Brazilian BookTubers and the COVID-19 pandemic
by Inês Silvia Vitorino Sampaio and Andressa Souza Costa

Abstract
Reading is an essential skill for coping to an increasingly connected society. This article aims to analyze reading skills moderated by young Brazilian BookTubers while they narrate their reading experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study draws on multiple data sources and uses a mixed methods approach to explore their narratives in 10 videos on the best books of 2020. Results indicate BookTubers are developing a range of learning, literacy, and citizenship skills, but also suffer from pressures of connectivity, productivity, and exposure. In a pandemic context, marked by the mandatory isolation and unequal access to books and digital culture, they acknowledged reading as an encouragement for them and their audience to face hardships. However, despite these communities’ efforts to make Brazil a country of readers, the social gap that precedes the existence of digital culture widens and intensifies.

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Introduction
Reading is an essential skill for coping to an increasingly connected society. With the increased use of screens associated with COVID-19, the fear that the intense use of social networks would drive young people away from books was growing (Veja, 2021), especially among parents and educators (Idoeta, 2019).

Despite these expectations, young Brazilian BookTubers [1] encourage reading through social networks,
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forming communities of readers. This is a recent phenomenon, still little researched in its complexity. Understanding how they contribute to promoting reading in a time of mandatory isolation remains timely and relevant to many areas, e.g., education, literature, and communications.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the spaces that children and young people usually use for socializing were closed, namely schools, libraries, and cultural centers. Some migrated to social media to escape isolation and deal with this adverse time, including reading and sharing their reading experiences in BookTube communities. That is something to celebrate, but more than that, it is a reading experience to be investigated in its potentials and limits to promote life and digital skills.

Two aspects deserve special attention in this discussion. First is the dramatic inequality of access to education, books, and the digital world between BookTubers and young people from low-income families in the country. Second is the contradictory nature of social networks, which are, simultaneously, sharing platforms, social networks, and business models. This led us to discuss which reading competencies of books and the world the young BookTubers were promoting or neglecting in the informal space of YouTube.

BookTubers have not yet reached the popularity of influencers from other entertainment areas, e.g., games and cinema/television, whose channels have millions of subscribers and videos with up to billions of views. Still, as we will address in this paper, promoting reading in a country of non-readers, marked by deep social inequalities, is a feat that needs to be recognized and investigated.

This article aims to analyze the reading skills moderated by these young readers while they narrate their reading experiences within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw on multiple data sources and use a mixed methods approach to explore BookTubers’ narratives in 10 retrospective videos of the best readings for 2020 posted on their YouTube channels.

Literature review: Life and digital skills, BookTubers, and shared readings

In a systematic literature review on “twenty-first-century skills and digital skills”, van Laar, et al. (2017) identified “seven core skills: technical, information management, communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking and problem solving.” Taking a non-technical approach, they further recognize five other contextual skills as important: “ethical awareness, cultural awareness, flexibility, self-direction and lifelong learning.”

But what do we understand when we refer to the word “skills?” According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (1997), “life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behavior, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.” Although this concept can lead to an endless list, some skills are considered key in promoting the well-being of children and adolescents. They are: “decision making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions and coping with stress.” Looked at carefully, they can also be seen as associated with the well-being of other groups, including young people.

Park (2016b), when addressing digital skills directly, defined three levels of learning these skills: “digital citizenship,” “digital creativity,” and “digital entrepreneurship.” Park pointed out that digital citizenship, seen as “the ability to use digital technology and media in safe, responsible and effective ways,” has been the most neglected, and therefore we will give it more attention.

The following are considered skills associated with the exercise of digital citizenship: “digital citizen identity,” “screen time management,” “cyberbullying management,” “critical thinking,” “cybersecurity
In this article, considering the BookTubers’ experiences of non-isolated reading in the COVID-19 pandemic, we will be looking at how these digital skills link to the learning skills (“creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration”), literacy skills (“information, media and ICT literacy”) and life and career skills (“flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility”) proposed in the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2008).

BookTubers present specific practices and competencies as readers, which characterize them as a community. One of these behaviors is non-isolated reading among young people, when there is “a need of reading not only to oneself but with other young people, sharing reads, searching for identification and collectivizing fruition.” [8]

Reading, therefore, becomes an act of integration and belonging, especially in a situation of co-presence (Schroeder, 2002) of other readers, or in tune with them. “Today, youngsters’ cultural practices are complex, multiple, inter-related, and are strongly based in a playful and socialization process which, in turn, gain increasingly globalized outlines.” [9]

For BookTubers, reading is a process that begins by going through a given text but is only complete with digital sharing of the reading experience (Arantes, 2017). Thus, there is a gregarious and performative aspect, at the same time, in which being a reader is not enough — you also need to show yourself as a reader. So, communicative competency becomes a central element of this relationship, which deepens the intersubjective dimension of that reading.

Despite that, reading in the community manifests itself as a voluntary habit, which is not bound by pedagogical, institutional, or corporate commitments. Although several BookTubers turn their hobby into work, the origin of the reading-Internet cycle is, as a rule, free of impositions about what to read, how to read, when to read, in which media to read. They have an opportunity to develop another life skill by getting involved in this community of readers: the autonomy to make their own choices, associated with decision-making and self-direction skills.

In this light, these readers’ actions also drive changes in literature production, circulation, and fruition processes. The collective and participatory scene of BookTube allows its members to create audiovisual reports that are an invitation to reading and stimulate interaction among readers. After all, reading by habit or for pleasure does not depend only on material access to books (Petit, 2009), but also on the incentive from mediators — such as BookTubers — who can connect text to people, making reading something alive, personal and related to a reader’s reality (Lima, 2018).

Research methods

This article presents results from an ongoing study on young people’s participation in public media spheres. This research about young BookTubers within the COVID-19 pandemic context began in May 2021, continuing previous studies (Costa, 2020; Costa and Sampaio, 2018).

We draw on multiple methods to identify the potential and limits of BookTubers’ reading practice. For this analysis we used a combination of resources including news about BookTubers and reading practices in the pandemic; Brazilian government documents and relating to national and international organization on reading and Internet use by young people; and videos of 10 young Brazilian BookTubers with a high rate of popularity during the pandemic.
The quantitative data for this research comes from national surveys, conducted, among others, by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.Br, 2020; Instituto Pró-Livro, 2020). These surveys provide an overview of Internet access and use by young people, and also access to books and reading practices in the country. These are valuable data for measuring the implications of social inequality in the development of reading skills of this social group. In addition, data on the number of subscribers to selected BookTubers’ channels, and the number of views and likes of videos made available by the YouTube platform were also considered. Data were collected on 20 December 2021.

The qualitative data for this research contains several types and sources of data, such as news about BookTubers and reading practices in the pandemic as well as videos of young Brazilian BookTubers during the pandemic. Since the YouTube platform does not provide precise data on the total number of BookTubers in the country, we tried to identify those most relevant in the news.

We set up our corpus according to three criteria. The first criterion was the BookTubers being cited more than once in news during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second criterion was the profile’s popularity, measured by the numbers of subscribers on the channel over 100,000. Lastly, our third criterion was age. All of them began their career at a young age, and some of them are still young.

Considering the interest in reflecting about the skills and not exactly about the whole dynamics of the influencers’ channels, we selected 10 videos with an emblematic situation (Kuhn, 1996) from the chosen BookTubers that contributed to elucidating the handling of life skills, especially digital skills. The emblematic situation was the retrospective video of the best books read in the first pandemic year, posted in December 2020 and January 2021. Other Booktubers videos, at times, were also considered.

Videos were between 13’21” and 32’56” minutes long. The 10 videos together add up to 04:03:58’ (see Table 2). Considering that each of them was viewed at least four times, the total viewing time was 16:15:52’.

To perform the video analysis, we defined some central categories to be considered, e.g., mentions of the pandemic, books recommended, themes approached, and skills presented. In addition, to identify elements of the context and dynamics of BookTubers’ attitudes, we also considered BookTubers’ testimonies about their practices related to reading and readers, taken from the news.

Results: Analog readers, digital readers

Historically, reading has encountered great obstacles in Brazil. As an ability to decipher and interpret linguistic code, there is a 6.6 percent illiteracy rate in the country. According to the National Continuous Household Sample Survey (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatistica [IBGE], 2020), 11 million people aged 15 or older could not read and write even a simple note in 2019.

The economic crisis that has rocked Brazil since 2015 has hit the book publishing and sales sectors hard. The survey of Produção e Vendas do Mercado Editorial Brasileiro (Nielsen Book, 2020) registered a 20 percent reduction in total sales from 2006 to 2019. The two largest bookstore chains in the country filed for bankruptcy even before the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily forced the physical closure of stores.

The cancellation of in-person book fairs also contributed to reducing the pace of the industry’s recovery, beginning in 2020. In the first year marked by the coronavirus, the Brazilian publishing market shrank 8.8 percent compared to 2019.
The fifth edition of the *Retratos da Leitura no Brasil* survey (Instituto Pró-Livro, 2020) revealed that just over half of Brazilians are readers. In 2019, 52 percent of the population (about 100 million people) read a book in whole or in parts in the three months prior to the survey. This represents a four percent decrease when compared to the previous study, based on data collected in 2015.

The decrease was widespread and affected all levels of education, family income, social class, and age (with the exception of those between five and 10 years old). The worsening of the socioeconomic crisis and post-coup policies of 2016 were among the main factors that explained this decline.

In this context, an aspect stood out in all editions of the study: young people were always the ones who read the most in the country. Seventy-one percent of people in the five to 10 age group are readers, 81 percent in the 11 to 13 age group, 67 percent in the 14 to 17 age group, and 59 percent in the 18 to 24 age group are readers.

The study published in 2020 also pointed out that reading for pleasure was more common among children and teenagers (five to 10 years old: 48 percent; 11 to 13 years old: 33 percent) than among Brazilians in general (26 percent). Young people up to 17 years old were the ones who read most on the Internet (10 percent) and 25 percent of readers between 18 and 24 years old were digital book readers.

At the same time, the *Survey on the Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Brazilian Households* for 2019 [10] (Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil [CGI.Br], 2020) revealed almost unanimous presence of the Internet in the lives of young people. The use of the network reached 84 percent in the 10 to 15 years old age group and 92 percent in the 16 to 24 years old age group. Therefore, besides being the biggest readers in the country, young people were also the most connected, an indication of a strong coexistence between reading and the Internet.

The potential of the collaborative relationship between reading, youth, and the Internet is also manifested in other results. Fifty-two percent of young people consulted by the third edition of the *Juventudes e Conexões* survey (Fundação Telefônica Vivo, 2019) included reading digital books in leisure activities carried out online.

Among literature readers consulted by the *Retratos da Leitura no Brasil* 5 survey (Instituto Pró-Livro, 2020), 29 percent posted some text, image, or video online about their reading in the last 12 months. Twenty-five percent of these same readers had their interest in reading sparked by a digital influencer (the rate rises to 37 percent in the 14–17 age group).

Petit (2009) argued that “books play a transformative role by allowing the reader to develop a critical spirit, affirm a singularity/identification.” [11] It is necessary, thus, to think about the relationship of young people with reading considering the socio-cultural and technological moment we live in. After all, the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century could be considered “singularities,” i.e., events that change the scenario so fundamentally that there is no going back (Prensky, 2001).

On BookTube, content relates to literary culture, and interactions are established based on readings, favorite authors, literary events attended, and reflections made possible by contact with literature (Jeffman, 2017).

In this space, young, passionate and, mostly, amateur readers coexist. These characteristics are fundamental to understanding the particularities that mark the community’s productions, especially in comparison to the activities of literary critics and cultural journalists. The contents of BookTube are deeply marked by personal reading experiences: the reader is the real protagonist of the story told on video. Emotions, memories, and individual reflections provoked by reading books are part of these narratives.

Books, reading, or literature are not specific video categories on YouTube, unlike other niches, e.g., fashion and games. Because they do not fit into a classification of their own, literary channels spread out in more generic segments such as “entertainment” and “people and blogs.” This makes it difficult to identify and
systematize the participants in the community and, therefore, there is no way to catalog precisely how many channels exist on BookTube.

However, it is estimated (Arantes, 2017; Jeffman, 2017) that about 500 literary channels are active in Brazil, of which the first has been publishing since 2009 and the largest has 943,000 subscribers. Therefore, a community of young readers, which is connected and engaged in the promotion of reading, continues to thrive.

Considering this brief contextualization of the BookTubers’ community, we can now move on to reflect on the life skills, especially the digital ones, mobilized in this shared reading experience.

Among young people, YouTube is almost unanimous: 96 percent of those aged 18–35 have the habit of accessing it (Think with Google, 2017). The Juventudes e Conexões survey (Fundação Telefônica Vivo, 2019) points out that 80 percent of Brazilian youngsters follow blogs and YouTube channels, and 35 percent use the Internet to create or update video channels or podcasts periodically.

These indicators are directly linked to “digital creativity,” the second level of learning of digital skills set forth by Park (2016b) as the least neglected. It is understood as “the ability to become a part of the digital ecosystem by co-creating new content and turning ideas into reality by using digital tools.” (Park, 2016b)

That is exactly the case for the BookTubers selected for this article, who began as amateurs and became professionals, valuing their digital creativity. We list below these BookTubers’ names and some substantial data about their channels, e.g., numbers of subscribers, videos posted, and the number of views (see Table 1). These are expressive numbers that attest to the strength of this reader community.
In order to achieve such popularity as expressed by the volume of subscribers, posts, and views, these influencers had to develop, apart from their creativity, a number of other competencies, and to do it over several years. All of the BookTubers listed above dedicated at least five years’ investment of time and personal resources to this professional project.

The number of subscribers reveals these BookTubers have achieved respectable popularity with the reading public. Some of them, including Pam Gonçalves, Paola Aleksandra, and Bel Rodrigues, have also had their influence recognized and valued by the publishing market [14] and are sought after by publishers, writers, and bookshops for campaigns and advertisements. An example of that is the “Queen’s Club” project, an online reading club dedicated to Agatha Christies oeuvre, which reached two years of activity in July 2021 and is a partnership between Bel Rodrigues and HarperCollins [15].

This digital skill enhancement stage is driven not only within the family or school environments, but it is also fed back by the market. The rise and professionalization of digital influencers on different platforms (in Brazil, YouTube and Instagram stand out) is proof of that. According to the O Brasil e os Influenciadores Digitais survey (IBOPE Inteligência, 2020), 52 percent of Brazilian Internet users follow a digital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOOKTUBER</th>
<th>SUBSCRIBERS</th>
<th>VIDEOS</th>
<th>VIEWS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bel Rodrigues</td>
<td>943,000</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>59,903,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella Lubrano (Ler Antes de Morrer [To Read Before Dying])</td>
<td>585,000</td>
<td>792</td>
<td>29,482,603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam Gonçalves</td>
<td>340,000</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>16,898,921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola Aleksandra (Livros e Fuxicos [Books and Tidbits])</td>
<td>328,000</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>26,772,648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ju Cirqueira (Nuvem Literária [Literary Cloud])</td>
<td>290,000</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>21,258,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatriz Paludetto</td>
<td>221,000</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>15,690,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulo Ratz (Livraria em Casa [Bookshop at Home])</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>12,655,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor Almeida (Geek Freak)</td>
<td>179,000</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>14,983,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mell Ferraz (Literature-se [Literature Yourself])</td>
<td>167,000</td>
<td>970</td>
<td>8,736,393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karine Leôncio (Kabook TV)</td>
<td>142,000</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>9,640,799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,375 million</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,084</strong></td>
<td><strong>216,023,319</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
influencer, and 50 percent usually buy products and services recommended by influencers.

It is within the context of the dissemination of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) that several digital platforms such as YouTube allow non-specialists and amateurs to publish content, with a potentially global reach for large audiences, changing the way people communicate and interact through the Internet.

The figure of the prosumer, *i.e.*, someone who will simultaneously play the roles of content producer and consumer, is representative of this new communicational scenario. This becomes evident when the prosumer is considered an agent that “produces, shares, spreads his/her own and their peers’ contents, and also endorses them to their audience in blogs, microblogs, online discussion forums, communities in online dating services, and chats, among other media.” [16]

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**BookTubers, reading, life and digital skills**

Sharing and endorsement of some reads within the COVID-19 pandemic context was the emblematic situation selected to investigate the promotion of life skills and reading by these 10 BookTubers. After all, retrospective videos present an overview of shared reading experiences throughout the year, working as a catalog of suggestions for the following year for those who have not yet read the books recommended. The number of views of these videos is revealing of the public’s interest in following the list of recommendations, as we can see in the Table 2.
Table 2: 10 videos of ‘the Best Books read in 2020’ by 10 Brazilian Youtubers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOOKTUBER</th>
<th>VIDEO DURATION</th>
<th>NUMBER OF VIEWS</th>
<th>VIDEO LINK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bel Rodrigues</td>
<td>18’08’’</td>
<td>157,389</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jTk6h0Qzn8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jTk6h0Qzn8</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola Aleksandra</td>
<td>27’47’’</td>
<td>117,796</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C2qICCkQTY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C2qICCkQTY</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella Lubrano</td>
<td>27’04’’</td>
<td>106,797</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jzPotq10k4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jzPotq10k4</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatriz Paludetto</td>
<td>28’19’’</td>
<td>103,658</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJSPadd5uHI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJSPadd5uHI</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor Almeida</td>
<td>30’38’’</td>
<td>72,367</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvP1Hd082eg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvP1Hd082eg</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulo Ratz</td>
<td>32’56’’</td>
<td>56,409</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S61Y0v0qTcc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S61Y0v0qTcc</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ju Cirqueira</td>
<td>23’05’’</td>
<td>50,862</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EahpaMH1jc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EahpaMH1jc</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam Gonçalves</td>
<td>15’17’’</td>
<td>45,681</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGZ6JDIYHKz0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGZ6JDIYHKz0</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mell Ferraz</td>
<td>17’39’’</td>
<td>23,478</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNv38AS8JJk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNv38AS8JJk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karine Leônico</td>
<td>23’05’’</td>
<td>30,039</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VT6SNiB6LqU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VT6SNiB6LqU</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>04:13:58’’</strong></td>
<td><strong>764,476</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, BookTubers put a lot of effort advertising these videos, around which there was always a lot of expectation. Besides, a series of connections was established with other content shared throughout the year. All these elements could be recognized as engagement strategies that usually included repeated requests for channel subscription, views, likes, and sharing of videos (old and new alike), contests, promotions, and discounts, among others.

Today we’ll have the video everybody was waiting for on the channel! (Paola Aleksandra)

Please support my work, it’s super quick, easy, painless, you just need to click below, like this video and send the channel to your reader friend. (Mell Ferraz)

There’s a video about this book here on the channel, I’ll leave it here in the cards for you to check. (Ju Cirqueira).

You can support my work with a monthly amount, but you’ll also get back lots of rewards. We have a joint reading every month, we have a WhatsApp group, we have trinkets, we have some early-access information. (Victor Almeida)
Please, don’t forget, for God’s sake, to use the Amazon links below to buy something. (Karine Leôncio)

Bel Rodrigues also reminds watchers to click the “like” — or, as she herself says, the “thumbs up” — button. Even if this is quick, such requests are recurring on YouTube, so that the audience can help with channel metrics, contributing with likes, comments, shares, and/or subscriptions, a practice that is also present in other BookTubers’ videos.

This is a free way of stimulating youtubers to keep their production (it is already a kind of asynchronous response from the public) and also to improve their position in the platform’s rankings. The numbers reflect the relevance of Bel Rodrigues’ contents for the algorithm, so, more engagement, more spreadability (Jenkins, et al., 2013).

Thus, an element related to the mastery of literacy skills (“information, media and ICT literacy”) stands out, where the BookTuber shows how to get to know the operation of the platform, and uses this knowledge in her favor. However, this conduct has a process of normalization of the logic of social recognition through the number of likes, with possible negative effects on a youngsters’ well-being [17].

When it comes to talking about well-being, this seemed to have been difficult for many people during the pandemic. Several BookTubers expressed their feelings about the pandemic in a final 2020 video. In some cases, they explicitly displayed sympathy for their audience’s pain and loss. Several of them also highlighted opportunities to intensify their reading practice during this period and the importance of reading as a resource to deal with this situation.

Hi, folks, today we’re going to remember the best reads of 2020, this year of the Devil, but very productive for me, literary wise. (Isabella Lubrano)

This last year was very intense, very difficult, very sad in numerous ways, but I think that, just like me, many of you also felt that the books kept our spirits up, helped us deal with emotions and soothe our minds. (Paola Aleksandra)

Some hypes take too long to happen but, because of the quarantine, a lot of people stayed home and read a lot, read even more than usual, write here in the comments if you read more than usual during the quarantine. (Karine Leôncio)

When it comes to the titles of books mentioned by the BookTubers, more than 102 were mentioned in total, as the lists would range from 10 to 30 books indicated as their favorites. Among them, the following books were mentioned more than once: The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo (4), O Peso do Pássaro Morto [The Weight of a Dead Bird] (4), Normal People (4), Dayse Jones & The Six (3), Flowers for Algernon (3), The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (2), The Dutch House (2), Dune (2), Strange the Dreamer (2), Recursion (2), Verity (2), White Chrysanthemum, My Dark Vanessa (2), Se Deus me chamar, eu não vou [If God Calls Me, I Won’t Go] (2), Watery Eyes (2), and Long Way Down (2).

In the retrospective of best books read in the year, some BookTubers also mentioned the large number of books read. Isabella Lubrano even outlined a panorama with the geographical distribution of these reads, prizing not only the high number of reads (45 in total), but also the diversity of her choices and the predominance of Brazilian books in her list:

Taking a look at the division per country: the top country, and I’m glad to see that, once again, was Brazil — I read 11 Brazilian books, then 10 American, North American books,
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eight books from the United Kingdom, British books, and many other nationalities after that. (...) So, we went like that, all around the world.

The number of reads in an atypical year as 2020 stands out for some of them, like Pam Gonçalves: over one book per week, a number completely distant from the national average for young people in the country. She produced and shared 70 YouTube videos throughout 2020, apart from several live broadcasts of projects, namely “Good morning, Pam” and “Madrugadark”. The second one was a daily live reading project with an average duration of one hour, carried out in August 2020, because the BookTuber was “tired of the quarantine” and felt she needed to do something different on the channel [18].

Other BookTubers also emphasized in their videos their joint reading experiences during the pandemic:

_Giovanni’s Room_, this one we read, it was a joint read, one of the best reads we did for the Club of Three. (Victor Almeida)

And I read _Quarenta Dias [Forty Days]_, by Maria Valeria Rezende with the folks from _Leia Mulheres_ from Jundiaí, and it was a very interesting experience (...). Talking to other people, getting in contact with other ideas, other perspectives, other interpretations, was very valuable for me. (Mell Ferraz)

Among the books chosen by the 10 BookTubers, only Karine Leôncio (Kabook TV) chose to present a list of the most hyped books, based, according to her, on her own research. Of the 15 books she listed, eight had been cited by other BookTubers, e.g., _The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo_ and _Flowers for Algernon_, which indicated some common contextual elements that contributed to these choices.

The most hyped books were also highlighted by other BookTubers. Another strategy to keep in tune with the reading public was to ask them to make comments about their preferences:

I brought lots of hyped books to my book club. I think it’s very cool to build joint reading of books that are really talked about. (...) The hype brings a huge visibility to these books, but it also brings along a little pressure (Karine Leôncio)

I’d like to hear your opinion, which books you liked most in 2020, if you agree with my choices (Isabella Lubrano).

Leave below which book was the best you read this year, your top book or, if you want to, make a short list in the comments below, please feel free, write down your top 10 to me. (Victor Almeida)

As highlighted by Pam Gonçalves, 2020 was the year of “sad books”, and the best books read by Pam, and also by other BookTubers, were full of drama, tragedy, horror and rebellion. One of her and Paulo Ratz’s favorite books and among the most hyped ones mentioned by Karine Leôncio was _Flowers for Algernon_.

_Flowers for Algernon_ is a science fiction story about a revolutionary IQ-enhancing surgery for a man with a severe intellectual impairment. The plot deals with how the experiment interferes in the character’s perceptions about reality and social relations in a scenario where the world is also questioning reality.

In a pandemic context, the exhaustion arising from the difficult year was expressed in videos by several BookTubers who took the opportunity to gladly say good-bye to that year, in some cases, even with profanity. The disappointment with some reads also led to an association of feeling of sadness with the year
that was about to finish. 2021 was then celebrated with hope.

Nothing is more ‘2020’ than this [disappointment], is it? (...) Happy new year! Fuck you, 2020! What a hell of a bad year! (Bel Rodrigues)

I truly hope that 2021 is a lighter year, a year with more hope, a year with less hate, a year when we manage to understand each other a little better, a year when we start believing in science again. (Isabella Lubrano)

Lists were full of books and reflections about death (*A morte é um dia que vale a pena viver [Death is a day worth living]*)), abandonment (*Heart Bones*), and loneliness (*Se Deus me chamar eu não vou [If God calls me, I won’t go]*)), whether followed or not by justifications directly associated with the context. There were also recurring reports of intense crying during the reading of some books, a vivid emotion related to a given book, but also the use of reading as a means to process anguish, fear, and pain associated with the pandemic.

This book [*Death with Interruptions*], it gained another dimension, because this book talks about death. He [death] just decides he’s not working anymore, so people will not die anymore. This causes such chaos. (Mell Ferraz)

Folks, this book [*White Chrysantemum*] is very painful, I cried a lot as I read it. (Ju Cirqueira)

I cried a lot with this book [*The Joys of Motherhood*] (Paola Aleksandra)

And I cried, I cried, I cried, I completely lost my composure, thank goodness there was nobody watching me. (Isabella Lubrano)

Such a careful look at the context — whether in terms of societal and/or market trends — which may or may not be aligned with each other — was also made visible in the themes approached. The most recurring themes highlighted in the books recommended were issues of gender, racism, and situations of abuse (*e.g.*, pedophilia, violence against women), among others.

I always like hairy books [*O peso do pássaro morto [Weight of a dead bird]*], because they make me think a lot. Here it made me think about women’s condition in society. (Mell Ferraz)

By the way, for those who don’t like horror, the supernatural, things like that, I super recommend this [*11/22/63*], which has nothing to do with that, since it is more like a sci-fi book, and more about people’s relationships. (Ju Cirqueira)

The reference to gender, in remarks addressed to the public, guided the reads and constituted one of the elements contributing to the identity of BookTubers:

It is a sci-fi movie [*Recursion*], but it is known as a sci-fi thriller or a sci-fi and a thriller together, and these are two genres I love, so it had to be in this favorites list. (Ju Cirqueira)
Best fantasy book *Nevernight* that I read this year (Victor Almeida)

Some BookTubers displayed their critical thinking competency when they expressed their points of view and recognized the same abilities in their audience. Suggestions such as “I recommend you watch it because you have to form your own opinion” (Bel Rodrigues) or “I liked it a lot, this book is amazing. Some people didn’t like it, but that’s ok, too” (Ju Cirqueira) were identified.

The YouTube literary community can be diverse, even if it follows some standards. For a reader to find a “niche within a niche,” *i.e.*, a group whose interests are even more in line with theirs, it is necessary to discover which BookTubers have more similar “literary tastes.”

That is where the handling of a digital identity makes a difference. With their skill to invent and manage an online persona (who can be completely fictitious, as a character created for the camera), BookTubers create a kind of “editorial line” on their channels. It is then possible to distinguish each creator’s style and approach.

For example, for several years, Pam Gonçalves was synonymous with “literature for young people,” because this was her favorite and most frequent type of read. Meanwhile, Bel Rodrigues was known for reading “darker,” “heavier” books: thrillers, detective stories, and true crime.

Another aspect in the construction of this identity manifested itself in the video format. In general, they followed a common structure. The structure of the video was simple: a quick introduction explaining the selection criteria and order of presentation, followed by an exposition of favorite books. In the part dedicated to each book, the BookTubers provided a brief summary of the plot and shared a little about their reading experience.

Despite that, they tried to establish some singularity through the use of communicative strategies, including the use of humor, special effects, construction of scenery — which is almost always made up of bookshelves, reinforcing a BookTuber’s identity.

In this setting, although there are rich narrative possibilities, there tended to be a reproduction of some common standards, and in this way BookTube built its special and unique identity.

This “BookTuber formula” was established, consisting of some elements found in most videos: a) the reader as the protagonist of the literary experience, mixing up narrative and argumentative elements in the report; b) personal (and sometimes even emotional) involvement with reading as a narrative axis; and c) the presence and materiality of the book, either in background bookshelves and/or as a physical copy which was shown and handled during a given video.

The ability to interact with different agents of the book world and mastery of the dynamics of the platforms became another key element. In the videos, some BookTubers revealed their familiarity with marketing strategies to boost sales. They recommended links to be clicked for the purchase of books so that they might some financial gain, leading for specific books to be sold out in bookstores after posting a video review.

Since you’re here, subscribe to the channel, turn the notifications on so that you don’t miss any videos and follow me on Instagram, I’m always sharing my reads, all new things here in the channel, so ... (Ju Cirqueira)

I don’t know if it was by chance, or because I recommended it, but the point is that, when I talked about this book here *Old Dog*, by Teresa Cardenas, it sold out on Amazon. (Isabella Lubrano)
Another aspect in the construction and management of a digital identity was the management of the effects of their online presence, both in short and long terms. Pam Gonçalves had already been talking about books on the Internet for over a decade, whether in text or videos; Bel Rodrigues was close to that and has reached eight years on her channel in 2021. Both BookTubers acknowledge the weight and strength of being on the Internet for so long, in different spheres.

Paulo Ratz, for instance, stayed out of the network for one year and went back during the pandemic. In the video [19] in which he reported his return to the BookTuber community after a year away, he stated:

So let’s go back to the channel a year after posting the last video? YES! Today I’ll try to explain to you that I put my mental health first in this last year, and I was a terrible reader, BUT if there’s something the quarantine brought me, it was the desire to read all the books that kept staring at me from the bookshelf. I know it is a tense and complicated moment, not everybody is in the mood for reading, so I tried to explain the tactics I used and how it has made me wind down and relax with my little books.

Pam Gonçalves commented, in stories on her Instagram profile, that she avoided sharing personal information (family, friends, love relationships) so she was “not attacked on the Internet.” It was a way of dealing with repeated offenses, even if not through fighting, but through a conscious protection of her privacy as a strategy to dodge potential “conflicts.” By engaging in such conduct, apart from revealing a mastery of self-direction skills, she inspired other young people to reflect on their own self-exposure on social networks.

Bel Rodrigues, in contrast, was more open with regard to her “personal life.” Through her social network, we can follow her trips, family visits, birth of her goddaughter, and even hear of her engagement. Such conduct was closer to more common self-exposure patterns in entertainment. At the same time it exposed her to higher vulnerability, especially in connection with mental health. The BookTuber has already resorted to breaking her video publishing and live broadcast routine for months because of anxiety and exhaustion resulting from the pressure to maintain and expand her digital presence on different platforms.

Discussion and conclusion

The popularity and professional achievements of these BookTubers are consequences — although not exclusive — of the joint use and improvement of their digital skills. Communicative and digital literacy skills are key elements for BookTubers to create and maintain their channels.

These associated skills (communicating, collaborating with others, creating and sharing content) are in the backstage of their production routine. Without joining these competencies to others, e.g., creativity, innovation, critical thinking (learning skills), flexibility, adaptability, initiative, productivity, and responsibility (life and career skills), they would only be able to be “ordinary readers”. They would not be professional BookTubers, agents who are able to promote — on scale — certain specific readings to a young audience.

Recent technological transformations did not invent prosumer practices, but deeply influenced them. As agents of this new communication scenario, BookTubers have developed life skills that will exceed digital ones, e.g., collaborative ability and problem-solving.

There is the promise that, apart from learning as prosumers, there may be a gain for these youngsters’
actions as citizens as well. Whether such promises will be fulfilled and to what extent is another question which we tried to discuss here, but further studies will be needed.

These youngsters made use of digital skills related to digital intelligence (Park, 2016a) to create and maintain BookTube as an online community. We mentioned some, such as: digital communication (“to communicate and collaborate with others using digital technologies and media”); digital literacy (“to find, evaluate, utilize, share and create content”); and digital emotional intelligence (“to be empathetic and build good relationships with others online”).

As a profitable business model based especially on advertising [20], YouTube established a “success formula” that could be reproduced. To be considered by the algorithm [21] that delivers content to the public, YouTubers from diverse segments adjust to a model that enforces informality, charisma, and intimacy in performances.

Within this logic, what are the limits enforced on young BookTubers to create a digital citizen identity? To what extent is “the ability to create and manage one’s online identity and reputation” (Park, 2016a) conditioned to adjusting to a given platform’s standards? In these conditions, where the structure to which the content creator is subjected establishes an ideal to follow, is it possible to reach the values of authenticity and creativity found in YouTube’s discourse?

It seems that although we can acknowledge that the platform contributes to the development of youngsters’ creative competency, it can also undermine it, conditioning it to commercial standards that favor a logic of content boosting (Sampaio and Craveiro, 2019).

Another aspect to be considered is the large number of books read, several of them even reviewed. If the BookTuber’s job were not reading and creating content about it, we could think maybe they had resorted to literature only as a way to escape pandemic chaos into a book.

The rhythm of their productivity certainly allows us to assume there is a mismatch between time and reading. What is the possible quality in a rushed reading process? Can critical thinking competency be activated in such an accelerated process? Does the reading rhythm, in this case, just reflect the voracity of readers who have the financial means and available time to devote to reading, or is it related to the demands of productivity beneath the logic of networks?

In contrast, the choice of favorite books, as shown in the BookTubers’ lists, reflects a synchronicity between “reading the world” and “reading the word.” The sadness that Pam Gonçalves and other BookTubers identified within their reads can also be seen as a kind of social mirror which also shows an empathetic competency.

According to the *Jovens: Percepções e Políticas Públicas* survey (Neri and Hecksher, 2021), Brazilians aged 15–29 are sadder, more worried, and angrier. On a 0–10 scale, the mean happiness of Brazilian youth in the year of the pandemic was 6.4 — the lowest since the beginning of the studies in 2007. The number of worried youngsters was also a record: 59 percent in 2020. In the same year, the percentage of stressed youths increased: 56 percent, following a global trend, which intensified in Brazil.

In this context, some BookTubers expressed digital empathy skills, i.e., “the ability to show empathy towards one’s own and others’ needs and feelings online” (Park, 2016b), when they provided their audience with “trigger warnings” about sensitive events in the plots, such as sexual violence, child abuse, and torture, among others.

We notice this ability to put themselves in somebody else’s place when Pam Gonçalves, for example, stated that *A Little Life* was one of her favorite books, but that she was not “comfortable recommending it,” because it was a “very, very heavy” read.

Besides revealing empathy towards her audience, Pam Gonçalves and other BookTubers, e.g., Ju Cirqueira
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and Beatriz Paludetto, proved that they mastered contextual skills, namely ethical awareness and cultural awareness, in their dialogs with young people.

The empathetic competency and critical thinking also manifested themselves when we examined themes of their favorite books. Racism, sexism, and homophobia were some of the latent topics in the political and social discussion that touched, in a more or less intense manner, the books mentioned in the analyzed videos. It is therefore another reflection of the connection between the BookTubers’ literary readings and readings of the world.

Resorting to testimony as a way of communicating these YouTubers’ reading experience, the informal, easily accessible language, and the emphasis on feelings and emotions evoked by the books revealed the competent use of successful communicative strategies, i.e., the development of communicative competencies in their actions as BookTubers.

With the social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of live broadcasts in several areas, from education to entertainment, increased. The time of exposure of their image — therefore, connectivity time as well — grew exponentially. With this, some other needs also intensified, such as that of managing a dynamic of a continuous online presence and its implications. An example of that was the hiatus Bel Rodrigues took in view of the physical and emotional exhaustion caused by the intense routine of working online.

This situation was revealing of more sensitive aspects of these young BookTubers’ participation in the networks, who, even with vast experience, had a difficult time in dealing with competencies to manage excessive screen time and their own emotions and stressful situations associated with them.

The need of a hiatus — a protection against the situations described — made it clear that, at some point, the decision to protect personal well-being prevailed. However, it also indicated a previous situation of mental distress that this specific BookTuber had to deal with.

A broader analysis about the implications of BookTubers’ actions directly on the young community or even on the country’s young readers community would require another methodological approach to hear these readers that escapes our scope here.

This experience of stimulating book reading by these young BookTubers needs to be discussed — in their ability to promote and/or neglect the development of skills, considering the country’s social inequalities. After all, the development of such competencies directly depends on conditions of access and use of these technologies.

These 10 BookTubers are voracious readers, with a characteristic they share with the YouTuber community that keeps them connected exactly because of a common cultivation of the practice of reading. They develop a singular kind of reading: collaborative, i.e., constructed in the dynamics of dialogs about readings which in turn evoke ideas and emotions.

It is in this gregarious practice that the meanings about the world and a sense of belonging were strengthened. This reality was profoundly distant from that of many young people from less privileged classes, whose access to the world of books is barred or limited.

Disadvantaged young people receive a substandard education, which often does not equip them with the skills to even read and write, severely diminishing chances to access these experiences. In this sense, acknowledging the importance of stimulating book reading promoted by BookTubers, although valuable, has a clear limit in its sphere of influence. In addition, it poses new challenges for the balanced development of life and digital competencies among these different youth.

The BookTubers that we investigated have financial resources, time, and formal education to devote to reading. During the pandemic, they could afford to buy — and receive, as gifts — physical and electronic
copies of books through the Internet. With schools and libraries closed, the already precarious access to books by young students from public schools was even worse, and was further worsened with the dismantling of public policies in education, especially those encouraging reading.

All these aspects considered, we have to acknowledge the ever-widening gap between the BookTuber community and other youngsters deprived of the right to read, due to their socioeconomic reality. Obviously, this does not depend solely on these young YouTubers’ and the BookTuber community’s individual desire and action to promote and disseminate reading.

Among BookTubers and their communities, there is a continuous process of competency development, especially in the areas of communicative and media literacy, which tends to positively affect the course of their lives, both as citizens and professionals. As influencers, they exert their agency promoting the debate around agendas with which they identify, and which they fight to overcome (e.g., racism, sexual violence, ableism, homophobia).

BookTubers promoted the learning of communicative and collaborative competencies — fundamental to any professional area. Another generation of young people, for reasons already explained, was not able to enjoy the same opportunities, which contributes to the vicious circle of social exclusion.

This is not about generically denying the agency of young people in lower classes who, even in the face of numerous difficulties, become leaders in their communities, promoting digital activism, following successful careers either as influencers or in other areas. Our remarks are about those who did not have the chance to take advantage of these kinds of opportunities. If these processes continue, chances to exercise their citizenship and build successful professional careers will be even more compromised.

For this reason, this analysis of the BookTuber community cannot be understood only through the celebratory lenses of the figure of prosumers, raised from a generic condition of active agents of the communicative process in the convergence culture. After all, the unequal relations of power in society and on platforms determine — in a diverse manner — these youngsters’ own actions as consumers and content producers in social networks and outside of them.

Historic exclusions precede the experience of living in a convergence culture, which affects the bonds of youth with reading books and reading the world (e.g., illiteracy). There are other exclusions associated with the business model enforced by social network dynamics, which do not operate to benefit solely best interests of these youngsters. On the contrary, they try to have YouTubers conform to a consumerist logic of fallacious hyper-exposure, success, and fame, with damaging implications to their well-being.

Brazilian BookTubers mirror a number of contradictions associated with their own dynamics and their context. The community consists mostly of middle-class youngsters connected to the Internet with technological equipment, maintaining a purpose of sharing literary experiences.

These youngsters use media literacy competencies to reach out to other youngsters and encourage the practice of literary reading in a society whose contingent of non-readers, including illiterate people, is still significant.

While young BookTubers promote book culture, a number of learning competencies clearly stand out: creativity, innovation, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. These competencies are expressed in their individual performances, in the repertoire of books that they choose to read, in the discussion of relevant social topics, and in their ability to establish bonds with the YouTuber community by sharing ideas and feelings about selected works, among others.

The challenges of identity management and the pressures of popularity also require that BookTubers develop problem-solving competencies on a more individual plane, but also that they instigate these processes more broadly when dealing with agendas to which they are not committed.
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Literacy skills are certainly among the competencies that the 10 BookTubers have developed the most. They show an ability to deal with information, both as data and a constructed narrative, put it into the context of a media system which establishes standards for gender, performance, spreadability, etc., and which operates according to its own algorithmic logic. This action, however, is not free of contradictions.

In this sense, they also act by making more natural the celebratory practices of popularity, which are subjugated to the not very transparent logic of content boosting. This reveals a certain disregard for promoting media literacy skills.

Finally, as for digital citizenship, we can conclude the 10 BookTubers try to maintain a conscious and responsible use of technologies and media. This is expressed especially in the management of their digital identities, security, critical thinking, and empathy. Even with all their experience, some of them reveal, in contrast, a difficulty in dealing with hyper-exposure to screens, and hyper-demand of their digital presence.

These BookTubers develop — in a collaborative manner and guided by a gregarious spirit — their competencies of reading the world, and constructing meanings for literary narratives chosen as motifs of their discussions. In a pandemic context, marked by mandatory isolation and unequal access to books and digital culture, they acknowledged reading as an encouragement for them and their audience to face pandemic hardships.

In contrast, millions of other young Brazilians do not cross the digital divide. Deprived of public policies aimed at promoting reading and mitigating the harmful effects of the pandemic on their education, they face an immediate challenge of survival on their own.

So, despite BookTubers communities’ efforts to make Brazil a country of readers, the social gap that precedes the existence of digital culture widens and intensifies. 

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Notes

1. Members of BookTube, i.e., a “Networked Knowledge Community made up of YouTube content creators who use this particular media channel to celebrate and discuss books.” (Sorensen and Mara, 2014, p. 87)


5. Ibid. This literature review has focused on competencies considered crucial in the training of future workers, but we believe that the proposed classification meets a broader training profile.

7. *Ibid*.


10. The *2019 ICT Households* data were collected in a period before the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.


12. See [https://www.youtube.com/user/tatianagfeltrin](https://www.youtube.com/user/tatianagfeltrin), accessed 29 May 2021.

13. See [https://www.youtube.com/user/alguminfinito](https://www.youtube.com/user/alguminfinito), accessed 20 December 2021.


17. For the implications of the promotion of this kind of engagement, see Francis Haugen’s testimony in Ordonez (2021).

18. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CaoQScPPqs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CaoQScPPqs), access: 22 October 2021.


20. In 2019, the amount of ad sales on YouTube was US$15.1 billion, representing a 35.8 percent revenue increase compared to the previous year (G1, 2021).

21. There is no transparency from YouTube as a company about criteria guiding its algorithm to deliver (or not) content to an audience, especially related to advertising.

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