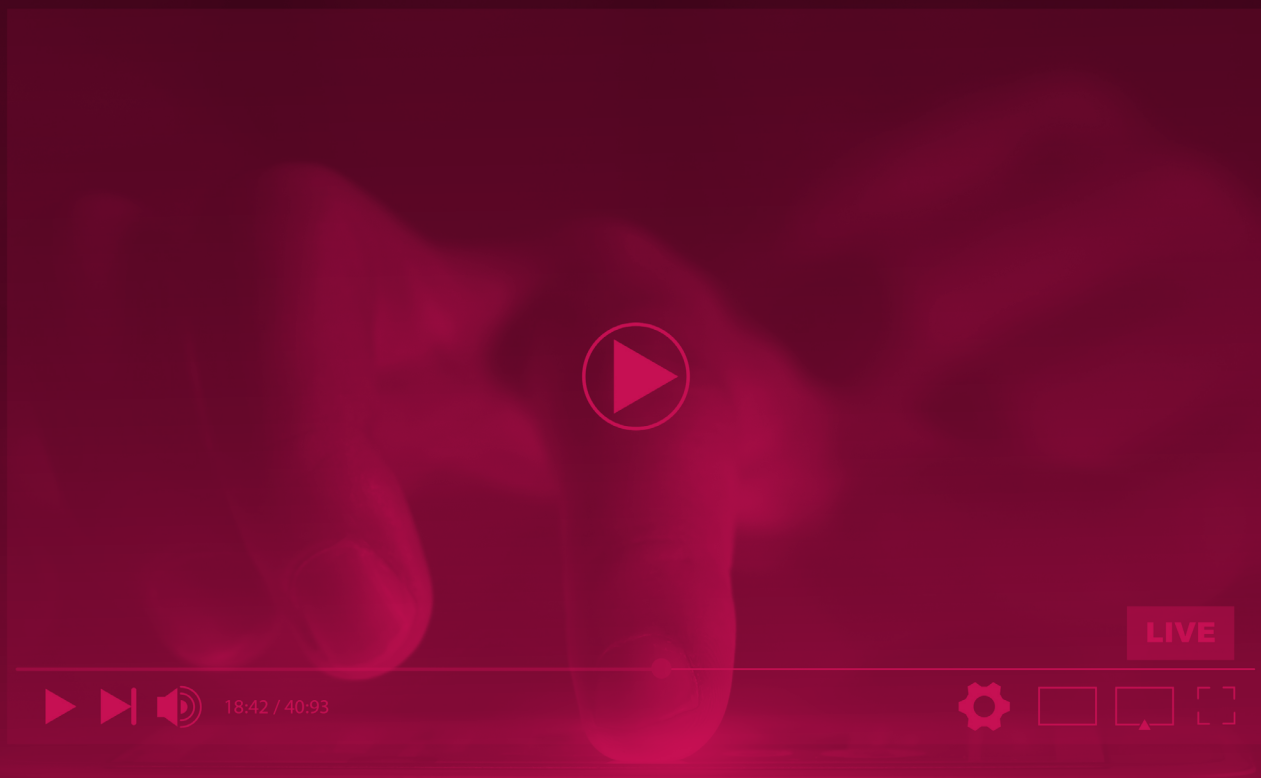


Investigation 1

Teenage Gamer Personas

Aoife Gallagher





Amman | Berlin | London | Paris | Washington DC

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Executive Summary & Key Findings

This first investigation in ISD’s series examining the YouTube recommendation algorithm explores how content was recommended to two 14-year-old users who were fans of popular gaming channels and videos. Additionally, ISD wished to explore whether the gender of the account would impact the content being recommended. Therefore, one male and one female account were created.

While the analysis found that the videos most frequently recommended to both accounts were related to gaming, there was evidence of inappropriate and harmful content in the videos being recommended to these young users. This included gaming videos with sexually explicit content and those with themes of self-harm and suicide.

Videos recommended that were not related to gaming covered a variety of subjects including anime, music, and kids’ entertainment. Within these unrelated videos was content with adult themes and videos related to guns and ballistics. Although these videos were presented in an entertaining fashion, they also glorified the use of such weapons. YouTube did not include content warnings or age restrictions on these videos.

Despite the accounts being set up as identical in every way except for gender, there were clear differences in the number of videos recommended to each, the content of the videos, and the number and types of ads seen by the accounts. More than half of the videos recommended to each account were not recommended to the other, and the themes and subject matter of these unique videos were also different for each account.

Although some of these differences have gendered themes, particularly ad content, it is difficult to conclude that the accounts’ gender was the only factor in these differences. Instead, this indicates that each user’s YouTube recommendations are unique and based on unknown algorithmic decisions.

The results of this analysis highlight clear gaps in YouTube’s efforts to protect young users from harmful content and raise further questions as to how the recommendation system decides what content will be shown in people’s feeds – questions that can only be answered with increased transparency from YouTube.

- **The videos most frequently recommended to the teenage gamer persona accounts were related to gaming.** These were either videos from channels previously watched or subscribed to by the accounts, or videos featuring content related to the subject of gaming.
- **Within these gaming-themed videos was content containing sexual themes or references to suicide.** Minecraft videos were recommended that contained “sex mods” and imagery of suicide.
- **More than 50% of all the videos recommended to each account were not recommended to the other, even though both accounts watched the same content.** These unique videos were largely recommended just one time to each account, with more than half of these containing content unrelated to gaming. This may indicate an effort by the algorithm to show users videos from a wide range of subjects in order to learn what will pique a user’s interest beyond gaming.
- **Recommended content unrelated to gaming tended to sway into traditionally male activities and subjects, including sports, cars, guns, and fishing.** Videos featuring guns and weapons were presented in an entertaining way but did not contain any content warnings or age restrictions.
- **Analysis uncovered significant differences in the number of videos, number of ads, and the type of content recommended to the male and female accounts.** Despite this, there were few conclusive indications that these differences were related to the gender of the accounts, indicating that as of yet unknown algorithmic decisions determine what content is shown to users.

Project Overview and Methodology

According to YouTube's internal data, in 2018, 200 million people watched gaming content on YouTube every day – half that number watched the Super Bowl that year.¹ In the years since, the worlds of gaming and YouTube have only grown more connected. 8.4 million hours of live streams were broadcast on YouTube Gaming in the third quarter of 2022, and gaming influencers are some of the most subscribed channels on the platform.² The only platform more popular for gaming livestreams is Twitch.³

Gaming is enjoyed by people of all ages and genders. According to Statista, 22.7% of gamers in the US are under the age of 18.⁴ ISD created two YouTube accounts for users based in California – one for a 14-year-old male and the other for a 14-year-old female – and built their personas to simulate teenagers interested in gaming.

According to research, users spend an average of 19 minutes per day on YouTube.⁵ This project aimed

to examine what the recommendations on the platform present to users after five days of watching YouTube (with watch time over five days averaging 19 minutes per day).

For the accounts to act as similarly as possible to regular users, they engaged in different actions, including searching for channels, searching for specific keywords and phrases, subscribing to channels, and watching videos. A period of scoping research for each persona was carried out to identify popular channels, keywords, and trends associated with them.

The teen gamer personas were built by watching content from the most popular English-speaking YouTube channels focused on gaming. At the time the research was undertaken, these were Markiplier, MrBeast Gaming, and jacksepticeye.⁶ Content from the most played and most sold video games was also watched. These were Minecraft and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2.⁷ Figure

Figure 1: Persona building process for teen gamer personas – both the male and female accounts watched the same content throughout the five days.

Content/Channels watched by teen gamer persona (% of total watch time)

Day 1 (16 min watch time)	Search for Markiplier	Subscribe to channel	Watch last uploaded video
Day 2 (29 min watch time)	Search for minecraft	Watch first video in results	
Day 3 (12 min watch time)	Search for MrBeast Gaming	Subscribe to channel	Watch last uploaded video
Day 4 (21 min watch time)	Search for Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2	Watch first video in results	
Day 5 (17 minute watch time)	Search for jacksepticeye	Subscribe to channel	Watch last uploaded video

1 above outlines the exact actions taken during the persona building phase.

After the fifth day of persona building, a browser automation tool was used to record the recommendations displayed on the homepage of each account every six hours for one month. The coding guidelines below were used to code all videos that were recommended more than once to each account and unique videos (i.e. videos recommended to one account but not the other). Analysis was also conducted on the number of videos recommended and ads shown to each account.

Coding guideline

- Videos were labeled as **subscribed** if they came from an account the persona had subscribed to. In this case, these were all videos from Markiplier, jacksepticeye, and MrBeast Gaming.
- Videos were labeled as **watched** if the video came from an account that was previously watched by the persona (but not subscribed to). In this case, all videos were from Nico or Raid Away.
- Videos were labeled as **closely related** if the content in the video was related to content and/or channels previously watched by the persona. In this case, videos about Minecraft or Call of Duty, or videos related to subscribed or watched channels (for example, MrBeast's main channel)
- Videos were labeled as **subject related** if the content was related to the wider interests of the persona – in this case, gaming.
- Videos were labeled as **unrelated** if the content did not fall into any of the categories above, for example, videos about music, cooking, or sports.

Analysis was then conducted to answer two specific questions:

- What content does YouTube's recommendation algorithm serve to teenage users who watch popular gaming content?
- Is there a difference in content recommended to fans of teen gaming based solely on gender?

Figure 2: Content watched by accounts with teen gamer persona.

Content/Channels watched by teen gamer persona (% of total watch time)



Results

Table 1: Differences in the numbers of videos and ads recommended to the male and female accounts.

	Male account	Female account
Total no of videos	543	521
Total no of ads	47	54
Videos recommended at least twice	104	105
Unique videos	305	287

Number of videos/ads recommended to each account

Although both accounts watched the same content for the same amount of time and data for both accounts was collected for the same amount of time, the male persona was recommended 22 more videos than the female one.

These differences were also seen in the number of ads shown to each account. The male account was shown 47 ads, while the female account was shown 54.

Although it is difficult to discern the reason for these variances without further information from YouTube, it does suggest that the number of videos and ads recommended to accounts is not consistent and is determined by as of yet unknown factors.

Videos recommended to each account at least twice

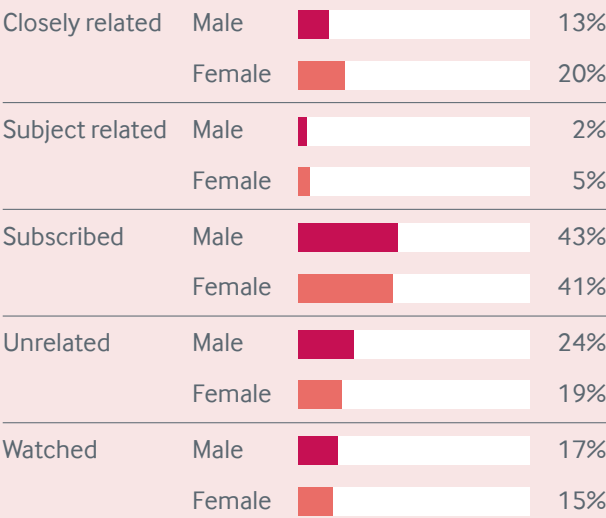
For the male account, 104 videos were recommended at least twice; this number was 105 for the female. These videos were then coded and analyzed to understand the nature of the content most frequently recommended to each account.

In this analysis, most videos (74% for the male, 76% for the female) fell into the subscribed, watched and closely related and subject related categories. In other words, the content recommended most frequently to the accounts was related to the subject of gaming in some way.

However, some differences were noted between accounts. The female account, for example, was recommended more closely related and subject related videos than the male. The male account was recommended more unrelated videos and marginally more subscribed and watched content (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Analysis of videos recommended more than once to each account.

Percentage of video types recommended more than once



Upon closer examination of the subcategories of videos recommended more than once to each account (see Table 2a in the Appendix), differences emerged between the subject related videos recommended to the male and female accounts, despite all of them being related to gaming. In the closely related category, the female account was recommended almost twice as many Minecraft videos as the male. Again, it is difficult to discern a reason for this difference given that both accounts watched the same amount of Minecraft content. This points to unknown variables in how recommended content is decided for users.

Videos recommended to one account only

In terms of the number of unique videos, the male account was recommended more than the female – 305 compared to 287. These unique videos constitute over 50% of all the videos recommended to each account. In other words, over half of both accounts’ video recommendations were not recommended to the other, which may indicate that user journeys on YouTube differ according to gender. In both cases, nearly all unique videos were only recommended once (90% for male, 87% for female).

As Figure 4 shows, in both cases, more than half of the unique videos recommended to each account contained content unrelated to gaming. The male account was recommended more closely related content and marginally more unrelated content, while the female account received over twice as much content from channels it had subscribed to.

The results in Table 4a (see Appendix), which take into account the subcategories of all the unique videos, revealed further differences between the accounts. The female account, for example, was recommended almost three times the number of meditation and relaxation videos as the male, while the male account received over twice as many religion-themed videos (see further discussion on this below). This is despite neither account watching videos related to these themes.

Other marginal differences were also noted, such as the male account receiving more educational videos, news content, and vlogger videos, while the female account was recommended more hobby/arts/crafts videos, music, and sport content.

Ad analysis

Analysis was then conducted on the ads recommended to each account. The ads were coded according to the type of content in the ad, with ten categories emerging: education, entertainment, gaming, jobs, non-profit, products, research, services, technology, and travel (see Table 5a in Appendix).

Several immediate differences were apparent; the male account received fewer ads than the female – 47 compared to 54. The female account received ads for entertainment, including for cartoons and movies, but the male account did not. Ads for various types of technology were the most common type for the female category, but ads for products were the most seen by the male.

The male account received more ads for jobs, including one advertising jobs with US Border Patrol (see Image 1); the female account was not served this ad. An ad to request a free pin of the US and Israeli flags from the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews was seen by both accounts, but the male saw it three times. This may be related to the gender of the account as YouTube can target certain demographics with specific ads.

Figure 4: Analysis of unique videos recommended to each account.

Unique videos recommended to each persona

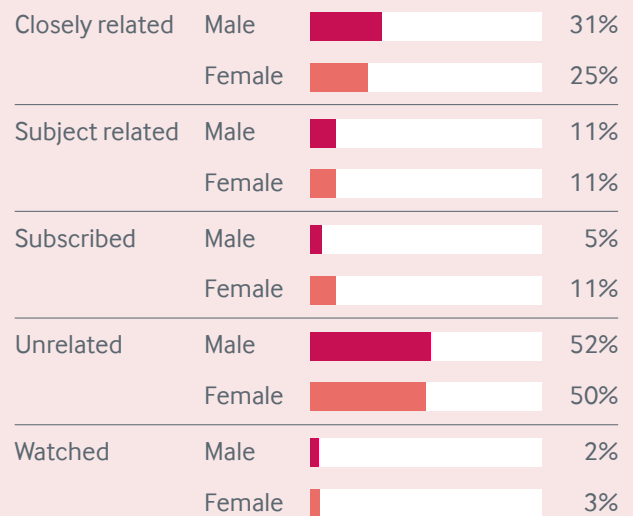


Image 1: An ad recruiting for US Border Patrol seen by the male account.

U.S. Border Patrol Is Hiring

Earn up to \$20,000 in additional incentives when you become a Border Patrol Agent.

Ad U.S. Border Patrol

Discussion

This analysis shows that the majority of the videos most frequently recommended to both accounts created with teenage gamer personas were related to gaming. These included videos from channels that accounts had subscribed to, or previously watched, or videos that contained content related to the subject of gaming. Unique videos (those recommended to one account and not the other) tended to only be recommended once and contain content unrelated to gaming. This is perhaps an indication of the algorithm attempting to discern what other subjects a user is interested in beyond gaming.

Minecraft videos featuring sexually explicit content and themes of suicide recommended to young users

A worrying trend noted within this analysis was a small number of recommendations for Minecraft videos containing themes of a sexual nature and others referring to suicide. Such videos contained sex mods, where nudity features have been added to Minecraft characters. A closer look at the channels these videos came from showed that sexual content was a feature of almost all the accounts' videos (see image 3).

In two other instances, Minecraft videos that contained the title: "JJ and Mikey HANGED THEMSELVES – in Minecraft" were recommended. Although the videos had been removed from YouTube before the analysis was conducted, a quick search for the title returned results for similar videos, one of which had over 1.2 million views (see Image 3).

Such content being shown to teenagers is extremely problematic and points to clear gaps in YouTube's efforts to safeguard young users.

Adult entertainment and videos related to guns recommended without content warnings or age restrictions

Both accounts were recommended content that was categorized in the coding process as adult entertainment. This included clips and full episodes of South Park, Family Guy, and American Dad, which have parental ratings of TV-MA, meaning they may not be suitable for children under 17.⁸ Similarly, both accounts were recommended videos of SML Movies, an adult puppet web series.⁹ All of these shows deal with adult themes including violence, profanity, sexual innuendo, and drugs.

Image 2: An example of a Minecraft video featuring sex mods along with other channel content.

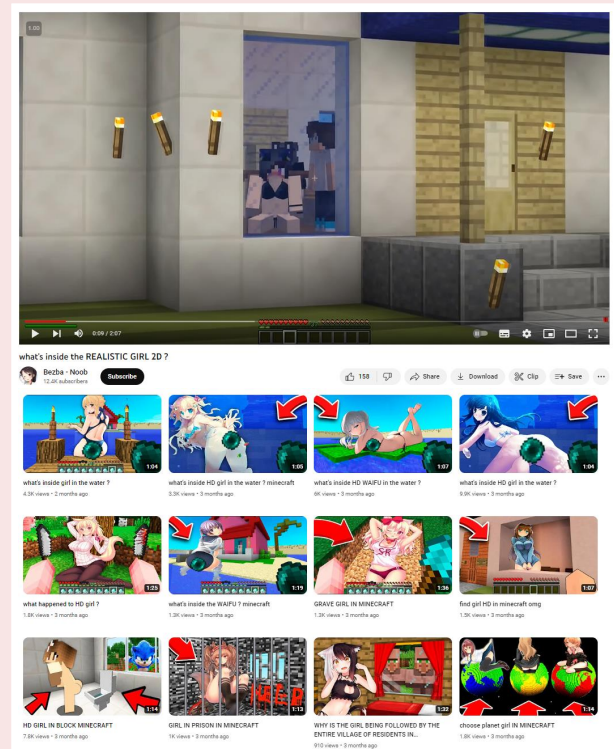
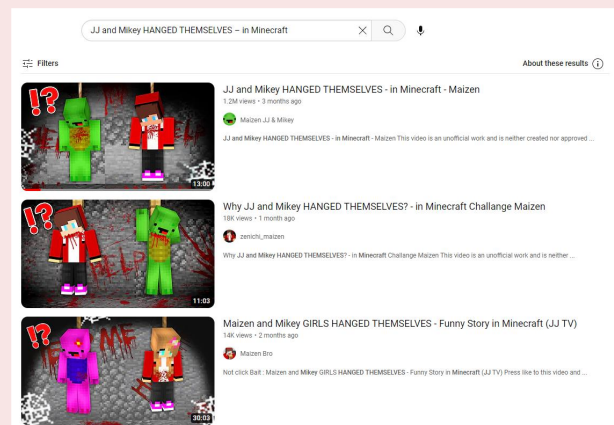


Image 3: Minecraft videos referencing suicide.



Other channels could also be considered inappropriate for younger viewers, including the Sidemen content discussed in further detail below. In another instance, a video was recommended four times to both the male and female account that contained a content warning for topics related to suicide or self-harm (see Image 4).

Both accounts were recommended videos related to guns and ballistics, with the male account recommended more than the female (five videos compared to two). The channels recommended included Demolition Ranch, Brandon Herrera (The AK Guy), Kentucky Ballistics and Wag Entertainment.

The common theme of the videos involved testing the strength of certain materials by shooting them with different weapons. Although produced in an entertaining style, the videos and their creators glorify guns and shooting, which some may find inappropriate for young teenagers. Only one channel (Kentucky Ballistics) was found to include disclaimers on their videos warning people not to mimic their activities; however, no additional warnings were added by YouTube.

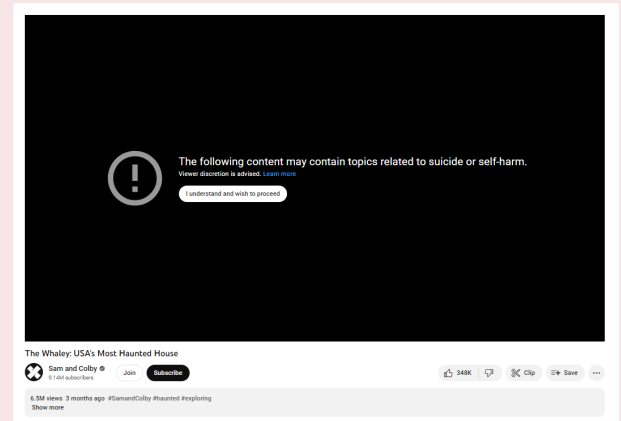
Possible gendered differences

Although there are discernible differences in the numbers and content of videos recommended to each account, there are only limited indications that these differences relate to the gender of the account. It is therefore difficult to come to any definite conclusions about whether gender impacts the recommendation algorithm.

The male account, for example, received a total of 10 video recommendations for content from the Sidemen – a collaborative channel of popular male YouTubers. The female account only received five recommendations for this channel. One Sidemen video, which was recommended four times to the male account (but only twice to the female), featured YouTuber Kai Cenat in a real-life Tinder scenario where he was presented with 20 women and had to decide within seconds whether he would like to date them.

However, in other instances, content that, in the past, would have traditionally been associated with males, such as sport, was recommended to the female account more than the male. Similarly, videos in the unrelated category about hobby/arts/crafts, which were recommended to

Image 4: A video recommended to both accounts that included a content warning for suicide or self-harm.



both accounts, were related to subjects that are also typically associated with boys and men, such as guns, cars, and fishing.

There is a question as to whether these trends within the algorithm reflect the fact that gaming has traditionally been seen as an activity associated with boys.¹⁰

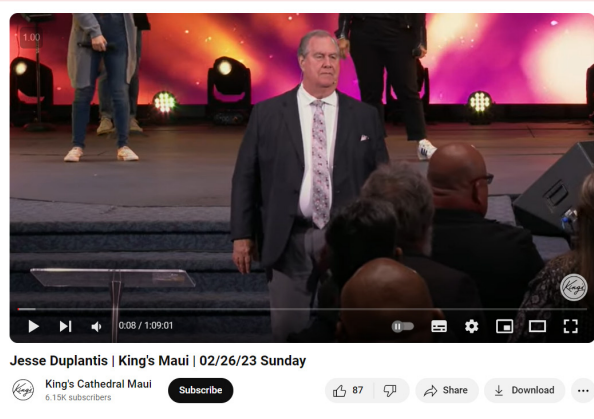
In some instances, ads were shown to the male account that were not shown to the female account, where a gendered difference could be noted. For example, the male account was shown an ad to join the US Border Guard, but the female account was not (despite the ad featuring an image of a female border guard. See Image 1 above). The female account was shown ads for hair extensions, teeth whitening treatments, and workout clothes, all of which were not shown to the male account. The capacity for ad content to be targeted based on demographics may explain these differences.

The presence of videos with religious themes raises questions

Both accounts were recommended videos with religious themes despite neither account watching or engaging with such content. All religious content recommended to either account was related to Christianity. This is a trend that was seen across all four investigations in this series.

A number of these videos combined religious themes with meditation, relaxation, or self-healing content. For

Image 5: A livestreamed service from a Pentecostal mega-church recommended to the male account.



example, the female account was recommended five meditation videos that had religious overtones. One such video was titled "Archangel Michael - Ask Him To Protection, Awakening Strength and Enhancing Self-Confidence". Another was called "Archangel Chamuel Raises Your Energetic Vibration - Clean Destructive Energy - Love Frequency 852Hz". As well as these, the female account was recommended three videos of religious sermons.

Similar trends were seen for the male account, where eight videos of religious sermons were recommended, including livestreams of services from a Pentecostal mega-church (see Image 5).

The reasons for such content appearing in YouTube's recommended feed are unclear, and the fact that the videos are exclusively Christianity-themed raise further questions as to why the algorithm determines that a user may be interested in such videos.

Appendix

Table 1a: Total videos recommended to each account and the distribution of video recommendations (i.e. for the female account, one video was recommended 14 times. For the male account, one video was recommended 10 times, etc.)

# Recommendations	Male (#)	Male (%)	Female (#)	Female (%)
14	0	0	1	0.2
10	1	0.2	0	0
8	0	0	1	0.2
7	1	0.2	0	0
6	1	0.2	4	0.8
5	5	0.9	3	0.6
4	9	1.7	4	0.8
3	17	3.1	24	4.6
2	70	13	68	13.1
1	439	80.8	416	79.8
Total	543	100	521	100

Table 2a: Results for analysis of all videos recommended more than once to each account

Category	Subcategory	Male (#)	Male (%)	Female (#)	Female (%)
Closely related	Call of Duty	2	1.92	1	0.95
	Minecraft	7	6.73	13	12.38
	MrBeast alt channel	4	3.85	5	4.76
	Markiplier clip	1	0.96	1	0.95
	jacksepticeye	0	0.00	1	0.95
	Closely related total	14	13.46	21	20.00
Subject related	Five Nights at Freddy's	1	0.96	0	0.00
	GTA	1	0.96	0	0.00
	Among Us	0	0	2	1.90
	Halo	0	0	1	0.95
	SuperMario	0	0	1	0.95
	XBox	0	0	1	0.95
	Subject related total	2	1.92	5	4.76

Subscribed	jacksepticeye	20	19.23	16	15.24
	Markiplier	21	20.19	23	21.90
	MrBeast Gaming	4	3.85	4	3.81
	Subscribed total	45	43.27	43	40.95
Unrelated	Adult Entertainment	2	1.92	1	0.95
	Anime/Manga	2	1.92	1	0.95
	Chess	1	0.96	1	0.95
	Educational	4	3.85	1	0.95
	Food	0	0.00	1	0.95
	Hobby/Arts/Craft	1	0.96	2	1.90
	Kids entertainment	3	2.88	3	2.86
	Meditation/Relaxation	0	0.00	1	0.95
	Movies	2	1.92	1	0.95
	Music	1	0.96	1	0.95
	Science/Nature	0	0.00	1	0.95
	Sport	3	2.88	2	1.90
	Vlogger	6	5.77	4	3.81
	Unrelated total	25	24.04	20	19.05
Watched	RaidAway	5	4.81	2	1.90
	Nico	13	12.50	14	13.33
	Watched total	18	17.31	16	15.24
Grand Total		104	100.00	105	100.00

Table 3a: Types of unique videos recommended to each account

Category	Male (#)	Female (#)
Closely related	93	72
Subject related	33	31
Subscribed	13	32
Unrelated	160	144
Watched	6	8
Grand Total	305	287

Table 4a: Results of the analysis of all unique videos recommended to each account

Category	Subcategory	Male (#)	Male (%)	Female (#)	Female (%)
Closely related	Call of Duty	5	1.64	3	1.05
	Minecraft	80	26.23	60	20.91
	MrBeast alt channel	8	2.62	6	2.09
	Dead Space	2	0.70	2	0.70
	Interview with jacksepticeye	1	0.35	1	0.35
	Closely related total	93	30.49	72	25.09
Subject related	Age of Empires	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Among Us	1	0.33	2	0.70
	Apex Legends	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Battlefield 2042	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Cities Skyline	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Destiny 2	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Dragon Ball Legends	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Dota 2	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Elden Ring	0	0.00	3	1.05
	FNAF	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Fortnite	7	2.30	3	1.05
	Garena Free Fire	1	0.33	0	0.00
	GTA	2	0.66	0	0.00
	Halo	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Harry Potter	1	0.33	2	0.70
	League of Legends	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Mortal Kombat	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Nail Salon 3D	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Pico Park	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Pokémon Go	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Project Playtime	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Roblox	3	0.98	2	0.70
	Rocket League	0	0.00	2	0.70

	Star Wars game	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Survivor	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Tekken 7	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Transformers game	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Universe Sandbox	1	0.33	1	0.35
	Valheim	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Valorant	1	0.33	1	0.35
	Various games	1	0.33	1	0.35
	VR	0	0.00	1	0.35
	War Dragons	0	0.00	1	0.35
	War Thunder	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Worldbox	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Xbox	2	0.66	2	0.70
	Subject related total	33	10.82	31	10.85
Subscribed	jacksepticeye	4	1.31	14	4.88
	Markiplier	4	1.31	11	3.83
	MrBeast Gaming	5	1.64	7	2.44
	Subscribed total	13	4.59	32	11.15
Unrelated	Adult entertainment	7	2.30	8	2.79
	Animals	1	0.33	0	0.00
	Anime/Manga	10	3.28	8	2.79
	Chess	1	0.33	1	0.35
	Compilation	2	0.66	0	0.00
	Educational	15	4.92	11	3.83
	Food	0	0.00	1	0.35
	Hobby/arts/crafts	11	3.61	15	5.23
	Interview	4	1.31	4	1.39
	Kids entertainment	12	3.93	12	4.18
	Meditation/relaxation	4	1.31	14	4.88
	Movies	13	4.26	10	3.48
	Music	10	3.28	15	5.23

	Nature	0	0.00	1	0.35
	News	7	2.30	1	0.35
	Random	2	0.66	0	0.00
	Religion	8	2.62	3	1.05
	Sport	9	2.95	11	3.83
	TV	3	0.98	1	0.35
	Vlogger	40	12.79	28	9.76
	Unrelated total	160	52.13	144	55.07
Watched	Nico	6	1.97	7	2.44
	Raid Away	0	0.00	1	35.00
	Watched total	6	1.97	8	2.79
Grand Total		305	100.00	287	100.00

Table 5a: Analysis of the types of ads recommended to each account

Broad category	Subcategory	Male ads	Female ads	Broad category	Subcategory	Male ads	Female ads
Education	College application consultants	1	1	Jobs	Various	1	-
	Cooking classes	1	-	Jobs Total		3	1
	Data science program	1	2	Non-profit	International Fellowship of Christians and Jews	3	1
	University/College	2	3		Non-profit Total	3	1
	Education Total	5	6	Product	Air purifier	-	1
Entertainment	Cartoons	-	1		Camera	1	1
	Israeli TV and movies	-	1		Cement	-	2
	Movies	-	1		Combustion engine	1	-
	Entertainment Total	0	3		Female formal wear	1	1
Gaming	State of Survival	1	1		Hair extensions	-	1
	Various	1	-		Phone	4	3
	War Robots	1	1		Razor	2	1
	Gaming Total	3	2		Security camera	1	1
Jobs	Modeling	1	1		Smart watch	1	-
	US Border Guard	1	-		Solar panels	1	-

Broad category	Subcategory	Male ads	Female ads	Broad category	Subcategory	Male ads	Female ads
	Speakers	1	-	Technology	Social media	1	1
	Stickers	-	1		VPN	1	-
	Teeth whitening	-	2		Technology Total	11	17
	Vehicle	1	1	Travel	African safari	1	-
	Women's workout clothes	-	1		TAP Air	-	1
	Product Total	14	16		Travel Total	1	1
Research	Cancer research	-	1	Grand Total		47	54
	Research Total	0	1				
Services	Banking	1	1				
	Dog training	1	-				
	Gutter cleaning	1	1				
	Healthcare	1	1				
	Insurance	-	1				
	Management coaching	1	-				
	Online grocery service	1	-				
	Recruitment	-	1				
	Tree removal	1	-				
	Wedding band	-	1				
	Services Total	7	6				
Technology	Ad blocker	-	1				
	AI "Friend"	1	1				
	App development	1	1				
	Database software	1	-				
	Ecommerce software	1	1				
	Financial software	-	1				
	Marketing software	-	2				
	Management software	1	2				
	Online security	-	3				
	Internet plan	3	3				
	Search engine	1	1				

Endnotes

- 1 Marketing Strategies – YouTube Video Gaming. Google.
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