



Components of adolescents' attraction with YouTubers

Ana Sedmak^{1,2} · Matija Svetina²

Accepted: 17 May 2023 / Published online: 2 June 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

Data from previous studies show that YouTube and YouTubers have become an integral part of adolescents' lives and have a significant impact on how adolescents view themselves and the world around them. Previous studies suggest that parasocial relationships with YouTubers are likely to have some characteristics that differ from those with traditional celebrities, such as reciprocity or the illusion of intimacy. The question of this study was why YouTubers are so attractive to adolescents and what are the main components of this attractiveness. A sample of 39 adolescents aged 11 to 20 who were fans of at least one YouTuber participated in focus groups in which we collected data on participants' perceptions of their favourite YouTuber and their YouTuber-related behaviours, expectations, beliefs, and social context. The grounded theory approach was used. The analysis yielded core category "identification" which is a powerful mechanism in adolescent psychology. The core category was supported by four general categories: (1) personal characteristics of YouTubers, (2) characteristics of the relationships between YouTubers and their followers, (3) characteristics related to followers' social context, and (4) characteristics related to the medium itself (e. g. accessibility). Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords Adolescents · YouTubers · Identification · Parasocial relationships · Social models

Introduction

YouTube is among the most used websites in the world; it recorded 74.8 billion visits in November 2022 alone (Ceci, 2023), second only to Google (88.4 billion). It is the second largest social network after Instagram (GMI Blogger, 2023). More than 500 h of content are uploaded to YouTube every minute (Dixon, 2023). YouTube has over 51 million active channels, more than 100 local versions in over 80 languages; 30% of Internet users report watching at least one video life stream on YouTube weekly (McLachlan, 2022). In January 2022, users spent an average of 34 h per month on YouTube, followed by Facebook and TikTok (20 h), WhatsApp (19 h), etc. (Hootsuite, 2022). YouTube is often being watched on mobile phones; for example, of the 34 h spent on YouTube

on average in January 2022, 24 h were spent on Android phones alone.

YouTube and YouTubers seem to be particularly popular with adolescents. For example, YouTube is the leading app or website among American teens, with 95% of teens having used it, followed by TikTok (67%), Instagram (62%) and Snapchat (59%) (Vogels et al., 2022).

Adolescents use YouTube for a variety of activities. For example, García Jiménez and Montes Vozmediano (2019) analysed the content of 400 videos on YouTube for a number of variables, including genre, number of views, and comments. They found that the topics with the most views were related to bullying, sex, pregnancy, drugs, and education. The authors found that users showed greater interest in seeking constructive content, such as learning and education, than content intended only for entertainment.

In addition, Pires et al. (2019) conducted a large study with adolescents aged 11 to 19 in eight countries in Europe, Central America, and Australia, in which they surveyed over 1600 adolescents, conducted over 50 workshops, 300 in-depth interviews, collected diaries, and applied online observations of websites, media celebrities, and online communities. They classified the way adolescents use YouTube into five groups. The first was *radiophonic* and included

✉ Ana Sedmak
ana.sedmak@cirius-vipava.si; as3524@student.uni-lj.si
Matija Svetina
matija.svetina@ff.uni-lj.si

¹ CIRIUS Vipava, Vojkova Ulica 33, SI--5271 Vipava, Slovenia

² University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Aškerčeva 2, SI--1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

activities such as finding new songs, downloading music, listening to music as background while multitasking, finding new songs, archiving or collecting music; listening to music was found to be part of adolescents' daily routine. YouTube was perceived as a companion that is generally assessed from mobile devices. The second group of activities related to YouTube use was *televisual* and included watching entertainment content, following YouTubers and celebrities, keeping up to date; adolescent reported watching episodes, recaps, highlights, sporting events, etc. Adolescents used YouTube as a search engine to find their personal TV programmes and shows that matched their personal interests. Adolescents indicated YouTubers provide tips and share experiences that they can apply to their daily lives, learn with YouTubers, and have fun. The third group of YouTube-related activities was described as *productive* and included creating and managing personal content; this included activities such as taking photos and creating videos. The fourth group of YouTube-related activities was *social* and included watching videos together, commenting on videos, sharing content, and co-producing content. The main goal of this group of activities was to gain social recognition and socialise. The fifth group of activities was labelled *instructional* and included answering questions, learning something new, learning by doing, and problem solving. Learning included a variety of topics, such as learning academic content, learning tricks in the most popular games, or learning how to care for an animal. Adolescents reported using YouTube (rather than Google) as a search engine to find learning content, imitating YouTubers, and learning by doing.

Furthermore, Balleys et al. (2020) reported a study that was conducted in two steps: They first conducted a content analysis of YouTube video productions created by adolescents aged 14 to 18, and then run focus groups and in-depth interviews with adolescents aged 12 to 19 years of age to examine perceptions of these videos. The results showed a strong bond between YouTubers and their viewers, creating a sense of closeness and connection with YouTubers and making YouTubers characters with whom one can identify, as reported by adolescents. The authors noted that YouTubers film themselves doing daily activities and address their audiences directly to the camera, which creates "the impression that this is a private conversation between friends. It is as if the YouTuber is present within the same time and space as their audience and confining with them" (p. 3). This form of interaction is characterised by, among other things, calling out "us" or "you" in a confessional style and the YouTubers giving direct feedback to the viewer, according to the study. Balleys and colleagues called it an "intimate confessional video format" which is supposed to reinforce identification with YouTubers. An important part of this interaction between YouTubers and their audiences is what the authors call dual social recognition, a process of viewers

acknowledging the personal value of YouTubers and vice versa.

The findings that viewers feel close to their favourite YouTubers are also supported by the study of Marôpo et al. (2020), who conducted a content analysis of vlogs of popular female YouTubers under 18 years old in Portugal and Brazil, as well as comments on the vlogs. The study showed that the most popular videos typically included YouTube speaking directly to the camera in a monologue, recording their daily activities. The authors concluded that this type of narration and disclosure of personal information evoked a sense of connection with YouTuber and invited a friendly relationship. By watching the videos and responding to the vloggers' frequent prompts for interaction, viewers are likely to feel like active participants in the activity. The authors believe that this kind of what they call "performed authenticity" is highly valued by viewers—the more the vloggers narrate their own lives, the more sincere, spontaneous, and authentic they are perceived to be.

Furthermore, a qualitative study (Dülgerler & Bilgin, 2022) reported the results of semi-structured interviews with 10 adolescents aged 14 to 18 who were regular followers of a particular YouTuber. The authors reported a variety of reciprocal or semi-reciprocal activities such as subscribing, watching, following, commenting, and emailing, which, as reported by adolescents, created a sense of belonging and influenced their real-life decision making. Adolescents reported that YouTubers helped them cope with feelings of frustration, loneliness, and boredom, and helped them gain insights about themselves and in building personal identity. Dülgerler and Bilgin (2022) attributed these activities to the process of identification with YouTubers.

The data clearly suggest that YouTubers have a remarkable impact on adolescents' attitudes and behaviours; YouTube and YouTubers are embedded in adolescents' daily lives and have a significant impact on how adolescents perceive themselves, other people, and the world around them (Dülgerler & Bilgin, 2022; García Jiménez & Montes Vozmediano, 2019). Adolescents replicate YouTuber behaviours to learn new skills (Hong et al., 2020; Ladhari et al., 2020; Murphy, 2019) or follow their advice (Levinson et al., 2020). The content YouTubers post on a daily basis influences their followers in many ways; adolescents tend to replicate YouTuber behaviours (e.g., their clothing style), buy products they promote, and want to become like them; get closer to them by attending different events, forming online fan groups, and sending them messages (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Because of the interaction between YouTube celebrities and their fans, YouTube celebrities quickly adapt to the preferences and needs of their viewers (Chen & Dermawan, 2020). Consequently, adolescents perceive YouTubers as their friends or family (Balleys et al., 2020; de Bérail et al., 2019; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). Moreover, adolescents tend

to see YouTubers as an important source of experiences and help (Sangeorzan et al., 2019). This is likely related to the fact that YouTubers reveal their personal lives and record themselves doing various everyday activities (e.g., eating), which makes their fans feel like they are meeting or hanging out with them (Ferchaud et al., 2017; Rihl & Wegener, 2017). YouTubers can also interact with their fans on a daily basis (e.g., by talking to them in streaming videos). An example of this is Study Tubers (Turner, 2019), who film themselves studying; in this way, YouTubers create an environment where their fans feel like they are studying with their friends. Thus, data from previous studies suggest that YouTubers' influence on adolescents goes far beyond mere repetition and fun; YouTubers can, for example, influence adolescents' understanding of their social roles in peer and family relationships (Balleys et al., 2020) and influence social appearance anxiety (Caner et al., 2022). YouTube videos also influence viewers' emotional states (Westenberg, 2016), act as therapeutic (Sangeorzan et al., 2019) and educational tools (Hong et al., 2020), and promote interaction with other viewers (Maziriri et al., 2020).

Whereas the impact of YouTubers on adolescents is significant, it may not be as large as qualitative studies suggest. For example, there are data suggesting that media exposure, especially after controlling for family environment or personal characteristics, has limited effects on adolescents in terms of violence (Ferguson et al., 2008, 2014) and body dissatisfaction (Ferguson et al., 2011). In addition, Schmuck (2021) found that 10 to 14-year-old adolescents who reported following media influencers had higher levels of FOMO and lower social well-being, whereas supportive communication with parents decreased adolescents' FOMO in response to following vloggers.

YouTubers appear to play a significant role in attracting adolescents to YouTube. YouTubers as well as other web celebrities seem to have taken the dominant role over traditional celebrities such as film stars or athletes (Kepios, 2021; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). With smartphones, web celebrities are never far away (Xu et al., 2022); compared to traditional celebrities from TV and live shows. The amount of time that adolescents spend online and the number of web celebrities they follow is increasing (Vannucci et al., 2020), leading adolescents to perceive online media as more important than traditional media (e.g., TV) (Chen & Dermawan, 2020; Levinson et al., 2020). Currently, the most popular web celebrities are those who post on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Kepios, 2021).

YouTubers reveal an important part of their private lives online and interact with their followers so that their fans feel that YouTubers are their friends. This type of relationship has long been known as a parasocial relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Previous data suggested that parasocial relationships with web celebrities differ from those

with traditional celebrities. For this reason, Xu et al. (2022) hypothesised that followers perceive web celebrities (such as bloggers or vloggers who become popular through social media) as more authentic and the relationship as more reciprocal and intimate than with traditional celebrities who are famous and already have a strong public identity. A study with university students in China did not confirm these assumptions and showed that participants perceived their relationship with web celebrities as more reciprocal than that with traditional celebrities, but at the same time perceived web celebrities as less authentic, and experienced the relationship with them as less intimate than that with traditional celebrities. While reciprocity and intimacy positively predicted parasocial interaction with both web- and traditional celebrities, perceptions of authenticity did not foster parasocial relationships. These results could also be attributed to the fact that web celebrities are not a homogeneous group in terms of parasocial relationships. For example, unlike YouTubers, TikTokers mainly focus on dancing, funny clips, DIY (Zeng & Abidin, 2021), and education (Li et al., 2021), whereas Instagrammers focus on marketing (e.g., food, e-cigarettes, alcohol) (Hendriks et al., 2020) and different lifestyles (e.g., pictures with daily activities, personal health) (Lucibello et al., 2021). Our study focuses on YouTubers because YouTubers are highly exposed, compared to other web celebrities, by filming their personal lives and talking about various social problems (e.g., bullying) (Ladhari et al., 2020; Levinson et al., 2020).

Thus, the question of the current study is why YouTubers are so appealing. Why would adolescents form seemingly strong bonds with their favourite YouTubers? The main goal of the current study was to explore the question of why adolescents are so attracted by YouTubers and to determine the main components of this attraction—as seen by adolescents themselves. To explore this question, we used grounded theory approach to analyse the responses of adolescents collected in focus groups, described in the following section.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from schools in two small Slovenian towns (EU), located in an urban area and inhabited mainly by middle-class families. All participants were proficient in the Slovenian language. Participation was voluntary. A written invitation to the study was distributed to all students aged 11 to 20 years (414 in total). The invitation included a description of the purpose of the study, the procedure, the schedule, and a written informed consent form. Written invitations were distributed in-vivo by the first author in classes, where the investigator explained

the purpose of the study and answered questions from the students. Participants younger than 18 years also needed parental consent to participate in the study. The reason for this type of convenience sampling was our desire to obtain a larger and more diverse sample than we could have obtained by surveying individual participants outside of schools. We followed the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013) and the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2017). The study procedure was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

One hundred and ninety-four students agreed to participate in the study and were given a questionnaire about their online activities. The questionnaire was completed in classrooms in the morning, with only participants and the researcher present. The questionnaire included questions about their use of social networks, the average time they spend online each day, YouTubers, and the topics they like to watch, and took 20 to 40 min to complete. Privacy was maintained while completing the questionnaire. Students who reported using YouTube and named their favourite YouTubers were invited to participate in focus groups ($N=86$). Finally, 39 participants (age range 11 to 20 years, $M=14.33$, $SD=2.60$; 19 females and 20 males) agreed to participate and received parental consent. The main reasons for participants to drop out the study were their parents not giving permission to join the study or participants not wanting their answers to be recorded.

Materials and procedure

Participants were divided into eight focus groups of 4–7 participants each. Five focus groups were conducted in elementary schools (11–15-year-olds, 12 female and 15 male participants) and three in high schools (15–20-year-olds, 8 female and 4 male participants). The number and size of the focus groups depended on the availability of students and their school activities. The students who participated in the focus groups were active on YouTube and had their favourite YouTubers, which were: 5-min Crafts Kids, AlishaMarie, Baka Prase, Barbi in Matic, Cool Fotr, DanTDM, Dolan Twins, Draw with Jazza, Fugglet, II superwoman II (Lilly Singh), Infinite, JoJo Siwa, KianAndJc, The King of Random, Komotar Minuta, LazarBeam, Lele Pons, Lepa Afna, Llama Arts, Manny MUA, Miranda Sings, Mudja, Mumbo Jumbo, Muselk, Nightblue3, NinjasHyper, OMCO, PewDiePie, Simply Nailogical, Smidi Plays, STORROR, Thinknoodels, Vsauce.

The questionnaire and focus groups were conducted by the first author, female, a post-graduate student, who had little experience conducting focus groups at the time. The researcher was a stranger to the participants and was

perceived by the students as a teacher, as she was volunteering at the school during the study. The investigator herself was familiar with YouTube and YouTubers. Some of the participants occasionally met her at various school activities where they happened to be involved in small conversations about YouTube and YouTubers.

The focus group participants were mostly classmates or schoolmates, and some were friends. However, not all of them knew each other as they were from different classes. The focus groups were conducted in a classroom where the participants sat in a circle. No other people were present except the investigator and the participants. At the beginning of each session, the purpose of the meeting and the rules of the group discussion were explained to the students; then the participants were given a sheet of paper with the rules and questions for the discussion. After that, students were asked to write down the names of their favourite YouTubers. Then, a motivational video was shown to the whole group on a laptop; we used YouTube Rewind: The shape of 2017 (YouTube Spotlight, 2017); the duration was about 7 min. Participants watched it with English subtitles. A brief discussion followed this video. The questions discussed were: Which YouTubers did you recognise? What do you think about the video? This video was chosen because it was a compilation of various web-related events, music, and trends with which most participants were familiar. In our case, the video served to familiarise the respondents with the topics and stimulate further discussion. The video helped students interact and motivated them to answer the questions the investigator asked in the main part of focus group. The questions were: What does it mean to you to watch YouTubers? What motivates you to watch their videos? | What topics do you find most interesting? | What do you expect from YouTubers? | What impact do YouTubers have on your life? | Have you learned anything by watching YouTubers? How does that show? | What do you think about when you watch videos? | What do you like about your favourite YouTubers? Have you found commonalities between you and YouTubers? What kind? | What do your friends/parents think of YouTubers? | How would you describe your relationship with YouTubers? The list of questions was based on previous literature to address the main topic of the current study (e.g. Westenberg, 2016). Additional clarifying questions could have been asked in each focus group to clarify vague or unclear answers. The questions were not pilot tested, and no repeated interviews were conducted. Due to organisational issues in the schools, participants were only able to attend one session, which was limited to a maximum of 90 min.

During the discussions, participants also had the opportunity to show the moderator their favourite videos and comment on them. The discussions were video and audio recorded and then transcribed. Participants' reactions and comments on the videos were also recorded in the form of

field notes while the transcriptions were made. The duration of the sessions ranged from 40 to 90 min, of which approximately 15 min were spent on introductions. During the discussions, all participants were invited to comment on every question. The final transcripts were not returned to participants for comment or correction, neither did they provide feedback on the final findings.

Data analysis

The analysis approach followed the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Pidgeon & Henwood, 2009). ATLAS.ti and Microsoft Excel were used to analyse and manage the data, and themes were derived from the data. The coding was done by the first and reviewed by the second author.

In the first step, the first author carefully read through the transcripts to get an overview of the content and sentiments of the responses. In a second step, the responses were broken down into the smallest meaningful units (entries) and coded using an open coding procedure according to Strauss and Corbin (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After about half of the responses had been coded, the coding was checked for accuracy and vagueness, and the codes were restructured (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to distinguish them as clearly and distinctly as possible from other codes. Codes with overlapping content were combined into a single code, and codes that were too vague were split into separate codes. After the coding structure was found to be relevant to the research objective and agreed upon between the two authors for overlap and clarity, the remaining half of the responses were coded according to this scheme. Finally, the results were reviewed again for accuracy of coding and linked to meaningful theory. The quotes were translated from Slovenian into English by the first author to keep both the content and the sentiment of the statements as close as possible to the original. Due to established time-sensitive collaboration, data were collected all at once, which did not allow us to fully follow the saturation procedure.

The analysis yielded 954 open codes which were finally classified into one core category with four general categories and nine categories. The process of coding, including the coding instructions and commentary, is described in detail in the supplementary materials.

At the time of the study, the first author used YouTube daily and was familiar with popular YouTubers and trends, while the second author was not familiar with current events and YouTube celebrities. The rationales for conducting this research were the first author's personal knowledge to YouTube-related influencers and the observation that adolescents who use YouTube daily consider their favourite YouTubers as significant others. We hypothesised that YouTubers might straddle the psychological line between (real) friends and (classic) celebrities, with the relationship

containing characteristics of the former, the latter, or both; furthermore, YouTubers, in conjunction with their influencer status, would likely be identification models for their adolescent followers. We expected the data to reveal several features of adolescents' relational schemas with YouTubers, but we did not assume the number or content of these features.

To ensure that all elements of qualitative research were considered, we used the COREQ checklist (Tong et al., 2007). The completed checklist can be found in the [Supplementary material](#). All materials (open codes, axial codes, axial coding instructions, written responses, transcripts) are available at https://osf.io/e6rau/?view_only=81a7e5e6b99e47e1914d8cad91c7e5ca. The transcriptions and written responses are in Slovenian, the codes are in English.

Results

The analysis yielded nine components of adolescents' identification with Youtubers, grouped into four general categories; the core category was "identification", which is addressed in more detail in the "Discussion" section.

Personal features:

1. Charisma
2. Personal resemblance
3. Conformity to social norms

Relational features:

4. Reciprocal relationship
5. Closeness and emotional support
6. Instrumental support

Social context:

7. Engagement of significant others

Features of the medium:

8. Accessibility
9. YouTuber as a dream job

Charisma Typical codes in this category explain YouTubers as authentic, interesting, inspiring, friendly, relaxed, knowledgeable, experienced, funny, energetic, hardworking, helpful, independent, humble, powerful, influential, enthusiastic, positive. In addition, participants find YouTubers more likeable and authentic than traditional celebrities (e.g., actors, athletes). Participants believe that YouTubers became famous by their own efforts and had to work hard for their goals; at the same time, singers and other traditional

celebrities receive different types of social or institutional support to be successful, as noted by adolescents. Participants would generally prefer to follow YouTubers than traditional celebrities because they believe YouTubers are more attractive, fun, independent of others, engaged in a variety of activities (compared to actors who are famous for a single activity); YouTubers are not as "self-centred" or "snobby" as traditional celebrities, the participants noted.

Girl (14): "That they are honest, they speak their own mind and do not pretend to be someone else. And that they don't do it for money, but stay honest and do their job because they like it."

Boy (17): "They show the real them ... they do not play a role ... like they do not have a mask on their face, but that they show the real them in their videos ... like they are not pretending to be someone else."

Girl (18): "With Youtubers, you see another side, the one that most celebrities do not show. Some of them, for example vloggers, record their daily life and you see what they do all day long. Whereas with some celebrities, you have no idea what's going on behind the scenes."

Girl (13): "Most classic celebrities are full of themselves ... they think they are better than others because they are rich, for example."

Personal resemblance The "personal resemblance" category included codes such as similarity in behaviour, similarity in hobbies, similarity in personal interests and goals, similarity in personal characteristics, similarity in physical appearance and appearance, similarity in life history, family similarity, perception of YouTuber as a common individual, like the participants themselves, or the participants' desire to be like their favourite YouTubers. Although the quotes in this category included particular differences between the participants and their favourite YouTubers in terms of gender, age, and nationality, the participants emphasised that despite these differences, the similarities in terms of psychological characteristics outweighed the differences and that their favourite YouTubers were perceived as similar to them.

Boy (12): "For example, my favourite YouTuber ... we behave the same, we are both interested in how to do something, even playing video games. Similar things interest us. We also have the same hair and eye colour."

Girl (18): "I was bullied a lot at school because I am Muslim, and then I found this YouTuber that I had a similar life story with ... For example, I denied my religion a lot, and then when you look at these people

who went through the same thing as you, you realise it's not a big deal."

Girl (18): "Yeah, my favourite YouTuber has a big family, just like me ... We are similar, but we are also different."

Girl (18): "If you are watching some YouTuber too much ... you feel as you are hanging out with them and your personality becomes similar to theirs".

Conformity to social norms This category includes codes that refer to the participants' disapproval of YouTubers behaviour that violates the social code or does something that is morally inappropriate. Those include disapproval of inappropriate behaviour (e.g., fighting, rushing, dangerous challenges, destroying things, etc.), disapproval of YouTubers treating other YouTubers disrespectfully or giving hate speech, YouTubers should not pressure viewers to like them, YouTubers should not threaten or harass viewers to like them or subscribe to their channels, YouTube should strictly punish inappropriate behaviour by YouTubers. For example, participants complained that YouTube is biased in punishing inappropriate behaviour and only punishes less popular YouTubers. Participants expressed concern that inappropriate behaviour from popular YouTubers might be repeated by younger fans (e.g., siblings).

Girl (11): "My little sister watches this channel too ... it gets on my nerves because this girl ... she's ten years old and uploads nonsense ... The last time I saw her playing a prank on her father, she threw the MacBook, ... she threw the phone, and she threw slime on his head when he was in the hot tub. I don't think that's okay. That girl isn't good."

Boy (12): "I watched someone playing a prank on others ... He put a balloon on the platform, and when the train stopped, the conductor got off the train onto the balloon and got scared ... The YouTuber started laughing ... I didn't try, because if someone reported me ... I'd end up in gaol."

Boy (17): "YouTubers who are YouTube's favourites, like Logan Paul, who violated all rights in some videos, and they (YouTube) did absolutely nothing for a while. If he wasn't so popular ...".

Reciprocal relationship The prototypical codes in the "reciprocal relationship" category were YouTubers as friends, meeting YouTubers, meeting YouTubers at cons, linking videos, subscribing, and wanting to meet YouTubers and get their personal response. Responses in this category included participants reporting that they send and receive messages from their favourite YouTubers, talk to YouTubers via private messages, play video games together, help

YouTubers prepare YouTube videos; participants reported that YouTubers ask their fans for suggestions, send gifts to their followers, etc. Some participants reported that interactions with their preferred YouTubers were more frequent and intense than those with their (physical) friends. This category also included some participants' desire to expand the number of interactions they already had with their preferred YouTubers, or to establish a reciprocal interaction with their preferred YouTubers that they did not have before.

Boy (15): "Every time I wrote something, he replied to my comment or talked to me. He talked to me more than my friends."

Girl (14): "I added him on Facebook and we talked... we played video games together... my friend drew him pictures and he used those pictures on YouTube. We also made a video together."

Girl (11): "I once watched a YouTuber from Argentina ... got some products from her ... and from then on I watched her regularly."

Closeness and emotional support The typical codes in this category related to YouTubers revealing a great deal of their privacy and responding to their fans' initiative, being fun, feeling heard, a feeling that one matters to someone, getting attached to YouTuber, identify with YouTuber, feeling emotionally close to YouTuber, being cheered up by YouTuber, making their fans feel less sad, less angry, more comfortable, and just relaxing and entertained. Some participants stated that watching videos helps them regulate emotions.

Girl (12): "You are not alone in the world, and there is always someone with you to help you."

Girl (18): "When I am having a bad day, I watch some of my favourite YouTubers or a video I have seen before, and it makes me laugh ... it puts me in a better mood."

Boy (17): "You do not feel like a number. You feel like your opinion counts."

Instrumental support The typical codes in this category were getting advice, imitating YouTubers, learning different skills, learning about other cultures, learning DIY, learning cooking skills, learning a language, getting ideas, learning to accept themselves, getting inspired. Participants explained that they learn a variety of things while watching their favourite YouTubers: languages (e.g., English), new skills (e.g., sports, playing guitar), things about their hobbies and interests (e.g., cooking, makeup, cars, video games), and school subjects.

Girl (11): "I also learn English a lot ...".

Boy (12): "I watch (him) do experiments. It's exciting, and then I do it myself."

Boy (12): "We have a dog at home, and I get a lot of ideas for him."

Engagement of significant others This category includes codes related to the interest of participants' social environment (peers, parents, teachers, etc.) in participants' favourite YouTubers. Codes include watching favourite YouTubers with friends, talking about YouTubers with friends, talking about YouTubers with siblings, watching or imitating YouTubers with friends. An important set of codes in this category related to parental involvement in participants' enthusiasm for their favourite YouTubers: parents following their own YouTubers, watching and talking about videos with parents, parents not liking participants' watching of YouTubers, parental disinterest in participants' favourite YouTubers. Participants reported that it was important for peers to be familiar with YouTubers so that they could watch YouTubers together or talk about them. Participants also reported that parents' attitudes toward their preferred YouTubers were important to them, regardless of whether parents were positive, reserved, negative, indifferent, or were they disinterested in their offspring's enthusiasm for YouTubers.

Girl (11): "My parents say I shouldn't watch these YouTubers for so long; they say I should do something smarter and not watch these stupid things. And then I show them a video, and they like it! Then I can watch it."

Boy (12): "My friends are watching YouTubers a lot and I also watch YouTubers with them. We are reacting to their videos together."

Girl (11): "Yes, I talk about YouTube with my friends a lot ... Sometimes I also talk with my parents about YouTubers and we are watching funny videos together ... , my younger sister also watches videos with us."

Accessibility This category includes the codes related to the ease and accessibility of watching their favourite YouTubers and the large amount of time participants spend watching their favourite YouTubers on a daily basis. Participants noted that watching videos has become their daily routine and that they can access YouTubers whenever and wherever they are. By using notifications, they ensure they do not miss new uploads and can instantly connect with their favourite YouTubers. Typical codes in this category include watching videos daily, watching videos to avoid boredom, YouTubers upload regularly, watching YouTubers as a daily routine, watching YouTubers to escape real life, and watching specific content such as challenges, pranks, video games, vlogs, music, etc. Participants reported using YouTube to escape their problems (e.g., watching YouTube instead of studying).

The codes in this category suggest that participants likely watch their preferred YouTubers as a daily routine, though the motivation behind this routine could be twofold. As participants noted, they watch YouTubers to fill their free time and avoid boredom, or to avoid thinking about the challenges of their real lives, such as problems at school, home, peer relationships, etc.

Girl (11): "... when certain YouTuber is uploading daily for so long, you get used to it and if they are not uploading for three days then ... You are worried that they won't upload anymore ... Then you go watch another YouTuber and when you get notified for a new video, you quickly go back to previous YouTuber."

Girl (11): "Sometimes when someone doesn't upload video for a longer time, I check their channel every day if there's a new video or I didn't get notification for it."

Girl (14): "Not that I wouldn't survive without YouTube ... you can search on the internet or in a book, but instead you automatically look on YouTube. It is easier that way. "

Girl (17): "... YouTube is accessible everywhere, on your phone, on your computer, on your tablet ...".

YouTuber as a dream job The codes in this category include the participants desire to become YouTuber themselves, to become YouTuber to show others their skills, knowledge and life experience, to become YouTuber to have fun, just as YouTuber seems to enjoy filming and editing, to become YouTuber to make money, to be YouTuber because it is easier to become popular as a YouTuber than it is as a traditional celebrity.

Girl (11): "When I grow up, I want to become a YouTuber too. You get a lot of money."

Girl (12): "We filmed with my neighbour and it was exciting. I want to be a YouTuber or something."

Girl (13): "I want to show my life experiences and tell others about mistakes I have made so that others can avoid them...."

Girl (14): "I love playing video games. I would like to make a game video to share my skills with others ... I want to have fun. It's fun to make and edit videos. It's my dream (to become a YouTuber)."

Discussion

The main objective of the present study was to answer the question of why adolescents are so attracted by YouTubers and to determine the main components of this attraction—as

seen by the adolescents themselves. The study was framed within the concept of parasocial relationship, proposed back in by 1951 by Horton and Wohl (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and is supported by the findings of recent studies on Web celebrities (Taillon et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020; Xu et al., 2022). We hypothesised that the parasocial relationship with YouTubers has some characteristics that differ from those of traditional celebrities, such as lack of reciprocity, displaying a persona instead of an authentic personality, addressing the audience as if they were in physical contact, a sustained relationship, and the illusion of intimacy.

We conducted a qualitative study and used the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Pidgeon & Henwood, 2009) to gain insight into the structure of adolescents' understanding of why YouTubers are so appealing to them. The study may be biased because we selected adolescents who reported being YouTube fans and having at least one preferred YouTuber. However, the decision to select only YouTube fans to participate in the qualitative study was intentional. We wanted YouTube fans to tell us as openly as possible why they think YouTubers are so attractive to them and their peers.

The analysis yielded nine categories, which were grouped into four general categories: (1) personal characteristics of YouTubers (e.g., charisma, personal similarity between YouTuber and their followers, and characteristics related to social code and morality, e.g., conformity of YouTuber 's behaviour to social norms), (2) relationship characteristics (e.g. reciprocity of relationship, emotional and instrumental support from YouTubers), (3) characteristics related to participants' social context (e.g., engagement and shared enthusiasm for YouTubers by significant others), and (4) characteristics related to the media itself (accessibility, YouTuber as a dream job).

The findings suggest that adolescents' understanding of why YouTubers are so attractive to their followers is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Below, we discuss our main findings and their theoretical significance in terms of hypothesised underlying psychological mechanisms such parasocial relations and identification. Identification was determined as the core dimension of our analysis; we discuss identification as a central concept of adolescents' attraction with YouTubers, note major limitations of the current study, and address practical implications and questions for the future.

Personal characteristics Adolescents noted personal characteristics of their favourite YouTubers as an important source of attraction to YouTubers. Personal characteristics primarily included positive descriptions of the YouTubers' personality such as being relaxed, friendly, knowledgeable, energetic, humble, authentic, and positive. These are the characteristics likely to be ascribed to close friends (Kitts

& Leal, 2021) or charismatic leaders (Cocker & Cronin, 2017). In addition, participants also noted personal similarities between YouTubers and themselves. The personal similarities included a variety of traits. In addition to personal characteristics, participants noted similarities in behaviour, hobbies, interests, goals, life histories, and perceptions that YouTubers are ordinary people—as participants perceive themselves to be. Participants were generally positive about their favourite YouTubers, but were also critical when YouTubers engaged in behaviour that did not conform to social norms, such as disrespecting people or other YouTubers, destroying property, fighting, dangerous challenges, etc. This is the only negative category in our data, suggesting that while participants who are followers of some YouTubers might share uncritical views of YouTubers' behaviour, the data suggest that this admiration appears to have limits. Participants noted that social code boundaries should not be crossed, even for those who are famous and admired.

Relational characteristics The second major source of participant attraction on YouTubers was characteristics related to the relationship between the participant and YouTubers. These characteristics included emotional and instrumental support that participants reported perceiving on YouTube. Of particular importance, however, was a perception that the relationship was reciprocal, such as sending and receiving private messages, playing games together, receiving gifts, etc. Not all participants reported a reciprocal, interactive relationship with their preferred YouTuber; some reported a one-way relationship, including linking videos or subscribing, yet some of these expressed a desire for this relationship to be reciprocal. These responses indicate that the reciprocity of the relationship, the perception of reciprocity, or the fact that the relationship at least has the potential to be reciprocal, is an important component of YouTubers' appeal to their followers.

Characteristics of the medium The third important source of the participants attraction with YouTubers related to the characteristics of the medium rather than the YouTubers themselves. An important part of this characteristic is the fact that videos are easily accessible, always at hand. Participants reported having a daily routine of watching YouTube and their favourite YouTubers, suggesting that YouTubers are a part of their daily lives. Participants frequently reported the motivation behind these activities, focusing on entertainment and indicating that watching as a daily routine could be a coping strategy to escape their problems or postpone unfavourable activities such as studying. In addition, participants indicated that YouTuber is a job they would like to have because YouTubers can earn a living by recording, editing, and uploading videos, activities the participants would do anyway.

Features of a social context The fourth important source of YouTubers' appeal to participants is the engagement of significant others—an interest that people from the participants' physical environment showed in the YouTubers. Watching YouTube and following YouTubers does not occur in a social vacuum, but is socially established and practised. Participants share videos with their peers, watch them together, and talk about them. Responses also indicate that participants wish greater parental interest and involvement in their engagement with YouTubers. As participants noted, parents were generally disinterested or dismissive of participants watching YouTubers and, as participants noted, had very limited knowledge about YouTubers; parents also had limited understanding of the sources of attraction YouTubers have for participants and their motivations for watching and talking about them. As some participants reported, their parents felt that the videos were generally silly and that watching them was an unproductive waste of time. Implications of these findings are discussed below.

Therefore, YouTube and YouTubers play an important role in adolescents' daily lives, and there are already many data addressing this issue (Balleys et al., 2020; Dülgerler & Bilgin, 2022; García Jiménez & Montes Vozmediano, 2019; Pires et al., 2019). However, to our knowledge, this study is the first to systematically address the components of YouTubers' attraction with YouTubers from the perspective of adolescents themselves. The data revealed nine main characteristics of this attraction, including personal characteristics of YouTubers, characteristics of the relationships between YouTubers and their followers, characteristics related to adolescents' social environment, and characteristics related to YouTube as a medium (such as ease of access). This structure seems to make sense; it includes different aspects of attraction: aspect of YouTubers, aspect of the relationship between YouTubers and their followers, aspect of the social environment of the followers, and aspect of the medium itself. The results have both theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical implications Although the findings seem to carry clear structure in terms of four core components of adolescents' attraction to YouTubers, the real question would be what kind of mechanisms lie behind these components. What processes underlie this relationship and determine the appeal of YouTubers and turn adolescents into their followers?

In this sense, identification with web celebrities—the core category of our analysis, is a plausible explanation. Identification is a powerful mechanism and an important topic in adolescent psychology. Identification with ideas and social groups is crucial for adolescents to gain and maintain identity (Levinson et al., 2020), political and civic preferences (Zimmermann et al., 2020), purchasing decisions (Sokolova

& Kefi, 2019); it is associated with higher levels of health (Yancey et al., 2011) and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Sangeorzan et al., 2019), substance abuse (González et al., 2020), and misconduct (Moreno Ruiz et al., 2012). Identification models can reduce negative influences related to academic achievement (Hurd et al., 2009) and risk behaviours (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003), inspire and motivate (Morgenroth et al., 2015), and play an important role in sexual identity development (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Identification models in adolescence can include parents, peers, teachers, significant others, or celebrities (Dumas et al., 2012). Adolescents reported watching YouTubers of similar ages, having similar tastes and goals, engaging in similar practises as themselves (e.g., playing games) and identifying with them (Pires et al., 2019). Identification is the central concept of our grounded theory—the one that may rise the findings to a more general level. Theoretical and practical implications that arise from our findings, as well as limitations related to our study are addressed below.

Limitations Previous research has already suggested that identification is an important mechanism behind adolescent attraction to YouTubers (Balleys et al., 2020; Dülgerler & Bilgin, 2022). However, much of this research was qualitative and therefore limited in terms of hypothesis testing. In this regard, our study has the same limitations as other qualitative studies, but raises many issues worth addressing in subsequent research. For example, we only examined the characteristics of YouTubers' appeal among adolescents who are followers of at least one YouTuber. What influence do YouTubers have on adolescents who are not true fans but who share their social environment with peers who are fans? They likely talk about YouTubers, watch videos, and are familiar with YouTubers and events related to them. Why do these adolescents not become their fans? To ask the question from the opposite perspective: What are the characteristics of the followers that make them become fans: personal characteristics, a specific social context, or both? In addition, we discovered the characteristics of parasocial relationships between YouTubers and their audiences in a selected group of YouTube enthusiasts. Can our findings be generalised to the audience at large?

The structure that emerged from our study is useful because it encompasses multiple perspectives, including characteristics of YouTubers, characteristics of the relationship between YouTubers and their followers, characteristics of the fans' social context, and characteristics of the medium itself. What we think is missing are the characteristics of followers, which fell outside the scope of the current study. We can only speculate that the dimensions obtained in this study would apply to the general audience—to adolescents who are not real fans of a particular YouTuber. This however, needs to be tested in further quantitative research. In addition,

we believe that subsequent research should also include personal characteristics such as personality, motivation, as well as the social context of the individual, such as peer, family, and school environments. Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) PPCT model or Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) models could possibly be good frameworks to address this question.

Next, the study is framed in the context of parasocial relationships. Previous literature (e. g. Balleys et al., 2020; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019) has suggested that identification may be a valuable concept to explain the nature of this parasocial relationship and, in relation to our study, adolescents' attraction to YouTubers. However, the question is whether identification is a prerequisite for the formation of a parasocial relationship between YouTubers and their fans, or whether it is the other way around. This is an interesting question because the mechanism, if known, could potentially explain the processes behind adolescents' attraction to YouTubers, establish a stronger theoretical framework for addressing this issue, and help us formulate the practical implications addressed in the next section.

Practical implications and conclusions The final question that arises from the present results relates to the practical implications of our study. Here, the question is what can we do with the results. How can our findings be used to stimulate discussion about important issues with adolescents? The motivation to become a fan of a YouTuber is complex—it includes characteristics of YouTubers, characteristics of the relationship between YouTubers and their followers, characteristics of the social environment of the followers, and characteristics of the medium itself. Of great importance is the finding that not only did adolescents talk about peers as important social referents in contextualising YouTubers, but they also expressed a desire for adults to be involved in their endeavour with YouTubers to a greater extent that they actually are.

We do not know the percentage of adolescent who would want adults to be engaged into their endeavour with YouTubers; this was not the goal of the current study and could certainly be a topic for further research. Nevertheless, we believe this finding has great potential for adolescents' understanding; it could be the door to reaching out to adolescents. Teachers who are familiar with YouTubers are likely to be knowledgeable interlocutors with adolescents, and can address a variety of issues that are important for adolescents, such as identity, moral issues, friendships, emotional and sexual issues, aggressiveness (García Jiménez & Montes Vozmediano, 2019), and so on; the influence of family environment on adolescents' Internet-related behaviours, such as FOMO, has already been demonstrated in previous research (Schmuck, 2021).

The desire of adolescents to discuss YouTubers related issues with adults was also evident in several chance

encounters between the first author of this article and students in the schools where the study was conducted, when YouTube-related topics were brought up in small conversations and one of the students replied, "Finally, there is someone who understands us." In this sense, the enthusiasm for YouTubers should not be considered a peculiarity of adolescents, but could be used as a tool to address the issues that adolescents find relevant to them; this door should not be shut just because adults are not familiar with YouTubers and consider watching YouTubers a waste of time. For adolescents, watching YouTubers is not a waste of time; understanding the mechanisms behind this attraction will help us to understand adolescents too.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04784-x>.

Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available at https://osf.io/e6rau/?view_only=81a7e5e6b99e47e1914d8cad91c7e5ca. The transcriptions and written responses are available only in Slovenian language, while the codes (open codes, axial codes and axial coding instructions) are available in English.

Declarations

Statement This manuscript has not been published previously and is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal. Both authors have contributed to the work in meaningful way and have agreed to its submission.

Ethics All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study was approved by the by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Informed consent Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Additionally written informed consent for minor participants was also signed by their legal guardians. The written informed consent included section explaining data availability and anonymity. No identifying information or images are available in the article or in datasets.

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclosure.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding Attitudes and Predicting Social Behavior*. Prentice-Hall.
- American Psychological Association. (2017). *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (Including 2010 and 2016 Amendments)*. Retrieved July 18, 2020, from <https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/>
- Balleys, C., Millerand, F., Thoër, C., & Duque, N. (2020). Searching for oneself on youtube: teenage peer socialization and social recognition processes. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120909474>
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. M. Lerner, & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical Models of human development* (6th ed., 1st vol., p. 793–828). Wiley.
- Bryant, A. L., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2003). Role models and psychosocial outcomes among African American adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 18(1), 36–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558402238276>
- Caner, N., Efe, Y. S., & Başdaş, Ö. (2022). The contribution of social media addiction to adolescent LIFE: Social appearance anxiety. *Current Psychology*, 41, 8424–8433. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03280-y>
- Ceci. (2023). *YouTube: distribution of global audiences 2023, by age and gender*. Statista. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1287137/youtube-global-users-age-gender-distribution/>
- Chen, J.-L., & Dermawan, A. (2020). The influence of YouTube beauty vloggers on Indonesian consumers' purchase intention of local cosmetic products. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 15(5), 100–116. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v15n5p100>
- Cocker, H. L., & Cronin, J. M. (2017). Charismatic authority and the YouTube: Unpacking the new cults of personality. *Marketing Theory*, 17(4), 455–472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593117692022>
- de Bérail, P., Guillon, M., & Bungener, C. (2019). The relations between YouTube addiction, social anxiety and parasocial relationships with YouTubers: A moderated-mediation model based on a cognitive-behavioral framework. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 99, 190–204. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.05.007>
- Dixon, S. (2023). *Media usage in an online minute 2022*. Statista. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/195140/new-user-generated-content-uploaded-by-users-per-minute/>
- Dülgerler, M. N., & Bilgin, G. G. (2022). The YouTube effect on adolescence: Exploring the influences on YouTubers on adolescents' identity construction. *Journal of Theory and Practice in Education*, 18(2), 126–141. <https://doi.org/10.17244/eku.1127880>
- Dumas, T. M., Ellis, W. E., & Wolfe, D. A. (2012). Identity development as a buffer of adolescent risk behaviors in the context of peer group pressure and control. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35(4), 917–927. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.12.012>
- Ferchaud, A., Grzeslo, J., Orme, S., & LaGroue, J. (2017). Parasocial attributes and YouTube personalities: Exploring content trends across the most subscribed YouTube channels. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 80, 88–96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.10.041>
- Ferguson, C. J., Olson, C. K., Kutner, L. A., & Warner, D. E. (2014). Violent video games, catharsis seeking, bullying, and delinquency: A multivariate analysis of effects. *Crime & Delinquency*, 60(5), 764–784. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001128710362201>
- Ferguson, C. J., Rueda, S. M., Cruz, A. M., Ferguson, D. E., Fritz, S., & Smith, S. M. (2008). Violent video games and aggression: Casual

- relationship or byproduct of family violence and intrinsic violence motivation? *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 35(3), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854807311719>
- Ferguson, C. J., Winegard, B., & Winegard, B. M. (2011). Who is the fairest one of all? How education guides peer and media influences on female body dissatisfaction. *Review of General Psychology*, 15(1), 11–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022607>
- García Jiménez, A., & Montes Vozmediano, M. (2019). Subject matter of videos for teens on YouTube. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590850>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Publishing Company.
- GMI Blogger. (2023). *YOUTUBE USER STATISTICS 2023*. Global Media Insight. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/youtube-users-statistics/#daily>
- Gomillion, S. C., & Giuliano, T. A. (2011). The influence of media role models on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58(3), 330–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2011.546729>
- González, M. T., Espada, J. P., Fernández-Martínez, I., Orgilés, M., & Sussman, S. (2020). Group self-identification, drug use and psychosocial correlates among Spanish adolescents. *Revista de Psicología Clínica con Niños y Adolescentes*, 7(1), 59–64. <https://doi.org/10.21134/rpcna.2020.07.1.8>
- Hendriks, H., Wilmsen, D., van Dalen, W., & Gebhardt, W. A. (2020). Picture me drinking: Alcohol-related posts by Instagram influencers popular among adolescents and young adults. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02991>
- Hong, J.-C., Chen, M. L., & Ye, J. H. (2020). Acceptance of YouTube Applied to Dance Learning. *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, 10(1), 7–13. <https://doi.org/10.17244/eku.1127880>
- Hootsuite. (2022). *Digital Marketing Trends 2022*. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://www.hootsuite.com/resources/digital-trends>
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19, 215–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- Hurd, N. M., Zimmerman, M. A., & Xue, Y. (2009). Negative adult influences and the protective effects of role models: A study with urban adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38(6), 777–789. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-008-9296-5>
- Kepios. (2021). *Global Social Media Stats*. DATAREPORTAL. Retrieved 24 July, 2022, from <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users>
- Kitts, J. A., & Leal, D. F. (2021). What is(n't) a friend? Dimensions of the friendship concept among adolescents. *Social Networks*, 66, 161–170. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2021.01.004>
- Ladhari, R., Massa, E., & Skandrani, H. (2020). YouTube vloggers' popularity and influence: The roles of homophily, emotional attachment, and expertise. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 54, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.102027>
- Levinson, J. A., Greenfield, P. M., & Signorelli, J. C. (2020). A qualitative analysis of adolescent responses to YouTube videos portraying sexual and gender minority experiences: Belonging, community, and information seeking. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 2, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2020.598886>
- Li, Y., Guan, M., Hammond, P., & Berrey, L. E. (2021). Communicating COVID-19 information on TikTok: A content analysis of TikTok videos from official accounts featured in the COVID-19 information hub. *Health Education Research*, 36(3), 261–271. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyab010>
- Lucibello, K. M., Vani, M. F., Koulanova, A., deJonge, M. L., Ashdown-Franks, G., & Sabiston, C. M. (2021). #quarantine15: A content analysis of Instagram posts during COVID-19. *Body Image*, 28, 148–156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2021.04.002>
- Marôpo, L., Jorge, A., & Tomaz, R. (2020). “I felt like I was really talking to you!”: Intimacy and trust among teen vloggers and followers in Portugal and Brazil. *Journal of Children and Media*, 14(1), 22–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2019.1699589>
- Maziriri, E. T., Gapa, P., & Chuchu, T. (2020). Student Perceptions Towards the use of YouTube as An Educational Tool for Learning and Tutorials. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(2), 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.1329a>
- McLachlan, S. (2022). *23 YouTube Stats That Matter to Marketers in 2023*. Hootsuite. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://blog.hootsuite.com/youtube-stats-marketers/>
- Moreno Ruiz, D., Povedano Díaz, A., Martínez Ferrer, B., & Musitu Ochoa, G. (2012). Emotional and social problems in adolescents from a gender perspective. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 15(3), 1013–1023. https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_SJOP.2012.v15.n3.39392
- Morgenroth, T., Ryan, M. K., & Peters, K. (2015). The motivational theory of role modeling: How role models influence role aspirants' goals. *Review of General Psychology*, 19(4), 465–483. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000059>
- Murphy, R. H. (2019). The rationality of literal Tide Pod consumption. *Journal of Bioeconomics*, 21(2), 111–122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10818-019-09285-1>
- Pidgeon, N., & Henwood, K. (2009). Grounded Theory. In M. Hardy & A. Bryman (Eds.), *The Handbook of Data Analysis* (Paperback, pp. 625–648). Sage Publications.
- Pires, F., Masanet, M.-J., & Scolari, C. A. (2019). What are teens doing with YouTube? Practices, uses and metaphors of the most popular audio-visual platform. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(9), 1175–1191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1672766>
- Rihl, A., & Wegener, C. (2017). YouTube celebrities and parasocial interaction: Using feedback channels in mediated relationships. *The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 20(10), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736976>
- Sangeorzan, I., Andriopoulou, P., & Livanou, M. (2019). Exploring the experiences of people vlogging about severe mental illness on YouTube: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 246, 422–428. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2018.12.119>
- Schmuck, D. (2021). Following social media influencers in early adolescence: Fear of missing out, social well-being and supportive communication with parents. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 26(5), 245–264. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmab008>
- Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2019). Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.01.011>
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge University Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures of Developing Grounded Theory*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Taillon, B. J., Mueller, S. M., Kowalczyk, C. M., & Jones, D. N. (2020). Understanding the relationship between social media influencers and their followers: The moderating role of closeness. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 20(6), 767–782. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBPM-03-2019-2292>

- Tolbert, A. N., & Drogos, K. L. (2019). Tweens' wishful identification and parasocial relationships with YouTubers. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 1–50. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02781>
- Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care, 19*(6), 349–357. <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042>
- Turner. (2019). *One in five teenagers now using 'Study Tubers' to help them revise for GCSEs, survey shows*. The Telegraph. Retrieved July 18, 2020, from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/04/03/one-five-teenagers-now-using-study-tubers-help-revise-gcse/>
- Vannucci, A., Simpson, E. G., Gagnon, S., & McCauley Ohannessian, C. (2020). Social media use and risky behaviors in adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Adolescence, 79*, 258–274. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.01.014>
- Vogels, E. A., Gelles-Watnick, R., & Massarat, N. (2022). *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>
- Westenberg, W. (2016). *The influence of YouTubers on teenagers: A descriptive research about the role YouTubers play in the life of their teenage viewers* [Master Thesis, University of Twente]. Retrieved July 18, 2020, from https://essay.utwente.nl/71094/1/Westenberg_MA_BMS.pdf
- World Medical Association. (2013). World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association, 310*(20), 2191–2194. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2013.281053>
- Xu, Y., Abeele, M. V., Hou, M., & Antheunis, M. (2022). Do parasocial relationships with micro- and mainstream celebrities differ? An empirical study testing four attributes of the parasocial relationship. *Celebrity Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2021.2006730>
- Yancey, A. K., Grant, D., Kurosky, S., Kravitz-Wirtz, N., & Mistry, R. (2011). Role modeling, risk, and resilience in California adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 48*(1), 36–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.05.001>
- YouTube Spotlight. (2017). *YouTube Rewind: The Shape of 2017 | #YouTubeRewind* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved July 18, 2020, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlsCjmMhFmw>
- Yuan, S., & Lou, C. (2020). How social media influencers foster relationships with followers: The roles of source credibility and fairness in parasocial relationship and product interest. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 20*(2), 133–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1769514>
- Zeng, J., & Abidin, C. (2021). “#OkBoomer, time to meet the Zoomers”: Studying the memification of intergenerational politics on TikTok. *Information, Communication & Society, 16*, 2459–2481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1961007>
- Zimmermann, D., Noll, C., Gräber, L., Hugger, K.-U., Braun, L. M., Nowak, T., & Kaspar, K. (2020). Influencers on YouTube: A quantitative study on young people's use and perception of videos about political and societal topics. *Current Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-020-01164-7>

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.