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When corporate dataveillance brings beneficial experiences:

Service-specific qualitative evidence for YouTube

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Abstract

Entertainment, information seeking, socialization: internet users are constantly dataveilled when relying on various online services to meet their diverse needs. Yet research that considers online-service peculiarities in shaping personal experiences in response to corporate data collection and analysis is scarce. This study investigates young adults' dataveillance imaginaries, sense of dataveillance, and behavioral responses on YouTube, which extensively displays personalized content based on digital traces. Our thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with frequent users demonstrated the perceived self-evidence of dataveillance on this major platform. Users tended to accept and take advantage of, rather than resist, pervasive dataveillance practices. The results also revealed that on YouTube, dataveillance brings greater benefits because it fosters user satisfaction and confirmed that individual attitudes and behaviors related to dataveillance are highly context-dependent. Our fresh service-specific approach contributes to refining user-centered research on everyday dataveillance beyond its expected adverse consequences.

Keywords: dataveillance; profiling; digital traces; imaginaries; behavior; YouTube

1. Introduction

Corporate dataveillance is ubiquitous in today's digital landscape. Corporations constantly collect and analyze people's digital traces from online services they rely on to meet their everyday needs. This top-down data surveillance (Clarke, 1988) is a key component of the ongoing digitalization of society, conceptualized as a "co-evolutionary interaction" of datafication, algorithmization, and platformization (Latzer, 2022, p. 335). Accordingly, platformized services have become optimal spaces to generate big data from human activities and algorithmically process this asset to create capital. Dataveillance specifically derives from datafication and interplays with algorithmic selection to profile individuals based on their digital traces (Büchi et al., 2020; Latzer, Hollnbuchner, Just, & Saurwein, 2016; Van Dijck, 2014). For corporations, such profiling is highly advantageous for aims such as economic profit or risk management when engaging in practices like targeted advertising and credit scoring (Christl, Kopp, & Riechert, 2017). For individual internet users, profiling is most visible through the personalization of

online content, ads, or services and can bring personal benefits such as productivity and cost savings (Lupton, 2020; Plangger & Montecchi, 2020). Nonetheless, dataveillance practices can lead to harmful – and often unintended – consequences for users, such as privacy infringement, social sorting, and self-restricted internet use due to perceived dataveillance (Büchi, Festic, & Latzer, 2022; Clarke, 1988; Solove, 2006). This rationale has driven extensive privacy research in the social sciences (for an overview, see Acquisti, Brandimarte, & Loewenstein, 2015).

Beyond this worrisome picture, how individuals experience the diverse manifestations and consequences of corporate dataveillance in their everyday lives is not yet fully understood. This study hence adopts a *user-centered* and *service-specific approach* to respond to the calls for empirical research on the sense-making of, feelings about, and responses to dataveillance across contexts (Büchi et al., 2022; Strycharz, Kim, & Segijn, 2022; Strycharz & Segijn, 2022). Specifically, we investigate young adults' *dataveillance imaginaries* and *sense of dataveillance* on YouTube, i.e., their sense-making of dataveillance and the extent to which they feel dataveilled, as well as their *behavioral responses*, i.e., their (intended) behaviors in response to their dataveillance imaginaries and sense of dataveillance. Our research questions are:

RQ1: What are young adults' dataveillance imaginaries and sense of dataveillance on YouTube?

RQ2: How do young adults respond to their dataveillance imaginaries and sense of dataveillance when using YouTube?

To answer these questions, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with adults aged 18 to 29 who regularly consume content on YouTube. In doing so, our work advances research on the context-dependence of personal experiences with everyday corporate dataveillance in three ways and provides important insights to inform future theoretical contributions and policy initiatives.

First, studies conducted with adult samples in the context of general internet use showed diverse and even opposite attitudes and behaviors in response to dataveillance, data collection, and online surveillance (Plangger & Montecchi, 2020; Sörum & Fuentes, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Our work thus contributes to explaining these variations by considering the characteristics peculiar to the online service and the demographic group using it. There is still a lack of substantial evidence on how these attitudes and behaviors relate to the specific online service used. To narrow this gap, we examined users' experiences on YouTube, a prominent corporate actor engaging in dataveillance and major online service. YouTube extensively displays personalized content to its users based on their digital traces on the platform and other Google services they use (Goodrow, 2021; YouTube Help, n.d.). For many, it is also an essential platform, considering its dual nature as a social media and video service that enables interactions, content creation, and consumption for purposes such as recreation and learning (Khan, 2017). Additionally, our study is also specific in the demographic it examines. On a descriptive and comparative level, existing research has shown that the context-dependence of dataveillance perceptions and behaviors applies not only to services used but also to individual differences pertaining to, for instance, demographic characteristics or internet skills (Kalmus, Bolin, & Figueiras, 2024; Marinelli & Parisi, 2024; McClain, Faverio, Anderson, & Park, 2023; Segijn & van Ooijen, 2020; Zhang, Boerman, Hendriks, Araujo, & Voorveld, 2023). Considering this, this study focuses on a specific group, young adults, because they use YouTube frequently (Gottfried, 2024; NETendances, 2023) and are thus particularly exposed to dataveillance.

Second, the service- and platform-specific body of research that conveys a comprehensive perspective on both attitudes and behaviors related to corporate dataveillance or online surveillance practices in the adult population remains limited (e.g., Augusto & Simões, 2017). Although scholars have devoted more attention to social media platforms, these studies tend to focus either on social media use in general or only on sense-making processes and attitudes (e.g., Alvarado, Heuer, Vanden Abeele, Breiter, & Verbert, 2020; Büchi, Fosch-Villaronga, Lutz, Tamò-Larrieux, & Velidi, 2023; Kennedy, Elgesem, & Miguel, 2017; Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2018; Southerton & Taylor, 2020). This study thus contributes to expanding

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knowledge on personal sense-making, feelings, and behaviors related to dataveillance and how these aspects connect together.

Third, while the neighboring disciplines of privacy research (Marwick & Hargittai, 2019; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013) and algorithm studies (Karizat, Delmonaco, Eslami, & Andalibi, 2021; Sued, 2022) have contributed to this topic, fewer studies (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2023; Lupton, 2020) have adopted a user-centered dataveillance perspective explicitly focusing on people's lived experiences of being constantly monitored through their digital traces. We contribute to this crucial research area by empirically refining and challenging our normatively shaped understanding of how dataveillance can help or hinder individuals from seizing online opportunities or fulfilling their needs.

In the next chapter, we detail our theoretical background and review existing empirical literature. Then, we describe our methods, present and discuss our results, and conclude by highlighting our findings and contributions.

2. Dataveillance from a user-centered perspective: Theoretical background and existing research

This chapter discusses *dataveillance as a distinguishing characteristic of life in digitized societies* and introduces the key concepts that theoretically inform this user-centered article: *dataveillance imaginaries*, *a sense of dataveillance*, and related *behavioral responses*. Our work explicitly focuses on users' experiences with top-down institutional dataveillance, distinguishing these from experiences with social or peer surveillance when using online services like social media (e.g., Duffy & Chan, 2019; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). (Corporate) dataveillance practices shape individual dataveillance imaginaries and their sense of dataveillance, which can both, in turn, influence behaviors when using online services (Büchi et al., 2022; Kappeler, Festic, & Latzer, 2023). Such behavioral responses can prevent or facilitate the meeting of personal needs and, therefore, underline the importance of understanding the context-specific consequences of dataveillance on people's lives and their underlying determinants.

2.1 Dataveillance on YouTube

Dataveillance represents the *automated, continuous, and (unspecific) collection, storage, analysis, and sharing of digital traces by public and corporate actors* (Büchi et al., 2022, p. 1; Strycharz & Segijn, 2022, p. 575). It is a form of surveillance, i.e., "the watching, listening to, or recording of an individual's activities" (Solove, 2006, p. 490), relying on data points and carried out by institutional actors, not individuals themselves (Büchi et al., 2022; Clarke, 1988). Legitimized and driven by the logic of datafication, the ubiquitous dataveillance of everyday online activities is, on the one hand, unspecific due to its continuity, opacity, and automation (Büchi et al., 2022; Van Dijck, 2014). On the other hand, dataveillance is also specific from an actor perspective when aiming to influence individuals and potentially change their behaviors (Degli Esposti, 2014), for instance, when displaying personalized ads to encourage purchases (Strycharz & Segijn, 2022). The concept of *surveillance culture* especially relates to the prevalence and significance of dataveillance. Lyon (2017) argued that a surveillance culture has emerged given the extensive surveillance possibilities enabled by digital technologies and their widespread application at the individual and institutional levels. This culture structures and surrounds people in their daily lives and pushes them to adopt a particular vision of this phenomenon and react to it.

One purpose of dataveillance is profiling, i.e., "the systematic and purposeful recording and classification of data related to individuals" (Büchi et al., 2020, p. 2). Profiling implies the algorithmic processing of people's digital traces to detect patterns and infer individual characteristics, thereby creating profiles (Hildebrandt, 2008). On YouTube, dataveillance becomes visible to users through this algorithmic profiling. The platform extensively personalizes content, ads, and search results displayed on

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its interface based on users' inferred profiles. These profiles are built from various digital traces collected about users, such as their location, what they previously watched, clicked on, and liked, and their activities when using other Google services (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016; Goodrow, 2021; YouTube Help, n.d.). As YouTube states, "data [users] provide to Google and YouTube helps us improve [their] experience when using our services" (YouTube Help, n.d.). The platform hence legitimizes dataveillance by claiming that it enables it to provide a beneficial service to the user. The next sections detail how individuals experience dataveillance.

2.2 Dataveillance imaginaries and a sense of dataveillance

Our user-centered perspective first draws on the concepts of dataveillance imaginaries and a sense of dataveillance. People develop their own *dataveillance imaginaries*, i.e., "sense-making processes of dataveillance," which can include diverse imagined "actors," "workings," "data types," and "consequences" (Kappeler et al., 2023, pp. 2–4). These imaginaries, conceptually borrowed from Lyon's (2017) surveillance imaginaries, are nurtured by personal experiences, knowledge, and media coverage. Imaginaries are rooted in Taylor's (2002) "social imaginaries" of living in society and enable scholars to analyze personal and common sense-making toward dataveillance practices. By encompassing individual understandings, dataveillance imaginaries also relate to the concepts of "surveillance beliefs" (Strycharz & Segijn, 2022) and "folk theories," i.e., the "intuitive, informal theories […] to explain the outcomes, effects, or consequences of technological systems" (DeVito, Gergle, & Birnholtz, 2017, p. 3165).

In addition to understanding how people make sense of dataveillance, it is relevant to consider to what extent they feel dataveilled. Rooted in user-centered research on dataveillance, the concept of a *sense of dataveillance* is particularly suited to capturing the personal "sense of being subject" to dataveillance practices and the feeling of "being constantly watched" through one's digital traces (Büchi et al., 2022, p. 2). Exposure to and imaginaries about dataveillance practices can "shape a sense of dataveillance" (Kappeler et al., 2023, p. 2). This concept shares similarities with terms such as "perceived surveillance" (Segijn & van Ooijen, 2020) or "the perception of being observed" (Lefkeli, Tulan, & Gürhan-Canli, 2022). While these terms also encapsulate this individual belief or feeling of being monitored online – whether on a cognitive or sensory basis – a sense of dataveillance specifically relates to dataveillance as conceptualized in the present study. Exploring people's sense that their digital traces are being collected and analyzed is necessary to determine, first, whether salient dataveillance practices like algorithmic profiling increase it and, second, what factors are associated with it, such as unpleasant personalized online experiences, changed media use, or privacy concerns (Büchi et al., 2023; Strycharz et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

Given the above, we consider that people's dataveillance imaginaries and sense of dataveillance are closely intertwined. Our analysis did not separate both aspects from one another but rather captured the diversity of sense-making processes and feelings of being dataveilled, considering our focus on YouTube. This open approach aligns with existing empirical research, which tends to focus on exploring and describing online users' perceptions of corporate dataveillance and profiling, including their awareness, attitudes, feelings, and understandings. Qualitative evidence, including service-specific evidence, suggests that adults and Internet users in Global North countries tend to hold diverse and mixed attitudes and feelings about dataveillance and various degrees of awareness and understanding (Alvarado et al., 2020; Büchi et al., 2023; Dencik & Cable, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2017; Lupton, 2020; Plangger & Montecchi, 2020; Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). For instance, some people saw profiling practices as beneficial because they provided relevant online services (Lupton, 2020). Others expressed ambivalent attitudes because such practices elicit both satisfaction and creepiness by capturing intimate details to make better predictions (Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020). In a mixed-methods study, Plangger and Montecchi (2020) identified from interviews four types of attitudes: the "protectionists," "pragmatists," "apathists," and "capitalists" (p. 41). Each type assigned varying degrees of importance to

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privacy protection and advantages retrieved from corporate surveillance. Furthermore, there are indications from quantitative studies that attitudes and concerns about dataveillance, data collection, and profiling practices greatly vary depending on the type of online activities, actors involved, type of data, intended use, and participants' sociodemographics (Kalmus et al., 2024; Marinelli & Parisi, 2024; Segijn & van Ooijen, 2020; Vitak et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). A study found that social media elicited the highest feelings of being watched among a representative sample of the Dutch population, ahead of other types of online services and smart devices, and these perceptions were associated with younger and more educated respondents (Zhang et al., 2023).

2.3 Behaviors in response to dataveillance imaginaries and a sense of dataveillance

Dataveillance imaginaries and a sense of dataveillance can lead to distinct online behaviors. As emphasized in privacy research, how people manage their online information depends on what is deemed acceptable and expected in terms of data flows in a given context (Acquisti et al., 2015; Nissenbaum, 2019). Behavioral responses are therefore inherently contextual (Strycharz & Segijn, 2022) and connect with Lyon's (2017) surveillance practices, which are "activities that relate to being surveilled (*responsive*) and also modes of engagement *with* surveillance (*initiatory*)" (p. 830). Whereas responsive practices focus on counteracting surveillance, initiatory practices center on individual participation in surveillance, for instance of others or oneself.

Considering this, empirical evidence has shown that people adopt diverse behaviors when encountering (corporate) data collection or surveillance practices. These include privacy protection (McClain et al., 2023), "self-inhibition" of internet use (Büchi et al., 2022), and other types of "coping tactics," such as trusting the online service used (Hartley & Schwartz, 2020). An emerging strand of qualitative research in the Global North has specifically examined how sense-making processes and feelings about dataveillance practices affect behavioral responses. Differences in contexts or individual understandings, skills, or attitudes may lead people to keep using online services the same way due to satisfaction or helplessness toward dataveillance practices, using them less, or adopting data management strategies (Armstrong et al., 2023; Augusto & Simões, 2017; Gruber & Hargittai, 2023; Hartley & Schwartz, 2020; Kappeler et al., 2023; Sörum & Fuentes, 2023). For example, Sörum and Fuentes (2023) identified three main "sociotechnical imaginaries" about corporate data collection. Participants belonging to the "good data" imaginary positively embrace and normalize related practices, whereas those linked to the "dystopian" imaginary resignedly accept them and tend to stay passive despite negative perceptions. In contrast, those from the "activist" imaginary actively combat them and deploy strategies such as using privacy-enhancement tools or not using certain services.

Closely related is research on "algorithmic resistance" (Velkova & Kaun, 2021), which investigates individual actions based on the logic of algorithmic profiling to influence personalized outputs. While implicitly linked to dataveillance, this perspective focuses more on user interactions with algorithms to resist their governance, for instance, by engaging with specific content through viewings, likes, or comments on platforms like TikTok and YouTube (Karizat et al., 2021; Sued, 2022). Our service-specific approach also connects to, but differs from, the extensive yet debated literature on "affordances." Whereas this field centers on the relational role between platforms and users to "enable and constrain specific uses" (Ronzhyn, Cardenal, & Batlle Rubio, 2023, p. 3178), we instead focus here on how dataveillance practices specific to YouTube shape both attitudes and behaviors. Our study thus contributes to clarifying the rich but mixed empirical evidence summarized above by explicitly considering the peculiarities of the online service used, an approach adopted to a limited extent in user-centered research related to corporate dataveillance.

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3. Methods

This qualitative study is based on ten semi-structured interviews with young adults integrating the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018) and analyzed with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). This approach contributes to user-centered research on dataveillance and its consequences by thoroughly investigating individual experiences on YouTube.

3.1 Participants

We selected participants based on our target population: French-speaking young adults from 18 to 34 years old living in Quebec, Canada, who regularly access YouTube to consume content. We recruited participants from this age range because YouTube is highly used among younger adults, making them particularly subjected to dataveillance. According to a representative survey, 73% of adult social media users in Quebec use YouTube for recreational purposes, and this percentage rises to over 80% in the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups (NETendances, 2023, p. 17). We also sought to better distinguish the experiences of these users from those of other age groups, given the variety of attitudes and behaviors reported in the literature (Plangger & Montecchi, 2020; Sörum & Fuentes, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Participants also had to access YouTube at least once a week for at least one year to guarantee "sufficient experience," following the criteria used by Alvarado and colleagues (2020, p. 8) to study individual beliefs related to YouTube recommendations. We excluded English-speaking Canadians and YouTube content creators to increase sample homogeneity (Robinson, 2014) and pursue our research aim of investigating dataveillance imaginaries, sense of dataveillance, and behavioral responses in a very specific context.

We advertised our study as being about "YouTube use" to avoid priming during recruitment. The first author shared a flyer and a screening questionnaire to fill out on social media, with student associations, and via snowball techniques, inviting her social network to share this material with people meeting the inclusion criteria. The final sample included ten young adults: eight women and two men aged 18 to 29. As a main occupation, seven participants are employed, and three are students. Although our sample's gender distribution is unbalanced, this is unlikely to substantially impact the results. We used purposive sampling and followed a maximum variation strategy to ensure participant diversity and strengthen the significance of the patterns identified in the analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 235). Additionally, gender differences in YouTube use for recreation are relatively small (80% of male users compared to 67% of female users; NETendances, 2023, p. 17), and past research has generally found no significant gender differences in perceived surveillance or acceptance of dataveillance practices (Segijn & van Ooijen, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Our analytical approach also focuses on participants' experiences as described and understood by themselves rather than adopting a critical or gendered perspective. Participants' sociodemographic characteristics are shown in Table 1. To ensure confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms.

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Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants
The education level is based on the education system in Quebec and corresponds to the highest degree obtained (Gouvernement du Québec, n.d.). Low level: Secondary School Diploma. Medium level: Certificate or diploma of vocational studies, Diploma of College Studies. High level: Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, Ph.D., or another type of university certificate or diploma.

Participant	Age	Gender	Main occupation	Education level
Rose	23	Female	Student	Low
Marie	26	Female	Employed person	High
Anna	18	Female	Student	Low
Chloe	26	Female	Employed person	High
Jade	28	Female	Employed person	High
Thomas	25	Male	Employed person	High
Julie	29	Female	Employed person	High
William	29	Male	Employed person	High
Lili	22	Female	Student	Medium
Olivia	28	Female	Employed person	High

Our sample size enabled an in-depth analysis of interview transcripts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) and was appropriate because data saturation was reached by observing recurring patterns as the interviews progressed (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Nonetheless, data saturation is difficult to apply due to its absence of clear thresholds, lack of compatibility with thematic analysis, and the uniqueness of each study (Braun & Clarke, 2022a; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Therefore, the concept of *information power* (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016) also helped determine a suitable sample size, where "the more information the sample holds, […] the lower amount of participants is needed" (p. 1753). Our sample held enough information power considering the distinct aim of the study, target population, and theoretical framework used. Table 2 details participants' YouTube use characteristics. All participants are experienced users, and most are heavy users. All have been using the platform for over five years, and more than half use it daily. All participants use YouTube for entertainment but also for other purposes.

Table 2. YouTube use characteristics of participants
[a]*The average usage time of Rose, Chloe, Jade, Thomas, and Lili can vary.*

Participant	YouTube experience	Average weekly access	Average usage time (per use or day)[a]	Main purposes of use
Rose	10-15 years	Daily	30-40 minutes per use	Entertainment, tutorials, background noise
Marie	10-15 years	Daily	2 hours per day	Entertainment, education tool, relaxation, personal health
Anna	5-10 years	3-4 times per week	20-30 minutes per use	Entertainment
Chloe	15 years or more	4-5 times per week	20-60 minutes per use	Entertainment, learning, workout, tutorials
Jade	15 years or more	Daily	2 hours per day	Entertainment, information seeking, background noise
Thomas	10-15 years	Daily	5-6 hours per day	Background noise, learning, entertainment, music listening
Julie	15 years or more	Once a week	20 minutes per use	Entertainment, tutorials
William	10-15 years	3-4 times per week	60-90 minutes per use	Entertainment, learning
Lili	5-10 years	Daily	3-4 hours per day	Workout, entertainment, background noise
Olivia	10-15 years	Daily	1-3 hours per day	Background music, entertainment, information seeking, learning

3.2 Data collection

The first author conducted the semi-structured interviews via Zoom in February and March 2023. Participants signed a consent form. The average interview length was 67 minutes, allowing a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences with dataveillance on YouTube. We designed an interview protocol that remained flexible during the sessions, leaving room for adjustments and further probing (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). The design of the questions was in part informed by two interview protocols focusing on people's sense-making and interactions with algorithmic systems (Hargittai, Gruber, Djukaric, Fuchs, & Brombach, 2020; Karizat et al., 2021). These works were valuable because dataveillance becomes visible on YouTube through algorithmic profiling. Our prepared questions did not include words like "surveillance," "algorithm," or "data."

During the interviews, we asked participants questions about their attitudes and behaviors related to dataveillance practices on YouTube, such as personalized content and targeted advertising. Questions were grouped into thematic blocks. We first explored participants' YouTube experience and invited them to look at their YouTube app to explain how they use the platform. This variation of the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) aimed to increase the salience of dataveillance practices, help remember past experiences (Møller & Robards, 2019), and facilitate observation of personalized profiles. Afterward, we examined participants' dataveillance imaginaries, sense of dataveillance, and further attitudes, such as their attitudes regarding privacy on YouTube. We investigated dataveillance imaginaries by asking how they make sense of personalization (e.g., How do you think the content you see appears on your app?) and data collection and analysis practices (e.g., How do you think YouTube has/may have information about you? How do you think [this information] is used?). To measure their sense of dataveillance, we asked about their feelings towards these dataveillance practices, to what extent they felt observed when using YouTube, and how this manifested. Finally, we explored their behavioral responses by asking them whether their sense-making and feelings about these dataveillance practices influence how they use the platform. We also included questions about their self-inhibition, algorithm skills, privacy protection, and behavioral intentions, asking, for instance, whether they have ever avoided searching content or changed recommended content on purpose, their familiarity with the "Your data in YouTube" section, and their likelihood to change their YouTube use after the interview.

3.3 Data analysis

We used reflexive thematic analysis[1] with a general experiential and realist approach to develop themes close to perceptions and experiences shared by participants and followed the six phases suggested by Braun & Clarke (2022a, 2022b, pp. 35–36). The analysis mainly conveyed a semantic meaning close to what participants said but on a more aggregated and abstract level involving some latent interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was both deductive, i.e., guided by the concepts of dataveillance, dataveillance imaginaries, and a sense of dataveillance, and inductive, i.e., based on interview material. An iterative coding and theme generation process with repeated feedback loops was employed. We extensively coded interview transcripts using the "open coding" feature in the MAXQDA software, generating more than 2800 codes. To organize this material, we assigned to each code a shorter "coded idea," summarizing the core idea behind the code. A coded idea could be assigned to more than one code. During coding, we created codes and coded ideas that closely aligned with both our theoretical lens and past research (i.e., more deductively, such as "dataveillance is continuous," "profiling is a black box," "trade-off," or "resignation") and with the experiences shared by participants during the interviews to remain sensitive to unexpected patterns (i.e., more inductively, such as "personalization is positive," "extension of the self," "intimate relationship," or "voluntary contributing to dataveillance"). We then grouped coded ideas with similar meanings on a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to form themes

[1] The reflexive analytical approach is detailed here: https://osf.io/58fm2/?view_only=101651769be94d2c94fca1624989a86f

addressing our research questions derived from our theoretical framework. We discarded codes falling outside this scope throughout this process. Themes were progressively refined, and their prevalence across interviews and excerpts was assessed.

4. Results and discussion

This chapter presents and discusses our thematic analysis of the interviews with frequent YouTube users aged 18 to 29. We developed themes focusing on their *dataveillance imaginaries* and *sense of dataveillance* on YouTube (RQ1), considering these aspects closely intertwined, and their *behavioral responses* to their imaginaries and sense of dataveillance (RQ2). Overall, our results underscored the perceived self-evidence of dataveillance on the platform, generally leading users to accept and orient their use to benefit from it. The results further revealed that participants' imaginaries, sense of dataveillance, and behavioral responses are aligned. Despite some concerns, they were generally aware, tolerant, and appreciative of dataveillance practices on the platform. They tended to perceive greater advantages than inconveniences from these practices, given their lack of resistance, voluntary interaction with them, and unchanged YouTube use.

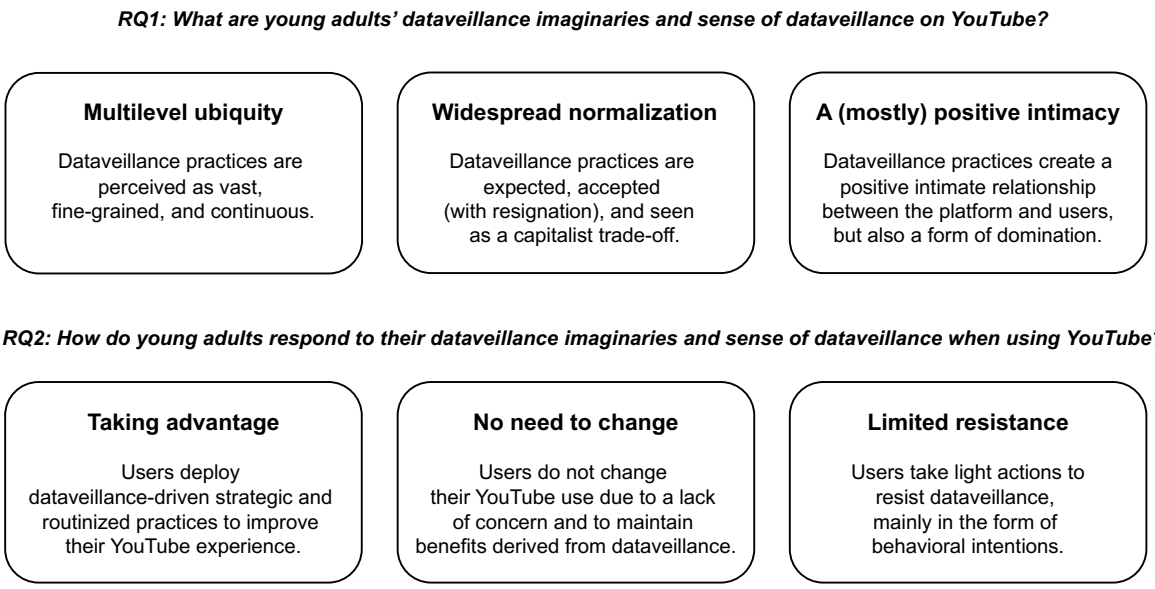

Figure 1. Themes illustrating young adults' dataveillance imaginaries, sense of dataveillance, and related behavioral responses on YouTube

4.1 Dataveillance imaginaries and a sense of dataveillance on YouTube

YouTube users' intertwined dataveillance imaginaries and sense of dataveillance revolved around three themes. First, dataveillance was perceived as ubiquitous, pervading all possible actions on YouTube and connecting with other online services. Second, dataveillance seemed widely normalized because participants tended to expect, accept, and justify it as a capitalist trade-off for YouTube services. Third, dataveillance fostered a predominantly positive intimacy between users and the platform due to YouTube's ability to understand their interests and display highly personalized content.

4.1.1 Multilevel ubiquity

During the interviews, participants evoked imaginaries related to the vastness, detailed character, and continuity of the phenomenon. Dataveillance practices were first seen as vast and difficult to grasp fully

because they had no clear boundaries and were linked to Google or other online services. When asked what kind of data YouTube can have about him, William said:

> Not only information about me in relation to how I use the platform, but being connected with my login name, my Google login, I imagine that there must be a multitude of data other than my YouTube usage with this login name. That's why it's free, by the way. (William, 29)

This quote illustrates the perceived vastness of dataveillance and underlines the transactional role that user data plays. Participants also commonly shared the idea that detailed and refined data were collected for purposes such as recommending content and ads. Collected data could be *raw*, i.e., directly gathered from YouTube activity or related to the YouTube or Google ecosystems, or *inferred*, i.e., created and deduced from raw data. Raw data mentioned included watch history, search history, type of content watched, viewing time, location, likes, comments, and subscriptions. Inferred data comprised information such as gender, relational status, interests, occupation, personal attributes, and buying habits. For Marie, what YouTube inferred about her was based on ultra-precise raw data:

> All the information, every click you make. Just when you go on the app and you click on history. If I see it, they see it too. Each account has a lot of statistics. When you have skipped the ad or watched the whole thing. Whether you have watched the whole video or...It's all written in their statistics. (Marie, 26)

As suggested here, the entire YouTube experience appears subjected to dataveillance. Lastly, the ubiquity of this phenomenon was demonstrated by its perceived continuity. This aspect was raised by several participants when questioned about the frequency of information-gathering practices on YouTube. For many, data were constantly collected, saved, and processed. Dataveillance may even occur when the YouTube app is not used, a possibility mentioned by Olivia (28) and Jade (28). This might be linked to the default tracking settings, the location feature, or staying connected on the platform. In short, the vast, detailed, and continuous nature of dataveillance imagined by participants closely echoes theoretical understandings (Büchi et al., 2022; Strycharz & Segijn, 2022; Van Dijck, 2014) and signals that YouTube users seemed to be well aware of dataveillance and perceived it as a prevalent phenomenon.

4.1.2 Widespread normalization

Sense-making processes and feelings also centered around the idea that dataveillance was the norm on YouTube. Dataveillance practices were generally expected and not perceived as a form of surveillance, in contrast to our theoretical understanding. For example, Chloe (26) did not feel observed when using the platform: "[...] YouTube is still going to collect the information I am giving it because, well, I am using its service. But I don't think I feel like I am being watched to any extent, no." Some users also remained detached or neutral toward dataveillance or deliberately expected to be profiled, like Julie (29), who expressed surprise by the lack of personalization after looking at the ads displayed on her app. As dataveillance is integral to users' experience on YouTube, accepting it was also part of the norms. Some users felt they had no choice but to agree to it, sometimes with resignation. For instance, Jade was asked whether she feels observed on the platform and responded:

> Yeah for sure, but I think it's inevitable...We want to have content that looks like us, to have it [...] it's not magic [...] there has to be data. [...] there has to be data to build on. They have to see habits. So yeah I know that, it's definitely based on something. (Jade, 28)

This quote suggests that dataveillance is perceived as a necessary condition for enjoying personalized content. Finally, normalized dataveillance was also understood as part of a capitalist logic. There was an implicit trade-off between some users and the platform, where dataveillance practices pay in exchange for YouTube experiences. For example, Thomas (25) viewed data as a currency for accessing YouTube. For him, this was a *win-win* situation: "I give my information, then they give me free entertainment, learning [opportunities]. So I gain from having free access to this platform, and if my data must pay for this, then let them pay." Some participants also saw dataveillance as a model that benefits corporate

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actors: data from their YouTube activities can be sold to third parties, and profiling practices increase their usage time and enable targeted advertising on the platform.

This perceived normalization supports previous research; compared to other age groups, younger people tend to be more accepting of corporate dataveillance practices (Kalmus et al., 2024; Segijn & van Ooijen, 2020). Many participants used YouTube daily. They were highly familiar with dataveillance practices and had come to expect and integrate them into their habits; hence, they did not generally feel monitored on the platform. They also implicitly understood the economic value given to their data to keep them on the platform and provide them with accessible and relevant content (Plangger & Montecchi, 2020). This echoes the literature on the privacy calculus (Dinev & Hart, 2006), where potential gains in self-disclosure outweigh perceived risks. Nonetheless, some were critical of dataveillance by expressing resignation or similar views. These attitudes align with the powerless attitudes toward online surveillance and data-gathering practices found elsewhere (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Sörum & Fuentes, 2023) and highlight the perceived imbalance between YouTube and its users (Andrejevic, 2014).

4.1.3 A (mostly) positive intimacy

Finally, dataveillance created a sense of intimacy between users and the platform. Participants tended to perceive this intimacy positively because profiling practices could grasp and understand their interests and desires. Therefore, such monitoring was associated with benefits such as enjoyment, satisfaction, and discovery, enabling participants to consume well-suited content. Rose said she developed over time a "bond of trust" with her "favorite platform" and felt less scared by the profiling practices on YouTube than on Instagram:

> It seems, on YouTube, less scary to me because […] they are trying to get to know me, but at the same time I am okay with it because I have videos, new creators that appear or content that I had not necessarily watched […]. (Rose, 23)

This intimate relationship was further emphasized by Lili (22), who noticed that YouTube stopped recommending content that no longer represented her interests at some point. She appreciated the change as if YouTube closely followed her "evolution" and "vibe." She got the impression that the platform could "understand" her, which she found useful. Thanks to this intimate bond nurtured by profiling practices, diverse gratifications can be retrieved from content consumption on the platform (Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020). At the same time, such intimacy also raised negative feelings and imagined consequences (Kappeler et al., 2023) for some due to the disproportionate power gained by YouTube. This perceived domination was generally associated with these potential effects: heavy personalization could reduce content diversity and lead to addiction, and dataveillance practices may influence users on a cognitive or behavioral level. Some users also shared conflicted views toward dataveillance, recognizing its negative and positive aspects or desiring and disliking profiling. This aspect relates to the concept of "intimacy of surveillance" (Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020), which emphasizes the inherent dichotomy of corporate dataveillance because it fosters both expectation and rejection of profiling practices due to their intimate but invasive character.

4.2 Behaviors in response to dataveillance imaginaries and a sense of dataveillance on YouTube

Our thematic analysis also generated three types of behavioral responses to participants' dataveillance imaginaries and sense of dataveillance. First, users deployed strategic and routinized practices driven by the logic of dataveillance to optimize their YouTube experience. Second, most did not change their YouTube use as dataveillance did not raise significant concerns. Third, users' resistance toward dataveillance was limited and mainly consisted of behavioral intentions.

4.2.1 Taking advantage

Participants first interacted with dataveillance to their own advantage. They used strategies or tactics to produce or limit their digital traces and, in doing so, could improve their experience on the platform.

Dataveillance-driven responses included watching specific videos or avoiding this action to influence personalized content. For instance, Thomas (25) was highly aware that his actions were recorded to build his user profile. When he wanted to learn about a new topic, he intentionally created digital traces by searching content on YouTube or voluntarily talking to his smartphone:

> Participant: As a joke, I'm going to pick up my phone, I am [going to say]: 'I want to learn how to snowboard.' […] My FBI agent, I guess, will do its job.
>
> Interviewer: Okay, I get it. Does it usually work when you do that?
>
> Participant: Yeah.

Thomas used the term "FBI agent" to describe the "perceived surveillance of conversations" (Frick et al., 2021) conducted by his smartphone. In this quote, he acknowledges and contributes to his monitoring.

This theme was further illustrated by the routines adopted by users, which revolved around profiling practices considering their prevalence and practicality. For William, the manual search tool seemed unnecessary:

> I used the "search bar" more [before], but now the content offered to me is so personalized that I often don't even need to use the "search bar" because the videos that I want to watch are the first ones that are suggested. (William, 29)

Many participants also shared that their usual routine on YouTube starts by looking at the recommended content displayed on their homepage or subscription section. Dataveillance, therefore, had functional purposes for them. Taking advantage of dataveillance echoes discussions on engagement with digital traces and initiatory surveillance practices (Kennedy, 2018; Lyon, 2017). Users oriented their YouTube use toward dataveillance because it is intrinsically linked to the platform's functioning and brings them benefits, such as optimized use.

4.2.2 No need to change

Another type of reaction to imaginaries and a sense of dataveillance was the absence of behavioral response. For instance, data-gathering practices did not trigger Julie (29) to change her YouTube use due to the perceived triviality of the data collected: "No, I am not going to use [it] differently. [...] it's nothing illicit, it's commonplace, so I don't mind them telling I don't know who that I watched videos of this, of that." This quote implies that Julie had "nothing to hide." In fact, she explicitly used this argument afterward when asked if data-gathering practices could impact her life. It made no sense for Julie to imagine that YouTube could misuse her information because that could be detrimental to the platform. Moreover, limiting dataveillance was not a valuable option for Jade and William because it would worsen their experience on YouTube. Jade said that she would not change her settings or log out of her account after the interview:

> Because in fact the interest that I see in their access to […] my data is also that they can suggest content that is interesting to me. So if I remove it or if [...] I change it quite a bit, then I might have less content that interests me. (Jade, 28)

Most participants also indicated that they generally do not think about privacy when using YouTube and have not changed their privacy settings in the past. No participants used the incognito mode, and most were unfamiliar with the data management tool "Your data in YouTube."

The quotes above suggest that the perceived low sensitivity of digital traces, the absence of privacy concerns, and the benefits derived from dataveillance are associated with unchanged YouTube use. Kappeler and colleagues (2023) also observed the same behavior when using other online services and pointed out the role played by trust in dataveillance actors and positive and resigned attitudes toward this phenomenon and its consequences. As users' imaginaries and sense of dataveillance relate to the high awareness, normalization, and enjoyment of dataveillance practices on YouTube, they were less likely to have significant concerns or adopt data- and privacy-protective behaviors. This type of response further highlights the importance of considering the context in individual reactions to dataveillance practices (Marwick & Hargittai, 2019; Strycharz & Segijn, 2022).

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4.2.3 Limited resistance

The last behavioral response we observed centered on light actions to resist dataveillance practices and effects. This resistance was limited and mainly consisted of behavioral intentions. Strategies included restricting data-gathering practices or the potentially addictive effects of profiling. Some participants said they wanted to pay more attention to the mechanisms of dataveillance, such as William, who would like to explore the data management and privacy settings on YouTube:

> I would like to maybe [try] deleting some search [and] content viewing history [to] see how [...] it is going to be shown to me or just go look at the data policy, see if there are things in there that I find [...] that don't make sense that I didn't know were being done. (William, 29)

Earlier in the interview, he also directly examined the settings on his device. He realized he could turn off search and watch histories, geolocation, and personalized advertising and found this possibility "interesting." Anna (18) and Olivia (28) also shared that they sometimes limit what they click on, slightly self-inhibiting their behavior on the platform. For instance, Olivia mentioned she is careful about her digital traces because she "accepts but questions" profiling practices. She linked her behavior to her imaginaries:

> It may not have that much impact on what I do, but that's why I try to, I am really not encouraged to share, to contribute to the YouTube community with likes, with comments. I try to be a little bit more anonymous because if I am anonymous [...] they have less data on my profile, my habits, how I interact with the platform. (Olivia, 28)

In sum, behavioral intentions mentioned by some participants signal they were aware of potential adverse outcomes of dataveillance. Still, these did not appear as incentives strong enough to take actual actions, which connects to the privacy calculus (Dinev & Hart, 2006). The interview setting may have also increased behavioral intentions, as the topic of dataveillance was discussed in depth. Moreover, the perceived sensitivity of digital traces can contribute to self-inhibition when searching online (Penney, 2016). As users did not tend to perceive their activities and data as sensitive, they seemed less likely to restrict their YouTube use. However, caution is advised because past behaviors may be difficult to remember.

5. Conclusion

The central argument and contribution of this article is that individual *dataveillance imaginaries*, *sense of dataveillance*, and related *behavioral responses* need to be studied from a service-specific perspective. There is still a lack of comprehensive, user-centered research that considers the context-dependence of people's experiences with corporate dataveillance despite its pervasiveness, significance, and potential consequences in everyday life. This study addresses this gap by investigating sense-making of, feelings about, and behaviors in response to dataveillance when using the social media and video service YouTube. This platform requires careful examination due to its extensive profiling practices, high popularity (especially among younger people), and close links with other widely used Google services. We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with young adults aged 18 to 29. While our results reflect the experiences of our specific sample, they showed that dataveillance was perceived as a ubiquitous and normalized phenomenon, fostering a mostly positive sense of intimacy between participants and YouTube. Users behaviorally responded to their imaginaries and sense of dataveillance by taking advantage of dataveillance, showing limited resistance, or not changing their YouTube use. Our analysis further suggests that users' sense-making of and feelings about dataveillance connect with their behavioral responses. Participants were generally aware of dataveillance practices, tolerated them, and enjoyed them despite expressing some concerns. Considering this, they tended to perceive greater benefits from these practices than inconveniences given their voluntary contribution to dataveillance to improve their YouTube experience, integration of dataveillance practices into their routine on the platform, and lack of privacy and data protection.

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This study makes three main contributions to dataveillance research. First, we contribute to explaining variations in personal attitudes and behaviors in response to corporate dataveillance found in the empirical literature by considering both online-service peculiarities and demographic characteristics. Our approach demonstrates that on YouTube, and for young adults specifically, dataveillance seems to lead to greater benefits because it helps ensure satisfaction when using the platform. This finding aligns with the privacy calculus literature (Dinev & Hart, 2006), existing evidence on this age group (e.g., Marwick & Hargittai, 2019; Southerton & Taylor, 2020), and suggests that responsive surveillance practices (Lyon, 2017), like self-inhibition and privacy protection, may be less prevalent when using YouTube. Second, this study advances our current understanding of everyday dataveillance imaginaries, sense of dataveillance, and related behavioral responses, as well as how these aspects can relate to each other in a specific context. Specifically, our findings reveal the perceived *self-evidence* of dataveillance on YouTube for experienced and frequent users. Personalized content pervasively displayed on the platform makes dataveillance easily perceptible and deeply linked to YouTube's workings. For users, dataveillance hence appears as an implicit condition to seek gratifications on YouTube, such as entertainment and optimized use (Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020). This aspect resonates with the surveillance culture advanced by Lyon (2017) and engagement with everyday surveillance. The self-evidence of dataveillance suggests that users are part of a widespread dataveillance culture on YouTube that nudges them to embrace rather than react to this phenomenon. Third, our findings challenge previous contributions (Clarke, 1988; Dencik & Cable, 2017) that normatively shape our understanding of dataveillance as a phenomenon negatively affecting people's lives. We provide evidence, expanding initial but briefly detailed indications (Lupton, 2020; Sörum & Fuentes, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024), that those subjected to dataveillance can also perceive it positively and may even take advantage of it. Our argument is not to justify dataveillance as it is, considering its tangible risks, but to keep broadening discussions that consider the users' perspective and engagement with their digital traces (Kennedy, 2018).

The main limitations of this study concern the sample size and the chosen data collection method. Although our sample size was justified due to appropriate information power (Malterud et al., 2016), the number of participants remained small. Including more participants could have contributed to capturing different or unexpected patterns of dataveillance imaginaries, sense of dataveillance, and behavioral responses. In addition, while producing in-depth knowledge on YouTube users' lived experiences of being dataveilled, the interview method has inherent biases and measures behavioral responses in a limited way. First, unconscious social desirability or interviewer bias may have affected participants' answers. Second, actual behaviors could not be assessed systematically during the interviews. The walkthrough method may have helped participants describe how they generally use YouTube in real life and remember their past behaviors (Møller & Robards, 2019), but recall issues cannot be excluded. Therefore, more research is needed to better measure how people's imaginaries and sense of dataveillance impact their daily online activities beyond self-reported behaviors and intended behaviors. Promising avenues include mixed- and multi-method approaches aiming at triangulation that consider, for instance, changes over time and natural settings (see also Büchi et al., 2022, 2023; Strycharz et al., 2022).

Regarding practical implications, we found that participants were generally unaware of and did not use YouTube's privacy-enhancement tools. This highlights the need for continued data literacy efforts among young people (Segijn & van Ooijen, 2020) and those having a limited understanding of risks associated with dataveillance. While approaches like fostering "personal pedagogies of data" to enhance individuals' awareness, understanding, and critical thinking about their digital traces (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2020, p. 216), along with public and educational initiatives, are crucial, this responsibility also lies with dataveillance actors themselves. Involvement from corporations remains required, considering that social media create environments nudging users to integrate data sharing into their habits (Southerton & Taylor, 2020). Online services should thus make privacy-enhancement tools more salient to users.

In sum, this article confirms that individual experiences and consequences related to everyday corporate dataveillance are highly context-dependent. This opens the door to future work focusing on

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specific (types of) online services across life domains. It also informs future theoretical contributions and policy initiatives by narrowing the gap on how individuals engage with dataveillance in which contexts and why.

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