



Video Production on YouTube: The Meaning of Gender Images

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Contents

1	Introduction	850
2	Gender Differences in the Production of YouTube Videos	850
3	Gender Roles in the Content of YouTube Videos	852
4	Reception of Gender Images in YouTube Videos	853
5	Effects of YouTube Videos on Gender Relations	855
6	Conclusion	856
	References	857

Abstract

How is the world's leading social media video platform YouTube to be assessed in terms of gender equality? The analysis shows that video production on YouTube is male-dominated and that the video content often conveys traditional gender roles. However, recipients also access niche content that offers more diverse gender images than traditional mass media. The chapter identifies research gaps and concludes with practical recommendations for promoting gender equality on YouTube.

Keywords

Online video · Web video · YouTube · User-generated content · Social media

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1 Introduction

The video platform *YouTube*—founded in 2005, currently owned by Google LLC—is the second most visited website on the Internet after the Google search engine (Similarweb 2025) and at the same time the world’s most popular social media platform. Particularly among young people, YouTube is prominent as an entertainment and information medium: The vast majority of young people use YouTube daily or several times per week (mpfs 2025). Mass media content is distributed via YouTube (e.g., TV shows, films, music videos, and advertisements). However, there are also numerous user-generated YouTube productions. The most viewed videos on YouTube come from leisure-related genres such as “Music,” “Comedy,” “Entertainment,” “Gaming,” and “How to & Style” as well as “People & Blogs.” But there is also information-related YouTube content, for example, in genres like “Education,” “News & Politics,” “Science & Technology,” and “Nonprofit & Activism.” The mentioned genre groups are predefined by YouTube. Video producers categorize themselves accordingly. The popularity of the genres can be seen from the social media statistics platform SocialBlade.

People who have become known through their self-produced YouTube videos are referred to as *YouTubers* or *YouTube stars*. Some YouTube stars now have millions of fans. One of the biggest YouTube stars in the gaming genre is the 1989 born Swede Felix Kjellberg, whose gaming and entertainment channel “PewDiePie” has more than 110 million subscribers (as of: November 2025) and who became a multimillionaire through YouTube. YouTube stars are also gaining importance offline: They organize fan meetings, appear on radio and television shows, and are reported on in newspapers and magazines. The German youth magazine “Bravo” now regularly features YouTube stars on the cover. YouTubers monetize their videos through advertising, cooperate as influencers with companies, and market their own products and services such as books, fan merchandise, fashion, cosmetics, dietary supplements, online courses, or offline coaching. YouTube is subject to the trend of increasing professionalization and commercialization (Döring 2014; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki 2018).

As YouTube use has increased, research on YouTube has expanded accordingly, with a primary focus on the content analysis of YouTube videos. The following presentation is based on gender-related YouTube studies as well as on relevant examples from the German- and English-speaking YouTube sphere.

2 Gender Differences in the Production of YouTube Videos

Looking at the *YouTube charts*, i.e., the top 100 most subscribed YouTube channels (SocialBlade 2025), it becomes clear that popular video content is predominantly shaped by male YouTubers: A content analysis across nine countries showed that men account for about 75% of YouTube stars, roughly three times the share of women (Döring and Mohseni 2018). A significant gender gap exists not only among YouTube stars but also apparently in the online video production in general: Around

4% of young people in Germany publish their own YouTube videos, among them approximately four times more boys than girls (mpfs 2013, pp. 32, 35).

This *gender gap* disadvantages girls and women insofar as they do not equally shape the YouTube culture, express themselves creatively, and benefit from the professional development opportunities as YouTubers and influencers. Different explanatory approaches for the lower participation of girls and women are discussed and require further theoretical elaboration and empirical examination:

- There is greater interest among boys and men in active video production, leading to stronger participation while simultaneously better promotion of their YouTube video production (e.g., more peer exchange among boys about video production; video workshops more often led by male educators; Döring 2015a).
- Female video producers are exposed to gender-specific aggression and hostility and generally receive harsher criticism and also more sexist and sexually aggressive comments on their videos, which can discourage girls and women from appearing publicly on YouTube or contribute to their abandoning video production after being harassed (Amarasekara and Grant 2019; Burgess and Green 2018, pp. 119–120; Döring and Mohseni 2018; Szostak 2013; Wotanis and McMillan 2014).
- Female YouTubers receive less public recognition and appreciation compared to male YouTubers, which hinders their reputation building and reinforces YouTube as a male-dominated sphere (Döring 2015a). Thus, famous female YouTubers from the beauty genre are often belittled and ridiculed as “make-up girls,” while famous YouTubers from the gaming genre are not similarly marginalized as “gaming boys.” After the so-called *Web Video Award Germany*, marketed as the “Oscar for the Internet,” had awarded all prizes in all categories to male YouTubers in 2014, it was only after public protest that the category “Person of the Year: Female” was introduced to ensure recognition and appreciation of the video production of girls and women (categories and winners of the Web Video Award [in German: Webvideopreis] are documented in Wikipedia). Generally, young adults of all genders traditionally seem to have more male than female idols (Boon and Lomore 2001, p. 442), which additionally results in gender-unequal opportunities in gaining YouTube fame.
- Women have fewer opportunities to rise to the top YouTube spots, because these are already occupied by male YouTubers and once a star status on YouTube is achieved, it often persists over time (Budzinski and Gaenssle 2018).

It should be noted that both the extent and the causes of the gender gap in video production on YouTube have not yet been conclusively clarified scientifically and must also be contextualized historically and culturally. Some studies suggest that girls and women tend to participate more in gender-role-conforming social media communication in closed groups, i.e., they communicate more privately than publicly (mpfs 2025), other studies report platform-specific gender dominances (e.g., YouTube is more male-dominated, and TikTok and Instagram are more female-dominated), and yet other studies suggest that the gender gap on YouTube in the USA may be closing (Khan 2017).

3 Gender Roles in the Content of YouTube Videos

Since YouTube largely disseminates mass media content, the gender stereotyping documented in mass media (Becker and Becker 1999; Mühlen-Achs 2003) can also be found on YouTube (e.g., significantly stronger sexual objectification of women compared to men in music videos on YouTube: Aubrey and Frisby 2011). However, what is the situation with user-generated YouTube videos? Are there deviations from traditional gender roles here?

At first glance, no: *Sexual objectification and stereotyping* are widespread in YouTube videos: Comedy videos that show what is “typical girl” or “typical boy” are very popular and affirm binary gender images and problematic clichés (e.g., “GIRLS normal VS when they have their PERIOD” with more than 10 million views; Döring 2015a, transl. by auth). Male YouTubers extensively comment on the appearance of female YouTubers in their videos and discuss whether they can be recognized by their secondary sexual characteristics (e.g., “GUESSING YOUTUBER’S BREASTS EXTREME” with almost 1 million views). Some female YouTubers present themselves in explicitly sexualized ways, such as Katja Krasavice, who with videos like “HOW I PLEASURE MYSELF” achieved more than 6 million clicks. In line with the sexual double standard, sexualized videos of women attract great voyeuristic interest (measurable by the high number of clicks), but are also accompanied by a massive devaluation of the video creators as ‘cheap’, ‘embarrassing’ and ‘slutty’ (observable in the public video comments; Döring 2017).

Traditional gender roles are also evident in terms of *gender-differentiated topic choices*: Genres coded as feminine such as make-up, styling, and fashion videos are mainly produced by girls and women and accordingly show mostly girls and women in front of the camera, while YouTube genres coded as masculine such as gaming, sports, news, politics, or science predominantly represent boys and men (Amarasekara and Grant 2019; Budzinski and Gaenssle 2018; Döring 2015a; Welbourne and Grant 2016). Comedy, entertainment, and vlogging (= video blogging: documenting one’s own life) are, in contrast, more gender-balanced genres (Molyneux et al. 2008).

Looking at the top 50 most subscribed YouTube channels in Germany in 2018, there were only five channels by young women—in the ranking of their popularity, these were (1) “BibisBeautyPalace”; (2) “DagiBee”; (3) “ShirinDavid”; (4) “MelinaSophie”; and (5) “KellyMissesVlog.” These predominantly focused on gender-role-conforming beauty and styling, as well as comedy and vlogging. No gaming, news, politics, or science channel, run by a woman and featuring a woman on camera appeared among the top 250 most subscribed YouTube channels in Germany 2018, and only one sports channel (“Sophia Thiel”).

The top channels on YouTube thus predominantly affirm outdated female and male roles. However, more diversity becomes visible when less popular channels are included. Because generally, YouTube as a social media platform offers relatively low-barrier participation options. Thus, the literature acknowledges *empowerment potentials* in the sense that groups of people who are otherwise underrepresented in societal and mass media public spheres can appear in the online public sphere and raise their voices (Burgess and Green 2018). Accordingly, there are YouTube

channels where women present themselves beyond traditional female roles as gamers, scientists, politicians, entrepreneurs, athletes, artists, and not least as *activists*. For example, the Pakistani children's rights activist Malala Yousafzai is represented on YouTube with the channel "Malala Fund." The channel includes, among other things, her speech on the occasion of the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize 2014, in which she advocates for the access to education for all children worldwide ("Malala Yousafzai Nobel Peace Prize Speech"). Also, there are explicitly feminist YouTube channels that create counter-publics, deal with gender issues politically, and can be constructively used in academic teaching (Eudey 2008).

An ambivalent example is the YouTube channel "FeministFrequency" by Anita Sarkeesian with over 200,000 channel subscriptions. Since 2009, the channel has been comprehensively analyzing from a critical-feminist perspective how women are portrayed in various media—be it cinema films, advertising clips, or digital games. An example is the video "Are Women Too Hard To Animate?" (more than 400,000 views), in which Sarkeesian criticizes that development studios often do not even consider female characters in their games. Such socially critical content would hardly have been broadcast on television for such a long time and to this extent, which underlines the empowerment potential of YouTube. At the same time, the *risk of disempowerment* becomes clear: The channel operator became the victim of a serious *harassment and defamation campaign* including death threats, in response to her criticism on YouTube of the lack of or sexist representations of women in digital games. This online and offline hate campaign, which started in 2014 and also includes various hate videos on YouTube, became known as "GamerGate" and had several other female victims besides Anita Sarkeesian (Mortensen 2018).

4 Reception of Gender Images in YouTube Videos

Unlike the passive consumption of mass media content, the active social component plays an important role in the use of YouTube videos: The audience not only watches the videos on their smartphone or computer but also rates, comments, and shares them. This results in a closer *feedback loop between video production and video reception* (Burgess and Green 2018). Video producers regularly call on their audience to provide topic requests or questions, which they then respond to in their subsequent videos. Likewise, video producers closely monitor which features of their videos (content, title, and thumbnail) generate more or less clicks and user engagement and thus adapt to the audience's taste. Because production aims to maximize attention, it tends to reflect mass taste and favor attention-grabbing content such as scandals, nudity, or sex. This is exactly the development that can be observed on YouTube and directly affects the handling of gender images.

The top female YouTubers, who—as described—often engage in topics coded as feminine (make-up, shopping, styling, etc.) and conform to common beauty norms (young, pretty, slim, blonde, white, etc.), mainly have young female fan communities who follow these YouTubers because they are "so beautiful" and "confident" and lead an enviably luxurious life (Döring 2015a). The world of beauty and lifestyle

channels is cheerful and carefree, consumer-oriented, and conventional: Having “fun” with friends but also studying for school or university to “make something of your life” is the mantra. The female YouTubers know that pubescent girls idolize them and often talk about the great responsibility they have as role models. Accordingly, there are no swear words in the videos. Smoking, alcohol, or sexual escapades are used at most as stylistic devices to parody “chavs” and “sluts” (e.g., in the video “10 TYPES OF GIRLS + Outtakes” with over 10 million views). The videos located in the societal mainstream convey a traditional image of being a girl. Many female recipients follow the make-up, styling and shopping tips of their female YouTube idols and dream of becoming social media stars themselves. Similarly, many male recipients orient themselves toward the traditional images of masculinity on YouTube, which revolve around muscles, money, cars, and success with women (Döring 2015a).

The reception of images of women and men on YouTube has, in addition to problematic aspects, also helpful dimensions: The female beauty YouTubers are like virtual big sisters for the viewers, who have encouraging messages and answers ready in the confusion of puberty, when it comes to stress with parents, pimples, heartbreak, eating disorders, self-harming behavior, and self-doubt. While mass media role models such as actresses and models can be intimidating in social comparison, beauty YouTubers provide practical help and confidence, show themselves without make-up, and report on how they themselves were bullied in the past. Using the topic of beauty as a hook, girls and young women create gender-homogeneous social communication spaces on YouTube, where they sometimes act very solidarily and support each other in various everyday matters (Döring 2015a).

In addition to the mainstream channels, YouTube offers a variety of *niche channels*. There are beauty YouTubers of all age groups and body shapes, some present their styles from the hospital bed or in a wheelchair others present themselves with face tattoos and still others talk about their diverse religious and sexual identities.

Role models with nonbinary, androgynous, transgender, and queer gender identities—as well as with diverse sexual identities—are far more present on YouTube than in mainstream mass media (Döring 2017). “TheNosyRosie,” for example, is a German-language YouTube channel primarily operated by and for lesbian girls and women since 2010, where non-heterosexual viewers find positive role models and identity validation (Döring and Prinzellner 2016) in videos such as “TNR || Am I lesbian? - Inner coming out” (more than 15,000 views).

The YouTube video “A Girl Like Me,” produced by a student and published as early as 2007, addresses growing up as an African-American girl in the USA and has so far received almost a million views and predominantly positive ratings and comments (Hoskins 2009).

There are videos on YouTube where the professional roles of women are in the foreground, such as when astronaut Karen Nyberg demonstrates everyday life in space (e.g., “Running in Space!”) or psychotherapist Esther Perel explains infidelity (e.g., “Rethinking infidelity ... a talk for anyone who has ever loved”). The

associated video comments are partly interested in content and appreciative (“This woman is so intelligent, captivating, and powerful”), partly again objectifying (“nice legs, space lady”).

Contrary to the cliché of a one-dimensional beautiful, colorful world in social media, girls and women as well as boys and men on YouTube also find numerous role models who demonstrate how to deal with crises, failure, experiences of violence, relationship problems, diseases, and disabilities and can contribute to empowerment (Döring 2016b). Previous studies have also demonstrated that controversial video topics such as self-determined birthing (Longhurst 2009), eating disorders (Holmes 2016), or female sexuality (Döring 2017) are addressed (Döring 2016a). Also, on YouTube, there is extensive self-reflection about problems related to social media (e.g., tricks used to create illusions such as special slenderness or muscularity on video, warnings about the danger of comparing oneself with embellished representations of social media stars, and personal experiences as a social media influencer shared, for example, in the video “I am not as perfect as I pretend to be on the internet”). Such videos can help the audience question social roles, norms, and self-presentations.

On the other hand, it is noticeable that alternative YouTube content triggers extremely critical, aggressive to openly hateful reactions from parts of the audience. The hate campaign against the operator of the YouTube channel “Feminist-Frequency” has already been mentioned as an example (Burgess and Green 2018; Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Gray et al. 2017; Mortensen 2018). Affected YouTubers react differently to attacks: Some turn off comments and video ratings completely, others delete individual hate comments and block haters, and yet others read out hate comments in their videos, criticize them, and demand an appropriate communication style. Sometimes, however, participation in YouTube is paused or completely abandoned to protect oneself from the devaluations and aggressions of the online audience.

Gender-related hate comments against YouTubers are to be considered as an expression of sexist attitudes, which can be expressed particularly uninhibitedly in the online context and can be reinforced by the approval of other commentators (Döring and Mohseni 2018). However, sexism is not the only cause of hate on YouTube. Racism, homo- and transphobia, and other discriminatory attitudes also play a role.

5 Effects of YouTube Videos on Gender Relations

Public and professional debates about the impact of YouTube on gender relations are polarized. On the one hand, there is hope that YouTube as a social media platform, through its relatively low-barrier participation opportunities, contributes to greater media gender equality and empowerment. On the other hand, critics argue that gender asymmetries and hierarchies to the disadvantage of girls and women, as they are known from the old media, also appear on YouTube and are sometimes intensified, contributing to disempowerment.

For both tendencies, there are—as outlined in the previous sections—corresponding examples and studies. However, the specific short- and medium-term positive and/or negative effects of the examined videos and video comments have so far rarely been systematically assessed or experimentally tested. One of the few *experimental effect studies*, for example, found that beauty YouTubers with their explanations of video production could motivate viewers to consider making their own videos, provided the YouTubers are perceived as attractive (Choi and Behm-Morawitz 2017). This would then be considered an empowerment effect, because girls are encouraged to actively participate in the male-dominated YouTube world.

What is still missing is a broader and more systematic overview of the findings on YouTube's effects on gender relations, both regarding the quality and the magnitude of these effects. Strong positive outcomes (e.g., YouTube videos supporting lesbian girls during coming out) and strong negative outcomes (e.g., YouTube videos fostering body-insecurities and triggering eating disorders), may occur in certain contexts, but they are often accompanied by more moderate effects for many users, for instance, some may feel annoyed by sexist YouTube content in popular channels while simultaneously benefiting from helpful, entertaining, and emancipatory niche content on the same platform. As always, predictions about media effects require a detailed understanding of content and usage patterns and the development of appropriate media effects theories. Much research remains to be done. In particular, other video platforms beyond YouTube need to be comparatively examined from gender perspectives (e.g., live-streaming platforms like Twitch or YouNow; Döring 2015b).

6 Conclusion

If gender equality on YouTube is to be promoted, then in addition to increased research efforts, practical measures are necessary. This starts with promoting gender-equal participation in video production (e.g., through workshops for potential video producers, which not only teach video production skills but also prepare for dealing with gender-specific online hate speech; Döring 2015a, 2016b). Furthermore, a gender-sensitive media literacy promotion is necessary, which helps users critically classify traditional gender roles and gender images in mainstream YouTube channels and identify alternative role models on the platform if needed (Döring 2016b). Media literacy promotion also needs to include raising awareness about the prevention of sexist and other online hate speech, so that all YouTube users are aware that certain negative comments are not “funny,” but hurtful and threatening and should therefore be avoided. It is also important to know how to proceed and protect oneself, when encountering sexist comments from other users.

Equally important is increasing the gender sensitivity of multipliers (e.g., in education, in youth work, and in journalism), so that they can appropriately represent and appreciate the online engagement of YouTubers of all genders. Finally, the platform operators also have a responsibility: Many video producers criticize that the YouTube algorithm unilaterally favors high-click content and lets mass taste dominate. It would certainly be possible for YouTube to actively promote high-quality niche content, for example, through deliberate placement in YouTube trends.

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Video Directory

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