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# Negotiating Youth Cultures Intermedially: YouTubers, Vlogging and Teenagers

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**Heather Braun, Elisabeth Lamothe, Delphine Letort (dir.), *Les Cultures ado : consommation et production***

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« Negotiating Youth Cultures Intermedially: YouTubers, Vlogging and Teenagers »

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## **Résumé**

Youtube occupe une place de plus en plus important dans le quotidien des adolescents. Ce site n'est pas seulement populaire en tant que divertissement ; il offre un nombre croissant de « rôles modèles » en même temps qu'un espace d'expression pour les adolescents qui cherchent leur voix en abordant différents problèmes avec des jeunes de leur âge du monde entier. En quête de « rôles modèles » parmi les personnalités connues sur Youtube, les adolescents peuvent trouver pléthore de vidéos leur donnant des conseils sur le harcèlement, l'image corporelle, et la sexualité. Cet article explore cette tendance à travers la transmédialité, phénomène qui a conduit de nombreux Youtubers à publier des livres pour diffuser leurs conseils. Il envisagera également les relations complexes entre ces créateurs sur Youtube et leurs publics à travers une analyse du vlog. Nous étudierons comment le vlog attire le public et nourrit une dévotion amicale en développant l'identification. Enfin, nous évoquerons le cas de Sabrina Cruz, créatrice adolescente dont l'engagement contre les stéréotypes enfermant les adolescents dans une image de consommateurs encourage l'expression.

## **Mots-clés**

réseaux sociaux, stéréotype, vlogging, Youtube

## **Abstract**

YouTube is becoming increasingly important for the everyday lives of teenagers. The website is not only a popular source for entertainment, it also provides a growing selection of role models as well as a platform for teenagers to find their own voice and discuss issues with peers worldwide. Because teenagers are actively looking for role models in YouTube personalities, a plethora of content providing advice on issues like bullying, body image, and sexuality is available on the website. This article will explore how this tendency has grown into a transmedial phenomenon that has led to a variety of books of advice being published by YouTubers. Moreover, it will trace the complexities of the relationship between YouTube creators and their audiences, investigating how vlogging as a format impacts this dynamic. Furthermore, it will be of interest how relatability as an ideal draws audiences to vlogs and fosters friendships-like devotion. Lastly, the focus will be laid on a teenage creator, Sabrina Cruz, and her activism to shake the stereotype of teenagers as consumers, and to encourage her peers to make themselves heard.

## **Keywords**

social networks, stereotype, vlogging, Youtube

YouTube is becoming more and more important for teenagers in contemporary societies. For teenagers and millennials, YouTube is not only a source for entertainment, it is a platform to observe and support personalities, to showcase creativity, as well as to form social networks. According to YouTube statistics, “Over 80% of teens and millennials use YouTube”<sup>1</sup> and they spend an average of forty minutes per session on their phones alone,<sup>2</sup> and thus, the website reaches more young people than any television network in the US.

In terms of content, there is quite a variety available on YouTube, which falls into three main categories:

- Professional content (i.e. adverts, Music Videos, webisodes, promos and trailers).<sup>3</sup> These productions work with a budget, production teams, and they rely on other media output as their main source of income.
- Amateur content (i.e. home videos of pets and children, videos of various random situations in everyday life, and videos that record chance encounters). In this category video producers do not expect monetary gain, they do not adhere to regular upload schedules, and they have no regular viewership
- Semi-professional content (i.e. content by self-identified YouTubers, including for example vlogs, sketches and tutorials). These videos are characterized by the consistent uploading of new content over time, a stable view count/subscriber base, as well as the practice or desire to earn a living by making YouTube videos.

The boundaries between those categories are fluid, and much of what is uploaded does not fit neatly into one of these categories. Most YouTubers, for example, have at some point started with amateur content and later evolved to semi-professional and occasionally professional content. The semi-professional YouTube content, in particular the vlog, will be of central interest in this paper. Vlogging on a regular basis has become a significant part of teenage life, and teenagers turn to these videos for advice, comfort and inspiration. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the fact that becoming a YouTuber is the new number one dream profession for UK teens, outranking rock stars, actors and athletes.<sup>4</sup>

As microcelebrities, a term coined by Theresa Senft,<sup>5</sup> YouTube vloggers have garnered a

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<sup>1</sup> “By the Numbers: 135 Amazing YouTube Statistics”, last modified August 16, 2016. <<http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/youtube-statistics/>>, accessed on February 4, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Statistics”, *YouTube Press*, <<https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> This includes also, for example, the webisodes put out by *Last Week Tonight*, or the partial upload of segments from various *Late Night Shows*, as well as webisodes tied to narrative television shows etc.

<sup>4</sup> LONDON and CLIFF, “Forget footballer or actress, young Brits’ dream job is a YouTube star (and judging by the teen vloggers’ success, it’s hardly surprising)”, *Daily Mail*.

<<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2777511/Forget-footballer-actress-young-Brits-dream-job-YouTube-star-judging-teen-vloggers-success-s-hardly-surprising.html>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> In “Microcelebrity and the Branded Self,” Senft defines microcelebrity as “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same”. Theresa M. SENFT, “Microcelebrity and the Branded Self,” in John Harteley et al. (eds), *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, Chichester et al.: Blackwell Publishing, 2013, 346.

lot of attention, especially among young viewers. This paper argues that vlogging fosters the perception of online “friendships” between YouTube creators and their viewers and traces the underlying reasons for this development. It explores how YouTubers’ content reflects this trend not only in their videos but also in their published books, highlighting that the success of these books validates the teenage experience that is often reduced to seeing teenagers merely as consumers or even undermined by dismissive discourses on “fangirling”. The informed perspective of teenage YouTuber Sabrina Cruz and her efforts in advocating the appreciation of what teenagers are capable of provides an illuminating counterpoint.

## **YouTubers and their books: transmedial phenomena and transmedia storytelling**

Since mid-2014 YouTubers have published more than sixty books, many of which have become instant national bestsellers and incredibly successful internationally.<sup>6</sup> Given that the majority of these books have come out of a desire to provide a physical and bankable object for fans to purchase that closely resembles and expands on the content YouTubers put online, a transmedial approach to this topic proves most useful. Investigating these books as well as their writers’ YouTube content, which their marketing quite clearly shows goes hand in hand, underpins an intermedial approach that offers the theoretical toolbox best suited to examine content in both media individually as well as in context of one another. Broadly speaking, intermediality is concerned with phenomena and narratives that involve more than one medium. This analysis looks at YouTube videos, in particular vlogs, as the core medium, while physical books YouTubers have published are regarded as transmedial expansions of the core medium’s content.

Intermediality is a concept used by numerous scholars with sometimes contradicting approaches. Two intermedial approaches prevail: Irina O. Rajewsky’s seminal work on intermediality refers to transmedial phenomena that are non-media specific and can appear in all sorts of media,<sup>7</sup> whereas Werner Wolf describes transmedial phenomena as “non-media specific, these phenomena appear in more than one medium” and without “an easily traceable origin”.<sup>8</sup> As examples of transmedial phenomena, Wolf includes myths without discernible original text or medium, as well as formal devices that transcend media boundaries, such as “the

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<sup>6</sup> The flood of books published by YouTubers is well documented; see for example: Peter ROBINSON, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/01/zoella-youtube-books-pewdiepie-tyler-oakley-dan-phil-jamie-curry-alfie-deyes>>, accessed on December 16, 2016; or the ranking on the bookseller’s website Barnes & Nobles <<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/bestselling-books-by-our-favorite-youtube-stars/>>, accessed on December 16, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Irina O. RAJEWSKI, *Intermedialität*, Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag Tübingen und Basel, 2002, 11-15, 206.

<sup>8</sup> Werner WOLF, “(Inter)mediality and the Study of Literature”, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011), 4-5.

repeated use of motifs, thematic variation, narrativity, descriptivity, or meta-referentiality.”<sup>9</sup> In YouTube videos and respective books complementing the online personality brand, there is a variety of such transmedial phenomena. Apart from an abundance of meta-references and a thematic focus on the personal and confessional, most YouTubers express the desire to help their viewers and readers via the content they create. Self-improvement and relatability therefore appear as transmedial phenomena which illuminate how these concepts function in video and book format.

Another approach to transmediality that allows us to examine the engagement of audiences with YouTubers is that of transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling, as defined by Henry Jenkins, is the practice of telling a story across several media platforms.<sup>10</sup> Even though YouTube vloggers are not—for the most part—fictional, and do not build elaborate and fantastic storyworlds, the concept of transmedia storytelling still applies. As exemplified by the title of a collaborative work of two YouTubers, *The Amazing Book is not on Fire: The World of Dan and Phil*,<sup>11</sup> the world building process, even if it might seem minuscule and negligible at first glance, is to a certain degree still a concern. Dan Howell and Phil Lester have been prominent YouTubers for several years now, and have consistently built up their subscriber base individually as well as collaboratively, as they each run their own channels, on which they sometimes collaborate, as well as a collaborative gaming channel that has seen instant success. Their collaborative book, then, explores various aspects of the two cohabitating YouTubers’ lives respectively and caters to many aspects that their subscribers (i.e. the Phandom) demands and/or expects. In terms of world building, the book takes care to present familiar settings, to provide backstories that cement the image/brand of the YouTubers and to promise that the “world of Dan and Phil,” i.e. their friendship and collaboration will continue on in a similar way as long as their fans support their work. In many ways this world is constructed to provide fans with an ideal and idyllic world they have access to via videos and the book whenever they need to be cheered up.

Besides YouTube itself, other online platforms such as YouNow, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Tumblr also function as expansions allowing fans to engage further with the YouTube personality. In many transmedia projects, transmedial expansions originate from a core story and a core medium. Thus, YouTube videos are the core material and viewers can choose to further immerse themselves in the YouTubers’ life story by interacting with them on other social media sites, and as of recently, also via physical book publications. Transmedia storytelling is therefore of key importance in the exploration of community building around YouTube personalities.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Henry JENKINS, *Convergence Culture, Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: NYU Press, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Dan HOWELL and Phil LESTER, *The Amazing Book is not on Fire: The World of Dan and Phil*, London: Ebury Press, 2015.

## Self-help/self-improvement, online support systems and role models

Self-help or self-improvement literature has been around at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, self-help has become what sociologist and cultural critic Micki McGee calls a “postmodern cultural phenomenon”.<sup>12</sup> Publication numbers and sales show that self-improvement literature is as popular as ever and indicate that there is a global desire to “become your best self”.<sup>13</sup> However, it is significant that in the past thirty years self-help has shifted in meaning from a group endeavor to an individual practice. Rather than attending a self-help group in person, there is now a tendency to buy books to work out issues in private.

This shift, however, is in transformation once again. Self-improvement literature and practice have become significantly more transmedial. More and more forums and chatrooms are used as virtual self-help groups. Teenagers turn towards YouTubers and the communities that have formed around them. YouTuber Dan Howell, for example, regularly hosts what he calls an “Internet Support Group”<sup>14</sup> in which he responds semi-humorously to e-mails from his viewers detailing problems and issues. Viewers often make use of the comment section underneath a video to ask for and receive advice from peers. This practice makes such interactions in some ways reminiscent of a self-help group. Aware of this trend, many YouTubers actively encourage and explicitly invite viewers to engage with the community around them, even when it comes to somewhat controversial subject matters. Joey Graceffa, for example, lauded his viewers for the “99%” positive feedback he claims to have received from his viewers in the comments of his coming out video and invited viewers to make use of the comment section as a support system for those struggling with their sexuality.<sup>15</sup> The fact that these support systems can be accessed anonymously is certainly an important reason why teenagers gravitate towards looking up to YouTubers. They can ask them questions online without having to worry about not being taken seriously because of their age or being judged for outward appearance and fashion choices. Even if YouTubers often do not respond to those questions and queries in videos, the communities around YouTubers, and especially around vloggers, attempt to support not only the YouTuber they admire but also those who ask for help in the comments, as in the following excerpt from a comment thread under Graceffa’s “YES I’M GAY” video:

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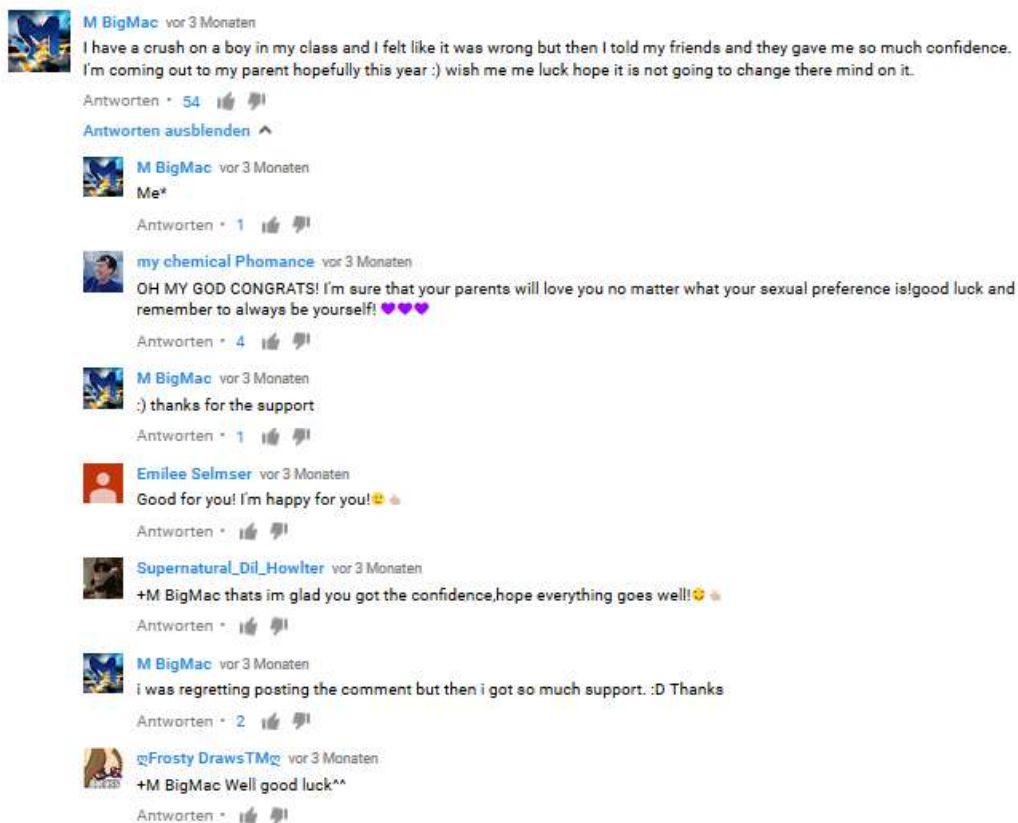
<sup>12</sup> Micki MCGEE, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 11.

<sup>13</sup> See for example these articles, all published in 2016; “How to be your best self,” *Huffington Post*, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/scott-barry-kaufman/how-to-be-your-best-self\\_b\\_9865220.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/scott-barry-kaufman/how-to-be-your-best-self_b_9865220.html)>, accessed on February 27, 2017; “41 Books to Motivate You,” *Success*, <<http://www.success.com/article/41-books-to-motivate-you-to-become-your-best-self>>, accessed on February 27, 2017; or “Becoming Your Best Self,” *Training: The Source for Professional Development*, <<https://trainingmag.com/content/becoming-your-best-self>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Dan HOWELL “Internet Support Group 8,” YouTube, 9:36, August 13, 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InTZfnNyLIQ>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Joey GRACEFFA, “YES I’M GAY”, YouTube, 11:58, May 18th, 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1PoNhYb3K4>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.





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As the countless requests for advice over various social media platforms clearly show, YouTubers have become role models. Being aware of that status and of their key demographic of predominantly younger viewers, they increasingly address the growing demand for advice in videos, but they also transcend their medium and publish advice tackling recurring issues in their books.

Viewers are clearly preoccupied with the opinions and experiences of their role models on YouTube, which most likely correlates to some extent with the fact that, because of the archival properties of YouTube, the growth and development of YouTubers is often very easily recognizable and observable. Viewers know to some degree what vloggers have experienced in their own teenage years and that they have, as Carrie Hope Fletcher puts it in her introduction to *All I Know Now*, “emerged on the other side”.<sup>17</sup> Teenagers look for the advice of those who they have observed improve themselves, as their videos prove, and who are not too far removed from them in age; a concern that is greater now than it might have been before, because millennials, rather than their parent generation can deal with the technological side of social life that is becoming increasingly important. Over several years, many YouTubers have not only improved their technical skills, their editing, writing, and video production; they have also upgraded their technology: they now have professional lighting equipment, microphones, cameras and editing

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Carrie H. FLETCHER, *All I Know Now: Wonderings and Reflections on Growing Up Gracefully*, London: Sphere, 2015, xxv.

software. The improvements also extend to more personal levels: some have improved their posture,<sup>18</sup> or have become, as they say, happier and more positive people,<sup>19</sup> and, of course, many of them have become rather successful. They have book deals, they have created and hosted television<sup>20</sup> and radio shows<sup>21</sup> and they are producing movies<sup>22</sup> and documentaries.<sup>23</sup> Such transmedia projects help increase the number of views and broaden the reach of the respective YouTubers. This process can turn vlogging into a – sometimes quite lucrative – career, especially if transmedia elements are diligently nurtured.

## The practice of vlogging

The popularity of YouTube personalities is apparent in the increasing numbers of views as well as in the increasing interest from advertisers and traditional media conglomerates. Teenagers, however, are the target group that pays YouTubers the most attention, and YouTubers who vlog seem to generate the most loyal and dedicated fan communities. It is important to note that, as Senft has pointed out, microcelebrity “as a social practice [...] changes the game of celebrity. Essentially, [it] blends audiences and communities, two groups traditionally requiring different modes of address. Audiences desire someone to speak *at* them: communities desire someone to speak *with* them.”<sup>24</sup> YouTubers, as I will show below, indeed do both, speak at large audiences and speak with the communities centering around them. The appeal of watching vlogs lies in two key aspects; firstly, regular viewers develop friendship-like relations with YouTubers and, secondly, vloggers endeavor to be relatable in order to facilitate identification and understanding.

The perception of a YouTuber being a friend, even though they address millions of subscribers in their videos, is to a large extent due to the choice of filming vlogs rather than other kinds of videos. A vlog is an extremely open format and can thematically deal with any topic and can stylistically be handled in a variety of ways. However, there are some common characteristics of vlogs that contribute to notions of intimacy and authenticity. Typically, a vlog is a YouTuber filming their face in their home, very often in their most intimate and private space,

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<sup>18</sup> See Evan EDINGER, “How to be more attractive,” YouTube, 7:20, November 8, 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKBSKhTJPB4>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See Emma BLACKERY, “How to Shut Up Online,” YouTube, 10:26, October 13, 2015. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iUBa\\_4OTBE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iUBa_4OTBE)>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> See “The Grace Helbig Show,” eonline, <[http://www.eonline.com/shows/the\\_grace\\_helbig\\_show](http://www.eonline.com/shows/the_grace_helbig_show)>, accessed on February 27, 2017; or “TV Series and Multiplatform Storytelling,” *Fine Brothers Entertainment*, <<http://finebroent.com/tv-series/>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> See “The Internet Takeover,” *BBC Radio 1*, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b055k5n3>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, *Camp Takot* (Nick Riedell and Chris Riedell, 2014), *Dirty 30* (Andrew Bush, 2016), *Not Cool* (Shane Dawson, 2014), *Joe and Caspar Hit the Road* (Brian Klein, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> *Snervous* (Brian Klein, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Theresa M. SENFT, *op. cit.*, 350.

their bedroom. The bedroom, and the teenage bedroom in particular, has been used as an analogy for online spaces since the 1990s, as Paul Hodkinson points out, in order “to conceptualise the personalised orientation of social media [...]”<sup>25</sup> While the analogy first surfaced with personalized homepages that could be stylized according to individual tastes and interests, it has since developed into a “fixed display of identity provided by profile and decoration [that forms] merely the backdrop to a plethora of ongoing updates and interactions [...]”<sup>26</sup> One of the limitations Hodkinson sees in the bedroom analogy is that, even though social media platforms “can support or enhance close friendships, [they] [...] are suited to communication with a wider number of superficial acquaintances [...]” and those “superficial relationships with one another appear [...] at odds with the intimacy evoked by the bedroom analogy.”<sup>27</sup> This is crucial in the YouTube vlogger context, as the bedroom is not only evoked as an analogy, but often presented as the literal backdrop providing identity markers and suggesting a high degree of intimacy and authenticity. Viewers mostly consume vlogs in equally intimate spaces, their own bedrooms, which facilitates the perception of a vlog as a personal interaction. This perception, like Hodkinson observed in the context of the bedroom analogy for personal websites, is at odds with the fact that vlogs of successful YouTubers are very much intended for as large an audience as possible, while continuing to simulate face-to-face interaction with the promise of intimacy and authenticity.

The formation of a friendship-like relationship is further encouraged by the set-up of vlogs, as viewers almost exclusively see the face of the YouTuber. Visually this convention results in the imitation of a (virtual) face-to-face conversation, even if dialogic properties of such interactions are often outsourced to other social media sites.<sup>28</sup> Besides the visual aspects of a vlog, the content typically also encourages personal investment in viewers, as YouTubers often share rather personal experiences and present, or stage, their insecurities and vulnerabilities in vlogs. In turn this practice often results in viewers sharing their issues and problems as well, either publicly in the comment section, or directly with YouTubers, for example, via Twitter DMs, Tumblr ask boxes or even physical letters sent to P.O. boxes. Overall, sharing personal and intimate content publicly aids in building communities and virtual support networks around a certain YouTuber.

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<sup>25</sup> Paul HODKINSON, “Bedrooms and Beyond: Youth, Identity and Privacy on Social Network Sites”, *New Media and Society*, online before print, 2015. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> The outsourcing particularly to Twitter and Tumblr, however, might become less common with the establishment of YouTube’s community tab that is currently in the testing phase, see “Engage with creators in community tab,” YouTube Help, <<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7124175?hl=en>>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

## YouTube relatability and merchandizing the self

The term relatability, as writer Rebecca Mead defines in an article for *The New Yorker*, is a relatively new term “to describe a character or a situation in which an ordinary person might see him[- or her-]self reflected” and was coined by the television industry but has only become a “widely accepted criterion of value” in the very recent past.<sup>29</sup> For YouTubers relatability as a value judgement has become so common that being relatable has developed into a joke that many YouTubers refer to rather self-consciously.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless there is a tendency to address issues that are especially relatable for teenagers, for example in videos about sexuality,<sup>31</sup> bullying<sup>32</sup> or school.<sup>33</sup> This trend is clearly a transmedial phenomenon, as these topics are ubiquitous in all media teenagers consume. Such topics seem to be best suited for the strongly autobiographical books that YouTubers have been publishing since late 2014. The majority of these books, even if the focus is on autobiography, make it clear in their introductions that personal experiences of the writers’ own teenage years have been published in book form in the hope that they might be helpful for readers who are going through similar struggles.

All of the autobiographical YouTuber books feature chapters on school, bullying, sexuality and a section full of advice on how to set up or improve a YouTube channel. All of these are topics that the teenage viewers specifically ask them to address in numerous comments across their videos and social media, as British YouTuber Phil Lester points out in *The Amazing Book is not on Fire*, “One of the things we are always asked the most is advice on being a YouTuber.”<sup>34</sup> American YouTuber Connor Franta, in a chapter detailing his struggles with coming to terms with his sexuality, remarks,

I know this story may not resonate with everyone on the surface of things, but this story isn’t about sexuality. It’s about overcoming our biggest fears. It’s about seriously examining whatever it is that may be holding us back. I cleared a barrier that at one point felt insurmountable. In fact, for far too long, I allowed myself to believe the self-defeating thought that I’d never overcome it.

All of us have barriers in the way. What’s yours? What do you want to do, be, or say, but feel you can’t or shouldn’t, based on the limitations or expectations within you or those around

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<sup>29</sup> Rebecca MEAD, “The Scourge of ‘Relatability.’” *The New Yorker*, August 1, 2014. <<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/scourge-relatability>>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Connor FRANTA, “So Relatable,” YouTube, 4:39, December 22, 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9W5XWekhMI>>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Shane DAWSON, “I’m bisexual,” YouTube, Shane Dawson TV, 14:35, July 7, 2015, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPdE3rbqf\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPdE3rbqf_Q)>, accessed on September 29, 2016; or Carrie Hope Fletcher, “Let’s Talk About Sexual Health: Getting Tested,” *ItsWayPastMyBedTime*, 6:46, January 31, 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHqDBvLxPNM>>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Carrie Hope FLETCHER, “How to Handle a Bully,” *ItsWayPastMyBedTime*, 4:59, January 17, 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuIPVz1kX1o>>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> See Grace HELBIG, “HOW TO SURVIVE HIGH SCHOOL/A HURRICANE”, YouTube, *DailyYou*, 2:56, August 25, 2011. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQ00rILfiGo>>, accessed on September 29, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Dan HOWELL and Phil LESTER, *op. cit.*, 132.

you? Remember this: your thoughts, wants, needs, and desires are valid. If you keep coming back to a lane in your life that you're too afraid to take, perhaps accept that life is leading you there; maybe one day, try taking it. Get past the fear of the what-if and just do it. Then, and only then, can you know the truth about yourself.<sup>35</sup>

This quote showcases how personal stories and revelations are presented to be meaningful and helpful to readers. The method of starting with the personal experience (“I”), moving towards the supposition of shared experiences and conditions (“us”), and ultimately encouraging reflection and action in recipients (“you”) is also commonly used in vlogs. It is apparent that this strategy can successfully be translated into the book medium to implicitly or explicitly give advice. The emphasis on the relatability of YouTubers manifests in their outright insistence in book and video format that they are – or were – just like their readers. The underlying message clearly is that they have gone through the same or similar struggles as their audience and can therefore give authentic and relevant advice on how to deal with them. This notion is further enforced by the fact that many successful YouTubers have started their online careers in their teens and there is a traceable record of how they have grown into their status as role models.

The ability to follow somebody’s life story in real time and over several years fosters loyal and dedicated fans, which means that subscribers of vloggers are often exceptionally engaged when it comes to online activities. They do not only like, share and leave comments on YouTube, they transcend the platform and visit, follow, friend and interact with YouTubers on other social media platforms, and they are also eager to buy merchandise and create fan art. Both, buying and creating serve – or are presented to serve – the same purpose: they are both seen as tools for community building. Online communities form around a common interest, such as a YouTuber, through creating, whether it is a fan website, fan art, fan fiction or quite simply through commenting. Fan creations are welcome and encouraged by most YouTubers; Jacksfilms, for example, regularly organizes contests, awarding his favorite creators with physical prizes.<sup>36</sup> Dan Howell and Phil Lester annually film two videos centering around fan creations on tumblr,<sup>37</sup> and even support fans, for example, by advertising their work on their shop’s website.<sup>38</sup> Shane Dawson has sent chapters of his books to some fans before they were published and subsequently featured their artwork with a brief biography at the beginning of each chapter of both his books.<sup>39</sup> However, even when fan creations are not recognized or noticed by the

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<sup>35</sup> Connor FRANTA, *A Work in Progress: A Memoir*, New York: Keywords Press, 2015, 160.

<sup>36</sup> Jack DOUGLASS, “Jack’s Challenge (YIAY#98)”, YouTube, jacksfilms, 4:10, June 6, 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWNYZGXoljk>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Phil LESTER, “TUMBLR TAG 3! (With Dan)”, YouTube, AmazingPhil, 11:34, October 3, 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0H-YB9PuSE>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Dan and Phil SHOP, <<https://www.danandphilshop.com/>>, accessed on February 27, 2017; ohnoitspricilla, “OFFICIAL DANANDPHILSHOP COMMERCIAL: 2ND EDITION”, YouTube, ohnoitspricilla, 1:35, April 1, 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCFmqjk0nLU>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Shane DAWSON, *I Hate Myselfie: A Collection of Essays*, New York: Keywords Press, 2015. Shane DAWSON, *It Gets Worse: A Collection of Essays*, New York: Keywords Press, 2016.

Youtuber they are about, such fan creations are mostly made with the community in mind; they are a way to comment on content, to speculate, and to find friends online who share the same interests.

The merchandise, on the other hand, promises to help identify those who share that particular interest in real life. There is an observable tendency to sell subtle clothing that is designed to help identify those who share a common interest via coded and often wearable merchandise. This can help to prevent being bullied for showcasing interest in, for example a Youtuber, as only those who already know the Youtuber in question will also recognize that such an item is merchandise at all. Wearing such merchandise is in fact a piece of advice sometimes given by YouTubers in order to facilitate social contacts in new situations. When asked about advice on how to make friends at a new school in a Q&A video, British Youtuber Luke Cutforth, for example, says:

My advice to making friends in new situations – genuinely, not in a buy my merch way – is: merch. Buy merch for things that you love, like YouTubers, or bands, or taekwondo, or K-Pop, because other people who like the things will see you and identify you and latch onto you and be like “I want to be your friend because we like the same thing.” So, as a result, the t-shirt that I’ve made is this because it’s a really nice way of advertising [to] people “I like YouTube and I like that Luke guy,” but at the same time it looks like you’re just wearing a shirt with the hair on it. It’s like a giant billboard for friendship... for Internet weirdos, but that’s the best kind of friends, it’s the only kind I have now.<sup>40</sup>

His t-shirt is an off-white shirt that features only an iconographic depiction of Cutforth’s own ginger hairstyle, without facial features, or any textual or other explanation.<sup>41</sup> Dan Howell and Phil Lester also have a t-shirt for sale that features only their iconic hairstyles, as well as for example, a t-shirt with a lion or a llama printed on the breast pocket.<sup>42</sup> Long-term viewers will not only know that the lion represents Phil Lester while the llama represents Dan Howell, they will also appreciate the meaningfulness of the color choice for those shirts. Their personality brands are after all often explicitly expressed via their wardrobe; colorful clothing is indicative of Lester’s quirkiness, while Howell’s predominantly black attire is illustrative of the existential crises he has become known for. The significance of black or colorful clothing, is in fact, assumed to be so familiar to their audience, that their collaborative book includes four double pages

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<sup>40</sup> Luke CUTFORTH, “I SHAVED MY HEAD – AskHole #5”, YouTube, LukeIsNotSexy, 7:54, June 3, 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bzw-V9BGY0>>, accessed on February 27, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> See Cutforth’s shop on Big Cartel: <<http://lukeisnotsexy.bigcartel.com/product/lukeisnotsexy-ginger-shirt-last-stock>>, accessed on September 26, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> See the products on Howell and Lester’s shop: <<https://www.danandphilshop.com/collections/wearables/products/llama-pocket-t-shirt-black>>, accessed on September 26, 2016; and <<https://www.danandphilshop.com/collections/wearables/products/lion-pocket-t-shirt-green>>, accessed on September 26, 2016.

juxtaposing Howell's black jacket, shoes, t-shirts and socks to Lester's colorful ones.<sup>43</sup>

## Being Young on YouTube: Sabrina Cruz

The majority of highly successful YouTubers are in their mid- to late twenties, however, this is not to say that only creators in that age range are making videos. Nevertheless, it is clear that this is currently the age group that garners most interest from viewers. Young teenagers increasingly emulate their idols, and instead of merely fantasizing about their dream job, often take up the camera themselves and try their hand at vlogging. Nevertheless, young teenagers are often seen primarily as consumers, be it as consuming videos or in the more capitalistic sense as buyers of merchandise and books. The experience and interaction of teenagers with the platform YouTube and its most prominent creators, is far more intricate. The career of a vocal and successful young YouTuber, NerdyAndQuirky, or Sabrina Cruz, "your self-professed relatable teen," illustrates some of these complexities.<sup>44</sup>

Cruz started vlogging when she was thirteen. In 2013, at fourteen, she won a vlogbrothers competition.<sup>45</sup> Winning the competition meant Sabrina Cruz, along with three other winners, was selected to make videos instead of John Green while he went on paternity leave for several weeks in 2013. Taking over a channel that has millions of subscribers, meant getting exposure to a much larger audience and she subsequently gained many more subscribers on her own channel. This also opened up other opportunities; in 2014 she started hosting *Crash Course Kids*, an educational YouTube channel aimed at explaining aspects of Earth Science, Physical Science, Biology, Geography, Engineering, and Astronomy to children aged approximately ten to eleven.<sup>46</sup>

At the age of fifteen Cruz posted a video entitled "Young on YouTube" addressing the fact that she was as young as fifteen and by YouTube standards quite successful.<sup>47</sup> In the video she

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<sup>43</sup> Dan HOWELL and Phil LESTER, *The Amazing Book is not on Fire: The World of Dan and Phil*, London: Ebury Press, 2015. 6-7, 28-9, 63-4, 190-1.

<sup>44</sup> See YouTube, NerdyAndQuirky, <<https://www.youtube.com/user/NerdyAndQuirky/about>>, accessed on September 16, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> The vlogbrothers are two brothers who were among the earliest successful YouTubers and have become highly influential on the platform and especially in the YouTube community. The older brother, John Green, is the author of bestselling Young Adult literature, such as *The Fault in our Stars*, *Paper Towns* or *Looking for Alaska*. Together the brothers have pioneered many projects, among which are several educational channels, including SciShow, CrashCourse and Sexplanations, but also other projects, like an online charity event (Project4Awesome), an online store on which many notable YouTubers sell their merchandise (DFTBA Records), or the largest online video conference worldwide (VidCon), as well as the most recent project providing online resources designed to inform, unite and help YouTube creators (The Creator's Guild). See John Green, "NERD FACTOR! (...And Why I Fear For Tumblr)," YouTube, vlogbrothers, 3:54, May 28, 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHSX2-pTw3Q>>, accessed on September 26, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> See "Crash Course Kids," YouTube, <<https://www.youtube.com/user/crashcoursekids>>, accessed on September 26, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Sabrina CRUZ, "Young On YouTube", Youtube, NerdyAndQuirky, 4:48, August 17, 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXRUONCFglU>>, accessed on September 26, 2016.

explains what it means to be young on the platform, including, for example, that many people are surprised that somebody her age can be successful at all. She argues that teenage YouTubers have to combat “a stigma that anybody under 18 can’t make good videos.”<sup>48</sup> This stigma, as well as the surprise that young teens are capable of creating good content, partly stems from the fact that, as mentioned above, the majority of notable YouTubers are in their twenties. Even though almost all of these “Big YouTubers” have started creating videos when they were teenagers themselves, the platform has changed significantly in the past decade; so much so, that the experience of creating videos in 2006/7 as a teenager was quite different to teenagers creating videos today: apart from other creators there were fewer people watching YouTube videos and especially vlogs; there was no, or hardly any, financial benefit in creating videos; traditional media were not interested in vloggers; and the style and form was freer and more experimental, as there was no standard to adhere to or full-time YouTuber to emulate yet. For YouTubers starting in 2009, the experience was already radically altered. Jenn McAllister, for example, details the bullying she endured in high school because of the fact that she made YouTube videos.<sup>49</sup>

Because young creators on YouTube are often overlooked or not taken seriously, Cruz decided to try and make them more visible at VidCon, the largest online video conference in the world, and proposed a panel dedicated specifically to under eighteen-year-old YouTubers. In her video proposal she referenced the video “Young on YouTube,” reiterating some of the points she made:

I talked about how the younger generation is viewed more as consumers rather than creators, creators who could make amazing content, but people don’t believe we can because we haven’t finished high school, or something like that. But if you believe that somebody’s ability to make amazing things isn’t limited by the year they were born in, I have an idea. There’s this thing happening in the summer, I don’t know if you’ve heard of it, it’s called VidCon. And you know what happens at VidCon? Panels! And you know what should happen at VidCon 2014? A young on YouTube panel called “#YOUNGTUBERS”! [...] My goal is to see a panel arise where young, bright minded YouTubers can discuss experiences all content creators share while also talking about what it’s like to be a kid on the Internet. I want to talk about content, and I mean all kinds of content, from music to vlogging to film to beauty to gaming to education. I wanna see it all. I wanna remind kids my age that our voice is important in this massive website. That’s my dream.<sup>50</sup>

The proposal was indeed successful, and the fact that “#YOUNGTUBERS” was represented at VidCon for the third time in 2016 indicates that young creators can not only make good content and be successful but also that they can effectively demand to be taken seriously and make themselves heard within the YouTube community.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> Jenn McALLISTER, *Really Professional Internet Person*, New York: Scholastic Inc., 2015, 53-64.

<sup>50</sup> Sabrina CRUZ, “Youngtubers: A Vidcon Proposal”, *op. cit.*, 3:48.



## Conclusion

YouTubers suggest an intimacy in vlogs and invite their subscribers into their private – although consciously and heavily coded, as well as presentational – space, they are also consumed very often in similar settings: the viewer’s most private space, in their own bedrooms. This set-up consequently allows for the illusion of the interaction being intimate, as meeting YouTubers on an equal footing. In any case, this kind of situation allows for a high level of identification. This is even further emphasized by the content that most big YouTube vloggers tackle on a regular basis and also shows their awareness of their predominantly teenage audience.

Teenagers spend more and more of their time watching YouTubers, reading their books, and creating content themselves. The vast and increasing number of YouTubers to choose from, however, means that more than ever teenagers are able to find role models they can identify with. Not only can they control who to follow, they also have a certain degree of influence in what these role models do for them. YouTubers often ask for feedback and suggestions of what to tackle in their vlogs, which means that topics and issues that come up repeatedly have a good chance of being discussed in a vlog or a Q&A video.

Even though, through anonymity, for example, the Internet can be a daunting place filled with trolls and bullies, it is also a social place that offers global online peer groups and a place where teenagers can discuss their problems and be heard and supported. YouTubers, through the intimacy and emotionality they present publicly, allow for the formation of communities around them while also providing virtual content and physical products to support this development (and make a living) on and offline. This is becoming quite necessary too, as teenagers – according to media scholar danah boyd – increasingly turn to social media because their geographical freedom is becoming more and more restricted, mainly because of threats parents see lurking in public spaces. Therefore parents rigorously control their children’s activities outside their own homes, thus restricting access to public places like shopping malls, which has long been the place for the American teenager to hang out with peers.<sup>51</sup> In conclusion, because YouTubers are becoming increasingly skilled in transmedia marketing, their venturing beyond the platform, by, for example, publishing bestselling books, makes them more visible to the general public. This is an important step, not only to legitimize their own profession, but more importantly to emphasize the value of the teenage experience for teenagers as well as for society at large.

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<sup>51</sup> See danah BOYD, *It's Complicated*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014, 21-22.

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