


Searching for Oneself on YouTube: Teenage Peer Socialization and Social Recognition Processes

Claire Balleys¹ , Florence Millerand², Christine Thoër² and Nina Duque²

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Abstract

YouTube is the preferred online platform for today's teenagers. As such, this article explores the relationship between socialization processes in adolescent peer culture and the meanings behind the production and reception of YouTube videos by teenage audiences. Two fields of enquiry comprise the data analyzed in this article. First, through content analysis, we studied the production of videos on YouTube by teenagers between the ages of 14 and 18. The discursive construction of an audience is expressed by YouTubers through intimate identity performances using specific, dialogical, and conversational modes. The second study investigated the reception of these videos by teenagers between the ages of 12 and 19 through the use of focus groups and in-depth interviews. The results explained the way young people develop a sense of closeness with YouTubers. When examined collectively, our studies reveal how teenage YouTube practices, both as production and reception of content, constitute a twofold social recognition process that incorporates a capacity to recognize oneself in others—like figures with whom one can identify with—and a need to be recognized by others as beings of value. The “intimate confessional production format,” as we have termed it, reinforces this bond.

Keywords

YouTube, YouTubers, youth culture, adolescent socialization, social media, vlogging, teenagers

Introduction

YouTube is the preferred website of young people today (CEFRIO, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018; Steeves, 2014; Willemsee et al., 2014). The videos published on this platform, regardless the method of production, have given rise to audience communities centered around shared interests and the development of social relationships (Balleys, 2018; Lange, 2007a, 2014; Michielse, 2018; Raun, 2012; Rotman & Preece, 2010; Strangelove, 2010). Of particular interest to teenagers are vlogs (video blogs; Anderson & Jiang, 2018). A vlog is a video in which the author(s) express thoughts or opinions on their daily experiences and concerns through the use of the first-person point of view. Unlike live videos, vlogs are the result of editing work (Himma-Kadakas et al., 2018, p. 57).

Vlogging, or the making of vlogs, is a video production practice. At the same time, it is a social practice based on shared experiences and a sense of belonging (Balleys, 2017;

Burgess & Green, 2018).¹ “Doing vlogs,” YouTubers place themselves facing the camera and address their audience directly in a “calling out” style, saying things like “Hey girls, hope you’re doing great!” or “Guys, I’m talking to you!” These practices are part of a dynamic that is highly dialogical, relational (Lange, 2014; Marwick, 2016), and participatory (Caron, 2014; Jenkins, 2009). Teenage vlogging is about getting in touch with an imagined audience (boyd, 2008; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2010); a likewise young audience that expresses itself through actions such as choosing what content to view, subscribing to YouTube channels, approving or disapproving content (“like” or “dislike”),

¹HES-SO, Switzerland

²Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Claire Balleys, Haute école de travail social, HES-SO Genève, 28, rue Prévost-Martin, CH-1211 Genève 4, Switzerland.
Email: Claire.balleys@hesge.ch



writing comments, reacting to other people's comments, or sharing the videos. Furthermore, teenage YouTube viewers' practices reach beyond their online activities. Discussing content with peers, classmates, or family members is part of the social and relational dimension of their media audience activities, as is the case for most viewers and fan communities (Liebes & Katz, 1990; Pasquier, 1999).

This article attempts to understand how and why vlogging is a part of the adolescent socialization process. To do so, we investigated the sense of shared identity adolescents perceive through this dialogical and intimate online "cultural system" (Burgess & Green, 2018). On one hand, we examined how teenage vlogs relate to socialization processes, and on the other, we explored how teenage audiences appropriated these YouTube videos. The concept of appropriation refers to the process that takes place at the interface between the media offer and the social and identity experience (Tschannen, 2010). In other words, what do we do with what we see?

Through the results of two qualitative studies, we investigated both video content production and audience reception. Our analyses found evidence that teenage vlog producers and audiences are entwined in a twofold social recognition process. Both want to see themselves in other teenagers (a reflection of themselves), seek social recognition from other teenagers, and be seen as individuals of social value (Honneth, 2005). This process is a characteristic of the adolescent search for autonomy and new identity references (Balleys, 2016; boyd, 2014). Parents and family are the first agents of socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). However, as children develop into teenagers, these primary agents are in part "replaced" by other identity models—such as friends or peers—that likewise act as identity agents and self-recognition mediators (Balleys, 2015). It is within this teenage socialization framework that we propose to examine how adolescents express this process of dual recognition found in both the production and reception of YouTube videos.

On YouTube, everyone is a spectator, including YouTubers and teenage audiences. It is both a platform for creative youth practices (Burgess & Green, 2018) and a standardized teenage reference system (Balleys, 2017; Garcia-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017). Several studies have investigated young people and YouTube; in particular, broadcast-oriented studies have looked at musical bedroom performances (Michielse, 2018), YouTube beauty communities (Garcia-Rapp, 2018), "toy unboxing" video productions (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018), online practices of male self-expression (Balleys, 2018; Maloney et al., 2018; Saul, 2010), self-representation in transgender youth videos (O'Neill, 2014; Raun, 2018), vlogging about school experiences (Snelson, 2015), about everyday experience of racism (Banaji, 2013), and civic engagement (Caron et al., 2018). The uniqueness of this article, however, is the simultaneous study of both content production and reception processes within the context of teenage socialization and media practices. It is these two sides of the same coin that we will examine in greater detail.

First, we will see how the dialogical dimension of YouTube vlogs is an invitation to identify with a sense of belonging to a collective identity. Second, we will examine how teenage audiences respond to and appropriate this invite through their reception of vlog contents.

Peer Socialization and Media Practices

YouTube Communities and Teenage Socialization Processes

Studies show that teenage digital practices are linked to broader youth socialization processes that include both peer sociability and peer stratification (Balleys, 2015, 2016; boyd, 2008, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013). Teenagers experiment and negotiate peer culture within a continuum of social practices that range from face-to-face relationships through to "mediated sociabilities" (Balleys, 2015). Accordingly, studying vlogs made by and for adolescents supposes considering socialization dynamics among peers.

One of the challenges in adolescence is finding identity models outside the family and home setting who can act as both identity agents and self-recognition mediators (Balleys, 2015). Berger and Luckmann's (1991) notion of the "significant other" helps us problematize this need for social recognition associated with the teenage socialization process. The mediating role of the "significant other" is threefold. "Significant others," give meaning to the world, symbolize identification models, and recognize the legitimacy of individuals, conveying a sense of intrinsic worth (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 151). The first agents of socialization are parents and family members. However, to grow and achieve a certain degree of autonomy, teenagers need to seek out new "significant others" such as peers. Extensive work on youth social practices has unpacked the role of peers in this process (Adler & Adler, 1998; Eder et al., 1995; Fine, 1987; Pasquier, 2005). Studies have shown that at the onset of this identity transition period, peers and peer groups gradually become the primary agents of teen self-recognition, acting simultaneously as models, arbiters, "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker, 1963), and social prestige distributors (Balleys, 2015, 2016).

Teenage YouTube communities develop, in part, through the shared "values and discourses around authenticity and social connexion" (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 95). Analyzing teenage vlogs through the lens of socialization is, therefore, fitting inasmuch as these contents specifically deal with relevant teenage issues such as puberty, first dates, cultural consumption, school life, or gender identity (Balleys, 2017; Caron et al., 2018; Saul, 2010). YouTubers discuss teenage concerns and questions while providing identity models (Balleys, 2017; Caron et al., 2018; Rotman & Preece, 2010). They film themselves in their bedrooms—often sitting on their beds—and address their audience looking right at the camera. Everything is staged, creating 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 confiding in them (Balleys, 2016, 2017). These discourse settings and the contents shared form an intimate confessional video format.

Creating social connections through videos that mobilize shared intimacies carries implications. On one hand, it promotes a “public discourse about formerly uncomfortable, distasteful, or difficult topics in ways that other media or other methods have not” (Lange, 2007b), suggesting that YouTube can be envisioned as an expanded field for self-expression and self-identification. On the other hand, it is also a way for YouTubers to increase both their audience reach and engagement levels, consequently augmenting their revenues. “Intimacy becomes a currency” on YouTube (Raun, 2018). YouTubers that shift to a “micro-celebrity” status (Marwick, 2016) generate substantial incomes by branding themselves as authentic and intimate (Abidin, 2015).

Teenagers as Media Audiences

To fully appreciate the multifaceted relationship that exists between vlogging on YouTube and teenage socialization processes, we must correspondingly consider reception practices.

Viewing YouTuber videos has become a significant audience practice for today’s teens (Thoër et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, then, the appeal of YouTubers is inspiring new and exciting audience research and reception studies (Gauntlett, 2015). According to Shuchen and Wei (2014): “The advent and growth of the new media has brought great changes to the role of the audience, the way the audience utilizes the media, and the reaction the audience makes to the new media” (p. 313). Research on digital environments, such as this project, is a significant development in understanding the connection between producers of content (for instance, YouTubers) and audiences and offers new ways of researching these digital relationships (Jenkins, 2006; Livingstone, 2013). According to Livingstone (2013), what it means to be an audience in today’s digital world is changing; we are now part of a participatory audience where everyone feels they could be both an audience member and a content creator.

Research on young audiences indicates that, while viewing content is foremost an entertainment practice, it is also very much a social one (Astigarraga Agirre et al., 2016; Combes, 2013). Socializing around content is an integral part of the viewing experience, and digital media, such as YouTube, have enhanced the active socializing role of content watching (Lacalle, 2015; Livingstone & Das, 2012). Both online and offline, teenagers actively participate in conversations around content and meaning, discuss and share thoughts, and suggest content to be watched and appreciated (Bondad-Brown, 2011). In addition, these digital media spaces act as connection hubs, allowing audiences to forge and maintain friendships both online and offline (Baym, 2010; Boyd, 2014).

Platforms such as YouTube are spaces where YouTubers and their audience network, and they also provide a kind of digital mirror in which identity is explored, shared, and constructed (Glevarec, 2010; Marwick et al., 2010; Morris & Anderson, 2015; Pasquier, 2005). Although much research on teenage audiences has focused on television practices, we can use their insights to understand today’s digital world. Media researchers have observed that one of the reasons teenagers identify so keenly with some content is that the narratives presented are accessible, appealing, and linked to their own life experiences (Glevarec & Pinet, 2007). Studies on television audiences have shown that watching TV, such that it supports shared practices and allows for exchange and conversation, is closely linked to the construction of identity (Combes, 2013; Maigret, 2007). Digital media content viewing may then be understood, as traditional media content is, as a mediated mirror through which teenagers’ attachment to characters and situations help them construct not only meaning but also a sense of who they are (Arnett, 2013). Some teenagers develop a feeling of attachment to YouTubers, who, in return, act as role models and guides (Westenberg, 2016). As Hennion (2017) puts it, attachment “[. . .] is not born of causality, nor can be registered regarding causes or intentions, structures or determinations [. . .] it is rather constrained and situational” (p. 112).

One may begin to study teenage attachment to YouTube vloggers by examining their individual experiences and learning what they care for, what they like and dislike, and why. To figure out why and how they are creating these deep connections with YouTubers and understand how these connections participate in the socialization process, one must explore how they experience this relationship and explore the meanings they give to their practices.

Methodology

The findings presented in this article stem from two separate qualitative studies: the study of YouTube vlogs, uploaded by teenagers between the ages of 14 and 18 years (according to their online statements) and the reception of YouTube videos by youths between the ages of 12 and 19 years.

The First Study

The first study is a qualitative video content analysis, built on a corpus comprising 80 French-language vlogs (40 produced by girls and 40 by boys) uploaded on YouTube between September and December 2016. The selected YouTube vlogs (produced in Switzerland, Québec, Belgium, and France) discuss the subjective experience of being an adolescent. The vloggers (both boys and girls) present themselves as teenagers, exploring what it means to “be a teen” in today’s world. Our research goal was to understand how vlogging participates in the adolescent socialization process. This led us to select vlogs that described adolescent

socialization experiences. The topics discussed covered peers, family, friends, puberty, dating, intimacy, gender identity, or daily routines. This sample originated from an 18-month online ethnographic study on YouTube, focusing on vlogs explicitly discussing adolescence in the first person “I” or plural person “Us” (Balleys, forthcoming).

Underlying this fieldwork was a combined analysis of the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) by adolescents on YouTube and the evaluation of identity statements. In other words, self-presentation as a teenager is the selection criterion (besides age and language). Coding and examination of this corpus—in connection with adolescent socialization—followed the methodological processes described by Liebes and Katz (1990) in “The Export of Meaning.” This method pays attention to enunciative referencing modes (to whom is the speaker speaking) and helps uncover identity affiliations (what identity references indicate a “belonging to”). Two questions guided our analysis: for who are the videos made for and what references constitute membership as indicated by the use of pronouns such as “I,” “we,” or “they” (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p. 105). The selected vlogs, narrated in the first person, whether singular or plural, in forms such as: “I am weird” or “Us guys, we get hard-ons—for any reason whatsoever!” were uploaded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The analysis method focused on both the discursive elements and the performative features (gestures, expressivity, attire, setting) of the videos (Balleys, 2015).

Following ethical concerns, only selected vlogs that explicitly stated that they were uploaded to YouTube for public use were chosen. The YouTubers had to state (at any time) that they wanted their video to be broadly seen and shared through statements such as “please share this video.” No personal data were collected (other than age and gender) to protect the anonymity of the YouTubers.

The Second Study

The second study is based on research examining media content reception by teenagers. Between 2014 and 2016, eight focus groups, involving a total of 33 boys and 28 girls between the ages of 12 and 19 years, were organized. Recruitment was conditional on the participants already viewing a minimum of two online entertainment videos per week, a criterion that was exceeded by all the participants. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways: social networks, schools, and youth centers located in diverse neighborhoods of Montréal (Québec, Canada). They were of various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and all attended French-language educational institutions in Montréal. Natural groups (Kitzinger, 1994) were formed, composed of all-male or all-female participants who already knew each other. Natural groups are valuable for understanding how content viewed on YouTube is “inherently” discussed within peer groups and has proved useful in documenting teenagers’ feelings and interest in YouTubers (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018). The focus group participants

discussed questions regarding the type of contents they viewed and their labeling and classification of these videos. They were also asked to explain why the content listed appealed to them, to describe their viewing contexts, and discuss the interactions they had concerning their viewing practices.

Following this first stage of information gathering, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 29 participants primarily recruited from the original focus groups (12 boys and 17 girls). These interviews provided an opportunity to learn about individual teenage online viewing practices, understand how teens engage with the various content they watch, and observe how their practices evolve over time. The research questions that guided this part of the study focused on teenage media practices in online contexts. The analysis—linked to the research questions on teenage socialization—covered a body of data exclusively concerned with the reception of YouTube content. A qualitative thematic analysis (Lejeune, 2014) was carried out using NVivo to categorize the data collected. Initially, a codebook was developed with a structure based on the interview guide and was iteratively revised as the coding progressed. Beyond a simple descriptive annotation, the aim was to produce an understanding of the focus groups and interview transcripts using conceptualized categories (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012). The analysis followed two main lines of questioning: (1) how teenagers’ YouTube viewing practices relate to sociability practices and (2) how teenagers recognize themselves in YouTube video contents.

The First Field of Enquiry: Intimacy at the Heart of the Recognition Process

The data collected suggest that teenage vlogs on YouTube are based on an eminently dialogical format that both themes and scripts the outlines of a shared intimacy; intimacy being that part of the individual experience and identity that is not visible when observed from the outside (by others) but rather concerns individual subjectivity (Latzko-Toth & Pastinelli, 2014, p. 149). The public and mediated settings, as well as the performance of intimacy, is like a “parade,” as Goffman (1959, p. 5) suggests: an exercise in self-presentation producing in others a managed impression of the self.

To Whom Are YouTubers Speaking? Closeness and Bonding

In the vlogs analyzed, teenage YouTubers directly address their teenage audience and discuss teenage concerns. For example, in a video made by Michael (age 15) on first sexual experiences, he discusses his fear that his girlfriend will refuse to have sex with him once he is naked. As he considers this disastrous situation, Michael suggests a proximity bond with his male audience by enacting an imaginary conversation as he faces the camera: “Admit it, it’s the worst thing that could happen to us! Isn’t it, guys? Yeah, I’m talking to

you, yeah, you!” Scripts using the second-person singular create a sense of male complicity through shared intimacy. This grammatical point of view enables a personal YouTuber experience to become a generalized typical male teenage one. For example, Marc (age 15) switches from using “I” to using “you” when talking about getting his first pubic hairs: “I remember when I got my first hair on . . . the thing. You are happy. You’re feeling grown-up, right?” In doing so, he is sharing an assumed experience of puberty with a specific audience: teenage males. The use of the second-person singular conveys the impression of an interpersonal conversation between friends.

Expressions such as “dude” or “hey bros” are frequently used to emphasize a sense of closeness with an imagined male audience as do statements that “everyone” or “all the dudes” act or think the same thing. Michael (age 15) illustrates such a case: “I’m 15 years old, and I’m a virgin. And I’m not ashamed! But, as soon as I won’t be anymore, I’m going to make fun of every virgin on earth! Yeah! As everyone does!” Likewise, videos made by girls addressing a similarly aged and gendered audience, employ a level of language that implies emotional closeness. For instance: “[. . .] if you ask me from the heart, I’ll shoot this video for you” (Alicia, age 16). Furthermore, girl YouTubers attempt to convey, as do their teenage male counterparts, a shared intimate experience:

I’d like to know if you spent this Valentine’s Day alone or with your boyfriend or girlfriend, so send me your answers. We’ll see each other soon in a new video [. . .] in the meantime, I’m sending you all big kisses [blows kisses to the camera with her hand]. (Giulia, age 17)

Vlogs that describe teenage experiences are regularly produced using intimate confessional declarations. These may include feelings of familiarity, bonding, and identification with the other. YouTubers trigger this peer recognition process through the sharing of personal and intimate experiences: “See what I mean?” or “Guys, we’re not going to lie to each other, right?” (Jonas, age 15). This experience sharing creates an intimate imaginary conversation and participates in the process of peer socialization. Simultaneously, it presents normative standards regarding adolescence while developing a sense of collective belonging through a common and gendered teenage intimacy. This gendered dimension was not part of our initial research interrogations; however, its importance as an essential theme in adolescent vlogs has become apparent.

Talking About Oneself on Behalf of Everyone: “Us guys” Versus “Us girls”

Talking about oneself and one’s intimacy on YouTube allows the participants (both producers and audiences) to be part of a shared experience that helps to define the contours of a “we.” These identity relationships are analogous to what Ricœur (2004) calls “community building,” a term used to

describe the act of individuals seeking to identify with others who are like them (p. 249).

Addressing an audience of peers in an intimate confessional manner initiates social and identity recognition processes. The recurrent procedure is to discuss one’s teenage life so that a peer audience can recognize itself in the narrative. For example, at the end of her video on being single, Judy (age 17) states: “If you recognized yourself in at least one of these situations, say so in the comments.” When the audience identifies with the content of a video, they are manifesting their involvement in the content, consequently confirming the YouTuber’s media visibility. Social recognition, as defined, is genuinely a twofold process: audience members recognize themselves in the media contents put forth, and in exchange, they validate and reward these contents by commenting, liking, or sharing them.

What is interesting is how the search for social recognition correlates with the process of building shared identities. Looking for the “us” in teenage YouTube narratives allows for the detection of elements used to build a shared world. In turn, these elements function as socializing agents (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Teenage YouTube videos that discuss intimate issues create a binary “us”—“us girls” versus “us boys”—that marks gender affiliation. For example, “Guys, when we’re in love” (Frédéric, age 14), or “Guys, you know how we have our little moments of madness” (Damien, age 17). This associative process provides inclusion in a shared gender while establishing distance with the opposite gender. Phrases such as “us guys” are used along with “you girls” (and vice versa) to create a feeling of being at odds with the other gender. The following example from Benjamin (age 13) illustrates this process:

I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but girls and boys don’t flirt the same way. If we want to flirt with you, us guys need great abs, nice clothes, and great hair. If you want to flirt with us, all you girls need is a pretty face!

Shared intimate teenage experiences, when they are explicitly masculine or feminine, create a collective reality that plays a fundamental role in the socialization process (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Teenage YouTuber vlogs reveal how personal narratives can be generalized to all boys or all girls. In the following example, Catarina and Justine, two 15-year-old Québec teenagers, discuss their “dream date”:

Catarina: “Well actually, I know many girls would like, say, a high-class restaurant, and be like Oh my God! I’ll tell you what I think, it sounds pretty ordinary, but for me, it’s the little details that count. If he takes me to MacDonald and a movie, I’ll be the happiest girl in the world.

[. . .]”

Catarina: “Us girls, we need to feel . . .”

Justine: “. . . important.”

This excerpt allows us to isolate three specific reference markers (Liebes & Katz, 1990)—“many girls,” “me,” and “us girls”—that are used by the two YouTubers to anchor the self-presentation exercise within a larger group dynamic centered on the need to be a part of a group. Initially, Catarina establishes herself as different from other girls by declaring that her expectations may not be the same as theirs. In doing so, she considers the potential responses her female audience might have. She goes on to explain her point of view, describing her idea of a great date and what would make her “the happiest girl in the world.” She concludes by canceling her initial and unique choices. Instead, she chooses to build a shared outlook: “Us girls, we need to feel . . .” It is interesting to note that Justine finishes Catarina’s last sentence. In doing so, she validates Catarina’s generalization of what “girls need to feel important.”

The Second Field of Enquiry: YouTube as a Mirror of the Self

Analysis of YouTube video reception by teenagers shows that attachment to YouTubers is linked, though not exclusively, to two critical dimensions: a sense of “belonging to” and of “connecting with.” On one hand, teenagers who watch YouTuber videos, subscribe to channels, and engage in exchanges with YouTubers and the broader community of followers, are registered in a networked community that is lived both online and offline. At the same time, teenage audiences see themselves in and through YouTubers: they identify with them and have affection for these online figures.

YouTubers and YouTuber Channels as Socializing Worlds

YouTubers not only solicit comments from their audience but also respond to them. This engagement and online interactivity add to the perception that YouTubers are available and reachable. The teenagers met felt they could talk to YouTubers just as they would talk to a friend. Marion (age 16) explained: “They make Q&A videos sometimes . . . and you can ask questions, and if you’re lucky, they’ll answer your question, and they’ll mention you in their video.” When asked if she had ever posted a comment or a question herself, she explained that she had not, but did not feel that this was a problem; what mattered was that YouTubers always read the comments posted. Commenting, as a way of being seen and read, increases a sense of connection, especially since YouTubers are perceived as “part of the gang.” It would seem that the mere possibility of interaction is enough to provide the feeling of engaging in a privileged relationship—even if it is an unfulfilled one. As long as teenagers feel that the YouTuber is genuine and honest, this feeling of intimacy holds. It can even enable those who feel more isolated, as Marion explains, feel less alone:

[. . .] when I was little, I didn’t have many friends I could talk to . . . so, when I started viewing her stuff [unclear name], it felt like I had found a new friend, but a virtual one. I felt like I wasn’t alone in liking the same things.

By watching YouTuber videos, teenagers discover not only identity models but also virtual friends.

The length of the viewing relationship amplifies this perceived sense of interconnectedness (Abidin, 2015). The teenagers met had been following some of their favorite YouTubers for several years, seeing them develop from teenagers to young adults to professional YouTubers. This might explain why many teenagers interviewed felt it was essential to leave some form of positive feedback on the YouTubers’ videos (no matter how slight) letting them know that they were liked and appreciated. “I like to support them. I watch their videos, and I like their videos [. . .] I do things like that when I like their stuff” (Arthur, age 16). Interestingly, leaving negative feedback was considered inappropriate, disrespectful, and even harmful to the YouTubers.

Teenagers develop interactive relationships not only with YouTubers but also with individuals who share their interests. Socialization takes on a collective component because following a YouTuber often means, for a teenage audience, following a group of like-minded peers. Today’s teenagers are living in worlds where their “offline” lives are more and more structured by their parents, where their every moment is regulated and accounted for, and where real-world public spaces are inaccessible (Livingstone, 2007). According to the teens interviewed, watching YouTubers offers a virtual place where they can build friendships, engage in social dialogue, and share experiences. As boyd (2014) aptly remarks, these dynamics, at the heart of typical teen life, are now being played out in a mediated and wired world. Through YouTuber channels, fan chats and comments sections, teenagers expand their networks of friends and create a sense of community. This feeling of belonging to a group is also linked to the fact that YouTubers connect to other YouTubers by mentioning them or inviting them to participate in their videos. “It’s a circle of friends,” as Roxanne (age 13) suggests. This adds to the perceived authenticity of YouTubers: a successful teenager is part of a group. Roxanne further explains this appeal: “She [My Life As Eva] has friends, and they’re all popular, and they also have YouTube channels [. . .], and now they make videos together too.” Following a group of YouTubers whose productions are frequent and regular adds to the audience’s feeling of belonging to a community of YouTubers.

There is also a sense of community created offline. Friends tend to follow the same YouTubers. They watch videos together and talk about YouTubers and the content of the videos. Attachment to YouTubers as a socializing connection can be powerful offline and can also result in new friendships, as one of the focus group participants explains: “She and I started to talk more often because we both knew

IISuperwomanII. Yeah, we met because of a YouTuber. Yeah, we started talking about her and laughing together” (female participant, focus group, ages 12–14). Attachment to YouTubers also maintains social ties in real life. Teenagers discuss videos, talk about which YouTubers to follow, or send each other alerts and messages when new content is available. They can even use YouTube videos to communicate how they feel.

Social networks are essential to the discoverability of YouTubers; these networks are part of being “in.” There are also distinctive practice strategies among young people. For example, some teenagers specialize in finding content that they will then share with others. As Janie (age 19) explains, “I have a friend who follows YouTubers. She goes looking for videos on YouTube; I just watch what comes up.” It is worth noting that young people watch videos and share content in all their key spaces and moments, not just at home or in places where they typically hang out. School is one example: “If there’s a new [video] that just came out . . . so we’re in the classroom, and we have a free period, we watch it [. . .] then everyone watches it” (Adrien, age 13). YouTubers offer content that is short and easily accessible through mobile devices such as mobile phones or tablets. These viewing rituals fit well in a teenager’s everyday life, making it possible to escape from the daily routine. They can access these contents whenever they want and wherever they want. Since YouTuber videos tend to be short in length (between 3 and 10 min long), they can easily be played over and over again, increasing the sense of attachment to the content and the YouTuber.

Through the YouTube Looking Glass: Teenagers Recognizing Themselves in YouTubers

What teens appreciate most about YouTubers is feeling a sense of closeness and familiarity. Many of the teenage participants in the study felt that watching YouTuber videos was, for them, an identity marker. Hilana (age 15) describes what she finds engaging about one of her favorite female YouTubers: “[She talks about] school, her love life, her social life . . . also about being a girl . . . how it’s harder than being a guy. How we feel more pain.” Like looking in a mirror, teenagers see themselves in the narratives put forth by YouTubers. They identify with the YouTubers, their lifestyles, their opinions, and especially their problems. In a sense, YouTubers act as mediated mirrors.

Teenagers connect with YouTubers in particular because they consider them as “real.” They could be the girl or the boy next door, adding to the authenticity they project. YouTubers sit in their bedrooms and recount intimate moments for their teen viewers to see. These practices seem to borrow from the strategies observed in “micro-celebrities” (Senft, 2008). Nevertheless, if YouTubers similarly seek to maintain or attract a more numerous public, they are not regarded by the viewers as TV or movie celebrities whose lives not many regular teenagers relate to. Teenage viewers regard YouTubers

as amateurs rather than inaccessible superstars, even when they have gone on to become semi-professional online celebrities. YouTubers are often described as like-minded teenagers with passions, rarely as professionals with scripts. A point that many young people find inspiring. Léa (age 14) explains why she appreciates the DIY styles some YouTubers opt for: among other things, it gives her a sense that she too could be making YouTube videos. “Sure, there are quality differences . . . but I like it better when they do things themselves. He [a YouTuber] shows us how we could do it too. He’s inventing everything, doing everything himself.” In other words, attachment to YouTubers is a result of both the content they put forward and the format they use in the videos.

Young people also feel YouTubers are different from television and movie stars because YouTubers feel familiar. Valentin (age 15) explains: “When you watch a series [. . .] it’s not like reality, except if you’re watching a series that’s boring. [. . .] They [YouTubers] are like us because [. . .] they act like us and are close in age to us.” Because some teenagers have been following YouTubers for a long time (up to several years), they feel they have grown up with them, and this adds to the sense of connectedness (Maigret, 1995). Teenagers often described their viewing experience as YouTubers “speaking to us,” rather than “us watching a show.” This acknowledgment supports the view that the dialogical format employed by YouTubers in their videos creates a bond and a sense of closeness with their audience.

It would appear that the straightforward nature of teenage vlogs stories and narratives, as they relate the most intimate aspects of their teenage lives, make YouTubers seem not only familiar but also honest. In the teenage audiences’ own words, YouTubers are “authentic.” Moreover, YouTubers will often use their own experiences as starting points. This personal engagement resonates with young people. Participants of this study were asked to explain why they followed or liked specific YouTubers. Answers regularly revolved around the fact that the YouTubers spoke about their lives and the same experiences that teenage viewers were going through. In a sense, YouTubers are like everyday life companions. This sharing of similar interests, problems, and life-stories appeals to a teenage audience and helps foster a process in which teenagers recognize themselves in YouTubers and their videos. As Hilana (age 15) explains, YouTubers “really” understand what it means to be a teenager in today’s world:

IISuperwomanII [. . .] for example, she shows us differences between the kinds of friends we have, [. . .] a sister we like a lot [or] different kinds of teachers we can have. [. . .] We can relate to what she says . . . it’s really what we feel.

YouTubers put forward a wide range of identity models that young audiences can explore and recognize themselves in.

This feeling of familiarity and deep attachment to YouTubers seems to confer authority and a sense of truth,

regardless of the topic presented in the vlogs. Teenagers turn to YouTubers for advice and find inspiration in terms of fashion, humor, and opinions on events. While at first glance, some teenagers' viewing practices seem to favor contents such as beauty, clothes, or video games, as one looks beyond the surface, one discovers that what this audience connects with is the intimate quality of the stories, and the humorous way it is told, rather than the subject matter presented. Also, YouTubers offer solutions to problems or real-world advice. As one participant points out: "Today if you are faced with any problem in your life, you can type your problem on YouTube, and for sure someone has already answered your question in a video" (male participant, focus group, ages 18–19). YouTubers propose many different kinds of support, including concrete solutions to help manage actual daily life problems. Not all teenagers are looking for answers, but they are happy to see that other teenagers share the same difficulties or interests because it makes them feel better about themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion: Looking for the Self on YouTube

Teenage socialization presents itself as a twofold need for social recognition. It is both a capacity to recognize oneself in others—like figures with whom one can identify with—and a need to be recognized by others, that is, to be seen as an individual with social value (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). YouTube is unmatched as a platform for the broadcast and reception of media content produced by and for teenagers. One of the principal findings that arise from this twofold analysis of the production and reception of YouTube videos by teenagers is that the search for social recognition involves a shared sense of intimacy. The stylistic construction of videos made for and watched by teenagers on YouTube is based on an identification principle. Mechanisms mobilized both in YouTuber performances (Goffman, 1959) and by adolescent viewers are similar to "community-building" practices (Ricœur, 2004, p. 249) and refer to the processes by which individuals identify with others who are like themselves. Teenage YouTubers and viewers from the two studies seek to validate their "social significance" (Honneth, 2005, p. 50) by asking each other to like, share, and comment on their content. The reactions they search for are linked to an identification process. YouTubers and viewers alike seem to seek a common belonging to adolescence through a feeling of shared intimacy.

Teenage video productions on YouTube display a twofold need for recognition that manifests itself through the use of intimate confessional-type production formats and the sharing of common identity markers. This social recognition process is a reciprocal movement: audiences recognize YouTubers through social validation and recognize themselves in YouTubers through identification. Regarding reception practices, watching YouTuber vlogs is part of a quest for

self-knowledge. It is a process of looking for identity reference models that are similar in age and gender affiliations (Pérez-Torres et al., 2018). YouTubers are sources of information and identity representations; by the same token, they are active socialization hubs. Socialization takes on a dual articulation that can be understood through perceived connectedness with YouTubers and other fans as well as offline conversations about YouTubers between peer groups, friends, and siblings.

Teenage socialization and recognition dynamics develop from both the video's subject matter and from the platform itself. These interactions become part of an intimate dialogical register while also conferring media exposure. The choice of topics presented in the videos does, in fact, matter. YouTubers discuss topics that are relevant to young people, but it is less the nature of the content that makes teenage audiences connect with YouTubers than the intimate and personal way in which it is presented. Teenagers do not feel that they are "watching" YouTubers (as they do programs) even though being entertained is an essential component of watching vlogs (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018). Instead, teens feel that YouTubers are talking to them in a dialogical framework. This relational tone, facilitating intimate exchanges, is observed both in the videos produced (use of an intimate confessional style, calling out "us" or "you"), and in the reception of these videos (teens know they can write directly to YouTubers).

The intimate nature of the relationship between YouTubers and their teenage audience is based on a shared sense of closeness and connection. YouTubers are seen as being close to young people, unlike inaccessible celebrities, even though many of these YouTubers have millions of subscribers. Some teenagers particularly enjoy YouTubers who employ amateur formats even if the videos are professional. This "pro-am" status (see Leadbeater & Miller, 2004) acts as a measure of closeness and authenticity that helps maintain an intimate relationship with the YouTubers, thus creating a mirroring effect.

Of course, the intimate confessional format is not exclusive to vlogs made by teenage YouTubers. What is their own, however, is the connection that exists between this intimate format and youth socialization, and especially its link to the realization of social prestige. Adolescent culture represents a stratified system that relies on a clear differentiation between members and non-members, in addition to the capacity to make oneself visible. In high school, to be popular, you must be seen (Eder et al., 1995; Kinney, 1993). Online relationships follow a similar logic. An individual's social prestige is correlated with peer validation of their self-presentation, and in particular, how they stage their intimacy (Balleys, 2016; boyd, 2014). Asserting and recognizing a subjective relational and physical intimacy is a way of providing evidence, within peer culture, of having attained autonomy and maturity. Making friends and relationships online in a socially compliant manner, and manifestations of puberty along with the development of a personal relationship to oneself, are

ways of demonstrating that one is no longer a child and that one has achieved a form of independence.

In conclusion, this study's originality lies in the way it gives insight into both the teenagers who express themselves through YouTube videos and the teenagers who watch them. In doing so, it contributes to the understanding of YouTube video producers and their audiences, specifically the particular connection that exists between them. Observing the production of teenage YouTube videos reveals how an audience is constructed discursively through identity performances and dialogical and intimate enunciative formats. Examining how teenagers view these videos, allows for the empirical observation of what "public engagement" might look like (Livingstone, 2013)—that is to say, how "similar" participants participate in "community-building" exercises (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 249) by interpreting and incorporating these videos into their teenage experiences. The production and reception of teenage YouTube videos are eminently social practices and must be understood more broadly as youth socialization practices in which identity affiliation processes play a prominent role. At a time when YouTube is the preferred teenage platform, YouTubers videos are particularly fertile ground for examining contemporary adolescent socialization processes and the quest for the self through a digital mirror.

Finally, several questionings emerged from our two studies that would support further investigation. First, the financial business model at the heart of YouTube invites us to critically question the strategic commercial use of the intimate confessional format we have described. Second, the fact that this type of intimate format requires the public to have significant digital media literacies should be investigated from a critical point of view.

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ORCID iD

Claire Balleys  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5522-8705>

Note

1. Vlogging can be understood as "produsage" (Bruns, 2008), that is, as user-led content creation that takes place in online environments. However, in this article, we are not interested in the dynamics between producers, consumers, and content creation as such, but by the relationship between socialization

processes and the meanings YouTube video holds both for producers and audiences.

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Author Biographies

Claire Balleys (PhD, Université de Fribourg) is an assistant professor at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO), School of Social Work, Geneva. Her research interests include juvenile socialization, online cultures, and digital practices.

Florence Millerand (PhD, Université du Québec à Montréal) is a full professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) where she holds the Research Chair on Digital Technology Uses and Changes in Communication. She is also Co-Director of the Laboratory for communication and the digital (LabCMO). Drawing from Communication Studies and Science & Technology Studies, her research interests include online cultures, digital knowledge infrastructures, data publics, and datafication processes.

Christine Thoër (PhD, Université du Québec à Montréal) is a full professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal (Faculty of Communication) and a member of the Research group on international and intercultural communication (GERACII). Her research interests lie in the fields of Reception and Audience studies with a particular focus on young adults’ engagement with internet-distributed series, transnational viewing experiences, and rewatching.

Nina Duque (MA, Université du Québec à Montréal) is a PhD candidate and lecturer in communication studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Her studies focus on digital technologies and youth culture. Before her graduate studies, she worked as a journalist and television producer for 17 years.