" in order to soothe their boredom, loneliness or depressive feelings. Rather than silencing their feelings, it is better for adolescents to learn how they can effectively cope with the undesired feelings and events. Thus, school counselors can design activities or guidance sessions on management strategies to support adolescents to deal with negative feelings, such as disappointment, frustration, sadness, and loneliness. Thanks to these sessions and workshops, adolescents can be empowered to face the difficulties they have and develop ways to overcome those challenges. Embracing unpleasant feelings might increase the overall well-being of adolescents and allow them to get more satisfaction during their lifespan (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hafferon, & Worth, 2016; Tamir, Schwartz, Oishi, & Kim, 2017).

Regarding identification with YouTubers, the current study indicated that adolescents have added the option to become a YouTuber to their career plan because it was shown that adolescents gravitate to the luxury and comfort of the being a YouTuber. Rather than pursuing their talents, skills and gifts, they prefer chasing easy money and fame. Authorities would do well to be aware of this emerging reality and they should take it seriously in order to help the development of occupational identity of adolescents. All these findings underline the urgent need to empower adolescents with critical media literacy skills in formal settings. It might be suggested to hold on media languages and workshops to recognize fake news and disinformation. Also, adolescents can be trained on digital identities, hidden messages and fictional videos not reflecting realities. In this way, we can help adolescents for being more sensitive and selective on choosing media contents

As the results of this study revealed, there are other parties that need to be empowered in particular aspects. In this period, adolescents might experience conflicts with their parents, which can reduce the effective communication between them. Although there are significant alterations in adolescents' cognitive, social and emotional state, familial emotional bonds are noteworthy for their healthy development (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Parents would do well to empower their communication and conflict resolution skills to strength their relationships with their children. For example, parents can be trained through seminars that aim to raise their awareness and empower them with vital skills regarding communication, social approval and acceptance of their children.

This study has aimed to understand identity construction from the perspective of adolescents. In a future research design, in-depth interviews can be conducted not only with adolescents, but also with parents, teachers or peers in order to have different perspectives, which might help researchers have a deeper understanding in this matter.

Contribution Rate of the Researchers

All authors contributed to the manuscript equally.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have disclosed no conflict of interest.

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