

POPULAR CULTURE AS A VEHICLE FOR IDENTITY REPRESENTATION: SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS, COLLECTIVE IDENTITY PORTRAYALS, AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

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Social media influencers—regular people who become famous through successful self-presentation on social media—intertwine entertainment with socio-political narratives in their communication. In this content, they display collective identities like sexual or religious identities. These collective identity portrayals (CIPs) could foster the visibility of marginalized groups and shared meaning-making but may also reinforce stigmatization. This quantitative content analysis investigates how YouTubers identified in a prior youth survey (N = 1829) portray collective identities in their political videos (N = 267). Our findings reveal that most (67.79%) of these videos contain at least one CIP. Furthermore, videos containing political and religious CIPs receive more comments, suggesting that collective identities may trigger collective action. Finally, while religious and gender CIPs are embedded in an emotional context, sexual CIPs co-occur with incivility. These findings align with the idea that collective identities in digital public spaces are expressed through personal experiences without formal gatekeeping. Notably, many sexual CIPs referred to minorities, underscoring the assumed visibility of underrepresented groups on social media. However, their presence alongside incivility contradicts the assumption that these spaces may approach such issues in a more positive way compared to the discourses dominant in legacy media.

KEYWORDS social media influencers; socio-political content; collective identity; digital public sphere; content analysis; YouTube

Introduction

Social media influencers (SMIs), popular personalities who reach fame via successful self-branding on social media (Khamis et al. 2017), are nowadays a constant in young people's media diet (Newman et al. 2024). Although they are mostly known for their entertaining lifestyle content, SMIs include issues that are socially or politically significant as well. Research suggests that SMIs address socio-political topics through identity narratives (Bauer 2024; Chinn et al. 2024; Renström and Bäck 2024), for instance when they tackle the harassment of trans people, the visibility of people with disability, or men's rights. In their

public communication, SMIs use language that “defines social group boundaries” (Chinn et al. 2024, 4). These portrayals express collective identities, which can be understood as shared values, symbols, or beliefs of a group (Klandermans 2014). Among viewers, collective identity portrayals (CIPs) can enhance the salience of identity aspects and determine the valence of group representations. As such, SMIs’ collective identity narratives can shape if and how people think about social groups in society.

Yet, thus far, much of the research is theoretical (e.g., Banet-Weiser 2021), qualitative (e.g., Abidin 2016), or focuses on specific case studies (e.g., Shtern et al. 2019). Moreover, many identity-related studies focus on specific aspects like gender and sexuality (e.g., Abidin 2019; Banet-Weiser 2021), while SMIs may portray a wide range of identities, including intersectional identities. Thus, we lack a systematic quantitative investigation of CIPs in SMIs’ content. Given that many young people nowadays prefer SMIs over traditional news sources for information (Newman et al. 2024), it is important to tackle SMIs’ socio-political content and investigate how collective identities are portrayed in it. Minority groups are often underrepresented in legacy media content, but may be more visible in SMIs’ content (Papacharissi and Trevey 2018). Drawing on research about traditional media portrayals, it is also crucial to assess *how* collective identities are depicted in SMIs’ socio-political content. Next, scholars typically examine SMIs in general, without taking into account their group membership. Therefore, we examine whether SMIs’ portrayals of collective identities depend on their status as in-group member. This status may further relate to the context of the depiction: By portraying collective identities within emotionally charged videos, SMIs may strengthen community-building (Reicher et al. 2005), while these videos may also foster polarization, for instance, if they contain incivilities (Chinn et al. 2024). Finally, prior studies have largely focused either on identity theory or on SMI influence in areas like marketing. However, it is crucial to consider how identity-related content from SMIs impacts public discourse among viewers. Consequently, we study engagement metrics in the form of comments, which provide insights into how the type and context of SMIs’ CIPs relate to the reception of these identity portrayals among the public.

We address these research gaps by bridging work on identity theory, influencer studies, and the (digital) public sphere. We do so in the context of a content analysis in Germany which, with its highly active political YouTube scene (Allgaier 2020), is a fruitful setting for this research. More specifically, we analyse $N = 267$ videos on socio-political topics, created by German-speaking YouTubers identified through a survey of $N = 1,829$ young people.

Social Media Influencers’ Socio-Political Narratives

Social media influencers (SMIs) are not just notable brand endorsers used in influencer marketing, Abidin (2016, 3) more broadly defines them as “everyday, ordinary ... users who accumulate a relatively large following on ... social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles.” This description aligns with the idea that SMIs acquire their fame by cultivating a certain image of themselves—thus engaging in successful self-branding or self-commodification (Marwick 2015). SMIs tend to interact directly with their followers and generally provide the authenticity their audiences crave (Marwick 2015). This perceived authenticity is typically “associated with the performance of particular interpersonal attributes, communication styles, and digital practices [which] include sincerity, trustworthiness, accuracy, originality, spontaneity, and visibility” (Ebben and Bull 2023, 3). Positioning oneself in this way is seen as a fundamental prerequisite for SMIs’ success (Banet-Weiser 2021) but requires substantial personal vulnerability to accommodate “commercial platform logics” (Duffy et al. 2024, 355). Some authors, however, argue

that this authenticity is *enacted* (Ebben and Bull 2023) or *performed* through the “constant renegotiation of their ‘authentic’ selves relative to their perception of the preferences of their audiences” (Shtern et al. 2019, 1952; see also Goffman 1959). This ties in well with the tension described by Banet-Weiser (2021, 143): “The more effort [influencers] make in crafting themselves according to a particular version of apparently effortless authenticity, the more authentic their self-presentation.”

SMLs appear to seamlessly blend their entertaining lifestyle content with more substantive subjects that address societal concerns or explicitly political issues (Harff and Schmuck 2025; Suuronen et al. 2022). As such, they may also leverage their authenticity “to shape public discourse for social and political goals” (Ebben and Bull 2023, 6). Researchers commonly distinguish between topics focused on formal politics (e.g., political institutions, processes, actors) and those not directly tied to the political sphere but reflecting broader societal issues (e.g., sustainability, racism, mental health). These are often referred to as formal political and lifestyle-based political topics, respectively (Harff and Schmuck 2025; Suuronen et al. 2022). We group them under the umbrella term *socio-political topics*: issues that are political and societal in nature, including those not inherently political but framed to ‘politicize’ SMLs’ (supposed) private life. Examples are linking cooking, sports, or traveling with narratives relevant for society, like injustice, education, or sustainability as well as ideologies such as (anti-)feminism (Bauer 2024). This perspective on politics is rooted in the famous assertion that “the personal is political,” implying that an issue does not have to be inherently tied to institutional politics but becomes political when an individual believes it should be collectively debated by the public (Mansbridge 1999, 214).

The essence of the personal fundamentally centres on an individual’s identity, a multifaceted concept. While personal identity pertains to defining oneself based on personal attributes like hobbies or personality characteristics, social identity refers to defining oneself in terms of belonging to social categories (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Some authors additionally distinguish social identity from collective identity (e.g., Klandermans 2014; van Stekelenburg 2013). Following this perspective, collective identity relates to shared concerns and beliefs among individuals within a single group. Despite multifaceted definitions of collective identity across disciplines, the concept has been best described as “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 285). It follows that collective identity is a group characteristic referring to a group’s common experience, based on one’s social group memberships (van Stekelenburg 2013). Markers of collective identity are phenomena such as “the group’s symbols, its rituals, beliefs, and the values its members share” (Klandermans 2014, 2). Accordingly, collective identity can be observed by investigating artefacts of communities such as videos, comments, or images through analysing content and discourses. To this date, the conceptual framework by Ashmore et al. (2004) is the most comprehensive to conceptualize collective identity. In their work, they encourage a shift from the term ‘social identity’ to ‘collective identity’ because (1) describing an identity aspect as *social* does not differentiate it from other aspects since all of them are socially influenced, and (2) the term ‘social identity’ is more ambiguous and therefore problematic than ‘collective identity’ (Ashmore et al. 2004, 81). Drawing on their framework, our study will use the latter terminology, thus referring to a collective identity as “one that is shared with a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common ... such as ethnicity or gender” (Ashmore et al. 2004, 81).

On social media, SMLs commonly connect their personal lives with socio-political narratives. An example is female SMLs sharing insights in their lives as mothers and housewives to convey traditional role conceptions or even anti-feminist ideology (Bauer 2024).

In doing so, SMIs do not only politicize their private lives (Bauer 2024), they also enact and enhance the salience of collective identities such as mothers or women. If SMIs address a social group in a socio-political post, collective identities become politicized (Klandermans 2014). In a similar vein, Khazraee and Novak (2018, 4) refer to “discursive processes” of collective identity construction on social media, which “concern narratives, frames, and meaning making.” These are further distinguished from “enacted processes [whereby] networks of relationships [are activated]” (Khazraee and Novak 2018, 4). Such networks may become prominent with the use of visuals, symbols, and slogans (see also Gerbaudo 2015). Such instances in which SMIs use narratives or symbols relating to collective identity can be seen as collective identity portrayals (CIPs).

Social Media Influencers’ Portrayals of Collective Identities

In today’s high-choice media environment, users are exposed to highly selective news diets (Van Aelst et al. 2017), where norms and values are transported via algorithmically curated content on platforms such as social media rather than through TV or newspaper consumption. This process of platformization has previously been argued to “[empower] all potential users in principle to become independent and equally entitled authors,” thus fulfilling the idealized “bourgeois public sphere [including] all citizens equally” (Habermas 2022, 159). However, these innovations have also been argued to create an “unbounded public sphere” with isolated issue publics and an increased risk of “fragmentation for political opinion” (Habermas 2022, 160). Studying such an unstructured public sphere and online public debates, researchers have often focused on ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’, particularly fearing the risk of polarization (Kaluža 2024). However, there seems to be insufficient evidence to support such worries (Dommett and Verovšek 2021; Kaluža 2024).

Other scholars argue for the importance of emotion and identity in the discussion of socio-political issues. With their large follower bases and unbound to journalistic practices or formal gatekeeping, SMIs open up public spaces and create commentary fields in which affective publics may engage in public discussion and community-building. Such affective publics—“networked public formations that are mobilized and connected, or disconnected, through expressions of sentiment”—can use social media to oppose the dominant narratives (Papacharissi and Trevey 2018, 92). That is, sceptical toward traditional media and political systems, citizens turn to digital media for personal narratives on socio-political issues (Papacharissi and Trevey 2018). Whereas news curation was formerly guided by news editors and traditional broadcasters, socio-political issues nowadays reach people without formal gatekeeping, via a large variety of different curators like SMIs or algorithmic filters tailored to an individual’s own predispositions and interests (Thorson and Wells 2016). So, while marginalized groups or issues are often under- or misrepresented in legacy media content (Dixon and Williams 2015), social media offer the opportunity to express one’s point of view through user-generated content that can reach broad publics. As such, SMIs have the potential to raise the salience of collective identities that are underrepresented in traditional media—like the YouTuber Leeroy Matata, who is in a wheelchair himself and interviews other individuals belonging to minority groups. Yet, only few studies so far have systematically addressed collective identity portrayals (CIPs) in SMIs’ content.

Political and National Collective Identities

Some SMIs have used their channels to create public attention for socio-political causes such as the YouTuber Rezo who, during the 2019 European elections, discouraged

young people from voting for conservative parties due to their alleged inaction to battle climate change (Allgaier 2020). Other case studies show that some SMIs embrace politically radical stances, including high-profile far-right supporters or (esoteric) QAnon SMIs (Rothut et al. 2024). SMIs may also express national identity (Marcella-Hood 2021) or convey nationalist stances (Rothut et al. 2024). Some existing work suggests a counter-narrative in SMIs' portrayals of national identities: Motahar and colleagues (2024) found that travel SMIs portray Iranian nationality in more diverse ways on YouTube compared to Western legacy media.

Ethnic, Migration and Religious Collective Identities

SMIs seem to exploit social media platforms' unique affordances to increase their media visibility and create their own identity online, potentially to counter the dominant stereotypical portrayals in traditional media. For instance, Asian American SMIs were found to represent themselves in a more fluid and multifaceted way than is shown in legacy media (King and Fretwell 2025). Exploratory research also revealed that immigrant SMIs portray complex identities pertaining to niche communities and spread their experiences with discrimination and claims for rights (Jaramillo-Dent et al. 2022). Regarding religious identities, Aini and Kailani (2021) observed that female Muslim SMIs leverage their religious identity to challenge conventional societal perceptions.

Gender and Sexual Collective Identities

Concerning gender portrayals, SMIs may use their channels to fight for a feminist cause or more gender equality, for instance, in view of the #MeToo campaign (Barbala 2024). Nevertheless, also a countermovement of anti-feminist SMIs can be observed who engage in "political self-branding as anti-feminist role models," linking personal issues with anti-feminist discourse (Bauer 2024, 15). Furthermore, manfluencers are known for encouraging men to perceive women and feminism as threats to their masculinity and social status (Renström and Bäck 2024). Pertaining to portrayals of sexual collective identities, prior research explored how queer SMIs enact their sexual identity on YouTube (Duguay 2019), by narrating stories about collective community experiences like coming-out, dating, and relationships (Abidin 2019).

Disability- or Health-Related Collective Identities

Finally, social media offer the opportunity to share personal narratives about living with a disability or health condition, thereby portraying (niche) identities otherwise under-represented in mainstream media (Saito and Ishiyama 2005). Despite concerns about their vulnerability in social media environments, research has shown how SMIs with intellectual disability may use these platforms as an opportunity to shape society's beliefs of disability and to normalize their group's image (Bonilla del Río et al. 2022). Moreover, portrayals of mental health have been on the rise in the social media landscape. In fact, much of the YouTube content dealing with depression originates from vloggers who are typically not mental health professionals (Devendorf et al. 2020).

Taken together, extant research on SMIs' portrayals of collective identities only seems to consider collective identities that are depicted by SMIs belonging to these social groups and tentatively suggests that SMIs' content features diverse marginalized collective identities. However, we lack a comprehensive investigation and systematic comparison of the

portrayals of these identities by SMIs. Consequently, we aim to determine how these collective identities are portrayed in SMIs' political YouTube videos by asking:

RQ1: Which kinds of collective identity portrayals are featured in SMIs' content?

Understanding the Context: Incivilities and Emotions in SMIs' Content

In contrast to legacy media outlets, social media are largely based on user-generated content which is distributed in an ungated way. In that sense, posts on social media can be more emotional or negative, since they are not subject to the same level of gatekeeping as content in legacy media (Kaakinen et al. 2018). Furthermore, they often include opinionated perspectives on socio-political topics. As such, the videos in which collective identities are portrayed are likely to be emotionally charged or may even contain incivilities. By embedding collective identity portrayals (CIPs) in the context of certain videos, SMIs also (un)intentionally transfer this context onto the collective identities they depict. When SMIs portray collective identities in an emotional way, this may also make their followers treat these CIPs in a more emotional way (Hatfield et al. 1993). That way, SMIs may even affect viewers' perceptions of these collective identities, potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Prior content analytical work, though, found that SMIs' portrayals of the elderly were mostly positively valenced, raising the question whether SMIs may actively try to contradict prevailing stereotypes (Ng and Indran 2023). It is reasonable to assume that not only the presence of CIPs but also the specific types of identities may be related to the presence of incivilities and/or emotions in SMIs' political YouTube videos. So, we ask:

RQ2: How does the presence of a) incivilities and b) emotions within SMIs' videos differ as a function of a) the presence of a CIP and b) different types of CIPs?

Defining Group Boundaries: The Role of SMIs' Shared Identity

When depicting certain collective identities, SMIs may either share that identity or not. As such, CIPs define social in-groups and out-groups which may (un)intentionally strengthen divisions (Chinn et al. 2024). Distinctions between such in- and out-groups may be further manifested by the context of the identity portrayals. That is, SMIs' group representations may feature in a neutral or positive environment, fostering community-building within their own group, but they may also be included in a more hostile context (e.g., uncivil language) to guard their own group from perceived attacks from others (Chinn et al. 2024). Previous research has shown that SMIs' posts containing in-group pronouns (like "we") tend to have a more positive sentiment compared to those with out-group pronouns (like "they") (Chinn et al. 2024). Thus, we ask:

RQ3: How does the presence of a) incivilities and b) emotions within SMIs' videos differ as a function of SMIs' in-group membership?

Collective Identity Portrayals and Engagement

Collective identity is often linked to various forms of collective action and is helpful to explain *why* people are mobilized (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Particularly social media with its specific affordances have previously been argued to be well-suited for new forms of protest, whereby socio-political narratives may strengthen collective identity and incite action

(Khazraee and Novak 2018). If SMLs use markers of in-group and out-group identities, they define boundaries between social groups, and hence, increase the salience of group identification. Already in 1985, Melucci wrote that “collective identity is ... negotiated through a repeated process of ‘activation’ of social relationships connecting the actors” (Melucci 1985, 793). In a similar vein, the social identity model of collective action or SIMCA (van Zomeren et al. 2008) posits that people’s identification with a social group predicts collective action. In other words, in- and out-group portrayals make individuals’ own identity more salient, affecting their political engagement with socio-political topics (Bos et al. 2020). The salience of group identity through collective identity portrayals (CIPs) may ‘activate’ or trigger collective action, visible in more engagement with the videos (i.e., comments). Furthermore, the politicization of collective identities often signifies injustice (van Zomeren et al. 2008), which may again mobilize collective action (Klandermans 2014; van Stekelenburg 2013). When a collective identity is portrayed, it gives viewers a chance to see themselves as part of a group, which can lead them to engage in collective action. However, if no collective identity is depicted, this response is less likely to occur. So, we hypothesize:

H1: The presence of collective identity portrayals within SMLs’ videos will increase comments per views.

Relatedly, a prior study investigated predictors of user engagement with anti-gender hate speech and revealed that participants’ intention to comment on the posts was significantly related to the specific topic (i.e., sexism, homophobia or anti-gender) of the online hate (Wilhelm and Schulz-Tomančok 2024). However, there is no research, so far, explaining which CIP *types* increase user engagement. Therefore, we ask:

RQ4: How do comments per views differ as a function of the type of collective identity portrayed in SMLs’ content?

Furthermore, drawing on affective intelligence theory (Marcus et al. 2000), the tone of SMLs’ videos on collective identity should relate to viewer engagement, as different “emotional states trigger distinct cognitive strategies” (Valentino et al. 2011, 158). A positive emotional state is assumed to reinforce existing behaviours and attitudes (Marcus et al. 2000). Consequently, encountering CIPs embedded in a neutral or positive context would rather trigger acceptance of the status quo, instead of action. A negative emotional state, by contrast, fed by anxiety and anger, has been found to be mobilizing (Valentino et al. 2011). That is, when people experience perceived injustice toward their own social group, emotions such as group-based anger incite collective action (van Zomeren et al. 2008). More specifically, when SMLs, who can function as group leaders, use emotions and thus affect how their followers feel, they may stimulate certain group-based emotions, which in turn spark collective action (Reicher et al. 2005). Similarly, incivilities within SMLs’ videos may be related to more action, as it could again induce a sense of injustice. As such, the presence of incivility might result in a higher number of comments too. Relatedly, previous research found that online hate speech including insults and derogatory statements elicited a greater number of comments, compared to other types of hate speech (Wilhelm and Schulz-Tomančok 2024). Consequently, we expect videos containing CIPs to trigger more comments, if they contain uncivil or emotional language. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2: The presence of a) incivility and b) emotion within SMLs’ videos will strengthen the relation in H1.

Research Design

We conducted a quantitative content analysis informed by a prior youth survey. Although part of a larger project (Harff and Schmuck 2025), this study uses unique, newly coded variables and integrates them with video metadata (e.g., comment counts) and general style characteristics.

We used a quota-based youth survey in Germany ($N = 1829$; 49.59% men, 49.75% women, 0.66% diverse; $M_{age} = 19.72$, $SD_{age} = 1.72$) to identify the most popular German-speaking SMIs (Harff and Schmuck 2025). Youth were asked to name up to three YouTubers who at least sporadically mention political topics in their content. Political topics were defined in a way that they reflect the definition of socio-political topics used here. Next, using the *tuber* package in R (Sood 2020), we scraped metadata of all videos between from May 2017 and May 2022 and drew a stratified sample from these videos. These were manually coded for the presence of political information (see OSF for details on the coding instructions: <https://osf.io/7y932>). Taking another stratified sample of the videos containing political information, we ended up with a sample of $N = 267$ political videos. After successful reliability testing (see Table 1), these political videos were analysed in depth. We coded up to three CIPs of the same type (e.g., up to three political CIPs could be coded) per video. A more detailed overview and visualization of the complete sampling and coding procedure can be found in the Appendix and in Figure 1.

We operationalized collective identity portrayals (CIPs) as any depiction of a social group that revolves around collective identity: That is, an identity based on shared attributes with other members of a social group, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion (Ashmore et al. 2004). The CIP could either be portrayed by referring to an individual or to a group of individuals but was always referenced in relation to the social group these individuals are part of. To be coded, the YouTuber had to either (1) make a reference to an entire social group, (2) use an attribute that defines a social group, or (3) emphasize an individual's belonging to a social group. Next, drawing from existing literature on stereotypes in traditional media (e.g., Dixon and Williams 2015), eight different types of CIPs were included in the coding process: political, national, ethnic, migration, gender, sexual, religious, and health CIPs. Subcodes for each of these types were selected in alignment with previous studies on the topic (e.g., Harwood and Anderson 2002). To determine SMIs' in-group membership to the coded CIPs, we drew on previous content analyses examining group representation in media (e.g., Dixon and Williams 2015). SMIs' in-group membership was coded based on their own explicit verbal mentioning of their group identity, or on inferences made from the SMIs' appearance, clothing, environment, etc. (more details in the codebook on OSF). SMIs were

TABLE 1
Intercoder Reliability (ICR) Testing

	Political CIP	National CIP	Ethnic CIP	Migration CIP	Gender CIP	Sexual CIP	Religious CIP	Health CIP
Presence of CIP	$K_{bp} = 0.714$	$K_{\alpha} = 0.765$	$K_{bp} = 0.858$	$K_{\alpha} = \text{N/A}$	$K_{\alpha} = 0.700$	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$	$K_{\alpha} = 0.765$
Type of CIP	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$	$K_{\alpha} = 0.745$	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$	$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$
Membership				$K_{\alpha} = 1.000$				
Incivilities			Vulgar language: $K_{\alpha} = 1.000$ Insults: $K_{\alpha} = 0.856$					
Emotions				$K_{\alpha} = 0.856$				

Note: K_{α} = Krippendorff's alpha; K_{bp} = Brennan and Prediger's kappa.

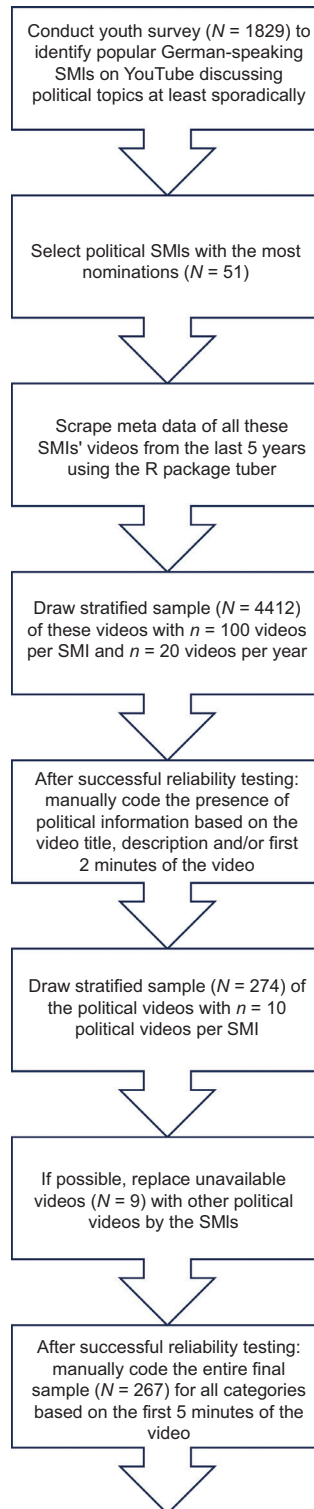


Figure 1. Visualization of the Sampling and Coding Procedure.

TABLE 2

Overview Prevalence Collective Identity Portrayals (CIPs)

Collective identity	N CIPs coded	N videos with CIP	% videos with CIP
Any CIP	474	181	67.79%
Political CIP	117	71	26.59%
National CIP	102	74	27.72%
Ethnic CIP	29	23	8.61%
Migration CIP	16	15	5.62%
Gender CIP	114	74	27.72%
Sexual CIP	27	23	8.61%
Religious CIP	36	28	10.49%
Health CIP	33	28	10.49%
Multiple CIP types	–	94	35.21%

coded as in-group members if they shared membership of at least one CIP in their video. In about half of all videos containing CIPs in our sample (50.3%), the SMI was an in-group member. Mind that this does not necessarily align with the number of SMIs in our sample that identified as a member of a minority group. To categorize the presence of incivilities in influencer videos, we coded the use of vulgar language/swear words (found in 33.70% of videos containing CIPs) and insults (found in 27.62% of videos containing CIPs), which were merged in a mean index. Furthermore, we coded the presence of emotions, both positive and negative (present in 78.33% of all CIP videos). The presence of incivilities as well as emotions was assessed based on a pre-set list of words and their derivatives and were only coded when these words or phrases were used by the SMI and/or other co-presenters in the video. Finally, building upon literature on the SIMCA model (van Zomeren et al. 2008), viewer engagement in the form of comments per 1000 views served as a proxy for collective action.

Data Analysis

To explore the presence and type of CIPs in SMIs' YouTube videos (RQ1), we calculated descriptive statistics. We tested our other RQs and hypotheses using multilevel linear regression analyses (for the continuous variables 'incivilities' and 'comments per view' representing engagement) and multilevel logistic regressions (for the categorical variable 'emotions'). The multilevel regressions were conducted in R, using the packages *lme4* (Bates et al. 2015) and *lmerTest* (Kuznetsova et al. 2017). In all multilevel analyses, we used the SMI as a grouping variable, as videos are nested in the SMIs' accounts. The ICC (see Tables 3-7) supported the applicability of multilevel models in this context.

Results

Regarding RQ1, descriptive analyses showed that most of the political videos in our sample ($N = 181$ or 67.79%) contained at least one collective identity portrayal (CIP), and about half of those ($N = 94$ or 35.21%) even contained multiple types of CIPs. The most prevalently coded CIPs were political ($N = 117$), gender ($N = 114$), and national ($N = 102$) CIPs, followed by religious ($N = 36$) and health ($N = 33$) CIPs. Least frequent were ethnic ($N = 29$), sexual ($N = 27$), and migration ($N = 16$) CIPs (see Table 2 for the full overview).

TABLE 3.
Regression Table for Model 2 and Model 5 with Incivilities and Emotions as Dependent Variables (resp.)

Predictors	Incivilities (model 2)			Emotions (model 5)		
	Estimates	std. error	p	Log-odds	std. error	p
(Intercept)	0.33	0.05	< .001	0.43	0.28	.116
Presence of CIP	−0.03	0.05	.521	0.99	0.33	.003
Random Effects						
σ^2		0.10			3.29	
τ_{00}		0.04 _{Influencers}			0.49 _{Influencers}	
ICC		0.27			0.13	
N		41 _{Influencers}			41 _{Influencers}	
Observations		267			264	
Marginal R ² /Conditional R ²		0.001 / 0.266			0.054 / 0.176	

Note: We ran multilevel linear regressions for the outcome ‘incivilities’, and multilevel logistic regressions for the outcome ‘emotions’.

TABLE 4
Regression Table for Model 3, Model 6 and Model 8 with Incivilities, Emotions and Comments per View as Dependent Variables (resp.)

Predictors	Incivilities (model 3)			Emotions (model 6)			Comments per view (model 8)		
	Estimates	std. error	p	Estimates	std. error	p	Estimates	std. error	p
(Intercept)	0.30	0.04	< .001	0.61	0.23	.009	5.39	1.25	< .001
Political CIP	0.01	0.05	.866	−0.26	0.36	.476	2.99	1.04	.004
National CIP	−0.05	0.05	.329	0.34	0.37	.353	0.34	0.97	.723
Ethnic CIP	−0.09	0.08	.299	0.34	0.73	.642	0.56	1.68	.741
Migration CIP	−0.15	0.09	.106	−0.55	0.65	.393	−1.75	1.77	.325
Gender CIP	0.07	0.05	.166	0.91	0.39	.020	−0.28	0.96	.768
Sexual CIP	0.23	0.08	.004	0.50	0.72	.485	0.27	1.58	.864
Religious CIP	−0.13	0.07	.073	1.62	0.80	.043	3.06	1.49	.040
Health CIP	0.06	0.07	.349	0.44	0.52	.405	0.77	1.33	.564
Incivilities	—	—	—	—	—	—	1.35	1.26	.285
Emotions	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.23	0.95	.808
Random Effects									
σ^2		0.10			3.29			36.19	
τ_{00}		0.03 _{Influencers}			0.23 _{Influencers}			26.34 _{Influencers}	
ICC		0.27			0.06			0.42	
N		41 _{Influencers}			41 _{Influencers}			41 _{Influencers}	
Observations		267			264			261	
Marginal R ² /Conditional R ²		0.069/0.316			0.155/0.210			0.053/0.452	

Note: We ran multilevel linear regressions for the outcomes ‘incivilities’ and ‘comments per view’, and multilevel logistic regressions for the outcome ‘emotions’.

TABLE 5

Regression Table for Model 1 and Model 4 with Incivilities and Emotions as Dependent Variables (resp.)

Predictors	Incivilities (model 1)			Emotions (model 4)		
	Estimates	std. error	p	Log-odds	std. error	p
(Intercept)	0.33	0.05	< .001	1.23	0.28	< .001
Group Membership	−0.04	0.05	.376	0.19	0.37	.605
Random Effects						
σ^2		0.09			3.29	
τ_{00}		0.04 _{Influencers}			0.14 _{Influencers}	
ICC		0.29			0.04	
N		38 _{Influencers}			38 _{Influencers}	
Observations		181			180	
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²		0.004/0.295			0.003/0.044	

Note: We ran multilevel linear regressions for the outcome ‘incivilities’, and multilevel logistic regressions for the outcome ‘emotions’.

TABLE 6

Regression Table for Model 7, Model 9 and Model 10 with Comments per View as Dependent Variable

Predictors	Comments per view (model 7)			Comments per view (model 9)			Comments per view (model 10)		
	Estimates	std. error	p	Estimates	std. error	p	Estimates	std. error	p
(Intercept)	5.10	1.32	< .001	5.44	1.39	< .001	4.69	1.51	.002
Presence of CIP	2.25	0.97	.021	1.68	1.21	.164	2.96	1.60	.066
Incivilities	1.05	1.21	.387	−0.08	1.89	.965	1.05	1.21	.389
Emotions	−0.43	0.95	.654	−0.41	0.95	.669	0.27	1.58	.865
Presence CIP*Incivilities	—	—	—	1.79	2.28	.433	—	—	—
Presence CIP*Emotions	—	—	—	—	—	—	−1.08	1.95	.580
Random Effects									
σ^2		36.44			36.45			36.50	
τ_{00}		28.19 _{Influencers}			28.46 _{Influencers}			28.45 _{Influencers}	
ICC		0.44			0.44			0.44	
N		41 _{Influencers}			41 _{Influencers}			41 _{Influencers}	
Observations		261			261			261	
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²		0.018 / 0.446			0.019 / 0.449			0.018 / 0.448	

Note: We ran multilevel linear regressions for the outcome ‘comments per view’.

Next, we examined whether the presence of incivilities in YouTube videos would be predicted by the presence and type of CIPs in those videos (RQ2a). These analyses showed that the mere presence of a CIP did not significantly predict the presence of incivilities in SMLs’ YouTube videos ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .521$; Table 3, *Model 2*). However, the presence of sexual CIPs, in particular, acted as a significant predictor of incivilities ($b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .004$; Table 4, *Model 3*). Regarding RQ2b, we found that the presence of any CIP predicted emotionality ($b = 0.99$, $SE = 0.33$, $p = .003$; Table 3, *Model 5*). For the different types of CIPs, we found gender ($b = 0.91$, $SE = 0.39$, $p = .020$; Table 4, *Model 6*) and religious ($b = 1.62$, $SE = 0.80$, $p = .043$; Table 4, *Model 6*) CIPs to predict emotionality. Regarding RQ3, we found that

TABLE 7
Regression Table for Model 11 and Model 12 with Comments per View as Dependent Variable

Predictors	Comments per view (model 11)			Comments per view (model 12)		
	Estimates	std. error	p	Estimates	std. error	p
(Intercept)	8.54	1.77	< .001	10.54	1.96	< .001
Membership	−2.22	1.46	.130	−6.55	2.38	.007
Incivilities	−1.22	2.27	.591	1.40	1.67	.404
Emotions	−0.75	1.34	.574	−4.48	1.85	.016
Group Membership * Incivilities	5.09	2.97	.089	—	—	—
Group Membership * Emotions	—	—	—	7.40	2.63	.005
Random Effects						
σ^2		44.94			43.47	
τ_{00}		33.85 _{Influencers}			34.04 _{Influencers}	
ICC		0.43			0.44	
N		38 _{Influencers}			38 _{Influencers}	
Observations		180			180	
Marginal R ² /Conditional R ²		0.016/0.439			0.034/0.458	

Note: We ran multilevel linear regressions for the outcome ‘comments per view’.

SMLs’ group membership did not significantly predict incivilities ($b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .376$; Table 5, *Model 1*), nor emotions ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.37$, $p = .605$; Table 5, *Model 4*).

Furthermore, we expected that comments per view would be higher for videos containing a CIP (H1), which was confirmed ($b = 2.25$, $SE = 0.97$, $p = .021$; Table 6, *Model 7*). More detailed analyses (RQ4) showed that political ($b = 2.99$, $SE = 1.04$, $p = .004$; Table 4, *Model 8*) and religious ($b = 3.06$, $SE = 1.49$, $p = .040$; Table 4, *Model 8*) CIPs significantly increased engagement among viewers. By contrast, incivilities ($b = 1.79$, $SE = 2.28$, $p = .433$; Table 6, *Model 9*) and emotions ($b = -1.08$, $SE = 1.95$, $p = .580$; Table 6, *Model 10*) did not further increase the impact of the presence of CIPs on viewer engagement (H2).

Additional Analysis

We also tested whether incivilities within SMLs’ videos interact with these SMLs’ identity on comments per views. We found that the presence of incivilities did not significantly interact with group membership on engagement among viewers ($b = 5.09$, $SE = 2.97$, $p = .089$; Table 7, *Model 11*). Yet, for emotions and group membership, data analysis revealed a significant interaction effect on engagement ($b = 7.40$, $SE = 2.63$, $p = .005$; Table 7; *Model 12*).

Discussion

The current study bridges literature on social media influencers (SMLs) and work on the (digital) public sphere, by investigating SMLs’ socio-political narratives on YouTube. These SMLs often harness their popularity on social media to draw attention to more ‘serious’ topics. Through their socio-political narratives, SMLs engage in meaning-making and portray collective identities such as nationalities (e.g., Marcella-Hood 2021), ethnic or religious groups (e.g., Aini and Kailani 2021), or raise the salience of collective political ideologies (e.g., Rothut et al. 2024). By portraying collective identities, SMLs may increase the visibility of certain social groups, especially those that are often marginalized in traditional

media (e.g., Dixon and Williams 2015). That way, SMLs can open up public spaces to affective publics where they express their views on diverse socio-political issues, which may counter dominant discourses (Papacharissi and Trevey 2018).

Our findings suggest that collective identity portrayals (CIPs) are highly prevalent in YouTubers' political communication, with almost 70% of the videos containing at least one CIP. Our results also highlight the possibility of the expression of intersectional identities, since more than a third of the videos contained more than one type of collective identity. Among the CIPs, ethnic, sexual, and migration identities appeared the least in the examined videos. Although these findings seem to demonstrate that SMLs play a considerable role in opening up the public sphere and allowing some visibility for diverse collective identities, they also suggest that marginalized identities are not that prevalent in our sample. This aligns with Habermas' (2006, 423) note on "isolated issue publics." It is reasonable to assume that such marginalized identities are discussed in niche publics which fall outside of the most popular SMLs nominated by German youth. Future studies should extend our research by moving beyond general influencer pools and investigating people's personalized experiences with more niche SMLs. Yet, with such a considerable number of political SMI videos still depicting collective identities, the role of social media content cannot be neglected in public debates surrounding media representation.

In addition, we found that most of the portrayed sexual identities pertained to non-heteronormative sexual identities. This finding suggests that CIPs on social media may oppose to the dominant narratives in traditional media (see Papacharissi and Trevey 2018). However, our analysis showed that sexual CIPs were presented in a context marked by incivility. This suggests that SMLs' portrayals may lead to a more polarized opinion climate regarding sexual minorities. In fact, previous cross-sectional research found that targets of online hate speech are most prone to victimization based on, for example, their sexual orientation (Obermaier and Schmuck 2022). Future research should, therefore, investigate the potential effects of exposure to collective identities by SMLs on polarization among viewers, for example by analysing the actual content and sentiment of the comments.

Moreover, videos containing a CIP were found to be emotionally charged, that is, containing more markers for positive and/or negative emotions than videos not containing a CIP. In addition, we found that the co-presence of group-membership and emotion increased engagement. As such, our findings align with the idea that SMLs address socio-political issues through identity narratives in which they express their own viewpoints and experiences—thus underlining the importance of identity narratives and emotion in collective identity construction (e.g., Abidin 2019; Chinn et al. 2024; Khazraee and Novak 2018; Papacharissi and Trevey 2018). These results further corroborate existing evidence suggesting that identities on social media are portrayed in an emotional way, which potentially differs from portrayals in most legacy media that adhere to stricter journalistic norms and gatekeeping (Kaakinen et al. 2018). The finding also supports research on identity formation in an interpersonal context, indicating that emotions are highly important for a sense of group identity (Reicher et al. 2005). When zooming in on the specific types of CIPs that predict emotionality, we found that SMLs were most likely to portray gender and religious identities in an emotional way. While, in our sample, the collective identities revolving around sexual orientation were, in most cases, non-heteronormative CIPs, the gender CIPs in the analysed videos were mostly of cisgender people. Thus, it is possible that SMLs' sexual CIPs on YouTube feature in greater taboo atmospheres, triggering incivilities, whereas their gender portrayals do not. Since we did not make the distinction between positive and negative emotions, we do not know the valence of these discourses. Yet again the emotional portrayal of these CIPs may point to the presence of polarized discourses for these identities.

Furthermore, the presence of CIPs within SMI's YouTube videos predicted viewer engagement, with videos containing at least one CIP receiving more comments per view than those without CIPs. This finding aligns with the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren et al. 2008) also suggesting that SMI's portrayals of collective identity may successfully increase the salience of group identity, which in turn, stimulates collective action. As such, our findings also add to the literature on public discourses (e.g., Heiss et al. 2019), suggesting that SMIs can evoke political discourse and potentially enhance (young) people's deliberative participation by stimulating comments and discussions about the video. Yet, we did not assess the valence and specific content of this discourse and can, therefore, not judge its deliberative quality. Of course, there is also a risk of hate speech and incivilities arising along with the portrayals of CIPs in SMIs' content—especially against the background of our findings showing that sexual CIPs are portrayed in a context marked by incivilities and CIPs in general in a highly emotional discourse.

Limitations

Of course, this study has some notable limitations. First, SMIs may address collective identities not covered here, like age-related identities (Ng and Indran 2023). While we assess the prevalence of multiple CIPs within single videos, we do not account for intersectional identities. Future research should expand our approach to additional collective identities and conduct more in-depth analyses of the identity types portrayed in SMIs' content.

Furthermore, our study was limited to one platform, YouTube, chosen for its frequent use in socio-political communication in Germany (Allgaier 2020) and its popularity among young people (Rhody 2022). Additionally, we selected content of the most popular and thus also predominantly mainstream YouTubers, nominated in a prior youth survey, which was quota-based for gender and age, but not regarding migration background or religion. Consequently, minority SMIs may be underrepresented in this study. Still, in-group membership was expressed in half of the videos. Overall, our study provides a general overview of different collective identity portrayals in SMIs' content that can constitute a starting point for future in-depth research on each of these identities.

Finally, we did not assess the emotional direction of the videos or the emotionality of comments and therefore cannot infer the valence of SMIs' or the public's discourse. However, by coding incivility, we captured whether collective identities were portrayed within a hostile climate, which was only observed for sexual identities. We encourage follow-up research to examine CIPs in greater detail. Our content analysis serves as a springboard for future work by demonstrating the prevalence of CIPs in SMIs' content and highlighting the importance of studying these portrayals and their consequences for followers in the future.

Implications

The current study unravelled the expression of politicized identities in SMI content and highlights that social media fundamentally reshape how collective identities are negotiated in digital public spaces. The fragmented, niche spaces on social media nurture the opportunity for affective publics to discuss identity narratives that may counter the dominant discourses in legacy media. Therefore, CIPs in the social media landscape should not be neglected. Although these portrayals may offer some visibility to social groups which remain otherwise underrepresented in the mainstream media, it also raises concerns as to how these portrayals could increase the risk of polarization and intergroup conflict (Obermaier et al. 2023). Consequently, scholarship should focus on the effects of SMIs' various CIPs on the

public's perception of and attitudes toward social groups depicted in their content. On the other hand, we invite scholars to study the potential benefits of SMLs' collective identity portrayals. Building on previous research, individuals belonging to minority or underrepresented groups may greatly benefit from exposure to (positive) portrayals of their social group online through shared meaning-making and community-building. Additionally, SMLs' positive CIPs may enhance perceptions and debunk prevailing stereotypes among relevant out-groups.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The prior youth survey on which the current study builds was approved by the Internal Review Board of KU Leuven University [approval number: G-2022-4768-R2[MIN]].

DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data underlying this article are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF). The link is provided in the document.

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APPENDIX

Sampling Procedure

The sampling procedure consisted of five steps (Harff and Schmuck 2025). First, we used a quota-based youth survey in Germany ($N = 1829$; 49.6% men, 49.8% women, 0.7% diverse; $M_{age} = 19.72$, $SD_{age} = 1.72$) to identify the most popular German-speaking SMIs. Youth were asked to name up to three YouTubers who at least sporadically mention political topics in their content. Political topics were defined in a way that they reflect the definition of socio-political topics used here. A total of 51 SMIs, those with the most nominations, were selected. Using the *tuber* package in R (Sood 2020), we scraped metadata of all videos between May 2017 and May 2022.

Second, we drew a stratified sample from these videos, representing each SMI's content equally ($n = 100$ videos per SMI, $n = 20$ videos per year per SMI), which consisted of $N = 4412$ videos.

Third, following a reliability test between two coders (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .78$), we manually coded the presence of political information in each video based on video title, description and, if needed, the first two minutes of that video; see OSF for details on the coding instructions.

Fourth, SMIs were excluded from our dataset if they did not have any political videos in their content. Following this step, we were left with $N = 3760$ videos. We then took another stratified sample, consisting of a maximum of $n = 10$ political videos per SMI. This number was chosen so that there were enough videos per SMI in the sample to conduct multilevel analyses and given that most SMIs did not have more than 10% political content among all their videos. Additionally, with this sample size per SMI, we were able to safeguard that no SMI's content would be heavily over- or underrepresented in the sample. At this stage, we ended up with a sample of $N = 274$ political videos from 41 SMIs.

Fifth, we conducted an in-depth manual analysis of this content once reliability testing was complete, in which two coders coded all relevant variables by watching the first five minutes of the videos. For each reliability round, 5% of the total sample ($N = 14$) was randomly selected. In this content analysis, we used two reliability measures: Krippendorff's alpha and Brennan and Prediger's kappa, which showed sufficient reliability (see Table 1). Unavailable videos ($N = 9$) were, if possible, replaced with other political videos of the respective SMIs, leaving us with $N = 267$ political videos for the final sample. A visualization of the complete sampling and coding procedure can be found in Figure 1. We coded up to three CIPs of the same type (e.g., up to three political CIPs could be coded) per video.