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Making sense of YouTubers: how Swedish children construct and negotiate the YouTuber Misslisibell as a girl celebrity

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ABSTRACT

When children use the Internet, they commonly choose to watch their favorite YouTubers. In this article, we aim to deepen the understanding of how children make sense of YouTubers as a phenomenon, and the role of microcelebrities in children’s everyday life. The study is based on group interviews with 9- and 12-year-old Swedish children, and pays specific attention to how they make sense of the video “Heart Pin up tutorial (JFR.SE)” produced by the YouTuber Misslisibell. In the analysis, we explore how the children construct and negotiate Misslisibell as celebrity, celebrity endorser, and young girl. Particularly salient were children’s negotiations around the YouTuber’s celebrity status, children’s normative discussions around Misslisibell’s YouTube practices related to her young age, and children’s various interpretations of the video as advertising, “tips,” and as a space for learning. These multifaceted and sometimes contradictory ways of making sense show the multiplicity of meanings YouTubers have for children.

One of the most common activities that children engage in online is to use the video-sharing platform YouTube (Ofcom, 2017; Swedish Media Council [SMC], 2017). In Sweden, for instance, YouTube is the most popular site among 9- to 18-year-olds (Swedish Media Council, 2017), and in the UK 81% of 8- to 11-year-olds and 90% of 12- to 15-year-olds use this video-sharing site (Ofcom, 2017). Watching YouTube videos is also preferred to watching television programs for a majority of children (Ofcom, 2017; Swedish Media Council, 2017), and children commonly turn to this platform for information about hobbies and creative activities (Ofcom, 2017). When selecting videos to watch, children of different ages commonly choose to watch their favorite YouTubers (Ofcom, 2017; Swedish Media Council, 2017).

YouTubers can be understood as microcelebrities, that is, often ordinary people who have gathered a substantial number of followers or subscribers on social media platforms (Driessens, 2016). Despite being an important part of children’s media usage, and, hence, of children’s everyday lives and contemporary childhood, there are few studies on the topic of children and YouTubers. The few studies that exist are primarily textual analysis studies (e.g., Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Lovelock, 2017; Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016), focusing...
on how YouTubers construct themselves and their relationship with their viewers. One study that takes an ethnographic approach — and that is specifically relevant for our purposes here — is the study by Marsh (2016) observing how a 4-year-old child engages with “unboxing” videos (the unpacking of products) on YouTube. Marsh (2016) argues that the child, who did not ask his parents to purchase the products, took the position of cyberflâneur who seemed to enjoy the mere act of viewing.

The present article directs its attention to children’s own perspectives, and seeks to deepen our understanding of how children make sense of and negotiate YouTubers as a phenomenon. To do so, the article focuses on one particular case, namely how Swedish 9- and 12-year-old children in a series of group interviews construct meaning from the YouTube video “♥Pin up tutorial (JFR.SE)♥.” The video was produced in 2015 by the young Swedish YouTuber Misslisibell (Lisa Jonsson). In the video, Misslisibell shows how to do “pin-up” makeup, and in the video she presents makeup products and displays the name of the online shop where the products can be bought. When this video was produced and the interviews were conducted, Misslisibell was 13 years old, she had 248,188 subscribers, and this particular video had 49,705 views.

When exposing brands in the video “♥Pin up tutorial (JFR.SE)♥,” Misslisibell can be said to act as a celebrity endorser and social media influencer (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Celebrity endorsement through social media influencers is a growing marketing strategy globally (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), and the video is illustrative of the commercial celebrity culture on YouTube. In 2015, Misslisibell (Lisa Jonsson) was nominated “super-communicator of the year,” and was considered by the Swedish advertising industry to be an important influencer and a vehicle to reach the young consumer segment (Winberg, 2015). Among the children interviewed in this study, several of the 9-year-old girls and boys, as well as the 12-year-old girls, subscribed to her YouTube channel, and most children knew who she was. While having a sort of “microcelebrity” status, she was also only a few years older than many of her viewers, including the children interviewed in this study. Marsh (2016) conceptualizes children’s interest in other children’s videos online as an emerging and steadily growing “peer-to-peer cultural industry.” The YouTuber Misslisibell can thus be said to occupy a complex set of subject positions in this video, simultaneously that of celebrity, celebrity endorser, and young girl. In light of this, and in order to contribute to research on children’s engagement with YouTubers, the present article asks the following question: How do 9- and 12-year-old girls and boys make sense of and negotiate Misslisibell as celebrity, celebrity endorser, and young girl? And more generally, how can such insights enhance our understanding regarding the role of microcelebrities in children’s everyday lives?

To analyze how children make sense of YouTubers, we situate this study in work on celebrity culture and celebrity endorsement, with particular attention paid to literature on children and celebrities. This becomes specifically relevant as social media applications, such as YouTube, offer new space for celebritification (Driessens, 2012) to new groups (or kinds) of celebrities. Hence, it becomes important to also explore the wider significance of their existence, not least for young people.

**Celebrity, celebrity endorsement, and children’s engagement**

During the last couple of decades, celebrity culture has become a salient topic of academic debate (Marshall & Redmond, 2015; Redmond & Holmes, 2007). As a consequence, celebrity
culture is not only referred to in analyses of celebrities per se, but has instead increasingly come to be included in various studies of its wider social, cultural, and political significance (e.g., Couldry & Markham, 2007; Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos & Huliaras, 2011). One particularly vibrant and growing area of analyses of the wider significance of celebrities concerns their commercial value, and more specifically the potential value of celebrity endorsement (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). This widened scholarly interest is also seen in studies on childhood and celebrity culture, focusing on the complex ways in which children and childhood become part of contemporary celebrity culture (O’Connor & Mercer, 2017).

**Celebrity culture and the phenomenon of YouTubers**

Media have always been fundamental to the creation of celebrity and celebrity culture. It is in fact hard to think of celebrities, as we know them today, without considering the part played by the media (cf., Forslid, Lundell, Ohlsson, & Olsson, 2017). In the nineteenth century, people were typically made celebrities through press exposure. Throughout the twentieth century, celebrity was also an outcome of visibility in movies, and, later, television. In the mid-1990s, when digital media became widespread all over the western world, the conditions for the creation of celebrities were thoroughly changed. Despite the many differences between media such as newspapers, radio, film, and television, they have in common that they mainly foster broadcasting relations with its users – a few are talking to many readers, listeners, and viewers. The interactive character of digital media relativizes this communication model as they open up opportunities for users to become not only users, but also producing users, or produsers (Burgess & Green, 2009a; Jenkins, 2006).

This change in communicative conditions obviously means that the spaces for celebritification (Driessens, 2012) are multiplied. Apart from giving established categories of celebrities additional spaces for celebritification, contemporary communicative conditions also offer a democratization of such spaces (Smith, 2016). Online spaces like YouTube and Twitter offer ordinary people the opportunity to accumulate “attention capital” (Van Krieken, 2012). These opportunities have been brought to attention in academic debates and also inspired the establishment of new concepts to understand such celebrity practices, for instance “microcelebrity” (Driessens, 2016; Marwick & Boyd, 2011), “instafame” (Marwick, 2015), “entrepreneurial vloggers” (Burgess & Green, 2009b), and “DIY-celebrities” (Turner, 2014).

The YouTuber is probably the example par excellence regarding new kinds of celebrities. Anne Jerslev (2016) points to the fact that YouTubers are a “huge phenomenon online” (p. 5233) and identifies three specifically salient categories: game players, comedy vloggers, and – which is of particular interest in this study – “lifestyle and beauty” vloggers (Jerslev, 2016). Lifestyle and beauty vloggers, including game players, have inspired research reflections concerning self-promotion and promotion of commercial products. Studying the British beauty-YouTuber Zoe, Berryman and Kavka (2017) argue that Zoe is representative of successful YouTubers in the sense that she is “combining commodification and celebritification, using the one to fan the flames of the other” (p. 309). By adopting a “big sister” position and by revealing details from her everyday life, she uses intimacy and authenticity to establish relationships with her viewers and between the viewers and the brands she exposes (Berryman & Kavka,
Analyzing the YouTube channel of the young YouTuber Evan Snyder, Ramos-Serrano and Herrero-Diz (2016) find that the majority of videos center on commercial products, such as product reviews and unboxing videos. In addition to these studies focusing on YouTubers as part of consumer culture, Smith (2016) analyzes how “celebrity” is understood and justified on YouTube. Using the case of VlogBrothers and their online community, Smith discerns an ideology of fame based on democratic values that stresses an egalitarian relationship between “YouTube celebrity” and “fan.” This ideology of fame emphasizes that all individuals are equal and unique, and, hence, opposes traditional and hierarchical conceptions of celebrity and idol worship (Smith, 2016).

Celebrity endorsement and social media influencers

Celebrity culture and commercial culture are intimately intertwined; on the one hand, celebrities are constructed as brands and commodities through self-promotion and marketing, on the other hand celebrities are used in the promotion of commercial products, both their own products and others (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Celebrity endorsement – the use of celebrities in advertising – is a well-established and often used marketing technique (Shimp & Andrews, 2012). Marketing theories on celebrity endorsement commonly stress the value that celebrities give to the advertising message or product in the form of attention, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and varieties of cultural meaning, which can affect consumers’ brand attitudes and purchase intentions (McCracken, 1989; Nanda & Khandelwal, 2017). However, researchers also suggest that engaging in endorsement is a mutual phenomenon in the sense that it also can be valuable for the celebrity brand (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Driessens, 2016).

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) make a distinction between traditional and nontraditional celebrity endorsement in online media, where nontraditional endorsement is found among bloggers and YouTubers. Nontraditional celebrity endorsers are also conceptualized as social media influencers, which refers to people “who have built a sizeable social network of people following them” (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 798). Hence, social media influencers and nontraditional endorsers are microcelebrities that are attractive to marketers due to their ability to reach out to social media users, commonly young people. This new form of celebrity endorsement is regarded as more effective among marketers as consumers are likely to interpret these advertising messages as credible digital word-of-mouth and peer-to-peer recommendations (De Veirman et al., 2017). Nontraditional celebrity endorsement commonly works as “hidden” advertising, aiming to bypass consumers’ skepticism toward traditional advertising. Misslisibell’s video is an example of nontraditional celebrity endorsement that is meant to influence her young followers.

Existing research on children and celebrity endorsement is primarily based on experimental studies, and they indicate that celebrity endorsement affects younger children’s and teenagers’ product preference and attitudes (e.g., Jain, Roy, Daswani, & Sudha, 2011). These studies do not focus on celebrity endorsement in social media; however, in a study with young female Instagram users (18–30 years), Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) analyze how celebrities influence the purchasing behavior of Instagram users. The results indicate that celebrities on Instagram influence the participants’ purchasing behavior, and that
nontraditional endorsers – i.e., the microcelebrities – are more effective as audiences view them as more credible and can relate to them more easily than traditional celebrities.

**Children’s engagement with celebrities**

The present study analyzes how children make sense of YouTubers, and how meanings are established and negotiated in social contexts (Buckingham, 2008). Sense making is here understood as relational and situated in social interaction; hence, it is misleading to think of meaning making as something that goes on solely in the individual mind (Linell, 2009). We regard children as active social actors that both shape and are shaped by their social worlds (Corsaro, 2015). Children’s peer cultures are important spaces for appropriating, negotiating, and making sense of mediated symbolic material, such as YouTubers, and mediated material is also an essential part of children’s identity construction in the peer group (Corsaro, 2015; Thompson, 1995).

As stated in the introduction, previous research on YouTubers as celebrities and commercial actors is mainly based on studies of their online appearance, how they construct themselves in videos, on blogs, and in social network media. This research bias is paralleled by how studies of celebrities, more generally, have preferred to focus on their appearance in media texts rather than on the audience usage of them in everyday life (Barker, Holmes, & Ralph, 2015). However, as pointed out in recent celebrity research (Johansson, 2017), our understanding of the significance of celebrities, such as specific YouTubers, becomes incomplete if we do not also pay interest in how they are made sense of among readers, listeners, and watchers.

Despite the fact that research on children and YouTubers is scarce, there are studies on how children engage with other types of celebrities. One central theme in previous research is how children (primarily teenagers) engage in identity work related to gender and social class when they interpret and discuss celebrities (Allen & Mendick, 2013; Allen, Harvey, & Mendick, 2015; Cocker, Banister, & Piacentini, 2015). This is in line with Turner’s (2014) argument that celebrity consumption is “a highly contingent and negotiated social practice” (p. 114) in which audiences construct their identities. Another prevailing theme in research on children and celebrities is the question of celebrities as role models. These studies – primarily qualitative interview studies with pre-teens and teens – come to different conclusions about the role of celebrities in children’s lives. For, instance, Power and Smith (2017) argue that celebrities play an important role in children’s lives and that children’s selection of the famous people they admire is highly gendered (see also Girsh, 2014; Read, 2011; Tsaliki, 2015).

**Method**

This study was part of a larger project that investigated children’s experiences of advertising on the Internet. In 2015, 12 group interviews with 46 Swedish children aged 9 and 12 were conducted. Among the 9-year-olds, there were 12 girls and 12 boys, and among the 12-year-olds, there were 13 girls and 9 boys. The reason for interviewing both 9- and 12-year-olds was mainly to get variation among participants, but also to be able to see potential differences between younger and older children. The group interview method was used because peer interaction can encourage children to
communicate their experiences, and because this method can elicit information on children’s joint meaning construction (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). In these interviews, the children were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences of advertising on the Internet, and in order to prompt further discussion the children were shown concrete examples, including Misslisibell’s video “Pin up tutorial (JFR.SE)”. This particular video was selected as it is an illustrative example of celebrity endorsement on YouTube, and because several children had mentioned watching Misslisibell among their preferred online activities in a questionnaire prior to the interviews (“followers” were found among all groups of children, except the 12-year-old boys). The interviews revealed that the children did not speak about the video solely in terms of advertising, despite this being the overarching theme of the interview. This made us interested in further exploring the different ways in which the children made sense of the YouTuber Misslisibell.

The children were recruited from two different schools in the south of Sweden with pupils from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds. After inviting the children to participate in the study, and after obtaining informed consent from the parents, the groups for the interviews were composed. Most groups consisted of four participants, and there was a combination of mixed-gender and same-sex groups (there was no mix between the older and younger children). Before starting the interviews, which took place in a smaller group activity room, the children were ensured anonymity and the interviewer stressed that their participation was voluntary. The researcher also informed the children about the importance of respecting every participant’s opportunity to speak as well as any points of view presented.

After general discussions about the children’s experiences of Internet advertising, and after watching and discussing videos with banner advertisements, the children watched the video “Pin up tutorial (JFR.SE)”. To encourage free associations, the children were asked one open question after seeing the video: “What are your thoughts when you see this video?” If the children did not spontaneously comment upon the theme of advertising, or the fact that Misslisibell shows products, they were later asked one directed question: “What are your thoughts regarding the fact that Misslisibell shows products and where they can be bought?” In this article, we only analyze the responses to these two questions and the follow-up prompts.

The audio-recorded group interviews were transcribed verbatim and significant tones of voice as well as laughter were included in the transcripts. The analysis started with a holistic reading of the transcripts and an open coding to identify the major categories in the data (Bazeley, 2013). The analysis then progressed to more focused coding to further interpret the categories, and to see how the children negotiated meaning with their peers (Bazeley, 2013). In this stage, we also searched for connections between the different constructions of Misslisibell and children’s age, gender, and whether they were followers or not. In the last stage, we also analyzed the interview data for its performative and wider contextual dimensions, that is, how the constructions could be seen as part of children’s identity work, and how the children related to societal discourses, here defined as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1).


Children’s constructions of the YouTuber Misslisibell

In the “Results” section, we present and analyze how the children made sense of Misslisibell as celebrity, celebrity endorser, and young girl, starting with children’s negotiations around Misslisibell’s celebrity status.

Making sense of Misslisibell as celebrity: negotiating celebrity status

The children negotiated Misslisibell’s celebrity status, and the spectrum ranged from “super-famous” to “not famous.” Despite different interpretations, the children most commonly constructed Misslisibell as having celebrity status. These different constructions were found among the 9-year-olds and the 12-year-olds, and among the boys and the girls.

Misslisibell was constructed as a celebrity by explicit comments such as “She’s a well-known YouTuber” (Lisa, 9) and “She’s known for her YouTube channel” (Amir, 12). In one of the group interviews, the 12-year-old boys and girls very actively negotiated the degree of her fame:

Amir: It’s, like, YouTubers. She’s a YouTuber.
Sara: She’s a YouTube blogger.
Amir: She’s well-known.
Sara: She’s really famous.
Malin: She’s not super-famous.
Hilda: She’s well-known.
Malin: She’s not super-famous.

In this discussion, the 12-year-old boy Amir, who is not a follower, states that Misslisibell is well-known. Sara, who is a follower, then puts forward that she is “really famous,” while her friend Malin, also a follower, opposes this statement arguing that she is “not super-famous.” This shows how YouTube microcelebrity status is a highly negotiable position. Not even within this small group of children was it possible to reach consensus regarding the YouTuber’s position as a celebrity.

The children also defined Misslisibell’s celebrity status based on the number of followers. This indicates that children measure celebrity status on YouTube in relation to followers, as also suggested by Burgess and Green (2009b) when discussing “entrepreneurial vloggers.” Some children stated that she had many followers, while other children argued that she did not. The 9-year-old boy Marcus said: “How many subscribers does she have? She’s not famous. She doesn’t have many subscribers.” After this, he and his friend mention a YouTuber they consider famous:

Marcus: Can I do a search on a famous YouTuber in Sweden? He’s one of the most famous ones in the world and he lives in Sweden... I want to watch PewDiePie.
Nils: He is the most famous person in the world.
Marcus: And he lives in Sweden... Guys watch PewDiePie.

By mentioning PewDiePie in this context, the boys construct hierarchies among YouTubers, which also reflects the relational and relative character of how celebrity and fame is constructed. Stating that “guys watch PewDiePie,” Marcus makes sense of
YouTubers from a gendered perspective (Allen et al., 2015), and he positions himself as a boy who knows how to select among YouTubers in a way appropriate for his gender. Emphasizing twice that the YouTuber PewDiePie “lives in Sweden,” Marcus also expresses a strong national pride.

The children also constructed Misslisibell as a celebrity by describing her followers as “fans.” In one of the group interviews with 9-year-old girls, Maria stated that Misslisibell receives gifts from her fans. Her friend Annika commented that this practice was strange and then stated: “Yeah, but just because she’s on YouTube doesn’t mean she’s like world-famous.” Here the girl relativizes YouTube as a space for acquiring real fame, and in this way also relativizes Misslisibell’s celebrity status. This shows an awareness that it takes more than being on YouTube to reach the higher levels of fame. The idea that these new spaces for celebritification bring about a democratization of celebrity status (Driessens, 2016) is thus problematized by children.

Making sense of Misslisibell as a celebrity endorser

The 9- and 12-year-old boys and girls made sense of Misslisibell as a celebrity endorser in different ways; some children spoke about the video in terms of advertising, while other children spoke in terms of “tips” and did not relate to the marketing dimension. Despite some exceptions, children were mostly positive about Misslisibell displaying products and they saw the video as a space for informal learning about commercial products and how to do makeup.

Critical reflexivity: constructing Misslisibell as a paid celebrity endorser

Some 9- and 12-year-old boys and girls constructed Misslisibell as engaged in making advertising. They reflected critically about the video and wanted to explain their ideas about why Misslisibell displayed commercial products. Discussing the purposes of the video and the source of the information, the children thus exposed critical digital literacy (Buckingham, 2015). The following quotes illustrate the children’s ways of making sense of the video:

It’s like that. “If you demonstrate this on a YouTube channel we can give you this bunch of money.” That’s how it is... I think she started doing it because it’s fun. And then she got subscribers and then others, sellers, notice it. (Gustav, 9)

I think they’ve paid her to do it sometimes. That’s what usually happens, but not always... That’s the way it usually is everywhere. All celebrities do it. (Ernesto, 12)

She has masses of subscribers on YouTube. She may be sponsored by some companies, like make-up and stuff. So she like gets it for free. (Samuel, 12)

As these quotes reveal, some children related Misslisibell’s endorsement and relationship with corporations to her celebrity status and number of followers, an idea which is also central to the definition of social media influencers (De Veirman et al., 2017).

In the interviews, the children also related to traditional celebrity endorsement to make sense of what they saw. One 12-year-old boy, Amir, stated that many people see
products on Misslisibell’s YouTube channel as she is famous, and then compared this with the football player Zlatan appearing in a television advertisement for Volvo:

Like Zlatan who did the Volvo...tons of people watched the Volvo ad, but otherwise not that many people watch Volvo ads...So just because there’s a celebrity in it, everyone wants to watch it.

Associating spontaneously to Zlatan to construct meaning, the boy does not identify a difference between traditional and nontraditional celebrity endorsement. He also shows his awareness of the fact that marketers use celebrities to attract consumers’ attention (Nanda & Khandelwal, 2017).

Some of the children related directly to advertising when discussing the video. However, some children expressed more uncertainty about what they saw. The discussion on advertising could for instance develop during the course of the interview, and was commonly related to the observation that Misslisibell displayed, in their view, an expensive brand. The children who spoke in terms of advertising also expressed uncertainty by proposing alternative explanations of why she had the expensive product. One idea was that she was able to afford the product as she received money from advertising on YouTube. In one of the group interviews with 12-year-old girls, they said:

Clara: Oh yeah, the stuff she has is really expensive [laughs a little].
Johanna: But like I said, she probably gets it given to her from companies.
Ida: Yes.
Noelia: Yes.
Clara: Yeah, some people say that.
Ida: From advertising, too, because of course before the video it’s advertising.

In this quote, we can see how the children jointly try to make sense of an unclear situation and that the video prompts speculation, when saying “maybe” and when referring to rumors “some people say that.” This also shows children’s joint critical reflexivity.

Some children explicitly criticized Misslisibell for showing expensive products, arguing for instance that this could make other people jealous or feel bad. In one of the interviews with 9-year-old boys, they critiqued her for doing this video to make money:

Gustav: She gets paid to demonstrate that, of course.
Kasper: Yeah, and that’s what she wants – that’s what she’s all about. And I don’t think it’s so great – doing stuff like that just because you want money. Lots of people do it...
Alex: It’s not so great, because you should actually do YouTube because it’s fun, not just to make a lot of money.

In this quote, the boys critically reflect on Misslisibell’s practices, and they express how they dislike that Misslisibell does this “just to make a lot of money.” Stating that one should be engaged in YouTube “for fun,” the boys tap into the discourse about the ideal YouTube participant – an amateur motivated by personal creativity and expression (Burgess & Green, 2009b). In this way, the boys criticize the commodified YouTube environment and stress the value of authenticity.
Providing information: Misslisibell’s endorsement practices as “tips”

There were also 9- and 12-year-old boys and girls who did not speak in terms of advertising, and that used other words for making sense of what they saw. The word “tips” was used by some of the children, and some children explicitly resisted the use of the word “advertising.”

The following quote shows how two 9-year-old girls negotiate whether to use the word “advertising” or “tips”:

Lisa: I mean, I think that, I mean she’s a famous YouTuber and she wants to do some advertising for her fans, and so I think that’s cool.
Anna: So, like, tips.
Lisa: Yeah, like tips, like... She does advertising for her fans.
Interviewer: And what do you think about that?
Lisa: [give a thumbs-up]...
Anna: I actually think it’s pretty cool that she gives her tips about make-up and where you can buy it and stuff like that. I think it’s pretty cool. I think it’s a pretty cool “haul” – I mean, what she’s bought.

Lisa starts by talking in terms of “advertising” and portrays this as something positive that she does “for her fans,” but Anna opposes this description, stressing that it should be understood as “tips.” Using the word “tips” does not seem like an attempt to put the YouTuber’s practices in a better light, as she finishes by defining the video as a “haul video,” that is, a video where vloggers show products they have purchased themselves (Jeffries, 2011). To see the video as “tips” is in line with the marketers’ intentions, that endorsements using nontraditional endorsers should be seen as peer recommendations (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Children that did not speak in terms of advertising, like Anna in the quote above, commonly just voiced their positive views on Misslisibell showing the product. They expressed that it provided information about products and that one could miss information about relevant products to buy if she had not shown them in her videos: “It’s good. If I needed those things I would have found it relevant, but I don’t need them” (Christian, 9) and “Yeah, like, sometimes it’s good, because a lot of people buy stuff because of her tips (Mania, 12).” The children were also positive to Misslisibell displaying the website where the product could be bought, and argued that this helped them, or other children, to find the product. Speaking about Misslisibell, the children also associated to other YouTubers and said that they commonly used YouTubers as a source of information for products to buy. This indicates that YouTubers are used by children for consumption purposes.

A space for learning: constructions of Misslisibell as an instructor

Children who spoke in terms of advertising, as well as the children who spoke in terms of tips, were mostly positive to Misslisibell showing products and where they could be bought. They viewed Misslisibell as an instructor and argued that she provided learning opportunities for themselves, their siblings, and other children. In the following quote, two 9-year-old girls state how Misslisibell provides learning opportunities for an older sister:
Tuva: Yeah, I think it’s good that she demonstrates products and stuff, because… Yasmin, my big sister, she watches Misslisibell a lot and she’s given Yasmin masses of tips, so Yasmin has become really good at doing make-up. She’s become extremely good at doing people’s make-up. She sometimes does it on me.

Dina: Mm-hmm, so I think it’s great that she gives tips for people who are maybe a little older than we are, so they can learn a bit more about how to do it, like, if they didn’t know much. As Tuva said, her big sister watches her and it’s like she’s been helped by her.

The boys also brought up learning possibilities as something positive, even though this specific video had no relevance to them: “Yeah, well, it’s good for those who want to wear makeup – they learn from her” (Naser, 12). Previous studies have shown how YouTube provides an informal learning environment for children as they develop digital skills through video production (Lange, 2014). The present study shows how children regard YouTube and YouTubers as a space to learn about how to use commercial products.

Making sense of Misslisibell as a young girl: between “competent” and “incompetent”

The children also engaged in highly normative discussions concerning Misslisibell’s appearance in the video, and regarding this topic there were clear differences between the children. Some of the female and male nonfollowers launched critique toward Misslisibell due to what they thought was behavior inappropriate for her age, and in doing so they stressed her lack of competence when it came to making good judgments. In contrast to this, the female followers defended her and constructed her as a competent young girl and media producer. Hence, when making sense of Misslisibell, the children drew on common discourses about children as “competent” or “incompetent” (Brembeck, Johansson, & Kampmann, 2004). When defining Misslisibell in this way, the children simultaneously engaged in identity work where they, for instance, constructed themselves as competent and knowledgeable.

In the following quote, we see how Julia, a 12-year-old girl, launched heavy critique and expressed her disgust toward Misslisibell:

Excuse me for saying this but I think she’s a total bitch [they laugh]. Because she’s in seventh grade, but she acts like, um, I don’t know, like an 18-year-old that’s short…I can hardly stand to look at her [sounding disgusted]. She acts like she’s the queen of the world. She is, like, covered in make-up. She wears it on an ordinary day, and she’s in seventh grade!

Julia calls Misslisibell “a bitch” and her disgust takes an almost physical form when stating that she hardly can watch her. Stressing that Misslisibell acts inappropriately for her age when wearing heavy makeup on an ordinary day and when acting “like she’s the queen of the world,” the girl constructs Misslisibell as lacking knowledge about how to behave according to age and situation. Criticizing Misslisibell for acting as “the queen of the world” can also be seen as a way to disapprove of the way in which she performs celebrity on YouTube, in line with ideas of more egalitarian and
democratic forms of celebrity construction on social media (Smith, 2016). Later in the interview, Julia also criticized Misslisibell for being a damaging role model that will make her young audience dissatisfied with their looks. Distancing herself from Misslisibell, the girl constructed her own identity as a natural “horse girl” who does not care about makeup.

The boys also criticized Misslisibell for acting inappropriately for her age, but they did this from their position as boys. The following dialogue took place in one group interview with 12-year-old boys:

Abdel: So, I mean, a girl our age shouldn’t have make-up like that, go around with a bunch of face powder, psh [makes a gesture as if wiping powder onto his face].

Samuel: I think powder and mascara are ugly.

Edvin: Why do they use it? . . .If she gets a boyfriend because of that I swear they’ll break up before the end of the year. I’m 100% certain they’ll do it. There’s no point.

Samuel: These are girls our age. I think they feel bad about how their face looks. They use make-up to try to hide it. Like, pimples or something.

Abdel: But sometimes it’s a little overkill.

Samuel: And then when they get a boyfriend, and then when she takes her make-up off when she meets him he’s just gonna say “Uh, buh-bye” or something. Yeah, something like that.

When the boys speak about how they dislike Misslisibell’s appearance, they group her with other young girls. Stating that “sometimes it’s a little overkill” and that young girls wearing much makeup will have little success in their attempts to get a boyfriend, they construct Misslisibell as incompetent when it comes to making good judgments. At the same time, the boys construct themselves as knowledgeable and competent about “how it works.” This shows that talk about YouTubers is a site for gendered identity work, and that discussions about YouTubers can be used for showing off competencies.

In contrast to this, the female followers defended Misslisibell in various ways. In the group interview where one of the girls called Misslisibell “a bitch,” there was another 12-year-old girl, Charlotte, who calmly came to the YouTuber’s defense:

She’s really good and I think it’s pretty cool that she can do make-up. She’s in seventh grade and she can put on make-up like...She can do her make-up better than, like, what an adult can. I still think it’s pretty cool.

In this quote, the girl constructs Misslisibell as competent, and even more competent than an adult.

Female followers who did not experience critique within the group interviews also came to Misslisibell’s defense. After discussing the theme of makeup, two 9-year-old female followers had the following conversation:

Lisa: It’s like you learn a lot, I mean, like, you learn stuff from it, so she, I mean, she gives you like tips about school. Like she doesn’t just sit there and put on make-up. She gives you tips about how to focus on schoolwork and stuff.
Anna: I was thinking that she like, like Lisa said, she does so many different things. She can like talk about what’s in her school bag and where she’s going. Like she can take a video of a whole day when she’s in Stockholm just walking around with a camera just “Here’s where I am now”, but she like does this [edits videos] so it ends up being fifteen minutes and not like 12 h.

These girls put forward how Misslisibell does not only focus on makeup in her videos, but how she also gives advice about how to concentrate on schoolwork, and they also stress that the YouTuber is good at editing videos. In this way, they construct Misslisibell as a positive role model and a hardworking and competent media producer. The girls seemed to feel the need to highlight these other aspects of the YouTuber, aspects that reflect core values in adult society related to concentration, school, and hard work. Hence, they seem to be aware of and respond to societal risk discourses that threaten to put Misslisibell in a bad light. The negative discourses that potentially surround this video are, for instance, the idea about sexualization of young girls through the media and the disruption of childhood innocence (Tsaliki, 2015), as well as the perceived dichotomy between intelligence and focus on appearance (Allen & Mendick, 2013). Defending Misslisibell by highlighting her competencies can also be seen as part of these young female followers’ identity work; the media one uses, in this case YouTubers, become part of who you are (Thompson, 1995).

Discussion

The present article has aimed at furthering our understanding of how children make sense of YouTubers as a phenomenon, by analyzing how 9- and 12-year-old girls and boys construct and negotiate Misslisibell as celebrity, celebrity endorser, and young girl. The presented data and analyses have certainly revealed children’s active, mutual negotiations regarding Misslisibell’s status as celebrity, and the YouTuber’s status as “proper celebrity” is not self-evident. Instead, her status is part of ongoing negotiations (Johansson, 2017) in which the children refer to a variety of factors involved in determining celebrity status. Among such factors, the YouTuber’s number of actual subscribers and the extent to which she can be considered to have a fan base are specifically salient in the children’s considerations. In these negotiations, regarding whether or not the YouTuber is in fact a celebrity, commercial aspects play important but also contradictory parts. On the one hand, the fact that the YouTuber appears to attract commercial interest from companies who want Misslisibell to promote and endorse their products is interpreted as an indication of popularity and status as celebrity. On the other hand, the fact that the YouTuber herself, as well as YouTube as an online space, is commercialized also provokes critical remarks from the children. This is not what YouTube is supposed to be, some children argue. Hence, the commercialization of YouTube – observed in previous studies on YouTubers (e.g., Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016) – is sometimes viewed very negatively by children.

Our analysis also shows how children make sense of Misslisibell as a celebrity endorser in different, and also contradictory, ways. Some children demonstrated critical reflexivity when discussing the video in terms of advertising. This form of critical reflexivity has also been found in qualitative interview studies with children discussing television
advertising (e.g., Buckingham, 1993), and banner and video advertising (Martínez, 2017a). In contrast to this, some children – both the older and the younger – did not expose critical reflexivity but saw the video as “tips” and information about products and where to buy them. Related to this, the children also regarded these kinds of videos as a space for informal learning. This reflects the way in which children use YouTube in their everyday lives, that is, as a source of information and learning about things that interest them (Ofcom, 2017). Interpreting the video as “tips” and information also indicates that some 9- and 12-year-old children have difficulties recognizing “hidden” or embedded advertising on YouTube.

The use of Misslisibell as a source of information and informal learning shows that children make use of YouTubers in a very concrete way, and that they indeed play a role in children’s consumption practices. This contrasts with Marsh’s (2016) argument that the 4-year-old who watched “unboxing” videos took the position of a cyberflâneur who enjoyed the mere act of viewing the commercial products. YouTubers, hence, seem to play different roles for younger children compared to pre-teens (the 9- and 12-year-olds), and it may be the case that children gradually start to use YouTubers more actively for consumption purposes when they grow older.

The results show that the children, when making sense of Misslisibell as a young girl, expressed highly normative ideas about what is appropriate for a young girl to do. The female followers defended Misslisibell and constructed her as a competent young girl and producer while both female and male nonfollowers stressed her “incompetence.” This shows that children are active agents in reproducing cultural ideas about children and childhood (Corsaro, 2015), and that YouTubers are used as symbolic material in this process. One central theme in previous research on children and celebrities regards how children engage in identity work related to gender and social class when they discuss celebrities (Allen & Mendick, 2013; Allen et al., 2015; Cocker et al., 2015). This is also seen in the present study; however, this study also shows that children construct age identities in their discussions of microcelebrities; that is, “how individuals feel and think about themselves and others based on age” (Settersten & Gannon, 2007).

In the present study we did not find any systematic differences between the older and the younger children regarding the ways in which they made sense of Misslisibell. Critical and noncritical evaluations were found among the 9-year-olds as well as the 12-year-olds. Hence, the older children did not display a more “developed” critical digital literacy than the younger children. However, as discussed above, the study did find a difference between followers and nonfollowers regarding Misslisibell as a young girl. Interesting to note here is also the fact that it was only the female followers who portrayed Misslisibell in a positive light by emphasizing the YouTuber’s competence, and not the male followers. This gender difference may be due to Misslisibell being more important for the female followers’ identity construction. Future studies could look further into the role YouTubers play in children’s identity work.

**Conclusion**

Previous research has come to different conclusions regarding the role of celebrities in children’s lives; some studies argue that celebrities are important figures (Power & Smith, 2017; Read, 2011; Tsaliki, 2015), while others question their importance for children (Girsh, 2014). We have in this study focused on a new group of celebrities – microcelebrities – and our
study indicates that microcelebrities, in this case YouTubers, are significant figures in children’s lives. They play a part in the construction of identity; the microcelebrities you choose to follow – or distance yourself from – says something about who you are. They also have a more concrete role as a tool for consumption and as a space for informal learning. This shows how microcelebrities in social media contribute to the ongoing commercialization of children’s everyday lives (Martínez, 2017b).

The use of microcelebrities as social media influencers is a growing marketing strategy globally (De Veirman et al., 2017), and marketers see young microcelebrities as an attractive means to reach the young consumer segment. In this process, children’s peer-to-peer cultural industry (Marsh, 2016) becomes appropriated by strong commercial interests. Our study has shown that some children, irrespective of gender and age, demonstrate critical reflexivity in relation to these marketing strategies, while some children do not. This has implications for both educators and researchers. Educators play an important role when it comes to strengthening children’s critical digital literacy, which is highly necessary in today’s media landscape. Researchers also need to further investigate how children’s peer-to-peer cultural industry is shaped by processes of celebritication and commercialization.

Note

1. The video can be accessed through the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iu7m8TDeIoY&t=6s.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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