'Okay, so I guess I'm not a girl then': Representation and negotiation of gender by YouTubers and their young audiences

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Abstract:
Young audiences are spending an increasing amount of time watching online videos, with YouTube being one of the most popular sites they visit. While some YouTubers have become stars to whom teenagers look up, little is known at an academic level about the content of their videos and the role they play for their young audiences. Utilizing a qualitative content analysis, the study discusses two popular YouTubers and viewer reactions to their videos in the context of developmental needs in adolescence. The analysis focuses on YouTube culture from both the content and the reception perspective – with the latter including affirming, but also challenging negotiations of the videos. The study reveals that both channels display a narrow range of stereotypical identities for young people, with both male and female vloggers tending to reinforce existing stereotypes about gender-appropriate behavior. The vloggers' acted-out scenes of young people's lives inspire the commenters to talk about their everyday-life experiences with gender identity as well as relationships with friends and (potential) partners. What stands out is the high degree of affirming comments from viewers and the fact that the reproduced gender representations, including problematic stereotypes, are only rarely deconstructed or challenged.

Keywords: YouTube; vlogging; adolescent media use; identity building; gender representation

Introduction

When YouTube was launched in 2005, it was initially populated by users who predominantly uploaded videos they had made themselves (Burgess & Green, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013). This gave rise to new formats such as the vlog, or video blog, in which video makers discussed or showed aspects of their daily lives or presented more elaborate, but still essentially personal, short films (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010). Fifteen years later, YouTube's success has reached new levels, with some of the most popular video channels becoming central pillars in the media use of children and teenagers (Feierabend, Rathgeb, & Reutter, 2018, 2019).

This high level of popularity of YouTube and its stars raises questions for researchers dealing with adolescent media use and media reception, such as what adolescents view online and who they admire in online video environments. In a phase of life during which identity building is of prime importance (Mazzarella 2013; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011), the social and particularly gender roles enacted by popular vloggers provide adolescents with ideas about who they want to be and how they think they should behave toward others.

However, apart from the names of popular channels, researchers know relatively little about the content that young viewers watch on the platform or the messages they receive (Martínez & Olsson, 2019). This gap in scholarship about the media use of young audiences is additionally wanting because of recurring media reports about problematic behaviors displayed by some YouTube stars, for example through sexist (Gruber, 2016; Yin-Poole, 2013) or homophobic remarks (Leber, 2014). A growing body of research is addressing this issue (see for example Morris & Anderson, 2015; Wotanis & McMillan, 2014). Yet it is still unclear in what ways vloggers re-enact, for example, stereotypes about gender or sexuality on YouTube and how their audience reacts to such representations.

Drawing on insights from studies of YouTube content and media-related needs during adolescence, we use in-depth qualitative content analysis to investigate two highly popular German YouTube channels as well as the corresponding viewer responses on the platform. Given the importance of gender roles in adolescence (Brown, 2004; Harper, Serrano, Bruce, & Bauermeister, 2016), we focus on the display of gender and contrast this content analysis with the visible audience reflections expressed in user comments. Our findings aim to inform media and communication scholars interested in adolescent media use as well as the complex entanglement of gender representations and youth's media appropriation in digital spaces.

Media-related Needs in Adolescence

As Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2011) point out, 'constructing a stable and coherent identity is a key developmental task during adolescence' (p. 76). This is closely related to becoming more independent from parents and other adults and entails the need for a well-defined social role (Strom, Strom, Whitten, & Kraska, 2014). Many digital media offer young users

the necessary autonomy and independence from the parental sphere for this task (Weber, 2013), for example through providing content that is highly relevant for them, but not available through other media.

Developing this independence typically includes addressing gender as well. One's own desires about enacting a gender-specific role may change, as may expectations about the behavior of other people of different genders. Since gender is widely assumed to be culturally constructed, its interpretation depends heavily on the respective cultural practices with which a person is confronted (e.g. Wood, 2001). Chen (2016) for instance shows that vloggers 'actively look for symbolic meanings of what an ideal woman or man is like from both lived and mediated experiences' (p. 242). The content available on YouTube conversely offers ample material for users to find orientation in terms of desirable or undesirable gender roles.

But the identity-related content is not only passively consumed. Both individually and within one's peer group, important (re)constructive processes take place. Such negotiations of media content can follow or differ from the intended meaning of its creator. This relates to Hall's (1981) conceptualization of different readings (dominant, negotiated, oppositional) of media texts – their encoding by the sender, and their decoding by the viewers. Martínez and Olsson (2019), for instance, show how children negotiate Mislisibell's, a popular Swedish YouTuber, performance of gender by focusing on different aspects of her appearance, behavior, and assumed importance to her audience. Based on group interviews, the researchers show how the young participants agree on some points, but also deal with different readings of the YouTuber's content and overall public persona.

Communicating about watched videos thus allows viewers to compare their own readings of the content with that of their peers and, if necessary or desirable, to align their personal views with a group consensus (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Martínez & Olsson, 2019). This appears to reflect the typical need of adolescents to feel respected by their peers (Strom et al., 2014). On digital platforms, this can take place virtually, through reading the comments that other users have left under a video. An analysis of video comments on behaviors or statements of a YouTuber should thus give insight into how content is received and negotiated by users, individually and together with others. It is important to note, however, that the online expression of one's readings, that is visible to other users and the content creators themselves, may have a strong performative side. Viewers may carefully construct which reading they want to present to these (or other) audiences (Williams, 2015). Even if they do not perfectly reflect the audience's reaction to content, these readings may nonetheless inform us about what is deemed acceptable, appropriate, or desirable, both for the content creators as for their audience.

Research on YouTube Content Related to Adolescent Needs

In light of the importance of YouTube for young viewers, a number of studies have investigated content from the platform focusing on the representation of (young people's) identities and gender roles, both in niches and in the mainstream.

(Dis)Playing Identities

Identity is key to the vlog genre on YouTube as evidenced by studies that investigate content communities that form around specific user characteristics, interests, or needs. As such, ethnic minorities (Anarbaeva, 2016; Guo & Lee, 2013; Patterson, 2017; Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016) and people of specific sexual orientations (Lovelock, 2017; Muller, 2011) or gender identities (Miller, 2019; Raun, 2012) use YouTube to express their experiences, discuss their needs, and connect with others.

The analyses show that members of the respective groups value the platform especially highly as a virtual meeting space and a tool for (self-)empowerment. YouTube provides users with the opportunity to share images of themselves within a community and to present these images to a wider audience. These depictions often differ from typical mass media portrayals or give visibility to groups generally ignored in these mainstream forums. Some YouTubers therefore expressly frame their videos as a counternarrative to other media representations (Miller, 2019; Patterson, 2017; Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016; Raun, 2012).

YouTube undoubtedly allows for a grassroots culture of groups and individuals presenting themselves as they wish to be seen, often to a relatively small audience. However, some vloggers enjoy a very large viewership. Their number of followers is typically counted in millions, and each of their videos may be watched hundreds of thousands of times. In spite of this success, these YouTubers may still be perceived as ordinary and highly approachable people by their audience, which can lead to contradictory findings. Jerslev (2016) as well as Berryman and Kavka (2017), for instance, analyze how Zoella, a British vlogger with millions of subscribers, manages to appear authentic, trustworthy, accessible, and as a typical 'big sister.' Her audience is far too big to enable her to be truly approachable, but she upholds a sense of intimacy and familiarity with her viewers nonetheless. YouTubers of her level of popularity are very important to adolescent viewers (Feierabend et al., 2018), complementing or even replacing traditional celebrities from film, sports, or music (Deller & Murphy, 2020). Lovelock (2017) has critiqued the performance of authenticity of YouTubers as driven by normative ideals rather than true identity. But currently only a small number of academic studies investigate the wider perception of popular YouTubers.

Gender Representation

Given the importance of gender in adolescent identity building and the star-like status of some YouTubers, gender representation in vlogs is enjoying a growing interest. Analyses of popular YouTubers show, for example, clear differences between male and female vloggers. The latter typically fill their channels with videos related to beauty, fashion, relationships, or other stereotypically female activities, while their male counterparts display a wider variety of interests and activities (Prommer, Wegener, Linke, & Hannemann, 2019). This mirrors earlier findings about content-related differences due to gender (Molyneaux, O'Donnell,

Gibson, & Singer, 2008).

Through interviews, Prommer et al. (2019) document that many girls and young women perceive female-coded activities or topics as a 'safe' place to begin producing their own content on YouTube. Bishop's (2018) analyses show that the association between content creators' gender and stereotypical topics is reinforced by YouTube's algorithms and additionally incentivized by companies through sponsorships or free product samples.

Long-standing gender differences in videos are also reflected in different audience reactions to male and female YouTubers. Comment threads to makeup or fashion videos by female vloggers can reflect a seemingly endless series of gendered compliments for cuteness, sweetness, or similarly limiting values (Jeffries, 2011). Male viewers comment on physical characteristics of (particularly female) vloggers more often than female viewers (Molyneaux et al., 2008). Earlier videos from JennaMarbles, a highly popular female vlogger from the US, received a high number of hostile, including sexist viewer comments, compared to Nigahiga (Ryan Higa), a male vlogger (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014). A replication study on a larger selection of YouTubers, however, did not find such a gender-specific effect (Döring & Mohseni, 2019). This could possibly be due to the way in which JennaMarbles has previously navigated gender stereotypes on her channel and ultimately reinforced them, for instance through her then overtly sexy appearance (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014). However, the sheer number of sexist viewer comments highlights the potential that YouTube has for making harmful and exclusive content visible as well, next to empowering and inclusive counternarratives.

An example of the latter category is analyzed by a British study of how leading male YouTubers display and embody masculinity (Morris & Anderson, 2015). Based on in-depth interviews and video analysis of Britain's four most successful male vloggers (Charlieissocoollike, Danisnotonfire, and the duo from JacksGap), it examines the display of masculinity, focusing on gendered behavior and attitudes toward homosexuality. The findings show that the vloggers 'represent themselves as non-aggressive, emotionally open and embracing of their femininity; they […] support their gay friends and promote a more egalitarian perspective on the status of women' (Morris & Anderson, 2015, p. 1201).

Findings on gender representation and viewer reactions on YouTube are thus mixed, warranting future research of the display, reception, and negotiation of identities and gender on YouTube. Some studies find that current vlogging practices have overcome anti-gay or anti-feminine ideals of masculinity dominant in other parts of youth culture. On the other hand, sexism and gender-stereotypical behavior are still very much present in videos and viewer comments as well. And a study on trans YouTubers shows how viewers may hold strong normative assumptions about gender expression and may expect or demand that vloggers conform to them (Miller, 2019).

Rationale and Research Questions
Given the central place YouTube enjoys in adolescent media use, comparatively little is known about what they watch and how they negotiate the perceived content. As outlined

above, exchanging views on media is an integral part of youth identity building, to which the display of gender roles in online videos may be an important contribution. Large-scale surveys reveal which YouTubers are most popular among adolescents (Feierabend et al., 2018), but only a few studies investigate the respective content. As summarized above, this research documents conventional gender-differences in the choice of topics (Molyneaux et al., 2008; Prommer et al., 2019) as well as the style of the presentation (Jeffries, 2011), along with an increasing commercialization (Bishop, 2018). Our own study contributes to this research on content creators with very large audiences (and a potentially wide influence), as we agree with Deller and Murphy's (2020) conclusion on YouTube stars: 'explor[ing] gendered representations [...] is an area ripe for further study' (p. 125). The extant findings are mixed, with empowering and equality-based narratives on the one hand, particularly in smaller niches, but also the reinforcement of long-standing gender stereotypes on the other. Consequently, our approach draws attention to the representations of adolescent identities, in particular with regard to gender roles, in popular YouTube vlogs and to young people's reception and negotiations of this content.

The present study is based on an in-depth analysis of videos made by YouTubers popular among German youth and the comments these videos receive. While vlogs can be found across many different language communities on YouTube, Germany is an interesting case study, as most popular videos stem from video makers showcasing user-generated content rather than professional producers (Goldmedia, n. d.; Mahrt, 2017). For one thing, this distinguishes the German situation from other regions in which commercialization has begun to take increasing hold (Van Dijck, 2013) and major music labels or television channels are much more popular on YouTube than comparable German companies. However, YouTube's status in Germany is similar to other regions of the world in the sense that YouTubers are important role models for German adolescents alongside more traditional celebrities such as actors, musicians, or athletes (Deller & Murphy, 2020 Feierabend et al., 2018, 2019). Following music videos and clips of funny mishaps, comedy videos by vloggers are among the most popular types of YouTube content for German children and adolescents (Feierabend et al., 2018, 2019).

We analyze the behavior that two of the most popular German YouTube channels display in their comedy videos. A particular area of focus is the gender roles they enact. In addition to the content of videos, we examine viewer comments to investigate the extent to which these videos are subject to dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings among their respective audiences (Hall, 1981). Our research questions are:

(1) Which representations of gender roles do the videos display?
(2) How do the viewers reflect upon the displayed content?

In focusing on popular YouTubers and viewers' comments, our design resembles that of Wotanis and McMillan's (2014) study, which provides an additional comparison between popular English- and German-language YouTubers and their reception (Döring & Mohseni,

2019).

Materials and Methods

Our study is based on qualitative film analysis of exemplary videos as well as a qualitative analysis of the respective viewer comments. To select videos for analysis, we surveyed studies of popular YouTubers in Germany (Goldmedia, n. d.; Feierabend et al., 2018; Mahrt, 2017). We checked these against clickstream data acquired from market research firm Nielsen to verify whether self-reports of popularity match the actual video viewing behavior of German adolescents (aged 11 to 15). We chose two highly popular channels by these studies and by the data. Both have uploaded a roughly comparable number of videos in a similar style, namely lists of mostly about seven to fifteen items that are presented in a comedic way (often called '10 types of…'). These videos typically condense desirable and undesirable youth behavior into short scenes that are acted out by the YouTubers in question. Both channels contain a number of videos in this list format on gender, dating, and relationships, which allows a comparison between a female vlogger and a trio of male vloggers.

The selected female vlogger, Bianca Heinicke, started the channel BibisBeautyPalace in her late teens (Bibi being her nickname). She uploaded the videos chosen for this article between 2013 and 2016, when she was between 20 and 23 years of age. Apart from comedy videos in the style of '10 types of…,' she has uploaded clips on makeup, fashion, relationships, and, more recently, on becoming a mother. Her then boyfriend, now husband, Julian Claßen, appears in many of her videos and Bianca is often included in videos on his channel as well. She is the most popular female YouTuber in Germany, with over 5.9 million subscribers and 2.8 billion accumulated video views at the time of writing.

ApeCrime are three friends, Cengiz Dogrul, Andre Schiebler, and Jan Meyer, who have known each other since adolescence. Their list-like videos on relationships, girlfriends etc. stem from 2012 to 2017, when they were between 21 and 27 years of age. The main focus of their channel is comedy and includes parodies of music videos, pranks, humorous competitions, and the literal acting out of proverbs. More recently, they have also produced serious music videos. They frequently collaborate with other popular male YouTubers. Many videos also include Regina Hixt (for a while, Andre's apparent girlfriend) and Sarah Liz (Cengiz's girlfriend), both of whom are also active on their own YouTube channels. 3.7 million users have subscribed to ApeCrime and their channels has 1.1 billion video views in total. However, they currently do not upload new videos.

According to the Nielsen usage data, the adolescent viewers of these two channels are similar with regard to age (mean age for ApeCrime = 11.7 years; BibisBeautyPalace = 11.9 years), but not gender (proportion of girls among adolescent viewers of ApeCrime = 46%; BibisBeautyPalace = 92%).

We searched the available content from both channels for list-type videos whose titles suggested a focus on men, women, boys, girls, relationships, dating, or similar topics. The resulting nineteen videos (eleven from BibisBeautyPalace, eight from ApeCrime) were

viewed multiple times and analyzed scene-wise for the presented behaviors and gender roles. In the following, we have translated titles and quotes from videos from German to English.

Using qualitative content analysis approaches to study visual online content (Bock, Isermann, & Knieper, 2011), the research was inspired by a 'close reading of new media' approach from which we borrow the idea to unearth possible 'types of ambiguities' (Van Looy & Baetens, 2003, p. 8). The video analysis produced in-depth information on how the vloggers enact gender roles, in order to draw conclusions about the underlying narratives the videos present to the audience.

The nineteen selected videos received a large amount of comments on gender-related topics, especially 'THINGS that GIRLS say & what they REALLY THINK ♥' (BibisBeautyPalace) and '7 types of girlfriends!' (ApeCrime). To investigate viewers' readings of video content, we concentrated on the top-ranked comments to these two videos, which had received numerous replies and positive votes. These longer and prominent discussion threads proved fruitful for an analysis of viewers' perception of and reactions to video content. The results presented below are based on 5,100 comments from the top-ranked comment threads to the two selected videos. Through computer-assisted data analysis using MAXQDA, we examined these comments with regard to gender roles. In a first step, we searched the entire text corpus for words relating to gender and relationships such as, girl, boy, couple, and expressions related to intimacy. Secondly, we applied the MAXDictio tool to auto-code the text corpus using the indicated top issues. The third step was to examine the comments for text passages explicitly referring to the respective vloggers. Finally, we identified discussion threads that specifically addressed our selected issues. These threads were qualitatively analyzed in depth.

Starting with a bird's eye view of the whole text corpus and then step by step reducing the data set for closer analysis, helped us break down the large amount of research material into interpretable pieces. The approach simultaneously allowed a careful examination of more unusual comments to uncover potential negotiated or oppositional readings. In comparison to either exclusively quantitative or qualitative data analysis, we deemed this approach the best way to analyze a large text corpus without overlooking rare, but informative pieces hidden in the wealth of data.

The quantitative analysis reveals that the topic chosen by the YouTubers is often directly reflected in the frequency with which it is mentioned by the commenters. Bianca's video on types of marriage proposals receives more viewer comments on marriage than any other, for example. On the other hand, for almost all of ApeCrime's videos we find a small, but consistent number of comments on women or girls. The two videos selected for deeper analysis stand out through their high number of comments, but these also cover exceptionally broad areas. The audience of Bianca's video on what girls think not only comments on girls, but also boys, women, men, relationships, and friendship. ApeCrime's video on girlfriends is discussed with regard to women, men, relationships, and, with a similar frequency, physical intimacy as well as friendship. A deeper analysis of audience

readings of these topics is presented below. To protect users' identities when quoting their translated comments, their YouTube handles are replaced with pseudonyms, marked with an asterisk below. To reflect the style of YouTube, unusual typography has been kept, while profanities are omitted.

Results

The videos included in the analysis of video content and user comments carry titles such as '10 ways to definitely stay single,' '10 types of marriage proposals,' '10 types of couples' (BibisBeautyPalace) and '15 ways to kiss!,' 'Picking up women – 10 ultimate tips!,' '7 ways to break up!' (ApeCrime). The following two sections focus on what both channels present as 'normal' behavior for adolescents and young adults and problematic aspects of gender representation, respectively. The third section presents the analysis of the viewers' comments that reflect their reception of the vloggers' self-representations.

A 'Normal' Gender Identity According to Vlogs

As summarized in the overview of the state of research, highly popular YouTubers often present themselves as authentic and approachable, acting like an older sibling (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Jerslev, 2016). This fittingly describes how Bianca and the ApeCrime crew appear in their list-like videos on relationships and gender. Since these are comedic videos with acted-out scenes, the depiction of what is a desirable gender identity for an adolescent or young adult is usually displayed indirectly. The comedy typically arises from exaggerations of failing conversations and interactions between characters, which makes overly clear how one should *not* behave. Thus a consistent picture of how one should ideally behave to avoid such disasters emerges for each channel – which cannot be characterized as self-empowering counternarratives to the mainstream.

Many of Bianca's sketches culminate in the characters, played by herself and Julian, screaming at each other, hitting each other, or in one of them leaving and/or crying. The failure of the respective conversations, dates, or marriage proposals is usually due to the over-the-top behavior of one or both characters. Consequently, the videos suggest one should avoid such extremes if one wants to succeed in romantic and social matters. Especially girls are supposed to be moderate – or risk ridicule: Be too romantic, too shy, too bookish, too uncultured, all of this leads to 'dead ends' in the acted scenes. The ideal girl or young woman as depicted through the characters is thus a nice, loveable, and well-adjusted person, in line with Jeffries's (2011) earlier findings. This is also how Bianca appears as herself in the segments that frame the acted scenes of her videos. The male characters played by Julian likewise typically fail due to exaggerated behavior, and he appears as a nice, friendly person as himself, as in this very upbeat, but expressly humble example (outro of '10 WAYS HOW TO DEFINITELY STAY SINGLE + OUTTAKES'):

> Bianca: Okay, my dears, that's it with our video…

Julian: …ten ways how you will definitely stay single, too!
Bianca: Exactly! And we hope of course that you liked it as this was a ten ways-video after a very long break and if we were able to make you laugh just a tiiiny [drawn out] little bit we would be really very very happy about a thumbs up.

For ApeCrime, the 'normal' or desirable thing to do for boys or young men is more fleshed out across their videos, while the female roles are more schematic. First and foremost, one should adopt a cool and laid-back demeanor, be in the know, and stay on top of things, whatever happens. Comedy is derived from characters failing to retain their cool or exaggerating their self-assurance into overt macho and sexist behavior. There are thus again lines that should not be crossed. Many of the female characters in the selected ApeCrime videos are strong-minded in pursuing their interests. However, they are typically not the focus of the scenes, but serve more as obstacles to the fulfillment of the male characters' desires, because of their jealousy, lack of interest in the male characters' suggestions, or impossible-to-fulfill demands.

Sexual desire is an important part of what both male and female characters in the ApeCrime videos strive for. In contrast to Bianca's content, physical intimacy is central to many of the scenes from the other channel. This mostly relates to heterosexual pairings. The following excerpt from '7 types of girlfriends!' illustrates ApeCrime's unfazed approach to sex, in this case with multiple partners. As Cengiz is about to leave Charlotte's (played by Sarah) bed where they have just been intimate, Andre tumbles out of the wardrobe barely clothed and the following dialogue ensues:

Cengiz: Who are you?
Andre: I just had sex with Charlotte, too, and then she said her husband was coming and I should hide in there.
Cengiz: Eh? But I'm not the husband.
Andre: Okayyy [drawn out]? So, we don't have a problem with each other then?
Cengiz: No, but then who is her husband?
[Both turn to the bed in pretend-slow motion where Jan pops up from the sheets, embracing Sarah who moans excitedly.]
Jan: No guys, I'm the husband. [He pretends to make love with Sarah who giggles.]

In many other scenes, too much or too little sexual desire forms the basis of the central conflict. This occasionally includes (male) homosexual characters who, apart from one stereotypically effeminate gay character (in '7 ways to break up!'), are depicted in the same laid-back way as the straight characters, with regard to their behavior, speech, and appearance. As in the study by Morris and Anderson (2015), homosexuality is thus shown as

an acceptable and normal male sexual orientation without stereotypical or exaggerated behavior (apart the noted exception). In some scenes, intimacy between Jan and Andre's characters can be seen as a wink toward viewers who have repeatedly speculated about Jan's sexual orientation in video comments. The confidence that ApeCrime's characters display throughout thus includes (hints at) homo-, bi-, and heterosexuality.

In summary, there is a mostly narrow range of what identities both selected channels display as 'desirable' for young people. It may even be that in order to be as successful as these channels are, some sort of mainstream appeal or conventionality is mandatory. As Deller and Murphy (2020) have noted, the topics and messages in popular YouTube content are highly similar to those from traditional youth media, such as magazines aimed at teenagers. Thus, Bianca's videos affirm long-standing gender stereotypes about sweet and agreeable female behavior, while ApeCrime show jealous and hard-to-please female characters. Boys and young men, on the other hand, do not need to please as much, especially in ApeCrime's videos, but there is again a rather narrow and stereotypical depiction of cool and self-confident male gender roles. The latter include homosexuality, so our findings partly align with the hopeful conclusion of Morris and Anderson (2015) about inclusivity and acceptance with regard to sexual orientations on YouTube.

Problematic Aspects of Displayed Gender Roles

The limited and partly stereotypical display of gender identities on the BibisBeautyPalace and ApeCrime channels appears to be in line with other media messages. Their videos thus contribute to mostly mainstream gender roles, while counternarratives typical of niche YouTube channels are largely missing. In addition to this lack of bringing empowering or inclusive content to their audience, both channels also contain outright problematic messages that they deal with in very different manners.

In line with the moderate and well-adjusted role enacted by Bianca throughout her videos, the relationships presented on BibisBeautyPalace conform to normative ideals of (heterosexual) courting and marriage. There is a certain innocence to the scenes, as physical intimacy is hardly shown at all and kisses, for example, are mere pecks. Overall, the characters in Bianca's videos appear more like children playing house than two young adults (a couple who from the scenes' background settings appear to be living together in real life) actually approaching marriage or, for instance, having a child (both of which the two YouTubers did in 2018).

In addition to her focus on topics traditionally associated with women such as makeup or fashion, Bianca's channel displays a number of problematic tropes about gender-appropriate behavior in the '10 types of…' videos. This is most pronounced in 'THINGS that GIRLS say & what they REALLY THINK ♥' which affirms the stereotype of women and girls not saying what they mean or not meaning what they say. Bianca presents this as normal behavior for girls and cheerily states in the introduction that she does not know why she and others (she talks of a collective 'we' or 'us girls') do this. The video shows six scenes in

which a friend or partner says or asks something of Bianca's character. She acquiesces to each of them, but when the other person has hung up the phone or left the room, her face shows anger or frustration and her 'real' thoughts can be heard as an inner monologue. Her boyfriend or (female) friends (all played by Julian) are unaware of Bianca's actual thoughts concerning their requests or behavior. After her boyfriend informs her, for example, that he is going out to study with a female friend, she says she is okay with it, but having left the room, these are her thoughts, accompanied by angry facial expressions and body language:

> Bianca: You little rotten [long beep]. Ts, if you knew that I have installed the tracking app on your cell. Anyway, as soon as you are out of here I'm going to call Tina, Sophie, Lisa, and Marie and ask if they know where you two are hanging out. I think I'm also going to ask Anke if she can bring you doughnuts to quickly check out what you guys are up to. And believe me, should I hear just a tiny little thing that I don't like, well, your buddies are going to find the picture of you walking around in my high heels very funny. [louder] And I am also going to rip your head off!

This rift in Bianca's typically highly agreeable behavior and cheerful demeanor is commented on after the scene, where she appears as herself:

> Bianca [suppressing laughter]: When I look at some of my clips I am a little shocked myself what kind of things we sometimes think.

Bianca thus immediately creates distance to the (beeped-out) cursing and anger of the jealous girlfriend she just played. In none of her commentaries to this video, however, does she question the behavior of the characters, like the monitoring and threatened shaming of the boyfriend in the given example. And throughout the video she presents it as normal that girls and young women consent to everything or feign to be fine when in fact they are upset, angry, disappointed, or jealous.

Despite being of similar age as Bianca and Julian, the characters in the ApeCrime videos appear a little older and do not refer to themselves as 'boys' or 'girls.' They frequently and comfortably use swear words throughout their videos. ApeCrime address the monitoring jealous girlfriend cliché as well, but (in '7 types of girlfriends!') end such a scene with the boyfriend (played by Cengiz) convincing his partner (played by Sarah) that the woman he is talking to on the phone is his boss, not his affair – before returning to his phone and asking 'Clara' whether she has brought the condoms. Even though the male characters played by the ApeCrime crew most of the time respect the wishes and boundaries of their female partners, they may thus also deceive them to pursue their own goals. From Cengiz's laughter and facial expression at the end of the scene, this is displayed as highly gratifying and 'successful' behavior.

In addition to the overly jealous girlfriend, ApeCrime also show women as claiming to have a headache when their (male) partner wants to make love, wanting too much sex, showing no interest in what their boyfriend wants, or acting irrationally. The only scene that ultimately takes the woman's side is entitled 'the one who likes the […] hole.' Regina plays a character who coyly asks her boyfriend to better his dismissive behavior, to which he (played by Andre) replies:

> Andre: Stop babbling about your feelings, dude. Better look at the state of this place, man, tidy up the place. Anna will be here in half an hour, am I supposed to f[...] her in this dirty room, eh? What kind of a person are you?
> Regina [emphatically]: I love it when he treats me like this. I'm going to clean this place right away. [running away] Where's the broom?

This is the only scene to end on a commentary card, namely 'no power to […]holes.' The YouTubers thus feel the need to distance themselves from the exploitative and abusive behavior of the male character in this scene. Although they maintain a cool and aloof demeanor in most scenes, they apparently appeal to the ideal for men to be 'non-aggressive, emotionally open' as well, as described by Morris and Anderson for male British vloggers (2015, p. 1201).

Overall, the narrow and rather restrictive range of male and female roles that heavily tap into long-standing stereotypes for the videos' humor is thus rarely questioned on either channel, not even Bianca's somewhat alarming notion that it is normal for girls to consent to things they do not want.

Analysis of Viewer Comments

At the time of data collection, Bianca's video 'THINGS that GIRLS say & what they REALLY THINK ♥' had received 2,710 comments in the top-rated comment threads, while the ApeCrime video '7 types of girlfriends!' had garnered 2,434 top-ranked comments, including sub-comments. These are analyzed for differential viewer readings, references to viewers' own experiences, and associations between video content and viewer perceptions.

Differential Readings

Drawing on Hall's (1981) distinction of readings of media texts, we find three categories of video comments: First, the dominant comments are mostly affirmative reactions to the displayed scenes. This is either expressed directly by using expressions such as 'I totally know this situation,' 'Yes, that is so true,' and 'I completely agree!,' or describing a situation similar to one of the displayed scenes from the commenter's own experience. Although dominant readings prevail for both channels, the tone differs between them. Most of the comments on Bianca's video are supportive ('I love your videos'), affirmative ('I am your greatest fan'), or suggestions to produce more of the same of this kind of video ('Could you do a sequel, please!'). The ApeCrime commenters rather echo the coarse humor of the

respective video and the somewhat cool, laid-back tone. Here, affirmative comments repeat swear words or abusive language from the video, and use expressions such as 'Cool video, guys,' 'No kidding!,' or 'Awesome.'

Secondly, a smaller proportion of the user comments contain a negotiated reading of the respective video, where the commenters raise specific topics related to the video content and apparently intend to discuss their opinions with other viewers. These kinds of comments on the 'THINGS that GIRLS say…' video, for example, question specific situations from the clip: 'But this contradicts what it really means to be a friend,' 'I would always tell the truth,' or 'I would never…' Some of these statements are picked up by other viewers. On occasion, such reactions to comments insult the original poster or make fun of them.

The third category of oppositional readings, which disagree with the video content, is the smallest. In response to Bianca's video, some users jokingly or sarcastically question their own gender. User Jimdish*, for example, writes, 'okay, so I guess I'm not a girl then' – if what the vlogger shows is typical female behavior. Especially for this video we also find, similar to Wotanis and McMillan (2014), sexist, rude, or disrespectful comments that directly address Bianca.

Two viewers of ApeCrime's video wrote that they are uncomfortable with the sex scenes included in it. The viewers found these too explicit and thought the video was too much focused on sex in general. A self-described 13-year-old girl wrote:

> Sandra' Global Troupe*: no offense but I think this is perverse and besides I'm 13 years old and I'm a girl too so that's why this is perverse amd [sic] disgusting to [me] no offense

While we cannot be sure of this viewer's age or gender, the comment points toward the struggles young viewers on YouTube can face: Being far younger than the video producers, this ApeCrime viewer is challenged to deal with the content as well as the many other affirming comments in the thread. We find it notable that in this case, no other user publicly supports her disapproval, which means she apparently is left to negotiate her critical reading of the video by herself.

Self-referencing – Talking About Me, Myself, and I

Some commenters take the videos as an opportunity to talk about themselves, their own points of view, and their experiences from everyday life. They tell Bianca and the other viewers how they would have reacted in a comparable situation and describe their own experiences, for example in school, or from hanging out with friends during their leisure time. The examples these commenters use reflect their apparent young age, as they refer to 'school,' 'swimming class,' or 'my friend's parents' house' as social meeting places:

> Nadine Anderson*: If you're at a friend's place, and the parents ask: 'would you like something to eat?' And your friend be like: Well I'm not hungry – are

> you?' And of course, you say: 'Nah, thanks, I'm fine' but you're actually thinking to yourself: 'are you f*** kidding me?! You can hear my stomach growl from 8km away?!!' X'D

Among the ApeCrime viewers, references to one's own experiences are much less frequent and tend to be used in irony or in an effort to display one's own abilities at humor, as in this example:

> Great Time*: Wanted to make a 7 types of girlfriends video, too… Then I realized I've never had one.

Given that the comments can be seen by complete strangers, the openness of especially Bianca's commenters may seem surprising. But it may also relate to the finding from earlier studies that describe YouTube as a virtual meeting space (e.g. Anarbaeva, 2016; Patterson, 2016), where adolescents share images and information about themselves (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011) and may also meet their need to connect with a larger community (Harper et al., 2016). Even though some viewers receive insults in response to their comments or express disappointment with disrespectful comments by other viewers – which would be a particular challenge for adolescents expressed need to be respected (Strom et al., 2014) – the commenters apparently still value YouTube as a space to connect with others or receive recognition for their funny one-liners. The latter finding for ApeCrime viewers clearly appear to be more performative toward the rest of the audience or the YouTubers themselves (Williams, 2015).

What I Say Is What I See – Videos Shape Viewers' Worldview(s)
Our third finding of the comment analysis illustrates that what the commenters say is closely associated with what they see. For the selected videos, this means in most cases affirmations of Bianca's stereotypical 'cute girl style' and ApeCrime's 'laid-back, a little rough boy style,' respectively. In line with the title of Bianca's videos, how a girl should or should not behave is a dominant topic throughout the comments, as is a boyfriend's (in)acceptable behavior or reaction toward his partner.

For the ApeCrime video, however, it is not girlfriends who are the most commented on topic, but boyfriends as well as sexual intimacy. Some of the ApeCrime viewers pick-up the video's coarse humor and occasionally sexist tone (user SIRIUS ANSWER B* replies to a previous comment with: '@Pretty Girl*: da f[...], just cause you're a virgin'). Such comments mirror the occasionally crude language from the video as the following example illustrates:

> pyfyggy31 f* [quoting the video]: 'Stop babbling about your feelings dude, look at the state of this place, tidy up the place, man. Anna will be here in half an hour am I supposed to f[...] her in this dirty room, Eh? [...]' HAHAHAHA my

favorite part no kidding :D like totally no emotions at all and that uber-nice line :'D

It appears that viewers emulate the YouTubers' style of expression while sticking relatively closely to the video content itself. This underlines the importance of understanding popular YouTubers and the messages transported through their videos.

Discussion

Constructing a stable and coherent identity is a key developmental task in adolescence, with gender being a crucial part of this process. The display and negotiation of gender identities in popular youth media is important to understand the reception of these messages among young audiences. Some content creators expressly use platforms such as YouTube to make counternarratives to mainstream media available. However, many of these channels have a relatively small audience. On the other hand, research on YouTubers with a much wider reach is still fragmentary. For two of the most popular German channels, we investigated their representations of gender roles as well as their audience's reflections of the content.

We found that the videos of both channels display a narrow range of desirable identities for young people. Girls and young women are expected to please or are reversely characterized as hard-to-please. For boys and young men, in contrast, the reproduced ideal is to be cool and confident and to stay on top of every situation. Both investigated channels create humor through affirming such well-established gender stereotypes and making fun of deviations from the norm. The underlying message is thus intensified: If you fail to conform to gender-stereotypical behavior, you risk ridicule and exclusion. These findings are in line with extant research on stereotypical expression of gender roles on YouTube (e.g., Jeffries, 2011; Molyneaux et al., 2008; Prommer et al., 2019). Many studies, however, focus mostly on the video content. Our analysis broadens the scope of previous research by focusing on YouTube culture from both the content and the reception perspective – with the latter including affirming, negotiating, or challenging negotiations of the videos.

The vloggers' acted-out scenes of young people's lives inspire the commenters to talk about their everyday-life experiences with gender identity and relationships with friends and (potential) partners. The most remarkable insight for us concerns the high degree of affirming comments from viewers. The stereotypical gender representations that popular YouTubers reproduce are only rarely challenged. For the young audience, such clichés may possibly overshadow the inclusive and empowering messages of smaller online niches. Future research should investigate how the normative narratives from popular YouTubers are negotiated by young viewers who, because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, or other qualities, do not see themselves as part of the mainstream (Miller, 2019). We need to better understand how online vlogging contributes to segregating 'normal' from undesirable adolescent behavior, both online and offline. A comment analysis can, of course, be only a first step as we cannot be sure about the commenters' identity (e.g., their age or gender).

Compared to Martínez and Olsson's (2019) group interviews, our approach is thus limited, but allows us a wider analysis of viewer reactions – as well as responses to these initial statements in comment threads. The negotiation in YouTube comments appears to be less interactive than in students' discussions in the Swedish study. This might be due to their more performative character (Williams, 2015). The high number of very short and affirmative comments points toward a second limitation of our approach: There appear to be a high number of unquestioning fans among the commenters, which makes it less likely to find oppositional or even negotiated readings in comments.

In spite of these limitations, our findings underline the purpose vlogs can serve in the search for ideal gender roles (Chen, 2016) and highlight viewers' need to check their personal perceptions against their peers' thoughts (Jenkins et al., 2013; Martínez & Olsson, 2019). To construct a stable, coherent identity (Subrahmanyam and Smahel, 2011; Strom et al., 2014), long-standing, albeit somewhat out-dated stereotypes of gender and social roles may provide a seemingly safe starting point. In this sense, highly popular YouTubers, who are perceived as authentic and ordinary (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Deller & Murphy, 2020), may be important role models.

However, this also includes problematic behavior. We did not find openly homophobic or sexist slurs as those reported on in the press (Gruber, 2016; Leber, 2014; Yin-Pool, 2013). Yet some of the messages that BibisBeautyPalace and ApeCrime display are still troubling. In particular, the notion that it is normal for girls to agree to things they are not comfortable with has potentially far-reaching consequences. We find it regretful that Bianca, a highly successful social media entrepreneur, chooses to embody this overly agreeable character in her videos. Some viewers reject her narrative of 'normal' girl behavior, but their comments constitute only a small fraction. Even if in our examples the inability to voice one's needs concerns relatively harmless situations of not admitting jealousy or denying hunger out of politeness, future research and media-literacy work should continue the study of how audiences decode, (de/re)construct, and thus deal with such messages from popular YouTube content.

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