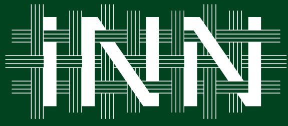

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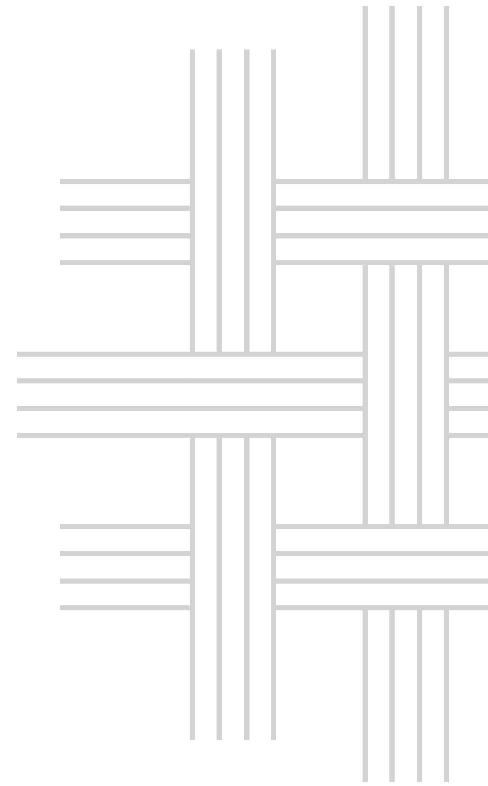

Faculty of Education

**Friederike Merkelbach**

PhD Dissertation

# Cyborg Talentification

## YouTube as a Hotspot for Child Pop Stars, their Fans, and Critics

PhD Dissertation in Teaching and Teacher Education
2022

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**Nr. 23** **Friederike Merkelbach** – Cyborg Talentification. YouTube as a Hotspot for Child Pop Stars, their Fans, and Critics

**Friederike Merkelbach**

# Cyborg Talentification

## YouTube as a Hotspot for Child Pop Stars, their Fans, and Critics

PhD Thesis

2022

Faculty of Education

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# Abstract

This qualitative, netnographic case study anticipates the cocreation of musical talent, a phenomenon I conceptualized as *talentification*. The *hotspot* of this investigation is the YouTube platform, on which fans and critics alike share their musical experiences and perceptions of talent related to selected Norwegian child pop stars' performances. Cyborg theory was introduced to elucidate the entanglement of human and machine. Thus, YouTube was conceptualized as a *cyborg system,* and talentification was subsequently reconceptualized as *cyborg talentification*. Cultural cosmopolitan theory and power structures complemented my theoretical framework. The empirical materials comprised YouTube comment rooms, their adjoining YouTube music videos, and YouTube interview footage starring the young celebrities. Regarding the internet as text rather than space, and based on ethical standards for online research, this investigation was solely conducted with publicly accessible material that obviated the need to seek consent. As offline experiences were found to inform my online understandings, I included a live concert visit. This autoethnographic experience proved valuable not only in pinpointing the characteristics of cyborg talentification on YouTube but also in shedding light on the online–offline binary, which was further investigated and deconstructed by cyborg subjectivity. The analysis of YouTube materials identified motivational, discursive, narrative, and cultural cosmopolitan levels in the cyborg talentification processes. In close discussion with existing scholarship on talent and adherent research, divergent views on talent and prodigiousness in commenters', the media's, and in child stars' own voices were unpacked. The child stars were found to be caught between contrasting expectations of innocence, authenticity, mature extraordinariness, and originality, which, supported by YouTube's archival functions, problematized both their present status and their transition from child pop star to adult artist. At the same time, the young celebrities' interpretive reproduction of pop performance confirmed, but also challenged, the general proclivity of infantilization and youthification of popular culture.

Throughout, I have discussed the topic's impact on the field of music education research. This included a consideration of YouTube as an informal learning platform and facilitator of online *Bildung*, and of the conceptual and practical contributions of cyborg talentification to discourses on musical talent, formal music education practices, and curricula. Furthermore, the findings gleaned from YouTube on the media industries' view of and influence on child stars were situated in a music education research perspective.

# Sammendrag

Denne kvalitative, netnografiske kasus-studien undersøker om musikalsk talent kan være samskapt, et fenomen jeg har beskrevet som *talentifisering*. *Hotspot* i denne undersøkelsen er YouTube, hvor fans og kritikere deler sine musikalske opplevelser og talentoppfatninger i møte med utvalgte norske barne-popstjerners fremføringer. Kyborgteori ble introdusert for å beskrive sammenfiltringen av menneske og maskin på plattformen. YouTube ble dermed forstått som et *kyborgsystem*, og talentifisering ble i min studie omdefinert til *kyborg-talentifisering*, eller *cyborg talentification*, som er betegnelsen brukt i avhandlingen. Kulturkosmopolitisk teori og maktstrukturer komplementerer det teoretiske rammeverket. YouTube kommentarfelt, musikkvideo og intervjuutdrag med popstjernene delt på YouTube, utgjør det empiriske materialet. Basert på generelle etiske retningslinjer, og ved å betrakte internettet som en tekst og ikke et rom, ble denne studien utført uten samtykke og kun basert på offentlig tilgjengelige data. Siden *offline* erfaringer viste seg å påvirke mine *online* forståelseshorisonter, inkluderte jeg en live-konsertopplevelse. Denne autoetnografiske studien ble brukt til å belyse kjennetegn ved *cyborg talentification* på YouTube, men også til å problematisere *online/offline* dualismen, som ble videre undersøkt og dekonstruert av kyborgteori. Analysen av YouTube-data avdekket motivasjonsbaserte, diskursive, narrative og kulturkosmopolitiske perspektiver ved *cyborg talentification*. I diskusjon med eksisterende talentforskning og annen relevant litteratur ble det avdekket ulike synspunkter på talent og vidunderbarn-image hos YouTube-brukerne, media og barnestjernene selv. Barnestjernene viste seg å være fanget mellom divergerende forventninger om barnlig uskyld, autentisitet, ekstraordinær modenhet og originalitet. Disse motsetningene, som ble forsterket av YouTubes arkivfunksjoner, problematiserte barnestjernenes nåværende status og overgangen fra barnestjerne til voksen artist. Samtidig både bekreftet og utfordret barnestjernenes fortolkende reproduksjon av popmusikk den generelle infantiliseringen og foryngelsestrenden (*youthification*) av popkultur.

Jeg har gjennomgående diskutert denne studiens relevans for det musikkpedagogiske forskningsfeltet. Dette innebar å belyse YouTube som en uformell læringsplattform og tilrettelegger for digital *Bildung*, samt å vurdere bidraget av *cyborg talentification* til eksisterende diskurser om musikalsk talent i formelle musikkpedagogiske rammer og læreplaner. Videre ble funnene fra YouTube om medieindustriens innvirkning og syn på barnestjerner satt i et musikkpedagogisk forskningsperspektiv.

# Preface

Precisely how I got into the story of this study is somewhat unclear to me, perhaps due to the matter under investigation where boundaries, thresholds and gateways were constantly deconstructed and rebuilt. Sometimes, I have wondered how this particular environment could affect me so strongly, as I was not standing on solid ground, meeting others in a common airspace and light, but rather was spending days and nights in front of my computer, its bleak light keeping an eye on me—and only me.

It became a fascinating world, this world of online communication, and I would not have wanted to write about, and within, anything else. Indeed, as I close this chapter, I am eager to explore what I had to leave behind and to follow the many paths I had to bypass along the way.

I want to thank my supportive and wonderful family and friends, my husband, and my grown-up children, and their partners—your continuous encouragement and kindness have kept me invaluable company in this otherwise lonely enterprise, a precondition that was amplified by the COVID-19 restrictions. Still, compared with many others, who lost their jobs during the epidemic and had their lives put on hold, I consider myself fortunate to have been able to carry on with my work, undisturbed. It is indeed a privilege to immerse oneself in an academic journey for three years, with an IT team ready to answer any questions, a service-friendly library, a dedicated Ph.D. team, and a pleasant office to work in, including impeccable home office support.

I want to thank my supervisors, Professor Ingeborg Vestad Lunde and Professor Petter Dyndahl, for giving me the freedom to explore independently, for sharing their excellent knowledge developed through their own inspiring research, and for supporting me and this project. I extend my thanks to everyone in DYNAMUS,[1] the Music Education and Cultural Studies group, and to all from the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies for engaging meetings, retreats, and social dinners, and, within DYNAMUS, an exciting book project.

I send a big thank you to my dear doctoral fellow students—such an inspiring, social and professional community of researchers! You know who you are, and I am thankful for all the small talks and messages in between, providing me with inspiration and support.

[1] DYNAMUS research group members: Petter Dyndahl, Live Weider Ellefsen, Anne Jordhus-Lier, Sidsel Karlsen, Kari Marie Manum, Siw Graabræk Nielsen, Odd Skårberg and Ingeborg Lunde Vestad.

I am grateful to both Associate Professor Eirik Askerøi, my *midtveisleser*, and to Associate Professor Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen, my *sluttleser*,[2] for providing advice and inspiration at important milestones during my process.

A warm "thank you!" is sent to Editor Nicole Gallicchio. Our paths first crossed during the inspirational and instructive Academic Presentations course that you conducted from some mysterious little stone cottage in the South of France. Since then, you have generously shared your extensive knowledge and your love for language with me.

It has been a privilege to partake in several other interdisciplinary and international events, such as the BAM!2019 conference, which allowed me to present the ethical framework for my study to the free-spirited and creative film- and gaming community. I also want to mention my participations at the 12th International Research in Music Education conference, RiME, and the 12th Biennial Symposium on the Sociology of Music Education, ISSME, both in 2021, where I could present and discuss my research with international scholars. Also unforgettable was *Forskerkamp*[3] in Lillehammer in 2019 where I was challenged to present my dawning project in the course of four—entertaining—minutes.

Despite COVID-19 travel restrictions, I managed to contact Professor Isabell Otto, who invited me to write an article in my mother tongue for the German research group *Media and Participation* at Konstanz University in 2020. Thank you, Isabell, for your trust and constructive feedback along the way.

Finally, I want to especially thank all my new colleagues at *SePU*[4] for supporting and cheering me unconditionally and warmheartedly when it was most needed.

Looking back, it has been an immensely enriching journey, not only into the world of cyborg talentification, but also into the micro and macro levels of academic research and conduct—a journey nourished and inspired by my own two decades of experience in doing pedagogical work with children and youth. They are, therefore, magically, close to the heart of this investigation.

Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, December 2021

Friederike Merkelbach

[2] *Midtveisleser* and *sluttleser* are academic opponents at presentations before the final dissertation defence.
[3] *Forskerkamp:* A performative competition between Ph.D. students.
[4] SePU: Center for practice-informed pedagogical research at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences.

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# Abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Definition |
|---|---|
| AGT: The Champions | America's Got Talent: The Champions |
| CMC | Computer-mediated communication<br>Cyborg-mediated communication |
| DIY | Do it Yourself video on YouTube |
| DMGT | Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (Gagné, 2004) |
| FTF | Face-to-face |
| GDPR | General Data Protection Regulation |
| MGP | Annual Norwegian Music Competition determining the country's representative for the Eurovision Song Contest |
| MGPjr | Norwegian song contest for young people |
| MGP Nordic | A Scandinavian song contest for children aged 8–15 (2002–2009) |
| MTV | Music Television, a channel launched on August 1, 1981 |
| NESH | The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (in Norway) |
| NRK | Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation |
| PGC | Professionally generated content |
| SMIP | Social media induced polarization |
| TACO | Text as a Critical Object |
| UGC | User generated content |
| UKM | Norwegian Youth Festival of art for children and youngsters from age 10–20 |

*“Human beings always have been astonished at one thing: that child prodigies are able to do something that is only accomplished by adults.”*

*Larisa V. Shavinina (1999, p. 25)*

*“YouTube literally mediates connections among children, but it also symbolically mediates the conceptual gulf between childhood and publicity by envisioning an intimate online public space grounded in domesticity.”*

*Tyler Bickford (2020, p. 166)*

*“We love prodigies when they are young, but will we still love them when they are adults?”*

*Freya M. de Mink and Gary E. McPherson (2016, p. 439)*

# Part I: Background, context, and existing scholarship

# 1. Investigating online talent

## 1.1. Musical talent across time—perceived, received, and judged

I have often wondered about the power of musical experiences. Playing the opening chords of Mozart's *Phantasy in C minor* on the piano, or hearing a young girl's charismatic voice as she sang *Puff, the Magic Dragon* in a corner of the market place in my hometown nearly fifty years ago—remembering those experiences still sends shivers down my spine, without me exactly knowing why.

Musical talent seems to be underlying both these events, and maybe it is just extraordinary musical talent that offers the key to understanding and conceptualizing my reactions—in the first through the declared musical genius of Mozart, and in the second through the particular quality of a street musician's voice. Yet without me, the medium or recipient, the talent involved in these particular moments would have gone unnoticed. Thus, my wonderings about musical experiences go hand-in-hand with a fascination for the enigmatic concept of *musical talent*, an interest I seem to share with many individuals, considering the enormous wave of talent shows in our times. Yet also scholars from various disciplines, now as in the past, are wrestling to understand and theorize talent and talent development, not least to explain the phenomenon of child prodigies.

Since the late sixties, technology has spurred considerable progress and changed the way music is made available, listened to, and performed, and it has also created new scenes for artists' promotion. Today, child prodigies' participation in talent programs, such as *Melodi Grand Prix Junior* (*MGPjr*),[5] and appearances on television programs, such as Ellen DeGeneres' show, grant them approximately the same prestige and economic assurance that the royal court gave in Mozart's times (de Mink & McPherson, 2016, p. 433). In addition, people from all over the world can take part in their performances, not by being physically present but by watching and reacting to the event in the comment rooms of video uploads on online platforms, such as YouTube. This type of online participation does not bind the *netizen*—the user of the internet—to either a specific place or a specific time; given the right technological equipment, an event can be played and replayed at almost any place and time, and by anyone. Taking part, watching, commenting, judging, and interacting about all things

[5] *MGPjr*: Norwegian song contest for young people.

musical, and all things related to talent online, as discussed in the current study, also signifies a type of learning that has become a common norm in the technological age. This tendency, following the research conducted by Folkestad (2006), called for music education researchers to broaden the context in which "*musical learning* should be considered" (p. 135). Folkestad grounded his argumentation by describing how a young child who enters classrooms and pursues formal education in recent times is never musically inexperienced or unknowledgeable due to early music exposure through digital and technological platforms (p. 136). Consequently, he observed that what was traditionally perceived as common and uncommon learning styles—formal and informal—had swapped places. Folkestad encouraged music education researchers to include all areas of life in which children and youth might become involved in music learning outside of formal classrooms. Also, with regard to the ongoing globalization of the world, he stressed that music research should extend its interests to "the full global range of musical learning in popular, world and indigenous musics in their studies" (p. 144). This study's research contributes to both aspects mentioned by Folkestad, even though I did not explicitly focus on informal learning or global music. Yet by directing my search on the making of musical talent on YouTube, I have considered both an identified informal learning arena (Lange, 2014) and a place where all music genres were shared globally and where people from all over the world could participate, the latter being pertinent to this study. This included thousands and thousands of individuals with YouTube access. With more than 500 hours of video footage uploaded every minute—and with a high percentage of musical content—YouTube, launched in 2005, was identified as an especially popular platform and a cultural or musical, social, and economic *hotspot*,[6] which is one of the reasons why it was chosen as my scene of inquiry.

People with special gifts have figured prominently across time and cultures, and yet their characteristics are likely to be distinct and culture-specific. Freeman (2005) observed how cultural diversity resulted in a "wide variety of international templates for the identification and education of the gifted and talented, which are sometimes entirely opposing" (p. 80). This, therefore, eliminated the possibility of a universal definition of talent. Also, at least within Western cultures, the practice of defining talent often brings disagreements rooted in cultural class to the fore. Stabell's (2018) research on three junior music conservatories contributed important insights into the complexity of talent perceptions, or what Stabell called

[6] The definition of hotspot as "a place for more than usual interest, activity, or popularity" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) was in my context modeled to indicate the accumulation of cultural and/or musical, social, and economic activities and products.

*talent assumptions*. Although grading talent from innate ability to something requiring practice and hard work was the common rating system used by both students and teachers in Stabell's investigations, the overall assumption seemed to be that musical talent was innate, special, and something "most people don't have" (p. 111). At the same time, in Stabell's material, it seemed "taken-for-granted . … that all students inside the junior conservatoire were talented" (p. 111). Therefore, implicitly, students and teachers assigned entrance criteria to the conservatoire to warrant talent attribution.

In mainstream public discourse, terms related to talent are used as commonly as those for the mundane concepts of everyday life, thereby insinuating that their inherent meaning must be self-evident to both the utterer and the listener. It is, therefore, somewhat surprising that the complexity of talent immediately becomes apparent when investigating the word's etymology. Consulting the etymological dictionary, *talent* is defined as "an ancient denomination of weight, originally Babylonian, . . . varying widely in value among different peoples and at different times" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The ancient Greeks and Romans used talent as a form of currency, implying the possibility of trade and of getting something in exchange (for a talent). By their definitions, currency and weight are variables that change over time and across cultures, making talent a naturally unstable unit. The other meaning of talent hidden in its etymology is closer to the modern associations of the word and houses "inclination, disposition, will, desire" (Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.). I anticipate that the combination of aptitude, will, and desire as cocreating elements of talent may indicate a certain determination towards some kind of fulfilment. Furthermore, the design of disposition and desire indicates that supportive environments, including economic resources and cultural understanding, are necessary if talent is to develop. I would suggest that it also implies talent as something worth investing in, and once talent has been ascribed, it may supply a means for measuring and weighing practical, artistic, and intellectual skills. Additionally, I suggest that judgements of talent may be products of underlying power structures. This might be especially true in online environments where this study's investigations have been conducted.

## 1.2. Online environments: Mapping actuality and context

During the worldwide COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, online development experienced an unplanned acceleration. By April 2020, after only three weeks of forced digital schooling, online meetings, exams, and lectures, the population of Norway had made "new experiences

regarding technology for which they otherwise might have used 10–15 years, and which they might never even have tested, if they not had been forced to do so" (Hagen et al., 2020, my free translation from Norwegian). This digital development steadily continued into 2021—not only in Norway but also globally, and not only in popular but also in academic circles—and online interactions such as internet conducted conferences are now seen as equally or, even more, valuable. They are definitely more environmentally friendly and innovative and easier to adjust to from different live situations, even though they might be less engaging due to their lack of direct, physical contact. As the impact of COVID-19 restrictions clearly showed, circumstances and demands govern how (technological) development occurs and what kinds of tools are discovered.

The "all-hands-on-deck" approach in times of particular need represented a sharp contrast to earlier sci-fi fantasies, which had already been harshly criticized by Kendall (1999), who began researching identities on the internet over 20 years ago. Kendall opposed sci-fi descriptions of humans' digital involvement as monstrous and misleading, and highlighted how these wild fantasies were, by no means, capable of illustrating the complexity in online and offline relationships (Kendall, 1999, p. 61). To illustrate "cyberspace as a separate reality depicting participant's bodies as left behind tediously typing, while their personas cavort in cyberspace" (p. 61) was deceptive. Kendall indicated that the two contexts, online and offline, were in a continuous, daily interaction in an individual's personal and political life (p. 58). Her major argument was that as soon as people were online, their analogue references and resources became activated so that they were able to make sense of their online interactions (p. 58). This statement was confirmed by Hine (2015, p. 5), and it has colored the design of this study in different ways. Offline influences on online perceptions triggered the inclusion of a live concert experience, pinpointing the specifics of cyborg talentification on YouTube and problematizing the online–offline binary (Section 5.1). This impulse leaned on the research conducted by Lange (2014) and the strategies she chose for making her investigations of young people's activities on YouTube more focused, detailed, and efficient. Lange (2014) established a parallel study that allowed her to compare "practices on and off of YouTube" (p. 232), thereby solving the separate worlds dilemma with a kind of *on and off* button. The online–offline conflict inspired the use of cyborg theory in this study, where a wide understanding of cyborg subjectivities penetrating our everyday lives contributed to and challenged the understanding of the different online and offline modes as happening in the same (cyborg) body (Compare Sections 1.3., 3.1., 5.1., and Chapters 7 and 8).

### 1.2.1. Changes to time, space, and communication—inspiring cyborg theory

Many of the fundamental effects and changes that the use of the internet would have on humankind and the experience of being were foreseen at an early stage (Castells, 2000; Kitchin, 1998). It might be "the transformation of time" (Castells, 2000, p. 460)—creating a rather confusing simultaneousness of living, perceived, archived, shared, commenting, and performing data—which was to have the greatest bearing on people's lives. Since then, researchers such as Otto (2015) have investigated the complexity of internet time, which "neither [can] be separated from technological conditions nor from locally defined times that were and are shaped by natural rhythms of daily routines" (p. 88). Otto traced the, what she called, "failed attempt of introducing a new stable standardized Internet time, independent of local times, namely the Swatch Internet time" (p. 89). Her research problematized the ongoing search for temporal stability in different online forums, where being in the same time zone was found to be imbued with economic and social interests (p. 101).

In addition to changes in time, the impact of the information technology paradigm was expected to affect experiences of space, communication or mass communication, and "the *blurring of modernistic dualisms*" (Kitchin, 1998, p. 17), such as real–virtual, authentic–fabricated, and technology–nature. In its blending of overarching perspective and accumulative simplicity, these predictions proved relevant and were discussed from ethical, methodological, technological, and ideological perspectives in the current study. They included matters of experience of self in online communication on YouTube, cyborg subject positions providing new modes of being, the dismantling and deconstructions of clear, ethical demarcations and traditional dichotomies, displacements of child stars' timelines, reconstructions of authenticity markers, and the continuous questioning of worlds, online and offline, textual and physical (Markham, 1998). To contextualize the environment of this research, a brief look at the development of the internet and its pragmatic effects on online communication over the last 20 years was taken.

Approximately around the year 2000, a new type of communication started to reshape mankind's social, intellectual, and mediated world. The gradual appearance of Web 2.0 allowed entirely new functions to enter the field of online activities, functions that accommodated immediate and global interaction. The term Web 2.0 itself was invented by DiNucci in 1999 and later popularized by O'Reilly and Dougherty at the O'Reilly Media Web

2.0 conference in late 2004. Defining Web 2.0 posed challenges, even for those who had developed it. O’Reilly (2005) himself suggested the following compact definition:

> Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices . … delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an “architecture of participation,” and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences. (O’Reilly, 2005)

The aliveness and communicative aspect of the new Web was predominant in O’Reilly’s definition, as he described the Web’s ability to *improve in accordance with usage*—a description that inspired the choice of cyborg theory for this study. Cyborg theory’s particularities, and how these were contributing to my investigation, are discussed in Sections 3.1., 3.2.4., and 7.1., and are also critically reviewed and weighted against other existing conceptualizations in Section 8.1. Thus, at first intuitively, and soon also theoretically confirmed, cyborg theory was found to accommodate the philosophical and sociological aspects of the human–machine interdependency and development not only in an effective but also in a challenging way. For, whereas Web 1.0 had been about connecting computers, Web 2.0 was about connecting people through machines that *developed alongside* and *with* online activities. I identified cyborg theory (Haraway, 1991) to be progressive enough to make sense of the codeveloping fluency of Web 2.0 intelligence and the resulting entanglement between humans and their technology, which O’Reilly (2005) had accounted for. As an example, Haraway’s (1991) problematization of digital production encouraged her conclude that, “it is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices” (p. 177) and rather pointedly here characterize, for example, the nature of internet algorithms.

Among laymen, Web 2.0 quickly received the buzzword *social web*, which quite obviously only covered parts of its functions (Otto, 2009, p. 47), even though one of the most common and popular features of the new participatory web was the possibility for people to connect in grassroots movements, as the developer of netnography, Kozinets (2015, p. 7) noted. The internet evolved from being a static, document-based service to acting as an arena that included interactive platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. This, in turn, allowed people to partake, communicate, and share. Although this change happened gradually, different cultures, who were quite unprepared for cultural exchange, were placed in

a position of promptly having to communicate with each other, despite their divergent traditional values and participatory traditions—traditions which, as I suggest, were mostly based on silent knowledge. Burgess and Green (2018) described this process of fusion as a platform-particular type of *cultural cosmopolitanism*, which rendered YouTube to become "a place in which individuals can represent their identities and perspectives, engage in self-representations of others, and encounter cultural differences" (p. 129). They argued that

> In YouTube, co-evolving aesthetic values, cultural forms, and creative techniques are normalized via the collective activities and judgements of the creator community (who enact the roles of both artists and audiences for each other's work) – forming an informal and emergent "art world" specific to YouTube. (p. 97)

Burgess and Green problematized the accessibility to all layers of participation, as these are shaped by

> the platform's cultural logics and affordances; and it depends on the motivations, technological competencies, and site-specific cultural capital sufficient to participate at all levels of engagement the network affords. . … Therefore, there are deep links between so-called "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" . … and the problem of digital inclusion. (p. 129)

Digital inclusion and exclusion through algorithmic mechanisms such as filter bubbles and echo chambers, which decide what netizens might like based on their previous choices, friends, clicks, connections, home location, nationality, gender, and other attributes, comprise the prizes of today's personalized Google (Pariser, 2011). It is personalized in such a way that no search will lead to the same results when conducted on different personal computers, and custom-made advertisements and recommendations place consumers in echo chambers with communications and information flows limited to other like-minded individuals and institutions. This fact also influenced my researcher activity on YouTube. Interestingly, "personalized" is, at least in reference to platforms such as YouTube and Spotify, described as something positive and progressive rather than as limiting and overriding—as exemplified by catch-phrases such as "get more of what you like," which refer to ready-made playlists and suggested YouTube videos. In this study, these strategies were identified as power structures (Foucault, 2000) that govern contents, personal contacts, tastes, and even future actions, as discussed in Chapter 3., alongside the discussion of echo chambers in Section 3.2.3.

Relevant for this study was also the consideration of the manner in which internet platforms proved to be effective modes to disperse music of all genres worldwide. Regev (2013), following trends in the development of popular music, noted the distinct changes that came about when the internet began allowing music videos to be uploaded in all countries, thereby making it possible for anyone with internet access to become acquainted with music from all periods and genres without having to invest large amounts of time and money. Hyperlinks embedded in the videos further increased the power of social platforms for circulating music (p. 139). Regev observed that two interacting elements, anonymity and reciprocity, comprised the characteristics of online sharing. These formed a relationship that replaced the person behind the sharing with "a sort of abstract entity of music collectors that communicate with each other through file sharing software" (p. 141). In my context, these relationships created particular cyborg subject positions, as presented in the next section.

## 1.3. Cyborg talentification: From concept to research questions

To more accurately describe the processes and subject positions produced on, by, and with the research environment of this study, several neologisms were crafted, and some pre-existing neologisms were slightly adapted. In recent decades, neologisms, such as *blogger*, *vlogger*, *tweeter*, *watcher*, and *screenling* (Choy, 2019),[7] have appeared trailing behind the use of continuously developing electronic devices by untraditional groups in untraditional social settings. Some academic traditions criticize neologisms, thereby accusing them of unnecessary complexity that reduce text-efficiency (Charmaz, 2014, p. 288). In this research, aware of the criticism but contesting it within my context, I deliberately use neologisms to come closer to the active process and narrow down the vast and complex field in question. All neologisms are associable with preexisting terms and are meant to guide the reader toward a purposeful understanding of the subject matter.

First, and most central, are the perceptions and the assumed cocreation of musical talent in cooperation with a specific social and technological environment. The process of *making talent* is envisioned to entail listening, viewing, producing, and performing, supported by multiple catalysts. Playing with the phrase resulted in *talenting*, which describes the activity of making talent. The conceptualization of this process, inspired and supported by *musification* (Edlund, 2020), resulted in *talentification*. Musification, derived from music and

[7] Urban dictionary defines "watcher" and "screenling" as "small children having the habit of sitting with an iPad or similar device" (Bock Choy, 2019, para. 1).

visualization, entails the musical representation of data. In this research, talentification is identified as the conceptual and practical representation of talenting processes, which are made relatable through communication.

Talentification is as such not a neologism, and other uses of this word can be traced. Developed by Jeffrey Magee (2020), TALENTification represents a program used by companies to build an active, innovative, and viable organization (Magee, 2020). The French philosopher Pierre-Michel Menger described talentification—without the capitalization in Magee's concept—as an anti-social process that deepened the gap between individuals (Moreau & Montety, 2018). Talentification was also identified in discussions of Norwegian cultural politics, again with a connotation of exclusion (Olsson, 2020, p. 7). There, it describes specific art-related talents gathered in glossy catalogues selling astronomically expensive art. In the context of this study, talentification is instrumentalized as a descriptor and collector, not a judge, of talenting processes. In this sense, talentification showed itself to be closely connected and supported by what Moore (2002) identified as *authentication*—the process of ascribing authenticity to a performance—with the effect that "every music, and every example, can conceivably be found authentic by a particular group of receivers" (p. 220).[8] Accordingly, this affination suggests that every presentation and every music can be judged and talented by a particular group of receivers in a process of talentification.

As is argued favorably in Section 1.2.1. and later in Chapter 3, cyborg theory (Haraway, 1991) was introduced into my context with the main intention to fathom the entanglement of human–machine in the online environment. Subsequently, the YouTube hotspot was conceptualized as a *cyborg system* and the catalysts of talentification were defined as *cyborgs* in the widest sense of the word (Gunkel, 2000; Haraway, 1991; Løvlie, 2003; Short, 2005). They are located in the cyborg system, interacting with, supported by, and themselves a part of online technology, thereby reconceptualizing talentification into *cyborg talentification*.

Thus, cyborg talentification is set to describe the cocreating processes assigning talent on YouTube, guided by a variety of agents that are identified as cyborgs and cyborg products, such as algorithms, videos, commenters, and reactors, and the virtual representations of the child stars. The reconceptualization into *cyborg* talentification was thus completed to illustrate the specifics of the theoretical perspectives through which the contextual processes of making a comment, a video, or an utterance, as well as their producers, are viewed. The functions in

[8] Compare Section 2.3.1.

the commentary process—such as emojis—and functions connected to video-viewing—as likes or dislikes, are understood as cyborg tools that support my conceptualization of the commenting language as a new*, cyborgian genre*. The conceptualization to *cyborg* talentification signals that the processes found and analyzed in the current study can be perceived as variants of talentification. It also indicates that the contributing catalysts adapt themselves to and are dependent on the overall context—here with a weighting of catalysts shaped and influenced by YouTube technology.

The inclusion of cyborg theory in this investigation has challenged basic understandings of an online–offline binary as the cyborg in an academic context has been assigned the status of a *common state of being* in the twenty-first century (Gunkel, 2000; Haraway, 1991; Short, 2005; Wells, 2014). Cyborg subjectivity, as presented by, for example, Short (2005), includes all

> Those whose occupation entails prolonged technological mediation, such as interfacing with a computer screen. … those who spend their leisure time similarly interfacing with technology . …. [and] those whose thought patterns have been shaped by their environment, particularly the various media that supplement daily existence in the West, affecting the way in which subjects perceive reality and themselves. (pp. 44–45)

Such a wide description of cyborg surmounts a solely online environment and questions clear demarcations. The resulting complexity of the online–offline dualism will, in particular, be addressed in Section 5.1. and again in Chapter 7.

Not all cyborgs in my context were renamed. Algorithms, those human–mind–machine constructed calculations that serve the platform in various ways, were already an established terminology. This despite, or because of, the fact that the term's etymological roots are found to reach all the way back into the ninth century and, thereafter, to analogue settings (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), long before the internet was developed. In my context, they are understood as computerized algorithms online, thereby offering an unambiguous description.

On the other hand, the netizens listening to and watching videos on YouTube are in music video literature referred to using a variety of terms, for example, as *viewers* (Vernallis, 2013a) *consumers*, *users*, *subscribers*, and *audiences*. As this group is the focal point of my investigation, I considered it important to describe its agents accurately. Appreciating a music video depends on two senses, *viewing* and *listening*, which I considered none of the above

named terms to describe satisfactorily. Therefore, parallel to the neologism *vlogger*, who administers a *vlog* combining video and blog, the term *vlistener*, uniting viewer and listener, was created for this study. Vlistener is not thought of as an agreeable term but rather as a working concept, awaiting a more elegant formulation. Neither is the purpose of creating vlistener to engage in a multi-model analysis, but rather to position amateurs' appreciation of music videos in the technological environment. The neologism is further meant to encompass the actual loneliness in this type of activity, even though I am aware of that other, already established, terms might be used as singulars. Yet, a concept such as *audience* carries "the Other" implicit in its understanding, whereas vlistener is free of such associations. Audience, as per definition, describes a group of people (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Vlistener is, therefore, most of all intended to be the seclusive agent engaged in a music situation where the two senses of listening and viewing are allowed to melt together without sincere interferences as all other senses that are needed for being, for example, part of an audience, are put on hold in a vlistener situation. This partly lofty conceptualization undeniably made sense as I experienced being a part of a body of audience in a live concert, as I discuss in Section 5.1.

As vlisteners start to engage in the participatory function of the YouTube cyborg system and write comments, they enter a new cyborg subject position. They do not precisely become authors, writers, or professional commentators. Rather, they become *commenters* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), a term that has reappeared alongside blogging and social platforms, and which is adopted into my context. Furthermore, being active agents in both consuming and producing talent, commenters and vlisteners are also identifiable as *produsers*, blending *user* and *producer*, a term developed by Bruns (2008/2009). In my context, the term produser is applied whenever I am not particularly referring to a vlistener or commenter situation, and it does, together with the more neutral term netizen, replace *user* throughout this text. The writing style in this study also follows the underlying idea of human and technological agency and expands itself to the text, resulting in formulations such as: "The study places itself," or "the comments display a vivid liveliness." At first, I was not doing this consciously; it happened automatically as I, in my role as researcher, actively removed myself from the empirical material, following my decision to not seek informed consent from my participants, to not conduct interviews of my own, and to not interact with the informants of my study.[9] Moreover, the cyborg perspective caused me to define my investigation not as case studies of

[9] The ethical and methodological choices mentioned here are elaborated on in Chapter 4.

child pop stars, but as studies of three cyborg talentification cases connected to, and appearing in, the online environment of the selected celebrities.

In sum, and following the notion of inter-connectedness between musical talent and musical experience and perception, I am interested in how YouTube accommodates musical child pop stars, and how online musical talent is perceived, evaluated and, possibly, cocreated, by fans, critics, the media, and the YouTube platform itself. The overall aim of this investigation has therefore been to trace and identify cyborg talentification processes in YouTube activities, products, and communications performed by the child pop stars, their fans, and critics, and to consider cyborg talentification in a music education research perspective. Inherent and central in these issues lies a confrontation, even deconstruction, of the concepts of *musical talent* and *musical child prodigy*. Supporting and guiding my endeavor, four main questions energize and inform this study. These are:

- How do child stars appropriate and interpretatively reproduce cultural cosmopolitanism and popular music on YouTube, and how do these practices and the mechanisms of the platform play into the processes of cyborg talentification?
- What cyborg talentification categories, discourses, and perspectives can be identified in fans', critics', and the media's communications with and about child stars on YouTube, and how do these negotiate child stars' positionings in society?
- How are child stars' futures perceived by fans and critics on YouTube, online media, and the child stars themselves, and what effect might these perceptions have on the processes of cyborg talentification and on child stars' futures?
- What impact might the concept of cyborg talentification have on the field of music education research and pedagogical praxis?

All queries move through the entire text, yet with emphasis placed at various stages, and, therefore, their answers are found at different nodes and cross-points of the discussion. The primary place of action is YouTube itself, the cyborg system, with traceable power structures (Foucault, 1977/1978, 2000) and divergent ethical codes on privacy and publicity (Burgess & Green, 2018; Markham, 1998, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018; Nissenbaum, 2010). YouTube as a cultural, economic, and social arena mirrors multiple views on popular culture which are discussed with relevant scholarship on popular culture (for example, Frith, 1998; Plasketes, 2005, 2010; Shuker, 2016). YouTube as hotspot also accommodates children's involvement in, and interpretive reproduction of, popular music, which I discuss (for example,

Bickford, 2016, 2017, 2020; Corsaro, 1992, 2018; de Mink & McPherson, 2016). Further, the cultural cosmopolitan traits and mechanisms on YouTube (for example, Burgess & Green, 2018; Lange, 2008) are paired with the concept of cultural cosmopolitanism, as anticipated by Regev (2019) and Papastergiadis (2018), as will be explicitly discussed in Section 3.3. Generally, in my context, cultural cosmopolitanism is used as an *umbrella term*, subsuming aesthetic cosmopolitanism (Regev, 2019, p. 28), and the first term is used unless the cosmopolitanism identified is specifically aesthetic, or both cultural and aesthetic. Both forms are identified in the three cyborg talentification narratives of this study, as discussed in Sections 5.3.4., 5.4.4., and 5.5.4.

The primary empirical data in this study are YouTube comments and their adherent YouTube music-, and reaction videos. Interview video footage retrieved from YouTube constitute another important source. In order to give a fuller narrative of the stars, online news reports provide background information. In the Jordan analysis, I also use textual online interviews, which I argue for in Chapters 5 and 6. In Section 4.3., the empirical materials and why they are chosen—or not chosen—are discussed more in detail, but Table 1 below offers a first overview. It does not show comments' word counts, or the total amount of comments used because of (a) the varying length of comments in my data, and (b), the process of my analysis which focuses on keywords and themes, and the gathering the total material of each section in a coherent document. In the actual discussions, though, an approximate count of comments as found whilst my investigations were running, is given. Music videos' and interview videos' playtimes are shown as average time counts in Table 1, except for the exact minute count of the reaction video used.

**Table 1**

*Primary empirical materials used in this study*

| **YouTube**: Primary data | | **The BlackSheeps** | **Marcus & Martinus** | **Angelina Jordan** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Comments | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| | Music videos | 3:08–7:33 | 3:21–3:49 | 2:55–4:03 |
| | Interview videos | 2:19–3:20 | 12:22–43:29 | 4:48–5:28 |
| | Reaction videos | Not used | Not used | 12:22 |

As is discussed in greater depth in Section 4.3.2., one main data source for the current study comprises YouTube comment sections. In my research context, I consider these sources not as *sections* but as rooms, leaning on the terminology of echo-chambers, to describe the place where textual materials are posted, read, and stored. The *room* metaphor represents the paradoxical binary of seclusion versus openness to illustrate that, even though comment rooms are available to the public with figuratively open doors, they are confined within their own four walls. Importantly, the room metaphor must not be confused with the concept of *space* used by Bassett and O'Riordan (2002), whose research is discussed in Section 4.1.3.

Before I present the child stars selected for this study, I will argue in more depth for selecting YouTube as my research environment.

### 1.3.1. Participating, converging, communicative, and broadcasting platform

The reason behind why YouTube was chosen for this study has to do with its history, original intentions, worldwide popularity, and its unique archiving qualities.

Burgess and Green (2009, 2018) were among the first to declare YouTube a subject and an arena worthy of research. Their work has played into this study as an important source of knowledge and as a bridge to other theoretical perspectives, as, for example, Regev's (2013) cultural or aesthetic cosmopolitanism. In addition, Lange's (2008, 2014, 2019) practical, philosophical, and critical research has informed the current study bridging over from everyday YouTube produser practice to posthuman perspectives of video production and the creation of "alters" (Lange, 2019, p. 9) on YouTube. According to Burgess and Green (2009, 2018), the original aim of YouTube, launched at the end of 2005, was more cultural than technological, as the platform intended to create a video site for literally anyone who had something to share (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 2). YouTube's ideology can still be expressed using the catchphrase "Broadcast Yourself," even though that label was removed from the platform's logo in 2010 (p. 7). Kim (2012) observed the manner in which, over the years, "YouTube developed from a user-generated content (UGC) . … to a professionally generated content (PGC) video site" (p. 53). At the same time, Gillespie (2010) observed how YouTube's crafty choice of the term *platform* continue to signalize equality, even chances and no preferences (p. 358), thereby upholding the idea of grassroots activity.

The reasons behind YouTube's immense popularity are probably complex. Its founders' vision to give everyone, regardless of their technological knowledge, the possibility to share their personal experiences (Lüders, 2007, p. 3) and allowing a limitless number of videos to

be uploaded seem to have contributed to its success. YouTube has also effectively attracted operative funding, quickly leaving other competitors behind (Hearsum & Inglis, 2013, pp. 483–484). The possibility of reaching stardom—to become a *YouTuber*, *YouTube personality*, or *YouTube celebrity*—has continued to attract produsers. The fantasy of the unplanned, spontaneous video going viral still exists and nurtures YouTube's attractiveness (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 38).

Many musicians have identified YouTube as a valuable promotion machine (Suhr, 2012, p. 55), and performers of all levels—from the young and inexperienced to adult and established—use YouTube to post their music videos, their historic and modern live concert performances, interviews and more. The YouTube cyborg system encompasses all these multiple contents and, like all web services, it uses algorithms to distribute, sort, and make these materials visible and effective. Although the vastness of YouTube's development may seem unprecedented, Jenkins (2009), in his foreword to the first YouTube report by Burgess and Green (2009), highlighted that the platform's rapid growth and success was only possible

> because so many groups were ready for something like YouTube; they already had communities of practice that supported the production of DIY media, already evolved video genres and built social networks through which such videos could flow. YouTube may represent the epicentre of today's participatory culture but it doesn't represent its origin point of any of the cultural practices people associate with it. (p. 110)

Jenkins (2009) cited various digital revolutionaries, early prophets, who all shared the fantasy of participatory, easy-to-use online spaces, which they called "garage cinema and bedroom television networks" (p. 111). Many of these pioneering netizens envisioned a networked community, and, were they still living, they would identify YouTube's accomplishments as their own dreams come true (p. 112). Jenkins therefore considered YouTube a *convergence culture* engulfing old media, and not a revolutionary new commodity (p. 113). Prior to the introduction of Web 2.0, for example Fry (1993) and later Auslander (2008), defined TV's influence not as the singular influence of one medium but as a *televisual culture*. Televisual, according to Fry (1993), marked "the end of the medium, in a context, and the arrival of television as the context" (p. 13). Now, as many TV programs are made available as video footage on YouTube, it appears that the platform has successfully engulfed the televisual and extended it through its enormous networks. In this way, YouTube has kept expanding its

influence into countless areas of social, cultural and commercial life. YouTube's ability to absorb mainstream media products has been vital for this research as it extended and made the material available for worldwide participation. In addition, Suhr (2012) observed the process of absorption and distribution as a mechanism that characterized the nature of YouTube, an observation that led her to describe YouTube as a *hybrid field*, which covers parts of the, in this study defended, idea of YouTube as a cyborg system. I extended Suhr's description of the hybrid field "that comes into play when the site functions as an intermediary between the mainstream industry and the artists" (p. 65) to include common netizens whom YouTube supplies with new uploaded materials from TV shows and other events. The cyborg system, therefore, exerts its influence through commenting on and sharing of ready-made products, and mainstream media has no other choice than to embrace YouTube's *omnivorousness*.[10] As Van Dijck (2013) described it rather vividly, the former antagonists TV and YouTube "after successive years of fighting, conciliation, courtship, and heavy petting . … finally got married" (p. 127), and their bondage proved successful. Undoubtedly, YouTube profited from this connection, and researchers have since called YouTube "the driver" (Vernallis, 2013a, p. 15) in an otherwise conversing media landscape.[11]

YouTube was, not least, chosen for this research, as its technological design, though maybe not extravagant, is "famously *usable*" (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 100). Compared to, for example, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, or Myspace, YouTube has the most functionality related to what this project required, even though—or specifically *because*—YouTube may almost be considered old-fashioned with regard to trends in speed and space. As time is observed to be getting faster and faster and space smaller and smaller, the content available on other, more recently developed, social platforms is harder to catch and contains less information. An Instagram video is allowed to be between fifteen seconds in the produser's history and a maximum of one minute on the feed. TikTok allows three minutes. However, on YouTube, fifteen or more minutes are possible, and, owing to the ongoing commercialization, full-length films have also been made available on YouTube. When it comes to space, YouTube can function as an enormous, historical video bank, though not a completely reliable one, as material may be blocked or deleted.[12] Subsequently, YouTube's design made it relatively easy for me to organize content and trace videos and comments

[10] Compare Section 2.4.2.
[11] This also includes YouTube's impact on the music video genre, as discussed in Section 4.3.3.
[12] Removal or takedown occurs as a result of a take-down notice sent to YouTube, which results in one strike. Three strikes, and the whole account is deleted.

years back in time, which also allowed for observing the site's development and including artists from YouTube's pioneering days in this study.

Summing up my argumentation, alongside the swift development and appearance of multiple social media platforms, YouTube has defied criticisms and successfully maintained at least some of its vernacular characteristics. These are unceasingly appreciated by produsers worldwide, thereby allowing YouTube to penetrate "all aspects of sociality and creativity" (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 129). YouTubers themselves have described the platform as "the mothership" (Lange, 2019, p. 221) of social platforms, as it has retained a gatekeeper position for many and continues to be constantly redefined by the approximately 2,3 billion individuals frequenting the site. Supported by Burgess and Green's (2018) statement regarding how produsers influenced "the purposes and meanings of YouTube as a cultural system“ (p. 96), this study expects YouTube produsers to considerably contribute to and influence the complex processes of cyborg talentification of selected Norwegian child pop stars accommodated by YouTube.

## 1.4. Finding child pop stars in Norway

As the overall context of my investigation is the DYNAMUS[13] project, which aims to investigate "the social dynamics of musical upbringing and schooling in the Norwegian welfare state" (DYNAMUS, n.d.), the child stars chosen are found in a Norwegian context. That is, they are individuals born and active in Norway, though of course not excluding international activities. The question of actual Norwegian citizenship was not of particular interest. Other factors, such as their popularity, a certain visibility on YouTube, variations within gender and fan groups, were more important. Also, as this study is a part of the first of three subprojects attached to DYNAMUS, which investigates children's musical media culture, I decided to find child stars of *popular* music as these appeared to be the most prominent.

Dyndahl and Vestad (2017), in their study of children's phonograms in Norway after WWII, stated that the turn toward the practice of popular music being performed by children in Norway occurred in 1955. That year, the first notable Norwegian child star, eight-year-old Grethe Kausland, released her first record that quickly became extremely popular (Dyndahl &

[13] DYNAMUS is a Norwegian research project, which was conducted from 2018 to 2022. It investigates "the social dynamics of musical upbringing and schooling in the Norwegian welfare state" (DYNAMUS, n.d.)..

Vestad, 2017, p. 4). What was remarkable about this young artist was that "even though she was a child star, her musical style was much more influenced by the popular music of her parents' generation, namely jazz, than by the upcoming rock and pop music" (p. 4)—a trend that, as Dyndahl and Vestad observed, was broken by the next generation of Norwegian child stars. In the context of this study, 65 years later, it was interesting to note that, again, a Norwegian child star had entered the public stage by showing a clear and determined aptitude for jazz, thereby making fans exclaim, "Jazz is back. Wow! Who thought, in a seven year old?"[14]

In my context, young artists are classified as pop stars not because of personal taste or judgement, but for several other reasons. First, society itself appreciates them as such. They have actual fan groups and have been visible winners in competition shows, such as *Norske Talenter*[15] or *MGPjr*, and their performances in these shows have been reposted and circulate on YouTube. Second, they aspire to be known artists, and they actively use, or have used, YouTube to broadcast themselves. Third, public media has named them stars, thereby describing them as extremely successful and/or talented young people. Summing up the conditions, in order to classify as a child star, the individuals or the groups in question had, in one way or other, been active in the world both through YouTube and in offline settings over a period of time, thereby receiving considerable attention, acknowledgement, and support, both emotionally and economically. Child stars, and their supportive environments, aspire to build a career based on the young artists' achievements, personal ambitions, and responses from fans, critics, and the media. In that respect, the concept of a *child star* seems quite devoid of innocence and naïveté. Therefore, it aligns with the pragmatic comment by Suhr (2012), who claimed that the way toward musical recognition could be a controversial matter. Suhr (2012) transferred Frith's (1988) two models for gaining success as a musician—the one through hard work, the other by means of chance and intelligent marketing—to social platform strategies, where these two models intersected. Although musicians met considerable challenges online and had to invest work and practice, sometimes a musician was discovered "without much effort, seemingly by sheer luck" (Suhr, 2012, p. 120). This observation assigned critical significance to the stars' *context*. In addition, as this study has a historic ambition in the sense of considering YouTube talents of a certain timespan, the child stars ideally covered both early and later YouTube. The practice of finding the stars was facilitated

[14] This is a comment from a YouTube comment room. These quotes are anonymized and cited without reference other than with "commenter" in longer quotes. This is more explicitly explained in Chapter 4.
[15] *Norske Talenter* is the Norway's Got Talent show.

by the fact that Norway, with its rather low population rate compared to many other countries, has a somewhat limited amount of successful child pop stars who are active on YouTube. Talents were, therefore, most likely to be more visible and sensational with distinct characteristics than they would be in an overpopulated part of the world. Celebrities in Norway tend to become the nation's stars, a part of the Norwegian community, which again makes it relatively straightforward to both find and follow them. None of this implies that their impact and artistic projects are of minor quality compared to that of stars in overpopulated countries. To underline this fact, one may consider chess legend Magnus Carlsen, who has, in fact, been a world champion since 2013 and continues to be one in 2021.

At the end of this process, the chosen child stars were The BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus, and Angelina Jordan. Their musical genres offered variations of popular music, with jazz, as represented by Angelina Jordan, standing out the most and the closest to the classical border. Some might protest, claiming that all forms of jazz should be considered as genres in their own right. Angelina Jordan's interpretations of jazz classics were in any case specific for her, appealing not only to hardcore jazz lovers—as I discuss specifically in Section 5.5.

### 1.4.1. Charming the world with a rocking dog, identical twinship, and a classic suicide song

Being a child star might as much be a personal enterprise as it covers a need in society—a matter that has been discussed at several junctures in this text—and, when young people perform at astonishing or even adult levels, they encounter reactions of utter amazement (Shavinina, 1999). Therefore, at the beginning of a *barnestjerne* career, comments on talent are likely to flourish. All artists chosen for this research had an official breakthrough song—"official" in the sense that their performances led them to win an official competition—which then were posted, shared and viewed by thousands on YouTube. All the stars were considerably young at the time of their debut: seven (Jordan), ten (Marcus & Martinus) and twelve–thirteen (The BlackSheeps).[16] Their rich narratives will be told in Chapters 5 and 6, but, here, it can be stated that their breakthroughs happened with rather unique songs—unique with regard to lyrics, performance style, and genre—even though they shared the same performance context. All three performed on a competition show, on a scene rigged for the occasion, with judges to doom and mirror their performances through facial expressions and

[16] I have made the decision to spell out the age of children and youth mentioned in this text since the age-discourse is closely connected to their (artistic) personae.

oral comments, in front of an age mixed audience and thousands of TV viewers and promptly by thousands, and even millions, of YouTube produsers.

Angelina Jordan, the youngest star, as "she doesn't even have teeth yet," entered public attention by singing the melancholic jazz classic "Gloomy Sunday" (TV 2, 2014), which is also nicknamed as the Hungarian suicide song (Stack et al., 2007–2008). The BlackSheeps engaged their first audience with the self-composed energetic rock–pop song with a Sámi title and chorus, "Oro Jáska Beana" (The BlackSheeps – emne, 2018), singing about the tragic fate of a fat dog, which triggered comments such as: "Who the f… sings about a dog???" Marcus & Martinus,[17] on the other hand, convinced their followers-to-be with a rap–pop–techno production called "Two Dråper Vann" (NRK, 2012), singing and dancing about entering life like "two drops of water," about being twin brothers, and doing everything together—a concept they have faithfully followed. It was Angelina Jordan, though, who, with her jazz classic, challenged preconceived ideas of childhood the most, creating a gap between common expectations adults might have about a seven-year old child vocalist and her actual performance; however, all stars surprised society in their own, unique ways, thereby ensuring themselves the title of child star at the time and in retrospective media reviews.

As I compared the empirical material available for the stars, I noticed an imbalance of both type and amount. The BlackSheeps' relatively short career—from 2008 to 2010—with the original four band members, and, of course, the fact that they were active some ten years ago, meant that they had the least of YouTube material available. Marcus & Martinus, on the other hand, had a lot of everything—music videos, concert videos, fan videos, and interviews. However, with respect to the Marcus & Martinus comment rooms, the material was rather meagre, as their fans mostly produce short and emoji-dominated comments and because many of their comment rooms were deactivated and are, therefore, empty. Angelina Jordan again had no fan-answering fun videos,[18] and so far (by 2018) only few professional music videos, and yet there was all the more an abundance of what I have called *raw-material-videos*—music takes with few props and no narrative other than the song, without other performer acts as, for example, dancing. Jordan's comment chains were rather exceptional in many ways and the masses of comments reacting to Jordan's videos could well be gathered into a book, if that were ethical—sorting them into whole chapters discussing her talent, her voice, her

[17] As "Marcus & Martinus" is the duo's artistic name, this combination is used throughout the text.
[18] Fan-answering fun-videos are videos where the stars answer questions from their fans online in an easy-going manner.

personality, her serenity, the wide array of feelings evoked by her music, the concerns for her development in the backdrop of the harsh music business, and her extraordinary ability to interpret classical jazz songs and well-known pop songs. In that respect, as this study largely focuses on comments—though this choice is more differentiated than it appears as is discussed in Section 4.3.1.—there was a clear overload of Jordan material. This might already be called a finding, characterizing the variances in the groups.

Regarding the terminology for describing the status of The BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus, and Angelina Jordan, I choose to refer to them as *barnestjerner*, translated as *child stars*, even though the timespan of their careers covered in this investigation exceeds the "pure" child phase of their lives. One reason behind this decision is that there exists no coherent, satisfactory term for describing an individual between ages seven and nineteen, which is the age span I investigate. In public debate, a child is defined as a person who has not yet reached puberty; a tween is a young child between nine and twelve; and a teenager, or teen, is an individual who is aged between thirteen and nineteen years. Bickford (2020), as I discuss in Section 2.2.3, observed that the so-called *tween timeline*, in a specific decade in the American cultural history, stretched to include preschool children, thereby creating an autonomous, new age group of both musicians and consumers of popular music between five and fourteen to fifteen years of age (Bickford, 2020, p. 19). Influences from this development have washed into the common Western understanding of children's use of popular music, and Bickford's (2012, 2016, 2020) research has made some major contributions to this study. The main reason behind holding onto the term *barnestjerner*, or child star, is that the chosen artists were first known and reviewed in the Norwegian media as such. In that sense, the concept of *barnestjerner* or child stars can be recognized as more of a title appropriating the context of their public activities than an accurate description of their ages.

The child stars of this study are not termed *child prodigies* as such, even though communications about especially Angelina Jordan are found to reflect an almost classic child prodigy discourse, which is discussed in Sections 5.5. and 6.1.2. The child prodigy concept, in general, was found to be closely connected to the specific and narrowing discourse surrounding exceptionally gifted children in traditional talent research—as is discussed in Chapter 2—and therefore does not capture the cases in the current study. In academic discourse, a child prodigy is defined as a child under the age of ten.

However, child prodigy as a *concept* effectively informs this study and provides an important tool for analyzing the observed cyborg talentification processes and the status of child pop stars on social media, reflecting, processing, and recreating their status in society.

## 1.5. Impact and structure

### 1.5.1. Impact of this study's investigation on music education research

Throughout this text, I considered the possible impact of my discussions on the field of music education. As my investigation is constituted of multiple aspects, these reflections naturally happen at different nodes in the text. In this section, I start to map my thoughts on the envisioned impact of the concept of cyborg talentification on music education research theory and praxis. As this is also the endeavor of the fourth research question, the discussion is continued in Section 5.2. and Chapters 7 and 8.

Advancing the discussions of Barthes (1990) in Sections 2.4.2. and 7.1., I suspect cyborg talentification to contribute to a depersonalization, yet not deindividualization of talent, as a normed musical ability. Depersonalization includes, following Haraway (1991), a "taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology . … [by] embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts" (p. 181). Leaning on Haraway's description, I suggest that, at a practical level, the processes of a fluid and flexible rebuild subsequent to the deconstruction of traditional norms could encourage engagements in and with music, in which individuals otherwise might not have involved themselves, be it due to negative projections, power structures, and/or social–environmental issues. This might include engagement with music across what has been identified as "gender performativity through musicking" (Onsrud, 2015) in classrooms. At a theoretical level, cyborg talentification could answer some of, for example, the by Green (2008, p. 68) and Vestad (2014) expressed need to expand the verbal repertoire available for talking about talent (Vestad, 2014, p. 269) in both formal and informal settings. I suggest that—based on my findings in this study—cyborg talentification, with its inherent informal, untraditional strategies, could be an innovative concept for discussing and working with talent. Subsequently, in pedagogical praxis and diverse formal and informal learning arenas—be they the classroom, the concert hall, or YouTube—I expect that youngsters with varying degrees of self-confidence could benefit from a talent concept that is

approachable without personal exposure, as it delegates and disperses traditional, subject-focused talent to a variety of catalysts and subject positions.

Small's (1998) concept of *musicking* and the idea of *musical gentrification*, as expressed by Dyndahl et al. (2020), are inspiring examples of theoretical terms useful in academic, pedagogical, and populistic music contexts. Projecting the understanding that "music is not a thing at all but an activity" (p. 3)—including participation, practicing, listening, and providing music material—into one concept, musicking gives refreshing opportunities for knowledge retention, interaction, and musical engagement. Similarly, the vivid picture of musical gentrification grants a head start into a discussion on the dynamics of symbolic power in academic and professional music institutions (Dyndahl et al., 2020).

Based on Haraway's (1991) conceptualization and combined with Foucault's (2000) suggested build of new subjectivities (p. 336), cyborg talentification as a concept is anticipated to possibly deconstruct, but certainly question normative aspects within traditional dichotomies. The dualism *talented–not talented* and *innate–worked for* are just some of the aspects I anticipate that the cyborg might be able to confront. Referring to Haraway's notion of the cyborg creating "a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (p. 181), Campbell and Kean (1997) emphasized the importance in Haraway's (1991) coupling of human and technological "because it transgresses the boundaries that fix people into set ways of thinking and acting" (Campbell & Kean, 1997, p. 294). Quite particularly, they declared "Donna Haraway's work … relevant to [the]discussion of gender and sexuality . …. since for her, the cyborg is beyond gender" (Campbell & Kean, 1997, *notes,* p. 295). As Haraway (1991) sought independence from all dominations, be it gender, sexuality, race, or class (p. 157), I also venture to transfer her utopian vision and model it into what I have called *the musical body*. These aspects are discussed in Section 3.1. and Chapter 7, where I also present critical voices opposing Haraway's enterprise and use these to accurately delimitate the intentions of my conceptualizations, including the place of the musical body in the field of music education.

Summing up, I suggest that cyborg talentification might offer an alternative and innovative approach to the engagement with musical talent, adding new vocabulary, conceptualizations, and talenting strategies. This vision is supported by what Short (2005) identified as the cyborg's greatest potential, the "posing [of] fundamental questions about identity and existence in the twenty-first century" (p. 52), thereby creating the scope for a wider look into all areas of life.

### 1.5.2. From process to product

Conducting online research proved to be chaotic and overwhelming at times, as I found myself frequently multitasking. The use of the internet as research grounds implied that many doors were open at the same time, as all materials were right in front of me on my computer. Instead of travelling to conduct an observation at one place and an interview at another, I could observe, listen to the music, scan comments, and read interviews almost simultaneously. The density of cognitive impressions that arose from this activity incited divergent thoughts and ideas that developed analogously, yet at their own pace. Additionally, watching online interviews and videos with the scrutiny of a researcher did, at first, make me feel slightly uncomfortable. I felt as if I were an intruder, despite the obvious public character and explicit sharing facilities of the material. However, eventually, I realized I simply had to grow accustomed to being an invisible and silent collector, "lurking"[19] in kitchens and bedrooms and watching young artists close up, exposing themselves as vulnerable and professional at the same time. Furthermore, my data refused to stay put, it they kept evolving and expanding at their own will until I decided to say stop, which I did many times, just to find myself rewiring to assimilate an update. My decision to take the research process as far as possible proved right. Not because it was hard to shut out my acute recommendation algorithm, which offered a new video every time I opened my YouTube page, but because keeping a keen eye on the research environment up until the very end helped sufficiently close it. The final product consists of eight chapters that are structured into the following four parts:

**Part I**: Background, context, and existing scholarship

Chapter 1: Investigating online talent

Chapter 2: Selected research for discussing cyborg talentification

**Part II**: Theoretical, ethical, and methodological frameworks

Chapters 3: Theoretical framework to unpack context and content

Chapter 4: Ethical methodology for investigating online perceptions

[19] «Lurking» was developed by Hine (2000) and described online observation without interaction.

**Part III**: Analyses and discussions

Chapter 5: Cyborg talentification cocreating stars

Chapter 6: Child stars' futures in times of YouTube

**Part IV**: Further discussions and preliminary conclusions

Chapter 7: Cyborg talentification and music education research

Chapter 8: Conclusions

To answer research questions one, two, and three, Chapters 5 and 6 discuss and analyze this study's data material based on the four cyborg talentification levels developed in this study with references to theory and in close engagement with existing scholarship. Chapter 6 uses mainly, though not exclusively, interview materials retrieved from YouTube to unpack the media's and child pop stars' views on child pop stars current careers, as well as the media's and the child pop stars' views on child pop stars' musical futures. Chapters 7 and 8 continue the discussion of research question four, as well as relate and summarize the findings of this research. In Chapter 8, all research questions and their answers are considered, and the contributions, strengths, and weaknesses of method and theory are critically evaluated. In both chapters, this investigations' relevancies for the music education research field are viewed and discussed, including a presentation of future research arising from this study in Chapter 8.

# 2. Selected research for discussing cyborg talentification

The field of relevant research was mapped in several phases as new, interconnecting layers were discovered along the way, each offering fresh perspectives that could enrich the project. Some trails had to be abandoned or at least acknowledged as playing a minor role, such as the topics of *sound*, *sound aesthetics*, *visuals and listening*, as well as a more extensive study of *fan communities*. Each of these still play into the mosaic of my investigation as they are tightly connected to the subject matter; however, they are not treated as main issues. The reason behind this choice is not their relevance but, rather, their complexity, with which they could have taken over the focus of the study. I will briefly explain this in more detail.

Sound and sound aesthetics in the mediated environment actually represent an entirely separate field of study;[20] however, in my research context, they are mainly understood through commenters' listening and combined with a heavy impact of visuals. Sound, listening, and visuals, therefore, constitute a basic element in this text, both as prerequisites of commenters' subject positions and their appreciations of music videos as well as a key skill in pedagogical music settings. Yet perceptions of sound and visuals, and the resulting listening and viewing is, in my context, understood as an *individual* matter to which I only had peripherical access through commenters' expressions. This approach has not diminished my acute awareness of algorithmic and fellow produsers' possible impacts, and these are, based on research (Allen, 2011; Rajewsky, 2002, 2010) conceptualized as the *mediation of relationships and clues* functioning at two basic levels (Compare Section 4.2.4.).

Fan's voices also figure strongly in the reviewed material, even though the arguments for anatomizing the phenomenon of fan communities are weighed differently than the arguments for sound and listening. My rationale for bypassing the highly interesting field of fan cultures is that YouTube comment rooms represent only a small part of fan life despite several characteristic community traits in comment rooms.[21] In addition, comments could as much be the result of algorithmically created echo-chambers[22] as traditional fan-culture rituals. Additionally, with comment rooms acting as public spaces, they allow for positive and negative voices to mingle, and, in turn, both fans' and critics' voices are found in the material.

[20] Compare texts on sound and sonic markers (Askerøi, 2013, 2017).
[21] Compare Section 4.1.4. Figure 1 on YouTube communities.
[22] Compare Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.3. on echo chambers and filter bubbles.

To research cyborg talentification—a term not yet present in the academic music literature—I begin my exploration with an investigation of theories on talent and the phenomenon of child prodigies and, specifically, the phenomenon of musically talented children.

## 2.1. Perspectives on talent

Before studying academic texts on talent, the empirical material was considered plainly, with no knowledge of the existing talent research. The preliminary findings of this approach placed talent on a continuum between two rather fixed and contradictory extremes—on the one side were arguments defending talent as innate and provided at birth, whereas, on the other side, more skeptical arguments considered talent to result exclusively from hard work. The material retrieved from YouTube comments was clearly dominated by arguments considering talent to be innate, God-given, and a gift bestowed on special individuals. Only a minority of commenters argued that talent was a condition that could be achieved by any determined and hardworking individual. These opinions usually occurred in comments by individuals who identified themselves as critics rather than as fans of the artist they discussed. These first observations spurred my curiosity, and I wondered how child prodigies were understood and explained in the academic discourse.

I traced several traditional theories about talent, giftedness, and talent development among children, and I found that these theories were often grounded in quantitative research in developmental psychology and neurology. Gagné (1998, 2004), Gagné and McPherson (2016), Ruthsatz et al. (2014), and Shavinina (1999), each developed particular theories that mostly offered categorization systems to detect talent. Generally, these studies were conducted with children who played classical music or with children who had shown particular mathematical skills. The results were based on a selection of the 10 percent of the most gifted children (Gagné, 2004). On the other hand, Bickford (2016, 2020), de Mink and McPherson (2016), Stabell 2018), and Vestad (2014), offered more culture-oriented, ethnographic research on talent, as well as Freeman (2005), who viewed talent and giftedness on a broader scale, noting that "no conception of giftedness or talent works in a cultural vacuum" (p. 80). Howe et al. (1998), on the other hand, approached the matter of musical talent combining a psychological and music educational view on exceptional accomplishments based on what they conceptualized as the "talent account" (p. 399).

In the following section, a selection of theories are presented, which, despite their differences, all offered links to adjacent themes in the current study's empirical material, and their conflicting traits are used to expose and discuss processes of cyborg talentification.

### 2.1.1. Discussing the possibility of innate talent

One traditional scientific model on talent is the differentiated model of giftedness and talent (DMGT) proposed by Gagné (2004). Gagné is among the best known and most acknowledged researchers on talent. Shavinina (1999) figures as another strong voice who was especially interested in children's sensitive periods. She proposed that "the child prodigy phenomenon is a result of the extremely accelerated mental development during sensitive periods that leads to the rapid growth of a child's cognitive resources and their construction into specific cognitive experience" (p. 25). Shavinina (1999) anchored her theory around the prodigy's age and the developmental leaps spurred by periods of increased cognitive sensitivity (p. 35).

According to Gagné (2004), the literature on talent is characterized by an inconsistent use of terminology. *Talent*, *giftedness*, and *prodigious performance*, are, to some theorists, interchangeable terms, whereas others deliberately use them to describe different steps of development, yet also this phenomenon could manifest in contradictory ways. Some assumed talent to come first, with giftedness following after years of practice; others decided that children were gifted and persevering adults were talented. However, Gagné stated, most researchers noted a variance between extraordinary abilities that were noticeable during a child's very young age, and extraordinary abilities that appeared later in adult life, thereby conceptualizing these abilities as "potential *versus* achievement, aptitude *versus* realization, promise *versus* fulfilment" (p. 120). According to Gagné, however, this differentiation had hardly ever been systemized—a problem he aspired to resolve. Gagné argued for a clear distinction between *talent* and *giftedness*, with giftedness being an extraordinary *gift*—implying a natural, untrained ability in at least one ability domain—that placed individuals among the top 10 percent of peers of their age. Talent, on the other hand, described the outstanding mastery of systematically developed abilities or skills and knowledge in at least one ability domain, which placed individuals at least among the top 10 percent of peers of their age (Gagné & McPherson, 2016, p. 5). Gagné (2004) explained the confusion between the two terms, talent and giftedness, by emphasizing their shared characteristics—both described human abilities and were normative, as they were used to describe non-conforming individuals (p. 120). More specifically, the normative aspect of both giftedness and talent

depended on how far from average extraordinary individuals could be placed (Gagné, 1998, p. 87).

Relating this thinking to the current research, I found that both the ordinary and the extraordinary were understood as fixed states of mind, which required certain normative conditions to be fulfilled—*the extraordinary* was explained and became confined through *the ordinary*, and vice versa. Haraway (1991) similarly delineated between the normal and the extraordinary in describing monsters' missions in society, as I discuss in Section 3.1.

The theory of DMGT suggests that talent, in whatever field, stems from inherent remarkable aptitudes or gifts, which are continuously encouraged and supported by both intrapersonal and environmental catalysts that are also an important perspective in cyborg talentification. The three basic statements that the DMGT rests upon are (a) the acceptance of natural outstanding abilities (gifts), (b) the need for various catalysts during the developmental process and (c) an understanding of talent as the product of systematically developed skills based on the first two factors. Another important element of identifying giftedness is the ability to rapidly learn and, consequently, a rapidly developing professionalism due to these extraordinary learning abilities (Gagné, 2004). In my research context, I decided that a distinction between talent and giftedness was superfluous, and even confusing, as YouTube commenters almost exclusively used *talent.* The main argument in online discussions centered on whether talent was *God-given* or the result of hard practice. The word *gift* was used occasionally and was then always associated with an innate ability received at birth; however, it functioned more as a supplemental term rather than as a replacement for talent. Despite the conflicting terminology, Gagné's core argument thus aligned with YouTube commenters' reflections and discussions about the existence of innate musical talent (or gift).

In the academic world, the discussion of *innate* versus *appropriated* abilities was identified to be a persevering core concern. Ruthsatz et al. (2014) pursued this question of talent (giftedness) as being "the product of nature or nurture" (p. 60). Developing their statement they argued that child prodigies' *very existence* sufficiently confirmed the existence of innate talent. Child prodigies, through the necessity of their young age, so their argument, ruled out the possibility of the otherwise ten years of deliberate practice needed to become an exceptionally skilled musician (p. 61).

Applying their summation theory,[23] Ruthsatz et al. claimed to have found several innate abilities among child prodigies, which enabled these prodigies to develop extraordinary skills in specific domains (p. 65), depending on their cognitive profiles. For musical prodigies, for example, one such innate skill entailed a high working memory, whereas math prodigies scored highly on visual–spatial skills (p. 64). Given this evidence, Ruthsatz et al. concluded that they had proven innate talent among some exceptional individuals. Confirming the existence of innate talent, their findings corresponded with most YouTube commenters' perceptions, even though fans' assessments obviously are based on arbitrary online stardom and individual responses. Howe et al. (1998), on the other hand, systematically deconstructed the idea of innate talent or what they defined as a *talent account*, disclosing it as a "simply exaggerated and oversimplified" (p. 407) concept. They did so by problematizing the matter that "innate talents are inferred rather than observed directly" (p. 407). Their findings indicated that the main factor for achieving extraordinary abilities comprised thousands of hours of training. Based on their research, Howe et al. took a critical stance to the selection criteria used by practitioners that were based on just as much "gut"—my words—as those of talent show judges. Howe et al. admitted that, although genetic reasons for individual differences and attributes identifiable in very few individuals could appear very rarely, the overall idea of innate talent entailed that it had to be "identifiable before the emergence of high ability,… providing a basis for predicting excellence, and … being domain-specific" (p. 407). Such practice, they claimed, was not based on knowledge. They stated that these preconceptions were crucial to see through as they colored practitioners' choices, "justifying selectivity and discrimination" (p. 407) of students without obvious and documented innate talent. Stabell (2018) developed the idea of talent assumptions, contrasting talent as "*innate and unteachable, …*[and] *graded*" (p. 110), and supplemented this with the assumption that "*musicality is something else than technique* and that *talent must be nurtured*" (p. 110).

The idea—or the myth—of a prodigy with innate abilities is keenly supported by popular culture through talent shows and the new online platforms for displaying, distributing, and consuming talent. In the context of this study, talent shows are essential, as the child stars' performances on these TV shows were rather promptly made available on YouTube from where they have become accessible for a worldwide audience. Indeed, it was first through YouTube's distribution of Angelina Jordan's "Gloomy Sunday" (TV2, 2014) that the young

[23] Summation theory entails that talent is a combination of general intelligence, domain-specific skills, and practice time (Ruthsatz et al., 2014, p. 14).

girl reached global recognition, and it was here she went "viral." The talent shows' staging of surprise, as their performances become reinstalled on YouTube, are thus put on an almost eternal repeat-button for produsers to relish.

Observing clips of talent shows on YouTube, de Mink and McPherson (2016) stated how the state of "total amazement" was desired, fostered, and, to a great extent, staged. Talent shows are built on the existence of exceptional talent and the wonders it incites in audiences. Talent shows, thus, make practical use of the satisfaction people express when being entertained by extraordinary performances. De Mink and McPherson described how talent shows are designed to trigger the adrenalin rush and goosebumps characteristic of being exposed to strong musical experiences (Compare Section 2.3.1. and Vetlesen, 2007). The specific excitement was identified as a response to the puzzlement and amazement observers experience when, as Shavinina (1999) expressed it, a young child performs technically advanced music and mediates mature emotions. The current research showed that this experience becomes intensified the more specifically and separately society perceived children's and adult's worlds to exist. This insight was perplexing, as clear distinctions between adults and children are found to conflict with the other observed trend of *youthification* (Bickford, 2020). Rasmussen (2001) expressed this trend of youthification to describe how adults strived to stay youthful and small children were drawn to teenage habits while still in preschool (p. 35). This, consequently, led to rather hazy age-related borders, and, following Bickford (2020), especially so in the online environment. I found this paradox of, on the one hand, constructing ideas about confined, standardized childhoods making young talents seem even more amazing and, on the other hand, wiping out distinct generations for the sake of everlasting youthfulness to be reflected in the contradictory perspectives on child stars in the data. These two discourses seemed incompatible, yet they co-existed and strangely supplemented each other, supported by "society at large" as I will discuss in the interview material retrieved from YouTube in Chapter 6.

In the conceptualization of talent, as well as in cyborg talentification processes, underlying cultural ideas about childhood seemed to play a major part. These diverging cultural ideas were caught in a conflict between the traditional view of the pure "Wunderkind" status and the desire for an everlasting youthful society where music genres and tastes, as well as performances and their consumption, can run crisscross between generations. As Bickford (2016) noted, the tricky question of extraordinariness becomes especially tricky in "genres that foreground performances of sociocultural identity in place of or in addition to technical

musical skill” (p. 753). Sociocultural identities are carried by genre and sociocultural settings (Frith, 1998), and, thus, performing jazz, punk, or pop hip hop, on a stage as *Norske Talenter* or *MGPjr* entails that young artists are put into a particular frame and provided with ready-made social and cultural roles. This thought was linked to the research conducted by Bickford (2016) who wondered whether the question of children performing qualitatively at so-called adult professional levels could be answerable at all (p. 753), and, with this reflection, he turned the child prodigy discourse upside down.

## 2.2. Childhood, child prodigies, and the tween moment

Upon entering the domain of the internet, it can be easily perceived that the notion of the child prodigy has received various colorings, from the more traditional ones displaying small Wunderkind representatives on YouTube (de Mink & McPherson, 2016) to more sensational and yet ordinary versions found in the role of *YouTubers* (Bickford, 2016). As child prodigy norms have thus become still more variable through technology and social platforms since the time of Mozart, talented children in all genres succeed to attract even vaster and more compound audiences.

### 2.2.1. YouTube and child prodigies

As is common practice today, TV talent programs become, almost simultaneously to their broadcasting, available as video footage on YouTube. This is especially true for all types of talent performances, but especially those involving children, as these have proven to be extremely popular video material on participating platforms, resulting in high viewer numbers. On YouTube, fans can revisit their favorite events and share their views and feelings about the performances. Thus, online platforms have affected the media routines of the general public and they have also simultaneously given access to novel modes of research. Before the advent of the internet, the practice of conducting studies specifically among gifted children might have required traveling long distances, observing these children over many years, and conducting interviews with them, their parents, and teachers. Now, young stars, who have an online presence facilitate the researcher with hours and hours of video materials from many aspects of their lives as prodigies. Online availability is though combined with the obvious snag of researchers being unable to control how uninterrupted and representative these video footage might be. Also, as online research is still rather young, online methods are continuously developing and changing parallel to the social media platforms and the services

they intend to investigate. Recent research on musical talent, conducted by Bickford (2016) and de Mink and McPherson (2016), offered valuable contributions to this study's intentions and conceptualizations. Online platforms showed clearly, de Mink and McPherson (2016) strongly emphasized, that there is a "stark difference between how the general public typically classifies and defines musical prodigies as opposed to . . . scientific models" (p. 424). In the following, I will discuss first some of Bickford's (2016) findings from his research on Justin Bieber's YouTube activities, and then the research by de Mink and McPherson (2016) on prodigy niches on YouTube.

This stark difference accentuated by de Mink and McPherson (2016) was also emphasized by Bickford (2016), who distanced himself from the criteria of talent measurements as used by theories such as DMGT. Bickford criticized the limited insights that research, based on, as Gagné and McPherson (2016) specified, "the top 10% of the relevant reference group" (p. 5), could provide. Bickford (2016) argued that such a selection clearly showed "how social inequality and hierarchy are already built into concepts such as child musical prodigy" (p. 751). He claimed that understanding the instrumentalized inequality in these concepts would help to unpack how *prodigy* and *talent* in fact "contribute actively to forms of popular cultural celebrity in large-scale capitalist societies like ours" (p. 751). Bickford called, thus, for a critical approach to prodigy and talent, and emphasized the need to map their influence, because, "to identify someone as a child musical prodigy—that such a category even exists for a community—is to express powerful ideas about the role and meaning of both music and childhood, and even more about their relationship" (p. 752). He transmitted the notion of social inequality and hierarchy to the lower status which adults traditionally have assigned to children as a group, a view he based on Jenkins' (1998) research. Considering these built-in hierarchies, Bickford (2016) fronted the idea of a restart of the child prodigy discourse. Discussing Justin Bieber, he drew attention to the astonishing fact that the young YouTube star managed to fill the whole of Madison Square Garden with an audience mainly compounded of young people. He argued that this achievement really should "call into question some basic ideas about children's role in public life, in the economy, and in their families" (pp. 752–753) and also raise children's status as active cultural and economic contributors to society. The very nature of child prodigies implied crossing boundaries, which had traditionally been perceived as fixed, he claimed (p. 752). Child prodigies, therefore, entered adult spheres, not only from an ideological perspective bound up with their abilities but also from a more pragmatic and economic perspective. Bickford found that online, the

term “child prodigy,” just as the term ”bedroom culture,” directed its searchlight on the smoldering dichotomies of public versus private and child versus adult (p. 763), a matter that has also been discussed in this study. Thus, Bickford surmised, the term “child prodigy” was connected with adult-like achievements, which legitimated their child embodiment” (p. 763). In case of Bieber, in particular, the term child prodigy

> involve[d] a complicated inversion of talent and childishness—or even talent as childishness. So rather than credentialing Bieber as fully adult, having surpassed certain developmental milestones and proved his exceptionality, prodigy does the reverse here. There is no aspiration to adulthood. Instead, conventionally adult forms of popular cultural success are domesticated, or even infantilized—treated not as the hard-won endpoint of a developmental ladder, but as straightforward and unproblematically childish. (pp. 763–764)

*Talent as childishness* entailed what Bickford conceptualized as the intermarriage of the traditional *child prodigy* concept and the new *tween* concept. He identified this intermarriage as an attempt by contemporary children’s media to justify their entry into childhood places so that they could impose their visions of commercial mass celebrity and popular stardom on young children (p. 764). Consequently, he attributed great importance to the cultural values present in the western capitalist institution of the child star, as they—by appropriating a norm of child performance in popular music—could explain the “changing media environment in which child performers are more and more prominent while child audiences are more and more influential” (p. 752).

The commercial perspective also featured in de Mink and McPherson’s (2016) investigations of *prodigy niches* on YouTube. Prodigy niches are YouTube spaces with videos of very young children playing instruments with great virtuosity or performing vocally at high levels. The study conducted by de Mink and McPherson was limited to a selection of 23, non-representative sample videos of children under the age of ten. In their niche, the piano was found to be the dominant instrument, and even though they strove to include prodigies from as many nations as possible, their efforts were countered by the simple fact that “some national cultures [were] more inclined toward celebrating exceptional performance than others” (p. 425). They identified four major influences that characterized the exposure of mainly very young talented individuals on YouTube. For instance, as I already mentioned in Section 1.1., they observed that the traditional places to gain societal prestige in modern times

had been replaced by participation and performances at prominent talk shows, which held true not only in the United States but also in small countries such as Norway. YouTube's archival function was found to enable spaces for verification and foster insights into prodigies' musical engagement and improvement across the span of many years in so-called biography channels (p. 433). De Mink and McPherson evaluated these channels to be a means of imposing pressure on the prodigies, as their accomplishments could easily be compared to that of others, thereby creating expectations for future performances. Moreover, negative responses, according to de Mink and McPherson, often focused on "suspected abuse, parental pressure, commercial interest, or excessive involuntary practice" (p. 432). Also, they found that thousands of subscribers to a YouTube niche did not necessarily imply that the particular prodigy received offline media attention, such as through winning some kind of—offline—competition (p. 434). Although this last point did not correspond with the current study's selection of musicians, it did draw attention to the assumed gap between virtual and real-life talent. This indirectly reconfirmed my prerequisites for the selection of child pop stars as having to be visible in online and offline worlds, in order to ensure their *actual existence* and to guarantee a certain equality with regard to the preconditions of their success.

De Mink and McPherson (2016) made a point of referring to YouTube as a commercial platform (p. 435) also by influencing netizens' choices. That YouTube is commercial has certainly become more and more true, even though it is still possible to join the platform without investing more resources than paying for regular internet access. Yet, admittedly, once I had experienced the premium paying member version of YouTube without the constant interruptions of advertisements, it really seemed unthinkable to put up with the free, advertisement-flooded version. Yet, the existence of advertisement was only a small slice of the commerciality de Mink and McPherson had in mind. They suspected various commercial forces to control how produsers perceived children's musical talent, and, through their choices, determined whether a video would go viral while another would not (p. 436). They wondered the extent to which YouTube produsers were manipulated by "commercial packaging and scripted marketing strategies" (p. 436), which could blur, distort, and change the actual extraordinariness of children's abilities. These manipulations, de Mink and McPherson claimed, problematized commonly applied tools to measure children's musical talent as authenticity[24] and uniqueness (p. 436). They arrived at these conclusions based on their analyses of YouTube dialogues between prodigies and jury members, which they found

[24] Neither authenticity nor uniqueness was further elaborated on by de Mink and McPherson (2016).

to insinuate the fabrication of (prodigy) answers to convey (prodigy) authenticity to audiences. By embracing normal childhood wishes—such as getting a dog or spending time at playgrounds—jury members contrasted the amazing fact that *although* or *despite* being a *normal* child, living up to the expectations of normality and a safe childhood, a genius could live within these small, childish bodies. Consequently, de Mink and McPherson argued, to trace even just a hint of individuality in children's performances in these prodigy niches, was almost impossible because they always entailed the prospect of fabrication (p. 438). With that supposition, they foregrounded a universal truth for most internet materials involving children—it cannot be known whether the young participants are speaking freely or whether they are made to conform to adult conceptions of childishness, "Mozart-likeness," or other cultural stereotypes (p. 438). To a certain degree, this uncertainty has always been true, I suggest, as children are manipulated and educated to do, answer, and act as the adults, who they depend on, tell them to. If anything, this tendency has become enforced and commercially exploited on social platforms, and here, as in the case of YouTube niches, such discourse has shown to be heavily supported by the parents. De Mink and McPherson summed up their research rather pessimistically by posing the open question about who, if anybody, would continue to appreciate child prodigies once they had become adults (p. 439).

As the prodigy experience was seemingly closely bound to the power imbalance between children and adults (Bickford, 2016; de Mink & McPherson, 2016), and there were clear, "culturally specific views of childhood innocence" (Bickford, 2016, p. 752), I determined a closer investigation of what it might mean to be a child and live a childhood in the Western society, to be relevant.

### 2.2.2. (Musical) childhoods and interpretive reproduction

Bernstein (2013) developed an unusual and unconventional image of *childhood* by comparing it with *performance*. She placed the two concepts on a timeline of development, stating that "both are paradoxically present only through their impending absence" (p. 205). Performance, and childhood, disappeared the moment they had begun and both concepts were accompanied by mourning over their loss. Therefore, following Bernstein, childhood was "best understood as an act of surrogation that compensates for losses incurred through growth" (p. 205). Children's small bodies were as much a surrogate or effigy for something lost as performances were surrogates for lived experiences (p. 204). Bernstein's arguments inform

especially the discussion vis-à-vis the Marcus & Martinus cyborg talentification case in Section 5.4.3.

Throughout history, the practice of defining childhood has ever been a complicated matter (Campbell & Wiggins, 2012). Medieval society likely lacked a consciousness of children as anything other than small adults; at least, artistic depictions from the Middle Ages suggest so (Ariès, 1962/1996, p. 31). Until the end of the nineteenth century, interest in children mainly centered around who they might become instead of who they might be at the present moment, Corsaro (2018, p. 6) stated. During the twentieth century, children and childhood received unprecedented attention, thereby marking the *century of the child* (James & Prout, 2015). As Corsaro (2018) described, scholars like Vygotsky and Piaget[25] criticized the old deterministic models that viewed children as merely someone, or even some*thing*, unfinished and in need of adequate shaping. The old models were based on society's appropriation of the child (Corsaro, 2018, p. 7), whereas new constructivist models defended by Vygotsky and Piaget included the child as an agent. Still, their approaches did not completely satisfy Corsaro, either, who admitted to struggle with the term *socialization* as such, which so strongly insinuated the idea of guiding individuals towards a specific future (p. 18). Corsaro, in turn, created his own concept of *interpretive reproduction*, which was thought to capture children's creative involvement in society through their peer cultures. Interpretive reproduction conceptualized children's ability not only to absorb but also to be "actively contributing to cultural production and change" (p. 399). It also accentuated the importance of children's surroundings and embedded contexts, thereby creating differing developmental pathways to reach common goals, as found by Azmitia (2002). According to her, interpretive reproduction "views issues of power and equity as central to developmental analyses" (p. 357) and shows how children within their peer cultures reenact and "interpretatively reproduce societal power structures" (p. 358). The blend of creative contribution and dependency is suggested, in the current study, not to be limited to childhood but to extend to adolescence, and thus relevant for this study's cases as discussed in Sections 5.3.4., 5.4.4., 5.5.4, and Chapters 6 and 7. There, Corsaro's (1992, 2018) concept of interpretive reconstruction was used to embed child stars' appropriation of adult popular music into a wider perspective, identifying a unique creative power in child stars' expressions with which they actively contribute to change and development in popular music culture. Children's peer cultures, which are vital in Corsaro's

[25] Piaget (1896–1980) developed the theory of cognitive development, and Vygotsky (1896–1934) developed the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development.

conceptualization, are in the current study replaced by the assemblage of commenters and other cocreating cyborgs.

Generally, in present childhood studies, the child-as-subject perspective[26] has become a common matter, which implies an awareness of and an eagerness to listen to children as the recognized experts of their own lives. Despite this resolution, I observe that both in educational circles and in public awareness, children are still also thought of as the important contributors and maintainers of *tomorrow's* society rather than as representatives of their own culture. Nevertheless, the new sociology of childhood redefined childhood identity to be socially constructed by both society and the child itself (Matthews, 2007, p. 324). This society within which, and with which, children engage in and contribute to the discourse was by Solberg (2015) understood as built up of macro- and micro levels. This implied that childhood was both constructed within the larger society within specific times and specific cultures, and also within individual family units. Family cultures, as identified by Solberg, displayed increasingly divergent views on what it meant to be a child, what childhood was supposed to hold, and how parents were expected to follow up their children. Solberg observed that in later times, at least in Western cultures, "the shaping of particular childhoods *is* the family's task, particularly in relation to ideas of age and conceptions of dependence" (p.111). Solberg also found this to be true in the shaping of *musical* childhoods as pairing musicality and talent with notions of childhood often caused frictions evoked by cultural and family-based disagreements.

Thus, society as well as family structures were identified to have a major impact on whether and in which way children were encouraged to engage in their musicality, as also described by Vestad (2014) and her research in Norwegian kindergartens. Vestad observed musical practices with and by children themselves, both in the kindergarten and in their homes. She noted that parents ascribed their children different musical subject positions based on the parents' own preconceived ideas. Often it was a child's defined temperament rather than its actual musicality that proved decisive for parents' judgement, and once one child in the family was appointed to be "the musical one," the others could not be musical (Vestad, 2014). This assumption of musicality to be a *scarce resource* (p. 265) was found by Vestad to be part of a two-sided discourse. The first being *only the talented can*, which was most prevalent in the family homes, and the other being *everybody is musical*, which was mainly found in the

[26] Compare, for example, Vestad (2014, p. 257).

sampled kindergarten, and exemplified by all the singing routines throughout the different activities of the day where all children were perceived as happy to join in (p. 267). Another point made by Vestad, which is perhaps especially true in the Nordic context, was that extraordinary talent might not necessarily be considered a positive thing at all, because "healthy" childhood was supposed to be innocent and carefree. Indeed, Vestad met attitudes that condemned encouraging a talented child to practice an instrument every day. Such practices were by parents perceived to pressure the child into a negative and unhealthy way of life, and the discipline needed to practice every day was judged to counteract the child's natural need for free play (p. 268). Vestad, therefore, offered a third discourse, a moving-beyond of the two dichotomies based on Small's (1998) term of musicking and modeled a narrative of the "musicker" (Small, 1998, p. 248), the "happy, talented, committed, musical child" (Vestad, 2014, p. 270), who displays an intrinsic interest and engagement in daily music practice. This musicking discourse invited me to include what Kulset (2018) described as every person's *musical capital*. Kulset did not use musical capital in the way Bourdieu first introduced the term, in the sense of being connected to taste, but rather as a kind of social capital (p. 104), thereby referring to an inherent potential that enables individuals to freely engage in their musicality.

One process fundamental to the—assumed—cocreation of talent comprised the assimilation of young children as a new consumer demographic. This assimilation gradually developed across the span of the last century and was carried out by two diverging discourses. Whiteley (2003) represents the skeptical voices, which harshly declare that there is no such thing as "the 'innocent eye' in contemporary society" (p. 29). Following Whiteley, the renewed interest in children over the last century was best described as an adult obsession to both depict and use young children in arts and movies, often loosely clothed or quite naked, be it as chubby angels in churches or as miniature actors, playing adult scenes in productions such as in the *Baby Burlesk* series (ChangeBeforeGoingProductions) in the 1930s. These short films were promoted as critiquing society. They starred very young children and toddlers such as Shirley Temple, who, owing to their age—Shirley Temple's parents signed her *Baby Burlesk* contract when she was only four years old—were unable to make themselves heard. The *Baby Burlesk* productions unmistakably showed pedophilic features and had possibly been prepared by the questionable "appeal of the eroticized child during the nineteenth century . . . [which reflected] a disturbing alliance between fine art and child pornography" (Whiteley, 2003, p. 26). As a matter of fact, these movies can be compared to modern reality shows such as the

*Toddlers & Tiaras* series, a program broadcast on TLC between 2009 and 2013. Although *Toddlers & Tiaras* have been declared controversial, many episodes are still available on YouTube.[27] At the core of the show are preschool girls, preferably still toddlers, who get dressed up as beauty queens, competing for best outfits and best—most sexy—movements on stage, judged by grown-up juries and competitive parents.

The other discourse defends views of children in need of protection from adult worlds and adult desires. These attitudes were mirrored in what was then was supposed to be appropriate music for children. Traditionally, children's music—and, more specifically, music *for* children—targeted very young children, preferably in the company of adults, at home, or in preschool, and not "kids together with their friends" (Bickford, 2020, p. 2). These songs are mainly educational, in minor or major ways, counting toes, recognizing colors, or serving as accompaniment to daily practical chores and rhythms such as washing, baking, waking, and falling asleep. They are often made up of pentatonic or simple, repetitive tunes and with lyrics that are generally regarded as child-appropriate. Though not necessarily devoid of death, hurt, or evil, they are certainly devoid of sex and romance,[28] the latter two comprising the main themes of the growing pop music industry. Possibly sensing the tensions and disagreement between the different views of childhood, the music industry followed children's development into the spotlight of society's attention, thereby ensuring children's integration into the music market. For a struggling industry, the possibility of making music for children as performers and consumers was quickly identified as a possible gold mine (Bickford, 2020). Once children had become active consumers and producers of both popular culture and popular music, the line between adults' and children's worlds was again blurred. Simultaneously, age as a "key marker of identity and affiliation" (Bickford, 2012, p. 417) reappeared, assigning children and their music an ambiguous role in media and society generally. The contradictory demands and discourses that appeared in the wake of young performers did not go unnoticed, and were identified as a "double-consciousness" (Bickford, 2012, p. 431) and also as a "parallel canon" (Vestad & Dyndahl, 2017, p. 11) in parents' negotiations on behalf of their—at talent shows—performing children.

I suggest that the twenty-first century can be said to carry agelessness and eternal youthfulness conceptualized as *youthification*, as well as distinct ideas on childhood and

[27] For example, see https://youtu.be/I0keCRE3iik.
[28] Children's songs do not, however, exclude such favorite themes as marriage, husband and wife, and so on. Yet, these kind of lyrics mainly serve to maintain gender roles in society and, in general, do not include personal or detailed eroticized dreams about love.

adulthood. An important asset, or a result, of the youthfulness in popular music and culture is represented by *tween* artists.

### 2.2.3. Tweens, popular music, and childhood innocence

According to Bickford (2020), the *tween moment,* as he called the period from 2001 to 2011 retrospectively, was just this—a ten year moment in American popular culture that has in recent times faded into a less spectacular, less articulated music format among many others (p. 186). For the current study, the discussions and the conceptualizations of the tween moment have served as a means to understand how tweens' engagement within popular music has prepared and contributed to the legalization and normalization of the extensive celebration of child stars on platforms as for example YouTube. Therefore, I will in the following section present and discuss Bickford's (2012, 2020) findings and conceptualizations of the *tween era*. At the dawn of the tween moment, preschool children and adolescents were embraced as a new, targeted consumer demographic referred to as tweens, and these young children were flooded with music products "that teetered between the pleasurable intimacies of children and the defiantly autonomous consumption of teenagers" (Bickford, 2020, p. 2). Bickford's periodization of the tween period ends with tween star Justin Bieber—or, rather, Bieber's film *Never Say Never*, which, following the findings in Bickford's study, had overcome the paradox of children's popular music engagement (p. 173). Bickford (2016) noted the film's clear focus on all the aspects of child performance in changing times, and, by instrumentalizing these aspects, also legitimized them. Bickford (2020) identified the underlying strategies used by the media to justify their commercialization of child stars as a "marriage between 'old' concepts like child musical prodigy and 'new' ones like tweens and online video sharing" (p. 764). I have addressed the conceptualization of this intermarriage process specifically in the discussion of child stars' gateways into adulthood in Section 6.1. Bickford's (2016) focus on contemporary children's media is, in the current study, replaced with a focus on fans' and critics' comment material, and their data is assessed in correlation with media utterances and the discursive levels of cyborg talentification discussed specifically in Sections 5.3.2, 5.4.2., 5.5.2., and Chapter 6.

Bickford (2020) argued that once the new consumer demographic of tweens had been discovered and established, it quickly developed into a successful business and pop music appeared in a new guise on children's screens. Pop music's focus on sex and adult relationships did not fit into the childhood vision of innocence, and yet this "adjusted" focus

managed to gain trust from both young consumers and their parents. Bickford described how this trust was possible because the music industry by and by managed to transform childhood "into a cultural identity like race and gender" (p. 5). Somehow, the music industry succeeded in preserving and intensifying essential childhood traits and packing them into popular music, transforming the pop music genre into a natural and welcomed part of children's musical lives. Bickford observed how popular music became a portal through which children and childhood were integrated into and made part of popular culture. Media succeeded in overcoming the perceived unsurmountable tensions between the values of childhood and the values of pop music by emphasizing the "underlying complementarity as cultural symbols" (p. 6) of pop music and childhood. Traditional childhood values such as innocence, privacy, and dependency, and popular music themes such as love and romance were consequently identified as overlapping and not polarizing tendencies, initiating processes of adult infantilization and child maturation (p. 10). As *tween pop* and *tween media* established itself, both mainstream music and adult audiences were drawn into their magnetic field (Bickford, 2012, p. 419). This made adults more childish and children grow older more quickly, leading to a general *age compression* (Bickford, 2020, p. 17). Bickford observed how big industries, such as the Disney market, understood the opportunity of making mainstream pop music available for children as young as four and as old as fifteen years. The concept of KidzBop,[29] an American vocal group of children performing pop songs in child-friendly environments, cleverly made children their own agents in popular music. By eliminating offensive language and allowing children to perform as themselves, KidzBop contributed to legitimizing pop–rock content and performance for the very young (Bickford, 2012, p. 423). The act of replacing pop artists' individual voices with an anonymous mass of "ordinary" children's voices can be said to have incited a democratizing of pop music—by removing the *grain*[30] of the individual pop singer and replacing it with something maybe even closer to the song's "essence" (T. Bickford, personal communication, May 20, 2021). The observation that the Kidz Bop's project in some way or other changed the view on children's and adults' voices (Bickford, 2020) offered another interesting and relevant view on young pop stars' appropriation of mainstream pop music in my context.

The gradual blending together of traditional childhood values and popular music in the tween moment was, indeed, rather remarkable. It was contrasted by the myth of childhood innocence

[29] KidzBop is a commercialized kids' vocal band founded in 2001 in the USA, with live tours, music videos, radio performances, and merchandise. For more information, visit https://kidzbop.com/.
[30] Barthes (1990) and the *grain* are introduced in Section 2.4.2.

that, for example, Jenkins (1998) identified as a means to “regulate cultural hierarchies, [and] to separate the impure influence of popular culture from the sanctifying touch of high culture” (p. 15). The idea of a sanctifying ability among innocent and pure children was also investigated by O’Connor (2009) in her analyses of child stars. By opposing the depiction of child prodigies as victims of an evil and destructive adult world, she endeavored to give young talents rather a status of autonomy and power as actors performing a mission in society (p. 216). O’Connor accomplished this goal by lifting child prodigies to the level of mythical heroes with supernatural powers—an archetypal subject position that has always existed in mythology. Discussing modern child stars against the backdrop of ancient mythologies, O’Connor defined child prodigies’ exceptionalism as embodying “the facets of childhood which represent the ideal in that society at that particular time” (p. 218). In her analysis, O’Connor applied psychologist Jung’s theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious to understand the reason behind why modern society included child stars at all (p. 215). She determined that modern society assigned child stars the task of fulfilling a fundamental need as giving hope, refueling the belief in innocence, and even restoring a—possibly lost—connection with the divine (p. 224). O’Connor’s findings suggested that the smaller, more natural, and more innocent, children were, the more palatable appeared their adult-like achievements and the more effectively they could satisfy what O’Connor identified as an ancient, human need. O’Connor fronted that adults’ strong reactions upon viewing innocent, gifted children should not be regarded as exploitations but, rather, as a way to acknowledge these children’s powers. In YouTube comments, references to the angelic nature of Angelina Jordan resonate with O’Connor’s analysis, yet O’Connor’s superchild image—representing a timeless archetype (p. 216) with Christ-like qualities—was also associable with adults’ unhealthy obsession with perfect little children, which Whiteley (2003) described. This association again remade child stars’ image into victims of adults’ needs instead of powerful and culturally important symbols that O’Connor (2009) found them to be.

Jenkins (1998) thought the image of the innocent child to, in many ways, also serve a politically convenient myth. The child, by virtue of its innocence, was pictured as free of any desires and wishes (p. 2), and in that sense, the child was an easily moldable object. Assumed childhood innocence placed children outside of society and stripped them of their agency, he observed. They became objects used as pawns in political and economic arguments with respect to everything from fights for civil rights to fueling anxieties on technological development (p. 2). Therefore, keeping children and childhood as innocent as possible was

also by Jenkins identified as a cultural, commercial, and political necessity. As Warwick (2016) keenly observed, “the child must appear vulnerable, so that the audience experiences anxiety about her (or his) safety” (p. 719), activating adults’ feelings of protection and power become activated for to maintain children’s safety and innocence.

The described collision between cultural and political perspectives on child prodigies and childhood innocence found resonance in the current study’s data derived from YouTube comment rooms and interviews. The tween approach, transforming impure popular music into child-accepted material opened a vast music market supported by very young audiences. Entering participatory platforms such as YouTube, the tween project created extensive fora for “sharing feelings” evoked by vlistening to children performing pop music. The data from the current study indicated that musical experiences, when triggered by child stars’ performances, often included notions of authenticity. Yet, even though concepts as *musical experience* and *authenticity* are used in common language as if they were self-explanatory, they can elicit controversy in academic contexts. I considered therefore both musical experience and authenticity as interesting and relevant notions in my research context, and I will discuss them in the next sections. They will be linked to questions of identity and artistic persona, the function of cover songs, and the importance of the voice in popular music and in a cyborg talentification perspective.

## 2.3. Musical experience, authenticity, identity, and artistic persona

### 2.3.1. Musical experience and authenticity

In Norwegian, as well as in the German language, two words are available to describe varying degrees of a musical experience—musical *opplevelse* and musical *erfaring*. The first word, *opplevelse*, describes a more fleeting sensation—one of many, such as all the feelings one might have experienced during a vacation. Regarding music, Vetlesen (2007) differed between more superfluous *opplevelser* and strong, existential *erfaringer*. The latter has the power to touch one’s heart and mind so thoroughly that the experience causes bodily responses, such as goosebumps, dizziness, a racing heart, and chills. Per the 2006 Norwegian curriculum, which formulated both these levels of musical experience as an educational goal, the English version of the curriculum expresses grades of musical experience as an aesthetic perception and an existential experience (Merkelbach, 2014, p. 20). Aesthetic perception versus existential experience encompasses most, yet not all, of the *opplevelse–erfaring*

dichotomy. In an academic context, and as a German and Norwegian speaker, my possession of only *experience* at hand in English writing can, therefore, be frustrating. In addition to the actual content difference offered by the two Norwegian/German terms, the words' dissimilar sound textures are also missing in English. In popular use of the Norwegian language, though, little consciousness surrounds that distinction, and the terming of existential could be even experienced as bombastic[31] (Merkelbach, 2014, p. 57). In the current study's data, different experience levels were by commenters mostly expressed by adding adjectives to nouns or by painstakingly describing bodily reactions in detail. According to Vetlesen (2007) existential musical experiences involve characteristics resembling the quality of a meeting (p. 40). Strong musical experiences move individuals deeply by placing them in contact with what he identified as "unavoidable basic conditions" (p. 41).[32] Vetlesen referred to these conditions as dependency, vulnerability, mortality, relational fragility, and existential loneliness.[33] Comparable to an unexpected meeting, an existential experience "sharpens the subject" (p. 44), and, just like this, a strong musical experience can take individuals by surprise. Vetlesen maintained that existential meetings could only happen once in a while by virtue of their intensity, as the contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary had to be appreciated and accommodated. In the context of the current study, I identified the power of enforcing an experience through its notion of surprise as a strategy frequently and consequently used in mediated performance settings. The data also showed that surprise, rather ironically, could be staged and prepared in the right environments, camouflaged as spontaneous acts.

The staging of surprise was found to take many forms, and *reaction videos* on YouTube are one example. Here, the reposting of performances, such as Jordan's performance at the *America's Got Talent: The Champions* show (*AGT: The Champions*), is built on the premise of reusing this surprise factor. Presentations are often introduced with an opening line, such as "This is the first time I ever heard about Angelina Jordan, and I am really excited." Respondents' replies are supposed to sound spontaneous and authentic, real and happening in the moment. I suspected reaction videos to enact some kind of produser power in the processes of authentication and cyborg talentification of a specific star, which I discuss in the Jordan reaction video in Section 5.5. Many popular music videos have received reaction videos whose self-declared goal is to promote the music to which reactions are provided. Anybody can create reaction videos and channels. Copyright issues are often avoided

[31] In Norwegian, *svulstig*.
[32] In Norwegian, *ufravikelige grunnvilkår*.
[33] In Norwegian, *avhengighet, sårbarhet, dødelighet, relasjoners skjørhet og eksistensiell ensomhet*.

creatively, and various *Do-It-Yourself* (DIY) videos on YouTube share the tricks of the trade—for example, how to avoid the cancellation of footage or their blocking due to copyright violations. While watching the original video together with fans on the other side of the interface, respondents make shorter comments and, afterwards, offer longer, more coherent comments sharing their personal opinions. Produsers respond in return, commenting both on the verbal reactions and the music shared. The vast amount of reaction videos on YouTube indicates that they are a popular genre, which might be connected to the amplifying impact on fans' own musical experiences. In this way, reaction videos are comparable to television talent shows, where judges' facial and oral reactions, audiences' massive applause, seem to accelerate the publics' feelings. Comments about and on reaction channels by fans confirm these amplifying effects. Some just appreciate that their own musical reflections are confirmed and strengthened by the reaction, whereas others describe how they discover particular music through reaction channels and how grateful they are for that exposure. Some critical commenters label reaction videos to be a waste of server space and reaction monitors as "people without own accomplishment, just feeding on other people's success," thereby sneering at the argument that reactions provide economic profit (only) for the artists reacted on. In her defense, the content creator stressed the economic profit for the artists she was reacting on as well as the PR impact and resulting expansion of fans.

Commenters and monitors of reaction video otherwise frequently describe their emotions with vocabulary that Moore (2002) related to authenticity, like "real," "with integrity," "truthful," and "genuine" (p. 209). To identify the authenticity perceived in audiences' musical experiences and reactions was, so Moore, just as vital as to identify the authenticity of the musical performance. Concerning the latter, Moore wondered whether "in a postmodern world where appropriation (of material by producers of music) is everywhere evident, [authenticity] no longer carries its originary force," (p. 210) and whether authenticity, instead of being associated with a whole experience, could rather be connected to parts of an experience, such as sound and sonic experiences. Traditionally, the perceived and actual intimacy and immediacy in unmediated musical practices were the key marks to identify authenticity in performances (p. 211). Grossberg (1992) described the recognition of authenticity as an *aesthetic value*, and as opposed to entertainment, especially within the rock genre (p. 206). Coulter (2017) observed *gendered authenticity*, finding that authenticity was discussed more often among girls than boys. Her findings showed that girls connected

authenticity with a musician's identity and life experience (Coulter, 2017, p. 5), constructing an what she called an *autobiographical authenticity*.

Moore (2002) discussed three existing authenticities, *first-, second-* and *third-person authenticities*, his conclusion, though, was that the important matter was not so much *who* was called authentic, but *what* (p. 220). With this, he ascribed perceivers of music a dominant status in the authentication process, and, subsequently, as having a major impact on the performed music's success. Moore emphasized that future academic attention should move "towards the activities of various perceivers, and should focus on the reasons they might have for finding, or failing to find, a particular performance authentic" (p. 221). The extensive mechanisms of publics' empowerment to authenticate made sense in the current study's participatory YouTube environment and the discussion of cyborg talentification processes. Commenters' voices are important, if not decisive, for performers' success. Liking or disliking videos, sharing posts, writing comments and reactions, or merely adding another view to a video, might increase its popularity and accessibility, making it more viewed, visible and, consequently, more successful. Commenters' power to boost a video can be enforced by what Burgess and Green (2018) identified as the perfect YouTube video containing "combinations of intimacy, humour, and irreverence, carefully balancing authenticity, community and brand relationships" (p. 37). Here, by Burgess and Green, authenticity is listed as a concept of whose content there exists an unspoken agreement.

Overall, the management and mediation of musical experience and authenticity seem to go hand-in-hand, not only in acoustic music appreciation settings but possibly even more so in the online environment. In the next sections, I will investigate existing scholarship (Auslander, 2021; Barker, 2012; Barthes, 1990; Cusic, 2010; Dunsby, 2009; Dyndahl et al., 2020; Frith, 1998, 2007; Frith and Goodwin, 1990; Hansen, 2019; Haraway, 1991; Hearsum & Inglis, 2013; Mosser, 2008; Plasketes, 2005, 2010; Ruud, 2012; Shuker, 2016; Suhr, 2012) on both "who," in my context might be authenticated, and "what," which implies discussing questions of artistic personae, identity, popular music, cover songs, and the voice from a cyborg talentification perspective.

### 2.3.2. Must we not also talk of identity and artistic persona?

The postmodern perception of identity as incoherent, multiple, decentered, fractured, and fragmented (Barker, 2012, p. 225) has in this study been expanded by Haraway's (1991) positioning process of the cyborg and posthuman existence, as discussed in Section 3.1.

Identity is, therefore, in my context not treated as a normative and fixed concept but is instead used to indicate a momentary, relatable, and yet changeable *subject position*. One specific aspect of this identity, which emerged from the data of comments, comprised the power of music to act as a *memory depot*, a term coined by Ruud (2013) in his study on music and identity. Music, according to Ruud, can take on memory functions in the sense that listening to, or sudden exposure to, particular songs one used to appreciate earlier in life triggers listeners' consciousness of former identities and particular places people connect to this music. Following Ruud, musical experiences are stored in our spine, ready to come to the surface whenever called upon (p. 262). In the current study, *identity* has been used as a term to link to other concepts as, for example, a specific childhood or child prodigy identity. Child stars' identities, on the other hand, are understood in terms of their *artistic personae*. Discussing the personal persona of The BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus, and Angelina Jordan, or their fans and critics for that matter, would have required a different methodological and ethical approach, including at least one instance of direct contact with informants, and with consent asked for and given. Observations and findings on the internet, in contrast, were understood as fragments that cocreated musicians' artistic personae, a personae placed online for public consumption and appreciation. In that sense, I aligned with the stance adopted by Auslander (2021) who viewed "music as an expressive resource musicians use to perform their personae" (p. 37), and I added the YouTube platform's specific possibilities and catalysts.

This consideration of artistic personae led to Hansen (2019), who identified the artistic persona to be "multiply constructed through sound recordings, music videos, live performances, interviews, social media posts, and a variety of other means" (p. 501). Hansen's multimodal model describing the cocreation of artistic personae complemented well with the current study where the process of assigning talent was anticipated to be carried out by numerous catalysts. In my context, the multimodal cocreation of artistic personae was in addition read specifically through an age lens, considering the young age of the pop stars. The very notion of being a child and youth was found to be a marker of their artistic personae—as they performed, discussed, and shared their interpretively reproduced popular music in the YouTube context—and also a trigger and lever into their cyborg talentification process. In order to contextualize this process more profoundly, certain aspects of popular music and performance had to be considered.

## 2.4. Popular music, cover songs, and the voice

Writing about, thinking about, and analyzing popular culture and popular music required an explanation of what the common share word “popular” was adding to culture and music. “Popular,” as such, means liked, enjoyed, and supported by many people. Shuker (2016) settled on a characterization of popular culture as “commercial, cultural forms of entertainment with markets as an inescapable feature” (p. 4). Popular music can also only be defined in generalized terms, Shuker added, though it comprises a mosaic of diverse musical expressions and genres. The common element in popular music, according to Shuker, would be a steady beat and a relative dependence on electronic amplification (p. 5). In addition, popular music is produced for the masses and stretches from carefully produced products to elevator music permeating modern lives. Popular music’s value has been debated, rejected, fought for, and eventually accepted or at least envisaged as accepted. Certainly, Frith (1998) was convinced that “the utopian impulse, the *negation* of everyday life, the aesthetic impulse that Adorno recognized in high art, must be part of low art too” (p. 20). Still, the process of including popular music in academic discourse has taken several decades and certainly several ardent souls. Also, the integration and acceptance of popular music into the academic discourse came at a certain cost, as the so-called low culture of pop music was partly taken over by the cultural elite in a process identified as *musical gentrification* (Dyndahl et al., 2020). However, also at grassroots level, popular music’s value struggled, especially regarding *song lyrics*, which, even though vital to most pop songs, have, according to Frith (2007) historically been devaluated. Even though pop lyrics van be accused for being repetitive, containing variations of romantic love, the main reasons behind the mistreatment of lyrics and their authors were, nevertheless, likely commercial (p. 209). In academic discourse, the analysis of popular songs has long rested on content analysis which “did make a certain amount of sense given the dominance of popular music by the well-crafted but generally bland songs of Tin Pan Alley, but assumed, however” (Shuker, 2016, p. 86), that the lyrics could tell something about the societies that had constructed them (Frith, 2007, p. 210). Shuker (2016) used Bruce Springsteen’s song “Born in the U.S.A.” to illustrate that truth’s complexity. He found that, what songs did for listeners and what points came across, were, clearly, not predetermined by the song or the lyrics themselves but, to a great extent, depended mostly on the listeners perception and cultural baggage. Eminent songwriters such as Springsteen are aware of this dependence, Shuker maintained. Listeners have used Springsteen’s song “Born in the U.S.A.” for their own diverse purposes, such that popularity

could not be said to be inherent to the musical material (p. 86), but showed to be dependent on audiences' responses. I suggest that alongside the development of the music video as a commonplace artefact (compare Section 4.4.2.), music receivers have gained even more power to use musical texts for their own purposes. In doing so, the song lyrics and the "meaning" of the texts never stay still but remain open for discussion (Hearsum & Inglis, 2013, p. 486).

### 2.4.1. Young people's performances in popular music

Another aspect developed by Shuker (2016) described popular stars' many-layered importance for society. As Springsteen can be said to be defined as a *star* in the world of popular music, he has acquired "symbolic status" (p. 61), and his career's continuity contributes to an economic stability (p. 78) in society. The interdependency between the market and adult stardom—and the suggestion that stars, as texts, cover both emotional and economic needs in society—was in the current study suspected to be mirrored, if not even intensified, in the performances of child pop stars. In addition, as popular music performances vitally depend on gesture and embodiment (Frith, 1989), bodily expressions are anticipated to play an important role in the process of representing an artistic persona, and in cyborg talentification processes. As the analysis showed (compare Section 5.2.5.), the three cases discussed in this study display significant variety in their bodily stage presence and in their performance strategies.

Auslander's (2021) research offers extensive contributions to understanding performing musicians. He argued that when musicians perform, a kind of "thing," a space is created between the musician and their performance that is almost perceivable. He argued that even "the source of the sound is a version of that person constructed for the specific purpose of playing music under particular circumstances" (p. 88), binding together sound, place, and artist embodiment in a performance. Auslander was rather harsh in his judgement of performances on television talent shows where, he claimed, most performers were unauthorized to perform as pop stars, as they were merely "pretending, playing, deceiving and posing" (p. 133). He criticized the lack of legal authorization to become and perform as a pop musician, which also complicated decisions as to whom might be authorized to perform. With the rise of social media platforms, the authorization of pop musicians has become even more a matter of audience reactions. It has also, as per Hansen (2019), led to the construction of the artistic persona in which "the performative potential of aesthetics is central" (p. 504). On

YouTube, audience authorization was in the current study found to occur on an endless continuum. As online performances are "always" available they create a particular "presence/absence dichotomy," according to Suhr (2012, p. 114). She figured that, by nature of their continuous availability, social platforms have actually changed *star roles*. As they reveal every aspect of stars' lives, social platforms have initiated a de-mystification of celebrities. The heightened connectivity between stars and fans on social media consequently blur the border between professional and amateur worlds (p. 114). I found this effect to be prominent in the Marcus & Martinus narrative which I discuss in Section 5.4.3.

One of the most important, but also most controversial, traits in mediated popular music performance and embodiment, is the voice. The voice is, and has always been, important because it can make a performance identifiable without any visuals. Through technology and diverse tools of mediation, "identifiable" becomes controversial, as a music technology can greatly affect and alter the voice. Perfectionated playback, autotune manipulation, and the whole spectrum of sound enhancements in concerts, studio recordings, and YouTube videos, continue to keep changing what a voice can be and also what produsers expect a voice to be able to do. As I have explained in the introduction of Chapter 2, this study did not examine the complex sound aspect, and stars' voices were, therefore, mainly treated and understood through comments and indications in public reviews of the stars—though these were also reinforced both through my own listening and through sparce, more philosophical, use of theory (for example, Barthes, 1990; Plasketes, 2010).

As cover songs constituted a considerable part of this study's empirical material, the use of the voice was considered as part and parcel in popular music covers' ideological and historical frame.

### 2.4.2. Art of covers and (the importance of) the voice

With Angelina Jordan—a young Norwegian vocalist who has built a vital part of her fame on covering classic jazz melodies—being included in this study, the need to investigate the phenomena of cover songs was evident. Yet, even without Jordan's participation, cover songs constitute following Mosser (2008), a vital aspect of understanding popular music. However, even though they are a loved and commercialized practice (Plasketes, 2010), cover songs never quite manage to cast off the spell of the original, and proud songwriters rather shy from the term covering (Plasketes, 2010, p. 29) and venture for more creative concepts, such as remaking or simply referring to covers as a way to make a song their own. Also according to

Cusic (2010), both fans and critics describe a singer as more authentic and even “legitimate” (p. 224) when producing original material. The controversial activity of covers in popular music invited me to quickly glance at classical music practice. In that context, to the best of my knowledge, covers are not a part of the discourse, even though playing Beethoven and Bach has always been part and parcel of classical musicians’ professionalism, education, and intention. Certainly, Beethoven and Bach’s compositions were written specifically to be played by other musicians, but still, I was amazed that “interpreting Beethoven” sounded so much better than “covering Adele” and no understanding allowed for “doing an interpretation” of an Adele song. Despite pop music being more accepted as an art in 2021, a distinct hierarchy was perceivable between classical and pop music, as expressed in discourses such as *covering* versus *interpretation*. This hierarchy might also pertain to the set of rules that, following classical interpretations, sounding exactly like Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven has long been the ultimate aim of classical music, which is almost perceived as a token of musical knowledge and technical virtuosity.

Having extensively researched covers as a genre, Plasketes (2010) viewed cover songs as “derivatives or deviants, morphs or mutants, interpretations or inhabitants, clones or copycats, shape shifters or genre benders, encores or echoes, favorites reformed or refashioned, fine tunes being fine-tuned, classics being re-classified” (p. 38). Some might remark that doing a cover, one way or another, is akin to adorning oneself with borrowed feathers; yet, to Plasketes, covering proved to mean much more. Plasketes (2005) developing previous researchers’[34] brandings of the ‘80s as *The Re Decade*,[35] and conceptualized these as *the Cover Age* (p. 138) as he found covers to nourish the basic human desire to indulge in the familiar. Thus, covering made nostalgia a “permanent state of mind, soul, spirit and lifestyle” (Plasketes, 2005, p. 138). Commercially, this tendency was effortlessly exploited as producers realized how easily they could increase sales by adding just one cover song to an album (Plasketes, 2010, p. 25).

As a genre, the cover song changed gradually “from being uncovered toward being discovered” (Plasketes, 2010, p.3). In addition, artists understood that cover songs were valuable assets in their repertoire (Cusic, 2005), as, apart from providing familiarity to the audience, they also could communicate artists’ influences and accentuate their musical

[34] Shales (1986), as referred to in Plasketes, 2005, p. 138.
[35] Referring to: repeating, retrieving, rewinding, recycling, reciting, redesigning, and reprocessing (Plasketes, 2010, p. 137).

personae (p. 174). Gradually, cover songs were discovered to cast a new light on a particular song, a performer, a musical genre, and, especially, a particular voice.

Taking a poetic stance, Emmylou Harris, in a beautifully formulated liner note, wrote, “Songs need new voices to sing them in places they’ve never been sung in order to stay alive” (Plasketes, 2010, p. 35). Elaborating on this poetic line, Plasketes declared that a singer’s voice might resettle a cover song in a new place (p. 37). The power of the voice, which can transpose a song into a new realm altogether, lifted the status of cover songs definitely and profoundly from their somewhat murky heritage. Plasketes summarized his reflections on cover songs with the strong metaphor of a *time traveler*:

> Perhaps as much as any categorization, in their purest sense, cover songs are simply time travelers. They traverse as reverent ricochets and resonant reminders; chronicles and containers; converted companions—rock renditions, borrowed blues, and pop portraits of the past. They are intertextual tourists, lost and found in translation. (p. 39)

From that perspective, cover songs’ polysemic nature (p. 3) could be a key to understanding both the fascination and distaste that cover songs have continued to evoke among audiences of all generations. The focus on and importance of the voice in cover songs and in popular music generally (Frith, 1998), were reminiscent of what Barthes (1990) described as the *grain* (p. 294). I was interested whether Barthes’ thoughts, which were first formulated in 1977, could contribute something to a discussion on singing pop stars in 2021. According to Frith and Goodwin (1990), Barthes’ considerations of the grain in classical music prepared “the ground for a reformulation of pop musicology” (p. 276). From before, I appreciated Barthes provocation of traditional musicology, a notion shared with Frith and Goodwin (1990), who acknowledged Barthes’ (1990) contribution as central to contemporary music discussions. Well aware of that Barthes’s idea had largely been mythologized (Dunsby, 2009, p. 113), I investigated the matter of grain in more detail. This grain, which was neither personal nor original, was still individual and, as perceived by Barthes (1990), “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (p. 295). Barthes critically listened to two world-famous singers, Fischer-Dieskau and Panzera. He identified the former to be singing with, and the latter to be singing without, grain. Dunsby (2009) suggested that this identification was a rather personal identification, as Barthes (1990) had friendly contact with the singer he identified as having the grain (Dunsby, 2009, p. 121). Barthes (1990) himself described such evaluations to be individual to each artist and dependent on the relation between the listener and the

performer's body. He defined this relation as erotic, yet "in no way 'subjective'" (p. 299) beyond the law, and unaffected by the musician's degree of fame and performing genre. Barthes was interested in whether or not the musician's inner body was engaged. As he developed his idea of the grain, Barthes attacked common vocal teachers' emphasis on the breath and their disregard of the throat's importance, as well as the use of "the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose" (p. 296). He built his theory of song on distinctions between pheno- and geno-text,[36] thereby explaining that pheno-song lacked grain, whereas geno-song possessed grain, as the "melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work" (p. 295). Geno-song was aligned with the creativity with which the body discovered and accompanied the song, and not only with the timbre of the voice but, by physically opening, for its *significance* in the friction between the music and a particular language (p. 185). Barthes referred to this process as the "sung writing of language" (p. 297). He claimed that the grain could be detected in performers of all genres, and not only in the voice. Pheno-songs were dominant, according to Barthes, and if musicologists were to reconsider the grain as a criterion, music history would have to be rewritten (p. 300). Barthes also expressed skepticism towards the soul's involvement in song interpretation, and even claimed that a song was sung with either the soul or the body (p. 296). He assigned singing with bodily gesture support—rather than the movement of emotion—to be the more difficult and correct way to sing. A song presented with the soul lacked sensuality and, therefore, did not lead to *jouissance*, he claimed (p. 295). Hearing not the breath, but a song driven by phrases, as Panzera offered, made songs speak (p. 296).

Dunsby (2009) advised against using *grain* as a mere slogan (pp. 113–114), and as I did not plan a detailed investigation of the sound of child stars' music, I did not employ Barthes' (1990) distinction between pheno- and geno-song into my analysis. Yet, in line with Dunsby, I agreed that Barthes had taken an unusual perspective from which he inspired to a renewed listening strategy (Dunsby, 2009, p. 129), and individual listening and vlistening, as I explained in the introduction of Chapter 2, has informed my analyses of the musical projects of The BlackSheeps, Angelina Jordan, and Marcus & Martinus. Although I do not share Barthes' (1990) skepticism towards the soul and the lungs, the latter of which he even referred to as a "stupid organ" (p. 183), I find his conceptualization of the grain as "the body in the voice at it sings" (p. 299) useful in my context. Moreover, Barthes' (1973/1975) himself came with a compromise, as he, in his comments about the grain perceivable in film performance,

[36] Compare *Desire in Language* (Kristeva, 1980).

decided that it captured "the sound of speech close up" (p. 67), which I find inseparable from the breath, and which was found in my data of Angelina Jordan.

Cover songs on YouTube, generally, enjoy great popularity, also when performed by indie bands, owing to fans and parents who broadcast their children (Haskins, 2020). Little consideration to the original song owners is found in the practices of social media, and indeed, "thousands of times a month, someone posts a *cover song on YouTube* . . . and most of these cover songs are posted without permission from the song's copyright holder—meaning they're infringing someone's copyright," Haskins reports. YouTube can block or remove videos if the algorithms scanning the material detected violations of accepted YouTube rules. Repeated violations may even result in the deletion of the responsible channel and all its data. On its official pages, YouTube encourages its clients to pursue the legal route when planning to post covers, and to obtain cover licenses from copyright owners. Yet YouTube also informs that "many music publishers have already made agreements with YouTube that allows their songs to be used in exchange for a portion of the ad revenue generated on YouTube" (Haskins, 2020). Plasketes' (2010) time traveler metaphor becomes too sophisticated in the overwhelming amount of cover songs that flood the YouTube platform. They can rather give associations to *musical omnivorousness* (Dyndahl et al., 2014; Regev, 2013) on social media platforms.

Contrasting, or at least challenging, the idea of omnivorousness with the concept of *Bildung* and understanding social media as informal learning platforms, I—as mentioned in Section 1.1.—will place the topic of the current study into a music education perspective.

### 2.4.3. *Bildung* and informal learning on YouTube in a music education research perspective

Quite early in the working process, the question of whether products and discussions of music on social media could be understood as inducing and facilitating *Bildung* had occupied my mind. I wondered whether emancipation, self-determination, co-determination, and solidarity—fundamental aspects in *Bildung*-centered didactics according to Klafki (2000, p. 104)—could be transferred to specifically YouTube, and in which ways. The concept of *Bildung,* describing self-cultivation in accordance with specific cultural idols, has undergone several transformations, and today, the attitude of *Bildung* infusing "all domains of education" (Sjöström et al., 2017, p. 185) is rather common, and to consider YouTube as a platform for *Bildung* seemed a consequence of this development. As Klafki (2000) discussed the tendency

of contemporary *Bildung* to mainly direct focus on the cognitive part of *Bildung,* neglecting the aesthetic dimension (p. 98), I updated my investigating approach to the wide range of music perceptions on the platform. Klafki described how aesthetic *Bildung* "embrace[d] the whole spectrum of the aesthetics of daily life" (p. 98), and, therefore, it did make references to all kinds of aesthetic expressions. He maintained that *Bildung* in the twenty-first century had to include "*all* the dimensions of *humane capacities* that we can recognize today" (p. 104) and strongly also emphasized the political aspect of *Bildung* supporting the democratization of society. This perspective reappeared especially in my reflections on possible implementations of cyborg talentification in the Norwegian *Fagfornyelsen* in Section 7.1.3.

Willbergh's (2015) approach to *Bildung* problematized the focus of Scandinavian school curriculums on abstract competences and it emphasized the importance of teaching, learning, and instruction to be linked to *real life* (p. 339). She discussed how *Bildung* in the European tradition was suggested to be an "educational concept . … to address the needs of a young generation in the 21st century to think critically, constantly evolve and be creative and imaginative" (p. 345). Willbergh argued in favor of that developing *Bildung* as an educational concept could, with "instruction as a mimetic interpretative practice, encourage[…] students to actively use their imagination" (p. 348), with the practical consequence of teachers showing appreciation of students' imaginative work. These aspects were linked to Foucault's (2000) call for imagination in the current study.

In the process of situating YouTube as a platform for *Bildung*, I came across a current research project investigating "Spotify as a case of musical *Bildung*" (Almqvist et a., 2021), first presented at the NNRME in Stockholm in 2019. Here, Almqvist et al. (2021) focus on individuals' experiences and how streaming media might serve as a facilitator of *Bildung* (p. 89). They observed that *Bildung* constructed itself as a relational action field of tension, where "existential dimensions—formation— and essential dimensions—cultivation" (p. 91) continuously mingled. In this way, musical *Bildung* pertained to an individual's journey, unceasingly learning in and about the world (p. 91). With the online platform Spotify as their focus, Almqvist et al. (2021) had, as did I, to work with a human–technology perspective, which they approached in a different way than what was done in this study. In order to make sense of the process of *Bildung* in the online context, they applied Heidegger's (1976) "becoming and ability to be" (Almqvist et al. 2021, p. 92) as well as the Heideggerian concept of *learning-with* and *thinking-with* (p. 93). They strove to create a context and a "reflective approach that [did] not take technology for granted. … [in order to open] up the possibilities

of technology, rather than letting it dominate or even determine our lives" (p. 94). In this way, they interpreted the human–art–machine interrelationship in streaming media as an asset and not as a threat. The researchers found the processes of *thinking-with*, *learning-with*, and *becoming-with* Spotify (pp. 99–102) as constructive for all the informants in their study. Based on their informants' description how Spotify widened their horizons and deepened "their engagement in musical *Bildung* by presenting tracks and artists that were not already familiar" (p. 103), they identified Spotify as an arena for presenting works of art (p. 103). Many of these features observed by Almqvist et al. on Spotify could be perceived as parallels to services and possibilities on YouTube, which are discussed throughout this study. Almqvist et al. did not address the dilemma of musical black boxes (Kiberg, 2019), which I discuss in Section 3.2.2., but they did problematize the possibility of consumers becoming deprived of independent, autonomous choices (Almqvist et al., 2021, p. 110). They acknowledged that "an evolving musical *Bildung*, evoked by the interrelatedness og human-machine-music, hangs in the balance" (p. 110) without elaborating this issue more closely. The aspect of technological *Bildung* on a general basis, and not specifically in matters of music, was also investigated by Løvlie (2003), to whom I come back in Section 3.1.2.

Another rather recent research worth mentioning when placing my topic into the context of music education was conducted by Cayari (2018). More akin to Folkestad's (2006) request to widen the context in which "*musical learning* should be considered" (p. 135) than to explicitly trace processes of online *Bildung*, Cayari (2018) investigated virtual performance practices on YouTube. By following a specific case, that is, the YouTube channel carrying the virtual name of *David Wesley*,[37] Cayari studied social media musicianship with the aim to evaluate its possible value for formal music teaching and learning. He concluded that "by exploring the practices of virtual ensemble creators, music educators may better understand which skills and practices might be beneficial to their students and classroom" (p. 373). Cayari suggested that the obvious and documented popularity of materials published informally on YouTube might suggest that the practices used to create these videos could and should be taken into consideration in formal music settings. In the current study, I venture it worth a discussion whether the social and technological constructions underlying cyborg talentification might inform both academic and popular forms of talent discourses, talent programs, and talent constructions. I further suggest that the concept of cyborg talentification

[37] Watch https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SaBhN2idbM

could be useful in both music education research and praxis in all kinds of music classrooms—as I will discuss in Chapter 7.

I suggest that the perceptions and shared expressions of talent, genre, and child celebrities, and the media's influence on these as they are traceable on YouTube present a kind of online *Bildung*, open and available for all who participate on the platform. Other than the research conducted by Lange (2008, 2014, 2019), who accurately traced YouTube's role as an informal learning platform for kids,[38] a space offering "interpersonal dynamics and self-perceptions of identity" (Lange, 2014, p. 11) to netizens from a very young age, little scholarship was found on this matter. Yet high viewer and producer numbers might suggest that YouTube videos have become a considerable part in children's cultures, influencing their understanding of the world in an informal way long before the young have started their formal schooling. Also, the wide range of YouTube videos—from fun to music, instruction and documentary videos—prompt these to have inherent as well as outspoken pedagogical influences, as common and expert individuals share their knowledge from all areas of life, including their musical knowledge and skills. I subsequently assume that—accelerated and enforced by the recent impact of COVID-19 restrictions starting March 2020—the continuously expanding music reservoir on YouTube has been discovered by music teachers at all levels, and that YouTube videos might serve both as individual teacher preparations and as formal teaching materials in classrooms. These are areas that by and large are still evading academic research; however, I suggest that an understanding of the nature of YouTube videos and their comment functions, the possibilities for participatory action, and the type of learning they present their produsers with, are relevant to consider academically.

[38] Lange (2014) consciously chose the term "kids," as her informants used that term to describe themselves (p. 233).

# Part II: Theoretical, ethical, and methodological perspectives

# 3. Theoretical framework to unpack context and content

The following chapter engages in a conversation and presentation of the theoretical framework used to unpack the current study's *context* and *content.* As introduced in Section 1.2., understanding the environment, i.e., the context, of the data was essential for comprehending the *content* of the data. These two aspects—context and content—are supported by the theoretical framework, yet each in different ways, as I will promptly explain.

The context and main arena of action in this study was YouTube, which was conceptualized as a *cyborg system* in order to describe the processes, mechanisms, and agents involved in cyborg talentification. The context was used to embed this study's content and pivot points, as were the data materials communicated through comments, videos, and interviews.

To map and conceptualize the context, YouTube was viewed from three perspectives—first, as an important part of contemporary society, which, consequently and following Foucault (1976/1978, 2000), is permeated by power structures affecting the communication and sharing practices on the platform. Second, YouTube was viewed as a platform accommodating cultural cosmopolitanism (Burgess & Green, 2018; Hall, 2018; Hull et al., 2010; Regev, 2019). Third, YouTube was viewed as a posthuman space and a cyborg system (Gane, 2006a, 2006b; Gunkel, 2000; Haraway, 1991; Jonasson, 2020; Lange, 2014, 2019; Løvlie, 2003; Nayar, 2014; Short, 2005; Wells, 2014). This also included the recognition of YouTube as an informal learning platform, as introduced in Section 2.4.3. Thus, three theoretical perspectives—namely, cyborg theory, power structures, and cultural or aesthetic cosmopolitanism—were applied to map out YouTube—the context, co-produser, and co-administrator of the current study.

In detail, *cyborg theory* conceptualizes the nature and structure of YouTube itself, including the platform's comment rooms and YouTube videos. Further, cyborg theory embraces the totality of catalysts involved in cyborg talentification processes, conceptualizing vlisteners', produsers', and commenters' hybrid subject positions and perceptions. *Power structures* were plugged into[39] the cyborg system, revealing procedures and mechanisms in the structuring and distribution of comments and video placements on YouTube. They also problematized the carelessness of online sharing, conceptualizing it as the surrender of self-government.

[39] "Plugging in" is a theoretical approach developed by Jackson and Mazzei (2012) that applies several theories to the same material to elicit multiple perspectives.

Plugging in the theory of *cultural cosmopolitanism* marked and consolidated YouTube as a cultural or musical hotspot for child pop stars and their fans' and critics' enactments. With regard to analyzing the content of the data, the various theories were applied to different degrees.

C*ultural cosmopolitanism* served as the main theoretical framework to understand and analyze the contents of comments, unpacking child stars' enactments and music materials on YouTube. This was supported by the notion of *interpretive reproduction* (Corsaro, 2018) and contrasted and inserted into conversation with the existing scholarship introduced in Chapter 2.

*Power structures* were applied to unpack strategies in child star promotion and in talent judgment based on the data from comments, texts from music and interview videos, as well as texts—utterings and body language—found by authority figures, considering reaction videos and talent shows available on YouTube. Power structures were also found to underlie the discursive, motivational, and narrative levels of cyborg talentification.

*Cyborg theory* was not directly used to understand the content of the texts as such, but instead served to outline the methods available for communicating and how these might affect the content of the messages. In comment rooms, this includes the use of emojis, the possibility of anonymity, the type and genre of comments, and their sharing, communicative nature. Cyborg theory provided particular lenses to understand hateful comments and tendencies toward more extreme and personal messages supported by ideological homophily (Quershi et al., 2020) and algorithms. With respect to music videos, cyborg theory related the type of music—mediated, multimodal, raw—and combined these with the posthuman activity inherent in video production and their sharing and "eternal" archiving qualities on social platforms (Lange, 2019). Cyborg theory, therefore, constituted the foundation for understanding the overall and the more detailed mechanisms supporting the cocreation of child pop stars' talent and commenters' talent perceptions on YouTube.

To begin, the cyborg's journey into this study and its relationship to posthumanism are described more thoroughly.

## 3.1. Are we not all cyborgs in a posthuman time?

As already established, I anticipated the human–machine interdependency of this online investigation to be central. Therefore, I needed a theory to cover all aspects of the hybrid subject—the communicative, the technological, the aesthetic, the musical, and the emotional. My reflections led me on a brief historical tour of human involvement with and development of online technology and the internet.

Scanning various findings of internet researchers (for example, Gillespie, 2010; Joinsen, 2005; Kendall, 1999, 2013; Lugosi & Quinton, 2018; Markham, 2018; Wolf, 2016) confirmed my basic idea that, by using the internet, humans not only become entangled with but also dependent on and defined by it (Wolf, 2016). Markham (2018), a professor of media and communication, who is especially concerned with the ethics of internet research, described the relationship between humans and technology as follows: "We carry the Internet in our pockets. It can be woven into our clothing. … The Internet is so ubiquitous we don't think much *about* it at all; we just think *through* it" (p. 650). I detected a growing matter-of-fact attitude about this interdependency and, as materiality and technology are continuously shaping new social practices, the active involvement of all agents engaging in online communication. Further, in the theory of mediatization, I also found a focus on the mutual influence of the involved agents *and* "the interplay between media, culture and society" (Hepp et al., 2015, p. 314). Non-human agents, such as algorithms, use information about human agents and sort produsers' musical tastes and preferences. At the same time, as algorithms are designed by human minds, they bear traces of human cognition. Rapid and continuous technological developments have thus rendered the boundary between humans and technology increasingly artificial. One could argue that tools and media have always been invented by humans, and that tools, from the first flint arrowhead to the newest Tesla, have always changed human behavior both socially and psychologically. The question is rather whether it is right to claim that the balance of influence has changed.

Early on, McLuhan (1964/2001) accentuated the subtle difference in the quality and influence of the medium, which proceeded from the mechanical ages to what he called the "final extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness" (p. 3). From having "extended human bodies in space" (p. 3), humankind "after more than a century of electronic technology, . . . has extended [its] nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time" (p. 3). Written long before the development of Web 2.0, McLuhan's words

were almost prophetic of what was still to come. He fronted the innovative idea of the medium itself being the message—a catchphrase assigning the nature of the medium major interest in favor of its (non-existent) content (p. 9). The medium itself changed human consciousness and perception, a matter which McLuhan exemplified with the electric light:

> Lighting as an extension of our powers affords the clearest cut example of how such extensions alter our perceptions . … In this domain, the media is the message, and when the light is on there is a world of sense that disappears when the light is off. (p. 139)

He developed his thought further, noting that "the electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no 'content' in itself" (p. 9). Computers, as communication mediators, are more obvious than the lightbulb, and yet here as well one can be led to think about the products and services of the computer and forget the medium. Still, compared to the lightbulb, the computer is a considerably more complex matter, and with regard to the internet, it can hardly be turned off anymore—as with 4G and 5G networks, "turning off" has become an illusion. The internet, and the services it accommodates and communicates, are interlinked and are ubiquitous contributors around most of the globe. Therefore, to comprehensively understand the manner in which a platform such as YouTube functions and how it controls its produsers—and, consequently, how it influences human perceptions, reactions, and actions—is simple, in the sense of obvious, but technically immensely complicated. Although I investigated power structures on YouTube, I did not intend to uncover the technological and psychological details of this influence. Instead, I accepted the entanglement of human and machine as a precondition and point of departure.

From here, the way to cyborg imagery was short and decisive—I entered the online space with the knowledge of existing scholarship and expanded it with the imagery and practical functions provided by the cyborg myth, exchanging the idea of human versus machine with that of connection (Haraway, 1991, p. 151). My ambition was not to trace the detailed channels of communication but rather to compose a piece of social media history and to account for the processes administered by the YouTube cyborg system—that is, cyborg talentification on the YouTube platform between 2009 and 2020. This decision was supported by Wells' (2014) approach, which interpreted the technology–subject dichotomy and entanglement as a metaphor for 2020s consciousness: "Perhaps we should consider ever more strongly that the cyborg concept (perhaps ironically) describes us as we already are, as we have been for some time, and as we are likely to continue" (p. 10). The rather open and

evasive description of cyborgs by Wells (2014) has been responded to by, for example, Short (2005), who elaborated on the image of a hybrid matter of course, supported by cultural hybridity and a “mishmash of identities” (pp. 49–50) in posthuman times. This study did not intend to avoid the controversy concerning this conceptualization but rather emphasize how culture and identities—subject positions—have always been changeable and fluctuating. The aspiration was to generate excitement about how the internet’s facilitations have removed cultures and identities from their ethnographic, physical, and time-fixed habitats, and have cast their images into cyberspace.

In sum, I anticipated that the mutual invasion of technology and the modern subject, as Siivonen (1996, p. 228) described it, might be rendered (more) concrete rather than diffused by the cyborg.

### 3.1.1. Cyborg’s journey into this study

The decision to adopt the cyborg myth, as first presented by Haraway (1991), into this study was thus a consequence of the overall context and my reflections on the complex possibilities and developments sustained by the reconceptualization of humans and technology. The cyborg was “already there” as an academic concept, and it prompted a fresh mind and a futuristic view anchored in the present. Also, as childhood has often been connected to femininity—with women being infantilized and children feminized (Bickford, 2020, p. 24)—an adaptation and adoption of the cyborg myth to study young people seemed particularly relevant. In my context, I used the image of the cyborg to lend the mediating process a conceptual visual clue[40] with the intent of making it more relatable, offering multiple subject positions to explore it. These hybrid subject positions make the concept of the cyborg not only relevant in the moment of online mediation but also when the obvious contact with the computer becomes interrupted and un-wired. It appeared that the musical cyborg could be just as useful and visible at the intersections between the virtual and the real, between offline and online, and between physical and textual (Sections 5.5.3. and 7.1.).

As a starting point, cyborg relevance in this study was supported by three major arguments. The first argument rests on the common denominator of the empirical materials in this study, *communication*, as all comments and videos are made available through different types of communication on YouTube. Gunkel (2000) equated cyborg existence to communication (p.

[40] In Section 7.1., I discuss the idea of a conceptual visual clue versus a physical visual clue.

348), and thus the cyborg myth not only manifested as a mere symbol in the current study but also imbued it with practical value.

Second, all music videos and musical material of the sampled child stars are already complex products of a human–machine, a cyborg, both with regard to locus (YouTube), through their inherent sound technology, and through the intermedial use of picture, sound, and film.

Finally, as a consequence of the two abovementioned reasons, or a fusion of these reasons, the concept of the cyborg underlines, explains, and opens avenues for cyborg talentification as a process that involves hybrid agents. Further, the re-fusion of traditional binaries, including preconceived ideas about who may, and who may not, judge talent and by what means, opens an avenue for the deconstruction of existing gatekeepers of talent discourses.

However, the cyborg myth not only shows a way out of the physical binary—machine *here,* human *there*—but also describes a population that is already interacting with, shaped by, and enhanced through technology. In that sense, cyborg talentification, though first perceived and "born" on YouTube, might be expected to also have value in music pedagogical discussions in settings other than YouTube, which I discuss in Chapter 7.

### 3.1.2. Cultural, musical, and pedagogical cyborg

Next, I present various perspectives on the cyborg, with the axis being Haraway's (1991) cyborg myth, that further argue for and illustrate the use of cyborg theory in this study.

Cyborg, as a term,[41] is—in common literature—frequently associated with a science fiction creature, a being of flesh and metal, brain and technology, imbued with superpowers. Haraway (1991) wrote the cyborg into an academic discourse with her cyborg manifesto in 1985, and her insights and interpretations of the cyborg have served as inspiration and provocation to researchers ever since. Haraway (1991) conceived of the cyborg as a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (p. 149)—a formulation that appears to be one of the most frequently cited conceptions from her text. Placing herself into a socialist–feminist context, Haraway (1991) prophesized the cyborg to be "a matter of fiction and lived experience" (p. 149) that would change society's views on women. She observed that society was already permeated by cyborgs, and, as technologies were advancing, human and machine characteristics were becoming increasingly confused because machines were "disturbingly lively, and we

[41] The term was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline.

ourselves frighteningly inert" (p. 152). With such observations, Haraway integrated her myth into the context of everyday life. Her analysis built on what she called the "three crucial boundary breakdowns" (p. 151), which declared clear, conceptualized demarcations between human, animal, and machine, and between physical and non-physical, to be increasingly imprecise (pp. 151–153). She argued that one reason for this imprecision was the changed nature of modern machines, which differed from the visible, physically impacting, and space-demanding old-fashioned machines. Today, "our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves . … Cyborgs are ether, quintessence" (p. 153), Haraway reflected. Their invisibility has made them omnipresent and ubiquitous. Haraway's cyborg myth was, therefore, predominantly about moving beyond boundaries of old traditional values (p. 154) and the resulting acceptance of a cyborg world, one which offered both a threatening and a constructive way forward. The "threat" implied that technology had an ever increasing fast and deadly grip on the planet (p. 154), whereas a "constructive" path represented a peaceful and less frightening option, one characterized by acceptance of blended identities and opposing opinions. Accepting this second type of cyborg world meant breaking free from the troubling dualisms of history (p. 177). In this study, I followed the potentials of the peaceful alternative, although I will return to Haraway's destructive alternative of cyborg domination in Chapters 7 and 8.

Another perspective extracted from Haraway's essay is her view on the extraordinary, the other, the monstrous, and its particular place in all cultures. Monsters, she figured, had, through all ages, been used as a measure for and a boundary to understanding and defending normality (p. 180). She used the imagery from the etymological source of the word *monster* to explain her line of thought. Etymologically, a monster not only indicates something huge and frightening but also something that demonstrates and points at something (a sign, an omen, and a reminder), an understanding that allows the monster to transcend its fearsome reputation. Haraway placed the monster in relation to postmodern–posthuman identities, which she described as constructed out of otherness, difference, and specificity (p. 155). Transferring this mission of the monster to the subject of this study incited me to wonder whether the extraordinariness of child stars displayed some type of bordering need, thereby allowing the placement of giftedness and talent outside of normality. This would align with Gagné's (2004) concept of extraordinariness and O'Connor's (2009) analysis of child stars answering the societal need to witness a norm being transgressed to again reaffirm one's own normality.

Although the cyborg myth was first introduced as a feminist weapon (Haraway, 1991), it has since been employed to support other marginalized segments of society, such as the LGBT movement. Recently, it was used in a doctoral dissertation about female and transgendered subject positions in creative music technological environments (Jonasson, 2020). This parallels the current study, which was concerned with perceptions of young musical talent and the subject positions of child stars as constructed by their online musical activities and communications, the activities and communications of their online fans, and by the platform itself. I suspected these diverse subject positions to be both appropriated and challenged by cyborg possibilities. For, as “the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world” (Haraway, 1991, p. 150), it seemed unable to serve the description of the distinct and gendered sexuality, as is often found in pop music. When confronted with the formulations of post-gender and the fact that her insistence on the femaleness of the cyborg (Gane, 2006a, p. 137) makes a gender-free world a mere utopia, Haraway admitted that “gender is as ferocious as ever among us” (p. 137). Still, in this interview (Gane, 2006a), Haraway denied that this fact made her project of a gender-free world a mere utopia. Instead, she described it as an ongoing project, a rationale to which I return when investigating cyborg talentification in a music educational context in Chapter 7. There, I also confront Haraway’s (1991) gender-free utopia with two other critical voices, Wilkerson (1997) and Mansoor (2017). Otherwise, in the observations of child stars and their musical products on YouTube, gender has been reported and discussed as it has been described by its commenters, the media, and the child celebrities themselves.

The experience of watching the series *Babylon Berlin* (Handloegten et al., 2017–2020) provided me with interesting insights into the old dream of humankind to create a man–machine, where war invalids were used as morbid guinea pigs for the still untried experiment. Only where an eye is missing can a technological replacement be implanted, and only an amputated arm can be replaced by a technological prostheses. Over the span of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, bodily enhancements through technology have become normal for many ordinary people. Laser operations improving eyesight, hearing restoration through cochlear implants, heart pacemakers, and multiple advanced prostheses are just a few of the many medical-technological procedures that now change people’s lives. Without them, people would be blind, deaf, unable to move, or, ultimately, even dead. Also, without technological interference, their lives would be different on all levels: personally, professionally, and psychologically. Possibly most obvious with the senses of sight and hearing, prostheses, once they have become a part of the body, transition from being mere helpers or extensions of

bodily functions to transforming an individual's life. Technology has enabled new modes of being, and, instead of being mere protheses, it "participates in describing and constructing the very subject positions that come to be occupied by the cyborg" (Gunkel, 2000, p. 347).

As accounted for by Gunkel (2000), technology has created new subject positions and, though these may not always result in visible physical impacts on bodies and minds, the picture just presented illustrates the comprehensive impact and the consequential metamorphosis through technology. Therefore, or despite this, I agree with another of Haraway's (1991) key quotes: "The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (p. 180). Regarding machines as "being us" not only scatters but also extends the subjectivities available in both online and offline settings. In addition, with the advent of the internet, the everyday uses of the computer and the smartphone have added themselves to the list of involvements and dependencies as they support, enable, perform, and constitute a large part of people's everyday life and work. Thus, instead of persistently maintaining the idea of human *meeting* machine and vice versa, "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway, 1991, p. 181). The claim "we are all Borg" (Gunkel, 2000) has become a material, reasonable, and matter-of-fact statement. Bridging over to this study, Angelina Jordan's description about how she first "met" jazz music on YouTube while she was still a toddler illustrates quite simply one aspect of the complex impacts engagement with mediated music on social platforms might have on people's lives.

The doctoral dissertation by Jonasson (2020) on transsexual and female music produsers supplied me with an inspiring modern use of the cyborg myth. Leaning on Haraway (1991) and Leijonhufvud's doctoral project (2018), Jonasson (2020) integrated the idea that "the relation between human, technology and music could create musical *cyborgs* or *hybrids*" (p. 187). Both Leijonhufvud (2018) and Jonasson (2020) used the theoretical framework of actor-network theory (ANT)[42] to analyze their material, thereby placing themselves into a socio-material, post-humanistic theory. Combining cyborg and hybrid subject positions has, in a music–pedagogical context, been described as children's becomings,[43] as they meet music technology in pre-school teaching (Jonasson, 2020, p. 71).

[42] ANT theory assigns agency to all parts. Compare to Latour's (2007) work, *Reassembling the Social*.
[43] "Becomings" is a free translation from the Swedish word *tillblivelser*.

The idea of a cyborg pedagogy has taken several other paths in academic circles. One of these is an approach investigated by Angus et al. (2002). They instrumentalized a radical pedagogy based on three guiding principles—situated knowledge, cyborg ontologies, and border pedagogy.[44] The combination of these principles, which were derived from Haraway's (1999) cyborg myth and Latour's ANT, allowed for undogmatic teaching and learning (p. 198), they claimed. Angus et al. (2002) illustrated this learning and teaching method through a course they conducted for bachelor students in the geographies of material culture (p. 195). Here, they challenged each student to develop "cyborg eyes" and observe the transit of a coffee bean from the plantation to the supermarket and further to the students' own morning cup, thereby discussing the interconnectivity and the consequential dilemma of responsibility of each actant. By raising awareness of how the material cyborg was nothing without its connection and the complicated ethics arising from this connectivity, Angus et al. (2002) demonstrated how their student, at the end of the course, was a "messy cyborg, still figuring things out, loving and hating it all at once" (p. 200). The student's insights culminated in an experience of the impossibility of going back to traditional, "blind" (without cyborg eyes) pedagogy. Angus et al.'s cyborg pedagogy strikes me as taking an environmental, material turn, possibly leading to unsolvable—and, with regard to the student's final confusions, almost unethical—results, as the interconnectivity and interdependency of all actants, owing to the individual's impotence, was described as causing paralysis rather than activism.

Brasher (1996) approached the cyborg concept from an ethical–religious perspective. She explored how the conceptualized cyborg, or what she called the "cultural cyborg" (p. 812), was an aesthetic idea long before the cyborg term appeared alongside the increasing presence of technology. Brasher agreed with Haraway (1991) that, as an aesthetic idea, the cyborg mentality had functioned as a gatekeeper of normality since antiquity, trapped in the body of monsters. The cultural cyborg described by Brasher (1996) envisioned an even stronger fusion between the imagined institution of technology and the institution of humanity, incorporating them as one project, one idea, and one culture.

The embedment of the cyborg in human culture was expressed by Wells (2014) in a catchy title, "Keep Calm and Remain Human: How we always have been Cyborgs" (p. 5), where he defended an optimistic and enthusiastic "cyborg-as-human argument" (p. 8). Here he focused

[44] Border pedagogy is an educational approach and metaphor, providing teachers with tools to deal with complex intersections of identity, space, place, language, culture, and belonging, especially when working with multi-cultural students. Compare to Giroux (1991).

on engaging positively with the question of "how to conceive of human beings and their augmentations" (p. 16). Already, the term cybernetics, which stems from a Greek term for an equalizing steersman, governor, pilot, or rudder,[45] invited positivity. In the literal sense of the word, having always been cyborg even meant, according to Wells, always having possessed the profoundly human abilities of being able to adapt to the environment, to invent, to make new tools, and to determine ways forward in the sense of technical, instrumental, and cognitive development. In line with Wells (2014), Short (2005) also represented an optimistic voice among digital skeptics. The development now, she stated, was that the balance between technologies and human lives was restored (Short, 2005, p. 42) and that cyborg presence and cyborg narratives might actually

> help to shape awareness and understanding, on both a personal and political basis, of both the world and our place in it. It is in this questioning ability that the cyborg's most progressive potential lies, posing fundamental questions about identity and existence in the twenty-first century. (p. 52)

The questioning ability of the cyborg, and the possibilities rather than the deficiencies of technological involvement, reappear in Løvlie (2003) and his discussion of technological *Bildung*. The events of 2020, with the worldwide COVID-19 restrictions and the consequent epiphany of digital solutions, confirm Løvlie's statement that technology is likely to be seen as a threat to and by humankind, before it is taken over by culture and suddenly used by all (Løvlie, 2003, p. 176). Without choosing it, people have become techno-cultural beings. Løvlie discussed how the techno-cultural *Bildung* extinguishes traditional opposites between nature, culture, human, and machine (p. 177). Løvlie used the cyborg metaphor as an opportunity to replace the old binary human–machine with the interface, and the space between (p. 181). His standpoint was adopted in this study, focusing specifically on (talent) perceptions, knowledge expansions, and experiences of musical content communicated at the interface. Using the cyborg metaphor, according to Løvlie, brings forth a (deconstructed) posthuman subject that, if it was something at all, was communication and otherness (p. 191). Løvlie stated that criticizing deconstruction for "dissolving of the subject" (p. 191), was a cliché critique, and that where there was no "I" left, there could not be a deconstruction of it. Løvlie debated that deconstruction has moved away from a subject–object dichotomy, one which lent the subject a privileged position throughout Western history. Løvlie argued that

[45] NTNU: What is cybernetics? https://www.ntnu.edu/itk/what-is

although the cyborg replaced the "I" as a metaphor, the question about who humans are still lived on, yet in a less pretentious and absolute way (p. 191).

In the context of cyborg talentification, the YouTube produsers' subjectivity is identified through their communication. They do not figure as a mass, but as singulars, transmitting their emoticon icons—emoticons and/or emoji—and words from individual servers, and, in that sense, they embody *difference*. Holding on to Derrida and deconstruction, such an assumption also involves the in-between room, the so-called *différance* (Bertram, 2002, p. 90). The idea of two separate units—one being the produsers typing comments, and the other being the computer processing, organizing, and archiving of the materials received—becomes too simplistic. Løvlie (2003) argued that the space in between the human and the world has been enforced by today's techno-culture and has even been given an enhanced meaning—an inter-rest that is embodied in communication (p. 182) where online *Bildung* can happen.

### 3.1.3. Posthuman activities on YouTube affecting offline worlds

As the cyborg entered this study, so, too, did the notion of posthumanism, even though Haraway (1991) expressed a somewhat ambiguous relationship to posthumanism (Gane, 2006a, p. 140). This outlined an ambiguity that, as she admitted, did not imply a rejection of the posthuman (Gane, 2006a). Quite distinctively, Haraway's (1991) cyborg introduced an ongoing discussion of the human in the age of technology, fundamentally questioning the central position of humans, which led to the term *posthumanism* (Bolter, 2016, p. 1; Gane, 2006b, p. 432).

Following Nayar (2014), the posthuman can, on the one hand, be understood as merely referring to "an *ontological condition* in which many humans now, and increasingly will, live with chemically, surgically, technologically modified bodies and/or in close conjunction (networked) with machines and other organic forms" (p. 3). On the other hand, posthumanism may reconceptualize what it means to be human (p. 3). Building on cyborg theory, the hierarchies and binaries of modernism are in posthumanism questioned critically, introducing a world where "the marginalization of 'other' bodies as infrahuman or nonhuman has been deconstructed" (p. 4). In its utter consequence, posthumanism "means opening oneself up not only to the non-human Other but to other species' *within* humanity as well. A critical posthumanism proposes a multispecies citizenship that involves *all* forms of life" (p. 155).

In the context of this study, mainly Lange's (2019) interpretation of posthuman activity on YouTube—such as the creation of alters (p. 9)—was used. Alters, according to Lange, are the results of the omnipresence and persistence of media, preserving, distributing, and adjusting produsers' digital footprints for an unlimited duration of time. Her reflections informed my discussion of the long-lived child star timelines in Chapter 6. Lange defended her argument that, in the future, posthuman features and hybrid, digital identities would be the norm and an accepted and natural part of a digital life. Yet, already in the present, "being human … means making, participating in, being unknowingly recorded on, or being affected by media" (p. 192), with all the consequences that might imply. According to Lange, understanding posthuman identity on YouTube provides a tool for "studying video-making anthropologically because it revealed how people work through what they believe to be their mediated self" (p. 191). She observed that video-making "bundles metaphors about embodiment, heterogeneity, distributed and collective 'intelligence', algorithmic living, egocentric border confusion, and machine-influenced subjectivity" (p. 192). Therefore, the experiences and perceptions of the stars and their musics, which vlisteners express in their comments, could be described as reactions by and to another type of identity and another kind of music and, in turn, to another kind of star, other than those figuring in an offline, real live performance. This statement certainly made sense in my own experience of a live concert described in Section 5.1.

Next, I look into some pragmatic aspects of online communication and especially the feature of emoticons and emoji.

### 3.1.4. Emoticons and emoji in cyborg-mediated communication

The type of communication this study investigated is *asynchronous*, with participants not active at the same time, as opposed to "synchronous CMC, where interaction takes place in real time" (Simpson, 2002, p. 414). Further, in my context, online communication, usually called *computer-mediated communication* (CMC), is modeled into *cyborg*-mediated communication using the same abbreviation (CMC).

An accompanying phenomenon in messages sent on computers and smartphones is the extensive use of *emoticon icons* (emoticons) and *emoji*. The difference between emoticons and emoji is basically technical, as "emoticons are punctuation marks, letters, and numbers used to create pictorial icons that generally display an emotion or sentiment" (Grannan, n.d.), whereas "emoji are **pictographs** of faces, objects, and symbols" (Grannan, n.d.). Both kinds

are small, round faces and other shapes, expressing feelings, thoughts, and concepts, even solutions, as well as activities, relations, and more. Both emoticons and emoji are especially numerous in the comment rooms of Marcus & Martinus' videos. The design of emoticons and emoji is identified as conveying a spectra of cyborg "feelings," communicated as frozen pictures of human faces and human feelings, cloned in billions, and with predetermined, categorized applicability, such as "happy," "sad," or "in love." Emoji,[46] according to Derks et al. (2008), have been invented to compensate for the missing physical presence in CMC, which, as it is text-based, implicates a lack of non-verbal cues. This lack, which could also be described as a gap, has been filled not only by emoji but also by other types of cues (Vandergriff, 2013, p. 1). These cues work as stand-ins or substitutes for the cues perceived through body language in face-to-face (FTF) encounters (Walther & D'Addario, 2001, p. 324), and they help to make text-based chat even more effective and closer to an oral exchange, as they allow people to quickly and efficiently add smileys, hearts, and other icons instead of typing longer phrases such as "thank you," "feeling tired," "miss you so much," and so on. Research on CMC cues has been somewhat sporadic, and yet the general development has transitioned from regarding CMC as a deprived means of communication, poorly supported by cues, to appreciating and recognizing CMC as an equivalent of traditional communication, with CMC cues acting as a natural part of online language (Vandergriff, 2013, p. 2). CMC cues are highly context-sensitive, and, therefore, they suit qualitative research. As the predominant CMC cues in the empirical data of this study were emoji—in addition to the occasional repetition of dots that generally stands for a prolonged silence (p. 3)—they were used in the analysis. Still, analyzing emoji use is not a straightforward matter, as a CMC cue cannot easily be transferred back into a physical sign.

Summing up, emoji are seen to possess similar, yet not equal functions as body cues in FTF communication (Derks et al., 2008, p. 379). At the same time, their use can be much more controlled than body language. A smile can be small, big, or flaring; a heart can be red, orange, or green. In this way, particular coded feelings can be signaled without the nuances, compromises, and misunderstandings that follow FTF communication and a "natural" smile. Anonymity in CMC, especially facial anonymity, and its impact on the type of message is highlighted at several stages throughout this text.[47]

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[46] Here, as in the discussion of Marcus & Martinus' narrative, only the term *emoji* was used.
[47] Compare for example Sections 4.1., 4.1.1., and 5.4.2.

Next, I discuss YouTube as an important part of society, one penetrated by power structures and the manner in which they might affect cyborg talentification.

## 3.2. Power structures affecting cyborg talentification

In this context, I chose to exclusively use Foucault's (Foucault, 1976/1978, 2000; Foucault & Sheridan, 1977; Foucault et al., 2007) more general philosophical ideas on power structures and governance in society. Among other theories on power, I found Foucault's versatile approach to present the most suitable way to follow the dispersion and fragmentation of the postmodern and posthuman self in online platforms, and the evasiveness, objectivity, and anonymity in online social settings (Cronin, 1996, p. 55).[48] I applied the idea that "power is only a certain type of relations between individuals" (Foucault, 2000, p. 324), and thus the more sweeping gesture with which Foucault viewed power relations to be deeply rooted "in the social nexus, not a supplementary structure over and above "society" whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of" (p. 343). Consequently, Foucault suspected "power to be everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1976/ 1978, p. 93). This scheme allowed me to combine a detailed look at the specific power of selected catalysts—as algorithms and commenters—with a more general understanding of the power mechanisms on YouTube.

### 3.2.1. Imagining new ways of being

Being a ubiquitous companion of the YouTube channel for the last two to three years while working on this dissertation has given me a wide array of personal and professional experiences and thoughts. I found multiple beliefs and truths expressed online, all accommodated, reorganized, and reconceptualized by the YouTube platform and its millions of produsers. The continuously growing global YouTube community entails a conglomeration of unlike cultural cosmopolitans polarizing, and uniting—a collision of discourses. That the participatory platform was likely to be brimming with power structures was, therefore, a pertinent thought from the start. The question was whether a follow-up of the power networks on YouTube was in the interest of the questions pursued in this study. Working with the empirical material over some time made it clear that considering this point was unavoidable and that the power structures at work on YouTube had to be addressed, as they were part and parcel of how communication on the platform functioned. At the same time, I could not

[48] Cronin (1996) compared Bourdieu's and Foucault's different approaches to power.

conduct a full, focused investigation and analysis, as I instead had to recognize the power structures in a way that communicated with the study's context and purpose. In the next paragraph, I first discuss Foucault's (2000) concept of power, after which I propose how his power mechanisms could be translated into the realities of YouTube. I also prepare the conceptualization of the discursive layers of cyborg talentification in the empirical material.

As already introduced, Foucault (1976/ 1978, 2000) became known for identifying power as a subtle, and yet persistent and pervasive, force in all social networks. His conceptualization of power as omnipresent suggested the need for unpacking these power relations, their constructs and connections, and their ability to objectify the subject. Taking a step back in the development of this particular mindset, Foucault (2000) considered *new* pastoral power, brought forth by the old "pastoral power" (p. 333). New pastoral power triggered "play relations between individuals" (p. 337), and Foucault strove to examine how and why "a human being turns him- or herself into a subject" (p. 327), and how and why the subject submitted itself. Dissimilar use of language and conventions in diverse areas of life and their discourses are all a matter of power, and Foucault (2000) determined that "a society without power relations [can] only be an abstraction" (p. 343). With power being as assimilated as described, the question arises as to how it can be identified. Foucault observed that the subject submitted and adapted itself to the rules, traditions, and habits of its family, local community, state, and historical time and found meaning in functioning sufficiently within that framework. This aspect makes it clear that power in Foucault's universe is not consequentially negative and dominating. It is something productive, creative, and supportive—something that can hold society together, a network emitting cognition and meaning. Jørgensen and Phillips (2013) built on Foucault's own words and described how power could be a positive possibility for social life, connecting it rather than suppressing it (p. 23). In such a perspective, the word "power" becomes too narrow and may easily give the wrong associations. This is perhaps the reason why Foucault, later in life, more often discussed *governing* and *regimes of truth*, and, at the end of his brief life, developed the new term *governmentality* to replace power. Governmentality, according to Foucault (Foucault et al., 2007), conveyed the questions of "how to govern oneself, how to be governed, by whom should we accept to be governed, how to be the best possible governor" (p. 88)—questions that are increasingly relevant for social media produsers. To answer these questions, one has to understand how power works, and how regimes of truth are maintained. Foucault (2000) observed that power relations were traceable due to certain productions of signs (p. 338), and

he composed five major points or questions he considered essential for detecting power. First, according to Foucault, there had to be identifiable differences in status and privileges, practical knowledge, and competence, or language and culture differences. Second, the aim of the power exertion had to be identified, whether it served to maintain privileges, social status, and/or governmental authority. Third, power could be exercised by the use of weapons, economic differences, or complex systems of control, surveillance, and rules with or without force. Fourth, power could be exerted through the maintenance of institutional forms, traditions, habits, and trends as observable in a family or community, and, finally, power automatized and rationalized actions.

Many researchers have adopted and used Foucault's ideas (2000) as theoretical frameworks for their projects. One example is Hammer (2017), who instrumentalized Foucault in his analysis of Norwegian kindergartens. Hammer (2017) argued that Foucault had prepared fertile ground for critical discussions encompassing all levels of society (p. 12). Hammer also called attention to how Foucault, inspired by Kant's text on the true nature of enlightenment, compared Descartes' question about *who* we are with Kant's question about *what* we are (Foucault, 2000). In this way, Kant's question became an "analysis of both us and the present" (p. 335). This study aimed to scrutinize the subject in society here and now, thereby giving a historical account and analysis of particular activities on YouTube from 2009 to 2020. Further, Foucault (2000) wondered if "maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are" (p. 336). This statement, presented as a question, can be extended in different directions. Choosing a direction that leads to refusing an identity inherited by a long, patriarchal history accords with the cyborg myth created by Haraway (1991). The interspace, then, is perceived as the place in which this refusal can and does happen, without limits on who to be, who not to be, or who to pretend to be. For, as Foucault (2000) further elaborated, there was a need to encourage new forms of subjectivity that freed humankind from the "political double bind" (Foucault, 2000), embodied as the parallel individualization and totalization of modern power structures (p. 336). Foucault offered no theoretical or even practical tools other than *imagination* to address this challenge. The promotion of new forms of subjectivity thus had to occur "through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (p. 336), Foucault concluded. In Chapter 7, where cyborg talentification as a concept influencing music education research and praxis is investigated, aspects of new subject positions and new modes of being are discussed in a cyborg perspective.

### 3.2.2. Algorithms and taste control in the field of music

The goals of YouTube's algorithmic search and discovery system are two-fold. On the one hand, it helps produsers find the videos they want to see; and, on the other, it seeks to maximize long-term viewer engagement and satisfaction. YouTube has received a good amount of critique for its extensive use of filter bubbles and recommendation algorithms. Then, in a media announcement in 2017, a decade after having used extensive "sniffing" and "pushing" algorithms (Wolf, 2016), the company announced it would change its practices, with the acclaimed intention to further satisfy its consumers (Dave, 2017). Still, the issue lies not with the platform alone, for as Chaslot, an early member of YouTube's recommendations engineering team, noted, netizens in general do not seem to be too concerned about their privacy or the amount of truth in the videos they choose to watch. Chaslot, who left Google in 2013, observed that common netizens were not interested in YouTube improving their approach to truth (Dave, 2017), despite the obvious falsification caused by YouTube's algorithms (Lewis & McCormick, 2018).

Jenkins (2009) described how YouTube has dramatically expanded both in size and video content over the span of the last 15 years, and how it has taken a whole generation of young people along with it in its development, educating, entertaining, and inviting individuals to participate, to create lasting symbols, values, and content through posting and sharing (p. 116). Using and engaging in YouTube have, at times, been described as empowering, especially for young people and minority groups. Yet, the opposite may also be the case, as YouTube, through its popularity algorithms, may also exclude minorities by circulating specific materials in particular niches (p. 124). To trace these mechanisms in more detail, especially targeting musical minorities, should be of interest for music education research not least as this might also reveal something about students' choices and preferences in music classrooms, I suggest. With the help of continuously advancing algorithms, the platform not only incites specific discourses for sealed groups but also actively reaches out to people who are already confined to a community-specific discourse (Wolf, 2016) and who, therefore, might be interested in joining existing communities. The statement that YouTube is upholding its popularity through "basic social functions like the opportunity to connect with others as 'friends'" (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 2) is, therefore, a moderated truth, as "these others" are most likely already defined as the type of individuals with whom the targeted netizens might be most compatible.

In the field of music, artists have been experiencing frustration about music lists and popular songs suggested on streamed music services, such as Spotify and Tidal—a function that creates what Kiberg (2019) called the "black boxes" (p. 7) of an algorithmic music culture. Even though Spotify, as found by Almqvist et al. (2021), can also be seen as a contributor to a specific type of *Bildung*, Kiberg (2019) found streaming culture to favor commercial music, and to make more unknown indie music much harder to find, as consumers only get what they are supposed to want and what is most popular at the time. These recommendations are made, Kiberg reported, by more sophisticated music connoisseurs and musicians, experienced as being too narrow.

The influences of algorithms are traceable in all kinds of cultural content, not just music, and consumers are, according to Wolf (2016), unconscious of how algorithms manipulate their taste and shape cultures. Wolf investigated consumers of DIY YouTube videos, and even engaging in these mundane activities, she observed, "can play a role in sense- and identity-making, highlighting the role of computational systems in the shaping of modern subjectivities" (p. 2). As new technology is making worlds smaller, "the rise of algorithmic systems is situated within a broader discourse on human information behavior. *Homophily*, or the concept that people favor those perceived to be similar to themselves" (p. 3) is nothing new. However, this natural human inclination has become more confusing in the conditions of YouTube and other social media where *known and unknown* have been taken over by algorithmic organizing activity, and which thus exert a new type of power. In the next chapter, I consider Foucault's (2000) conceptualization of power structures and their impact on this study.

### 3.2.3. Power structures on YouTube—and echo chambers

Concerning YouTube, the identification of power manifestations might not be so easy to trace but, I suggest, they exist in the complex systems of control by which participatory and social platforms are monitored. This includes how social platforms engage with and depend on technology, bots, and algorithms, how they are subject to marketing interests and political agendas. Foucault (2000) also emphasized the role of a "certain type of rationality" (p. 324), which he thought could not be found in the restricting institutions—mental hospitals and prisons—as such, but in the power structures between subjects.

I suspect that following these underlying structures can lead into grey zones of human conduct, with no possibility of correction, as they justify themselves through their own power

theory. As an example for the here suggested reversibility in Foucault's theory, he himself might have entered a grey zone of human conduct when he, together with many other intellectuals, signed the French petition in 1977 that called for a decriminalization of consensual sexual relations between adults and minors below the age of fifteen.

Foucault graded power relations as carriers of language, of symbols, and, therefore, of discourses—discourses that not only include and exclude, but also convey, knowledge. As already discussed, Foucault (1999) described how discourses were sustained through processes and rituals of exclusions and prohibitions by and within certain discourse communities (p. 23). The complex term of *discourse* has adapted itself to different situations, and it has been used in multiple arenas. In this study, discourse was employed in the spirit of Foucault (1999) as expressed through Grue (n.d.). He defined Foucault's discourse to imply the historical, social, and cultural conditions that allow an utterance or an action to be conceived as natural or acceptable. Grue further described Foucault's use of discourse to not primarily be about individual texts, but rather about greater and more loosely defined phenomena. To serve this study, I added *social networking conditions* to the phrasing historical, social, and cultural conditions (or even replacing the original phrasing with social networking conditions) contextualizing discourse to social platforms. There are, by now, countless examples of the cultivation of specific attitudes, stretching from normal to extreme, that develop through mutual affirmation within a group, and which result in utterances that, only within their discourse, are normal and acceptable, and extreme and unacceptable outside of their discourse. These groupings or gatherings in *echo chambers* comprise a phenomenon that appears in *social media induced polarization* (SMIP). SMIP represents the other side of the coin of unlimited access to information through the internet, fueling "ideological homophily" (Qureshi et al., 2020). Echo chambers can be perceived as complex systems of control (Foucault, 2000), as they are effective tools for gaining influence through governing, administering, and manipulating their members. In the best-case scenario, echo chambers support and give knowledge and a sense of belonging. In the worst case scenario, they lead to chaos and violence, as the world witnessed—in the quite unprecedented spectacle for a democratic state—during the 2020 USA elections with the storming of the Capitol in January 2021. The fact that the most severe punishment for the highest person in power might be the exclusion from Twitter for life poses an interesting dilemma, as power always finds new ways and new platforms that might be less traceable and even less restricted than Twitter. The

power exerted by social platforms has thus been confirmed by history itself, and it has also emphasized the responsibility and awareness needed from all parts involved.

Digital inclusion and exclusion through algorithmic mechanisms, such as filter bubbles that "decide" who and what netizens are and what they like based on their previous choices, friends, clicks, connections, home location, nationality, gender, and more, are, as mentioned above, the prize of a personalized Google (Pariser, 2011). Though echo chambers might solely be an internet phenomenon, they also comprise materialized manifestations of distinctions caused by cultural, social, and intellectual capitals, as prevalent in any offline, analogue society. Yet, manipulations, especially by means of hierarchical differences and intimidation through authority, are found to be more hidden in the online context as they are monitored by technologized processes. In the context of this study, echo chambers and filter bubbles were viewed as catalysts in cyborg talentification, and as contributors to the specific discursive features in each comment room.

Foucault's (2000) points for identifying power thus show correlations in the YouTube environment, even though their trail may be partly covered up. Identifiable differences in status and privileges, practical knowledge, and competence or language are integrated parts of the YouTube concept and ideology, where the privileges experienced as a site monitor are meant to inform and instruct the less informed. Referring to Wolf (2016), this type of situation can be constructive and positive, as well as manipulative and misguiding in the sense of narrowing choices. Regarding the degrees of rationalism and automation, social platforms work hard to make their sites as effective and responsive as possible with "goal-related activities" (Foucault, 2000, p. 338), such as simple likes and dislikes for boosting or diminishing video popularity. In this way, power structures are present as strategies throughout this text, though they might not be explicitly articulated at every intersection.

### 3.2.4. YouTube as a cyborg system—settings and functions

In the context of this study, an understanding of all of the *function*s of the YouTube platform was not the focus. YouTube's conceptualization as a cyborg system is intended to signalize where cyborg theory has been placed and how the platform's mechanisms were understood in my context. YouTube as a cyborg system represents several aspects: first, as a "driver" for mainstream media; a hotspot not only as a cultural administrator (Section 3.3.) but also as a collector, trendsetter, and distributor of products, solely by means of being a communicative machine. In this paragraph, the functions and settings that the everyday user encounters on the

video site are viewed through the eyes of a cyborg (Angus et al., 2002). As YouTube videos and their comments are at the heart of the data material, the obvious functions connected to the videos are the ones of interest, also because they are suspected to help promote, or block, artist popularity. These "easy to use" settings are visible as soon as a YouTube video is opened. In short, they comprise thumbs up, thumbs down, an arrow for sharing, a button to support the channel owner through subscribing, and a "save" button to store the video in one's private YouTube archive. Hidden in settings are the possibilities for manipulating playback speed, for adding or eliminating subtitles, or for changing the quality of the movie, as well as an on-and-off button for annotations. Further, video viewing on the screen can be regulated to default view, miniplayer, theatre view, or the use of full screen. Three dots also hide the possibility for netizens to anonymously report a comment in the video as spam. Next to the usual comment chains there also exists a direct chat function where commenters can react during direct streaming. This function mostly generates much shorter comments than the ones in the comment sections. The live chats get archived and can be viewed after the broadcast. Live chat comes in an unedited format, and this might be the reason why the live chat button in videos for children is "greyed out," and the function is unavailable. Live chat comments were not used in my analysis as they were only found in a few of Marcus & Martinus' and Angelina Jordan's latest releases.

The YouTube discourse is, therefore, based on simple signs and symbols retrieved from the physical world—such as thumbs—and yet, as emoji in CMC, they have been objectified into fixed meanings without any possibility for adjustment or nuance. These signs and functions were conceptualized as straightforward cyborg tools that organize and communicate produsers' actions in my context. Equipped with these tools, when *they*[49] face their private YouTube cinema, vlisteners in their confined space can feel empowered beyond straightforward audience experience, and, in turn, they might be tricked into a feeling of governing themselves and the products they use. Many of the YouTube functions are—by the platform itself—presented as produser-friendly and grassroots, and in accordance with the original intentions of YouTube (Section 1.1.2.). Yet, the complicated rhizomatic networks, which are triggered and activated through "likes" and "not-likes," continue to be invisible—as all "modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible" (Haraway, 1991, p. 153). Within such a panorama of invisible domination, the idea of self-government might quickly fade away, and, ultimately, be about "a cyborg

[49] Gender-neutral "they" was chosen throughout this text.

world [and] about the final imposition of a grid of control of the planet" (p. 154). Or, it could be, as Haraway described the other alternative, about "a cyborg world . … about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (p. 154). I return to Haraway's two alternatives in Section 8.1. when evaluating my choice of cyborg theory for this investigation.

## 3.3. Cultural cosmopolitans on YouTube

Already in postmodernism—the declared age of cultural relativism (Scott, 2012)—culture was regarded as unstable, and it certainly appears to be so in the age of internet and posthuman tendencies. Kozinets (2020), a globally recognized expert on social media and marketing research, identified culture to have become even more complex "through the misty, ever-shifting image-ethers of the Internet" (p. 9). On the internet, where technology connects people with widely differing cultural backgrounds, the unprecedented cultural complexness causes frictions, especially as different ideas, norms, and materials collide (Sudweeks & Simoff, 1999, pp. 38–39). Even though Sudweeks and Simoff problematized the presence of multiple cultures, the cultural connections appropriated by the internet can also be viewed in a positive light. A platform such as YouTube presents an important example of cultural complexity and fluidity that is characteristic of the type of cultural cosmopolitanism facilitated and hosted by the internet. Burgess and Green (2018) envisaged YouTube as a "potential enabler and amplifier of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship – a space in which individuals can express their identities and perspectives, . … and encounter cultural difference" (p. 129). Although especially true for the younger generation who literally grew up alongside YouTube, today all ages, cultures, genders, and all kinds of cyborgs are active on the platform. Before more closely investigating the possibilities of cultural cosmopolitanism on YouTube, the origin of the concept and its differentiation into aesthetic cosmopolitanism are discussed.

### 3.3.1. Everydayness of cultural cosmopolitanism

The sociological concept of cultural cosmopolitanism comes, certainly by 2021, close to being a matter of fact, thereby making essentially everyone a cultural cosmopolitan in postmodern times (Regev, 2019, p. 27). Therefore, establishing the ubiquity of culture in the world today, Regev (2019, p. 27) suggested it to be much more interesting and relevant to

identify the different trajectories through which cultural cosmopolitanism materialized instead of wasting time questioning its existence. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, cultural cosmopolitanism functioned as an umbrella term, with aesthetic cosmopolitanism as a subcategory. The latter exclusively concerns itself with the practices and products of artistic activity, as exemplified by the fusion of pop–rock music (Regev, 2013), thereby resulting in a *pop–rockization*. Cultural cosmopolitanism, as the wider concept, includes "all things that make reality meaningful: concepts, ideas and values, bodily practices, languages, religions and plentiful other things and objects" (Regev, 2019, p. 28).

Contrary to Regev's (2019) conception of an all-embracing cosmopolitanism and a discourse praising the internet's inclusiveness, Zuckerman (2015) found that "in practice, the concentration of individuals' information flows circulate within the bordered, local and homogeneous networks of one's meaningful lifeworld" (p. 70). Comparable to what Wolf (2016) and Quershi et al. (2020) accentuated, the tendency of online produsers to cluster with individuals of similar preferences clearly dominated online behavior and contradicted the idea of an expanding cosmopolitanism and a multicultural, tolerant awareness supported by the internet. However, Hall (2018) again challenged this critique as a "narrow conception of the virtual as an imitation of the real" (p. 409). In his research, Hall (2018) identified cosmopolitanism on the internet as an emerging condition with high potential that arose from "transnationally mediated social relations" (p. 409). Applying much of the same optimism and making use of the possibilities of participatory online culture, another group of researchers, Hull et al. (2010), conducted an ethnographic study with youth from "different hemispheres and countries, possessing different worldviews, languages, and aesthetic principles" (p. 332). Through a more or less guided set of tasks, the researchers inspired communication and exchanges between the participants on the social network Space2Cre8 combined with offline programs. They found that the site functioned well for developing cosmopolitan understandings, even though they underlined the necessity of the pedagogical context, thereby criticizing Burgess and Green (2015) for superficiality, assuming that "such [cosmopolitan] habits of mind spring full-bodied from such cultures and tools [as YouTube], habitus free" (Hull et al., 2010, p. 335). Hull et al. (2010) insisted, instead, that the combination of guided and free online activity helped consolidate young adults' cosmopolitan attitudes, as these engaged with their cultural citizenship in cosmopolitan practice. In this process, they identified two types of cosmopolitanism. The first comprised "the micro-movements of online intercultural exchange" (p. 360), such as sending messages, pictures, blogs, and videos,

whereas the second type was based on what they referred to as "intercultural triggers" (p. 361). These usually turned up unexpectedly, often set into motion by multimodal artefacts such as a digital story. The story initiated various responses, preferably over a longer span of time, and was observed to spur "often noticeable and often immediate shifts in attitudes and actions, as young people took giant steps forward in cosmopolitan understandings" (p. 361). Hall's (2018) and Hull's (2010) findings underlined that there was no definite answer as to whether internet activity invites power mechanisms such as echo chambers to cause exclusion and extremism, or inclusion and knowledge sharing. There might be always a possibility of choice, somewhere and somehow. To consider aesthetic cosmopolitanism online with an active and deliberate involvement of their agents might thus be a thinkable, though definitely complex, endeavor that should be of interest to closer investigate in a music education research perspective.

### 3.3.2. Aesthetic cosmopolitanism in times of internet access

Aesthetic cosmopolitanism was not intended to be an exclusive or rigid concept, and Regev (2013) observed that the concept of aesthetic culture was quite similar to the concept of habitus, but without implying the dichotomous nature of habitus, thereby supposing an either having or not having (p. 130). This facilitated work with subgenres.

The understanding of aesthetic cosmopolitanism in my context was directly derived from Regev (2013), who also inspired Dyndahl and Vestad (2017). Dyndahl and Vestad suggested that the "evolution [of recorded children's music in Norway] strongly resemble[s] aesthetic cosmopolitanism, especially in terms of pop-rockization" (p. 10). Inspired by that statement, I further pursued the idea of a young artist's aesthetic cosmopolitanism in the YouTube environment, which I discuss in Sections 5.3.4., 5.4.4., and 5.5.5. As all child stars in this research engage with what can be placed under the wide umbrella of pop and rock, Regev's (2013) analysis of pop–rock music as an example of aesthetic cosmopolitanism has been given considerable thought.

Pop–rock can be seen as its own category, a genre in its own right, even though pop–rock is a fusion of two usually contrasting genres (Regev, 2013), with blurred boundaries stretching to jazz and art music. Following Regev (2013), it was the sonic textures and their cultural narratives that linked rock and pop together, with aesthetic cosmopolitanism emerging "as the socially produced consequence of the interplay between these two fields" (p. 3). In general,

> *Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism* refers to the ongoing formation, in late modernity, of world culture as one complexly interconnected entity, in which social groupings of all types around the globe growingly share wide common grounds in their aesthetic perceptions, expressive forms, and cultural practices. (p. 3)

Elaborating on the above line of thought, Regev (2013) envisaged aesthetic cosmopolitanism as a three-way circuit, where, first, Western cultural products flow into non-Western countries and are perceived as models of modernity; and, second, where elements and components of this “modern” music are selectively assimilated and connected with indigenous traditional material. Finally, some of these products may flow back into Western cultures, as genuine products, and may again exert inspiration and influence over Western musicians.

Aesthetic cosmopolitanism, according to Regev (2013), is seen channeled through concrete modern technologies of expression, such as film, television, and pop–rock music: “The worldwide proliferation of the art forms associated with these technologies of expression is a key element in the growing proximity and overlap between national and ethnic cultures, consolidating aesthetic cosmopolitanism” (p. 9). Regev identified two dynamics that consolidate aesthetic cosmopolitanism, the first being the power from certain art forms—aesthetic idioms that are signifiers of contemporariness—and the second being forces within nations that implement these forms and trends into their ethnic or national uniqueness.

Further, Regev (2013) differentiated between advertent, active, and inadvertent, passive aesthetic cosmopolitans, such as two poles on a continuum. Inadvertent or banal aesthetic cosmopolitans comprised consumers of “typical, ubiquitous products of the cultural industries” (p. 16). Pop–rock music practice and production perfectly exemplify these two types. On the one side, there are the enthusiastic fans and ardent followers, with passive listeners on the other side. The pop–rock mashup has caused much confusion, and certainly also irritation. The common understanding among pop–rock musicians is that the sound technologies used are not enhancements to the acoustics but are unique “creative tools for generating sonic textures that cannot be produced otherwise” (p. 18), which further bound the two genres together. The rock-and-roll wave had a considerable impact on young people’s aesthetic understandings and sense of their otherness, in contrast to their parent’s generation. With the advent and fast expansion of the internet, fans of pop–rock can now not only easily access information about their favorite bands and musicians but also listen to the songs repeatedly, thereby gaining the knowledge and feeling of star or genre ownership, which characterize a music fan (p. 132). In this way, Regev (2013) observed that the internet

> afforded . . . greater, tighter, more efficient, and more immediate participation in the aesthetic cultures of pop-rock . … Being initially a loose chain of relatively isolated instances, global aesthetic cultures of pop-rock have become, with the aid of Internet platforms, tight and culturally effective networks. (p. 131)

The accessibility of all aspects of pop-rock musical material on the internet has made aesthetic cosmopolitanism an everyday, worldwide practice for pop-rock fans (p. 136). Thus, it has lost some of the thrill of the early days, where acquiring a new long play (LP) record with savings from last summer's job incited ecstatic excitement in ardent fans' hearts. The everydayness of aesthetic cosmopolitanism runs parallel to the development of omnivorous tastes, which have transformed the appreciation of cultural broadness and the consumption of multiple genres into characteristics of social status and moral worth (p. 15).

In the context of this study, both cultural- and the subgenre of aesthetic cosmopolitanism were identified in micro- and macroprocesses of my data. Microprocesses were identified as being contained to the defined spaces of specific YouTube comment rooms and specific videos, whereas macroprocesses were perceived as reaching out, inspiring worldwide internet audiences in a *one-world cultural experience*. Both aspects, the cultural and the more specifically aesthetic, actively contributed to the discussion of the empirical material. As my analysis shows, each cyborg talentification case conveys its own traits and strategies for appropriating cultural and/or aesthetic cosmopolitanism.

Chapter 4 describes and argues in favor of the methodological and ethical choices that supported this study.

# 4. Ethical methodology for investigating online perceptions

Having only been involved in qualitative projects based on face-to-face interviews and physical observations, entering the online environment as a researcher was a new step for me. As I considered various methods, my main guiding question was how to serve this project in the possible best way, and how to design it as credible, effective, and coherent as possible. Rather promptly, these questions were accompanied—and even dominated—by ethical concerns. In principle, online research is supposed to be conducted according to approximately the same rules as analogue, traditional research, following the guidelines of the National Committee for Research-Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, abbreviated as NESH (De nasjonale forskningsetiske komiteene, 2018). In both contexts, offline and online, the cardinal rule is to respect human worth and dignity. These concerns are as straightforward as they are hazy, as online informants mostly remain anonymous, of unknown age, and are communicative rather than physically present. Thus, they are at times impossible to trace, complicating the matter of respect for human worth. Accordingly, to determine the most appropriate ethical design for my study, I scanned the works of several researchers with a particular interest in online ethics ( Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002; Grabher & Ibert, 2013; Grimmelmann, 2009; Joinson, 2005; Kendall, 2013; Kozinets, 2015, 2020; Lange, 2014; Løfberg, 2003; Markham, 1998, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Nissenbaum, 2010; Thompson, 1995; Wolfgang, 2016; Vanacker, 2018). Additionally, I consulted the handbook for ethical guidelines in the Norwegian system (De nasjonale forskningsetiske komiteene, 2018), the rules of the General Data Protection Regulation (GPDR, 2019), and both the 2012 summarized guidelines (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) and the updated ethical guidelines of the *Association of Internet Researchers* (Franzke et al., 2020). Further, in the following paragraphs, the complexity of online ethics engages in a conversation with cyborg theory (Haraway, 1991).

## 4.1. Taking care of integrity in online research

By February 2021, Markham's (2012) report of the inherent conditions of internet research almost reads like the portrayal of a society shaken by an unpredictable coronavirus disease demanding constant awareness and adaptability. Markham described how the ongoing growth of the internet involved unstableness and insecurity, especially in terms of fundamentally opposing expectations to online privacy, often owing to national and cultural differences (p.

337). The internet's changeability was emphasized by many. This includes Lange (2014) who stressed that scholars needed to be aware of and actively register terms and conditions of the online sites they investigated (p. 235). Both the described diversity in expectations to privacy and the internet's changeability colored this study's ethical and methodological design.

In order to respect the cardinal rule of human worth and dignity online, researchers are called to understand the subtle differences between the internet and traditional physical research arenas, which involve direct interaction. One example is the vague line between private and public texts. As information available on the internet is organized disregarding academic and intellectual hierarchies, accessing a news article is as easy as accessing an academic paper—though this might involve a payment—a YouTube comment, or a Twitter chat. Subsequently, the definitions of *private* and *public* are problematic and complex. Haraway (1991) listed the private–public dichotomy as one that had been "techno-digested" (p. 163). Vanacker (2018) stated that the described ambiguity of public versus private not only related to changing online privacy protection policies but also to a lack of discussions surrounding privacy in daily life (p. 217). He noted that to decide whether privacy was "a right or a value . … an instrumental right or a fundamental right" (p. 217), were questions that needed to be discussed, for if people were unsure about what private was meant to encompass, they would be unable to understand where privacy ended and the public sphere began.

According to Thompson (1995), the distinction between private and public was firmly embedded in Western history, and even though these polysemic terms have been through several changes of meaning through the course of time, there was a general understanding of public connected to state-affairs, and private connected to personal affairs (p. 121). For example, written materials, such as newspaper articles, were considered to be public, whereas notes in a diary were acknowledged to be of a more private character. On the internet, however, these arenas intermingle. I suspect that computers themselves, through their very organization, could be said to blur these boundaries, objectifying subjects in digital text materials on the one hand, and enlivening the materials themselves on the other, such that texts become their own masters. Objectivity pairs well with anonymity, and at best grants communicative subjects freedom and security. Løfberg (2003), in her research on vulnerable young individuals online, explained that "the *feeling* of anonymity is one reason that internet research within social science is interesting . … [as it] gives a feeling of security that encourages an intimacy that would not be found in face-to-face (FTF) interactions" (p. 145). Moreover, she discovered that children and young people might actually become empowered

in computer-mediated settings, as the hierarchical differences between adults and youths, which are more outspoken in face-to-face interviews, become less intrusive online (p. 142). The consequences and ethical implications of such a shift were complex, Løfberg observed, as this empowerment could encourage young informants to reveal more sensitive data that again had to be treated with even more respect and discretion than a researcher might have accounted for in advance. These findings corresponded with earlier research such as Joinson's (2001), who identified CMC to lead to higher levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face communication—a process supported by *visual anonymity* (p. 179).

Also, Grabher and Ibert (2013) reflected upon the effects of physical distance in online meetings in their research on hybrid professional communities. They discovered "that distinct features of online interaction (quasi-anonymity, asynchronicity, virtual memory), [did] provide unique opportunities for collaboration, such as on-topic professionality and cumulative and problem-oriented learning" (p. 22). Grabher and Ibert concluded that the distance in online meetings and online knowledge exchanges can serve as assets to learning and knowledge accumulation. Clearly though, the anonymity provided in online communication was a double-edged sword, and communications might become extremely hateful (compare also Section 3.2.3.). Still, Wolfgang (2016), discussing ethics from a journalistic perspective, dismissed "blaming anonymity for antisocial behavior" (p. 94) as too simplistic and emphasized how restrictions to anonymity in comment fora hurt vulnerable internet produsers most while potentially causing conformity in discourse (p. 100).

Thus, whether identified as an asset or a deficiency, online communication differs from face-to-face communication and evokes complex ethical dilemmas. Thus, as Joinson (2005) emphasized, online researchers had to understand how the internet offered essentially different modes of research on human life and social structures (p. 21). Van Dijck (2013) expanded this argumentation further, especially emphasizing that "social media platforms have unquestionably altered the nature of private and public communication" (p. 7). Crafting an effective design for internet methodology, therefore, depended on an appreciation and incorporation of the social aspects of internet conduct (p. 21).

Markham (2006) proposed that, in the end, conducting online research was possibly even more closely associated with ethics than traditional research. Therefore, it did make sense to regard ethics as method, and methods as ethics (p. 39). This perspective suggested a close look at researchers' responsibilities concerning informants' and researchers' integrity. In order to determine whether a research object ought be treated as private or public, the object's

context and expected publicity had to be considered. Accordingly, in the following subsection, I discuss the question of contextual integrity and expected publicity as well as the matter of seeking and evading consent in online research.

### 4.1.1. Expected publicity, contextual integrity and informed consent

Based on Nissenbaum's (2010) conceptualization, The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities in Norway—*NESH*—introduced two terms, namely *expected publicity* and *contextual integrity* (De nasjonale forskningsetiske komiteene, 2018). These vital concepts were added to help online researchers deal with ambiguous borderline research situations concerning informants' expectations regarding the privacy of their products. Nissenbaum (2010) developed these terms based on her identification of privacy as a particularly complicated term that, by definition, seemed negotiable so that "privacy … at best [was] a culturally relative predilection rather than a universal human value" (p. 129). Building on this statement, Nissenbaum underscored that privacy should be understood within its context, where it created "context-relative informational norms" (p. 129). She identified "contexts … [as] structured social settings characterized by canonical activities, roles, relationships, power structures, norms (or rules), and internal values (goals, ends, purposes)" (p. 132). Consequently, Nissenbaum declared privacy in itself to be contextual and to carry "*contextual values*" (p. 134). Accordingly, *NESH* (De nasjonale forskningsetiske komiteene, 2018) defined privacy to be the researchers' task to consider, evaluating their informants' expected publicity and contextual integrity in each specific research and to "take a personal responsibility for assessing the appropriate criteria for *reasonable expectations of publicity*" (p. 10). These considerations should include the forms of communication and their inherent technological design, such as the place of communication, the data's accessibility to parties other than group members, the existence of age restrictions or passwords, and the possible harm inflicted. The researchers themselves were entrusted to apply practical judgement in each particular research case. According to Markham and Buchanan (2012),

> ethical principles are more likely to be understood inductively rather than applied universally. That is, rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgement attentive to the specific context (what Aristoteles identified as phronesis). (p.4)

I reflected on the question of harm at several crossroads in my research, and specifically with regard to the academic use of materials shared in YouTube comment rooms.

A closer look at the act of *online sharing* revealed this to be an especially troublesome practice concerning privacy, both for the produsers who share and reshare, and for the researchers who access the shared materials from open fora. The act of sharing in physical, face-to-face interactions means, in most cultures, to give away something, preferably to a particular person or a defined group. Sharing online becomes less specific, and sharing, for example, a picture on the internet entails *posting* it on the sharer's personal profile. Sharing online seldom means *giving away*, unless the picture is sent directly to a friend. Posting a picture on a site is for others to see and not take, even though the opposite often happens. Sharing on the internet has become "the *default relationship* between the self and technological infrastructures," Markham (2016, p. 194) observed. Software, companies, and even governments are "not *taking* information but simply picking up what was shared" (p. 195), lifting the ethical concerns of sharing into a political–economic sphere.

Also obtaining consent from online groups can be tricky, for although various digital solutions are available for reaching informants, researchers, especially on social media, are often unable to check whether they obtained consent from all their participants. In the case of YouTube data, the commenters are spread all over the world, placed in different time zones and in different times, having posted their comments several years ago. Online identities were generally also camouflaged, hiding their age, gender, education level, and social context for a researcher with ethical conduct. Online researchers' lack of physical closeness with informants presented thus a profound ethical dilemma, and Markham and Buchanan (2012) suggested that gaining informed consent could be perceived as an inductive process following the nature of the project (p. 14). Moreover, as internet research advanced, not only informants but also researchers might require protection (Franzke et al., 2020, p. 11)—a new concern that appeared alongside net mobbing and threats.

In confrontation with the discussed ethical concerns, the current study's design integrated two issues. The first were aspects of fabrication and narratives associated with ethical practices (Markham, 2012). The second was Bassett and O'Riordan's (2002) analysis of the internet as a place of texts. Basset and O'Riordan's (2002) perspective represented an almost outdated perspective, as it was written nearly two decades ago. Although their views might be regarded as obsolete, I suggest that their research confronted the important issues of protection versus incapacitation, which I still perceive as an urgent, current theme. Both Markham (2012) and

Basset and O'Riordan (2002) offered valuable contributions to a discussion of overly protective ethical standards which potentially restrict power on online research independency.

First, I discuss Markham's (2012) analysis, who opposed the general view of fabrications as unserious, valueless research. Second, I debate Basset and O'Riordan's (2002) analysis who identified the human research model as a *blanket research*, which threatened the integrity of online writers.

### 4.1.2. Burden of privacy and fabrication as ethical practice

Markham (2016) observed how online privacy, confined to a single person, was a contradiction and impossibility in itself. She identified this as the reason for why companies had pushed the heavy burden of reading, understanding, and acting in accordance to privacy protection rules onto the individuals using their sites. This agency trend, which shifted the focus of control to individuals, resulted in a state where "privacy has become a personal burden" (p. 193). Websites, such as Facebook and YouTube, used privacy protection services that barely any common netizen cares to read. At the same time, it made sense to state that "Facebook isn't a privacy carjacker, forcing its victims into compromising situations" (Grimmelmann, 2009, p. 1140)—so if people chose to be "dancing around the roof as they expose their personal information to the world" (p. 1140), it was really their own decision. The pressing question was not so much who is to blame but what motivates this carelessness (compare Section 3.2.2.). I suggest that the query of why netizens so easily comply with social platforms' rules evoke a Foucauldian notion of governmentality. Privacy rules' negligence highlight the controversial issue of vulnerable people requiring protection, especially when they—seemingly of their own free will—overstep a rule.[50] Some researchers tried to handle such complex situations creatively. Markham (2012) reported from a group of academics who acted on a deepfelt responsibility for their vulnerable informants and, therefore, chose to fabricate content instead of using authentic texts (p. 338). The journal, which was to publish the article, rejected the researchers' ethical choice. Markham (2012) challenged what she called the "persistent normative standard for social science inquiry . . . that continues to privilege conventional, standardized procedures" (p. 338), and claimed that

[50] Yet, as Austrian lawyer Max Schrems explained, social platforms' clever extraction of personal data exceeds most people's wildest fantasies and competencies, thereby calling the existence of free will into question (Schrems, personal communication, October 22, 2019). Schrems took his complaints to the European Union court in August 2020.

these had failed to adapt to social media's changing landscapes and complex research situations.

As such controversies surrounding fabrication clearly showed, online researchers often needed to confront critical questions and defend their decisions. Markham (2012) supported her argument of fabrication as an ethical practice by paralleling it with the traditional and accepted method of fictional narratives. She stressed how both fictional and actual results of real interviews, when presented as narratives, had undergone an analysis conducted by the researcher (p. 344). This view was indirectly supported by Sørly and Blix (2017), who identified narratives as the researcher's interpretations and results from their own meaning-making (p. 38). The lines between careful fabrication and researchers' elucidations from actual content were, therefore, less clear and absolute than general guidelines claimed them to be. In the context of this study, though fabrication is not used as such, the YouTube comment materials are both anonymized and slightly altered, following the suggestion from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

### 4.1.3. Internet as space and text—presenting a new ethical impact

Bassett and O'Riordan (2002) challenged the general inclination to understand the internet as *space* and advocated a view of the internet "as a cultural production of texts" (p. 233). They claimed that the dominating image of space overshadowed the fact that the internet also served as a major facilitator for all sorts of written material. It was vital to understand the internet as both space and text, as "adopting the spatial metaphor exclusively . . . can sometimes lead to *unethical* results" (p. 234), suppressing internet writers' integrity. Bassett and O'Riordan critiqued the application of the widespread human–subject research model to textual internet material as a "blanket-approach" (p. 234), which threatened, instead of protected, individuals' integrity. They built their argumentation on the fact that the internet also figured as "a medium for publication, and significantly one where users could take control of the means of production, create their own cultural artefacts and intervene in the production of existing ones" (p. 235). Therefore, online researchers had to consider whom or what they were protecting, and commenters needed to be given the same rights as offline authors whose materials were free to be used and discussed. Thus, online texts, especially when posted on minor public platforms, caused several ethical complications, as academic overprotection might create power imbalances, favoring print products as valid research objects (p. 236). Ultimately, overly protective research strategies might even reduce the

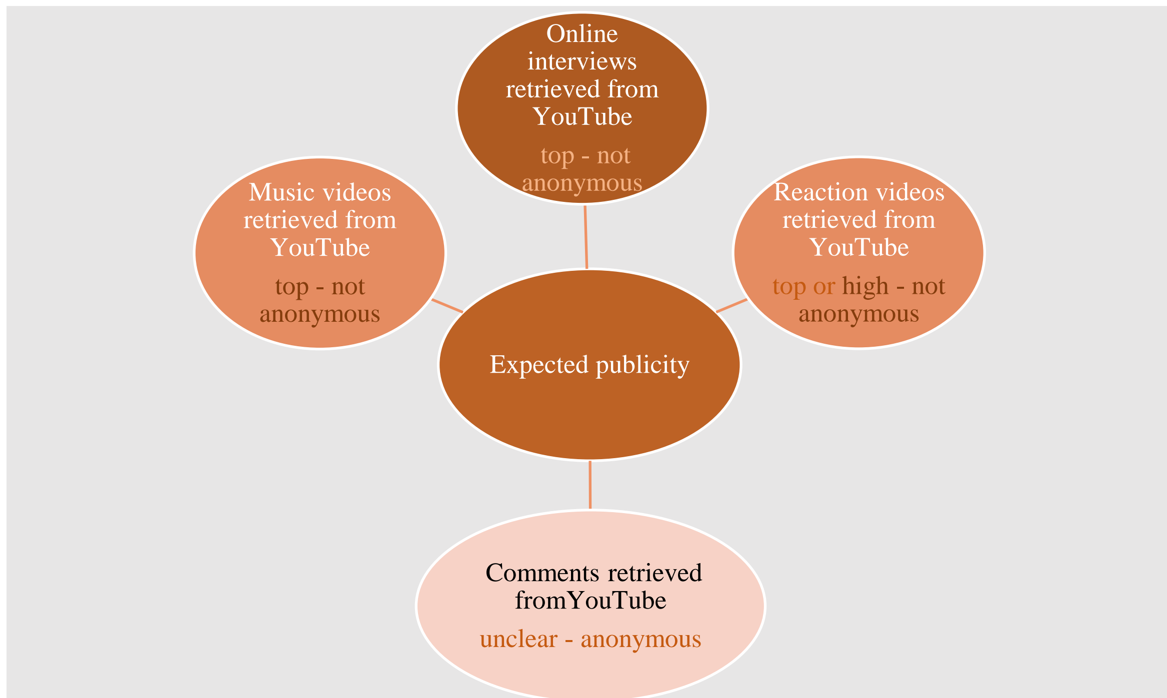
cultural capital of online produsers and could lead to disregard and marginalization (p. 244). Consequently, if researchers followed general ethical rules without contextual considerations, they might not only harm the individuals they aimed to protect but also do serious damage to academic integrity. Bassett and O'Riordan defended their ethical stance, arguing that "researchers cannot afford to assume that individuals engaging in cultural practices through the Internet are always more at risk than those using other media" (p. 244), and placed thus further responsibility on researchers' ethical compasses.

Gathering all the guidelines, reflections, and knowledge presented, my investigation treated the internet as an arena mainly composed of texts,[51] taking into account the ethical and methodological consequences arising from such an approach (Basset & O'Riordan, 2002; NESH, 2018). YouTube comments were considered textual products, placed on the internet to be read by the general public. Further, the overall argument for not seeking consent for any material in this study was supported by the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) article 85, which exempts academic utterances from privacy protection regulations (GDPR, 2018, art. 85). Further, I chose to only use preexisting online material, produced without interference, thus avoiding the classic researcher–informant positioning that might have easily disturbed the material at hand. This also entailed that I conducted my research using only material for which consent was contextually considered excessive. Still, the materials used were produced with varying involvement and, most likely, with unlike expectations to publicity. I graded these differences using a scale from *top* and *high* to *unclear*, as illustrated in Figure 1.

[51] Compare Section 4.3.1 and the wider text understanding, following Shuker (2016).

**Figure 1**

*Illustration of expected publicity in data materials*




Comments in YouTube comment rooms are posted in a kind of community-setting, even though these are not closed fan communities where members need passwords or have to comply to specific codes of conduct. As a term, Kendall (2013) suggests that community "evokes empathy, affection, support, interdependence, consensus, shared values, and proximity" (p. 309) as well as all the opposites—antipathy, hate, and other contrasting attitudes (p. 309). In the case of YouTube comment rooms, both these aspects are present. The expectancy to publicity in comment rooms is, therefore, anticipated to differ individually, despite the public nature of the forum. Some commenters define themselves as fans and display a certain ownership to both the star and the group supporting the star. Others are more fleeting visitors, just checking in and inconsistent in their use of social networks, being a part of a "networked individualism" (Wellman, cited in Kendall, 2013, p. 311). Comments from comment rooms are, therefore, anonymized.

The young artists, the producers, reaction video agents, and reporters have a consistent high-to-top expectation to publicity. Their direct voices are public, and the inclusion of identifiable quotes into the research is, thus, evaluated as causing minimum offense.

## 4.2. Online methodologies for qualitative research

Although ethical considerations facilitated much of my further research design, I still had to find the right methodology to direct my approaches.

### 4.2.1. Qualitative perspectives

As this study was qualitative in nature, I was foremost interested in investigating the qualitative characteristics (Sudweeks & Simoff, 1999, p. 32) of online communicative and artistic content. Within this qualitative, inductive frame, my investigation aspired to offer insights into the communicative and artistic content prodused by artists, fans, and critics on a specific platform in a specific timeframe. Through snapshots of YouTube activity, my objectives were to report and analyze online communication, identifying emergent themes and then applying them to the phenomenon of cyborg talentification. In order to "interpret these phenomena in context" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 13), I studied diverse methodological approaches to internet research. One of my first encounters was *netnography*, a term coined by the marketing professor Kozinets (1998, 2015, 2020).

### 4.2.2. Exploring netnography

When Kozinets introduced the term *netnography* in 1995, he had hoped his new method—when given the right "rigour, care and humility" (Kozinets, 2015, p. 5)—would enable a human interpretation of social interactions mediated by technology. At first, Kozinets (2015) firmly situated netnography in the hands of its more experienced big brother, ethnography,[52] thereby referring to his approach as one piece in the larger puzzle of ethnographic research as one piece in the larger puzzle of the ethnographic research universe, one which investigated specific instances in which community was produced through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets, 1998, p. 366). Kozinets (2015, 2020) continuously struggled to defend netnography's uniqueness and to demarcate its differences from existing or simultaneously developing online methods such as "digital ethnography [which] is a method for representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story" (Underberg & Zorn, 2013, p. 10). Another method, created by online research pioneer Christine Hine (2000), was coined *virtual ethnography*. Later in

[52] Ethnography is among the oldest qualitative methods used to study people and their cultures, originating in the seventeenth century (Savin-Baden, 2013).

her career, Hine (2015) referred to it as an ethnography for the internet, thereby identifying the internet as “an embedded, embodied, everyday phenomenon” (p. 13).

The first manifestation of netnography was designed to serve specific marketing purposes. Through observing and mingling and communicating with online consumers, early netnographers aimed to categorize and assemble consumers’ preferences, ideas, and suggestions into various products. As social media use proliferated, the need for online research capable of encompassing all aspects of online activities became evident. Kozinets (2020) addressed this need by adapting his methodology to several research fields and, in particular, to suit social media research (p. 5). He described his revised method as being connected to yet characteristically different from both digital ethnography and ethnography for the internet, especially in light of the new techniques and terminologies being introduced into netnography at the time.

The process of considering netnography for my study was, like netnography itself, ongoing and organic. Netnography became, in this sense, more like a work companion with whom I conversed along the research path than a fixed methodology to which I adhered. That said, while I continued to value the netnographic approach, I also became somewhat skeptical of Kozinets’ efforts to revise some elements of his netnographic analysis (2020), which I had, at that point, already started to use, and which I consequently had to abandon. Other internet researchers have chosen to combine “new forms of digital ethnography with classical methodological approaches” (Lange, 2014, p. 231). According to Kozinets (2020), this blending of methods has had devastating effects—“If you decide to call your work an online ethnography, it will be unclear what principles and procedures you followed. You will be cooking your data without a recipe, producing a dish without a name” (p. 8). Despite the categorical tone, I agreed with Kozinets that a mere transfer of offline methods to an online environment was unsatisfactory, and—in my process of making sense of online realities—many of the same questions that Kozinets sought to answer in his newest work (Kozinets, 2020) had occupied me too. One such question involved the inaccuracy of traditional terminology in online situations, a dilemma with which other researchers were also struggling (Markham, 2013). The activity of, for example, *observing* online comments, required different yet not completely dissimilar strategies as, for example, ethnographic observations of youths in a classroom. Youths, just like comments, appear and disappear, clustering together, then dispersing, only to cluster again, somewhere else, at another time. Yet comments are not people; they occupy a different place, they are textual, they are unaware of

the researcher just as they are unaware of anything else (I suppose). Markham (2013) noted that working with materials from social media required *archiving* rather than observing (p. 439) and, therefore, that the traditional ethnographic concept of observation did not really befit textual realities. Kozinets' (2020) newly constructed term *engaged data operations* grasped otherwise missing aspects of observation in online research, yet it assumed participation, and, therefore, it did not match my approach.

Thus, as per my understanding, the main contribution of Kozinets' (2020) new terms is the conceptualization process that guided them, and it is the acknowledgement of novel qualities that also characterizes his new methodological toolkit (p. 248). Here, Kozinets introduced what he referred to as the four levels of *netnographic engagement* with varying degrees of researcher involvement. The most relevant levels of this engagement in my context are *intellectual engagement strategies* and *emotional engagement strategies* (p. 250). Intellectual engagement strategies imply the intent to gain a deeper conceptual understanding of data, which might include discussions of particular ideas, the tracing of relational structures, and the questioning of information that seems to be taken for granted (p. 250). Emotional engagement strategies are intended to inspire investment in the feelings permeating the matter under investigation, thereby allowing researchers to be moved by the words and worlds of empirical material (p. 250). Neither of these two types of engagement demands interaction with the informants or the research field, and they are, therefore, suitable in my context. The argument for the use of intellectual and emotional engagement was formulated by Kozinets as the need to counteract a possible and general "lack of interpretative depth" (p. 249) in netnographic research. In this study, intellectual engagement in the subject matter was mirrored in the conceptualization of the contextual connections between, and in the questioning of, preconceived "truths" in concepts such as *talent* and *child prodigy*. Emotional engagement, which also involves the sharing of feelings evoked by the data (p. 250), allowed my personal reflections to manifest in the discussions of my cases.

Kozinets' revised netnography (2020) responded to preliminary suggestions for netnographic improvement by several academics, including, for example, Lugosi and Quinton (2018). They observed how internet activities created "new intimacies between technology and users" (p. 288), which traditional netnographic methods could not address. Taking these intimacies seriously, Lugosi and Quinton (2018) proposed the development of a "more-than-human netnography" (p. 287) that transcended the human research model. They advised netnographers to give "further weighting to the role played by non-human agents, for

example, [by] examining how technology platforms facilitate particular forms of interaction" (p. 291) and, in turn, derive insights from data, which would otherwise remain hidden. In the current study's context, this more-than-human netnography inspired me to introduce cyborg theory and to design my investigation as a case study of cyborg talentification instead of child stars. My use of the descriptor *case study* signals a "decision to focus on enquiry around an instance" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 152) and indicates that communications at the interface are performed by everyday cyborgs. Case study also implies a profound consideration of the context and the intermingling surrounding conditions (Yin, 2012, p. 4)—a matter that is instrumentalized by emphasizing the contextual frames, as I discuss in Sections 1.2. and 1.3., and in Chapter 3.

In conclusion, the influence of netnography in my research was minor, as it was mainly used to describe the nature of the research *locus* and to explain the inclusion of *intellectual and emotional engagement* as tactics for obtaining deeper insights into and greater intimacy with the data. Thus, to strengthen the foundations for my analysis, I added elements of deconstructive and philosophical hermeneutic thinking to my methodological framework.

### 4.2.3. Contextualizing deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics

Deconstruction, a concept made both familiar and instrumental by Derrida, embraces a controversial term that has caused heated debates in the academic world. Philosophical hermeneutics, as represented by Gadamer in my context, constitutes a more traditional and established research perspective. I anticipated that these two approaches would complement each other, but I was uncertain whether such complementarity was comprehensible. Searching the literature, I discovered that several theorists, already during Derrida's and Gadamer's lifetimes, had been eager to unite these two great academics and their philosophies. In the context of my study, I considered these scholars' thoughts and efforts as the best portals through which the reconciliation of deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics could be perceived (Bertram, 2002; Bernstein, 2008; Di Cesare, 2016; Feldman, 2000).

Indeed, from the very moment deconstruction was established, academics had been inspired by imagining in-depth conversations and exchanges of thought between the representatives of hermeneutics and deconstruction, Gadamer and Derrida. Their argumentation showed that both philosophies were derived from the same origin, namely Heidegger's philosophical *Being-in-the-World* (Di Cesare, 2016). According to Feldman (2000), a professor of law, both Derrida (2006) and Gadamer (1975/2013) made important contributions to hermeneutics

(Feldman, 2000, p. 51)—or to the state of mind prior to understanding, i.e., the in-between place that Gadamer (1974/2013) himself described as "the true locus of hermeneutics" (p. 306). Deconstruction filled this space with elements of the future. Bertram (2002) focused in detail on how the differences between deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics could only be understood precisely in reference to the backcloth of their kinship.

Bernstein (2008) claimed that the imagined philosophical relationship between Gadamer and Derrida had created a supplementary and "productive tension" (p. 597). In his discussion, Bernstein noted that both Gadamer and Derrida had a particular sensitivity to language and written and oral speech, even though each expressed this sensitivity in their own characteristic way (p. 587). By discussing *conversation*, *understanding*, *misunderstanding*, *interpretation*, and *misinterpretation* (p. 580) from a hermeneutic and deconstructive perspective, Bernstein reviewed the Gadamer–Derrida dichotomy and decided that "there is no Either/Or, but rather a Both/And" (p. 608), thereby cementing his idea of the interdependence between deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics. The "Both/And" of dichotomous parts was, in the current study, mirrored by cyborg theory and the notion of being human and machine, gendered and not gendered, at the same time. Also noteworthy is Bernstein's critical discussion of the *dialogue* and *fused horizons* developed by philosophical hermeneutics (p. 592). With questions derived from deconstruction, Bernstein emphasized the power play inherent in dialogue and identified the call for this kind of conversation as "a screen for doing violence to the otherness of the other" (p. 594). Despite this rather dramatic formulation, the power negotiations he indicated provide a useful conceptualization, especially in analyses of interviews and conversations between media and young artists. The interviews are thoroughly discussed in Section 6.2.

Like most theorists, Derrida and Gadamer have been criticized—Derrida for nihilism, and Gadamer for conservativism (Feldman, 2000). Feldman insisted that interesting things happened when the one attempted to do what the other was meant to do, or, as in my context, when both approaches were "plugged into" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) the same text. Feldman (2000) developed several interesting perspectives in his analysis of the interdependence between deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics. Using the example of society's conception and drive for justice, Feldman analyzed how an evaluation of justice was grounded in a hermeneutic understanding that had developed within the individuals' horizons (p. 64) and how any conceptualization of justice would "include an oppressed or denied Other" (p. 65). Deconstruction, then, always pushes to reveal this "other," the refused voice

that requires a further quest for justice (p. 65). In this way, hermeneutics and deconstruction can be forged into a sharp and valuable tool for postmodern academics, as Feldman (2000) concluded. Philosophical hermeneutics and deconstruction should be recognized as complementary postmodern philosophies (p. 53), and a researcher who walks this road should be referred to as a *hermeneutic deconstructionist* (p. 65).

From a roundtable discussion on October 2, 1994, several fine reflections and clarifications on Derrida's work, expressed by Derrida himself, were made available in the research conducted by Caputo (1997). The collection was titled, implementing Derrida's own formulation—"Deconstruction in a Nutshell" (Caputo, 1997). One of the first questions posed at the roundtable challenged Derrida to explain deconstruction. Derrida answered:

> The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things – texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need – do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always to come. Every time you try to stabilize the meaning of a thing . . . , the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away. (Caputo, 1997, p. 31)

Derrida did not deny *meaning* as such, only its fixed form, and by attacking the stable meaning of things, he opposed the assignment of meaning to deconstruction. On the other hand, meaning signifies a way to contain and pack things together "like a nutshell" (p. 31). Deconstruction, on the contrary, attempts to extend beyond boundaries and limitations. Still, Derrida admitted, "one might say that cracking nutshells is what deconstruction *is.* In a nutshell" (p. 32). Derrida referred to this as *the aporia of deconstruction*.

In his reflections on what deconstruction might do for music research, Dyndahl (2008) though Derrida's deconstruction to offer a

> key approach, which does not aim to expose that what is lacking with a view to rectifying the errors. More precisely, the purpose of deconstruction is to expose that which has been left out in something that comes across as complete, not in order to bring back what has been left out, but because the distance between what is present and what is absent creates a pattern in language, experience and existence which cannot ever be exceeded. (p. 125)

Dyndahl (2008) highlighted the capacity of deconstruction to uncover what is disregarded in music education, music socialization, and music research. Consequently, Dyndahl anticipated that deconstructing normative attitudes could reveal what had been left unattended (pp. 141–142). He identified the potential of a deconstructive approach to light a torch that would illuminate, and thereby expose, subcultures and untraditional learning arenas for music (p. 142). In the current study's context, the search for the unsaid, the eliminated, and the non-existent supplemented the findings of the existing, the expressed, and the pronounced. These two ways of thinking, thus, complement each other and are at times plugged into my analysis simultaneously or applied and represented consecutively.

O'Regan's (2006) conceptualization of the text as a critical object, which he abbreviated to TACO (p. 180), provided an additional systematization of my analysis of comment materials from YouTube (compare Section 4.3.5.). O'Regan's TACO comprises a procedure "in which a number of critical and poststructuralist perspectives are brought into dialogue" (p. 180). O'Regan extracted the, in deconstruction, pursued doubling commentary, investigating how, first, the text wants to be read, and second, how the first can be problematized, which he defined as the factual start of deconstruction (p. 188). Two phrases that O'Regan extracted from Derrida's deconstruction were integrated into my analysis: *preferred reading* and *the texture of the text* (p. 190). The first is connected to the *descriptive interpretation* of the text, intending to unpack the way in which the text seems to want to be read. The second phrase refers to the *deconstructive interpretation* of the text, which involves searching for "possible 'blind spots' and incongruencies which may have been passed over or neglected and which seem problematic to the first reading" (p. 190). In his construction of TACO, O'Regan added two dimensions to Derrida's twofold approach, namely a *representative interpretation* and a *social interpretation*. The first compounds interpretations of the grammar, vocabulary, and genre choices in the text, and the second investigates the social contexts in which the text is embedded (p. 191). In the analysis of YouTube comments, descriptive interpretations of the texts were mainly found in the narratives (Sections 5.3.3., 5.4.3., and 5.5.3.), and through the interpretation of commenting as a new genre and YouTube as a cyborg system (Sections 3.2.4. and 4.3.2.). The representative interpretations are the main focus in the discursive paragraphs (Sections 5.3.2., 5.4.2., and 5.5.2.), whereas the social interpretations are discussed in the online context (for example, Sections 1.2., 1.3.1., and 3.2.4.). The deconstructive interpretations are integrated into the discursive paragraphs, but they are also included in the discussions in Chapter 6 and summarized in Section 6.3.

Thus, in my investigation, I combined the understanding of the given with the search for the "Other" (Bernstein, 2008) by implementing lines of philosophical hermeneutics, deconstruction, and TACO. Understanding, according to Gadamer (1975/2013), arises from a continuous communication between the text and the researcher who approaches the text from a "fore-conception of completeness" (p. 305). Understanding, then, ultimately results from a fusing of horizons (p. 317). In my context, this also implies identifying the question the text poses and answers (pp. 382–383). Deconstruction approaches the text with new questions and dismantles given dichotomies and their inherent hierarchies, searching for what has been left out. This probing implies looking beyond the existing, hermeneutically understood text, as, according to Derrida, nothing exists outside the text in the sense that, inherent in the text, there are "always already traces … after what is going to come" (Gundersen, 2006, p. 9, my translation from Norwegian). Deconstruction, in this context, reflects on what questions have not been asked and what answers might be missing, further supported by Bernstein's (2008) claim that the strength of deconstructive practices is "that they bring forth complexities by revealing inner tensions and contradictory logics" (p. 594). Through TACO, approaches from deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics coalesced into a structure that allowed me to sort my data systematically, which included a consideration of inherent intertextual and/or intermedial links.

### 4.2.4. Intertextuality and intermediality in my data

All materials used in this study were mediated and multimodal, not only by virtue of their production and dispersion but also due to the steady flow of information of which they are a part and to which they reconnect in endless circles. According to Jensen (2010), who classified *physical bodies* themselves as media of the first degree (p. 66), these add an additional layer of mediation. On the one hand are the mediations between commenters, comments, and videos; on the other are the mediated videos themselves. These already represent multimodal units as, according to Rajewsky (2010), by "dealing with medial configurations, we never encounter 'the medium' as such" (p. 53), and all of the specific films and texts discussed are already products of a multimodal, complex mediality (p. 54).

As explained in the introduction and in Chapter 2, I decided at an early stage to not engage in an in-depth multimodal discussion. Consequently, the use and understanding of *intertextual* and *intermedial* (Allen, 2011; Elleström, 2010; Rajewsky, 2002, 2010) were, in this study, combined into a *mediation of relationships and clues*, one which functions at two basic levels.

First, at the micro level, I observed how comments affect and refer to each other, how they enforce musical experiences, star loyalty, and descriptive expressions such as “our angel” or “our sweet boys,” thereby shaping the various discourses in comment rooms and media responses. Second, at the macro level, I examined relationships that included discussions of societal aspects such as homophily, political positionings, childhood perceptions, and music industry influences. These can be triggered by the video material and/or a comment and can open the discussion to a wider world community.

The conceptual compression of intermediality and intertextuality I have chosen retrieves its argument from Allen (2011), who observed how “the cultural environment of today is so much more conclusively a new media environment, that a reassessment of the role of intertextuality is clearly required” (p. 202). This, he claimed, was due to how the World Wide Web had redefined the ways in which processes of online reading and writing are understood (p. 209)—and, I want to add, the processes of online viewing and vlistening, as well as the production of music video materials, as observed by Lange (2019).

## 4.3. Analyzing YouTube comments and video materials

### 4.3.1. Data material

Near to all of the empirical materials informing this study are found on YouTube, with the exception of online newspaper articles that supply background information about the stars. Only in the Jordan case, other, carefully selected material from online textual sources have been used directly in order to supply more sensitive descriptions by the star herself. This, quite concretely, refers to the interviews published in the *People magazine* and on *The Honey Pop* website, which appear in Chapters 5 and 6. In addition, in the case of Jordan, references are made to her own book with the argument that it compensates for limitations in her YouTube material. The connotation *YouTube material* covers all postings from comment rooms and the different types of videos on the platform, including takes from live concerts, TV shows, and other events conducted by mainstream media and reposted on YouTube. What all YouTube data have in common are their availability on the platform, which is free for produsers situated all across world to consume and interact with. Also, all materials were absorbed by the YouTube cyborg system and exposed to algorithmic sorting and distribution. Subsequently, they have become involved in produsers’ “complex decision-making processes” (Wolf, 2016, p. 2), ultimately creating personalized platforms for each netizen. All

empirical data are understood as texts, thereby implying a wide text understanding (Shuker, 2016, p. 81), even if "the central textual form in popular music is the song" (p. 83). The music material includes four different types of videos: professional music videos, so-called raw-material music videos, live concert videos, and reaction videos. Raw material music videos were found to be reminiscent of musical still-lifes (as in an art context),[53] as opposed to music videos with a, more or less coherent, story.

As mentioned in Section 1.3., representative YouTube comments are put at the core of the discussion in Chapter 5. Most were translated from other languages. They are marked as ordinary quotes, without further identification. Importantly, the comments are combined with, and enforced by, the child star's *own voices*, mediated and mediatized (Hepp et al., 2015) , and the impulses from TV hosts and reporters in interview materials posted on YouTube. The reason behind focusing on comments has to do with their close connection to the music videos to which they react. For example, as fans utilize the video's "sharing and commenting features to project identities that affiliate with particular social groups" (Lange, 2008, p. 361), their comments become the major vehicles for identifying cyborg talentification. Music videos are thus major informants, even though, as this study does not focus on sound aesthetics, it is the structure and the content of music videos—with a story, without story, professionally made, amateur—that are considered in the analysis. Importantly, music videos are the source comments are reacting to. The choice to focus on the reactions triggered was incited by curiosity paired with a deconstructive attitude trying to find the less visible, the less obvious, the marginalized (Dyndahl,2008). At the start of this project, I considered also document analyses of reviews and articles, an idea I abandoned after some time in order to be able to concentrate on the social media prodused material from the common netizen. The interview videos that are retrieved from YouTube are vital contributors that are used to catch some aspects of the media's influence and the child stars own voices, though mediated, and again in a format that is available for the average netizen. In Section 6.2., the focus is on interview materials and here, the interview questions, the celebrities answers, and the general set-up and content of the video footage are the core elements that inform my discussion and analysis.

[53] Compare for example Jordan's 2018 cover of «California Dreamin'» at https://youtu.be/EBI7Km3z7-U and Jordan's 2021 cover of «Billie Jean» at https://youtu.be/xp67k9wk2Mw

The next section reflects in more depth on the particularity of YouTube comments and discusses an analytical pilot project I conducted in order to find the most effective approach to "handle" YouTube comments. Thereafter, I present the genre of the music video and YouTube's impact on its development. In the last two sections of this chapter, I address my data's credibility and the nine steps of my analysis.

### 4.3.2. Taking hold of the axon of comments

The term comment *rooms* instead of section describes a metaphoric value, the comments' inherent dynamics, and their arranging and rearranging along incoherent timelines, frequently swapping place and position. These changes happen due to other incoming reactions or answers as well as algorithmic sorting for date and popularity. Comment rooms are in my context conceptualized as ideal *cyborg arenas*—playgrounds for social interaction (Løfberg, 2003, p. 142), which allow anonymous identities—and that are equipped with communicative characteristics, including hyperlinks, that accommodate unlimited networking.

According to Markham (2008), online communication in an open, free, and anonymous sharing space has led to a new twist in dualistic self-perception, dooming the classic phrase, *I think therefore I am* as "woefully inadequate in cyberspace" (p. 249). After likes and shares have been introduced on social platforms, online experiences of selfhood might rather be expressed as a reception, rephrasing the sentence into a "I am responded to, therefore I am" (p. 249). Some videos in this study have thousands of comments. These can be compact or more elaborate, varying from a single word or emoji to a 50-word miniature essay. Comments are posted anonymously; they are written without interruption of a "Other" from any place in the world. Reasons behind the popularity of commenting includes descriptions of textual identities: "In cyberspace, one dwells in language and through language. I exist as myself in language online" (p. 247), appreciating the possibility to "edit before . … think[ing]" (p. 247). Online communication constructs body-free identities: "I think myself in language as more communicative of who I am. Because I'm a good writer, eloquence makes me beautiful" (p. 247). Subsequently, comments are in my context identified as the closest to a physical representation of the netizens, presenting a fluctuating image of the cyborg behind or in the words. As long as comments "live" in the online environment, they are best described as fluid, alive, and changeable. I found comments to represent a unique way of communicating, and identified them as a new genre in their own right, a cyborgian way of expression. They are not unlike oral speech, even though they have to conform to the signs and symbols of

written language, which they expand with emoji and other non-verbal cues—cues I name *cyborg faces* (Compare Section 3.1.4.). These petite texts are only accessible and relatable because they are communicated and readable. They can express independent thoughts and feelings or they might be answers and reactions. Despite the fact that social media platforms are, by definition, meeting-places, posting material on them entails that their encounters or communications are choreographed without the physical, three-dimensional synergy or specific biological time that is vital for face-to-face meetings.

During my pilot study I observed a YouTube page of a recently posted video over a period of nine months. As soon as the video was posted, comment bubbles appeared. I took notes on the types of answers, what comments seemed to appear in clusters, the frequency of the comments, the type of themes, and other details that were noticed in the comment room and in the video itself. As the novelty of the video wore off, the posting intervals became longer. Then, maybe because the video was recommended on someone else's computer, new comments popped up, which caused the whole sequence to change, even though it had been quite stable for several months. In this way, comments could vanish in seconds. Scrolling down the list, they were suddenly back. A fixed date marked the end of my engagements. Thereafter, the comments were extracted in their final position and reassembled in a new document. Taking the comments out of their natural habitat assigned a different status to them. After their extraction, the material was no longer a pliable object, but, rather, a document with archival qualities, ready for analysis. The pilot study was valuable for becoming emotionally and intellectually engaged (Kozinets, 2020, p. 250) and becoming familiarized with the comment environment, thereby allowing me to unobtrusively observe the liveliness and thrill of the occasionally bubbling and interacting communications. It was clear from the start that this kind of observation would not be possible for all the comment chains in this research, as most had already been on YouTube for a considerable period of time. Yet, the pilot project also confirmed that it was not necessary to invest so much time in each chain production for, even though some comments were lost along the way, more than enough were left, and it was easy to trace their marked popularity and date of publication due to the YouTube settings. The aspect of observed changed internet time (Castells, 2000; Suhr, 2012 & Otto, 2015) further supported my consideration that I could capture the axon of comments in retrospect. Suhr (2012) observed how communicating on social media could be done at any time, "create[ing] a dichotomous situation of simultaneously being present and

absent" (Suhr, 2012, p. 113). Subsequently, the analysis of comments could happen at any—internet—time, and the result would still be embedded in a type of online present.

Working with the comment genre confronted the ideas of oral versus written speech—a dichotomy Derrida also challenged and deconstructed (Caputo, 1997). Understanding text as always present, Derrida (Derrida, as cited in Caputo, 1997, p. 9) criticized the tradition going all the way back to Plato, the great Greek philosopher, where living speech was seen as the essential part and writing was only considered to be a mere copy of oral speech. In the context of YouTube comments, I found that oral and living speech had reappeared in a new guise, harmoniously united in a specific type of cyborg-mediated communication.

### 4.3.3. Seeing and hearing music: YouTube and the music video

YouTube did, of course, not invent the music video, yet it effected a major change parallel to a paradigm shift in music consumption, which I will address soon. First, diving into the history of music videos revealed the genre's forerunners, the so-called musical short films that appeared in the 1920s. Yet only on the MTV channel in the 1980s was the music video as a proper genre born. From that moment on, music was no longer only listened to; it was also viewed (Arnold et al., 2017). The first music video played on MTV was, perhaps ironically, called "Video Killed the Radio Star" (TheBugglesVEVO, 2010). The song predicted the downfall of radio music, a medium that was suspected to collapse under the expected rush of audiences over to the two-fold entertainment offered by the combination of music and film. Arnold et al. (2017) expressed the concerns of a media landscape, fearing it would be overrun by visual culture, with the radio taking the hardest hit. The general attitude suggested that, for popular music to survive, it had to be integrated into the visual landscape, regardless of the cultural impairment resulting from such a move (Arnold et al., 2017, p. 2). This scenario, according to Arnold et al. (2017), would require re-invention. These concerns proved redundant, at least initially, as the interest in music videos on MTV quickly faded. MTV reacted to this decline with an "aggressive disengagement with music while the commercial importance of live music was revived" (Arnold et al., 2017, p. 2).

Yet again, the birth of the internet dramatically changed contemporary development, leading to an unexpected revival of music videos. Having become a produser-generated arena, the internet heavily influenced music videos' dissemination and consumption (Burns & Hawkins, 2019, p. 2). Unlike the experiences of listening to and watching a music video on MTV, online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter offered close to live music

experiences and encouraged the audience to participate in active interaction alongside listening, viewing, and blogging (Burns & Hawkins, 2019, p. 2). Thus, music video appreciation progressed from a dual to a multi-functionality practice (Burns & Hawkins, 2019). Although music videos still principally intended to present music, they were now heavily supported by movies, maybe written texts or other effects changing the characteristics of music and music appreciation. Indeed, listening without viewing might almost appear as only doing it halfway, as, to a vast degree, “listening is now done with one’s eyes, rather than one’s ears” (Arnold et al., 2017, p. 5), and Aufderheide (1986) described the first music videos as “the look of sound” (p. 57).

As music videos became an established part of musicians’ activities, they began to fill multiple functions in the promotion of their stardom. Consequential to that, academics also began to understand the music video as a distinct cultural feature worth their attention (Railton & Watson, 2011, p. 5), even though some offhandedly called them “the Kleenexes of popular culture” (p. 1), referring to the music video’s deployment of commerciality.

When YouTube entered the scene in 2005, it made a deep impact on the genre of music videos. Not only could new videos be posted on the platform but also forgotten concert takes and old music videos, which had previously only been available on video cassettes or on private players, would suddenly reappear on the platform, finding like-minded audiences and attracting new generations of fans. YouTube became a “vast ‘anarchive’ of music video that radically expand[ed] the ‘product’ associated with bands” (Arnold et al., p. 9). In addition, millions of homemade music videos started to flood the platform. The YouTube video style began to make a massive impact on the general media—a process that has continued and is still ongoing. Vernallis (2013a), a passionate music video scholar, described YouTube’s effects on other media:

> All media – from post-classical cinema to music videos and commercials – start to resemble or refer to YouTube. YouTube’s style (a do-it-yourself look or aesthetic) infiltrates everything. In the “Johnny Cash Project,” fans across the world each contributed one hand-drawn frame to a pre-existing music video, thus creating a new kind of crowd-sourced work. (p. 14)

By 2020, YouTube’s aesthetics had become the driver of other media, and once a video has gone viral on the platform, it often results in remakes and is picked up by the print media and possibly also by TV programs—spaces that have taken up an echoing function (Vernallis,

2013a, p. 15).[54] Somewhat melancholically, Vernallis (2013b) noted that, before YouTube, professionals in the music business still understood music videos' essence:

> We used to define a music video as a product of the record company in which images [were] put to a recorded pop song in order to sell the song. None of these definition holds any more. On YouTube, individuals as much as record companies post music video clips, and many prosumers have no hope of selling anything . … we might thus define music video, simply and perhaps too broadly, as a relation of sound and image that we recognize as such. YouTube especially makes it hard to draw the line between what is a music video and not. (pp. 438–439)

YouTube videos are not as bereft of commercial winnings as Vernallis (2013a) indicated, yet their commercialism is much more hidden and does not necessarily have to be linked to a specific artist. The fact remained that, with the removal of technological barriers, the YouTube music video spread into the nooks and crannies of mundane culture, and an attempt to categorize music videos into narrative, performance, conceptual products, or a combination of the narrative and performance with dream-like visuals (p. 487) only emphasized the music video format's wide continuum of possible analysis. Vernallis's (2013a) definition of a YouTube music video as a recognizable relation between sound and image encompassed Rajewsky's (2010) multimodality in all media and its inherent intertextual qualities.

The music videos in my data include professional and semi-professional music videos, lyric videos, and so-called raw-material videos. The BlackSheeps' "Edwin" (TheBlackSheepsBand, 2009) represents yet another type of video, as it involves a coherent story with spoken words that adds a strong narrative character, almost serving as a miniature play. About one-twentieth of the comments in my document on Angelina Jordan are retrieved from a so-called reaction video. Reactions on The BlackSheeps videos did not exist, and the rather few in the Marcus & Martinus case mostly had their comment sections turned off. The one(s) that did have an open comment room were only sparsely visited. Also, they were found rather superficial, even though this was a possible characteristic of the public Marcus & Martinus personae, as the reactor was more interested in talking about the singers' hairstyles than their music. This triggered one of the few reactions from a frustrated fan: "Can you react

[54] Vernallis (2013b) actually called other media *echo chambers* in the sense of echoing YouTube productions, yet not quite in the sense of *echo chambers* I discussed in Section 3.2.2.

to bars and melody please," to which the reactor responds: "Thank you for the suggestion!" without further comment (Bearded Reactions, 2020).

As I discussed in Section 2.3.1., the phenomenon of reaction videos is widespread on YouTube, and many popular music clips receive such visual-communicative feedback. Even though reactors address themselves "directly" to their vlisteners, their sociality seems defined by a kind of cyber loneliness as all involved netizens are constrained to their own confined and isolated spaces. There exist multiple reaction videos on Angelina Jordan's "*A Million Years ago."* For this study, I have chosen the channel of Smylyface. Her reaction was published February 23, 2019, around ten months after Angelina posted her cover on YouTube (April 7, 2018). Smiley had at that time 8,9 thousand subscribers, her reaction had been viewed 67544 times, and it had received 282 comments by January 9, 2020.

All music videos in this study use diverse audio–visual effects, which accompany sound or vice versa. Commenters' talent perceptions and constructions are, therefore, made in relation to a visual that is either tightly connected to or relatively removed from a song, having much or apparently little to do with the singing, the arrangement, and even the lyrics. Vlistening to a music video with a story means to receive a more or less ready-made backdrop for imagination. As I found in the artistic music video "Shield" (Angelina Jordan Official, 2019) by Jordan, the more vague and open those backdrops were, the less poignant were the connections between lyrics, music, performances, and sounds. Also, discussions concerning the *quality* of a music videos were incoherent, even though it was found that the more self-made and uncommercial a movie was, the more critical reactions it triggered, as was again exemplified in the Angelina Jordan narrative and her video "Shield" (Angelina Jordan Official, 2019), as discussed in 5.5.3. The professional music videos by Marcus & Martinus triggered few negative comments, even though they received the occasional complaint about their plot and especially so for "Like it, Like it," as discussed in Section 5.4.4. The BlackSheeps' videos were all intensely scrutinized by commenters for their quality, content, and provocative attitude or, as in the case of "Gold Lion" (Reisverket, 2008), for their amateurishness.

As the exposure of musical material—through and against the backdrop of a movie—can be interpreted as a statement from young artists who are about to enter the professional music-making world, it also represents their ability to establish themselves in the music industry. Music videos could, therefore, be regarded as ways to consolidate musical styles, and they demonstrate strategies used to negotiate a star's image and attract and keep new fans.

### 4.3.4. Credibility through meaning condensation and meaning interpretation

All of this study's analyses were conducted without any qualitative data analysis software, and this choice was motivated by my intention to be as close to the research material as possible. My decision was supported by experienced qualitative researchers who expressed their appreciation, if not even their preference, for manual analysis. Using a program like NVino, Transana, or f4analyse might have revealed additional traits, but I believe the virtual landscape that revealed itself to me through manual approaches afforded specific insights into the data, which might not have been so readily accessible otherwise. However, in order to double-check whether major elements might had been overlooked in this manual process, I introduced parts of the material into the f4analyse program. The results confirmed the manual method to produce similar results, and many of the choices that had to be made in setting the program were made during the manual process. Still, especially with regard to the enormous chunks of data produced in comment rooms, I acknowledge that future research tracing different trajectories in the data could be fruitful to either combine with, or execute solely with an analyzing program, especially when choosing to conduct a quantitative study. The way I handled thousands of comments manually, was eased by the fact that, as in the Marcus & Martinus's case, comments were repetitive, thus several hundred might write: ”Love,” gathering a large group in this category. In the Jordan case, comments had to be read more detailed, yet also here themes, as for example her voice, or soul, allowed for grouping. In The BlackSheeps' comment rooms, sorting was eased by the fact that the amount was reasonable, and that half of all comments belonged to the category of citing religious texts to argue for or against homophily.

Thus, to successfully extract the currents of perceptions from the mass of comments I was handling, I applied meaning *condensation* (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), using coding and categorization. Meaning condensation aims to "analyze extensive and often complex . . . texts by looking for the natural meaning units and explicating their main themes" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, pp. 233–235). This process was supported and complemented by the already introduced hermeneutic strategy opposing "familiarity and strangeness" (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 306) to gain understanding. This strategy applied to my data retrieved the four levels of cyborg talentification—motivational, discursive, narrative and supported by cultural cosmopolitan strategies—which I describe in Section 5.2.

Later on in the process of analysis, meaning *interpretation* was added, supported by deconstruction and allowing an expansion of the existing material. Meaning interpretation "goes beyond a structuring of the manifest meanings of what is said to deeper and more critical interpretations on the text . … [that] recontextualizes the statements within a broader frames of reference" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 235). In my context, the "broader frames of reference" were especially important in the investigation of the cultural cosmopolitan strategies of each case.

As I noted in the previous section, all materials from the studied comment rooms had to be anonymized and their data was verified only by myself. The interviews used in this study were all archived, openly accessible documents, with both questions and answers available as either videos or written texts posted on YouTube or the internet. In addition, all interviews were conducted without my researcher bias influencing neither the interview guide nor the physical interview space. Notably, in all kinds of research projects, be they qualitative or quantitative, the researcher will always function as a mediator, even an interpreter of the data, as already exemplified in the discussion of fabrications and narratives. Furthermore, as Silverman (2001) observed, all research displays definite artisan characteristics as everything passes through the researcher's hands (p. 159). Thus, instead of regarding this influence a challenge, it could be viewed as an insurance that decent work had been performed with the material at hand. Therefore, the discussed data from fans and critics were considered as reliable as the controllable data from online interviews.

### 4.3.5. Turning wheel of analysis

Comment material, interviews, music materials, and selected materials from online newspaper reviews represented different types of text. Yet, as the data's interdependencies were both obvious and important, they consequently challenged me to employ a coherent methodological approach. To do justice to both the separateness and involvement, I chose to allow conversations to run between videos and written or spoken words in comments and interviews, with my analysis flexibly considering either video materials, text materials, or both. The categories arising directly from the comments were reflected back on the videos and vice versa, depending on the perspective taken. For videos created specifically for the YouTube environment, six main codes were identified by Burgess and Green (2018), based on material from successful YouTubers:

> These content creators are embedded in the cultural economy of digital media, organically engaged with its vernacular culture, and exhibit mastery of its aesthetic and communicative codes. Successful YouTubers know how to articulate authenticity to entertainment and to navigate the inherent ambivalence of their performance and self-representations – using combinations of intimacy, humour, and irreverence, carefully balancing authenticity, community, and brand relationships (p. 37)

Intimacy, humor, irreverence, authenticity, community, and brand relationships figured as supplemental categories in a one-take video by Angelina Jordan, a music video by Markus & Martinus, and the reaction video on a Jordan performance.

My data operations on comments followed a firm pattern of nine steps. The first seven hermeneutic steps closely followed the process of meaning condensation. This implied a coding of content and a synthesizing of utterings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 233)—a procedure that in my context included to find representative quotes in the material in order to identify categories and trends. Steps 8 and 9 were used in the case specific analyses, and not for generating the three levels of talentification, to which I come back to shortly.

At the beginning of each new acquaintance, I listened to the video whilst scrolling through the comments and visually scanning the general setup, thereby allowing images to appear based on immediate observation. Then, I copied the data, pasted it into a new document, and deleted all usernames and dates. This step naturally prepared for the next one, identifying and highlighting words, concepts, and themes that were reoccurring and arranging these themes into groups in a next step. As the themes were now visually and spatially clustered, I could take qualitative and quantitative notes of the most dominant topics in the fifth step, followed by a more detailed categorization of the themes in step six, followed by an identification of representative quotes. Having familiarized myself with the themes and a comment room's particular nature and discourse—as the general length of comments, spellings, use of non-verbal cues, and other characteristics—I then, in the eight step, searched for intertextual links (as explained in Section 4.3.2.) followed by the ninth step of deconstructing the material. By asking what might be missing, or what had not been said, some blank spots were revealed, thereby opening a wider discussion and questioning the text's self-certainties (O'Regan, 2006, p. 188), as in the case of the apparent absence of reflective comments in Marcus & Martinus materials. Deconstruction was used to unpack the cultural biases and preconceptions embedded in the comments that, in this study, could, for example, be connected to the term child prodigy. In this way, a kind of critical reading of the text was introduced, in which the

method of deconstruction offered a "doubling commentary; that is, first as a descriptive commentary of how a text wants to be read (the reading of minimal consensus) and, second, as a fine-grained commentary which engages in and problematizes the first" (O'Regan, 2006, p. 188).

The first six steps were used to generate the first findings, the so-called general motivational, discursive, and narrative levels. All steps, from one to nine, were applied in the case-specific analyses. Here, describing the process of analysis as a wheel became ever more relevant as, working on the chapter of child stars' futures, I returned to some of the comment rooms only to notice that comments had been added by fans who were growing up, offering new perspectives that had to be included. Also, my original decision to concentrate on particular music videos and their comment chains and other reactions was questioned by the empirical material itself. As new topics emerged, so did the need to follow them up more widely, to extend the search and return to the "old" videos and comments. Therefore, the somewhat rigid pattern, which, at first, was conceived as *steps* of analysis, became a dynamic swirl, which was more comparable to a *wheel*. As both Jordan and Marcus & Martinus released new materials in 2020 and 2021, these became essential to the discussion of child stars' futures and were, consequently, included. This process of development, reliving, and rearranging was found to be characteristic of the mediated public cyborg space administered by YouTube.

**Figure 2**

*Illustration of the turning wheel of analysis*

An additional methodological aspect that influenced the analytical design has been already mentioned in Sections 1.3. and 3.1.1., which introduced the impact of offline experiences on online understandings, thereby leading to the inclusion of a minor autoethnographic project. I consider the debate of the online–offline binary to be an intermediary and overall topic of this study. Therefore, the main weight of this discussion was placed as a linking section, preparing the online analysis and discussion of my cases. The autoethnographic study of a live concert with its appertaining fieldnotes functions, therefore, as a type of secondary data material. This "parallel study" (Lange, 2014) was reduced due to COVID-19, as I will explain in more detail along with the wider argumentation for including it despite its flaws. To begin with, it can be noted that the discussion of the fieldnotes, against the backcloth of my YouTube concert experiences, prepare and contrast the cyborg talentification findings on the platform with echoes from the offline performance.

# Part III: Analyses and discussions

# 5. Cyborg talentification cocreating stars

As a netnographer, I quickly realized that I related to the online data through my—earlier and present—offline engagements, such as live experiences of music and physical meetings with people. As introduced in Sections 1.2., 1.3.1., and 3.1.3., this proved to be a relevant sensation confirmed by academic research. From an aesthetic perspective, it also aligned with what Auslander (2021) described as audiences' way of making sense of "recorded music as performance . … [due to] various forms of cultural knowledge, including knowledge of the performance conventions of particular genres of music and the performance styles of specific performers" (p. 26). Simultaneously—or because of that—to detect and trace exact intersections and crossovers between online and offline worlds proved to be increasingly difficult, especially due to the use of a cyborg lens, as I indicated in Section 1.3. In the first part of this chapter, I therefore account for aspects of the online–offline impact on my work, including a discussion of the experiences from an offline live concert. This autoethnographic narrative is used to pinpoint and prepare the cyborg talentification qualities on YouTube and to reconceptualize and understand online–offline experiences in light of a textual–physical representation.

## 5.1. How to make sense of online and offline crossovers

Studying other online researchers' works (Kendall, 1999; Lange, 2014, 2019; Markham, 1998) confirmed my need to engage in both the online and offline worlds and, at the same time, underlined the crumbling dichotomy between these "worlds," especially as the online world displays a very different relationship to time. As Lange (2019) observed, physical people engaging in online surroundings leave multiple digital footprints behind. These footprints can "exist indefinitely beyond the human life cycle and invite other people to judge, interact with, and make sense of partial dimensions of [their] personhood" (p. 187). This implies that through people's participation on platforms such as YouTube, pieces and memories of their once present physical lives—such as childhood photographs and video clips—become attached to the platform itself. Even long after a produser has left YouTube, such fragments continue to interact with their environment, a location Lange (2019) therefore identified as a *posthuman space*. Digital footprints allow individuals' virtual representations to exist parallel to their offline lifeline, and their *original physical* representations

consequently lose control of their digitized embodiments. Lange problematized how individuals could feel hunted by their former virtual engagements imposing severe impact on their physical lives—their offline lives inextricably bound to a traditional timeline. Also child stars' careers could be irrevocably damaged by this phenomenon as I discuss in Chapter 6.

The interaction between online and offline was blurred even before "plugging in" cyborg theory, yet I anticipated that the cyborg might symbolize, even incorporate, the dilemma inherent in a strict divide between online and offline. The question to ask was what a cyborg deconstruction of the online–offline dichotomy could offer, whether it might facilitate communication that confronts a normative division between the two "worlds." Other internet researchers, such as Markham (1998), chose to uphold the idea of two worlds, although she did not exclusively call them *online* and *offline* but instead *textual* and *physical*. Accompanying her research on online behavior, she argued that in order to understand people's engagement and "how they were making sense of their experiences as they shifted between being in the physical world and being in these textual worlds created by the exchange of messages" (pp. 16–17), she needed to participate in cyberspace communication herself. I understood this choice of physical and textual terms not as the establishment of a new dichotomy but, rather, in my context, as the creation of a more useful description for different modes and subject positions experienced *by the same cyborg body*. As introduced in Section 4.3.5., I modeled Markham's (1998) practice of engaging in both worlds by including an autoethnographic study with observations of physical live concerts of child celebrities.

I planned a sequence of visits to live concerts, yet this process was effectively interrupted by COVID-19 restrictions and the resulting suppression of all physical, cultural live experiences. I only witnessed one concert by Angelina Jordan before the pandemic-related lockdown commenced. This resulted in a set of fieldnotes that allowed me to reflect on involvement with and appreciation for YouTube music. In this way, the meeting of textual and physical received a personal account and was elaborated on in dialogue with existing scholarship (Auslander, 2008, 2021; Bickford, 2016; Castells, 2000; De Mink & McPherson, 2016; Frith, 1998; Hansen, 2019; O'Connor, 2009; Suhr, 2012; Vetlesen, 2007; Whiteley, 2003). This event confronted my existing textual impressions from online data with the physical feeling of standing amidst a bodily audience.

Also, as I removed myself from the YouTube platform and literally entered the grass of a live performance, the puzzling matter of *musical experiences* was brought to light, and aspects of cyborg talentification were confronted with their *alters* in physical space.

### 5.1.1. A live concert event in conversation with YouTube experiences

By summer 2019, I had already gathered a substantial amount of online material for this project, and I was looking forward to witnessing a live concert, where I, as a physical body among other physical bodies, would share the same airspace as the musicians and their audience. I planned to take notice of my own impressions and feelings and, at the same time, be aware of the audience and the overall atmosphere of the concert, taking mental screenshots of the event in order to capture a comparative image to use when processing the online data. This miniature autoethnography, this "narrative of the self" (Angrosino, 2007), was, in its primal form, designed to provide a window into the musical talent experiences a physical concert can convey and how these again might meet my textual experiences. The autoethnographic style permitted the use of "strong metaphors, vivid characters, [and] unusual phrasings" (p. 80), even though it meant holding back the interpretation to allow readers to develop their own feelings and thoughts (Angrosino, 2007). With this in mind, I chose a narrative style for conveying the edited fieldnotes.

### 5.1.2. Field notes from a live Angelina Jordan concert

The concert was to happen outside, in a middle-sized outdoor museum with a magnificent view of the wide and lush valleys characteristic of this principality. The sun was still shining brightly even though it was almost eight o'clock in the evening; as midsummer had only just passed, the sky would retain a resonance of light throughout the following night. I arrived to an already fully packed parking lot. As I entered the concert space, some children were running around on the lawn where the simple outdoor stage was set up. Otherwise, most people seemed to be in their 50s—some younger, some older—and they were already sitting in their places, 10 minutes before the concert was set to start. Despite the children's play, there was a calm atmosphere, a listening expectation that was spreading a light, but perceivable, duvet cover over the individuals gathered. I found a spare seat some 20 meters from the stage. There were about 10 to 12 rows of benches and chairs in front of me. Right next to my seat was the sound technician's tent, and behind me I noticed a little grass slope with five or more rows, also packed with people. Only a few minutes after the concert was scheduled to begin, Angelina Jordan and the band entered the stage. I did not see them coming at first as they entered from the opposite side and because the clapping was rather cautious. In fact, I did not notice them properly before they were actually onstage. The clapping did, indeed, bother me throughout the whole concert; it was too civilized and even a

little lame—not loud and enthusiastic, but muffled and polite. It might have been the fresh air absorbing the sound or the particular local temperament, which was known for being somewhat heavy. But, of course, the overwhelming applause (connected especially to the video footage of *Norske Talenter* and *AGT: The Champions*) I had grown accustomed to from YouTube had raised my clapping standard rather high and maybe, I had to admit, I even felt responsible for "one of my stars" to make this live concert a success. In addition, my head was full of the mumbling voices and numerous comments I had been reading, all of the unrestrained expressions of enthusiasm. Here, on this patch of grass, everything felt the opposite of unrestrained. On the whole, I sensed that tonight's audience had created an atmosphere altogether unlike the one I had perceived vlisteners to have generated in the online comment rooms for Jordan's YouTube videos. I caught myself thinking that these could not possibly be the same people as they were far more careful and dispassionate than their textual counterparts, who were always trying to surpass each other's praises. Just now, being a physical body devoid of my textual companions and my textual tools, it felt like two different worlds, and I wondered how and whether this would affect Angelina Jordan on stage.

The concert began without further ado. Jordan was very calm, announcing all the songs herself. Her proper and repetitive way of doing so reminded me of a presentation at a school concert. She always started with "The next song is called," and concluded with a polite "Thank you!" after the clapping had ceased, at times accompanied by a little laugh, a feature that was recognizable from her raw-material videos. On the YouTube videos, her "Bye!" at the end, and that little laugh, had been perceived as coming from another world than her singing, and were described as endearing features by her YouTube fans. Here, her thank you felt ordinary, but a little stiff. Even though her songs and their presentation seemed, in the live setting, to glide more naturally into each other, they also appeared slightly incoherent. A few individuals shouted the occasional "hurray" or "bravo" in between the songs. Somebody even whistled; I identified her mother doing so, whom I recognized from several YouTube videos. Otherwise, people were listening quietly, sitting still in their seats, and only once during the concert did a person far back start talking. The others turned around to spot the sinner, who understood the indignation, and the chatting came to a quick stop. Angelina Jordan presented an impressive repertoire of jazz classics and some popular pop songs, one after the other. I had heard all of them on YouTube, and I was, actually, a little disappointed. She sang beautifully, but not as convincing as I was used to experiencing online—and again, I missed

the more active, enthusiastic audience who could cast their thrills over to the young girl on stage. But then, Jordan gave a really impressive “Shield” interpretation, one of her own. Being the first song that gave me the chills, it caught me off guard and made me feel slightly lost, even vulnerable (Vetlesen, 2007). As such it was the only musical experience I could feel in my body, an pushed me, unexpectantly, to my—maybe not existential, but certainly some inner boundaries (p. 47). That the “Shield” performance affected me so strongly was especially remarkable because I had not been enthusiastic about it before; what I had vlistened to on YouTube had not convinced me. But now it was really powerful—and this experience took me *by surprise*, an element Vetlesen (2007) identified as a marker of existential musical experiences, and that YouTube researchers (De Mink & McPherson, 2016) found to be an important signpost for produsers’ appreciation of musical talent.

I considered Vetlesen’s (2007) claim that the ability to be touched has to be matched by the potential to touch (p. 47). In this concert setting, I had felt “closed” against my will, and therefore, I suppose, the potential to touch had possibly been greater than my ability to be touched. At the same time, Vetlesen emphasized that existential experiences had to break with the ordinary, and as such, they happened only in-between (p. 45), and their force was greater the more unexpectedly they occurred.

I talked to the sound technician afterwards. Apart from her obviously great voice, Jordan also had an excellent technique with the microphone, he emphasized, so he actually had very little to do. He only added the keyboard sound on the “Shield” song, but not much more, he insisted.

I found Angelina Jordan looking slightly uncomfortable in her role as the main focus and entertainer on stage. This feeling was contradictory to her own confirmations of loving to perform and never being nervous when singing—but it confirmed the span between her personal and her artistic persona. It also confirmed my findings, identifying her more as a jazzy, bluesy, even classical musician than a pop entertainer as discussed in Section 5.2.4. Following Frith (1998), *singing* the songs—and while doing so, engaging perfectly in *double enactment*—differed from the odd parts in between. Jordan appeared to lose that “protective coat” of her artistic persona during the in-betweens on stage, or maybe it was my interpretation of Jordan’s artistic persona that made me think so. As Hansen (2019) noted, “the astoundingly varied and complex ways in which pop personae are constructed and negotiated are matched only by the flexibility with which audiences interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences” (p. 526). Moreover, it could be part of a consciously decided

demeanor of *innocence* (versus knowing the world), so endeared by her fans, and, in a talent discourse by academics, highlighted as one of the strongest markers for child prodigies (O'Connor, 2009). *Innocence* (versus knowing the world) was indeed found to be a clear marker in the Jordan and Marcus & Martinus materials as debated in Sections 5.4. and 5.5., and generally in the child prodigy discourse represented by the media in Chapter 6.

Jordan only made minor contact with the audience during the concert, and such efforts were always connected to the program, like: "What do you guys want to hear now?" Otherwise, she seemed wrapped up in her own world, and, as far as I could observe, there was little or no engagement between her and the band either. In contrast, I thought of Jordan's YouTube raw-material videos, like "A Million Years Ago," where, even though there was hardly any visible interaction between Jordan and the guitar player, there was a musical warmth perceivable between the two that many commenters had noted enthusiastically and that supported her process of cyborg talentification. In the live concert, Jordan was doing her part of the show and so were the instrumentalists, but they were doing it individually and without apparent interest. The guitarist even appeared to be rather patronizing, visible in his body language when Jordan started the chorus too early in "Valery." The drummer stayed anonymous throughout. Jordan did not introduce the band either, enforcing the school concert feeling and making the performance stand out as less professional and engaging despite her singing advanced materials with a high level of ease and calm.

Eventually, I had to confess that I myself did not feel quite satisfied with this concert. The silent atmosphere and the fact that there were so many grown-ups listening to a teenager mediated a feeling of exploitation of the young person on stage, as if we were feeding on her talent in some kind of undefined or actually specific need (O'Connor, 2009). It paralleled the feeling of online "lurking" I had struggled to get used to, yet it was ever more confusing because I was now in open daylight and not hiding behind a screen. I wondered whether the many physical distractions around me, and the unresolved mind-bubbles hovering over each of the individuals in the audience of which my researcher awareness was trying to make sense, could take part of the blame. The concert setting was supposed to be safe and cozy, like an afternoon tea concert at a friend's house where the daughter happened to be an incredible talent and was singing to entertain her parents' guests. Somehow, coziness prompted the opposite, a discomfort, and I could not help thinking that she should have been out hanging with her friends. Yet, again, I suspected these to be my own ambiences, stuck in some expectation of what childhood was meant to offer. In this setting, I also found myself

suddenly in conflict with Jordan’s thoughts about music and art not being bound to a certain age. In this physical space, the argument confronted me with a protective adult intuition—a reflection on how a lacking age demarcation could easily become misused and dragged into intimate and personal, rather than aesthetic, spaces, ending in a power conflict. To free certain music and lyrics from an age restriction confronted me more directly with the complex implications such a statement might have than I had perceived online. So far, Jordan singing about romantic love had not felt problematic as her interpretations were most of all musical—with one exception, which was discussed in Section 5.5.1.—and not, as in the cases debated by Whiteley (2003), sexualized, neither were they in general reacted to in a sexualized tone. I wondered whether the YouTube format had contributed to legitimizing these aspects by framing her materials in a professional cover channel.

After the concert, I had to wonder whether having seen Angelina Jordan close-up on my computer for many months had tricked me into believing that I knew her, not only as an artist, but also as a person. After all, YouTube has been identified as creating a colloquial artist–fan relationship, doing away with the distant status of the star (Suhr, 2012, p. 114). The fact that Jordan was over there, on a stage, oddly estranged and too far away for me to actually see her facial expressions clearly—despite the moderate size of the arrangement—was upsetting, almost as if she were a child of mine to whom I suddenly could no longer relate, let alone protect. Protect from what? Well, yes, from restrained and adult “carnivorous” audiences, including myself. I had to wonder whether my reduced concert experience was due to my feeling uncomfortable or because I had become desensitized (de Mink & McPherson, 2016, p. 439) by having been exposed to far too many “perfect” videos—close-up experiences with no one else to take in except myself and the musicians on the screen. It might also be that I was unable to abandon my vlistener and netnographer role and just be in the moment as one body in the audience. I had to think of the excess of hours I had spent watching YouTube videos compared with barely two hours at this concert. On the other hand—the amount of time spent on *my own* feelings and thoughts during the live concert exceeded the time expended on such self-centered engagement when watching a YouTube video. There was indeed some trouble with the feeling of time spent, making me wonder whether the doomed changes to time the internet was foreseen to cause (Castells, 2000, p. 460) also included a change in *consciousness* of time experience. I wondered whether my physical awareness of time had changed in such a way that the repeat button on YouTube was giving me more pleasure than the one-time live experience. Auslander (2008) described the disappearance of evanescence

from all media and the resulting reduction of live experiences as these, with new technology, could be replayed online countless times. In YouTube videos, one button click even allows for changing the playback speed so as to review a performance in slower or faster motion, extending or reducing the time experience connected to the original event. Auslander (2008) transferred the technological development offering repeat functions to live performances, arguing that these could also now be mass produced and thus cover the "the hunger for reproductions" (p. 55). This though, again, was, in my local and one-time experience, contradicted by the one-off excitement about "Shield," which had made the concert worth attending. Generally, my fieldnotes ended with more question than exclamation marks.

Summing up and evaluating the effect of perceived talentification in this concert, I had to admit the scores were rather meagre. I did not manage to pursuade any of my family or friends to come along on that particular day, either, and it was hard afterwards to give an inspiring enough narrative to make Jordan's talent grow. It had simply been a moment of evanescence "that leaves little behind" (Auslander, 2008, p. 50).

However, something happened. A couple of days later, the live concert reappeared on YouTube. A fan had properly recorded and filmed all of the songs performed and posted them in an orderly fashion on his channel. As I allowed myself—though at first somewhat reluctantly—to vlisten to the performances on my computer in my home office, I made some surprising discoveries. For once, having each song presented in separate video footage actually allowed me to take in every performance with greater calm and concentration, appreciating a lot of details I had missed before. Second, the feeling and knowing that "I had been there, too," raised my spirits and my awareness considerably. Also, I now had something to show to my friends, and I could scrutinize and freshen up my own memories of that evening. Watching the concert online, I was suddenly reminded of the slight breeze that threatened the sheets of music on Jordan's music stand, which she continuously had to fix with clothes pegs—an act she performed with unshakeable calm. I had to admit that, maybe, what I before had conceived as a heavy atmosphere in the audience had actually been an atmosphere of awe, wonder, and respect for the musician, Angelina Jordan—it certainly came across that way when watching the performance online and reading the comments that quickly added themselves below. Also, the sound of the recording was perfect on the YouTube videos, and vlistening to the clips made me feel closer to the performance than I had felt in the physical concert. I was puzzled: Had it really been *that* good? I felt I was involuntarily sliding over to the other side of the seesaw of performance-experience—from what Auslander (2008)

described as invoking clichés stuck to live performances, such as magic, full of energy, and creating a community (p. 2), to defending the mediated music experience as the most energetic and magical type. More precisely, though, I anticipated the *synthesis* of both as, in my experience, it was through the online posting of the already experienced live concert that the offline talentification of Angelina Jordan received a renewed force, and she was safely back where she was meant to be: in the familiar environment of YouTube, a space that was "always linked to and enclosed in domestic safety" (Bickford, 2016, p. 761), where all catalysts contributed to her cyborg talentification. In my domestic seclusion, no more part of an audience but just a lonesome vlistener, enforcement through the full use of cyborg catalysts, physical and textual, and their apparently seamless melting together, had safely reconstructed Angelina Jordan into one of the stars about whom I had been writing. Though slightly depressing to admit, this experience resounded with Auslander's (2008) analysis that "mediatization is the experience to which live performance must refer and which it must seek to recreate" (p. 19) in order to be counted as realistic. What content to attach to "realistic," especially when describing live experiences modeled consistent with mediatized events, created at least in my thinking a certain confusion. Yet to mind came the planned big reunion concert for ABBA in 2022, where the band's physical bodies will be sitting in the audience while their digitalized selves, their avatars—their young personae from the golden times—will perform on stage. Such live engagements paired with digital representations pose new questions about the identification of adequate qualities that might define "liveness" (Auslander, 2008) and also different worlds. Such pairings of live engagements with digital representations validate a conceptualization of textual and physical presence—performed by the same cyborg body but in a different mode—and illustrate how these subject positions are unalike but communicating and connected.

With this consideration, to which I will return in Chapters 7 and 8, I exit the physical space and enter the core arena of this investigation, the YouTube platform, and thus turn my attention to the representations of child celebrities in the cyborg system. As illustrated in Section 4.3.5., employing the first seven steps of analysis on the data made three particular levels appear. These will function as organizers and analytical lenses in the case-specific discussions, making the vast data materials accessible and discussable in close engagement with existing literature on talent, popular music, children's musical childhoods, and child celebrities. Identified as *opening findings*, these three levels, together with a fourth, theory-developed level, are presented in the next sections before I integrate them with the data of The

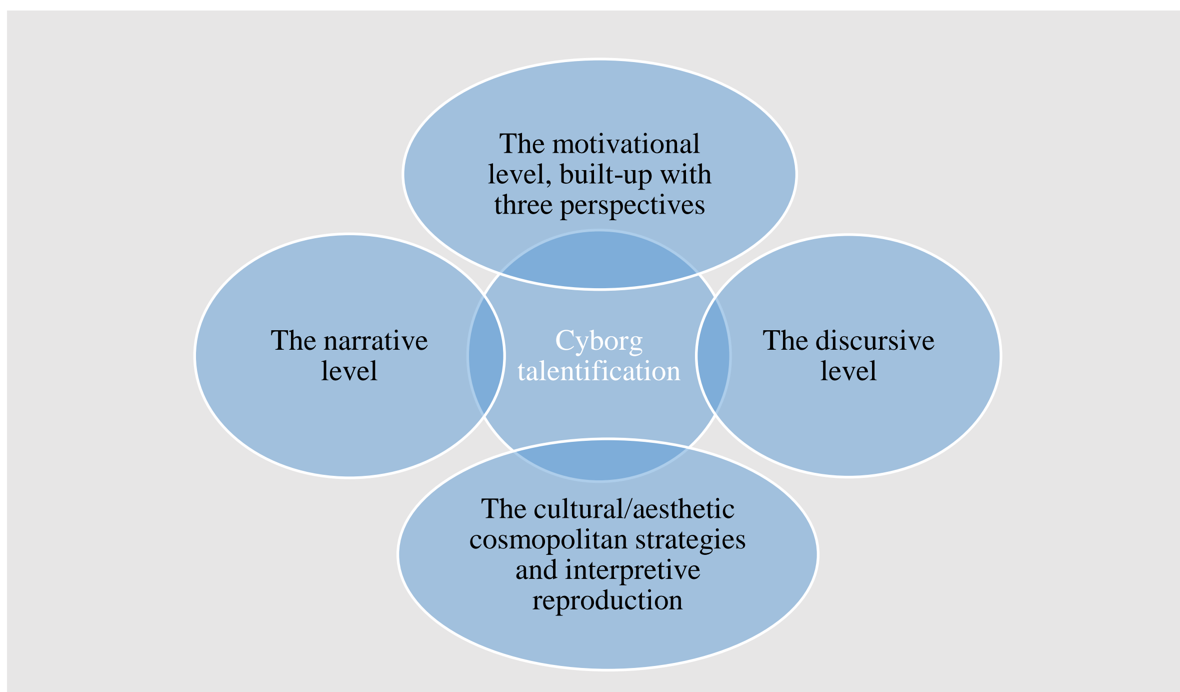
BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus, and Angelina Jordan Astar. The main aim of this chapter is to answer research question 2, which asks what cyborg talentification categories, discourses, and perspectives can be identified in fans', critics', and the media's communications with and about child stars on YouTube, and how these again negotiate child stars' positionings in society.

## 5.2. Levels of cyborg talentification

The opening findings, which were analyzed from the data using the first seven steps of the turning wheel, were sorted into three "levels"—even-layered platforms without a hierarchical structure—that I named *motivational, discursive*, and *narrative*. A fourth level of cyborg talentification was added that did not initially arise from the empirical material, but that was incited by theory based on Azmitia (2002), Burgess and Green (2018), Corsaro (1992, 2018), Papastergiadis (2018), and Regev (2013, 2019) (compare Sections 2.2.2. and 3.). This fourth level was set to unpack the *cultural, including aesthetic, cosmopolitan,* and *interpretive reproduction* strategies of each artist. All four levels will, in the following discussions, be used to reflect on the case-specific materials by reentering the wheel of analysis, thereby completing all nine steps.

**Figure 3**

*Illustration of the four levels of cyborg talentification*



Before I analyze each case, I will elaborate in more detail on the motivational, discursive, and narrative levels, explain how they are embedded in my context, and outline how they were found to contribute to the discussion. The fourth level, the cultural/aesthetic and interpretive reproduction strategies and embodiments of each star, will be directly discussed in each case.

The discussions throughout Chapter 5 are based on the data derived from YouTube comments and YouTube music videos. The narratives contain additional online reports from news channels. The analysis is strengthened by existing scholarship on childhood and musical talent (Askerøi & Vestad, 2021; Bernstein, 2013; Bickford, 2016, 2020; Bramness, 2015; Corsaro, 2018; Jenkins, 1998; Lury, 2002; de Mink & McPherson, 2016; O'Connor, 2009; Ruthsatz et al., 2014; Shavinina, 2016; Stabell, 2018; Vestad & Dyndahl, 2017; Warwick, 2016; Whiteley, 2003).

The discussion of popular music, cover songs, artistic personae, authenticity, cultural cosmopolitanism, and performance happens in dialogue with existing scholarship (Auslander, 2008, 2021; Barthes, 1973/1975; Frith, 1998; Grossberg, 1992; Hansen, 2019; Moore, 2002; Mosser, 2008; Papastergiadis, 2018; Plasketes, 2010; Regev, 2007, 2013; Ruud, 2013; Schellenberg, 2009; Scott, 2012; Shuker, 2016; Suhr, 2012; Vetlesen, 2007).

The online context and its methodological-theoretical framework, when relevant, are endorsed by scholarship (Burgess & Green, 2018; Dander et al., 2021; Foucault, 1999; Gunkel, 2000; Haraway, 1991; Kendall, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Lange, 2019; Markham, 2016; O'Regan, 2006; Quershi et al., 2020; Sontag, 1966; Wolf, 2016; Wolfgang, 2016).

### 5.2.1. Three motivational perspectives

As introduced in Section 4.3.5., listening and vlistening to YouTube videos, and reading and analyzing YouTube comments from all three cases, made, in the process of comparison, some common, overall themes appear. These included references to the *singing voices*, particular *feelings generated* by the music and lyrics, perceptions of *talent* emphasized by notions of *maturity*, *age*, and *musicality*, descriptions of *authenticity*, perceptions of *body language* and *intimacy*, and perceptions of *innocence* versus *knowledge of the world*, which also included perceptions of *exceptionality* and *concern for the young stars' future careers.*

The analysis was driven by the first seven steps of the turning wheel: I scanned the comments, copied and anonymized the data, color-coded themes and words, grouped themes in a new document, compared mass and quality, developed categories according to the most frequent

topics found (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), and identified representative comments. The latter helped me to further investigate the developed categories with regard to their underlying motives, and, identifying certain triggers, allowed me to organize the data based on **three motivational perspectives** that comprised the motivational level.

The first motivational perspective I identified comprised comments with **song- and performance-specific** content. These included reflections on the lyrics, specifics referred to and perceived in the choreography, the musical interpretation, the visuals, and the effects in the music videos. The second perspective contained comments discussing **comparisons with other artists**. These were found to be especially effective catalysts of cyborg talentification in the case of original, highly esteemed, adult artists—in the case-specific analyses of Billie Holiday, Adele, or Jay Hawkins—but they also worked well on a more intimate level, as in the Marcus & Martinus case, where fans were found to draw comparisons between the two brothers. A third perspective constituted comments communicating (**pre)conceptions about innocence and childhood**. These could be about "incredibly mature and adult-like" music interpretations (Jordan and The BlackSheeps), but they could also be articulated in more retrospective terms by, for example, Marcus & Martinus fans expressing "so cute they were!" Inherent in the (pre)conceptions about childhood and innocence were clear (pre)conceptions about *adulthood*, including ideas about what grown-ups were supposed to be able to do, feel, and be. Comments on (pre)conceptions about childhood and innocence were least frequent in the Marcus & Martinus material. Here, the main emphasis was on *love* (in the comment rooms), on their, among children, unprecedented *commercial success* (in interviews available on YouTube and selected online newspapers), and on their suspected *double lives* as *normal versus famous* (in interviews available on YouTube). Therefore, in the case of Marcus & Martinus, (pre)conceptions about innocence and childhood appeared mainly in the public discourse around the duo. Also, the duo's *own rhetoric* was found to make use of expectations about their innocence, as will be discussed in both their narratives (Section 5.4.3.) and the interview sections in Chapter 6.

Bernstein (2013) compared childhood to performance, as both were "always already in the act of disappearing" (p. 205), by understanding how children's bodies are used as effigies for something that has already been lost. Consequently, comments in the category (pre)conceptions about childhood could be motivated by the experience of *loss*, like fans remembering themselves as children, or by expressions of *longing*, such as for the untouched innocence of the child singer, discussed by O'Connor (2009). These aspects will be

considered in more detail in the narratives. Further, comments reflecting on the artists' future careers, including concerns for their transition into adulthood, also belong to this category. These will be discussed in depth in Chapter 6.

I depicted the themes listed above and the three motivational perspectives in an illustration (Table 2) filled in with representative comments to demonstrate their connections. As such illustrations always simplify content, some comments could arguably be put in several places. The comments were retrieved from all three star groups, although, as mentioned in Section 1.4.1., Jordan had the most material due to the overabundance of her fans' word-rich notes. Also, in the Marcus & Martinus case, the comments were short and generally contained an excess of nonverbal clues, which I did not use in the illustration but instead saved for the case-specific discussion. The BlackSheeps' material was, due to the band's status as veterans, less rich and numerous. Thus, considering these case- and time-incited differences, it is even more surprising that the three motivational perspectives were identified as important catalysts in all three artist groups. Being a qualitative study, these findings cannot be generalized, but they can indicate a tendency concerning how netizens react to musical material. Maybe they can also be indicators for offline musical appreciation. The authentication of, in my case, the stars' celebrity status, based on song- and performance-specific reactions, comparisons with other artists, and (pre)conceptions about innocence and childhood, might also spill over into an academic reflection on talent judgments. I return to these reflections at the end of Section 5.2.4. and in Chapters 7 and 8.

**Table 2**

*Empirical findings on the motivational level, exemplified by comments*

| *Cyborg talentification* | **1. Song- and performance-specific comments** | **2. Comparisons to other artists or original versions** | **3. (Pre)conceptions about innocence and childhood** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **The voice, the lyrics, choreography** | Guys your outfits are perfect, your sound is amazing, your voice is perfect, your new song is amazing, you guys are perfect/ That vibrato in Agnete's voice when she sings so high.... it's a knife in my emotions, so brilliant, serene. | Where Adele is screaming out, Angelina is singing/ Omg Marcus' voice in this song it's just AMAZING- Martinus is good too/ Much better voice than Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs. | What a beautiful voice! An ancient spirit in this child!/ How can a child this young sing about adult feelings?/ So cute they were!/ This topic is way over her head/ They are too young for that sexy dance. |
| **Feelings generated by the music** | Really touching and a great film with a brave message/ This song literally brought tears to my eyes/ Goosebumps on 2.02/ I want to sit on that chair! Jealous!!! | The song really fits you guys, you take the perfect tones and it makes the song so good. I love your cover way better than the original. It makes me cry. | Reminds me of when I was little and listened to this music/ Love you guys!/ The special thing about Angelina is her innocence, it is therapeutic, it calms me down. |
| **Maturity, age, body language, intimacy** | What? Only fourteen? They should serve as an example for youth/ She is too classy for this sex business/ I cried when M looked at the camera (he looked at me). | Heard the lyrics from Adele, understood them from Jordan/ I'm just in love with this acoustic version, it's so close. | She is a reincarnation of an old soul. Impossible to have that kind of maturity eight years old/ You must live double lives? |
| **Concerns and thoughts about future careers, and about authenticity** | The future of Norwegian Rock!/ Let Angelina keep that jazzy sound. Let her stay authentic. Good luck to our angel of music. | Brilliant cover of a great song! Very talented, the singer is very pretty and has an amazing voice, keep at it! | I believe and hope her family will never let her lose self-belief and that there will always be a corner of her being that has the naivety of the eight year old Angelina/ A child pop success we have never seen before. |

The **song- and performance-specific** reactions demanded a closer look at the type of music video, including an investigation of the lyrics, the plot, the musical actors, and the choreography. When Auslander (2021) noted that "music *is* what musicians *do*" (p. 48), he positioned the performer as the center of interest. The song- and performance-specific comments category also views the performer as central, but additionally as a "white spot" with a supportive apparatus, and the music around and through which the performer enacts, becomes visible and is assigned talent.

Comments motivated by **comparisons to other artists** were most frequently—though not exclusively—found in discussions of cover songs; songs that Plasketes (2010) named "intertextual tourists, lost and found in translation" (p. 39), making them brim with metaphorical meanings. YouTube has contributed to legitimizing covering for a wider public as it has allowed covering on a broad scale. As discussed in Section 2.4.2., researchers, producers, and musicians themselves have long since discovered both the idealistic and economic value of cover songs. Cover songs' idealistic task can be summarized as keeping already written music alive. Plasketes (2010) paid homage to Emmylou Harris by referring to her liner note, which reads: "All songs, also very good songs, need new places to sing them to keep them alive" (p. 37). Plasketes (2010) himself supplied that beautiful quote, noting that "sometimes it is the voice itself that provides the new place" (p. 37). One theme that occurred repeatedly in comments on stars' covers was just the *voice*. Voice has, in popular music, always had a central role, one closely connected to the artistic persona, because, as Frith (1998) observed, voice gives meaning to both the lyrics and the music (p. 187). In YouTube comments, voice consolidated its vital role, and I subsequently suspected that the mission of the voice was quite complex. Adele's voice has been celebrated as remarkable before, yet Angelina Jordan's covers of Adele made Adele's voice sound "thin and screaming." This hardly flattering characteristic of the superstar's voice was probably *not even thought of* before Angelina Jordan appeared. Comparison clearly adapts itself to those who are being compared; the more established and popular the original, the better or worse for the one who covers. Here might Barthes' (1977/1990) grain of the voice possibly come in, influencing vlisteners' judgment and, with it, the important connection between fan and musician, granting authenticity and success to the performer (Moore, 2002, p. 220). Moore (2002) thought that—in matters of assigning authenticity, and in making performances and performers successful—more attention should be paid "towards the activities of various perceivers" (p. 221). In the current study, such attention was attempted by focusing on

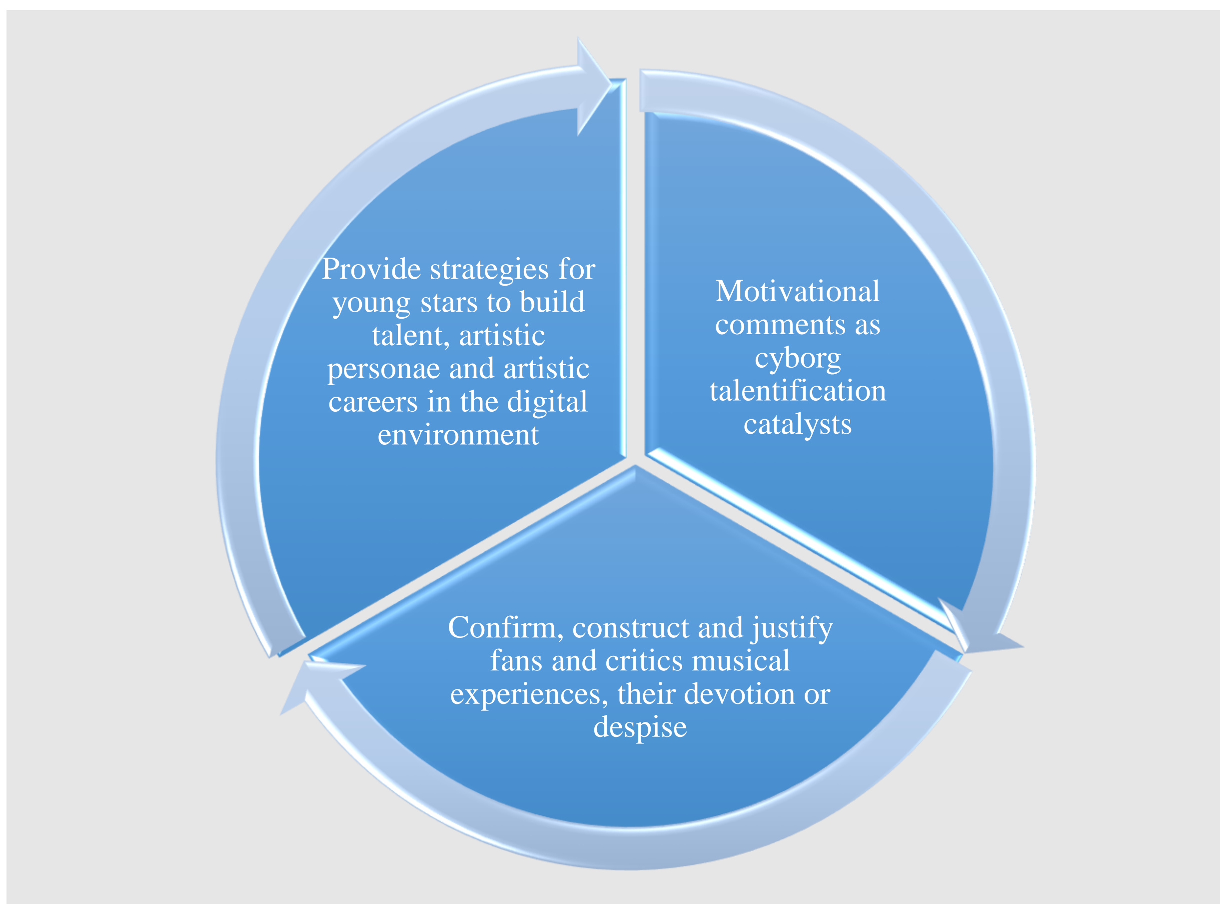
perceptions from commenters and the media. In the comment rooms, I perceived a star attachment, a “getting used” to a particular sound of voice and demeanor that quickly excluded others as being less intriguing. The perceived phenomenon, that covering a classic often benefits the covering artist rather than the original, might also indicate that a song, already made known by another artist, when performed by a beloved star, makes fans and critics appreciate both the song and the voice(s) in a sharpened way. Indeed, comments in all three cases at hand mostly praised the young artists’ ability to cover a classic in an even more convincing, more heartfelt way than the original. These comparisons seemed to supply fans with new insights into their star’s musicality *and* into the song covered, pumping fresh life into both the star and the song as “the cover song invites, if not insists upon, a comparison to the original . … engaging the listener in a historical duet with lyric and lineage” (Plasketes, 2010, p. 36).

The success of covering was another manifestation of how strong perceptions can come about through a touching on and a transgression of borders (Haraway, 1991), where borders, in the case of covering, can be viewed as synonymous with different manifestations of a song. The bordering phenomenon was definitely also traceable in the third perspective, **the (pre)conceptions of childhood and innocence**. Here, the border between child and adult worlds was touched, a border that, by no means, can be said to be fixed—for example, as Vestad and Dyndahl (2017) observed in a Norwegian context, “the ideals of contemporary childhood offered by the media [were] negotiated by the parents” (p. 11). Or, in a more global perspective, this border is anchored in varying cultural norms and constructed by society. Consequently, the (pre)conceptions, and the perceived border between child and adult, came across in multiple ways. Yet, the material agreed that, if there was anything fundamentally important to building and maintaining a child star image, it was exactly the idea of a *fixed border* between child and adult worlds. Only an obvious, definite border could create the space of astonishment from which child stars could blossom. This necessity has been strangely disturbed by the tween concept, which builds on the youthification at both ends of traditional childhood age, blurring and almost deliberately tearing down borders between children and adults. Bickford (2016) discussed this contradiction, describing how the term ”child prodigy” in the online environment actually contributes to a confusion of a normed child–adult border (p. 763). I will reflect on these questions in each cyborg talentification case, as well as in Section 6.1., which specifically discusses talent *as* childishness (Bickford, 2016) and the ambiguity of thresholds.

The three perspectives of the motivational level are thus identified to contribute to the cyborg talentification of young pop musicians. Further, as Figure 4 illustrates, these perspectives not only describe commenters' motivations but also provide essential tools for child stars' promotion, instrumentalized by the team around the stars and by the stars themselves, such as, for example, Jordan building her career on covering, and Marcus & Martinus insisting on their innocence (Section 5.4.). The effect of the motivational level can, thus, be described as a *three-way circuit*: As motivational comments cocreate child stars' cyborg talentification, they also justify and confirm fans' and critics' own devotion or rejection, their musical feelings, and their resulting admiration or dislike for the stars. These mechanisms again provide strategies for supporting and promoting child stars' talent, their careers, and their artistic personae in the digital environment. The latter, in the sense of being "transmedial phenomena" (Hansen, 2019, p. 502), accelerates stars' popularity and visibility on YouTube.

**Figure 4**

*Illustration of the motivational level's three-way circuit*



### 5.2.2. Discursive levels

The sighting of discursive levels was initiated when I first read and vlistened through the data and detected thought-provoking variations among the three cases. The naming of the perceived differences as *discursive* was based on both a close and wide definition of discourse, as already indicated in Sections 3.2.3. and 4.3.5. These two perspectives of discourse call attention to the specific language used as well as to the looser phenomena observed (Grue, n.d.). As discussed in 3.2.3., I widened Foucault's (1999) discourse conceptualization—viewing historical, social, and cultural conditions as fundamental for expressions and actions to be acknowledged as natural and acceptable—to include *social networking conditions*. The discursive level in my context fathoms and discusses the "mode of organizing knowledge, ideas, or experience that is rooted in language and in its concrete contexts" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), yet it is closer to a netnographic observation than to a purely textual analysis. Applying the theoretical lens of cyborg theory, as discussed in 3.1. and 3.2.4., a specific conceptualization of social networking conditions—the cyborg system of YouTube—identified the preconditions and sustaining factors of the discursive elements in general and in each group. Cyborg theory characterized the cyborgian genre of commenting, equipped with nonphysical clues, and it viewed YouTube mechanisms—likes and sharing—as cyborgian. Cyborg lenses, leaning on relevant internet research discussed in Section 1.2.1. and Chapters 3 and 4, identified the immediacy and free-of-physical time aspect in online commenting, and how these contributed to the creation of unique discursive environments in each case's comment rooms and adjacent spaces—the music videos, media reports, and celebrity interviews. Each of the environments surrounding, respectively, The BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus, and Angelina Jordan, evinced particular ideologies and language use that, recalling Wolf's (2016) analyses of online homophily gathering particular groups, were not startling. Supported by the cyborg system's mechanisms and structures, its algorithms and sorting abilities, Wolf's description of online homophily's "potential […] to shape social reality . … and aesthetic preferences" (p. 3) explained some of the discursive differences. Not surprisingly, social media have, in recent research, been described as *walled gardens* (Dander et al., 2021)—making me picture allotment gardens side by side—vividly illustrating the seclusion of diverse online meeting environments. In the case of The BlackSheeps, the initially perceived *lack* of homophily in their comment rooms was later, paradoxically, deconstructed as the specific characteristic of their homophily, describing the way in which the discussions were designed, drowning out the individual voices (compare Section 5.3.2.).

Using the same process of analysis as applied to the motivational levels, I was able to identify case-specific environments describing the main discourses in which the three star groups and their materials could be placed. For The BlackSheeps, this environment was categorized *society and provocation*; for Marcus & Martinus, it was *marketing forces* and *fans-as-family*; and for Angelina Jordan, it was *child prodigy*. Affirmed and consolidated by representative comments in my analyses, I further identified the overall discursive characteristics in comment rooms and consequently named these (a) *rooms of conflict and discussion*, (b) *rooms of feelings and emoji,* and (c) *rooms of protection and development.* The illustration in Table 3 outlines the case-specific environments of the main discourses and the discourses in the celebrities' comment rooms.

**Table 3**

*Case-specific discourses in musical materials, the media, and comment rooms*

| **Case-specific environments** | **The BlackSheeps** | **Marcus & Martinus** | **Angelina Jordan** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Main discourse** | Society and provocation | Marketing forces and fans-as-family | Child prodigy |
| **Discourse in comment rooms** | Rooms of conflict and discussion | Rooms of feelings and emoji | Rooms of protection and development |

Next, I will discuss the narrative levels in the data and their function in the analysis.

### 5.2.3. Case focused narratives

In short, the narrative level implements, discusses, and renders concrete the overall findings from the discursive and motivational levels by analyzing video examples and comments.

Narratives are stories told, with different voices, using various sceneries, embodiments, and strategies, and incorporating "a variety of non-musical elements" (Hansen, 2019, p. 507)—the non-musical elements in my context being the mechanisms on YouTube. In order to understand the processes of their talenting, the narrative focus intends to fathom "the stories told *about* pop artists as well as *by* them" (p. 513). The narrative perspective investigates the subject positions and embodiments the young artists inhabit in the cocreating process of cyborg talentification, either expressively through direct quotes from the stars themselves, via

their videos, or as seen through the eyes of fans and critics and communicated in their comments, likes, and sharing. These narratives thus permit a glimpse of the universal nature of each celebrity, the recognizable, "the 'real me" (Hansen, 2019, p. 507), meaning the persona within, or behind, all characters, roles, and subject positions the artists embody and how these support cyborg talentification. By approaching the persona in such a way, it, following Hansen, can give an image of "an artist's private self (but not identical to it)" (p. 507). Here again, the blurred border between private and public is addressed, and, as called to attention by Suhr (2012), "social media environments create a close proximity between the fans and the musicians" (p. 114) that makes the private and artistic personality blend—an observation that was confirmed in the expressed intimacy of my comment material. Fans' repetitive way of addressing their stars personally as "our girl," "my boys," and "just pure and real," for instance, strongly suggest a blend of artistic and personal identity, which, again, was found to be relevant in the processes of cases of cyborg talentification.

### 5.2.4. Impact on the field of music education research

In a wider, music education research perspective, the motivational, discursive, narrative, and also cultural cosmopolitan levels of cyborg talentification can be viewed as potent instruments to investigate mechanisms of talent production and talenting in both popular and academic environments. As I perceive it, the authority and power with which judges in talent shows generate a comparison like "the new Amy Winehouse" or "the new Mozart"—heavily supported by extreme facial and oral expressions underlining the wow! factor—are comparable to the gatekeeper role in a music conservatory. Here, "teachers sit in juries of competitions and entrance auditions to higher music education" (Stabell, 2018, p. 125), judging students' suitability in accordance with specific criteria that, in one way or other, also build on comparisons between the students and established, recognized—and often also already deceased—musicians. Here, tracing all four levels by investigating the responsible authorities' underlying motivations, discourses, personal narratives, and global-or-not aesthetic views in producing talent judgments could enter into the conversation with existing scholarship on the authentication of talent, artistic personae, and performance (Auslander, 2008, 2021; Hansen, 2019; Moore, 2002; Stabell, 2018). The superior, overall contribution of cyborg theory to such discussions will be explored more systematically in Chapter 7. Here, however, to continue along the already mentioned trajectories, applying cyborg theory might involve imagining a world of talent without Mozart and Winehouse being fixed entities to be used at will. This could include an inquiry into whether the modernist ideology of a

universalist culture, one that maintains and nourishes itself on a universality of all aesthetics portraying ethnic backgrounds and specific music traditions as walking the same path toward a common goal, "usually that of embracing twelve-note music" (Scott, 2012, p. 187), still influences judgments. Alternatively, the inquiry could concern whether, as Scott (2012) pondered, cultural relativism is now successfully penetrating the field of music, first described by Sontag (1966) as a "new sensibility" (p. 302), making high and low culture distinctions increasingly bland concepts. In praxis, this might also incite a debate about whether musical myths still influence judgments—like, for example, the Mozart effect, which argues that listening to Mozart's music heightens intelligence—that have long since been demystified (Schellenberg, 2009). The historical baggage of academic and popular gatekeepers could be challenged and analyzed to evaluate the need for a reorganization of talent evaluations. This might also amplify the call for an extended musical vocabulary (Green, 2008; Vestad, 2014) in both popular and academic circles—a topic I introduced in Section 1.5., and which I further discuss in Chapter 7 in relation to introducing the concept of cyborg talentification as an innovative term in music education. Since social media have quite persistently infiltrated all areas of life, the mechanisms observed in these arenas, as was done in the current study, could be acknowledged as important indicators for similar processes in music institutions for students of all ages, which, although perhaps not so relevant today, certainly will be tomorrow. As Lange (2019) prophesized: "A posthuman mediascape may not yet be a universal reality, but the YouTube case enables media makers to gaze through its portals to begin parsing its parameters and effects in the present and in perpetuity" (p. 190). Gazing through these portals is an endeavor I have pursued in this study.

### 5.2.5. Performance styles

Before discussing each case, I briefly indicate one line of thought that was incited by the live concert I attended and the contrast I experienced with the corresponding YouTube video presentation. As I started to wonder more profoundly about the differences between offline and online performances, I was made aware of Auslander's (2008) study on performance in a mediatized culture, and also his newest work on the performing musical persona (Auslander, 2021). Here, Auslander's interest centers on musicians as performers rather than on music as performance (p. 2), allowing a link back to Shuker (2016), who identified "popular music . … to emphasize interpretation through performance. … primarily in terms of the body and emotions" (p. 84). This was interesting, as Angelina Jordan, Marcus & Martinus, and The BlackSheeps all display different styles of performance. Jordan, when performing, as she

herself has expressed, was found to enter her "own room," in which she feels united with the music (Song & Heart, 2014). Marcus & Martinus, on the other hand, exhibit a much more open-heartedly entertaining attitude and have been identified as gifted entertainers rather than outstanding musicians, and have been noted to be capable of running a "real show" while performing their music (God kveld Norge, 2019). Marcus & Martinus engage in the rhythms of music making, with dancing constituting an important part of their performances. On stage, dancing. the right moves especially, might thus be more important to their show than the actual music. Jordan appears to be more actively "in the inside" of her music and demonstrates little of the entertainment strategy characteristics of the twin duo. Her performer talent evinces different qualities than those of the outgoing twins, and commenters have remarked that her communications speak directly to their souls and hearts. Jordan's performance style resonates blues/soul/jazzy and even classical vibes reminiscent of Billie Holiday's early performances.[55] Further, the YouTube video format offers a more introverted artist like Jordan the unique possibility of combining the feel of a grand display with the security of a small setting, one in which they are free to experiment with musical and choreographic material from their great idols. For example, Jordan's cover of Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" (Angelina Jordan CoverChannel, 2021) is not only a Jackson cover but also an adaptation of blues singer Whitney Houston's aesthetic choreographies and color-coded rooms in "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" (Whitney Houston, 2009). The difference between the two videos is mainly visible in how Jordan deploys the notion of color rooms, standing or sitting alone in these rooms, a sole artist, whereas Houston's video alternates between more active scenes and musical still-lifes that are further contrasted with dynamic dancers entering and exiting these colorful scenes. This type of interpretive reproduction converts the YouTube scene into a playground frequented by peer communities that Corsaro (2018) described as a vital tool for children's creative reproduction of popular culture. Still, the "peers" in this playground—watching, interacting, and commenting—are on the other side of the interface, anonymous and ageless.

The BlackSheeps rely heavily on the entertainment strategies of their vocalist, who typically makes (the most) contact with the audience, and whose charisma lends the band as a whole the lion's share of the energy it radiates. This observation is not intended as a disparagement of the other band members, but, as will be described further in Section 6.2.2., it was Johnsen who, after their first win, quickly moved to the center of attention, and, as the vocalist, was

[55] Compare Billie Holiday performing "Strange Fruit" in 1959: https://youtu.be/-DGY9HvChXk

given most of the spotlight from the cameras onstage and from the media. Johnsen appears to be a "natural talent" onstage, and none of the anxieties and insecurities, mentioned later, were noticeable in The BlackSheeps videos on YouTube.

Based on these observations, the chosen child celebrities can be said to perform their music in dissimilar ways, conveyed by divergent artistic personae and genres, supported by and triggering unalike cyborg talentification discourses. Jordan comes across as being more akin to the image of a jazzy, bluesy, classical singer than to that of an entertaining, dancing, and extroverted popstar, an embodiment chosen by Markus & Martinus and also, though to a lesser degree, by The BlackSheeps. The case-specific characteristic strategies of gesturing and embodiment most likely also play into the contrasting types of responses and the fan attractions they incite. In the context of the current study, the identified embodiments, and the corresponding gestures and styles of performance, were understood as supporting the processes responsible for their cyborg talentification.

In the next sections, each case is discussed according to the same pattern: First, I present the artist(s), followed by the case-specific discursive perspectives, after which I analyze the overall narratives, and, finally, investigate their engagement as cultural and/or aesthetic cosmopolitan and interpretive reproductions of popular music and culture. The motivational perspectives flow directly into each narrative. I start with the child star forerunners of contemporary popular YouTube musicians in a Norwegian context—The BlackSheeps.

## 5.3. "The future of Norwegian Rock"

The BlackSheeps entered the public attention with gold confetti on the *MGPjr* stage and exited it with trouble and commotion engendered by the trial that ripped apart the original four-member band for good only two years after their debut. Right from the start, they exuded a strong, energetic pride that secured them a steep success and a consequently harder fall. Though the group continued to perform with two new members after the breakup, the first quartet of The BlackSheeps happens to be the one that is reminisced the most, both for their vibrant songs and for the youthful, spontaneous playfulness and drive in their music. They are remembered for introducing the Sámi culture on the map of a competitive child's music culture, for confronting a softening pop culture with rock music and controversial themes, and for celebrating youthful rebellion in songs like "Punk revolution" (The BlackSheeps–emne, 2018). Having been called "the future of Norwegian rock" by an ardent fan vlistening to the

band's cover of "Gold Lion" by the Yeah Yeahs (Reisverket, 2008), it appears they did their best to live up to this adage by always being ready to have an opinion, a message, and just by being The BlackSheeps.

### 5.3.1. Introducing The BlackSheeps (2008–2010)

The Blacksheeps were a punk-rock band founded in 2006, only a year after YouTube was launched. They pursued a lively, energetic and youthful style of music and wrote most of their materials, both lyrics and music, themselves. In the Norwegian context they became *the* children's band, successfully pioneering the use of both offline and online platforms.

The BlackSheeps were local to the Nesseby principality, Northern Norway, where all band members went to the same school. Originally, The BlackSheeps was meant to be an all-female band; however, as the members were hanging out during break time, along came "Alexander who was bored, and so he joined them" (amy121314, 2008, 0:57), the drummer Viktoria Eriksen explained. The twelve-year-old Agnete Johnsen (now known as Agnete Saba) quickly rose to popularity as a charismatic vocalist. Emelie Nilsen proved to be a capable guitarist, well supported by Alexander Touryguin on the bass guitar and the energetic Viktoria Eriksen on the drums, all thirteen years of age. Having Sámi roots, the band members utilized their songs partly to promote the Sámi language, which, for the record, had become an official language in Norway in the 1990s. After having been noticed for their originality at the *UKM*,[56] the band was invited to join *MGPjr*. There, they had their breakthrough in 2008, with "Oro Jáska Beana" (TheBlackSheeps–emne, 2018),[57] being the first song to be partially performed in Sámi at the competition. Furthermore, due to the performance being posted on YouTube right after the TV production, all of Norway, and theoretically, all with YouTube access worldwide, witnessed their success and could gauge their ethnic determination: "We want to show that we both master the Norwegian and the Sámi language," explained a proud Agnete Johnsen on Sámi TV (amy121314, 2010a, 2:06) in an interview uploaded on YouTube. The catchy melody was born after Johnsen had shouted at her dog in Sámi (amy121314, 2010a, 1:36), and, as Viktoria Eriksen reported in the interview—supported by her giggling band members—the band members thought that the line could make a great chorus, which it did, securing them their victory at *MGPjr* in 2008. The BlackSheeps went on to represent Norway with "Oro Jáska Beana" at the *MGP Nordic*

[56] Compare list of abbreviations, p. xi.
[57] Translated lyrics for "Oro Jáska Beana" in Appendix 1.1.

competition (leetmanDk, 2008), winning there as well. The same year, "Oro Jáska Beana" won them the *Spellemannprisen*[58] in the best song category. In 2009, they came out with their first official music video on YouTube, called "Edwin" (TheBlackSheepsBand, 2009). Both the video and the song received conflicting responses that are discussed later in this paper. Their first single sold more than 15,000 copies in 2009, earning the name of *Gullplate,* which means golden album (Torsøe, 2009).

In 2009, they also played in a music video for the Norwegian movie *Bestevenner*,[59] featuring the song "Cancellation" (Bestevennerfilmen, 2009) from their debut album (The Blacksheeps, 2009). However, in 2010, the band members had a falling out, and Viktoria Eriksen and Alexander Touryguin were replaced by Nikolaj Nordbak Gloppen and Simon Stenvoll Pedersen. The situation turned rather ugly and ended in court as both parties claimed the right to the band name and the copyright for the songs. The media made sure to tightly follow and report the event, psychologically straining all the members. Agnete Johnsen and Emelie Nilsen were framed as carrying the main responsibility for the split up. Viktoria Eriksen later expressed that it took her a while to get rid of the identity of the one who played in The BlackSheeps and got sacked (Grønneberg, 2016). However, at the age of twenty-two, Eriksen secured herself a "dream job" as a manager at Sonic Music Norway (Noste, 2015). There, she also worked with Angelina Jordan, who she described as the little girl with the great voice (Noste, 2015), which was proof of the intimacy shared in the Norwegian music milieu. The material available on YouTube from the early times of The BlackSheeps comprise a couple of professional music videos, concert videos, back-stage videos, and a few online interviews.

### 5.3.2. Discourse on conflict, provocation, and discussion

The comment rooms of The BlackSheeps' videos evinced a characteristically high level of conflict, and clearly, their lyrics and musical genre reached out to, attracted, provoked, and engaged divergent ideological and generational layers in society. With songs such as "Edwin,"[60] which is about a boy coming out as a homosexual, The BlackSheeps signaled their active engagement with socio-political material. The accompanying music video, with its pointedly formulated message, confirmed the fearless and characteristically confrontational style The BlackSheeps had chosen. Packed into punk rock music, the young musicians made a statement with which, clearly, not all would agree. Their authenticity could be perceived as an

[58] Spellemannpris: yearly prestigious Norwegian music award given in different categories.
[59] Bestevenner: Best friends.
[60] Translated lyrics available in Appendix 1.2.

aesthetic value that was non-entertaining in the way it provoked audiences out of their comfort zones (Grossberg, 1992). Consequently, their comment rooms gave space to people to engage in rather heated discussions on gender, gender roles, and society's general role in controlling individual choices. Even though many loved The BlackSheeps' music and appraised them as "such a talented band," many negative critiques could be found as well. Aggressive and even hateful comments—"F… how sick song this is!... I almost threw up"—can be tough for anybody to cope with, especially for young individuals who are trying to build a musical and personal image. Agnete Saba has been open about her lifelong struggles with fear, which, in part, were exacerbated by online comments. At the age of 20, she revealed some strategies she had employed to avoid becoming too depressed or even suicidal:

> **Saba:** I have figured out how to avoid these thoughts. For example, I am not on Facebook, and I do not read comments about myself on the internet. In addition, I believe the most important thing is to do what you like, and not what you believe others expect from you. For me, this means standing on stage, challenging myself. (Strøm & Jensen, 2015, my translation from Norwegian)

Comments are as powerful as spoken words, and almost as indelible as the printed letters in a book. They are, according to Burgess and Green (2018), unavoidable for all who are in the public eye, especially on online platforms, where the possibility of anonymity protects the commenters. Burgess and Green (2018) stated that having to deal with "negative and often personally offensive commenters is part of the YouTube experience for those who participate in YouTube as a social network" (p. 119). As was observed in other research, "anonymity in online discourse can bring out the worst in some and the best in others" (Wolfgang, 2016, p. 99); thus, some commenters become net-trolls or haters. Allowing myself to *emotionally and intellectually engage* (Kozinets, 2020) with this phenomenon, I observed that the transition from offline to online platforms is often characterized by a noticeable change in the intensity and bluntness of one's comments. Through anonymity (Burgess & Green, 2018; Regev, 2013; Wolfgang, 2016) and with the ability to hide their identities, individuals seem to face fewer restrictions. This was found to not only foster more hate but also more enthusiasm and more hope—more of everything, compared with traditional offline expressions. Thoughts, utterings, opinions, and fantasies are allowed to grow almost unrestrictedly on online platforms and are well supported, attracting similar expressions within the secure walls of virtual echo chambers (Quershi et al., 2020).

Though Regev (2013) observed both anonymity and reciprocity to be characteristic traits in online sharing practices of music, I venture to attribute these features to all types of online sharing. The overlapping relationships between commenters and the technological environment can, as discussed in Section 4.1.1., be problematic in an ethical context. Markham (2016) further discussed the empowerment experienced through anonymity, which Løfberg (2003), too, identified in young people's internet activities. Løfberg (2003) observed that because "adults do not control Internet actions, here one can hide that one is a minor" (p. 144). She concluded with the opinion that internet communication allows for and triggers a more untamed release of expressions as it "gives a feeling of security that encourages an intimacy" (p. 145). These aspects have been highlighted in my contrasting experiences with offline and online audiences (Section 5.1.). In this sense, The BlackSheeps' critically social, political, and, for some, provocative lyrics, however innocently and playfully presented, were bound to trigger conflicting responses, more so in an online forum. Furthermore, creating an imagined identity clothed in a username that could literally be anything, in addition to the ability to evade exposure and add hyperlinks to other pages, results in the seamless links and erosion of boundaries (Haraway, 1998) found to be characteristic of cyborg activity. This cyborg does not "constitute a preestablished individual subject that actively engages in the process of communication. Rather, it is itself subject to and initially activated by communicative interactions" (Gunkel, 2000, p. 342). Thus, the cyborg commenter becomes first embodied in the moment of posting a comment on YouTube—be it as a reaction to other comments or just to insert itself into the active communication chain.

Grouping the comments from The BlackSheeps' rooms into supportive and unsupportive categories demonstrated that each side had approximately equal numbers; however, the unsupportive comments were generally more word-rich, politically sharpened, and extreme in their expressions. Overall, The BlackSheeps' commenters were either positive, enthusiastic, and supportive, or extremely negative and almost abusive in their language. Another characteristic observed in the discursive atmosphere of The BlackSheeps' comment rooms was the intense interaction between the commenters. One discussion that raged severely concerned the commenters judging the looks of the young musicians:

> **Commenter:** I might be a moron, but I do not make comments about others looks. Specially young talented children. What kind of person makes negative remarks regarding children's looks? Think about what you are doing and take into account the consequences surrounding such statements. You are just a pathetic person.

The above, most likely adult, commenter, who defended the autonomy and untouchability of children's looks, could be placed on the positive end of the scale of Whiteley's (2003) analyses, refusing to accept the presence of "the imaginary 'gap,' the space between the notes" (p. 25). For Whiteley, this "gap" was primarily filled with pornographic associations, as can be understood by her statement that society never was innocent, which, as I perceive, may also explain the self-constructed commenters' right to judge the looks of child stars. Derogatory talk about a young artist's appearance confirms Whiteley's statement that "what is sold, then, is [the child celebrity's] image" (p. 25). Furthermore, the wish for sweetness and innocence in a child star, who preferably should resemble an angelic figure—with a "pretty doll face … so perfect that you hope she'll never, never grow older" (O'Connor, 2009, p. 219)—could be the motivating factor behind offensive comments. The discussion on gender found in "Edwin" was continued in the comment room of the "Gold Lion" video, despite there being no obvious connection to the message in the lyrics, even though they might be about drugs, sex, and gambling, as some have indicated. The negative comments in the "Gold Lion" video read as if the critics from "Edwin" had decided to apply their argumentations to all The BlackSheeps' songs:

> **Commenter:** Great message to those that believe in gender bending and Gays—these people have no morals, because their parents taught them no morals. if the whole world was gay, there would be no children. Does that sound like the way to continue Humanity, obviously Not. In most cases i don't think its a result of "who U are" I think its a result of how u were raised.

As in the comment room of "Edwin," the above comment received a counter comment:

> **Commenter:** Homosexuality was practiced in ancient times (before Christ) and not condemned. All your comments really show is that as time passed society became more close minded in certain aspects. And if homosexuality is so against nature, why are so many individuals born gay?

None of these commenters actually acknowledged the role of young people. They did not appear to take underage artists seriously; their role was defined as "only" children and victims of their parent's misconceptions (the first) or just continuing society's development (the second). Their innocence remained indisputable behind the cover of rhetorical bickering. The theme *innocent as opposed to knowing the world* has been highlighted by multiple researchers (Bickford, 2016; Jenkins, 1998; O'Connor, 2009; Vestad & Dyndahl, 2017; Whiteley, 2003),

and could be traced not directly in the comments but instead in the assumption underlying the arguments that fill “the gap” (Whiteley, 2002). *Innocent as opposed to knowing the world* proved to be a burning theme in the data of all three groups in this study, and it was conceptualized as the general motivational perspective informing *preconceptions about childhood and innocence* (Section 5.1.1.).

Another feature observed in the discursive comment rooms of The BlackSheeps’ videos was the presence of occasional humorous comments. They were, among the three groups in this study, the only ones with some hints of humor, coloring the atmosphere in these comment rooms in a particular way. They added confidentiality and supported The BlackSheeps’ attachment and close connection to their ethnic roots—joking in their particular dialect—while simultaneously cultivating an ever-sharper tension with the political, harsh, and negative commenters.

In sum, all of the characteristics described here indicate that the main discourse on The BlackSheeps’ musical project—music style, performance, and lyrics—was found to touch and provoke all levels of *society*. This complemented the musical genre of punk rock that they represented and also, as discussed earlier, influenced the type of authenticity (Grossberg, 1992) they evoked in their fans and critics alike. Auslander (2021) noted that “genre [always functions] as a structure of expectation” (p. 10), and punk rock has been connected to youth rebellion. Their comment rooms were thus labeled as *rooms of conflict and discussion*—an adage that mirrored the theme in both the fans’ and critics’ comments and in the music itself.

As I take a step back to study the collected data anew, I wonder what is missing. I had detected a lot of character and individualism in the voices of The BlackSheeps’ fans and critics—expressions of anger, appreciation, adoration, humor, disgust, identification, rebellion, courage, fanaticism, and arrogance. There was joy and optimism, and also sadness. Commenters discussed and quarreled about matters of respect, education, religion, talent, musical futures, authenticity, fake sound, and performance styles. Despite The BlackSheeps’ data being the least represented on YouTube, they contained a wider spectrum of feelings and opinions than the other two cases. Thus, and at first glance, The BlackSheeps’ comment rooms lacked conformity and agreeability, and instead conveyed conflict and discussion.

Approaching the text anew, I attempted to question and contrast the text’s preferred reading, attempting to find “what it does not seem to know” (O’Regan, 2006, p. 188). This implied a search for what O’Regan referred to as “the ‘textured’ meaning modalities of the text” (p.

185), or the way in which the text itself actually does express its preferred reading. The text in The BlackSheeps' comment rooms seemed to be saying conflict and provocation, yet, as a complete document, the argumentations and the quarreling remained lonesome and static statements. Thus, in the clatter of arguments and diverging opinions and feelings, the individual voices did not really pronounce something; they were merely a manifestation of a particular style. Their messages drowned each other out, and, in the preferred reading, the perceived atmosphere of conflict and the lack of a homogeneous environment became, paradoxically, a type of predictable, reversed homophily (Wolf, 2016), designing a marker of the deconstructive discursive level of The BlackSheeps' comment materials. These fireworks of opinions that are of no use could be called the aporia in The BlackSheeps' data. They might possibly also say something about the development of YouTube, which, since 2009, has built continuously advancing algorithms to ensure that like-minded individuals can find each other, herding them into safe seclusion. They might also say something about the evolving nature of the art of commenting and about the commenters and vlisteners on the other side of the interface. I suggest that music education research is hurriedly attempting to address rapidly evolving social media strategies and habits, and that it ought to investigate how these strategies and habits influence produsers' listening, observation, and commenting skills, which, I suggest, also influence people's and students' learning skills in formal music settings.

### 5.3.3. Proud to be young and have a message

As the discursive analysis highlighted, many loved The BlackSheeps' musical messages but just as many had problems with it. On the "Oro Jáska Beana" page, one commenter wrote: "They are good, both with instruments and the singing and that stuff. The melody is catchy, but there could have been a different text. But one thing is for sure: they have talent!" This recognition of talent was found to come somewhat easier when contrasted with dubious lyrics. In addition, their musical style and stage presence, in addition to the enthusiasm and power when singing about a stupid dog, actually enforced the bands', and especially, the vocalist's musicality. Apart from being linked to the discussed genre of punk rock, this could be viewed as an indicator of the desired normality of child stars. A dog is a common theme for children to choose, and, as de Mink and McPherson (2016) observed in their study of interviews done with child prodigies, their musical talent could not "stand out as exceptional" without highlighting some kind of normality (p. 438). Furthermore, the lofty and somewhat far-off dispute on homosexuality triggered by the lyrics of "Edwin" created emotional responses

carried by more down-to-earth comments that actually enforced the positivity of the song, making the groups' message even more courageous. Hence, clearly, the lyrics created by the band did not go unnoticed, and people did listen and react to them.

The Blacksheeps' breakthrough song, "Oro Jáska Beana," can be viewed on YouTube in several versions. As the comment function in the *MGPjr's* official video for "Oro Jáska Beana" (The BlackSheeps–emne, 2018) was turned off, the *DR1*[61] concert video was used (leetmanDK, 2008). In addition, for accurate listening, the soundtrack was compared with the CD recording. Commenters remarked that the instrumentalists "exaggerate their performance, so it becomes very clear that they are not playing," indicating the use of an instrumental playback. The vocals on the other hand seemed live because of the differences in tone and pronunciation. This could be heard, for example, by listening to "bjeffa" at 0.55 on their album and at 00: 48 on the concert recording, and the ending phrase of "rota" at 2.23/24 on the album and at 2:31/32 on DR1. The aliveness of the vocals was further conspicuous as Johnsen's enactment appeared to engage in what Frith (1998) analyzed as "*double enactment"* (p. 212). By this, he meant that

> Singing, as an organization of vocal gestures, means enacting a protagonist in the song (the right emotions for this part), *and* giving some intimation of a real being—a physical body producing a physical sound; sweat produced by real work; a physicality that *overflows* the formal constraints of the performance. (Frith, 1998, p. 212)

Johnsen's double enactment was supported by the cameras that primarily focused on the vocalist, swinging over to cover the other musicians only occasionally, thereby adding movement to the take and supporting band identification. The backup musicians were in one corner of the stage, visible only at the beginning of the performance and at some points during it. Agnete Johnsen displayed professional stage presence with no hesitation in her moves; her singing was intense and coherent without losing physical presence. The particular focus on Agnete Johnsen and Emelie Nielsen might explain why they always received most comments. Viktoria Eriksen on the drums definitely displayed great energy but received only limited feedback. Some just mentioned that the "drums sound alright," whilst others expressed frustration through comments such as "the drummer really irritates. What that person has to play is not difficult, yet she draws worse faces than Lars Ulrich!" Of course, it could be interpreted as a compliment to be compared with Lars Ulrich, the drummer of Metallica and

[61] DR1 stands for Danish Broadcasting.

one of the most charismatic musicians in popular music; however, the comment seemed more sarcastic than positive. Commenters' reactions were generally focused on *the band*, *the vocalist* and *her voice*, *the lyrics*, *the song*, and *their young age*. Scrolling down the comments on the videos (leetmanDK, 2008) revealed that the discussions were indicative of the typical The BlackSheeps' dynamic liveliness, moving between enthusiastic and profoundly negative comments, occasionally spiced up by swear words in the North Norwegian dialect. The band was perceived as either "really great" or "really crappy." The vocalist was given much positive feedback, primarily about her voice; however, some complained how she could sing such "stupid lyrics" as those in "Oro Jáska Beana." The appraisals of that song and its musical format ranged from being called a tune with "energy and drive, the rock quality" and "already a classic," to complains about "how such a song could win *MGPjr*." The commenters' eager judgements and the performers' obvious inexperience brings to mind Auslander's (2021) general criticism of TV talent shows with regard to both unauthorized audiences and unauthorized performers. Auslander (2021) defined such performances as staged and manipulated events (p. 133). The online authorization of The BlackSheeps' act, originally on TV but now on the YouTube platform, was executed by the commenters who described the BlackSheeps' performance to be touching and authentic and even classified it as "the future of Norwegian rock!" The lyrics,[62] again, evoked divided opinions. The story of a fat, unhealthy, stupid dog that actually dies at the end of the song after the dog owner has shouted "Be quiet, dog!" several times did provoke some emotional reactions. It was remarkable that The BlackSheeps' lyrics could engage people so strongly, despite the amount of random song lyrics that exist in popular music and their generally low status in the commercial machine of popular music (Frith, 1998). Lyrics are important for fans, especially those of punk rock. Even though commenters expressed strong feelings about The BlackSheeps' controversial words, the repeated attention paid to the lyrics re-emphasized the bands' musical talent, indicating and inviting a "but" and "despite of" the lyrics and elevating the charismatic voice and the energy of the band. Frith (1998) described this phenomenon in the following manner: "The best pop songs, in short, are those that can be heard as a *struggle* between verbal and musical rhetoric, between the singer and the song" (p. 182). The absurdness of the lyrics were clearly enjoyed, appraised as ingenious, and the use of Sámi was generally received positively: "I love that they use Sámi." Several predicted that the band, and definitely Agnete Johnsen, would have a bright musical future.

[62] Available in the appendix.

Though the band took much pride in writing their own lyrics and melodies, they also did some covers, such as the Yeah Yeahs' "Gold lion" (Reisverket, 2008) or "No milk today," a Herman's Hermit cover, which they did for a commercial for the Norwegian milk-producer *TINE*. Here, cyborg talentification hit in most heavily, as motivational comments compared The BlackSheeps versions with the originals. Both songs were found on YouTube in the band's debut album (The Blacksheeps, 2009). "Gold Lion" might be considered their first breakthrough song prior to *MGPjr*. As Agnete Johnsen reported, "Gold Lion" was the band's absolute first song that they had practiced only for a couple of weeks before they performed it at UKM. Johnsen explained that they chose the song because they thought it sounded catchy and they were motivated to play it (VGTV, 2009, 00:49–01:14). The comments on Agnete Johnsen's voice in the "Gold Lion" video were quite overwhelming to read and were reminiscent of the type of feedback found in Jordan's discourse, praising "that vibrato in her voice when she sings so high … it's a knife in my emotions, so brilliant, beautiful, serene, I can't think of any positive word it is not!" It also seemed that The BlackSheeps' rock style was much appreciated as a break from all the soft pop tunes dominating the commercial children's music landscape. The BlackSheeps added a fresh wind: "My God! I have seen the future of Norwegian rock music! This kid has a voice that competes easily in the top 100 artist in the world!" The energy flow between the band members was impeccable, and the young Johnsen with her "beautiful smile" made commenters even more adamant about how incredibly better The BlackSheeps cover was compared with the sad, boring original. At least, some of the commenters thought so. Others complained: "No way this can beat the original by Yeah Yeahs, the voice is good but the whole thing just lacks oomph." The "Gold Lion" music video (Reisverket, 2008) was filmed and recorded in The BlackSheeps' school in Nesseby. A singing Johnsen holds open an iron door for her band members who come through, carrying and playing their instruments. They walk up the stairs and move out into the schoolyard through a second door, allowing glimpses of the nearby ocean. They gather in the schoolyard, moving around leisurely, with the drummer using goalposts as drums. The simplicity of the take triggered a couple of sour remarks from commenters but also sincere appreciation: "They just played live from their school for *Musikkverket,* a Norwegian music/news show on TV." The fact that it might have at least been a partially live take could be possibly supported by the actual stopping of the drumstick sound as Viktoria Eriksen hurries down the stairs out to the goal posts in the courtyard; however, the vocals have a steady volume and clearness that would be difficult to manage in a single take. Alexander Touryguin plays the bass riff on an acoustic nylon-string guitar, producing a characteristic slack sound that is slightly out of tune.

This was also commented on: “This act wasn’t prepared at all, but a spur of the moment-thing using old and out of tune instruments available in the school’s music room.” Such comments supported the stunt by making it more relatable and “cozy.” In any case, the recording was not high-budgeted, and was informed more by considerable charm than by professionalism, and yet, as someone posted on YouTube, it was something more. To be invited into the band’s homely space, their school grounds where “it all started,” supported the YouTube platform’s characteristic “as an intimate medium” (Bickford, 2016, p. 749), allowing publicity within safe and child-appropriate surroundings.

**Music video and song “Edwin”—once more**

The BlackSheeps’ first official music video for their song “Edwin” (BlackSheepsBand, 2009), was produced in the earlier days of YouTube (2009). Its comments ranged from “really touching and a great film with a brave message,” to hateful monologues on the wrongness of homosexual feelings that attacked the band for spreading false, dangerous, and unchristian[63] values. The video has been stored in the public YouTube archive for over ten years; however, in December 2020, its comment function was turned off, and it has been so ever since. The latest comment on that chain was posted in spring 2019. It made me feel like being on a treasure hunt in the last moment, retrieving the gold just before the door was locked for good.

Thematically, the song challenges conventional gender roles. The video begins with a simple instrumental introduction with melancholic piano and accordion music that complements the North Norwegian landscape well. The song unfolds the story of the boy who likes to dress in his mother’s clothes and her high-heeled shoes. The peaceful atmosphere is abruptly broken by energetic rock tunes supporting the boy’s determination to ignore his father’s demands to stop this “unnormal” nonsense and publicly stand up for his sexuality by going outside and showing himself off in his new dress. Well-garbed, Edwin takes his bicycle, hangs up posters for The BlackSheeps’ concert, and finally enters the scene as if it were a catwalk. The video ends in an almost euphoric atmosphere, reflecting the boy’s joy and relief, musically driven and supported by The BlackSheeps’ energetic arrangement and, most of all, by Agnete Johnsen’s compelling and perfectly balanced vocals. The music video narrates a complete, coherent story that is easy to follow and differs, in that respect, from many modern music videos that have rather patchy stories supported by sexy choreography. The storytelling aspect makes this a special music video—a miniature movie with a message and a happy ending. It

[63] No other religions are mentioned.

did not exactly become a trendsetter for YouTube music videos; however, it was celebrated within its own category. Perhaps due to the easy to follow and obvious story, most comments focused on the message, and comments on the band's talent were measured against the movie and what it was trying to tell. Several of the more elaborate enthusiastic comments emphasized the *courage* shown by these young people in choosing to bring up a controversial topic: "I love that song and that story! The BlackSheeps are young, but they are and should be an example for more of today's youth! Keep going." Some individuals thanked them, confirming that "unfortunately, many have it like this. But this is a beautiful story of hope and acceptance all should aspire to." Furthermore, girls, who wished to be boys, felt supported and invigorated by the story: "Just like me, just that I am a girl. I wish my parents would listen to me. I really only want to be a boy, both body and mind." Among the supportive comments were genre-specific ones praising the band's musical style. Furthermore, their young age added as an element of surprise: "Even though I have listened to rock all my life, these guys are an inspiration!" On the other hand, there were comments attacking both the band, the song, and especially the message in the video. This negative comments (to call them "critical" is actually too objective) could again be split into two sections: the first category being what appeared to be individual judgements based on taste and the other being extensive lectures on homosexuality as condemned by the Bible and the Christian faith. The negative attitudes toward homosexuality also influenced the haters' perceptions of The BlackSheeps' talent. There were arguments that "Edwin" had to be a bad song musically as the message was blasphemous and downright "disgusting." The interesting thing that indicated that these commenters were actually produced by net trolls was the fact that two different Christian standpoints were taken, engaging in a long discussion. One cited Sodom and Gomorrah and the so-called sinfulness of homosexuality, whereas the other claimed that the Bible was about forgiveness, not judgement, also indicating that Jesus himself may have been gay.

The BlackSheeps' artistic personae was found to be strongly linked to the band members' close connection with their hometown, the landscape of Northern Norway, and their Sámi roots. They themselves have expressed this connection strongly, and it was also been recognized and mirrored by their fans, yet from commenters' viewpoints, The BlackSheeps' artistic personae was rather connected to the image of the "cool" rock band with a charismatic vocalist and controversial lyrics. Thus, each provided a different narrative of the band (Hansen, 2019), and together, stars, fans and critics, and their products, created The BlackSheeps' specific artistic personae.

### 5.3.4. Aesthetic cosmopolitans by means of Sámi roots and punk-rock

The BlackSheeps combined the local with the global, creating a *glocal* matter in a, probably quite unconscious, but, when investigated retrospectively, very particular manner.

The interview with The BlackSheeps, conducted by the Sámi TV station Oððasat,[64] which was uploaded on YouTube by a fan, conveyed a feeling of a family gathering as the reporter proudly presented the young musicians from Nesseby, who, in addition to having Sámi roots, were performing a song with phrases in the Sámi language. The popularization their hit "Oro Jáska Beana" earned for the Sámi language all across Norway was unprecedented in popular culture at that time (2008). Where before almost no one other than the Sámi people knew the language, suddenly crowds of young people were exulting in the catchy chorus. As a concert video clip from Vadsø in Norway clearly demonstrated, the foreign sounds were on the lips of all fans (Rayhil, 2008) who were singing along with the band. Through YouTube, Swedish-, Danish-, and English-speaking commenters were given access to The BlackSheeps' material, and comments in all languages could be found. The few drops of an exotic, indigenous language were received enthusiastically, and they mixed well with the spirited rhythm of the music. Especially people who had not mastered either Norwegian or Sámi noticed the musical sound of that language—a language representing a culture that, for a long time, had been suppressed by the Norwegian government, similar to other indigenous cultures in the world. In that sense, The BlackSheeps cocreated "a cosmopolitan worldview that is produced through aesthetics" (Papastergiadis, 2018, p. 200). Papastergiadis (2018) called this type of production an interplay between what is produced and how it is received, not as a theoretical but as a physical, even sensual practice. The sensuality mentioned by Papastergiadis, was, in the case of "Oro Jáska Beana," infused by the articulation of the words and by the obvious enthusiasm experienced in mastering their pronunciation. Their sounds conveyed—to my ears at least, and possibly also that of other foreign vlisteners—something much more mysterious and poetic than their actual meaning. In this respect, the mysterious and poetic perspective in "Be quite, dog!" succeeded in igniting a kind of communal feeling in the fans, of being part of something outside of their own cultural heritage. Thus, the local, explicitly present in The Blacksheeps' musical project, interacted with the global through their emulation of a specific cultural heritage that carried the possibilities of identification for individuals far beyond Scandinavian borders.

[64] Compare Section 6.2.2.

The connection between the local and the global was also instrumentalized in "Edwin" (The BlackSheepsBand, 2009). Here, the combination of the North Norwegian landscape and Norwegian culture in the video (for example, the father wearing a traditional knitted sweater and other ethnic details), with a globally relevant, controversial topic (illustrated by a boy wanting to be a girl in a small town, wearing bright socks from the Norwegian trade *Moods of Norway*,[65] combined with a pink dress and high-heeled, red shoes) made this footage particularly interesting, also from an aesthetic cosmopolitan perspective. As The BlackSheeps sang the first two phrases of the catchy chorus in English—Edwin, Edwin, wanted to be a girl, Edwin, Edwin, do you wanna get out—one might wonder whether The BlackSheeps and their producers wanted to make sure, more or less consciously, that the main message of "Edwin" came across internationally. The blending of the two languages, Norwegian and English, sounds highly natural; the phrases glide smoothly into each other to the point that I did not even notice them at first. Just as the Sámi sentences incited interest in the mysterious and foreign on an international scale, the inclusion of an English phrase invited netizens worldwide to relate to a teenage band's message from far-away Norway. In the case of The BlackSheeps, YouTube functioned as a cultural hotspot and reservoir that made it possible for me to include them in this research without having to reach out to the four individuals personally or gain access to some type of archives. Though both desired and appreciated, this impersonal situation also engendered some frustration. Because The BlackSheeps were stars some ten years ago, they did not have much material available on YouTube. I was certainly tempted to contact them several times to, for example, obtain the lyrics of their song "Punk Revolution" (The BlackSheeps–emne, 2018); however, I did not act on that temptation. The fact that no lyric videos were available on YouTube emphasizes the platform's development over the years. In 2021, the newest Jordan or Marcus & Martinus song received lyric videos almost immediately after the song was released. Lyrics could, in addition, be found either in the comment rooms, in one of the many online song lyrics platforms, or in edited video versions posted by fans. The BlackSheeps were, indeed, pioneers, on YouTube, both as a Sámi-inspired group and as punk rock performers in a pop scene like the *MGPjr* show. Their cosmopolitanism, therefore, was best characterized as aesthetic, presenting a blend of specific ethnicity and the genre of punk rock, aligning their music with an aesthetic common ground worldwide. This act of blending "ethno-cultural uniqueness … associated with contemporary cultural forms like … pop-rock music" (Regev, 2007, p. 123) was defined by Regev (2007,

[65] Moods of Norway was established in 2003 in Stryn, Norway. Their trademark is a Ferguson TE 20 tractor.

2013) as a specific form of culture in, what he called, late modernity. Regev's (2007, 2013) understanding of aesthetic cosmopolitanism was thus breaking the exclusiveness of ethnic cultures "to which certain cultural products and art works inherently *belong* [emphasis added]" (Regev, 2007, p. 125). He defended an aesthetic cosmopolitanism that involved itself in a global culture.

Much in the manner described by Regev (2007), The BlackSheeps, a band of fourteen-year-old's from Nesseby—a municipality with a population of approximately 880 inhabitants—appropriated their unique type of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. They did so, supported by their individualized process of interpretive reproduction, in which their youthful rebellion integrated themes that enjoy universal interests into a child's perspective, as in "Edwin." Their aesthetic cosmopolitanism was a blend of local traditions and global punk rock—an ethno-uniqueness combined with an acknowledged genre.

## 5.4. "The present biggest Scandinavian pop phenomenon"

Marcus & Martinus were all set to become the biggest Scandinavian pop phenomenon in a few years. They earned this remarkable accolade after performing at the Norway-Asia Business Summit,[66] at only seventeen years of age. They were announced on the events' website as having "raised the bar for what's possible to achieve for Norwegian artists, and [having] smashed records all over Europe for ticket and merchandise sales" (Norway–Asia Business Summit, 2019, para. 1). Marcus & Martinus's success was, to a great degree, measurable through their sold-out concerts, dizzying financial gains, and millions of fans, but also by winning prestigious awards, reflecting the recognition of the Norwegian music elite.

### 5.4.1. Introducing Marcus & Martinus (2012–2020)

Marcus & Martinus Gunnarsen (born 2002) are identical twin brothers who charmed their way into the hearts of thousands of young fans when they, at ten years of age, won *MGPjr* with their song, "To Dråper Vann" (NRK, 2012). As their winning performance took place in 2012, YouTube stood ready for them, equipped as the perfect arena for sharing their success, their lives, and their hits with a much wider fan group than they might have reached through the *MGPjr* show alone or through other traditional channels, such as radio. Unlike other child stars, such as Michael Jackson, or, in this context, Angelina Jordan, Marcus & Martinus

[66] The largest annual gathering of Norwegian-related businesses in Asia.

"started their career by being promoted as child stars *for* children" (Askerøi, 2017, p. 9) rather than as child stars for an age-unspecific audience.

Their career took off straight after their breakthrough with "To Dråper Vann," and they earned the reputation of being the biggest pop act of their time in the Nordic region. Their annual turnover in 2018 was an incredible 60 million Norwegian kroner (Christensen & Aronsveen, 2019). By 2020, they had 3 million followers on YouTube, approximately 150 million views of their music video "Girls," and a concert history that included a sold-out *Oslo Spektrum*—a 5,000 $m^2$ arena. Their debut album, *Hei*, was number one on the Norwegian Albums Chart in 2015. Their musical genre could be classified as pop with elements of electronic hip-hop/rap. In 2016, the 14-year-old Gunnarsen brothers were the youngest to ever win *Spellemannprisen* in the category of "artist of the year 2016." Some cultural institutions expressed surprise that Marcus & Martinus were awarded this prestigious prize. The music journalist Robert Hoftun Gjerstad had this to say in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*:

> All honor to Marcus and Martinus, the young boys have definitely had a few amazing years as popstars, and everything around them is fun to follow. But that they receive the most prestigious prize in music-Norway, shows once again, that this prize is evaluating more and more the commercial success rather than the musical quality. Their album is, after all, not worthy of a nomination in the pop-class. (Aanstad, 2017, my translation from Norwegian)

Thus, their win was not uncontroversial, though it was spectacular, and the commercial aspect of their success was credited as being largely why they won *Spellemannprisen*. Marcus & Martinus themselves were elated about receiving the award, expressing how honored they felt, as they had never expected to earn this award (Aanestad, 2017). They called it the greatest prize they had received so far (Hype Music, 2021, 10:07).

In 2017, Marcus & Martinus and their team released a documentary movie, *Sammen om Drømmen* (Fahre, 2017)—in English, *Together (on a Dream).* This documentary was described by the media as a charming portrait of two normal boys living extraordinary lives, even though it was generally assessed to be a rather superficial film that only allowed glimpses into the boys' complex realities.

In 2017, the video "It's the Moments Together that Matters" (Marcus & Martinus, 2018), a kind of English miniature sequel to their documentary, was released. Here, they explain in English what being musical twin brothers means to them:

> It's all about creating moments together, as we have done since we were born. We are experiencing so many happy moments with each other, and with our fans, when we are on tour. I can't even imagine **how** it would be to stand in all of this alone. I think it would be kind of lonely, even with so many people around us. It feels so good to have someone next to you that gets you and always supports you. To stretch out my arm, and know that he is always there. He is my lucky charm. I **love** my brother's humor! One of my favorite things is when we are laughing at something that no one else understands. We understand each other completely, we laugh a lot. It's the moments together that matters the most. (Marcus & Martinus, 2018, my transcription)

Apart from the grammatical mistake in the title, "It's the Moments Together that Matters" has the air of a professionally produced video, with a slideshow of pictures and movie clips, supported by emotional, calm, and meditative piano music by an anonymous artist. The almost suggestive atmosphere elicited in this clip—achieved through a combination of music, pictures, and the calm voices of Marcus & Martinus—intensifies and thoroughly cements how the image of being twins has influenced everything associated with their musical project.

### 5.4.2. Discourse on marketing and fan relations—rooms of feelings and emoji

Marcus & Martinus's music—in contrast to that of The BlackSheeps—was not found to convey provocative or political statements. In their enterprise, the *commercial vision* is predominant, and their productions are intended to please their fans, not provoke them. Their music videos were designed along recognizable lines, coherently, with the twins playing the lead roles. The plots in their videos portray scenes from their ordinary but successful lives together. Their stories are close enough to those typical of normal teenage life that their fans can identify with them; simultaneously, they remain unattainable, much too glamorous, perfect, and romanticized through classic clichés, such as climbing a ladder to a girl's window to give her a rose or sharing a long piece of spaghetti with another. However, these stories are vital to the narrative of their artistic personae (Hansen, 2019). On a global level, Marcus & Martinus could be compared with Justin Bieber, although Bieber launched his career very differently, without all of the machinery of a talent show to back him up. However, once Bieber started posting his small street and homely performances on a YouTube channel, delivering specific YouTube performances, he became *the* YouTube star everybody knew and loved. After that, his life was never the same. As Bickford (2016) observed, Bieber's path to success is particularly "interesting for what it reveals about the role of cultural narratives of

child musical ability in a music industry in which children are an increasing important audience segment" (p. 749). This could certainly be true for Marcus & Martinus as well, since they, too, engaged millions of underage fans. Further, what Bickford (2016) emphasized about Bieber's achievements—that selling out big concert arenas "presented … a measurable demonstration of Bieber's extreme talent, while Bieber's prodigy is presented now as a commercial, rather than strictly musical, accomplishment" (p. 757)—is another feature that is distinguishable from Marcus & Martinus's career and the surrounding discourse. Contrary to Bieber, though, Marcus & Martinus are hardly ever described as *extremely talented*, or even just *talented*,[67] in public media—indeed, the word "talent" only occasionally appears in their comment rooms. Marcus & Martinus are instead described as more *successful* than talented. Among a total of 7,000 words in the "Girls" comment room, only seven were "talent," with none in "First Kiss." Likewise, in "Love You Less," only seven of 7,000 words were "talent," a percentage of merely 0.1%.

After their win in 2012, Marcus & Martinus, heavily supported by their father and a professional staff from the start, made optimal use of modern technology, particularly the media's influence, marketing, and commercial forces, proudly displaying their personal brand at concerts and applying it to their merchandise, such as clothes, school supplies, and other accessories. This strategy had an obvious, out-in-the-daylight and public media approach, and a more underground trajectory executed on social media that created a "non-stop accessibility between [Marcus & Martinus] and their fans" (Suhr, 2012, p. 114). This close connection was further nurtured by countless numbers of seemingly homely videos produced by Marcus & Martinus, in which they talk rather privately and joke about all aspects of their lives, often addressing their fans by looking directly into the camera and answering specific fan questions. These personal videos evoke a perceivably intimate atmosphere, confirming and making use of what Bickford (2020) identified as YouTube's ability to generate feelings of domesticity in a public space (p. 166). The video clips are named with terms from popular teenage mainstream discourse, such as "Fan Q & A," "Kardashian English," "Fan Moments," "100% single," "Teen-star-interview," "Marcus & Martinus fun," "Funny and cute moments," "Who is the best kisser?," "Dream girl," "Funniest TikToks," "Fear-Pong," or "Girlfriends."

With regard to international connections, the German music market has always been an especially significant—and lucrative—ally of Marcus & Martinus. In 2018, they toured

[67] It must be noted that in the case of Bieber, his talent is also publicly debated, yet he is undoubtedly a more versatile musician (playing several instruments) than Marcus & Martinus.

Europe and presented their musical project to the German music production elite. The leader of Sony Europe and Africa, Daniel Lieberberg, explained what he thought was the young Scandinavians' recipe for success: "Marcus and Martinus have simply the quality, energy, and appearance that I think an audience over the whole world can like" (Normuski, 2018, 2:16). In Germany, Marcus & Martinus also met the identical twin sisters Lisa and Lena, the German teenage celebrities who became famous for their video footage posted on the app musical.ly, which is now called TikTok. The pairing of Marcus & Martinus with these young influencers, who already had over 12 million followers of their own, triggered wild discussions about whether the brothers had more than befriended them, which again boosted viewer numbers for both twin duos. Thus, the Marcus & Martinus project branched out into multiple social trajectories, generating a fan base the size of which is nearly impossible to estimate.

Another component of their commercial strategy was their collaboration with adult popular artists—a form of teamwork they enjoyed and one that also proved to be profitable, adding not only fans, but also a "cool masculinity" to their otherwise childish and innocent demeanor.[68] Marcus & Martinus pursued, as already indicated, a recognizable style and way of doing things. Their professional music videos released between 2012 and 2019 always included young female dancers, and their songs were produced by professional songwriters. However, the latter was never discussed by their fans, who referred to all Marcus & Martinus songs as originals. Their lyrics were characteristically straightforward and easy to learn, supported by catchy melodies and a four-on-the-floor beat in the chorus. At the beginning of their career, Marcus & Martinus mostly performed in their Norwegian dialect, switching to English in 2016, most likely with the intention of reaching an international audience. Love and infatuation, mixed with child-friendly activities like skiing, bathing, or eating pizza, constituted the themes in most of their songs from that time. The comments and the general behavior of fans—so-called *mmers*—were reminiscent of Beatlemania revived, this time without restrictions.[69]

One can always wonder how and why popstars have such an emotionally charged impact on their fans, as the Beatles did. Auslander (2021) reflected on the Beatlemania phenomenon and suspected that the *informal closeness* the Beatles managed to cultivate through their music, and their way of being, might offer a key to understanding their fans' strong reactions:

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[68] Collaboration with male adult musicians is a major topic in Section 5.3.4.

[69] The Beatles were strictly advised not to encourage their hysterical fans by, for example, waving to them (CBSN, 2014, 1:03).

“Perhaps this feeling of intimacy with the Beatles, a feeling not confined to Beatlemaniacs, gave them a particularly strong affective charge that made them seem fit objects for such passionate response” (p. 173). Intimacy and closeness to fans together represented the clear strategy in the Marcus & Martinus musical project. They repeatedly expressed their love for their fans, they regularly read their fans’ posts, and they frequently posted YouTube videos responding to their fans’ questions. They accepted fan challenges and turned them into videos, and they mentioned their fans in every interview. In interviews and in their online fan-reaction videos, Marcus & Martinus reliably and continuously made a point of being friends, and *family* even, with their fans. The twins have occasionally been asked whether they are not a little afraid of their fans, who at times display rather wild and aggressive behavior. They have always denied this fear, though, in their latest interviews (2020), they adopted a more reserved attitude toward intense fangirling, as is further discussed in Section 6.2.3.

Marcus & Martinus’s fans’ devotion, especially in their early years, but also later, has been intense, even though in the comment rooms, mmers post only minimal comments, maybe just three words: “I love you!” To compensate for this brevity, their messages are generously accompanied by emoji to help express their emotions (Vandergriff, 2013). Emoji were earlier identified as cyborg activity: human–machine-created expressions that replace the aliveness of a breathing person’s face and the richness of physical facial expressions. After engaging with the comment material on Markus & Martinus’s videos for some time, the *absence* of written content began to tell its own story, indicating a kind of helplessness. How such engaged fans could have so little to say, have created such “empty” comment rooms, triggered the question, why, and left me wondering what I had missed. The opposite of emptiness would be fullness, wholeness, plenitude, and, in the context of “having nothing to say,” “having a lot to say.” In that sense, I suggest, emptiness also conjured a sensation of stillness versus clatter and noise, and immobility versus liveliness. The use of emoji imparted increased meaning to the seemingly empty and monotonous comment rooms, especially since, in more recent comments, many mmers—who had obviously returned to the room after several years—identified themselves as “only being six years then,” with “then” referring to the beginning of Marcus & Martinus’s career. Considering their young age, the lack of commentary was no longer all that surprising, as digital clues present a quicker, safer, less personal, and also not as easily misunderstood way of communicating strong emotions than elaborate textual formulations. The digital quickness and anonymity of digital clues make sending a red heart (or hundreds of them) an easier method of transmitting feelings than

spelling them out. Thus, the lack of text and the multitude of signs could, in a preferred reading of the text (O'Regan, 2006), convey emptiness—yet, digging deeper, what the texts really express are multitudes of complex and unclear feelings. Mmers remember "I had such a crush on these!" After many years of emotional confusion, they were finally able to articulate their feelings. The lack of complete sentences and the overload of textual clues in early comment rooms, therefore, actually signifies a rather noisy, crammed room full of sensations with which the six- and seven-year-olds were striving to cope. Emptiness was deconstructed as a mediation of powerlessness in the face of complicated feelings of captivation. Vlistening to Marcus & Martinus clearly gave rise to intense sensations and struggles that the fans remembered vividly, six years later, with a mix of reminiscence and regret: "I used to listen to this in the 4th grade in repeat. I'm in 8th grade now and the nostalgia hit me like a truck."

The commercial cyborg talentification discourse surrounding Marcus & Martinus's musical project is thus heavily supported and dependent on the massive fan audiences on YouTube, who have proven to be faithful consumers of their music and merchandise in the offline world as well. Some negative voices can also be found, scattered among the infatuated ones. These voices often cynically attack Marcus & Martinus's dignity and masculinity: "I thought I heard a girl singing." Such comments appear to be mostly from boys; however, due to online anonymity, this could not be confirmed. Other negative comments indicate jealousy and are particularly prevalent in the comment room of the concert video of "First Kiss" (macandtinushandsarehot, 2017a), where Marcus & Martinus take a girl from the audience on stage.[70] Also, as in the comment room attached to the "Girls" video, several spam links were found, with usernames connecting the video to pornographic sites. Otherwise, Marcus & Martinus's comment rooms had little or no material criticizing their lyrics or performances, and very few commenters—as discussed later—posed ethical questions about the use of young girls on stage or their collaboration with adult men singing about girls to an underaged fan audience.

In their newer productions, from 2019 onward, Marcus & Martinus have extended their fan strategy by pinning comments to the top of the chain, a feature recommended by the YouTube Creator Academy.[71] These comments included "Hey, guys, here comes our new video. We hope you enjoy it." The pinned comments might help promote positive reactions or at least set

[70] "First Kiss" is discussed in Section 5.3.3.

[71] See https://creatoracademy.youtube.com/page/lesson/connect-with-comments_overview_video?cid=connect-with-comments&hl=en

a certain standard for the direction in which Marcus & Martinus intend the conversations to go. This is one easy way through which content creators can attempt to actively steer fan comments on their channels.

Overall, the discursive mood in the comment rooms attached to Marcus & Martinus's videos, whether positive or negative, is characterized by emotional outbursts and non-verbal clues. Consequently, they have been identified as *rooms of feelings and emoji*. Here, the cyborgian language has served to replace physical closeness with the artists, making the reading and scanning of texts laden with emotional emoji a nearly sensual experience. Also observed was that fans' confrontation with "real," touchable, and physical closeness with their idols—with the protection of the facial anonymity provided by CMC stripped away—became almost unbearable, ending in fangirls' complete collapse and tearful fits, as can be observed on YouTube (*God kveld Norge*, 2019, 0:06–0:09 and 0:55). Here, the girls' emotional reactions and helpless shivering are strangely juxtaposed with the calm voices of Marcus & Martinus in the footage, as they leisurely talk about their busy schedules accompanying Jason Derulo on tour, seemingly unaffected by the girls' desperation. This might have been a conscious choice, cleverly edited on a YouTube clip, in order to be faithful to their star identity and "perform that status congruent with their musical personae" (Auslander, 2021, p. 130), which portrayed them as cool but innocent girl magnets, always surprised by their own popularity.

Furthermore, the type of videos Marcus & Martinus posted (professional music videos, answering fan questions, fan challenge videos, and interviews) indicates that they did everything "right," and that they followed the YouTube categories of intimacy, brand relationship, humor, irreverence, and authenticity (Burgess & Green, 2018) with great accuracy—maybe not in every video but overall in the whole package of their audio-visual materials.

### 5.4.3. Having fun, being two

By February 2021, Marcus & Martinus had turned nineteen, and, although the twins had, by far, ceased their musical activity, severe COVID-19 restrictions definitively put their career on hold. Within this dissertation, the end of their time as child stars is considered to be their last release as eighteen-year-olds, a song called "Love You Less" (Marcus & Martinus, 2020), in addition to some interviews conducted during this period.

To support their YouTube cyborg talentification narrative, the music videos and comments from "Two Drops of Water" (macandtinushandsarehot, 2017b), "Girls" (Marcus & Martinus, 2016), "First Kiss" (macandtinushandsarehot, 2017a), an acoustic version of "Invited" (Filtr Germany, 2018), "When We Were Young" (Marcus & Martinus, 2020a), and "Love You Less" (Marcus & Martinus, 2020b) have been discussed. The count of comments retrieved from these videos at the time of this investigation ranged from 1,000 in "Love You Less" to 30,000 in "Girls." Fans and critics alike continue commenting, and, thus, the comment rate is constantly increasing.

**Wholesome narrative of being two and the inherent comparison arising from it**

The lyrics of "To Dråper Vann" (NRK, 2012) narrate the story of Marcus & Martinus, starting from the moment of their birth, portrayed through the image of entering life as two drops of water. The concept of the inseparable twin brothers was, thereby, created right from the beginning and was faithfully followed throughout the entirety of their child star career. That song, and the ideal of being two, became their mantra, and their musical personae became closely intertwined with this particular and unique twosome-ness.

Being ten years of age at the time of their breakthrough, Marcus & Martinus already seemed to know what they wanted, singing: "Now time has passed and we know what we do" (lyrics in Appendix 2.1). Their performances mediated determination, and their tightly choreographed dance moves, smiles, and bright, childish voices conveyed cuteness and innocence, contrasted with male toughness, as they touched their crotches like adult hip-hoppers and rappers. As the comment chain of the original *MGPjr* video was deactivated, a performance from a live concert (macandtinushandsarehot, 2017b) with the then-15-year-old artists was used in the following discussion of their first song. In this concert, as an introduction and before they start singing "To Dråper Vann" onstage, the original take from their *MGPjr* show in 2012 was played on the big screen, showing the tiny past selves of the now well-developed teenagers—an effective strategy resulting in massive screams of delight from the audience. The miniature versions of the teenage twins resembled effigies of their childhood performances (Bernstein, 2013). Marcus & Martinus, similar to Bernstein's (2013) example of Shirley Temple, displayed here their greatest failure—not being those children anymore. However, unlike Bernstein's (2013) example, Marcus & Martinus used their past embodiments as signs of their success. The comments proved that this strategy was efficient, as the comment room was flooded with posts confirming the twins' talents, brimming with texts coated with nostalgic notions: "Look at them now and compare them, they are so cute"

and "this is very amazing—best song ever!" Most remarks were tightly connected to the commenter's personal feelings *evoked by the performance and the song*, with few indications of a more detailed consideration of their musical qualities. As mmers are self-declared, deeply devoted fans, their comments often expressed how "totally in love with Marcus & 'tinus" they were. Here, the older fans managed to express how they literally almost broke down whenever they saw or heard their long-time idols. Being a Marcus & Martinus fan came across as something deeply physical, with displays of tears and screams (Marcus & Martinus concerts, 2017).

In their 2017 concert, Marcus & Martinus made multifaceted use of their debut "To Dråper Vann," retrospectively showing the video from *MGPjr*, sharing nostalgic feelings with their audience, and, in real time, singing the song together with their fans and dancing with the same choreography they had followed in 2012. In a sense, they also used their own innocence by rewinding the clock. Nostalgia hit many in this performance; seeing the 10-year-old boys reminded fans of how they themselves were at the time. When listening to the song, fans explained, they had a sensual experience about their past selves, which brought them into contact with something they had forgotten. Here, music functioned as a memory portal (Ruud, 2013). As these recollections were enforced by the visuals of the old music video in addition to the real musicians on stage, they likely had an even stronger effect on fans' memories. Marcus & Martinus, by means of body and music, physically and musically became an embodiment of the young versions of the fans themselves. Using that old take, they made fans remember the journey of which they had been a part, and the reactions were remarkably emotional.

A row of 36 red hearts is, by no means, extraordinary, but, rather, substandard. Emoji were also used to compete with other fans. Many hearts in one comment were followed by even more hearts in the next. As fans grew older, the structure of the comments changed. They became longer, more reflective, and displayed greater variety, as seen in the comment room of "Love You Less" (Marcus & Martinus, 2020b). Premiering on October 2, 2020, the music video was much welcomed by fans, who reacted in confusion: "Are they still active? Oh, I didn't realize how much I missed them!" and "They have grown," or "Oh, I miss them when they were small." Again, some negative voices chimed in, claiming that the song ruined their

phone. After two weeks, the music video for “Love You Less” on YouTube had almost 3,000 comments and had been viewed over 500,000 times. A month later, the comments and views had doubled, which, by the way, was not much compared with the responses they received earlier in their career. Visible changes in the music video indicated that Marcus & Martinus were now trying to change their style. This may hardly be noticeable to the occasional netizen; however, loyal fans did note and comment on the changes. First of all, a teddy bear figure the size of a man plays a key role in the plot. In the beginning, the teddy bear is an accepted friend of Marcus & Martinus. They hang out with the teddy, and he surprises them with a Porsche. When the boys drive off in the car to meet other young people, the teddy bear tries to join them, but they push him away. This gesture upset the fans: “It is really sad that you guys left the teddy bear.” Toward the end of the music video, the group of friends allow the teddy bear back into the gang, and all are happy.

As Marcus & Martinus expressed in their interview on *Helt Harald* (Mmer Anime, 2021), they now wished to evolve beyond their child star career. The teddy bear might be a childhood trope they used to signify this change; he is then replaced by the Porsche, causing the necessary distance from childishness before they can allow the teddy bear back in again, and only when that reconciliation is initiated by their friends. Fans kept wondering about the teddy bear—who he might be and why he featured in the song. Commenters either loved or pitied him, even thought of him as just a weird prop, an “imposter,” almost a “monster” (Haraway, 1991). The lyrics of “Love You Less” are not quite straightforward and do not give definite clues, but they most likely describe an ambiguous relationship. They might illustrate something of the difficult feat of “navigating from child star to adult entertainer … without alienating those audiences who had enjoyed [their] childish work” (Warwick, 2016, p. 752). Marcus & Martinus themselves explained the lyrics to be about a girl who is unable to make up her mind, thinking the grass to be greener on the other side, but whom they still love (Universal Music Norge, 2020, para. 2).

Fans’ comments on other alterations in this music video were quite diffuse. They opined that “it’s kinda changed from the others,” and that it “hit” differently: “Aaaa, it’s so different but good at the same time.” They also found that the vibe and the style of the music had changed, and called it a new and fresh song they really loved. One difference in the video that I noticed was that the young people who are choreographed into the plot actually looked to be the same age as Marcus & Martinus themselves. Moreover, there were, for the first time, more boys than girls dancing. Both genders also wore the same type of clothing: long, loose pants and t-

shirts or hoodies, carefully contrasted by Marcus & Martinus swapping between decorated jean jackets, t-shirts, and sweaters leisurely hanging over their shoulders. Fans noticed and made remarks about the clothes, and, of course, on the Marcus & Martinus merchandise page, clothes with “Love You Less” prints had become available parallel to the song’s release. Also noticeable in the “Love You Less” comment room was the absence of the usual “love Marcus best, or love Martinus more” comparisons; some could not even tell the difference between the two. In “Love You Less,” Marcus & Martinus were mainly addressed as “the amazing twin duo.”

This marked yet another difference, as the category of motivational comments resulting from *comparison with other artists* in the Marcus & Martinus enterprise had, until then, been internal, centered around a comparison *between the two singers*. The most loyal, though, had always defended them both, but a lot of the excitement Marcus & Martinus had enjoyed during their child career can be traced back to the comparison between their different personalities, though they looked so much alike physically, apart from the mole Martinus has above his lip. As they grew older and their voices broke, the comparison also involved the ranges of their voices—especially noticeable in the comments of well-conducted acoustic video takes, which Marcus & Martinus started adding to their YouTube repertoire around 2018. These takes were partly executed in collaboration with Filtr Germany, a German YouTube channel and playlist service. The Filtr comments were, naturally, mostly from German-speaking fans, but comments from other European countries can be found as well. Filtr includes live chatrooms where fans can post comments during performances. For Marcus & Martinus, these texts were, again, overwhelmingly brimming with emoji, with crying faces and hearts. Regarding their voice register, in the 2018 acoustic version of “Invited” (Filtr Germany, 2018), Martinus still seemed to reach the highest notes: “Was that Martinus who sang so high? Oh my God, he kills me, hitting these high notes!” Enthusiastic comments on the duo’s individual voices were especially numerous in the “Invited” comment room, and here, Marcus & Martinus were occasionally described as talented, or rather as “the most talented boys ever.” Fans also compared the acoustic version with their original soundtrack—as it really is a cover version of their *own* song—and the verdict was clear: Fans preferred the acoustic version to the original one.

Noticeably, as Marcus & Martinus began playing more Angelina Jordan-like raw material covers (though these are auto-tuned like all their songs), fan reactions reached a new intensity, including indirect comparisons with the original artist. The 2020 cover of Adele’s song,

"When We Were Young" (Marcus & Martinus, 2020a), resulted in a substantial number of comments about how well the Adele song, loved by so many, suited their voices. Eighteen at the time of the recording, they seemed to be trying to break other patterns too, with the effect of shocking and exciting their fans. Not only was "When We Were Young" a relaxed studio recording, but it also broke several other "traditions." Martinus, usually the number two both in interviews and singing, started the song, singing the verses, with Marcus first coming in for the chorus. A commenter exclaimed, "When I saw Martinus started singing I was like, no, Marcus is not going to sing the chorus! When it turned out that Marcus sang the chorus I almost had a mental breakdown. It was beautiful." While singing this particular take, Martinus had his cell phone in hand and leisurely read the text, adding the feeling of a spontaneous act—a gesture quite common in Angelina Jordan's raw material videos, as is discussed in Section 5.4.

In sum, fans' and critics' comments on the Marcus & Martinus material became considerably more specific in the late years (2018–2020), especially in the few acoustic versions and cover songs. I suggest that this was due to at least three factors: the increased average age of the fans, Marcus & Martinus's choice to do covers, and the fact that, in these songs, the duo's voices are much more distinct and easier to listen to than they are in their professional music videos. The acoustic versions further seemed to reactivate the inherent twin dynamic, causing the motivational cyborg talentification of comparison. As Martinus seemed to be developing into a baritone, rather than a tenor, he was credited with: "Incredible—the deep notes, Martinus, that was beautiful. Gives me the goosebumps," whereas Marcus' voice in the chorus resulted in emotional outbursts such as "Omg (cry-faces) when you start to sing! Had a bad day all day and now everything comes out like a river. I love you so much." Thus, Marcus & Martinus continued to enjoy a persistent hold on the feelings of their mmers through a new-found intimacy awarded by their acoustic renditions.

Marcus & Martinus have created many popular hits; however, I chose to add a live performance of the song "First Kiss" (macandtinushandsarehot, 2017) to the analysis to look closer at Marcus & Martinus's live interactions with their fans. The video had, by January 2021, received 3,300 comments and had been viewed roughly seven million times.

In the concert video recording, before they sang "First Kiss" (macandtinushandsarehot, 2017a), Marcus & Martinus called a girl onstage, hugged her, and then placed her on a chair. She was asked her name and age, after which the playback track of "First Kiss" started, accompanied by a screaming audience, as they and the girl realized the song for which she

was chosen. During a performance that lasted three hours and forty-five minutes, Marcus & Martinus took turns holding hands with the girl, touching her arm or shoulder, embracing her from behind, or just giving her long looks. There were about three tiny spaces of “freedom” during which the girl onstage glanced at the audience, supposedly seeking eye contact with her friends. Otherwise, she appeared quite helpless, tethered to her chair, biting the sleeve of her jumper, wiping it over her eyes and nose, clearly spellbound by the attention of the two 15-year-old pop idols. When they looked at her, her body shivered, yet she had to look back, partially hiding behind her jumper sleeve, almost using it as a shield. Looking at the scene with the sound turned off—a mash-up of screams and playback music—the movements of Marcus & Martinus appeared to be a well-choreographed dance. The two boys alternated their attention, going behind the girl, moving diagonally, turning around. It almost evoked the image of a puppeteer dance, with them pulling the strings attached to the girl and her body following jerkily. As they were standing and she was sitting, an additional power imbalance could be detected. She was placed there at the mercy of their will, even though fans claimed it to be completely voluntary and an incredible honor. Marcus & Martinus owned the scene; they were older, and there were two of them. My researcher bias strongly kicked in as I noted that the comments had nothing to say about the #metoo element in the performance, which, to me, was quite obvious. Many defended the boys for “just having fun.” If anything, there was even more love, for both Marcus & Martinus and for their song, mixed with jealous feelings for that lucky girl and rather hysterical desperation to be allowed to be in her place: “I want to be that girl! On that stage. Sit there! Jealousy kills me, explode.. kill girl KILL.” The discussion swayed between those who hated the girl and others who tried to calm down the most envious ones: “Show respect! This girl is an mmer and she likes them. Be happy for that girl! Every fan wants to be on stage.” Another part of the discussion concerned specific acts: “Cute/kills me 3.03,” referring to an incident in which one of the stars had hugged a girl from behind, cuddling up close to her. There were fans from Poland, Russia, Azerbaijan, Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Macedonia, France, Slovakia, Greece, and Italy—all requesting the boys to come to their country. The intense feelings were again communicated by an abundance of emoji, confirming just how tightly the experience of Marcus & Martinus’s talent was connected to their fans’ personal feelings, which seemed to be intensely stoked by the music performance: “They are perfect. I love you so much. I was on the concert, your voice and your heart is a diamond.” Some did comment on “the crazy fangirling going on,” and that there was hardly any music to be heard: “it is mostly all screaming.” Commenters were extremely accurate in pointing out the exact places of intensified yells: “I love everyone

screams noooo! when they come close to the girl. When Marcus says ‘here is first kiss’ All girls: NOOOOOOO!!!! Marcus: yeah😎 Martinus: loooool.”

Nostalgia also resonated from this song, reminding the mmers that they had been fans for over five years and allowing them to reconnect with their old selves.

Why Marcus & Martinus chose to encourage the extreme fangirling at concerts is a question that has been posed in several of their interviews, discussed in Section 6.3.3, and it has followed them throughout their career. Their solid and active fan base has been a critical component of their success strategy and has opened many of the world’s concert scenes for them. Contact with fans was continuously nourished, not only through concerts and other acts already mentioned, but also by their up-to-date website.

### 5.4.4. Cultural cosmopolitans through commercialism and added masculinity

Marcus & Martinus’s website[72] boasts a sustained and professional design, making it easy to navigate all of their music and merchandise, their profiles on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Music. Ever since their first English album *Together*, produced in 2016, Marcus & Martinus have performed only in English, and all of the information on their website is presented in English. At the beginning of their career, when singing in their Norwegian dialect was still a part of their ideology, they paired the ordinary—the two boys from Trofors—with the special—the popstars worth millions of kroner. Still, they kept and maintained the “ordinary” Trofors life as a strategy even after they switched to English, but it was mostly rhetorical. Deciding to sing only in English was a big step for the duo, and they have been honest about having to practice extensively to improve their pronunciation to international standards. The change to English was successful, and new fans from all over Europe joined their fan base—often older fans (Mmer Anime, 2021). From 2016 onward, and parallel to their switch to English lyrics, Germany became an even more important fan country, supporting their commercialization attempts with TV shows, and so on, that became available on YouTube.[73] In addition to the anglicization of their music, Marcus & Martinus started regularly collaborating with adult male artists. These co-performances began with Norwegian-language performers in 2015 and 2016 and were extended to an international collaboration with an American performer in 2017. The three titles they produced after

[72] https://marcusandmartinus.com/

[73] Examples are Bravo TV (2018) (https://youtu.be/meumA6ZsT4g) and Filtr (2018) (https://youtu.be/llZYGaDSDkY)

gaining adult masculinity and fame were "Elektrisk" (Marcus & Martinus, 2015),[74] with the artist Katastrofe, a Norwegian singer and songwriter, born in 1989; "Girls" (Marcus & Martinus, 2016), with Madcon, the Norwegian rap duo with Yosef Wolde-Marian and Tshawe Baqwa; and "Like It, Like It" (Marcus & Martinus, 2017), with Silentó, the young American rapper, who, in 2020 and 2021, was arrested and charged for domestic violence and murder. "Elektrisk" became the most viewed Norwegian-language music video of all time (Norway–Asia Business Summit, 2019), with 273,757,342 million views on YouTube by March 2021. Fans from all over the world learned the Norwegian lyrics by heart (Normuski, 2018, 1.26–1.44). Marcus & Martinus also performed "Elektrisk" alongside Katastrofe at the *Spellemannprisen* 2015, where they were awarded the "Newcomer of the Year" award for their debut album *Hei*, before receiving *Årets Spellemann* in 2016. The setup and design, choreography, and ideology in all three music videos with male adult artists followed approximately the same pattern. There were parts in which Marcus & Martinus performed alone, in addition to solos by the invited vocalists and a combination of singing and dancing together. In all three videos, the themes and choreography focused on girls. Girl dancers and girl actors were described in the lyrics and depicted in the video as pretty objects in the boys' minds. A progressive attitude was observable in the more charming "courting-the-girls" approach in the first two videos, in contrast to the more "ignoring-them-but-having-them-around" conduct in "Like It, Like It."

In "Girls," Madcon comes into view by exclaiming an approving "Aha! The call!" after the school bell has rung, followed by a "Marcus and Martinus!" call that could be interpreted as an introduction, especially to the new English-speaking fans of the twin duo, leaving no doubt as to who the main characters of the video were. The theme and chorus of the song, girls, is employed as the cue for the grown men in their late 30s–40s to join the teenagers in the song. When Marcus & Martinus sing, "I've been looking at girls," the Madcon duo joins in at "girls" and then continue with their own verse:

> Girls. What would life be without them?/ High heels, crazy curves, right at the bottom/ So I thank God that we got them. Got my mind on these girls, you're the real gift/ Wouldn't be nothing without them, that's some real sh… I love ye, I love ye. (Cool Bruh Lyrics, 2017a)

[74] Translated lyrics provided for "Elektrisk" in Appendix 2.2.

One comment reappeared recently, in 2020—I had spotted it before but had later lost track of it—noting: "Is it me, or is it weird that forty year old men are making a song with some fourteen year old's?"—causing about a hundred new reactions discussing whether this might be weird, uncharacteristic of the otherwise accepting Marcus & Martinus fan base. Another statement received 10 new comments: "Imagine an old man saying I look at girls, girls," with disgusted reactions, such as "Creepy…I would run," or more neutral ones, like "I listened to this when I was six, so I did not notice." The collaboration with Madcon was described to have come about because the young stars felt that the song would fit the hip-hop group, but they were very surprised when they received approval from Madcon. However, with their huge fan base, Marcus & Martinus were just as much a catch for the collaborating artists as these artists were for the twins.

The title "Girls," the product of Marcus & Martinus's collaboration with Madcon, was not specifically original. A search on YouTube revealed, after several attempts, a number of productions with that title. In 1962, a musical comedy called "Girls, girls, girls," starring Elvis Presley, received a Golden Globe award. Here, some of the lyrics actually almost exactly matched those of Marcus & Martinus's version: "Girls—I can't stop thinking about girls." In 1976, Sailor, a British boyband, released one of their most known hits with that title. The latter was a somewhat naïve, old-fashioned, three-voice arrangement, quite different from that of Mötley Crüe (Mötley Crüe, n.d.), who, in the 1980s, released a complete album with that name. Mötley Crüe's music video shows tough, switchblade-carrying motorcycle guys and sexy nightclub-stripper girls dancing around to their typical rock/metal music. In 2014, the Korean boyband GOT7 released yet another version of "Girls." Here, an innocent girl enters a Korean boys' dance club to find the owner of a ring, providing the backdrop against which a handsome Korean boy sings "Girls, girls, girls, they love me." Then, in 2016, Marcus & Martinus released their "Girls." The single secured the first place in the *VG Lista*[75] and was nominated for "Song of the Year" by the Norwegian *Spellemannprisen* in 2016. In 2018, the bisexual artist Rita Ora came out with an erotic version of "Girls" (Rita Ora, 2018), featuring only girls. Although the melody and arrangement differed in all of the above-mentioned versions, the catchy repetition of "Girls, girls, girls" was common to all of them, and all lyrics described girls on the basis of their looks. For example, "a clear ten" was used in Marcus & Martinus's version. In all songs mentioned here, girls were described as normative bodies assigned with the task of cheering up and entertaining boys, or, as in Rita Ora's song, other

[75] The *VG Lista* is a Norwegian record chart.

girls. Thus, Marcus & Martinus's production of "Girls" fits perfectly into the mainstream, traditional view on gender roles—far from the ungendered ideal in Haraway's (1991) universe and more akin with popular music studies (Askerøi & Vestad, 2021; Whiteley, 2003). There were some more protests though. In the case of "Like it, Like it," the music video plot stirred some strong reactions, set into motion by the complaint of an eleven-year-old girl, Guro Heggholmen (Näumann, 2017). Guro thought it was unfair and strange that only the boys got to do the fun things in the music video, while the girls were there merely as "decorations." Guro explained the need to protest against this type of portrayal as a responsibility she felt, considering how many people actually listening to Marcus & Martinus's music might suddenly believe that this is how the world should be (Näumann, 2017). She wanted to do something about this stereotyping. As Askerøi and Vestad (2021) highlighted, the "video's positioning of young girls as passive, underage, underdressed objects of desire" (p. 66) supported and facilitated the stereotypical image of boys' masculine status. Sony Music agreed to remove some of the clips that, as they explained, had been introduced after the recording as a supplement to the video, as happened sometimes. It seemed that Guro had reacted only to these additional clips (Näumann, 2017) and to the fact that the girls were always presented as "more or less passive objects, while all the boys present in the video were active" (Askerøi & Vestad, 2021, p. 66). Marcus & Martinus's press officer did not want to comment on the case, shifting all responsibility to Sony Music Norway, who he claimed decided on the criteria for the content of the video (Näumann & Rosenlund-Hauglid, 2018 Precisely what was removed is impossible to determine in retrospect with only the information from the available YouTube video. The plot, though, had remained the same, and the girls were still not doing much other than crowding around the boys in a swimming pool.

The main point of my argumentation is how the presence of adult masculinity actually legalized, acknowledged, welcomed, and enforced the strongly stereotyped gender positioning, and that this was done following the approximately same patterns in all three songs: "Girls," "Elektrisk," and "Like it, Like it."

Marcus & Martinus's collaboration with adult male artists also happened the other way around. In 2016, they were invited to join parts of Jason Derulo's concert tour in Europe. Derulo, an American rhythm and blues (R&B), hip-hop, and pop musician, explained his invitation by emphasizing his admiration for the entertainment talent of the two teenage artists and his intention to help them reach the next level in their career. Talking about the lost art of performance, he explained: "It's like a fresh wind, you know, when you meet people who,

you know, put on a real show, you know, somebody who is able to dance, and sing, and actually have stage presence—that's exactly why I invited these guys …. They are performers" (Marcus & Martinus VEVO, 2018, 0:14–0:30). Marcus & Martinus accepted the invitation, confessing that Jason was one of their greatest idols, someone they thought of as a great artist and a cool guy and even as a friend. So really, the invitation to join Derulo on his fantastic tour was a dream come true (Wilberg Rostad, 2018). The tour led Marcus & Martinus to cities like Madrid, Barcelona, Berlin, and Warsaw, and their time with Derulo has been documented on YouTube through several privately recorded concert videos. These were mostly interesting because of what one could *see* onstage, rather than what one could *hear*, as the musical quality of most recordings was quite substandard. I suggest that this was not only due to a lack of proper recording equipment but also because of what appeared to be rather poorly prepared performances. The footage showing Derulo's song "Wiggle" (Lautia, 2018), for example, is more reminiscent of a chaotic, unplanned teaser than of a professionally conducted performance. This was puzzling considering how strongly Derulo had praised Marcus & Martinus's performance talent, insinuating, thus, that he was a capable performer himself who could provide advice and guidance to the young artists. In the video footage, Derulo did not display much performance talent, in my judgement, and Marcus & Martinus appeared to have been just placed there to add some kind of youthful legitimation without being given proper instructions in advance. The song begins with the sound of screaming fans—both Derulo's fans and the Gunnarsen brothers' own mmers—drowning out any music as their common idols appeared on stage. Derulo's performance primarily comprised dancing with nearly naked women, who show off their string-panty bottoms to the audience as they climb onstage. One of the women also touches Martinus in an uninhibited, sexy way (Lautia, 2018, 1:10). Then, Martinus, as he is trying to move out of the way, is held by Derulo, who makes him watch the "wiggle" of the girls together with him (Lautia, 2018, 1:16), an act that motivated one commenter to write: "I hate you, Derulo." The comment received reactions, some agreeing, and others just saying, "No reason to hate Derulo. Where on earth are you from?"

As I was watching the whole session, it appeared badly improvised to me, badly choreographed, and slightly desperate. Marcus & Martinus did not seem to be completely comfortable either. They were certainly not sure of where they were supposed to be or how they were supposed to move, and, by and by, they got pushed into a corner of the stage. Several of the adult male dancers took off their shirts and repeatedly danced close to the

scantily clad women, who alternated between spreading their legs and stroking their buttocks and breasts toward the audience and the dancers. Considering there were probably many underage fans following the concert due to the presence of Marcus & Martinus, these stunts appeared questionable. Commenters in fact discussed the touching of Martinus. Some were flabbergasted by it, either because they felt that their idol was "cheating" on them or because they believed that Marcus & Martinus "are too young for those sexy dances." Others believed that the woman touched Martinus to move him out of the way as she was about to dance with Derulo. Another comment hit the nail on the head regarding the overall atmosphere: "They look like they are scared and out of place." Discussions went back and forth as to whether Marcus & Martinus were too young for this sort of erotic dance, yet no one commented on the most pressing fact that underage girls and boys were watching this, and that these viewers might be too young to see what was happening. It would, indeed, have been interesting to know the ages and genders of the commenters to understand whether they were underage themselves and why they felt compelled to state that "Marcus & Martinus are not kids anymore" and "they have watched the original video, so they knew what they were getting involved with." The original "Wiggle" video (Jason Derulo, 2014) actually had associations with Marcus & Martinus's production "Like it, Like it," which was released three years after "Wiggle." In fact, "Wiggle" might have served as an inspiration for their video. Both music video narratives were developed around scantily dressed girls surrounding their cool, bossy males, which, of course, is true about countless music videos on YouTube. Although the settings in the two videos were not perfectly identical—Derulo's video begins with him sleeping in a bed with about 10 girls—they shared the swimming pool motif and the leisurely atmosphere of a pool party. Derulo sings about girls' "big fat butt," which is meant to wiggle, so that men can get aroused and "deeply penetrate" them. Marcus & Martinus sing about how they can only think about the way a specific girl walks and whips her hair as she goes—a girl with the right style and beautiful looks, the most popular one among her girlfriends. Marcus & Martinus's lyrics do pay the girl respect and appreciation: "It's like you run the world and I like it, like it." However, this acknowledgment is erased by the video's visuals and the boys' and Silentó's attitudes as the "cool kings."

Marcus & Martinus's delving into and assimilating with a global cultural sphere was, thus, observed to follow a traditional gender perspective. Due to this collaboration between male adults and teenage stars, Marcus & Martinus's productions effectively reached out to various age groups across national borders. The effect of the discussed contrast between innocence

and knowledge of the world was accelerated when an experienced citizen of the world, such as Derulo, teamed up with Marcus & Martinus, who ardently maintained their image of just being ordinary boys. This ordinariness was contrasted with a prudishness unusual for their age, as they, even after having turned 18, claimed to have never tasted alcohol, never had girlfriends, never have been invited to proper parties (Hype music, 2020). The contrast between knowing and innocence might have been additionally aggravated, and imbibed with a specific world-music emphasis, as three of the four male artists with whom Marcus & Martinus have collaborated had black ethnic roots. Whether this was a conscious choice is unclear; however, it can be likened to the strategies adopted by Miley Cyrus, whose "use" of female black dancers has been interpreted as a way of displaying "tween innocence against musical blackness" (Bickford, 2020, p. 109), with the effect of "the eroticization of innocence" (p. 109). These elements certainly correspond with the above-described scenes in the "Wiggle" video.

In sum, the cultural and aesthetic cosmopolitan strategies and subject positions taken by Marcus & Martinus could be described as a blend of intelligent marketing (reaching out to a world audience, implementing the most successful YouTube strategies available) and the integration and implementation of male and black male artistic performances. The latter legitimized the duo's music as having a place in "world music" by blending their rather "churlish" Norwegian heritage with Afro-American roots, the music styles of which are a major force worldwide. This certified Marcus & Martinus's hip-hop style as possessing international standards, radiating black masculine authority, and, as Marcus & Martinus actively sought the involvement of adult artists, their interpretive reproduction represented an interesting Twitter appropriation. They enacted a position of having one foot in each camp, thereby blurring the lines between childhood and adulthood in a double sense—they signaled not only growing into an adult world but already being within that world, though "protected" by their artistic personae of the "innocent teenagers."

Furthermore, the symbolic status (Shuker, 2016) that adult stars achieve as a consequence of possessing "a unique, distinctive talent in the cultural forms within which they work" (p. 61) was also transferable to Marcus & Martinus—this era's *biggest pop event in Scandinavia*. Shuker's (2016) reflections on how the essential question did not inquire about *what* stars were but *how* they functioned to meet individuals' imaginations and needs was typified in the fan history of Marcus & Martinus. Their fans' reactions and comments confirmed that

“stardom in popular music … is as much about illusion and appeal to fantasies of the audience as it is about talent and creativity” (Shuker, 2016, p. 61).

Marcus & Martinus, at a young age, succeeded in fulfilling millions of fans’ desires and fantasies worldwide. As child stars, they consequently acquired high symbolic status, recognition, and success in both cultural and economic worlds. Their specific techniques of interpretive reproduction—combining male adult *knowing of the world* with boyish “normality” and innocence—forged them into cultural cosmopolitans in their own right. It also secured them a place in the pop music tradition of playing on the contrast between untouched and touched, or innocent and knowing (Whiteley, 2003, p. 21).

## 5.5. “A musical genius of the highest order“

The above description of Angelina Jordan was just among the multiple comments recovered online that expressed fans’ shared perceptions of the extraordinariness of Jordan’s musicality and accomplishments. In the existing data of comment rooms, it seemed as if, once words like *genius* and *prodigy* were written down, they radiated a natural authority that other commenters willingly accepted, creating intermedial/intertextual connections. This “contagion effect” stemmed from a sense of authority—in this case, a fellow commenter, a reactor, or the judge of a talent show—and confirmed how assigning extraordinary talent was likely to result in “selectivity and discrimination” (Howe et al., 1998, p. 407) of others. In the case of Angelina Jordan, appraisals of her extraordinariness, not only regarding her talent but also her personality, were attached to the young musician from the very start, describing her as “even better than…” Since Jordan not was not a part of a band or a duo, she had to carry the joys, responsibilities, and expectations attached to such acknowledgements on her own shoulders—a weight that might, at times, feel like a burden, at least according to the lyrics of “7th Heaven” (Angelina Jordan Official, 2021). In this song, the then fifteen-year-old sings: “7th Heaven on my shoulders falls heavily/Sometimes I wanna be powerful/gotta find the strength within me/Sometimes you look for miracles/ But there’s nothing in you/Sometimes you have to let go” (Complete lyrics in Appendix 3.3.). In this manner, she seemed to say that the “dance on roses” as a child star entailed not only soft petals but also the painful thorns, indicating lack of inspiration and doubt in one’s own abilities. Facing and living up to daily comments like: “The world is in need of [your] voice,” could make the wish to be able to let go sometimes quite understandable.

By 2021, Angelina Jordan could already look back on an eight-year-long career in the general public, though it started long before that and as soon as she was able to press the YouTube button and a magic world of music opened itself up to her.

### 5.5.1. Introducing Angelina Jordan Astar (2014–2021)

Angelina Jordan, born in 2006, rose to popularity 2014 when she appeared on the TV show *Norske Talenter*, a performance that was immediately posted on YouTube and went viral, far beyond Norwegian borders. Jordan auditioned with "Gloomy Sunday" (TV 2, 2014), a performance that literally earned her the reputation of being an "old soul," of "being music," of being a "star" overnight, along with the fabulous appraisal of nothing less than "the Princess of Jazz." Jordan exited the show half a year later as the youngest winner ever.

Being seven at the time of her break through, she could quite safely be described as being a child, performing at an astonishing level, and she qualified in that sense also as a classical child prodigy (Gagné, 2004; Shavinina, 1999, 2016). Commenters credited that fact differently. Some, often newcomers, having discovered her after the *AGT: The Champions* show in 2020, were upset about her being singing "Gloomy Sunday" barefoot, with her hair looking untidy, and displaying a lacking front-tooth, and they complained about her songs being "inappropriate for a young girl with no life experience to fill it, this is way over her head."

Overall, though, the story of Angelina Jordan, who had been singing jazz since she first found Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Whitney Houston on YouTube at only one and a half years of age, touched the world. Jordan's website mentions that Whitney Houston's cover of Dolly Parton's "I will always love you" played a major role in inspiring Jordan from an early age. In another interview, Jordan acclaimed Billie Holiday as the main influence for her artistic career: "I have to say, if it wasn't for the unconditional love that came from Billie Holiday's legendary music, there would not be Angelina Jordan today. I am very blessed that her music found me very early" (Neophytou, 2020). Jazz definitely hit a nerve in the very young child and, in a spurt of time, gave Jordan a rather unusual repertoire and placed her on the artist list for Quincy Jones's 85th birthday celebration in 2018. She was also invited for the Nobel Peace Prize concert in Oslo at the age of eight and for the AMGT champion show in 2020—to mention only a few of her artistic accomplishments. In 2015, she was asked to provide vocals for Avicii—a produced commercial covering Nina Simone's "Feeling Good" (Avicii, 2015). Furthermore, in 2019, she gave vocals to the only song ("Song for A") on the

instrumental album *Melting* by Nico Cartosio. "Song for A" (Yozhik v Tumane, 2019a) is a lyric song, strongly reminiscent of Sting's "Fields of Gold." For several reasons, I found "Song for A" to stand out from the rest of Jordan's material. To my knowledge, it was the only song Jordan had so far never performed at other occasions, and on YouTube, it was available in only one version uploaded by a fan, edited with lyrics and pictures. Because of fans identifying "Song fir A" to differ from other Jordan materials, and also due to my own evaluation of the song mediating a particular, ambiguous quality, I give the song some space in the introduction of Jordan's narrative. Beneath the YouTube video of "Song for A," the composer, Nico Cartosio, described how the song came about:

> After the series of cold hells and *Melting* itself I longed for a song of a liberated soul, a soul that was set free from suffering. So, I remembered a beautiful poem by Robert Burns and wrote this song especially for Angelina. And she gave a sensual performance. (Yozhik v Tumane, 2019a)

There might be no other place in Jordan's narrative where Whiteley's (2003) explorations of "the problems surrounding the eroticizing of the child star" (p. 6) were more relevant to consider, and were more closely attuned to the reoccurring theme in fans' perceptions of Jordan's "angelic pure soul," alluding to O'Connor's (2009) research, as in this statement. Cartosio, seemingly without hesitation, connected the pure child image—that of a liberated soul—with sensuality. The lyrics disclose a love ballad, narrating the story of two lovers spending a night in a field of barley. Even though Jordan had sung many songs about love, there was something about this specific recording that left a feeling of unease in me. This unease was evoked by the young child describing, though poetically—but to my judgement in a sensual, erotic voice—a complicated love relationship. According to the comments reacting to the video, none shared this unease with me, as all focused on her talent and her "golden" voice.

Several commenters on "Song for A" identified themselves as grown men. "I am 80 years..," "I have a wife and children," followed by "but now I also have Jordan." Even though the video received 65 thumbs down, there were over 3,000 thumbs up. There was a coherent sound of politeness towards Jordan in the reactions. Commenters expressed how they appreciated her to "sing like a mature woman and poetess herself" without further reflecting on the implications of such a comparison. They referred of course to the poem itself, which was written by the renowned poet Robert Burns.

Commenters agreed that this recording differed from her other materials, judging it to be better and more spectacular. Both Whiteley (2003) and O'Connor (2009) later reappear in my discussion on the discourse on Jordan, but in the example of "Song for A," the interrelationship between Whiteley and O'Connor was found especially confronting. This despite of that the confronting construction was only articulated in the composer's comment cited above, and as such, my suggested interpretation might be the result of a cultural bias in my own horizon, having not grown up with the particular language of the romantic Scottish poet. Commenters' appreciations struck a balance between the "heavenly garden," and the earthly representative. They called it a "masterpiece" performed by "our little Angel," "my dear Angelina." In the following comment, beauty, talent, and age were referred to in an attempt to describe what the commenter admitted to not be able to grasp:

> **Commenter:** She is beautiful and she is the Queen of music. She has a talent that's so rare. How can a child entertainer at such a young age convey all this beautiful music and just touch our hearts and souls. I can't explain it.

The "having a talent" discourse is rarely disputed in Jordan's case, but the comment room of "Song for A" indicated how vlisteners cocreated this talent, as several verbalized how reading other comments reinforced their own feelings and made their musical experience even stronger, giving them a reason for scrolling down the comment section over and over.

This recording differed significantly from Jordan's usual materials, as she, characteristically, published raw material videos on YouTube to reach out to her fans and to release her musical projects. Further available on YouTube were online interviews, participations in talk shows, rehearsal videos, a couple of other professional music videos like "Fly Me to the Moon," "I Put a Spell on You," and "Back to Black." More playful, self-made music videos were "Valery," "Autumn Leaves," and her original song, "Shield." In addition, a great number of reaction videos on her materials could be found—a number that is ever growing.

Jordan is active on Instagram and Facebook, and, since 2019, she also sells merchandise, such as personally designed clothing and mobile phone covers printed with her own paintings, in addition to her two albums and the picture book she wrote in 2015. In 2020, she signed a contract with Republic Records and released her first two singles, "Million Miles" on 6 November 2020 (Angelina Jordan Official, 2020a) and "7th Heaven" on 19 March 2021 (Angelina Jordan Official, 2021b). "Million Miles" was first released as a lyrical music video on YouTube and then followed up on 16 December with a new recording in typical Angelina

Jordan-style: a black-white video with only a cello and a piano as accompaniment, herself barefoot,[76] simple, and "simply superb" (Angelina Jordan Official, 2020b). Eventually, Jordan released the song with a narrative music video, featuring herself and her little sister in the role of Angelina Jordan's past self (Angelina Jordan Official, 2021a), together with her imaginary (because he had passed away) grandfather, to whom she dedicated the song. Fan responded agreeably to the carefully designed image presented in her music videos, which depicts Jordan in her characteristic, recognizable, and predictable way. In this way, Jordan, as many artists like her, uses the music video as a means of her celebrity performance, exhibiting her artistic personae and even her political and ideological opinions (Arnold et al., 2017), as she does in her cover of "Heal the world" (Angelina Jordan CoverChannel, 2021b).

Jordan's contract with Republic Records gave her a new "artistic home" that she shared with other renowned musicians such as Ariana Grande, Amy Winehouse, Stevie Wonder, and Taylor Swift. Her personal biography page links to her two productions, both done with the Norwegian producer duo Stargate (Mikkel S. Eriksen and Tor Erik Hermansen), who, after their provincial start in Norway, became one of America's leading hit factories.

### 5.5.2. Child prodigy discourse—rooms of protection and development

> "She is definitely Heaven sent, Thank you Lord."

For Angelina Jordan, the concept and the very idea of a child prodigy (Ruthsatz et. al, 2014) with "God-given" talent seemed to become a—narrated, distributed, and advertised— reality. She was the only one among the subjects in this study who was actually referred to as being just this: a prodigy, a genius, and also, frequently, "an angel sent from heaven" with the mission to spread love and hope (O'Connor, 2009). With little visible apparatus around her, she became the "barefoot singer with the incredible voice." Followed closely by her mother, little sister, grandmother, and her uncle, who serves as her manager, the Angelina Jordan enterprise also encompassed commercial aspects; however, these seemed to be the result of careful considerations. Many fans praised her protective mother and grandmother, whom Jordan identified as major inspirations. Jordan's firm attachment to her family reassured fans with that Jordan's childhood values were taken care of, despite her exposure to popular music (Bickford, 2016, 2020).

[76] The story of why Jordan always sings barefoot is discussed in Section 5.4.4.

Observing Jordan’s progress on YouTube, fans overall admired Jordan’s mature musical interpretations, and only a few were critical of or questioned her musicality. Browsing through the open comment rooms on Jordan’s music videos was, thus, generally a pleasant, relaxing, inspiring, heart-warming, and positive experience. Most comments were clusters of carefully handled words, carrying meaning they either shared directly with the artist—"You are our Angel”—or with the world in general—“We need her voice.” Jordans’ commenters were polite, emanating good will, endeavoring to convey specific, personal, and significant musical experiences and thoughts. Many commenters also seemed to be frequenting the rooms at short intervals,[77] repeating their phrasings, and indulging with others in their shared feelings of devotion. In their conformity, these rooms resembled what Foucault (2000) called complex systems of control without clear indications on who exercised the control, who manipulated whom, and exactly how it was done. Following the trail of authority (Foucault, 2000) behind the scenes, could lead to the YouTube platform itself, the advertisers, or the stars themselves wishing to increase their popularity. In the foreground and “on stage” were the fans who together shaped Jordan’s YouTube stardom, and who conscientiously referred to the group of fans as “us:”

> **Commenter:** Well, many of us on this page always knew, we were certain that the powers that be would be as enthralled as we all have been for four or more years. Angelina deserves the best of success. May they allow her to retain her velvety bluesy deep-felt singing and unaffected persona.

The comment above expressed fans’ wish for Jordan to retain her unaffected persona—a common hope I found running through all the comment materials. Her unaffected persona was closely linked to what fans identified as Jordan’s authenticity: her demeanor, her style, her looks, her bare-footedness, and her particular style of jazz. According to Moore (2002), Jordan’s musical style could be identified as mediating a non-commercial authenticity, as her repertoire, in praxis, was not commercialized pop music that could attract younger fans. Moreover, Jordan’s authenticity seemed closely linked to commenters’ appreciation of her extraordinary talent, as it defined her artistic persona and made fans imagine they knew what it was like to be Angelina Jordan. Moore (2002) discussed non-commercial authenticity as a first person authenticity, “inherent rather than attributed” (p. 214), and my data confirmed that many believed in the inherent quality of Jordan’s artistry. This belief was supported by Jordan

[77] This could in my analysis be observed through comparing user names, dates, and phrasings.

calling herself *blessed*, thus writing herself into the discourse on the special child (O'Connor, 2009).

The feeling of knowing and familiarity could also be gleaned in especially long comments resembling small letters:

> **Commenter**: This girl is exceptional in many ways. Aside from the overwhelming magic of her voice, she is calm and confident. Her voice is a cascade of golden spells. I felt deeply and violently struck in the depths of the soul. God bless you Angelina your family must be a marvelous world if you grow up so well. Thanks for the emotion you gave me. All the best, love from X.

The keywords I found in the Jordan discourse were "exceptional, magic, old soul, depth, struck, bless, emotion"—all of which were incorporated in the above comment. Furthermore, the angelic and the magic elements were, in this comment, supported by color and metaphors (cascade of golden spells)—creating an almost visible picture of her perceived musicality using celestial vocabulary. "Our girl's" *personality* was honored by her fans in words bordering the existential. They perceive her to be "calm and confident, serene, adorable, a reincarnation of Billie Holiday and Amy Whitehouse, very cute, beautiful, really nice, pleasant, with integrity, elegant, classy, with such a calm demeanor, a real child prodigy." Her *talent* was described as "pure, amazing, so good it almost hurts, angelic, genial and prodigal, a clear star-material." Her *voice* was accredited as "mesmerizing, therapeutic, life-changing, upsetting, exhilarating, pure magic, vibing, mature, tantalizing, haunting, unique, literally older than the girl, made to fill our emptiness, with the power to call forth religious feelings." Fans were sure there had to be an old soul in Jordan, not only for angelic reasons but also because she sounded like a "tried and tested true blues singer." Watching her sing, according to her fans, was akin to witnessing a vocalist who allowed the music to fill every fiber of her body (Barthes, 1977/1990). One commenter offered a solution to the mysterious impact of Jordan:

> **Commenter:** I have finally solved one of the mysteries why Angelina has such a powerful effect on my emotions. When Angelina sings I am living each and every syllable of every single word. I am living through her voice. Can't say there is another artist who has ever affected me like this.

Here, Barthes' (1990) description of the "sung writing of the language" (p 297) was quite accurately expressed. The combination of body engagement in the language, and what other

commenters described as soulfulness, marked some of the specific traits of Jordan's musical mediation.

Her soulful singing was also a matter frequently highlighted in interviews, and her soul was always presented as something not matching Jordan's young age. Sven Ole Engelsvold, in a Norwegian interview uploaded on YouTube by a fan, addressed Jordan praising her soulful and nice voice, and pondered how it was possible for so much soul to live in a child. Engelsvold identified this combination—so much soul and such a young lady—as the key to the Jordan fascination (Yozhik v Tumane, 2019b). Here, preconceptions about what it meant to be a child, and how a little body could not possibly fathom a "big" soul unless exceptional, resounded through. Scholarship on talent suggested that sensitive periods in a child's life created a "developmental window" (Shavinina, 2016, p. 263), making the child extremely responsive and quick learning during such a period. The "big soul" of Jordan might be the result of such a window, in which she at two years of age or even younger, found the music she loved and absorbed it quite dramatically, making her sensitive to the peculiarities of jazz on which her career was to be built.

In addition to the strong feelings evoked by Jordan's artistry, many expressed solicitousness for her being a child artist performing at such a high level, feeling the need to protect her childlikeness. According to existing scholarship, few of these feelings were purely selfless—but rather traces of mechanisms rooted in culture, an eternal "ahistorical conception of the innocent child" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 15) that was put under a constant threat and "always on the verge of 'disappearing' altogether" (p. 15) calling forth a protective instinct in considerate adults.

The Jordan mystery engaged many, and sincere discussions on talent, whether God-given or the result of hard work, or both, appeared regularly in online comment rooms and reaction videos. Angelina Jordan herself expressed that she feels that music found her, and that she, through singing, entered a different world where she thinks about only music, something she deeply enjoyed (Song and Heart, 2014). The convincing metaphor and the almost cosmic aspect of entering a different world, bridges "the space between the lived world and the divine" (O'Connor, 2009, p. 216) and places Jordan firmly in the tradition of a *child prodigy* that was identified as the main narrative underpinning her artistic persona. Her comment rooms were named according to the overall discourse encouraging *protection and development*. Notably, most of these findings were collected during 2019. Over the course of 2020, a temporary increase in devaluating and critical comments was noted. Comments like:

"I really think this is ugly," "She sounds like my grandmother," and "Eww, she can't sing—I hate it!" were found spread out between slightly longer ones trying to argue in favor of their critical viewpoints: "There are millions of people with same age and with this voice or better. She has had her opportunity—next please." Long-time Jordan fans reacted to these devaluating comments with more confusion than anger: "Why are there so many haters? She sings amazing for her age! And she has a unique voice. I don't know why people are complaining, what more do you want from this little girl?" The question to be asked could also be: what did *anyone* want from this little girl?

As parts of her songs also became available in some minutes-long TikTok clips,[78] another new group of fans entered the community. Whether they were responsible for some of the negative comments is difficult to say. Regardless, their presence evoked irritation: "The amount of annoying TikTokers in this comment room are getting on my damn nerves," one commenter wrote, referring to the fact that TikTokers mostly seemed interested in finding out if: "Someone else [is] here because of TikTok." These comments were made in all kinds of languages from all over the world, and they competed with similar comments asking: "Anybody here because of the lockdown?"—signifying a kind of leisurely attitude discussed in Section 4.1.4, indicative of the "networked individualism" (Wellman, cited in Kendall, 2013, p. 311), probably enforced by restrictions due to the epidemic. Furthermore, Jordan's comment rooms were, in the last six months of 2020, increasingly (mis)used for political advertisements, with links being placed in random spots, posing questions about the elections in the USA or other similar questions.

These examples indicate that an ongoing flow in comment rooms is always to be expected—of both living, active artists, and artists that already passed away—and that these comments will have the power to change the types of responses that are to follow. This further highlighted the cyborg quality of comments: they are based on communication and algorithmic distribution, with no "respect" for time and development. Gunkel (2000) expressed this phenomenon in the following manner: "The cyborg does not constitute a pre-established individual subject that actively engages in the process of communication. Rather, it is itself subject to and initially activated by communicative interactions" (p. 342). Consequently, the vlistener *behind* the original communication—once the comment is

[78] Jordan is increasingly active on TikTok from 2021, developing a new style of presentations.

posted—has dispersed and *moved into* the “flow of information” (p. 343), in turn losing control of the cyborg message sent into the YouTube cyborg system.

More subject-related controversy in the Jordan discourse was discerned in commenters’ evaluations of her music video, “Shield” (Angelina Jordan Official, 2016). “Shield” is one of Jordan’s original songs that she performed on several occasions between 2016 and 2018. The video is a so-called “artistic video,” made by her grandmother, the artist Mery Zamani. The video starts off with a color boost—Jordan’s clothing and a bouquet of roses—contrasted by a desolate, yellowish landscape near a train track. Thereafter, the colors shift: Jordan’s clothing is white, contrasted now by a colorful cross she seems to be redecorating and almost praying to. Many of her fans were extremely disappointed with the visuals: “The video itself is piss poor quality. It’s amateurish. The song is good but this video is basically just a teenager playing in the sand.” The upset voices did not attack Jordan directly. Rather, they expressed dismay with her producer. Positive voices responded that the critique was beside the point, and that the idea behind the video was not to produce a professional, predictable, and commercial video but rather an artistic, simple, homemade product with space for free imagination. The discussion raged at the crossover between childhood innocence—teenager playing in the sand—and musical maturity—a good song. The fiercest defenders of it wrote: “Some people will not get this video,” a comment that received most answers and likes. The “otherness” of the video was exactly what made it appealing and suitable for the Jordan narrative, the commenter claimed, underlining Jordan’s *special* talent—that, indeed, received a supernatural boost in the controversial discussions of this music video. Jordan certainly played with the image of *otherness,* and narrated her artistic persona by embracing a posthuman identity constructed of “otherness, difference, and specificity” (Haraway, 1991, p. 155), or, as Løvlie (2003) described, as the embracing of the “posthuman self,” as based on communication and otherness (p. 191).

Overall, Jordan’s loyal fans communicated well-established opinions and were not easily persuaded by the newcomers to change these. Furthermore, Jordan’s newest releases from late 2020 and early 2021, received again almost exclusive comments carried by a mild, supportive, and interested tone. Her fans “knew her,” and chose to perceive Angelina Jordan’s voice and persona as they had created them in their minds, no matter what the disturbances. I compared this phenomenon with Auslander’s (2021) analyses of Beatlemaniacs’ behavior, who described how fans seemed to have integrated the recordings of the Beatles into their imagination. Consequently, they—in a live concert—could scream, close their eyes, and

ensure “that the personae they had already constructed … and with which they had already formed relationships were the images that they saw during the concert” (p. 181). Though this observation, at first, was most obviously transferable to the Marcus & Martinus’ enterprise, it also held true for the loyalty and behavior of Jordan’s fans. For, even though they did not scream and close their eyes in a performance—though they possibly did so in their secluded vlistener rooms—they seemed to always identify her singing as “mesmerizing, exceptional, and touching the soul,” despite some recordings or concert performances not necessarily matching these very high ideals objectively.

Taking an emotionally engaged, netnographic attitude to the discursive level in the Jordan enterprise, I got the sensation of sinking down into a swimming pool with warm water in a calm, aesthetic spa-like environment with customers moving around peacefully. All seemed to be enjoying the same experience, and happily listened to each other, over and over reaffirming their own feelings. I anticipated the lack of contrast in fans’ opinions like a nut of meaning waiting to get cracked by Derrida’s sharp mind. How to deconstruct harmony and support? The missing part, I realized, might be hidden under the overwhelming presence of the angelic star everybody was talking about. The star was the reason for all to “reside” in this room and without Angelina Jordan Astar, all these feelings they so openly shared with each other would not exist and not be expressed in comments. In this sense, everybody in that room was feeding on the child star’s ability, musicality, and persona, reminding me of the feeling of exploitation I experienced in the live concert. I suggest the missing other, the deconstructed harmony, to be, in fact, exploitation and lack of integrity.

### 5.5.3. Cyborg talentification narrative of awe, wonder and dedication

Angelina Jordan herself expressed what starting a musical career at an early age entailed with regard to securing herself a place in the music industry:

> **Jordan:** At such an early age, people believed in me and my dream. The biggest advantage was that I was recognized for my talent. Concentrating on my music and being so involved with every aspect of my songs takes a lot of time and effort, especially to develop yourself as an artist. (Picou, 2021, para. 6)

Therefore, even though the cyborg talentification narrative of Angelina Jordan was found to be based on fan’s expressions of awe and wonder, it was also anchored in Jordan’s own dedication and her personal narrative of her talent. Jordan signaled perseverance and a strong dedication to her work—to the music she loved and had declared to be ageless (Picou, 2021).

Three umbrella themes were addressed in Jordan's comments rooms: *her talent*, *her voice*, and *her personality*. The latter might be best described as a product of Jordan's personal identity and her artistic persona—though commenters were convinced they described Angelina Jordan as *she really was*, as I already discussed in the previous section. The ability to get close to a star through online enactment was problematized by Suhr (2012), who wondered whether such closeness might "enhance or delimit the empowerment of independent musicians" (p. 115). Suhr suspected that a musician's success greatly depended on engagement on social media, but also discussed the ambiguous effect of this closeness as it lead to a "de-emphasis of the mystique and privacy of the artist" (p. 115). Expressed the other way round and based on my own data, the closeness could result in a privatization of artists in fans' personal lives, resulting in comments that resembled private letters and claims of knowing "our girl." Another aspect of the blend between Jordan's artistic persona and her private personality assumed by fans was expressed by Hansen (2019):

> Pop personae are shaped by the stories told *about* pop artists as well as *by* them . …. [and therefore they] pertain more to the persona than they pertain to the actual person (even if they are often perceived to concern the latter). (p. 513)

Hansen's (2019) analysis dismantled the experienced closeness of stardom on social media, revealing the illusion defining fans' perceptions.

Reactions to Jordan's music were often connected to her performances. Going down the jazzy road, Jordan's song lyrics—classics from a highly esteemed music world—were molded, interpreted, and vlistened to in many jazz clubs long before her lifetime, awarding them with heavy validity. The heavy impact of these classics, or what Cusic (2010) called "history lessons for a new, young audience" (p. 226), presented by a young "beautiful, angelic, extraordinary" girl provided a powerful combination, and comments on Jordan's covers bore the characteristics of narratives triggered by strong musical experiences. Such experiences, as discussed in Section 2.3.1., put the individual in contact with their unavoidable, basic conditions, confronting them with their own vulnerabilities (Vetlesen, 2007). This explained the described tears, goosebumps, and deeply upsetting "life-changing and therapeutic" emotions and the shock fans admit of having, when Jordan's voice "deeply and violently struck in my soul, giving emotion." Many of the reactions communicated were about vlisteners' struggles to "handle all these feelings" triggered by Jordans' music and their wish to make these feelings last: "I couldn't help but tear up, so deep. How do you sing like that …

saw her for the first time at AGT. I so hope that they don't try to change her image and personality."

Most of the titles she performed between 2014 and 2019 were covers; however, as fans remarked, a major strength of Jordan seemed to be her ability to transform covers into something new. Commenters described how "one can almost observe how she lets the song slip down into her body" and how her "inner music wraps a gentle hand around it and renders it authentic." Angelina Jordan's outstanding ability to deliver enthralling covers became one of the main signposts of her achievements as a child star, and it triggered specific questions about the creativity, perceived authenticity, and musicality involved in producing covers. The rest of this chapter will, therefore, investigate this "queen of covers."

### Queen of Covers

Cover songs could be called "the Angelina Jordan Special," and with her renditions, she managed to reach out to music lovers of all genres, elevating the art of producing covers to an advanced level. She was highly praised for being able to transform any song: "How is it even possible, that whatever the song is, she always nails it so perfectly. I'm definitely not a fan of this style of music, but this, this is just awesome."

> **Commenter:** I don't care whose song this is. It is hers now . . . Angelina was born to sing . . .Truly! I have never heard a cover from Angelina that was not AT LEAST as good if not better than the original. I have also never seen or heard a singer with more natural talent.

Many of the strongest reactions found on YouTube were triggered by Jordan's covers. Given the millions of cover songs that are posted on YouTube, this achievement was, in itself, remarkable. The combination of Jordan singing jazz classics in her "smoky" voice and the intimate setting of her raw-material videos, as I have called them, made me recall Barthes (1973/1975) and his conceptualization of the grain in the voice. In particular, Barthes's comments about grain perceivable in film catching "the sound of the speech close up" (p. 67), where he included the breath, almost accurately described a raw video cover session by Jordan. Therefore, especially in Jordan's cyborg talentification case, Barthes' formulations effectively placed commenters' enthusiasm into a wider context as they wondered:

> **Commenter:** How many vocalists can you name who make you "feel" their vocals in your soul, or just reach in and grab your heart, and bring you to tears every time? How

> many vocalists can you name who aren't just singing to the music, but rather their voice IS the music? That's Angelina, with her wonderful melisma, vocal fry, vibrato and jazz stylings.

Frith (1998), who also elaborated on the importance of the voice in popular music, described the direct connection the ordinary person can feel with the vocal performance. The instrument of the voice was available to all, so Frith, as there were no strings or keys needed—"the voice *is* the sound of the body in a direct sense" (p. 192). When listening to different voices, audiences and vlisteners can compare them with their own; they can identify with the process of making the sound. I found that the motivation behind drawing comparisons with other artists consequently also always included an *inherent* comparison with the fan's own voice. Comparing this with listening to instrumental musicians, our ears are most sharpened when we hear an instrument we ourselves have attempted to master. Therefore, it was by no means surprising that voices were central in popular music appreciation, especially in those of cover songs (Plasketes, 2010).

On YouTube, comparisons with the original singers were found supported by both reaction videos and so-called "mash-up videos"—footage of a full song, alternating between, for example, renditions of Jordan and the original artist, for example Adele. Aware of the attention she received for her covers, Jordan, in an interview with the *American Songwriter* soon after she had released her debut single, "Million miles" with Republic Records, talked warmly about doing covers and the responses she received from her fans. However, Jordan also emphasized the challenges:

> I do appreciate the love I get when I sing those legendary songs. It is harder to sing a cover than your own song because you are going to be compared to the original. It is a big responsibility to make sure you are placing the worth into it. I have learned that we humans have unlimited ability, that we can do anything we want, just if we want to. I always keep that in my mind with cover songs or anything I do. (Neophytou, N., 2020)

Though Jordan claimed singing covers to be more challenging than singing originals, comparisons with the originals have served her musical image well. The superlatives with which her performances were described belong to a class of their own. Covers are a tricky genre, both in terms of copyrights and defining the boundaries and characteristics of a cover. The closest suitable category for describing Jordan's covers is what Mosser (2008) called "major interpretations" (p. 4), interpretations so good that they might "replace the base song,"

a point made by many of Angelina Jordan's fans. They claimed that Jordan's versions were actually no longer covers because they had become better songs through her performance and interpretations. Most of Jordan's covers were presented as raw-material videos, in a recognizable style fans called "authentic." Returning to Moore (2002) and his observation on compliments of noncommercial authenticity to be "attributes of intimacy (just Joni Mitchell and her zither) [combined with] immediacy" (p. 211), made sense in the Jordan discourse. Even though Moore's (2002) description of Joni Mitchell was based on an unmediated sound experience, I suggest that Jordan's raw material videos managed to mediate a similar type of intimacy, albeit with sound mediation, as Joni Mitchell's perceived live experience—well supported by YouTube's ability to make an artist appear as close, personal, and spontaneous.

In the following section, I take a closer look at the videos and comments from five of Jordan's covers available on YouTube: "Gloomy Sunday" (TV2, 2014); "Back to Black" (NRK, 2016); "Million Years Ago" (Angelina Jorden CoverChannel, 2018); "Nothing Breaks Like a Heart" (Angelina Jordan CoverChannel, 2019), and "Bohemian Rhapsody" (Boris Palenovski, 2020).

The first I discuss, is Jordan's breakthrough song, "Gloomy Sunday."

**"Gloomy Sunday" (2014)—cover of the Billie Holiday version**

> "From a simple man I can honestly say I'm listening to a prodigy that is going to set a new standard in the entire future music industry: she is a jazz monster!"
>
> "This is what I would call music. A young body with an old soul to bring the fresh breath of air we so needed in the music world today."

When the judges from *Norske Talenter* asked young Jordan what she thought the song was about, she confidently, calmly, and with great serenity answered: "Yes. It is about a very sad Sunday" (TV 2, 2014). Some commenters interpreted this particular dialogue as an obvious sign of Jordan's "stunning and pure" innocence: "One of the most adorable characteristics of this child is her innocence. She is a gift." Others even wondered if she was a "child at all." The video (TV 2, 2014) shows a seven year old in full control of the microphone, never in doubt about where and how to hold it, displaying convincing confidence onstage, in addition to a musicality that appeared to literally stream through her. Barefoot, with wild long black hair, a tooth gap in front, and clad in a simple white dress, her body softly swayed together with her rasping, full, and "mesmerizing, magic voice," rendering a trustworthy interpretation

of this difficult and controversial song that went “right into the heart.” Her technical professionalism was also reflected in comments: “How on earth does she know when to call upon the orchestra or to show the emotions to the lyrics? She is Out of this World Amazing.” That video quickly received almost 2,000 comments and over five million views. In the comment room, commenters already compared her to an angel, typing: “You have to believe in Angels because I just heard one sing.” The archetypal image of the angelic child with supernatural powers (O’Connor, 2009) was alluded her from her very first public performance, despite—or just because of—the dark lyrics of the song. People coming back to the video after many years noted that “watching this again still brings tears to my eyes.” More critical commenters reported experiencing a slight discomfort while vlistening, although not quite sure themselves what to make of it, trying to analyze the perception with common sense:

> **Commenter:** She memorized Billie Holiday’s way of singing from her parent’s records. It is slightly creepy and kind of fascinating. First time I saw this I could not quite accept it. It was unsettling and eery. I loved it. That microphone weighed more than she did.

Others tried to cope with the unsettling experience called forth by a seven-year-old singing—with great serenity—about depression leading to suicide, by joking about it. They thought about their own seven-year-old selves from the past—childhoods spent “ringing on other people’s doorbells, or being Spiderman”—all activities that are far from presenting jazz classics with empathy and musical mastery. Such comments describing “normal” childhood activities contributed only to make Jordan’s presentations even more special. Already in “Gloomy Sunday” video, most commenters agreed that the cover surmounted the original. Magically, it seemed, Jordan managed to convey that the “beauty was in the musicality, not in the actual song.” Her musicality was considered to outplay the sinister message of the song’s lyrics, supported by her untouched, white-dressed childish integrity. In some way, her innocence justified and consolidated her talent, much in the sense of what Bickford (2016) described to be “talent *as* childishness” (p. 763). By performing this “suicide song, to which people actually had died,” in her own, particular, sincere, manner, Jordan demonstrated what she was good for, and commenters were convinced that “the old jazz community would have been proud” of her achievement. Some, though, favored her more recent performances: “I am much more impressed by her recent performance on *AGT: The Champions*. Her voice as a thirteen-year-old is so much better. SO mature so controlled. Perfect.” Loyal fans, having followed Jordan from the start, were almost personally offended by the critical comments,

and, although they maintained a polite tone, they defended the seven-year old Jordan by emphasizing the technical ability needed to sing “Gloomy Sunday.”

The next cover I discuss is Amy Winehouse’s “Back to Black,” with a focus on Jordan’s way of handling the erotic message in the song and the particular recording with the Norwegian Radio Orchestra, called *KORK* (10 million views, 4,100 comments).

**“Back to Black” (2016)—An Amy Winehouse cover**

Calling her the reincarnation of Amy Winehouse highlighted how Jordan’s fans respected and appreciated her close connection to and intense renderings of Winehouse’s songs. In the comment room of “Back to Black” (Angelina Jordan Official, 2016),[79] no voice was found calling her a fake or a copy, or accusing her for exploiting a famous musician’s accomplishments for her own gain. Critiques of that nature were simply missing, and, of course, one had to wonder how this could be possible, as Winehouse enjoyed such high status. Instead, Jordan received praise for transforming Winehouse’s lyrics in “Back to Black,” (Amy Winehouse, 2009) most of which could be seen as problematic when performed by a young girl. Her fans expressed respect for how Jordan, at the age of ten, completely stripped the song *and* her performance of any erotic connotations. There were enough examples of underage artists copying sexualized behavior and even exaggerating it to catch attention or because they were told to do so, as discussed in Section 2.2.2. None of this was visible in Jordan’s interpretation, who unaffectedly connected merely with the musicality and beauty of the Winehouse melody, using a voice reminiscent of Winehouse herself, delivering “Amy Winehouse vibes,” as fans perceived it. Yet, her voice bore also indicative clear, recognizable Jordan characteristics.

Ignoring sentences from Winehouse’s original such as “He left no time for regret, kept his dick wet” and “You love blow and I love puff,” the ten year old singer delivered a different kind of love song, though still passionate (Angelina Jordan Official, 2016):

> I have gone mad by your love, crazy, sick, and mad I laugh I cry, I love.
> When I see you with others I cry, with strangers you are high,
> Alone and with no one I cry.
> I’m thinking of you and I cry, in loneliness behind this lie

[79] Lyrics to Amy Winehouse “Back to Black” can be found in Appendix 3.1, and those of Angelina Jordan’s “Back to Black” rendition in Appendix 3.2.

From this fun part of life.

Every night I become a star and I live with stars, shame they get it so afar.

I'm the one who speaks to the moon, I didn't want to be in love,

But I fall back to, I fall back again, I fall back again.

Oh, I love you so, I laugh at you, I have no warmth but the wind

I have gone away so many times

Just to forget 'bout you back on love with you, again.

I'm the one who speaks to the moon…

Laugh…

I still laugh at

I'm the one…… Love

Whiteley (2003) might have posed the question whether the well-known, sexualized lyrics by Winehouse became even stronger by virtue of being eliminated and replaced. I compared this to the effect of singing songs with children to develop language and memory, eliminating derogatory words or the use of *** to draw attention to the hidden letters rather than helping to avoid them. No one remarked anything to be "wrong" with Jordan's rendition, neither were any erotic undertones or reactions found in the comment rooms. Nevertheless, her performance could, of course, "invite questionable pleasures in [her]audience" (p. 29) without fans actually communicating these.

The orchestral version with KORK suits young Jordan perfectly. It is a well-balanced and dynamic arrangement, where the strong rhythmic element is primarily taken care of by the piano and percussion, with strings adding a more ethereal dimension. On the long "laugh" that functions akin to a break approximately two-thirds into the song (Angelina Jordan Official, 2016, at 2:44), the cello delivers a chilling solo function, repeating, elongating, and extending the vocal phrases apparently seamlessly—eventually echoed by shivering violins—thus adding a joyful, hopeful, and melodious note to this otherwise rather sinister, low-key song. Instruments and voice function in perfect harmony, without any obvious communication between Jordan and the musicians. I find that Jordan is quite visible in this magic room of music she so often refers to. The "laugh" section definitely makes my hair rise, again and again. Of course, Jordan sings barefoot also in this recording. The scene is choreographed in such a manner that she enters the scene with a calm but expectant look whilst the instrumental intro is playing in the background, and, then, she just glides into the music after having taken

her shoes off. Her authenticity is ratified by these actions: the entering into the room, slipping out of her shoes, singing every phrase sincerely, holding her concentration from the first note to the last, at times with eyes closed, and holding herself steadily in her spot at the microphone. The very idea of her starting to dance or move around whilst singing, as most pop musicians would do, is utterly disturbing, and no-one expects her to do so either; a matter well prepared by her raw material music videos resembling still-lifes—pictures—rather than developing stories. On the long “love” or “laugh,” the melody departs from the more monotonous mood and gains energy accompanying the sentence, “I’m the one who can speak to the moon,” a point where a personal theme for the young Jordan surfaces: the moon. The moon appeared several times in her songs, both in covers and in her own songs, as in “Million Miles” (Angelina Jordan Official, 2020a). Probably at the same time, or right before, her “Back to Black” recording, Jordan worked on her music video of “Fly Me to the Moon” (Angelina Jordan Official, 2017), where Jordan, in her recognizable white dress, wanders through a lonesome landscape, her bare feet wading in something that “looks like chocolate,” but most likely was meant to symbolize a dream version of moon-substance. Both “Back to Black” and “Fly Me to the Moon” were also part of her 2017 album. Thus, by including the moon in her lyric transcription of the Winehouse song, Jordan managed to expand the narrative of her artistic persona, adding another piece into her angelic myth that both fans and the media were eager to uphold.

Several commenters noticed the violinist at the beginning of the take, as his look expressed what they perhaps felt themselves, a sensation that cannot really be conveyed by words, although they tried to capture it again and again: “How is this possible? That voice at that age!” I also observed that Jordan, in the recording of “Back to Black”—as often observed in her raw material videos where she “eyes” out of the picture to read the lyrics off some device—partly sang the lyrics right off her notice sheets. It added an element of surprise, as the occasional glance, the hand holding the paper and even smoothening it—reminding me of the live concert visited—caused no disruption to her musical interpretation.

It might be Jordan’s alliance, suggesting a specific type of serenity and intimacy, together with the musical quality of her “Back to Black” rendition, that triggered commenters’ belief in her authenticity, which in turn strengthened the cyborg talentification of her artistic persona—in this case, through her lyrics and way of singing representing “symbols and signs … [that are] mutually supportive” (Hansen, 2019, p. 525) rather than contradictory, as also this commenter reflected on:

> **Commenter:** She does not care to imitate. What comes out of her is pure and natural talent. Period. Simply pleasure to watch and listen to. Amy Winehouse is looking down from above with a big smile on her face. That makes me really filled with love.

Here, the comparison with the original artist radiated great warmth, and Winehouse was viewed almost as a godmother-like figure. The next example addresses another much appreciated cover by Jordan, the pop song, "Million Years Ago," written by Adele.

**"A Million Years Ago"—an Adele cover (2018)**

Fans' comparison of Jordan's presentation with Adele's original evoked humiliation from the standpoint of classical music history: "Shit, poor Adele. Reminds of the scene where Mozart makes Salieri look like a fool all while innocently laughing."

Jordan's "A Million Years Ago" (AngelinaJordan CoverChannel, 2018), a cover of Adele's 2015 song "Million Years Ago" (Adele, 2019), is one of Jordan's most commented on songs. By 2020, the video, which was recorded when Jordan was twelve years of age, had received over two million views and over 3,000 comments. "A Million Years Ago" exemplified the young artist's ability to convert a great, popular hit by a well-established still living pop singer such Adele into her own song and, according to many, an even stronger version—an accomplishment that even fans of Adele had to recognize, though somewhat reluctantly: "I love Adele, but Angelina is better."

Adele herself was accused of having stolen parts of this song from two different melodies: the 1985 Turkish tune "Acilara Tutunmark"[80] by Ahmet Kaya and Dusty Springfield's "Yesterday When I Was Young."[81] Listening to these songs, it was evident that Adele's "A Million Years Ago" contained parts from both. The Turkish version had an instrumental introduction that clearly parallels Adele's sequence—or, more correctly, Adele's version was easily associable with the Turkish version in terms of melody, chord sequence, and lyrics, which were about love, pain, and freedom. Whether Adele and her producers were aware of the Turkish song remains unknown; however, Turkish netizens' adamant insistence on the plagiarism was highly interesting.[82] In general, of course, such plagiarism, be it conscious or unconscious, can exist anywhere, and can also be applicable to lyrics. Writing about childhood nostalgia, which is the overarching theme in "A Million Years Ago," is nothing

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[80] https://youtu.be/Bj5ZkCdEH38
[81] https://youtu.be/mLx8L04L8Dk
[82] There is a video comparing the two songs: https://youtu.be/rikkoKUhpMU.

new. In that respect, Adele's version was found to be much closer Dusty Springfield's "Yesterday When I Was Young," both in terms of the lyrics and of the inner feel—a closeness that can hardly be merely accidental. Yet where to draw the line between inspiration and plagiarism is not so straightforward, I think. For example, Angelina Jordan's first original hit with Republic Records from 2020 was called "Million Miles" (Angelina Jordan Official, 2020b), which was a title and type of song that could call forth associations to "A Million Years Ago," both with regard to the musical form and the lyrics.

YouTube codes, identified by Burgess and Green (2018), emphasized *intimacy* and *authenticity* (p. 37). Watching the video "A Million Years ago" (AngelinaJordan CoverChannel, 2018) by Angelina Jordan conveyed a feeling of intimacy, of almost being in the same room as the singer.

Being a typical raw material video and a musical still-life in my context, "A Million Years Ago" features the then thirteen-year-old Angelina Jordan and the twenty-six-year-old guitarist Ivan Mendez, looking like a teenager himself. The only prop is a standing microphone. The background is a pale yellowish-white. The guitarist wears a white shirt, and Jordan a light blue, loose-fitting top. They both sit and seem completely relaxed. Nothing visual disturbs or distracts them, granting full focus for both the eyes and ears. The girl is no doubt Angelina Jordan, modest, her hair combed, not styled; it is all perfect, carefully delivering *balanced authenticity* (Burgess & Green, 2018) in the sense that the image corresponds impeccably with what commenters expect Jordan to look like. At the same time, it is not an exact repetition of former performances as some "natural" differences will always be present—a different angle, different clothes—yet nothing *unsettlingly* different, just the natural variations of an "ordinary" life packed into her artistic persona (Bickford, 2016; Hansen, 2019). In "A Million Years Ago," the guitarist plays his instrumental intro and Jordan starts singing. Her voice appears to be close by, her breath quite naturally becomes a part of her interpretation, and every word comes across, well-articulated. She sings with sincere emotion, and the guitarist is participating with intense and, at the same time, discrete anticipation. He concentrates on his guitar play, adapting it smoothly to her interpretation. Occasionally, he rests his eyes on her and gives a little smile before going back to playing in what can only be described in a listening manner. The result is a four-minute, worked-through, and soothingly beautiful, yet melancholic, cover, where the concentration of the young musicians does not lapse for a single second, and each phrase is well taken care of and glides smoothly into to the next. When the song is finished, Jordan wakes, as if from a trance, looks into the camera, and

says “bye!” with a little wave. The guitarist smiles at her, and that is all. More correctly, that is the end of the video and the beginning of the comment room.

The data for “A Million Years Ago” was retrieved from approximately 3,000 comments attached to the original cover video and approximately 700 comments from the one selected reaction video (Smylyface, 2019).[83] On average, comments in Jordan’s rooms have a count of 50 words, although some comments are considerably longer or shorter. Roughly, the final document of comments consisted of 18,5000 words.

The first thing commenters reacted on was the song’s retrospective attitude. The line “*when I was young*,” sung by a thirteen-year-old puzzled them and they wondered “How does a little girl find that depth?” They respected and simultaneously questioned the manner in which Jordan managed to imbibe the lyrics with sincerity and passion, and reflected on the assumed *impossibility* that touched them so deeply. Pragmatics expressed it as “heard the words from Adele, felt them from Angelina.” Though thirteen was objectively young, in my opinion, one could also reason that the grown-up fans might have forgotten how deeply a child was actually capable of feeling. Furthermore, in their argumentation, they treated the young Jordan as if she, because of being a child, was different than the commenters, almost as if she lived in a country they themselves had already left behind (Bramness, 2015, p. 19).

This self-centered consideration of another individual’s age triggered skeptical comments as well: “Great cover but it is only a cover.” and “lyrics make it impossible to be taken seriously sung by a twelve–thirteen year old no matter how good she is.” In both cases, her young age played an important role in the comparison with Adele. Primarily, it made her performance appear even greater. As “all” knew Adele, being judged as a better vocalist did not go unnoticed. Though the commenters’ voices were anonymous catalysts in the vast space of YouTube, they became strangely relevant and specific in their singular context, as exemplified by the following comment:

> **Commenter:** Where Adele is screaming out, Angelina is singing. She shows the quality and strength of singing in a more quite voice, it is so powerful. Her voice is so rich, it has so many layers. Angelina has smoke in her voice, Adele doesn’t.

The mystery, flexibility, and ambiguity of the “age-card” was also played well by Smylyface (2019). When vlistening to her reaction, there appeared, at first, to be a kind of denial, a

[83] *Smylyfac*e’s reaction was published on February 24, 2019, approximately ten months after Jordan’s cover was posted on YouTube. *Smylyface* has 8,000–9,000 subscribers..

playing down of the importance of Jordan being a child, as the content creator formulated her initial thoughts: ”It’s not like listening to a child singer. It doesn’t matter that she is a child. She is my favorite female singer. Period” (Smylyface, 2019, 5:59–6:18). Seconds later, the content creator exclaimed, this time with particular emphasis on Angelina’s age: “The fact that she is just, well just turned **thirteen** years—that’s just incredible,” (6:30), in addition to: “O my God, a **thirteen-year-old** child that’s better than Adele” (7:47). The obvious contradiction in the reaction video’s argumentation was not reflected on by the commenters. They agreed with the reactor, even developing her argumentation further: “I am still trying to figure out what kind of fantastic woman’s voice is in that little sweetheart’s body?” Others seemed to know the answer: “Angelina does NOT sound like a child because she is an old soul that sings from beyond her heart that is full of pure LOVE with every word that comes out of her sweet voice.” Comments were thus influenced by the reactors’ articulated, and, through her vivid facial expressions also bodily mediated emotions and thoughts. There was a lot of appreciation—“this is exactly how *I* feel!”—and the reactor’s style was commented on: “I love your spontaneous laughter when you realize how good she is.” I found the reactor to occupy a type of power position (Foucault, 2000), as she enjoyed a different status than her followers, this being her channel and her presentation. Her authority was reconfirmed by the popularity of her reactions and the positive feedback from commenters. Furthermore, her respectful comparison of Jordan with Adele, were mirrored by equally respectful feedback from her followers, which thus, in turn, strengthened Jordan’s reputation additionally in terms of “Adele was *that* good, but young Jordan was even better!”

Both in the comment room from the reaction video and from Jordan’s original cover video Jordan was assigned clear artistic superiority over Adele. Yet, in the original Jordan video, the guitarist Ivan Mendez received just as much attention as Jordan herself. At first, I did not include him as a category in my analysis. A rechecking of the comment document, however, revealed that he played not only a small, but a major role in fans’ identification that particular performance as extraordinary. The interplay between Jordan and the guitarist was identified as enhancing their musical experiences, as “the voice dances with the guitar sound.” Mendez’s listening attitude and sensitive guitar play, and his friendly, concentrated, and handsome looks were repeatedly remarked upon, in addition to the fact that he seemed to fit Angelina in terms of age. He served as a kind of *mirror* for the commenters’ own emotions: “You can see how beautiful her voice is by the face of the guitarist who looks so happy and relaxed,” and “the guitar adds just enough music and actually emphasizes her voice.”

Ivan Mendez played the guitar on several of Jordan's covers; however, as I learned in an interview posted on YouTube between him and a Jordan fan, Alan Papier,[84] his collaboration with Jordan came to a somehow abrupt end. The interview provided an interesting insight into the experience of musicians working with Jordan—however, this was a focus I had to put aside for a future research project.

Two comments summed up most of what was expressed about Jordan's cover of "A Million Years Ago":

> **Commenter:** How is it possible for a twelve-to-thirteen-year-old to sing with the depth of emotion of a person who has lived with the pain and anguish she is so vividly portraying in this video? I honestly feel like crying... or hugging her and telling her it'll be ok. I mean, just watch the guitarist... several times you can see the emotional impact wash over him. To call Angelina special, is to call water, wet. There are not enough superlatives to accurately describe her abilities and connection of self. Humble. Wholesome. Confident. Able.
>
> **Commenter:** Soulful, touching and strong. Maybe the strongest you've done so far. You put your singing hands to the chest, bear your soul out and stop the world for a million years long moment. Some tears in my eyes, of course, from life and memories. But, as you know, quite often tears are nothing else but silent joy. I believe you're very close to the artist you shall be here. Excellent guitar too. It's just so beautiful altogether. I am spellbound.

Three years later (2021), the reactions to Jordan's second Adele cover, "All I Ask," released in 2021 (Angelina Jordan CoverChannel, 2021a), brimmed with much of the same enthusiasm and profound trust in the power of Jordan's musicality: "Angelina sings a song and the world becomes a better place." Many of her fans agreed with this comment, and similar attitudes were found in the comment rooms for her cover of "Nothing Breaks Like a Heart" by Mark Ronson, featuring Miley Cyrus.

The cyborg talentification narrative of Angelina Jordan consequently appeared to grow and expand with each cover she posted on YouTube. Cover songs strengthened her talent through commenters' musical experiences and fans' own, readily constructed images of Jordan's artistic persona (Auslander, 2021). In this manner, cyborg talentification processes

[84] Ivan Mendez interview by Alan Papier. View https://youtu.be/2uQyt2T3ayE

engendered a popular music stardom that functioned as “a platform for broader cultural meaning and action” (Auslander, 20121, p. 130), on which Angelina Jordan Astar always will be the exceptional YouTube child prodigy, irrespective of where her personal choices will take her in the future.

**Angelina Jordan’s “Nothing Breaks Like a Heart” cover (2019)**

Before presenting Angelina Jordan’s cover version of “Nothing Breaks Like a Heart” (Mark Ronson, n.d.), the original music video by Mark Ronson and Miley Cyrus (Mark Ronson, n.d.) is discussed, as it is in the breaking points between the original and the cover that Jordan’s interpretation is best understood and appreciated. The almost four-minute-long music video by Ronson and Cyrus, filmed in the Ukraine, followed the release of the song just a few months later and was uploaded on Cyrus’ official YouTube channel in January 2019. Upon first viewing, the ingredients of the video are reminiscent of a modern Bond-drama: helicopters, police cars, and heavily armed cops, large bridges with millions of fans, chaos, plundering, shooting, sex, and nightclubs. It all happens because, and in the trails of, the heroine, Miley Cyrus, who, with an inscrutable expression, mostly staring directly at her virtual audience, seems untouched by both the actual happenings and the lyrics she is singing. She gives a slightly more aggressive look when singing “this broken silence, my thunder crashing in the dark,” as the car stops inside a nightclub. Otherwise, Cyrus stays physically stable in her position, only changing seats at one point, revealing her naked behind while singing “We got all night to fall in love/ But just like that we fall apart, we’re broken,” leaving little space to imagine her loving as innocent and purely romantic. It could have stopped there. Yet, the narrative is sprinkled with brief clips of children, ten to twelve years of age—boys playing with cartridges, then shooting; girls in pink, with Miley hairdos, taking selfies outside the nightclub where the car bursts through the wall and surely would have killed them had it been a real setting. Cyrus, as the singer and main character, is, at all times, safely tucked away in her car before she eventually crashes on the highway and resurrects as an angel, standing open-armed in front of her upside-down car with dangling doors resembling wings. The lyrics indicate that this is a romantic breakup song. They tell the story of a couple, once madly in love, whose relationship seems beyond saving. The chorus, which is a repetition of the title, “Nothing Breaks Like a Heart,” is preceded by lyrics that accuse the world of hurting, cutting deep, and leaving scars. The video features bullets, commercial sex, a deathly car crash, children shooting with guns, and literally everything falling apart—a

vignette that appears rather cynical considering the lyrics claim nothing to be worse than a broken heart.

Lury (2002) argued that song lyrics were essential to the musical aspects of a song. Not all might agree with this notion, as some people even claim to never be able to take in the lyrics of a song at all, only the music. In pop music, lyrics play a critical role, in the sense that they invite fans to sing along and identify and empathize, even though pop lyrics, as has been discussed, were found to have low status (Frith, 1998). A catchy chorus that is easy to remember and easy to relate to, can be the key to a song's success. The statement "lyrics in popular songs are often concrete *and* mysterious," (p. 294) well described the lyrics of "Nothing Breaks Like a Heart," as they, notably without the distracting images of the video, allowed an easy understanding. Similar to a majority of Cyrus's work, her video juggled normative values of childhood innocence, sexuality, society's double morality, capitalism, and fandom (Bickford, 2020).

No glamour or material props support Jordan's cover (Angelina Jordan Cover Channel, 2018). As is usual in her raw material videos, the clip shows only Jordan and a microphone in front of a neutral background. Jordan stands in profile and is wearing a decorated denim shirt that is buttoned all the way up. The occasional instrumentalist from other videos is, in this cover, replaced by an authentic playback, used with the permission of Mark Ronson. Jordan begins the recording somewhat awkwardly by aiming some quick looks at the camera, waving to her virtual audience, and breaking into her "Mona Lisa smile," as fans have named her characteristic expression. Thereafter, the music engulfs her quickly, and all awkwardness is gone. Angelina Jordan's voice has depth, roughness, softness, grit, and flexibility. Without a trace of Cyrus's eroticism or the sexualized violent action featured in the original music video, she presents an interpretation of the song that made one of her roughly thousand commenters react in the following manner:

> **Commenter:** Everything this amazing angel sings is ten times better than the original. Her voice is an orchestra on its own… so much texture. I'm drawn into her full being and taken into the bliss and serenity she feels and wants me to feel.

Again, commenters expressed their fascination with the depth of feeling Jordan managed to convey, and were puzzled by how she managed to imbibe the lyrics with the pain of a breaking heart more convincingly than was achieved in the overloaded original Ronson–Cyrus music video. How the thirteen-year-old succeeded at adding the right portions of

sensitivity, appropriateness, and trustworthiness, without exaggeration, was interpreted in this comment room as the result of "serene, cosmic musicality." Fans perceived her to be "in the Goddess mode, compared to other suppose-superstars," a particular comment that was followed up by a more word-rich reaction:

> **Commenter:** What a presence! It's like she tells the artists she's covering that "You sing that well, but step aside and I'll show you how this should be done…" and she adds a level or two (And that is not bragging, she just performs).

I watched the official music video by Ronson/Cyrus after viewing Jordan's rendering of "Nothing Breaks Like a Heart." The contrast I experienced was considerable, almost as if these were two different songs. Or, to use Plasketes's (2010) image of the cover song as a time traveler, it was the same song but in a different body, a different voice, a different integrity, and in a different place. "Nothing Breaks Like a Heart" was also covered both by KIDZ BOP and Acapop!KIDS, the latter being a more advanced vocal group founded by the acknowledged American a-cappella group Pentatonix. Especially the version of Acapop!KIDS (Acapop!KIDS, 2020) offered an interesting comparison with Jordan's solo performance, not in the least because of the considerable high musical standard of both versions—though Acapop!KIDS' version was exceedingly technologically enhanced and thus impossible to judge fairly. In their cover, the thickness of the common sound provided by the group of nine singers, in combination with their rhythmic body sounds and the alternating solo voices, sharpened an awareness of the acute *loneliness* in the Jordan enterprise. The group of Acapop!KIDS singers provided a canvas of voices of a type that I later in this text (in Section 7.1.2.) have described as a "universal grain" that replaced the individual, singular voice. Commenters have remarked on the unusual richness and breadth in Jordan's voice, providing, at times, an almost symphonic quality, and, in such a perspective, Jordan's voice alone might be able to convey a type of "universal grain" that could help explain the comments on the therapeutical effects of Jordan's voice.

The next cover I discuss marked another threshold in Angelina Jordan's career, as it led to an expansion of her fan group and most likely to her signing a contract with Republic Records in 2020. It is Jordan's rendering of a two-and-a-half-minutes-long extract from "Bohemian Rhapsody" on the *AGT: The Champions* show. The discussed clip—there are many different versions on the platform—received over 35 million views and over 11,000 comments and stands thus out as her most viewed and reacted on video on YouTube.

**Angelina Jordan's cover of "Bohemian Rhapsody" (2020)**

> **Commenter:** Bohemian Rhapsody. What else. I guess there was silence in heaven when you sang. And exploding applause after. Your best performance ever. Divine simplicity. Divine sincerity. Divine power. Congratulations to you, Angelina!

Angelina Jordan had great hopes from her participation in the *AGT: The Champions* show. Yet, she also expressed that, if she were to win, she would remain humble and continue to work hard (Shackleford, 2020). She received the Golden Buzzer at her first performance and was thus granted a place in the finals without having to compete further. She did not win the show; however, her fans affirmed her that she had already won regardless of the final outcome. "Ok, she won, let's go home now," were the reactions after she had delivered "Bohemian Rhapsody" (Boris Palenovski, 2020). The fact that Queen tweeted "Wow, what a rendition!" must have been a nice appreciation to receive. However, her fans had more they wanted to say than just "wow":

> **Commenter:** Look and listen to her. No gimmicks, no pretense, no nudity, just great taste. No over-singing, no exaggeration. She's a brilliant performer and always communicates directly to the soul and conveys the lyrics of any song, no matter when it was written, in a way that speaks directly to the heart. She's a real game changer. She will be the one that brings style and class back to stages. She is of course going to go global, and she sings for us all, whether we are three years old or a hundred.

The performance lasted just a little over two minutes—two minutes that captivated an audience from all over the world, ushering forth goosebumps, shivers, shocks, tears, and even deeply felt gratitude communicated in the comment room. Fans crowned her as a game changer, a brilliant performer, a singer for all generations, and a sovereign lyric interpreter. In many ways, this act was a culmination all of her achievements up to that point, and, when she sang, "Too late, my time's come, sends shivers down my spine, body's aching all the time" with perfect timing, never letting one single note disappear too early, stretching the melody line without pressure, just with that breathy, pliable, soft, and powerful voice, I want to suggest that the performance embodied both her past, present, and future artistic persona. This act was there for a global community to witness and it was captured online forever—Jordan's digital footprints became firmly planted all over the internet. Since January 2021, those two minutes were shared, reacted to, and vlistened to thousands of times both on YouTube and on other social media platforms and streaming services.

### 5.5.4. Culturally and aesthetically cosmopolitan by means of genre and demeanor

The phenomenon of the Angelina Jordan cyborg talentification in a cultural cosmopolitan perspective was found to be centered on her elaborate jazz interpretations that carried a specific timeless quality, her particular repertoire of songs, the narrative of her artistic persona, and her unique performance style.

YouTube was specifically mentioned as the gatekeeper of the world of music for Jordan, and it was on YouTube she discovered her soulmate: jazz. She described herself finding all these great musicians and, I repeat once again, the *music finding her* (Song and Heart, 2014) when she was only a toddler. Jordan embraced this music with all her heart and in course of a few years of her career, transformed it in her own distinct way. Maybe because Jordan did not have an identifiable ethnic sound—new fans often ask where she is from—but a universal, timeless, and, simultaneously, specific and individual note in her voice and persona, she managed to attract fans from all corners of the world. Commenters identify themselves as being Asian, South-American, European, and Middle Eastern citizens.

As I will describe in more detail, I suggest that Jordan created her own genre that I want to describe as **jazz-popization** rather than as pop-rockization (Regev, 2013). It can be understood as a new substyle of aesthetic cosmopolitanism (p. 130). My conceptualization of a jazz-popization subgenre is the result of combining data materials from this study and theory.

Regev (2013) observed how “practicing and performing aesthetic cosmopolitanism, in the case of pop-rock aesthetic cultures, was immensely upgraded with the Internet” (p. 131). Consequently, different sub-styles could develop on social media platforms. Performing on YouTube with prepared YouTube videos and music clips allowed artists such as Justin Bieber and Angelina Jordan to front their own mix of musical styles with the particular authority provided by the platform. As fan bases were established, the styles of Bieber and Jordan created their own *aesthetic cultures*—“fluid, constantly changing realms” (p. 130), which were over time solid enough to be identified with the particular star. Commenters on YouTube described Angelina Jordan to be genre-unspecific, yet *knowledgeable* of genre, *and* as especially capable of mediating jazz (and blues) for pop audiences— singing jazzed up pop songs in a credible manner that conveyed meaning. Regev (2013) compared the type of knowledge base of particular aesthetic cultures that netizens create as they gather their music

with the concept of habitus, though without the either-or possession, but rather as dynamic and developing.

That the idea of Jordan creating her unique substyle of jazz-popization was credible gained further validity as her way of singing jazz received respect and appreciation both from genre-unspecified and pop-oriented commenters and representatives of the jazz community who stated: “Angelina Jordan is one of the most important finds in the entire history of jazz.” And in a reaction on her “7th Heaven” video, they observed: “As always she masters the song and fuses jazz and pop like no-one else.” In addition, Jordan’s offline activities and projects—the contract with Republic Records, the invitation to Quincy Jones’ birthday, and her performances in jazz clubs and festivals posted on YouTube—confirmed that she managed to cross genre borders. Her particular voice, her technique, her extensive jazz repertoire combined with her pop-music interpretations, and her demeanor seemed to open doors to global acknowledgement from both jazz-connoisseurs and laymen.

One example of this is also “I put a spell on you” (Angelina Jordan Official, 2016), which became one of Jordan’s most viewed videos from the first years of her career. Witnessing her sing this material at the age of ten clearly shocked common music lovers and experts alike, as the song is technically difficult and packed with powerful lyrics and “grown-up” emotions. Angelina Jordan’s interpretation was close to the Screamin’ Jay Hawkins version (Merv Griffin Show, 2012), and commenters were in no doubt abut her success:

> **Commenter:** She communicates the meaning behind the song so well. The song is about a heartbroken girl who still loves her man so much even after his running around with other women that she is putting a spell on him to keep him hers. The anger and desperation comes through when she sings the “I love you” part and it's a true tribute to Screamin' Jay Hawkins's version from 1956. Her expressiveness is astonishing—a fantastic vocal talent for this century.

Personally, I always thought that Jordan, when singing “I put a spell on you,” pictured herself in the act of casting a spell quite literally, and that this image colored her musical interpretation. I could almost see her wearing a pointy witch’s hat with green, disheveled hair and a black, shabby coat reaching down to her ankles—an image that felt more comfortable and appropriate for a ten-year-old than that of her singing about desperate romantic love. This image was, of course, also much in alignment with the bewitching version of Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, the pioneer of shock rock. The witch-like attitude in Jordan’s version showed a

convincing, individualistic, but not personal, interpretation (Barthes, 1977/1990) through which she managed to enter the mad fury and power of a sorceress. Interestingly, despite, or perhaps because of, the well-conducted anger and fury in Jordan's interpretation, a couple of commenters referred to the therapeutic effects of Jordan's talent in general and in "I Put a Spell on You" in particular. They described how they actually employed Jordan's voice as a drug-replacement, as it put them under a spell:

> **Commenter:** I find it very interesting, and strange at the same time that you can scroll through the comment section of nearly all of her [Jordan's] music clips and people are having the same experiences that it's almost like it is a force that we have no control over. I put her songs on as a way to help the struggle of getting through the constant up and downs of steering away from a horrible drug addiction and when I heard her voice for the first time the other day after my father mentioning her and sharing a link to the clip of "I put a spell on you," about 20 seconds in to the song it really did have a spellbound effect and words could never describe the emotions I felt. It's as if the state of the world at the moment needed something or someone to wake people up before it's too late, whether that be too late for themselves personally or collectively.

Though this comment appeared to have been written by an especially sensitive person, it was representative of others' experiences. Therefore, I turned to Jordan's interpretation once again, now with an ear and eye for the abovementioned effect of her voice, trying to find the "force that we have no control over." There were other covers by Jordan that struck me as more magnetic, though what I did perceive were the intense bodily expressions she engaged in here. At 2:09, these are mainly observable in her face and hands, whereas at 2:41, her whole body cringes with the extraordinary sounds she has to produce, and she seems to be almost struggling against gravity. Then, from 2:47 onward, holding that long line of the melody with full power, allowing herself only a quick breath at 2:57, she again has the earth-directed weight of an opera singer, following her phrase to the end with a full and rich timbre. The magnetic effect of her singing could be attributed to her ability to stay inside and with the music, never letting go; even her pauses to breathe cannot push away the vlisteners, instead, they draw them closer. The original version by Jay Hawkins from 1956 received considerable attention and was included as one of the five hundred most influential songs in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. That a young jazz-singer in 2016 again opened this song more than half a century later in a manner that engaged both the "old" and also the new generation of jazz

lovers—on and through YouTube—was a remarkable accomplishment, and another example of her jazz-popization mediating the type of aesthetic cosmopolitanism Jordan represented.

There were still two more layers in Jordan's live and artistic choices that supported and emphasized her cultural/aesthetic cosmopolitan attitudes, in addition to coloring her artistic persona and, in turn, also the cyborg talentification processes creating the artist Angelina Jordan. These were her cosmopolitan upbringing and, especially, the story behind her decision to always perform barefoot.

Jordan has Norwegian, Swedish, Iranian, and Japanese roots and mastered English and Norwegian already at a young age. Her family lived in the Middle East and Norway before they moved to the USA. Her love for the jazz genre and her life experiences from having been exposed different cultures at an early age delineated in her personal biography, might have together equipped her with the characteristics of an almost innate cultural cosmopolitan, with traits that have become inseparable from her artistic persona and success. Her cultural cosmopolitanism was inspired, and is continuously sustained by the story that earned her the adage of the "the barefoot princess." The emotional narrative, based on a real experience, was captured in Jordan's book (Jordan, 2015), written by herself and illustrated by her grandmother, Mery Zamani; however, this story was retold by Jordan herself in several interviews uploaded on YouTube. Both at the *Lindmo* (Yozhik v Tumane, (2019c)[85] and *AGT: The Champions* (Rusty Shackleford, 2020) interview, Jordan recaptured the story about her meeting with an unprivileged girl in the Middle East—though it could be anywhere, she said—who earned her money by weighing people. On the street, the two children started to talk to each other and made a mutual vow to never give up hope. Angelina Jordan gave the girl her own shoes, and, in memory of that girl, she has performed barefoot ever since. In the interview (Rusty Shackleford, 2020) conducted prior to the *AGT: The Champions* show, Jordan recalled the experience:

> **Jordan:** I asked her what she wanted to become, and she answered I want to become a doctor, but I can't because my parents have passed away and I have siblings. And then she told me what do you want to be when you are big? And I said I want to be a superstar and sing for the whole world, and she said I'm going to pray for you. And that's why whenever I sing on stage, I always remind [*sic*] about all the children that

[85] More about this interview in Section 6.2.4.

> don't have any parents and clothes and shoes. (Rusty Shackleford, 2020, my transcription)

That meeting on a street in the Middle East was a clearly existential experience for the young artist, which Jordan convincingly confirmed, whenever asked. It imprinted itself on her musical project and became inseparable from her artistic persona, emphasizing her cultural, aesthetic, and idealistic cosmopolitan attitudes. She declared in her book: "I am both a human being and a child" (Jordan, 2015), connecting herself, thus, to the whole adult world but also to the child demographic. Jordan, as a teenager, expressed in retrospect how she, throughout her child star career, experienced frustration over having to defend her ability to understand and interpret what the media, interviewees, judges, and adults in general anticipated to be complicated adult feelings, preserved for adult artists only. On the webpage, *The Honey POP*, the young artist expressed her dilemma:

> **Jordan:** I think one of the hardest parts was to be told that I was too young to share my music. I have been told that I am an old soul. A lot of people did not understand how someone so young could feel and project the kind of emotions and feelings that come with life experience. To me, art doesn't have any age gap/restrictions, it is for everyone, all ages. (Picou, 2021)

Jordan's statement that art did not have age restrictions, and her unique genre of her jazz-popization together with her natural, inherited cosmopolitanism, governed the child celebrity Angelina Jordan's contributions to popular music culture. Wishing for a world with no age-related distinctions in music—ultimately making music ageless—could also be identified as Jordan's specific type of interpretive reproduction—or as a heartfelt, deep sigh from the young artist, finding words for the profound desperation she felt repeatedly during her child star career, always having to defend her maturity.

This "crack" in her artistic persona provoked by the experience of not belonging to either world—child or adult—is further elaborated on in Chapter 6, where it was found mirrored in the media's questioning of the young celebrities.

# 6. Child stars' futures in times of YouTube

The big and fateful question whether audiences will "still love [the prodigies] when they are adults" (De Mink & McPherson, 2016, p. 439), haunts all small performers, and child stars have handled this issue in divergent ways. Some have tried to create their own "Neverland," a personal "sanctuary," as Jefferson (2018, p. 1) called it, on in which Peter Pan makes sure childhood will last forever. Such attempts make people wonder at times whether—as in the case of the adult Michael Jackson—they see a "man, man–boy, or boy–woman … mannequin or postmodern zombie" (Jefferson, 2018, p. 12). Others have invested deliberate efforts into breaking away from their perceived childhood innocence by replacing it with "bad girl" artefacts, as demonstrated by Miley Cyrus (Bickford, 2020).[86] By its very nature, the child star phenomenon's time is bound to come to an end, and *something* has to be done if the child star is to continue an artistic career and not experience failure because of their "inability to remain a child" (Bernstein, 2013, p. 207). As Whiteley (2003) observed:

> For teen-directed pop, the dividing line between youthful attraction and being "over the hill" occurs around the age of 25 … The question is thus raised of what happens to popular music's "old boys and old girls" when they exit from the fast lane of superstardom, and, more specifically, is there any way back? (p. 169)

Bamberger (2016) lowered the age threshold from child to adult considerably, and named the transition from the one to the other as "the *midlife crisis* [as it] seems to occur in the mid-teens—midlife for those whose public careers may have begun at age 5 or 6" (p. 294). Typical conflict faced by child prodigies in their midlife crisis, according to Bamberger, is their attempt to tackle and understand how they, at a young age, were able to do what they did—working hard, practicing, and excelling in their area of expertise.

With the intention of answering research question three, the main issues that are addressed in the next sections are (a) whether the idea of the Western[87] child prodigy has changed at all, or whether it has frozen in time. Further, I want to examine (b) how the media converses with child stars, especially about their musical futures, and how the child stars themselves think

[86] Compare also Section 5.5.3. and the music video for "Nothing Breaks Like A Heart" by Miley Cyrus.
[87] Western is used because my artists are from a Western context. More on West–Far East differences in Section 8.2.2.

about their musical futures. I am (c) interested in the nature of questions the media are posing and the kind of answers the child stars provide them with.

Thus, the place of the child prodigy in society is investigated once again, but now with an added focus on the impacts and concerns of being a child star, and on what might come *after* the child celebrity time. The discussions are based on data from interviews made available on YouTube, from YouTube comments, some selected online news channels, and from existing scholarship of the child prodigy discourse and child development (Askerøi & Vestad, 2021; Bamberger, 2016; Bernstein, 2013; Bickford, 2016, 2020; Corsaro, 2018; de Mink & McPherson, 2016; Jackson, 2018; Jenkins, 1998; O'Connor, 2009; Ruthsatz et al., 2014; Shavinina, 1999; Vestad & Dyndahl, 2017; Warwick, 2016; Whiteley, 2003). Further, the discussions are put into their context in dialogue with theory and research discussed in this study (Bernstein, 2008; Haraway, 1991; Lange, 2019; Ruud, 2013; Shuker, 2016; Vetlesen, 2007).

Whiteley (2003) presented a rather sinister perspective when she stated: "Exposure to fame is always problematic, but with the young it is doubly so, and even those who survive tend to bear the scars" (p. 31). Whiteley has projected here a vision of recovering from a child prodigy career as a matter of life and death. Her analyses of child star celebrities, namely Michael Jackson, Tori Amos, and Brenda Lee, illustrate how early fame comes at a cost. Yet there are not only the accomplished child stars to be concerned about. Next to them are "the others," the unaccomplished, half-initiated child stars who have never quite managed to live up to their own and their environments' musical expectations, and who might display high levels of burn out long into their adult lives (de Mink & McPherson, 2016, p. 439). Also, there are those prodigies who have never fully recovered from their midlife crisis, and who "tend to keep their pasts hidden" (Bamberger, 2016, p. 294).

I start by bringing Bickford's (2016, 2020) research on young, online talent back into the discussion, opening with his quote: "YouTube literally mediates connections among children, but it also symbolically mediates the conceptual gulf between childhood and publicity by envisioning an intimate online public space grounded in domesticity" (Bickford, 2020, p. 166). I found this observation specifically significant, though in somewhat modelled conditions, in the case of Marcus & Martinus, who consistently engaged with their fans through the YouTube camera in their fan-answering videos, showing them around their house and taking them along in their ordinary daily routines. This is also true for Angelina Jordan, and especially her raw material music videos, which, even though not taken in bedrooms or

kitchens, are mediating a kind of safe intimacy—a closeness of sound with her breath almost entering the vlistener's own four walls.

## 6.1. Child prodigies and child stars on YouTube

In his research on Justin Bieber, Bickford (2016) discussed the apparently immense influence exercised by both the youthful singer and the youthful audience, and how these together accommodate and inform children's music media. Here, he also introduced what he identified to be an attempt by contemporary children's media to justify their entry into traditionally protected childhood places, thus enabling them to impose their visions of commercial mass celebrity and popular stardom on young children (Bickford, 2016, p. 764). Bickford described this process as an intermarriage between the old or traditional concept of child prodigy and the new concepts of tween and online video sharing. This marriage resulted, according to Bickford (2016), in a "complicated inversion of talent and childishness—or even talent *as* childishness" (p. 763) that was devoid of actual ambitions for adulthood. In this manner, he identified modern child prodigies to be as much caught in a fixed time slice as they always have been, though Bickford viewed the traditionally assumed firm combination of talent and maturity (performing at an adult level) in a different light. Talent *as* childishness can, to a certain degree and with varying emphasis, be observed in all three sampled stars/groups and their data material. Yet, I employ the concept with a slightly different emphasis than Bickford (2016), who specifically emphasized the strong commercial aspects of his conceptualization, which serves only part of the current study's focus, and is most conspicuous in the case of Marcus & Martinus. Furthermore, only Marcus & Martinus, and to a certain degree, The BlackSheeps, attracted a juvenile audience, whereas Jordan has had adult fans from the start. In my findings, childishness is maybe not replaced but certainly supplemented with *innocence* as the main marker of a child star authenticity.

Furthermore, on a broader term, the phenomenon of young children performing popular music represented by the tween movement, described by Bickford (2020) is, in my context, instrumentalized as a path-maker, an enforcement, and a legitimator of recent children's pop music engagement in the Norwegian context and certainly also on the international YouTube platform. I then traced these strategies as they moved into alternative modes of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 2018) by referring to three case-specific embodiments, as discussed in Sections 5.3.4, 5.4.4, and 5.5.4.

Talent as innocence plays into this study's motivational level of *preconceptions about childhood*, and the comments indicate a strong embedment in a traditional Western childhood–adulthood dichotomy. Commenters, in general terms, interpretate stars' fame to be a result of a working distinction between the worlds of adults and children. The line between these two spheres is drawn at particular topics and abilities, cross-correlated with age. However, the age threshold proved to be inconsistent in the three cases. In the data, maintaining a distinct adult and child discourse, where *certain music is meant for children and other music for adults*, did not necessarily stand as an absolute demand but, rather, it figured as a measure for extraordinariness. A clear separation allowed for the appropriate amazement to arise, when children were singing *adult music in an adult manner*—a separation that also relied on the conception of children being inferior to adults, making the prodigy experience a result of a power imbalance (Bickford, 2016; de Mink & McPherson, 2016). Being able to not only master adult songs technically but also imbibe them with the "right" emotions, led to children being "automatically" identified as extraordinary, thereby creating signposts of their stardom. The data further highlighted that children with extraordinary abilities are given an endearing position in society, a reality that was confirmed by theory (Jenkins, 1998; O'Connor, 2009). Regardless of whether these abilities are developed during particular sensitive cognitive periods (Shavinina, 1999) or could be defined as innate (Ruthsatz et al., 2014), they self-evidently transformed children into transcendent beings (O'Connor, 2009), or even into "monsters" with superpowers (Haraway, 1991). As I have explained before in my text, and will discuss further in this chapter, my data posits society—represented by commenters, talent shows, talk shows, and interviewees—to have an articulated (economic, cultural, and psychological) interest in maintaining this institution of child prodigy built on "two generational worlds." This institution, through its observed actions, shows interest in feeding society's expectations of children as being less musically intelligent and mature than adults, as this conceptualization guarantees the shock when exactly the opposite happens and children perform in the manner of adults (Shavinina, 1999). A discussion worth having here concerns the preconceived, normative manner in which *adults* are invisibly integrated into this discourse on child prodigy. I could find no indications, and none or very rare reflections in the comment rooms or in the questions posed by the media, which challenged the normative ideas of adult abilities. If there were any, they addressed the grade of musicality but hardly ever the emotional side of the matter. Thus, the general awareness of what an average adult was meant to be able to do and especially feel, existed only as an empty space on the other side of the child–adult dichotomy. I could find little, or

no research on this matter; yet, even without academic conceptualizations, simple common sense suggests that all adults are far from being able to interpret and express the emotions that are so open-handedly called *adult* emotions. However, tearing down borders between children and adults does not serve society's need for the child prodigy myth to shine (O'Connor, 2009), nor does it correspond with the findings in the data. Here, a child star is identified as a child transcending the adult–child categorization—which has to exist in order to be transcended. The mission of the child star, if it can even be called that, has been identified in my findings as being able to touch and shock ordinary individuals with their extraordinary abilities, giving them "life-transforming and deeply upsetting impulses." In this way, child stars *rub against* the fixed thresholds surrounding the imaginations of how life is constructed, and extraordinariness is thus paralleled to the sensations called forth by, what Vetlesen (2007) described as existential musical experiences.

Another strategy I identified in the data that was employed to understand, maintain, and cope with the myth of the child prodigy was the conception of talented children living parallel lives. In such a strategy lies implicit the wish for sustaining talent as innocence, and the child stars' authenticity in their own space and room,[88] outliving the normal child development. Fans expressed this utopian longing for eternal innocence with comments such as "stay away from drugs!" and "stay who you are!" thus hoping to keep their star from the contaminations of real life. The empirical material thus confirmed that fans in comment rooms and talent shows do not really want their young stars to grow up; instead, they urge the artists to hold on to their child identity equating not only talent but also *authenticity* with innocence. Many grownups in the data—commenters that identified themselves as such—expressed a strong distrust, almost derision, for the state of affairs in the so-called adult world from which the child stars have to be protected. In cases where the fans themselves identified as children and teenagers, such reflections were less dominating; however, as reviewed in the case of Marcus & Martinus and their touring with Derulo, they were considered there too. What is lacking in all these comments, is self-reflection inquiring: "What about us? How do *we* cope with the dark sides? Is this sexy dance too much for *us*? Is the LA music business too much for *us*?" Instead, society at large is described as something existing in a different room, whose key had to be kept hidden as long as possible. More realism is spotted in the comment below:

[88] Compare Section 5.5.3

> **Commenter**: I learned over the years that my predictions for kids that have amazing talent almost never work out the way I thought it would. Yes, it would seem Angelina will have a great career, but things happen in life. Who knows what will happen. It could be she will end up singing on a Carnival Cruise ship because there is no market anymore for jazz. I see Bieber, Nicky and Miley on stage and I think what is this crap that's so popular? Why has real music died? Maybe we just ran out of ideas, and rap was the last dregs in the barrel. The music industry is controlled by teens and near-teens, as it always has been. That group cares nothing for jazz and Angelina. I really, really hope she makes it in spite of that. A lot of what she has achieved already is because she is so young and people are amazed at her voice. Going forward . . . who can tell. We can't just hit subscribe and watch her vids on YouTube; we have to actually BUY her album and spend money to see her in person. Otherwise she will fade away and we will muse: "What happened to that Norwegian girl 40 years ago that was so good. I wonder what she is doing now?"

I would especially like to highlight three points presented in this comment: the recognition of Jordan's young age and voice as the gateway to her child star success, the perception of the young generation as not appreciating Jordan's genre and style of music, and the commenter's insight into the pragmatic side of child star success depending on economic commitment. This third insight confirms the key role marketing plays in making child stars famous and the idea of commercial success equaling prodigious talent described academically by Bickford (2020). Hence, although the YouTube commenter's words are a personal account based on their personal taste in music and a particular star, they say something universal about young consumers' domination of the market and the commercial side of success. Moreover, it addresses the never-silenced question of child personae, of adult worlds, and how these might affect the future of child stars. These perspectives are further problematized in the next paragraphs.

### 6.1.1. Ambiguity of thresholds

The paradox inherent in the fact that fans and society love their child stars as innocent equaling authentic and talented, and the need to keep them that way, whilst simultaneously expressing thoughts, concerns, and hopes about their artistic and personal futures, was puzzling, but also somewhat understandable. For the child stars, this implies having to work against an expectation that contradicts the very nature of development, and especially the

physical part of it. For, not only do their visible bodies change, but also their audible parts experience a transformation. In fact, both girls and boys go through a voice change in puberty which may well alienate them to their own voices and possibly also imply that their "adult voice might not be attractive at all" (Warwick, 2016, p. 725) to their child star audiences. In my data, fans' devotion was found to be bound up to the familiar and, thus, appeared alongside a preference: "this is how we like it!" Following Shavinina's (1999) observation that, "human beings always have been astonished at one thing: that child prodigies are able to do something that is only accomplished by adults," (p. 25) highlights that the amazement and that preference a child star enjoys is likely to stop when they are no longer a child. I further suggest, leaning on Bernstein (2013), that concerns about child stars' futures are as much fans' and society's *personal* and *collective* anxieties about losing what they had and cherished than actual worries about the stars themselves. In the following paragraphs, I trace how The BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus and Angelina Jordan have handled, and begin to handle, their entry into adult artistry—or what Bamberger (2016) described the transition from "intuitive prodigious childhood toward mature spontaneous artistic performance" (p. 315).

The BlackSheeps' crossover is not really observable from the data I have presented so far, as I have used only material from the original band. As noted, their youthful rebellion, their punk revolution, was vigorous, however, it was quickly cut off due to the original band's breakup. Scanning additional material from YouTube, from after the original four's active time, allowed me a glance at their attempted path toward adulthood. The new group constellation sought restored fame in the same arenas where The Blacksheeps' original four had succeeded as child stars—a choice that apparently did not contribute to further development. Though The BlackSheeps' participation at the *MGP* in 2011 did secure them a second place, they subsequently disappeared from the public spotlight, and certainly from YouTube. Agnete Johnsen made several attempts to pursue a solo career, which are archived on YouTube, such as her participation at the *MGP* in Stockholm with "Icebreaker" (NRK, 2016), representing Norway in 2016, which unfortunately ended in a personal breakdown. Eventually, Johnsen reappeared in the public light, now as Agnete Saba, an old family name linking her to her Sámi roots. She also reunited with Emelie Nilsen in a new band called Agnete. They released two singles in 2020, where the first number has the possibly telling title: "Beginning of the end." To trace the adult Viktoria Eriksen, I had to turn to online news articles. There, I found evidence that Eriksen was enjoying the perfect job—her words—of a music manager. Nothing current on the band's bassist, Alexander Touryguin, could be found online after The

BlackSheeps' breakup in 2010. However, Agnete Saba's 2021 musical engagements reawakened the original band's old video footage on YouTube, and the young Touryguin was seen back in place on the platform.

In the Marcus & Martinus discourse, expectations about the length of their child career have been captured in the young artists' own words: "We did not think this would last for so long, after *MGPjr*, so we thought we just enjoy it as long as we can" (Hype Music, 2020b, 2:14). The child star narrative of Marcus & Martinus covers a timespan of almost nine years. Yet, if Marcus & Martinus are to continue their career and keep on making their music available on YouTube, old footage will keep popping up, new fans will discover their past, and, in that way, their time as child stars will be maintained in a kind of *online Neverland* (Jackson, 2018). In 2021, Marcus and Martinus turned nineteen years of age; thus, their way into adulthood should have been observable. However, the COVID-19 lockdown has given them an unwanted break from concerts and music productions. It has made their path forward harder to predict, even for themselves, at least according to the public impression they choose to give. In an interview posted by a fan (Mmer Anime, 2021), Marcus and Martinus explain how difficult it has been to be stopped by pandemic restrictions, and how this has prolonged their process of evolving their child star music into a more mature version. The matter is further complicated as their fans continue to connect affectionally to the duo's child versions *and* their own fan-child feelings: "You are not just little boys from Norway anymore, but you still belong to my little mmer-heart." Also here, the archival quality of YouTube can prove to be a hindrance rather than an asset when attempting to change an image, reminding the world of how they used to be. The complex matter of digital archives raises the question of people's mediated legacy (Lange, 2019) and the unclear consequences of having left "representations of ourselves online in perpetuity" (p. 187). I observed how the cyborg system shares its materials continuously with the whole world, resembling a magic, interactive global photo album, to fulfill the prophecies of the internet making changes to time (Castells, 2000). To the direct question on whether they were worried their music career was about to end as they were no longer underaged, Martinus answered "Yes" quite spontaneously (Mmer Anime, 2021, 1:09). He explained that he was anxious that their musical career was over *because* they had been child stars. They did want to continue with music, but they also wanted to change their style and distance themselves from their *barnestjerne* image (Mmer Anime, 2021).

In the Jordan material, which has been identified as a discourse on protection and development upheld by a discourse on child prodigy, the theme of fans' wanting to watch

over her transition into adulthood, was detected in a vast section of comments. This was somewhat contradictory to the fact that Jordan's *music* has been identified and discussed as "adult" from the very start of her career. Yet, Jordan's commenters bring up the dark world out there, endangering the bright room of Jordan's innocence; a darkness that threatens to destroy their authentic star: "Angelina's voice, technique and soul are incomparable! I hope she becomes the greatest singer of this century. But, most of all that she doesn't lose herself in drugs and the fame race." Another adds:

> **Commenter 2:** I too hope Angelina will grow into one of the big ones. Lucky her parents are very careful with her and let her be a child for as long as she needs to. It would have been so, so easy to start promoting her career way too soon. I hope the security and down to earth mentality they install in her will keep her safe from drugs and abuse later in life.

Even though fans wish for Jordan to develop, they express that they want her to do so in a particular manner. Drugs and a ruthless music industry are identified to be among the most threatening forces the young artist needs protection from. Where exactly the transition into adulthood might be acceptable is an open question, both for fans and the star herself. In an interview with *Skavlan* that was posted on YouTube (Emmanuel MIGNOT, 2020),[89] Angelina Jordan is asked if she feels like a twelve-year-old. Her answer, "I feel twelve when I look at my passport" (Emmanuel MIGNOT, 2020, at 4:50), is met with consenting laughter from the audience. The commenter concludes by saying, "Yes, that's what we thought. It has to be difficult to tell yourself that you are twelve when you have this life, this talent and people tell you that you are so special." The TV host introduces his question with: "Many people say that you don't *sound* like a twelve-year-old," before adding, "but do you *feel* like one?" (Emmanuel MIGNOT, 2020, at 4:37). Thus, he confronted Jordan with the way "everyone" talked about her. The description—of not sounding like a twelve year old—is packed with preconceptions. Looking at the situation more closely, to be called special, and to be described as not sounding like other children of the same age, is close to the understanding that something is "wrong" here. It suggests that there *is* supposed to be a different sound, a *child sound* there, consequential to the expectation that Jordan should "sing like a child" (Askerøi & Vestad, 2021, p. 51). There were—though only occasionally—comments found in the Jordan discourse addressing just this matter: "I prefer her when she was younger. Lately,

[89] The interview was done by *SKAVLAN*, a Swedish-Norwegian talk-show, yet the video footage referred to here only shows parts of the interview, edited by a French commenter on YouTube.

her singing doesn't call my attention. Maybe her voice changed or maybe she is less cute now for me, I don't know." Such argumentation about an aesthetic vocality does little justice to the music conveyed (Askerøi & Vestad, 2021). It also constitutes another signpost of society's urge to make her talent extraordinary by applying a narrow, adult discourse—"only adults can sing like this!"—onto Jordan's development of an ageless musicality that has never felt the need to represent children's music. Jordan simply wants to make music that is without age.[90] Commenters, however, seem to judge her in the way Whiteley (2003) found the public judging one of her research cases, that on Brenda Lee, described as "the little girl with the grown up reactions" (p. 25). In other words, Jordan's fans do not [really] think of music as ageless; rather, they put the age of her music into contrast with the age of the child performer. Whiteley (2003) would have probably never accepted a naïve—and even unselfish—motivation behind such utterings of Jordan's (or Lee's) fans. Her analyses were focused on unraveling the erotic tensions the young girl(s) were subjected to by society. As is the case with Jordan, Lee boasted a mature repertoire at a young age, with songs that, according to Whiteley, reflected "the tension between Lee's adult delivery, her appearance and the socially prescribed innocence of her actual age" (p. 24). This "exploitative play on innocence vs knowingness has a long history within popular music" (p. 21). Whiteley found this tradition to continue rather undisturbed, as I also noted in the case of Marcus & Martinus (Section 5.3).

### 6.1.2. Angelina Jordan child prodigy mystery

In this section, I will discuss and reflect on some of the complex and partly contradictory material that I found in the data connected to Angelina Jordan. Her main discourse has been described as carried by the institution of the child prodigy, as discussed in Section 5.5.2. This touches upon the manner in which she is talked about and judged; further, it says something about the commenters' feelings, expectations, and musical experiences that are evoked by her performances and artistic persona. The type of music she makes—jazz and blues—paired with her demeanor—"classy"— challenge aspects of the traditional child prodigy set-up and the notion of talent as innocence and authenticity. An entanglement of agelessness, innocence, and sincerity can be discerned, which makes me want to trace this mystery of child prodigy in more details. Still, in some way, it seems right to say that the "old-fashioned" child prodigy concept has become oddly revived in the Jordan case, despite the modern mediation of her musical material on YouTube. As in the case of Mozart, who was "allowed" to play whatever

[90] Compare Sections 5.1.2., 5.5.4. and 6.2.4.

advanced music he wanted and to develop at his own genius-speed, neither Jordan nor her manager have insisted on indulging in a childishness or an exaggerated emphasis on prematurity. At the same time, both Mozart's and Jordan's family enjoy, or have enjoyed, social as well as economic and cultural attention due to the young age of their prodigious musician, and both families have interpreted their role of offering guidance and education seriously. Jordan's cover repertoire, packed with songs and texts that might shout "child-alert," are handled professionally and are taken seriously by fans and critics, possibly making the matter of age, though signaled as astonishing, not as important as her musicality. At least it appears so from a perspective taken that does not belong to interviewers, media reviews, and YouTube reactors.

Jordan's musical development has been found to be continuously appreciated and noticed right up to the end of this project (2021), with commenters' observation such as, "she sounds great as she ages, like a great bottle of Australian Penfolds wine." The idea of her aging, as expressed in the last quote, does sound somewhat absurd when used in reference to a fifteen-year-old; however, it is a relevant and appropriate description from an aesthetic–artistic perspective describing an almost 15-year long development. The idea of aging like wine further evokes reverberations of the vocal qualities of jazz that Jordan has been aiming at honing since she was a toddler. The genre of jazz, as a culture phenomenon, has not been "infantized" in the same manner as has the genre of pop–rock, as described by Bickford (2020), even though there exist jazz versions of traditional children's songs on *Spotify* playlists and YouTube. Jazz has, to my judgement, kept an air of self-declared, mature professionalism attached to it, and Jordan herself has never belittled her covers of classical jazz. Her own version of a jazz-popization, as described in 5.5.4, strives for maturity, not naiveté. I suspect that the genre of jazz, which supports her stand as a cultural/aesthetic cosmopolitan, might make her transition into an adult performer quite natural; though there is no knowing what will replace the flair and fascination of her specific child prodigy identity. Possibly, the genre of jazz might render a child–adult timeline less interesting than other genres, even though it has forged her particular artistic persona. Her musical and artistic commitment is certainly praised by her fans and carries futuristic visions: "It's like jazz for a new generation. She will hopefully be the jazz miracle for the next 50 years." All comments I have used in this paragraph so far are connected to her latest release, and I, therefore, consider it worthwhile to focus in-depth on Jordan's second single with Republic Records, "7th

Heaven" (Angelina Jordan Official, 2021c) to also find something of Jordan's own voice discussing her prodigiousness and the expectations connected with it.

As mentioned in Section 5.5., I interpreted the lyrics of this song as an expression of the challenges Jordan might be experiencing, having to live up to her fans' and the media's perceptions of her as "God-given," "angelic," and as "healing the world with her voice." Already the title of the song, combining the number seven[91] and the concept of Heaven, suggests something of the like. The chorus indicates some inner conflict:

> Seventh Heaven on my shoulders falls heavy/ Sometimes I feel all my dreams are slowly fading/ I see myself in the mirror, I wanna love the person looking back at me/ Seventh heaven on my shoulders falls (Angelina Jordan Official, 2021c, 0:35–1:01)

Young Jordan, or so it certainly seemed at the age of seven when auditioning with "Gloomy Sunday," had many dreams that most likely were more vivid and accessible for her when she was still a very young child. At fifteen, Jordan's lyrics resemble an attempt to reconstruct or retell the story of the artistic persona of the seven-year-old wonder girl:

> Sometimes I wanna be powerful/ Gotta find the strength within me/Sometimes you look for miracles/ but there's nothing in you (Angelina Jordan Official, 2021c, 1:04–1:16)

Here, Jordan appears to make a kind of reimbursement with the adage of "angelic" that was accorded to her, because there were no guarantees that the miracles inside her would last—if they ever had been there. As such, this might have been a typical reflection by a child prodigy in a midlife crisis (Bamberger, 2016). Bamberger interpreted child prodigies' midlife reactions as a "powerful effect of these prodigious children seeking to look at the very means that they previously simply looked *through*" (p. 295). The new kind of analytical conversation described by Bamberger might be occurring in Jordan's lyrics, as the young artist opens up about the need to occasionally dilute focus and rid herself of melancholy:

> Sometimes you have to let go/And get lost in the moment/Sometimes you wanna be careless/And let go of sadness/ (1:17–1:30)

[91] The number seven is used around 735 times in the Bible and holds symbolic value also in other religions, numerology, and mysticism.

Then, standing forth, she acknowledges disappointments and pairs it with her youthful call for hope:

> All you know a lot of bitterness/There is nothing to do about it/Life should be/Life should be/Lived with hope. (Angelina Jordan Official, 2021c, 2:26–2:45)

Her fans interpreted her lyrics as signs of her maturity and praised her for the same. However, though the development of her talent was welcomed, fans still hoped for her to keep her talent as innocent in “a corner of her being.”

> **Commenter:** Listen to the lyrics, Angelina is growing up. The talent does not diminish, it becomes a little more refined a little more nuanced every time. When it comes to this genre of music Angelina is simply the best maybe of all time. In the lyrics, she is beginning to challenge herself, can she achieve the things she wishes for? Does she have the inner strength to pursue her goals? These are the thoughts of a growing maturity. I believe and hope her family and those close to her will never let her lose self-belief and that there will always be a corner of her being that has the naivety of the eight year old Angelina.

The generally warm welcome that her March 2021 release, “7th Heaven,” received on YouTube reflects the recognizable Angelina Jordan discursive atmosphere of her initial—as in earliest—comment rooms. One specific text sums up the faith of her fans, elegantly solving the problem of the “child-adult-or-what” obsession: “Angelina is my favorite child singer, adult singer, and … well I’m sure that she’ll also be my favorite singer when she’ll be a grandma.” This comment might have something to do with how Jordan, in “7th Heaven,” is also perceived as recreating the authentic jazz atmosphere of earlier times:

> **Commenter:** I have to listen a few times to believe what I am hearing. In seconds I felt I was in a jazz club in the 50ies. Angelina is our time machine bringing so much joy in this difficult period for humanity.[92]

The nostalgia and simultaneous modernity commenters experienced in Jordan’s productions is paired with the soothing quality of her voice that fans hope for her to carry into her future career. The comment rooms give an even warmer response to her cover of Adele’s “All I Ask” (Angelina Jordan CoverChannel, 2021) that was released shortly after “7th Heaven” at the end of March 2021. Here, Jordan is, for the first time, enthusiastically called the “Queen

[92] Difficult times in humanity refers here to COVID-19.

of YouTube … with nothing of the auto tune voices that otherwise are common on the channel." In "All I Ask," comments react to each other as they compete to express the whole register of feelings and reflections that Jordan's interpretations manage to incite. The simplicity of the setting, "just a piano and her voice," is highlighted, as is the fact that she delivers a performance devoid of "dancing, jumping, screaming." Some hail her as the first singer to reach their inner frequencies, others confess how "one of the pleasures of listening to Angelina sing, is seeing her totally lost in and vibing to the music." Fans state that she is actually "becoming more and more charming." At fifteen years of age, having been a child star for eight years, the majority of commenters express a clear excitement for Jordan's musical future and hope that she does not stagnate where she is: "She will give us many surprises, beautiful surprises. Genius, just genius." Nevertheless, these are expectations and statements of support that are built on the foundation of her present child star persona and, therefore, I suggest, there is no guarantee that these fans will continue to follow Jordan if she is to change her style of music and performance.

In the prism of perceptions, embodiments, strategies, and choices, I find Jordan placed between conflicting child prodigy perspectives. Some see the idealized version of a child star in her—the innocent child with superpowers sent to this world to heal and save it with her voice and innocence (O'Connor, 2009). Others present a more materialistic view, aligning her with the—in the future, if not protected and supported—scarred child star image as presented by Whiteley (2003), whereas some again hope for her to continue her journey into adulthood while still remaining innocent. In comment rooms, Jordan's innocence and the authentic purity emblematic of a child is repeatedly emphasized as a critical factor. Fans noted, for example, how the power of her innocence allowed her to transform the erotic, abusive language of "Back to Black" into philosophical poetry. None reflected over the fact that in order to do this, the young girl had to be knowledgeable of the original lyrics and their content. This untouchable innocence is then paired with her well-renowned "classiness," with her maturity described as devoid of eroticism and bereft of outgoing entertainment strategies—thus adding a particular type of "adult" professionalism into her child prodigy discourse.

Therefore, I suggest that the Jordan cyborg talentification process indicates a unique child prodigy discourse—mature and innocent—wherein the concept of innocence has to be redefined. Maybe her talentification case could be an example of an individual prototype of posthuman child stardom subjectivity, ignoring the child–adult and innocence–sexual

dichotomies, feeling at home on YouTube, on TV, and in real life. For this to be possible, the clammy grip of power imbalance in adult's and children's worlds would have to be deconstructed by the cyborg and the agelessness of music. As Jordan asserts, it would have to become more than a teenager's vision.

### 6.1.3. Fluctuating timeline from childhood to adulthood

Mainstream discourse does not speak in favor of futuristic prodigy images, and, as analyses have highlighted, the young age of all three star groups featured heavily in their stories of success. Still, no agreement could be reached upon as to exactly how the timeline from childhood to adulthood was to be structured. In this study, and on the basis of my data, the timeline is identified as inconsistent and puzzling, neither moving only in one direction, nor moving consistently. There prevails though an acknowledgement of development, and a matter of growth, accepted and wanted, not only by the artists but also by fans and critics—a development that exists in the moment and simultaneously stretches indefinitely in time, as if childhood, as I have discussed, represents a separate room with its own understanding of time and space. One commenter expresses the following feeling:

> **Commenter:** Where on planet earth did you come from my dear, very poetic, and so much soul, and the look in your eyes when you sing determines you are not from this world!!! Keep your beautiful soul and never stop singing with your originality.

However, the above expressed feeling of witnessing an extraordinary talent, and cocreating their artistic personae and talent through online participation, changes colors and tone as the young begin to show more independence. As they grow up—most clearly observed in the artistic career of Marcus & Martinus who came of age in the course of this study—their groups change and the viewer numbers dwindle. Moreover, the arguments in favor of talenting them alters accordingly, absorbing new references and characteristics. As for the twin duo, who started with a fan base of young children, the fans themselves matured, and, consequently, their reactions did as well. On YouTube, as introduced in Section 6.1.1, the natural development is countered by the platform's archival quality. The latter has, following Lange (2019), a *dual* quality, for not only does it make posted materials linger on, ready to be activated and awakened by increased activity, but it also continuously mediates this material to personal computers worldwide. In this manner, the cyborg system maintains an authoritative grip on individual's virtual past and their (personal and artistic) personae. The Marcus & Martinus' "Girls" music video, for example, recently received a rush of new

comments from “old” mmers. Not all expressed satisfaction with their former infatuations, and they remembered somewhat hesitantly how dedicated they used to be: “Oh god! I remember this time when they were my biggest crush….and now [horror-emoji].” Others were more at peace; yet they also identified their fandom as something belonging to their past lives: “I remember listening to this [smile-emoji]. It was my childhood.” This again illustrates how the child–adult timeline of the star is connected to the individual’s own experience of growing up, defining the stars’ timeline through particular moments in their *own* lives connected to specific musical experiences (Ruud, 2013). Together, stars and fans—as described in the motivational levels of the three-way-circuit discussed in Section 5.2.1.—interpretatively reproduce and create a specific child stardom (Corsaro, 2018). Here, the conceptualization that an “interpretative approach views development as reproductive rather than linear” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 161) illustrates the fluctuating timeline also from a sociological point of view.

Moving away from commenters’ perceptions, the next section accounts for the young stars’ own, though mediated, views on being child stars and their visions of an artistic future. On the basis of materials from interviews uploaded on YouTube, this section also investigates the media’s way of relating to the young stars. The selection of interviews presented is based on availability and representativeness and, although I found some common themes in all three cases, they showed individual traits connected to, again, availability and their set up—band, duo, soloist—their music’s genre, their fan groups, and their particular artistic profiles, as discussed in Chapter 5.

## 6.2. Media’s questions and child stars’ answers

I found Jordan’s description of not belonging to neither world—child nor adult—(discussed in Section 5.5.4.) causing a crack in her artistic persona to be remodeled into an endeared topic in interviews. For, one of the most common questions child celebrities had to answer, not just once, but many times, was “How does it feel to be so young and so famous?” The curiosity informing this phrase appears safely embedded in an understanding that *young and famous* constitute a dichotomous pair that is a privilege to unpack and present to the public and a matter of course performed by the media, without obvious restrictions or considerations. Being a child star equals an existence in the spotlight—a spotlight the media takes responsibility for (up)holding and reporting from. The media thus necessitates much of the guarantee that the young celebrity will actually be conceived as, and stay, famous. One

critical tool for accomplishing just this are child celebrity interviews, and many can be found as video footage on YouTube posted by fans or by the TV programs on which they originally aired. Interview settings may vary, from established talk-show scenes and radio programs to interviews conducted in home kitchens and street cafés or at unidentified places. However, all interviews I found on YouTube, and the slim selection I have used here, have been conducted in more or less the same traditional manner. They are initiated by adults, not children, enforcing the power asymmetry (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 37) that is present in any qualitative interview and is even more severe in the case of child stars—except, strictly speaking, in the interviews conducted with Marcus & Martinus after their eighteenth birthday. Second, a common and traditional, yet, as I challenge, unnecessary, characteristic of all interviews are the defined roles of the interviewer and interviewee. The first poses the questions and the second furnishes the answers. These roles were even perceivable in interviews where the interviewer and the questions were removed and the informant narrated their story in an uninterrupted fashion (Song & Heart, 2014) as the prepared questions clearly had defined the narrative.

Rethinking the art of questioning, and how to begin to confront the power asymmetry, the informants could pose questions to the interviewer; thus making the conversation more a face-to-face engagement that unraveled both ways, which is the original meaning of *interview* (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Bernstein (2008), by referring to Derrida, discussed how "too frequently the call for dialogue is a power play" (p. 594), simply due to the difference in material conditions, education, and verbal ability between individuals engaging in a dialogue. Though I understand that the inherent inequality cannot be deconstructed in a normal interview setting, I hope for modest rhetoric and practical changes with child stars returning questions to the interviewer to be able to initiate the process. Questions such as, "What do *you* imagine to be my fantasies for the future? What are *your* fantasies about *my* future?" or: "Why do most adults suppose that to be a child means to be less able than an adult?" could certainly open avenues for a new type of discussion.

### 6.2.1. Being young, being famous, having fans, and living parallel lives

The content of the questions found in the selected interviews, despite them displaying case-specific variations, allowed some headlines to be extracted. These cover themes were connected to *being young, being famous, having fans*, and the young stars' *musical influences and future dreams.* The questions found in interviews confirmed how ardently the institution

of the child prodigy considered *extraordinary* to be a nonconformity of a child norm—triggering formulations such as "talented *despite of* being a child." The questions seem to define what the media wants fans and society to see: the "ordinary" child in a glasshouse mediating "extraordinary adult" emotions, abilities, and maturity. These pictures correspond with findings in the research of Vestad & Dyndahl (2017) on parent's discourse on child stars, wanting them to "be child-like (but not too childish), ordinary (but still special), and mature (but still cute with a childish charm)" (p. 11). Yet, with the *Peter Pan ideology* (Jackson, 2018) and the *youthification without end* (Compare Section 2.1.1) being impossibilities, the growing child star has to end in a cul-de-sac. For when the contrast between ability and age dwindles, the spell breaks, the glass cracks, and with it, the fascination of the extraordinary within the ordinary.

The themes mentioned above appear in variations, often built on a considerable mountain of assumptions commonly accepted and difficult to notice. A question such as, "How do you handle two lives?" presumes so much that determining where to begin is challenging. Still, I suppose most adult interviewers do not consider this to be a leading question but, rather, a stating of facts. "How do you handle two lives?" is consequently a reasonable question that makes sense, because the traditional conception of the child prodigy discourse justifies it. Within this discourse carried by society and advocated by the media, a child celebrity *has* to be leading two separate lives: the normal one and the special one. Another popular question, loosely connected to this theme, enquires: "Do you *feel* like a child?" (Emmanuel Mignot, 2020). This question strikes me as a rather thoughtless interrogation lacking pedagogical insight, as any child will struggle to answer this type of question that presupposes a normative idea of childhood—just as any individual will struggle to answer how it feels to be their particular age. These types of monitored conversations with adults displaying interest in the personal feelings of the prodigy only to get the "right" answers that confirm the normal—parallel to the extraordinary—was one of the traits de Mink and McPherson (2016) observed in the online interviews in their YouTube research. They uncovered these approaches quite categorically as *well-planned rhetoric* and as eliminating children's individual personalities, presupposing a universal definition of childhood feelings, and, consequently, pushing the informant into a defined corner. Other themes that were observed in the interviews are related to outer, practical, and factual realities. These could be questions about the stars' relationships with their fans and their families, in addition to the importance these might have had as sources of inspiration and support for their careers, their personal lives, and their musical

choices. Child stars, by definition, are underage; therefore, the question of the families' involvement is often connected to how these follow up their children's career, touching on issues of protection, moral values, and choices of star promotion. "How much do you have your mum along on your tour?" Angelina Jordan was asked (Yozhik v Tumane, 2019b, 2:58). To this, as always, Jordan answered: "Everywhere. I have my whole family with me when travelling around" (Yozhik v Tumane, 2019b, 3:00); a habit fans have reaffirmed as positive and reassuring.

As I was recording and analyzing the interviews conducted in Norwegian, which I transcribed and translated, I focused on what the media seemed interested in getting answers to. Of course, by means of their online existence, these interviews were all staged and mediated before they even entered this research. They were even doubly staged, both prior to the actual conversation and before the interview was published on YouTube. In the Marcus & Martinus and the Jordan material, I found little variation in the available interviews on YouTube which I studied before settling on the selection for this discussion. As I will argue for more specifically, I have, therefore, also used two online text interviews in the Jordan case. In case of The BlackSheeps, only two complete interview videos were found, other YouTube material containing the stars own voices comprised fractured interviews backed into backstage clips. I chose to not include these, neither did I use interviews from teenage TV shows, which were only available for Marcus & Martinus. All materials I used, were conducted by established Norwegian media institutions before they were posted on YouTube. Some references from the interview materials have already been included in my text with the intention to enrich the narratives; however, the following sections focus on interview materials alone to shed light on the general and the specific characteristics in the media's engagement with the selected stars, and the artists' responses to that particular spotlight.

### 6.2.2. The BlackSheeps celebrated on Sámi TV and on YouTube

The first texts I will engage with to shed light on the media's perception of child stars' presents and futures and child stars' answers to these inquiries is an interview with The BlackSheeps by the Sámi TV station Oððasat—posted on YouTube in two parts (Amy 121314, 2010a; Amy 121314, 2010b). The interview was clearly conducted just before the young people from Nesseby were to perform at the *MGPjr* competition. Broadcasted by the local TV channel, Oððasat, the spoken language in the video is Sámi, texted in Norwegian. The TV host expresses considerable pride when mentioning the youngsters' ethnic roots—a

connection and responsibility that Johnsen, in particular and on several occasions, has confirmed she was happy to shoulder, and that gave the group a cultural anchor, as described in Section 5.3.4. Importantly, had it not been for a fan uploading and sharing this interview on her channel, this clip would probably have been gathering dust in a TV archive instead of receiving over a thousand views on YouTube. Furthermore, because of being published and viewed on the platform, the video triggered links on my computer to other The BlackSheeps events and concerts, for example, an upload of "Oro Jáska Beana" from 2010. Agnete Johnsen's winner performance at the 2016 MGP with "Icebreaker" and other news clip from Oððasat customized my searches.

The two videos of the broadcast I found on YouTube were posted by the same fan within just one day's interval. Though apparently from the same TV event, the two different videos convey rather different aspects. In the first (Amy 121314, 2010a), the band is portrayed as a harmonious foursome, they are filmed at a market in their locality, joking and clearly enjoying each other. In the second video, despite the enthusiastic introduction to the group by the *MGPjr* host, Simonsen, the focus is on Agnete Johnsen, with the effect that the other members, and especially Eriksen and Touryguin, remain somewhat obfuscated.

The first video shows a small documentary on The BlackSheeps, with clips of their activities leading up to the *MGPjr* competition. Sámi TV reports that The BlackSheeps have a good chance of winning because their song "Oro Jáska Beana" was written both in the Sámi and Norwegian language (Amy 121314, 2010a, at 2:02). The video alternately shows concert clips and informal conversations where the interviewer is invisible and the questions cannot be heard. The band is placed in a half circle, and here it is Viktoria Eriksen who is most active. However, although Alexander Touryguin only mumbles the occasional "yes," all band members are engaged and visible in a credible manner, representing a group of excited and proud teenagers with a common commitment.

The second video (Amy 121314, 2010b) focuses on the upcoming performance at *MGPjr*. The *MGPjr* host, Stian Barsnes Simonsen, raises high expectations as he declares himself deeply impressed: "They are an incredibly cool band with such a distinctive character, which is completely *mystical* that it is even possible to have at such a young age. So, yes, the BlackSheeps are really something to look forward to!" (Amy 121314, 2010b, at 0:39–0:50). From here onward, the program moves quickly to the little interview that takes place right next to the stage in *Oslo Spektrum*. The BlackSheeps stand, all lined up and ready, whilst reporter Mette Ballovara explains that she has been allowed to borrow the band during dress

rehearsals. She then immediately turns to Agnete Johnsen, who answers all questions fluently in Sámi. Thereafter, Ballovara turns to Emelie Nielsen, the band's guitarist, who answers a couple of questions in Norwegian, which the reporter repeats in Sámi. The interview component of the clip lasts only for approximately 1:15 minutes and comprises six questions. Below, the transcribed interview is presented in a slightly condensed form before I add some reflections.

**How are you feeling, Agnete**?

> Nervous! But also very excited!

**What are you excited about and what are you looking forward to?**

> To sing for everybody sitting in this big hall, and everybody at home watching TV. That's going to be great!

**Do you think a lot of people will be watching TV?**

> Yes, I do. I think so.

**How did the rehearsals go today?**

> It went well… there hasn't been…They went well.

**How do you think it will work out, Emelie? Do you think you are going to win?**

> Difficult to say, because there are so many gifted people here. Very clever. So, I do not know. I believe it's hard to say.

**Now we can't help and do want a little taste of your song. Oro Jáska Beana. How does the melody go?** *The four then start to sing "Oro Jáska Beana, do-do-do-do," after Viktoria Eriksen has counted up to four.*

> Ballovara to the TV audience: Now you should know the melody. We can hear that they have been practicing well. The leader of the program, Stian Barsnes Simonsen did in any case praise these young people a lot.
>
> The TV host asks Ballovara: Are they favorites?
>
> Ballovara: Many have noticed that they are very capable young people, but the program leaders have not dared to predict who is going to win because there are so many good musicians.

(End of the interview)

Several things are worth noting in this short sequence from 2008. As we know, The BlackSheeps did win the show, and thus, in retrospect, the description of the "very capable young people" seems almost staged. It certainly conveyed an assurance of quality, mediated by the *MGPjr* host and the TV channel, preparing the viewers' own judgements on the groups talent. The second factor is the physical interview situation. Unlike the informal setting from the first video (Amy 121314, 2010a), the casual half circle on the floor is replaced by a tidy line-up order that is indicative of how they, from this time onward, are presented: Agnete Johnsen as the front figure, supported by Emelie Nilsen next to her, and Viktoria Eriksen and Alexander Touryguin as the "tail." Eriksen and Touryguin do not speak, other than Eriksen counting up to four to get the acoustic chorus going at the end of the clip. This little stunt appears very coordinated; however, some of the group energy trickles from between the cracks of formality. How this distribution of responsibilities was conducted in advance, can only be speculated upon; however, in this presentation, the group's artistic personae and even their talent, I suggest, is represented by the vocalist—the one representing the lyrics and the voice. This might have to do with the fact that "the central textual form in popular music is the song" (Shuker, 2016, p. 83), and I wonder what might happen to this conceptualization if the vocalists were to be ignored and, instead, the percussionists were asked. The reporter addresses only young Johnsen in the first four questions and not the whole group, using a singular "you." It is Johnsen who is asked whether she expected a lot of people at home to watch their performance, which she answers alone. The reporter focused solely on Johnsen's feelings, making her representative for The BlackSheeps' group identity. There is a genuine excitement but also an astonishing calm, noticeable in Johnsen. Especially after I had watched other short fragmented video clips and backstage films of The BlackSheeps available on YouTube, this clip diminished, rather than brought fourth, the group's energy, marking Johnsen the leader of the band. The two clips do not say much about The BlackSheeps' future; however, they give an indication of what media focuses on and their choices—what to keep, who to address, how to present it, and how to attempt to guide their viewers opinions. Irrespective of how miniscule these priorities seem, they may exert an effect on how the stars are perceived by those who watch and listen. Of course, knowing what actually happened to The BlackSheeps, their breakup and quarrels, probably have colored my interpretation.

### 6.2.3. Markus & Martinus: On their fans and times to come

After they turned eighteen, Marcus & Martinus frequently received direct questions about their own futures. Having reached this point in life, they showed increasing openness about what they themselves called the backside of the medal of being a child star (Hype Music, 2021, 13:04). They admitted that they actually had missed out on several things, such as hanging with friends and partying (Hype Music, 2021, 12:46). They also expressed that they were worried about their musical future and especially concerned about how their Scandinavian fans continued to associate them with their ten-year-old selves from the *MGPjr*. show.

The first interview I will use particularly discusses Marcus & Martinus' relationship with their fans. It was first conducted on the Norwegian talk show, *Lindmo*, and then posted on YouTube (Marcus & Martinus concerts, 2017). Talk show hosts generally conduct interviews masquerading these as free conversations, and, although the back-and-forth conversation flows almost naturally, the interviewer keeps the conversation on track. In Norway, the *Lindmo* show has become an established weekly program with Anne Lindmo as the TV host. Before they are invited on stage, the duo is masterly introduced, with Lindmo building up high expectations in the audience:

> **Lindmo**: It started here in NRK as they won with "Two Drops of Water" (*A slideshow of concert footings is shown followed by massive applause)*. Give a warm welcome to: Marcus & Martinus! Very nice to have you here.
>
> **Markus & Martinus**: Thank you very much.

The TV host brings up their previous trip to Finland, introducing the special relationship between Marcus & Martinus and their fans:

> **Lindmo**: You are just now coming from Finland—been on a little roundtrip. When one wants to say hello to Finnish fans, what does one say? Have you learned some Finnish?
>
> **Marcus**: Yes, *moi*, which means hei, and *mun nimeni*, which means my name is Marcus, and then you have *minä rakastan sinua*, which means I love you.
>
> **Lindmo**: That's a smart phrase to have.
>
> **Marcus**: Yes. It was quite hard to learn. *(Applause)*

Now that the topic of fans as an essential component of Marcus & Martinus's stardom has been established, Lindmo makes sure it is further explored:

> **Lindmo**: You have been doing this, country after country. First Norway and the rest of Scandinavia. Then came Germany, Finland, Greece. How is it to come to new countries? Are you sure how many fans you have there?
>
> **Marcus**: No, well, sometimes we can get quite surprised. We were in Greece this summer. And there we were very surprised, especially on the airport. There were many waiting for us, with the Greek flag, just waiting. That was so much fun. And then, during the day, we had sound check, and there were masses of screaming fans, and we didn't know that they were there for us. And then we had a concert that evening, for 70,000 people there, that was completely crazy. The atmosphere was amazing. And afterwards fans broke through security. It was crazy!

It is puzzling that Marcus & Martinus claim that they did not know that those fans were waiting for them. This is either an unconscious or a very consciously planned fan strategy, as Marcus and Martinus keep repeating: "We still get surprised" on several occasions.

Though this conversation was meant to appear spontaneous, it is obvious that the content had been planned in advance, as Lindmo continues with:

> **Lindmo**: We have some pictures of that. So here it is clear that they know who you are, and that they want to say hello *(A video footage of screaming fans, knocking at the windows. Can hear one of the boys say: they are coming!)*
>
> This is clearly a sign that people are happy to see you, and that's nice.

Marcus and Martinus continue to express their amazement over their thousands of fans, and their modest "I hope so," supports the insecurity they choose to convey. Lindmo approaches this insecurity, indicating that maybe not all fandom was as easy to relate to as it seems, and cleverly questions about a specific occurrence that happened on their last trip to Finland:

> **Lindmo**: Hm, but does it sometimes happen that fans get past the hindrances? Past security, past the glass?
>
> **Martinus**: Yes, in Finland. Our first trip there was completely mad, completely crazy. We love crazy, you must know. We don't mean it in a negative way. And there [in Finland] fans managed to get into the car, as we struggled to get into the car. These

> thirteen-to-fourteen-year-old's were stronger than the safety guards we had with us. I hope they are not watching,
>
> **Lindmo**: Yes, but you know they are Finnish girls and they are *sisu.*[93]

Marcus then describes how the Finnish fans managed to get into their car and even succeeded to grab the steering wheel, whilst security was trying to get them out of the car, with the fans still holding onto the steering wheel.

> **Marcus**: It looked completely crazy! They were shouting I love you! And we answered we love you too, and when we started to drive, they opened the luggage door and tried to climb in. Those who drove the car were quite irritated, but we thought it was fun.

The TV host expresses moderate shock, wondering:

> **Lindmo**: What do you say then? I mean, these are fellow humans that come crawling … Are you trying to say hello?
>
> **Martinus**:
>
> Well, we did run out of words, just when that happened. We did say hello, but it was hard to talk to them because they were completely mad. But we loved it. Marcus and I loved it (Marcus confirms: Yes).

As always, Marcus & Martinus defend their fans and confirm their love for them. Here, Lindmo plays suspicious and follows up:

> **Lindmo**: Well, you say you love it. But don't you sometimes get a little scared?
>
> **Marcus**: No, you do feel that your heart pumps a little faster, but that's quite fun, I feel. Action.

The TV host shows again an expression of mild surprise, repeating Marcus's utterance of "Action!" followed by excited applause from the audience. With that, the conversational interview with the twins is over, and a new guest is called in. The main theme, Marcus & Martinus's relationship with their fans, features also in the next interview I want to discuss. It was conducted on October 2020 with the eighteen-year-old stars on a popular Norwegian TV

[93] *Sisu*: a Finnish concept used to describe resilience and hardiness.

program called *God Morgen Norge*—made available on YouTube straight after (Hype Music, 2020). The main questions asked, in a compact version, are as follows:

- What was it like to become popular at such a young age?
- Have you managed to have a normal childhood in the middle of this hysteria? You must live parallel lives?
- Is it hard to "land" as normal boys after tours and concerts?
- Do you never get fed up with pop life?
- Do you get tired of each other?
- Is it true that fans know everything about you?
- Is it difficult to start dating, as everybody knows you?
- Why did you refuse to make a contract with Scooter Braun?
- What have you been you doing during COVID-19 restrictions?

To begin, the TV host introduces Marcus & Martinus as Norway's most popular pop stars and shows a sequence of their newest music video, "Love You Less." From there, he quickly moves on to talk about the twins' second devotion in life, football, and specifically addresses the football match Manchester lost that very Sunday. In this matter, Marcus, a Manchester United fan, clearly did not receive support from his brother Martinus, a Chelsey fan. Engaging in the twin rivalry over football teams, the ordinariness of the two stars is established and effectively contrasted by the glamorous introduction. The interviewer links the *everydayness* of football to his first proper question, addressing Marcus:

> **TV host**: So it was clearly more fun in 2012 when you won *MGPjr* with "Two Drops of Water." Now you are eighteen and can think back a little—when you were younger and kids. How was it to become so popular? At such a young age?

Marcus just nods and Martinus answers for both of them, explaining how special that was, as they had never experienced anything like that before.

> **Martinus**: For us, it was just super fun and very strange that people wanted to take pictures with us—we get just as surprised every time. And we say, of course, just do it.

Marcus joins in, explaining that they thought this success would just blow over quickly; however, that it lasted longer than they expected. The TV host replies, slightly correcting him, that their success had not ended yet, and that it did not look as if it was to stop anytime soon. His next question approaches the much-discussed idea of a double life:

> **TV host**: I feel you have kind of lived two parallel lives, one as Norway's most popular pop stars, with fans over the whole of Europe, and another as two almost normal boys in Trofors. Have you managed to have a normal childhood in the middle of this hysteria?

Marcus answers well with "this has been our normal childhood, that's how we have lived, so we have of course prioritized other things that made our childhood not as normal as other kids'." He adds how grateful they are and concludes:

> **Marcus**: So in a way, I think this is the best upbringing I feel we could have had, and I just really appreciate all the moments together with Martinus I got to experience.

The twin moment is reaffirmed—the fundamental importance of having a brother to be with at all times, somebody of ones' own age to balance all the adults surrounding them: their father, the manager, and the whole team, stylists, media reporters, and the like. Their fans, though, are children, often very young girls, and the next question paints the image of the reality of screaming fans in vast, international concert arenas on the canvas of their artistic life. And again, it is contrasted with their return to Trofors as "ordinary" boys.

> **TV host**: Has it been hard to kind of "land?"

Martinus admits to that it was not really that difficult, and that they just had a little "off-button" back home. Pressing that button allowed them to relax, hang with friends, do homework, and, of course, practice music. In this interview, Marcus and Martinus are legally adults; however, they themselves do not seem to be quite aware of it, as they are almost taken by—innocent—surprise when the TV host reminds them that they no longer needed to ask their father for permission when wanting to have a beer, drive around town, or for doing anything else. Clearly, their father still exerted a strong influence in their lives, and Marcus and Martinus praise him for touring with them and for helping them to not "take off" completely when performing at concerts. Their father, in addition to the off-button, is credited for easing the transition from tour life to family life in Trofors.

> **TV host**: So, you never get fed up with popstar life?

> **Martinus**: Well, you do get tired…

Especially after the long break due to COVID-19, the duo express that they are very happy to be active again with their newest song.

**TV host**: And do you get fed up with each other sometimes?

This, again, concerns their normality standards, and they answer saying they obviously do get tired of each other, as it is normal; however, their dynamic usually worked well. The TV host then moves into a still more private sphere, asking them if it was difficult dating someone being a celebrity. They admit that it is, and, in fact, openheartedly confess that they have never dated anyone.

When talking about future girlfriends, Marcus and Martinus are clear about how possible girlfriends needed to be able to like them "not for what we do, but for who we are" (Hype Music, 2021). They explain that, in relationships, they expect trust and interest in getting to know each other. These reflections pose an interesting contrast to the image of girls associated with their artistic personae and their songs where girls are described as "a true ten" or as (in the formulations of Madcon) having "high heels, crazy curves, red at the bottom." Fans are probably most familiar with and intrigued by the artistic personae of Marcus & Martinus, by the type of boys they enact as in their music videos, courting girls that mostly look much older than themselves with roses and hip-hop moves, mixing a kind of cuteness with boy/cool clichés.

Marcus & Martinus appear somewhat oblivious to the fact that what they *do* and who they *are* for their fans, if not forever but at present, might be intricately intertwined. To hope for girls to like them in the "normal" part of their lives might be more complicated than they anticipate it to be. However, the prospect that child star fame can get intertwined with and confused with one's personal identity and life is probably not a natural thing for a child star to reflect on in advance, and the presence of an artistic persona seemed not accounted with by Marcus & Martinus. Further, in this interview, fans' intensity is described in less detail than in the *Lindmo* act; however, Marcus & Martinus show a slightly more reserved tone and body language than they had done in previous discussions on fans. Now, they call their fans the FBI—being very good at knowing things almost before themselves. Half a year later, on a reality show called *Helt Harald* (Hype Music, 2021), Marcus & Martinus share even more openly, revealing some unpleasant details such as: "In summertime there are always about five to ten fans daily strolling around the house, even taking pictures through the windows, which is not what we wanted" (Hype Music, 2021, 8:30). These incidents were the reason why the family had to install cameras around the house, they explain.

The last question addresses the twins' "turning down" of Scooter Braun, with the TV host making sure the audience understands what an incredible decision that was. Marcus reacts with complete calmness and explains that they and Braun had some differences. He was not really sure whether he was allowed to talk about those differences, but they had obtained a better contract with Universal Germany and a booking company called Paradigm. He repeats a couple times: "We really have found an amazing team with Universal Germany and Paradigm," almost as if asked to do so. Marcus & Martinus declare themselves ready and hopeful to soon be allowed out again, to go on tour, deliver concerts, and meet their fans.

Compared with earlier interviews, the balance in terms of taking charge of the conversation is more equalized between the twin brothers, as Martinus is clearly given more space by his brother Marcus and he manages to take it.

With the young artists at seventeen or eighteen years of age, the "missing-out of normal teenage-time" constitutes a reoccurring theme in the interviews of Marcus & Martinus. This might be because they proved more prepared to talk about the topic or, as they themselves explained, because their lost youth had become more obvious to them as COVID-19 restrictions stopped their artistic career and they ended in a void without a proper network of friends. Even though they confirmed in the *God Morgen Norge* interview that they could not have had a better childhood, they later admitted that, "to be honest, we have never been invited to a real party. I don't know why, really, maybe they don't dare, think we are busy" (Hype Music, 2021). Clearly, their extraordinary lives had come at the cost of "normal" social networking. Also, by relying as heavily on their fans as Marcus & Martinus have done, and by encouraging fans in all their "good craziness," the twins have possibly made their own way into adulthood, both as artists and as private persons, just this much harder.

Marcus & Martinus assertion that their success had come as a surprise to them and that it somehow still did "surprise" them seems more like a continuation of innocence with which they have clothed themselves. They narrate their career as spontaneous and unplanned; however, this declaration seems more like an intelligent strategy, which, if not thought of by the twins themselves has possibly been constructed by their surroundings that further decided to pair surprise with the inexhaustible twin factor. Scanning all interviews available on YouTube, I could not spot one interviewer who questioned whether they had ever considered to split up and pursue individual careers. Maybe Marcus & Martinus themselves, in one of their thousands of videos answering fan questions, have expressed some thoughts about this issue, but I have not been able to trace any such comment. Indeed, the image of being twins

that has supported and accelerated their popularity would be a drastic framework to move away from, especially as they themselves have identified performing together as giving them particular energy: “It is like performing with a lucky charm” (Hype Music, 2020a, 4:49), they express. Thus, breaking them apart would probably break their musical project, their musical personae, and, subsequently, also the basis of their cyborg talentification.

### 6.2.4. Angelina Jordan on musical influences and her devotion to music

The youngest star in this analysis, Angelina Jordan, promoted a very different type of career start than Marcus & Martinus, and her musical choices also differed from both that of The BlackSheeps and the twin duo. Jordan has always wanted to sing and be a star, even as a very little girl, and this motivation has shaped her artistic persona. As her mother confirms (MovieClips, 2014), it was her daughter who begged her to sign her up for the *Norske Talenter* competition. Her mother recalls that once her daughter had discovered music, she obviously enjoyed it so much that there was no point in stopping her: “She has found her big interest, really, the music, and especially jazz. She searched on YouTube and found her style” (MovieClips, 2014, 2:13). “Singing is like breathing…or, or, I just love singing” (pa1189w, 1:50–1:56), Jordan herself explains. Her mother adds that they have to turn down approximately 90% of all offers to perform, because, with Angelina still being a child, her education holds the highest priority. This was despite her devotion and motivation, which, according to both mother and child, was lifted up as a key marker in the Jordan talentification.

Angelina Jordan’s many interviews that are uploaded on YouTube include video clips from the Norwegian *Lindmo*, a video shoot in her own kitchen, and from a pre-show to *AGT Champions.* I have chosen some extracts from the *Lindmo* interview that was uploaded on YouTube November 17 in 2019, which especially highlights Jordan’s musical influences. Furthermore, I have extended my materials to include two written interviews found on the online *People* magazine and the *Honey POP* website (Picou, 2021). The reason for choosing this is that despite all the interviews available on YouTube, I missed vital aspects of what Jordan chooses to express in these particular texts. It made me wonder whether the specific topic—a more personal account of Jordan’s self-appreciation as an artist and her “role” as a child—was too complex for Jordan to handle in an oral environment. In the written medium she conveys the sore issue of being creative as a child with self-produced materials she has to defend. In the written interview, her texts are word-rich and well formulated, different to her struggle for words in oral settings. Comparing her with Marcus & Martinus, or other more

outgoing child stars such as the American Grace VanderWaal, and their easiness that characterize her interview situations, emphasize the Jordan style of wanting to think about what to say—and thus, when not singing, the written medium seems to suit her better.

At *Lindmo* (Yozhil v Tumane, 2019c), Jordan carefully suggests that she learns more from travelling than from going to school—an obviously bold statement that she immediately smoothens over with a slightly embarrassed laugh (0:44–0:47). Lindmo further questions Jordan about the influence of her grandma, who illustrated Jordan's book. Jordan answers with emphasis: "My grandma, she is very inspiring and … I love her!" (1:10–1:15). This statement again ends with a little laugh and is appreciated with applause from the audience. Thereafter, Angelina Jordan is asked to share her story of performing barefoot, and first, after some pleading from the TV host, she recaptures the story that has turned her into the artist she now is, singing barefoot, with the intention to never give up on her dream (compare Section 5.5.4.). Lindmo supports her narrative with leading questions (1:41–2:50) and makes Jordan repeat sentences, "I gave her my shoes" (2:48), so as to extract applause from the audience. The story about the homeless girl is then used to draw connections with Jordan's writing, and Lindmo asks her to read from her diary. Jordan confirms that she is writing a lot and everything "what is in my heart" (3:37). In the last sentence she reads, Jordan reflects on how it felt to give her own beloved shoes to the underprivileged girl: "To be able to do something for another human being … was so big. Hard to describe exactly" (3:56–4:00). Jordan uses the picture of climbing up a staircase connecting the earth and sky to illustrate the feeling she got from helping —an image that is also used in her lyric video of "Million Miles" (Angelina Jordan Official, 2020a). The *Lindmo* strategy, making the young girl read what she had written to help her express herself, allowed for the "missing parts" of Jordan's reflections to surface. These, I found, were captured in the two textual online interviews already mentioned, with the first published in the *People* magazine on 14 February 2021 (Johnsen, 2021). This interview was conducted immediately after Jordan released her first single as a new member of Republic Records. When she is asked how it felt to finally share an original song, Jordan keenly responds:

> **Jordan:** Many people may not know about this, but I've always been songwriting. When I was little, it's just hard to share all the feelings, but now that I'm older, I feel like I can express more of the emotion and the feeling into the song. That's why I feel I'm ready now to share it with people. (Johnson, 2021)

With this, Jordan also expresses how difficult it is to be taken seriously as a child, to have one's lyrics accepted as "possible," and to be acknowledged for being able, despite her being a child, to fathom and experience feelings usually dismissed as adult material. In her case, and in the cases of other so-called *sensitive children* (Shavinina, 2016), it may be that they feel so strongly *because* they are children, and not despite of it. The idea that children should be unable to understand complex artistic expressions has also been questioned by the Norwegian poet, Bramness (2015). Children were treated as if they were living in a different country, Bramness (2015) critiqued, without the possibility to familiarize themselves with the contradictory (p. 19). Placing them in a different "country" insinuated that children were only capable of understanding simplifications and replacements from the real world, from real poetry. However, it was just the particular mysterious and complex (adult) poetry that had made huge impressions on Bramness herself when she was still a child (Bramness, 2015). A personality such as Angelina Jordan, who appears to have much on her mind and heart but is repeatedly confronted with, "How can you possibly feel like this at your young age," might have had the same experiences as Bramness did.

Another interview on *The Honey POP website* (Picou, 2021) covered much of the same material, and it almost reads identical to the *People* interview, just using different parts of it. When asked about filming the music video for "Million Miles," Jordan enthusiastically describes her creative involvement, sketching scenes based on her memories with her grandfather, to whom the song is dedicated. She also underlines that the simplicity of the music video was designed to let the music talk. She calls her grandmother her lucky charm and the person who keeps her grounded. Her grandmother, with her art, has inspired and colored Angelina Jordan's clothes, lyric videos, and the book she wrote in 2015. "My Grandma is very special to me. She is a part of me. We are so close to each other that I don't even see an age difference" (Picou, 2021). Here, Jordan clearly connects her artistic grandmother to her own artistic persona and again mentions age as something that does not really matter to her.

The release of "Million Miles" happened parallel to Jordan becoming a teenage artist, and Jordan talks extensively about the emotional and professional impact of working on "Million Miles."

> **Jordan:** In the process of making Million Miles, I wanted to share the emotions that I had experienced for the first time; I had never felt that kind of loss that way before. When you are making something beautiful, you forget your sorrow for the time

being. I love to create meaningful lyrics and melodies from my own experiences. It was a relief for me to put all those feelings I had into that song. To work with Stargate has been an amazing experience because they understand my vision and, most importantly, they allow me to be myself. We clicked so much that we could create many more great songs together.

It is one of the best feelings to share your emotions into music and to also be able to share that with the world. When you put so much of yourself into something, it's always scary to think about what other people's expectations could be of songs you share. The feelings in my heart when I listen to a song I am working on, I want to share that same feeling with people. I want people to feel my music in their soul. That connection is so emotional and universal, no matter who you are, you feel it. I felt like Million Miles could be a light in this darkness, to spread love and a voice to say you are never alone. (Picou, 2021, para. 5)

For Jordan, growing older seems in many ways to be a relief, I suggest, and, at the same time, I can sense the burden she might feel that is imposed on her by the expectations following her accomplishments. None of these concerns were found in the interview data materials. In the comments, as has been discussed, fans' concerns centered around protecting her from negative adult influences or about her growing up too fast. None of the commenters reflected on the pressure of not only having to keep up with the already considerably high level of her art but also the pressure to continuously having to exceed herself, yet in the online interview (Picou, 2021, para. 4), the question was taken up.

## 6.3. Comparing case specific findings

Closing the discussion, I will sum up the case-specific discursive, aesthetic cosmopolitan, and interpretive reproduction strategies in a comparative structure discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Additionally, I include what I found on the deconstructed *discursive* level. In the following section, I discuss these before I briefly explain the rest of Table 4.

### 6.3.1. Deconstructed discursive levels

The deconstructed insights are based on (1) the original discursive findings, (2) the child stars' own voices found in interview materials, and (3) fans' and critics' engagements in comment materials. In The BlackSheeps material, the hidden side of the outgoing, energetic

band with controversial messages that engaged various strata of society was uncovered to express their inner conflict, illustrated by the band's breakup. It also revealed anxiety on an individual level, as indicated by Saba and Eriksen. The lively controversies and discussions in the comment materials created a particular signpost of homophily that drowned the strong, individual voices. Neither voice proved strong enough to color the comment room in such a manner that their individual opinion could exert a sustainable impact. In the Marcus & Martinus discourse, the "making themselves available" attitude—through the variety of fan videos, their branded music, and their merchandise—and their fans-as-family strategy is, as Marcus and Martinus themselves express, contrasted by their actual loneliness as regular young boys who have missed out on "normal" social contacts, and actually have to protect themselves from their fans (cameras around the house). Also, it is contrasted by their clear expectations of a girlfriend having to like them for what they are and not for what they do. In the comment material, the overload of emoji and the scarcity of words seems to indicate a powerlessness to handle the strong emotions caused by the fandom, and, indeed, the emptiness could be a metaphor for the clattering symphony of emotionally overwhelmed mmers' voices.

For Angelina Jordan, the appreciation of her as a "real" child prodigy was unpacked to be as much a burden as a blessing. In her own reflections, as in her lyrics in "7thHeaven" and also in the interviews, she expresses a kind of burden. The lyrics describe this burden as having been inflicted by expectations due to past achievements, and in interviews the burden is identified as due to her maturity not being trusted. In the comment rooms, the rooms of protection and development, the harmony and coherence of sensations were thus unpacked as an exploitation of the young star, by filling their own emotions with the emotions mediated through Jordan's singing. Further, commenters' mutual enforcement of their feelings, musical and emotional, conveyed a lack of independence in the fans' musical responses.

### 6.3.2. Cultural/aesthetic cosmopolitan and interpretive reproduction strategies

Artists' cultural/aesthetic cosmopolitan strategies were confirmed to be connected with those pertaining to their interpretive reproduction. In The BlackSheeps' material, the ethno-cultural uniqueness combined with punk rock music, was modelled into a child perspective using universal themes such as gender identification and ethnic discrimination. Marcus & Martinus utilized adult (colored/professional) masculinity in both categories, but for different means: in the first to legalize their musical style on an international level, and in the second, to contrast

their innocence with knowing the world, legalizing for example gender stereotyping in their music videos. Angelina Jordan's aesthetic cosmopolitanism was found to create a jazz-popization on the basis of her unique, professional interpretations of jazz and pop classics. These strategies were supported by her conviction that music should be ageless, thus appropriating adult pop music and culture in her own interpretive reproduction.

**Table 4**

*Findings of case-specific discursive, deconstructed discursive, cultural/aesthetic cosmopolitan, and interpretive reproduction characteristics*

| | **The BlackSheeps** | **Marcus & Martinus** | **Angelina Jordan** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Original discursive levels in 1) musical material, the media, and 2) comment rooms** | 1) Society and provocation<br>2) Rooms of conflict and discussion | 1) Marketing and fans-as-family<br>2) Rooms of emoji and feelings | 1) Notion of child prodigy<br>2) Rooms of protection and development |
| **Deconstructed discursive levels in 1) musical material, the media, and 2) comment rooms** | 1) Inner conflict and anxiety<br>2) Individual voices drowning in conflict as homophily | 1) Loneliness in their everyday life as young boys<br>2) Emptiness as a synonym for a symphony of voices/sign of powerlessness to handle overwhelming emotions | 1) Burden of expectations stemming from her "angelic" characterization<br>2) Exploitation of the young star persona, lack of independence in fans' musical experiences and responses |
| **Artists' cultural/aesthetic strategies** | Ethno-cultural uniqueness, combined with the universal punk rock genre | Use of (black) male professionalism to legalize their musical style for a world audience | Jazz-popization |
| **Artists' interpretive reproduction of "adult" pop music and culture** | Themes of universal interest modelled into a child perspective | Innocence versus knowing the world —through cooperation with male adult masculinity | Music as ageless |

# Part IV: Further discussions and preliminary conclusions

# 7. Cyborg talentification and music education research

In this chapter, I will continue to investigate the possible impact of cyborg talentification on the field of music education research and praxis. I first introduced this endeavor, formulated as research question four, in Sections 1.3. and 1.5.1. In section 2.4.3., I discussed YouTube—the original context of cyborg talentification—as a platform for informal learning and *Bildung*. In Section 5.1., I visited an offline arena and allowed a conversation to develop between online and offline talentification experiences. This process situated the characteristics of YouTube's cyborg talentification qualities, but also suggested a rhizomatic connection and synthesis between online and offline processes that could cause an enforcement of talentification in both worlds. In Section 5.2.4., I argued for the implementation of the four levels of cyborg talentification generated in this study—motivational, discursive, narrative, and cultural cosmopolitan—in an analysis of existing talent discourses. In this, and the next chapter, I attempt to extend and summon all perspectives based on a systematic investigation of the particular contribution of cyborg theory on talentification. Moreover, I will investigate its contribution from a music education research perspective. Here, I will consider Haraway's controversial views on gender and race in order to demarcate the stand I take in this discussion, before I reflect on how the concept of cyborg talentification could be conceptually and practically placed within the frames of the Norwegian music curriculum for primary and secondary education. As a first step in this debate, I discuss social media processes in light of music education research and praxis.

## 7.1. Social media and music education research

Working with social media in this study has caused me to consecutively question absolute demarcations between informal–formal, popular–academic, and online–offline manifestations. At the same time, these delineations have provided me with essential navigation tools and relevant vocabulary defining social media phenomena as informal, unacademic, and online manifestations. Rather promptly following my initial engagements as a netnographer, I experienced, and then discussed, the conceptual, emotional, virtual and aesthetic[94] influences of offline experiences on online understandings. As already indicated in Section 5.1.2., I

[94] Conceptual as fronted by Kendall (1999), emotional as described by Markham (1998), virtual as traced by Lange (2099), and aesthetic as found by Auslander (2008).

began to suspect a mutual influence between online and offline. Aesthetically aligning with Auslander (2008), who illustrated the Janus-faced, "reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized" (p. 3), and by reversing the offline-on-online influence, I here suggest that netizens transfer their online behaviors and experiences into the offline settings they frequent. Further, and accelerated by the covid-19 lock down, I suggest that social media and digital meeting platforms—and with them, informal learning strategies and methods—have connected with, and moved deeper into, the academic and professional world and, consequently, also into the field of music education. In the context of this study, I imagine that traces of the online mechanisms of cyborg talentification on YouTube observed in my data, unconceptualized, and therefore unnoticed, have already begun to infiltrate the pedagogical field.

### 7.1.1. Between reality and utopia

The perceptions of the possible impact of cyborg talentification on music education, which I will present in this chapter, are conceptual ideas, based on a blend of previous professional experiences and cyborg theory, and as such, they are awaiting future research. Yet, as Fry (1993) described in his early conceptualizations of the televisual: "It is less than a gift. It invites remaking. Another language is to follow, but first has to come the one to be rewritten" (p. 9), I imagine research on participatory media, such as YouTube, and the implementation, dispersion, and further conceptualization of its working processes, as cyborg talentification, to invite remaking. Thus, how to consolidate and further justify cyborg talentification and talentification as instrumental vocabulary for talking about talent in music education research, beyond what is discussed in this study, will demand additional investigations and experiments, fieldwork, and data operations. This will also include debates on the—implicit or superfluous—nature of the *cyborg* in talentification processes, and how to define online and offline cyborg subjectivities. Important for my discussion, and recalling Short (2005), to "provide a singular and conclusive interpretation of the cyborg seems an impossible feat" (p. 187), I suggest—here, and in Chapter 8— that cyborg theory and cyborg subjectivities provide useful perspectives and means to unpack and implement talentification processes online *and* offline through, what I describe as, the cyborg's ability to embody different "modes."

As a first step in the process of investigating a possible impact of cyborg talentification on music education research and praxis, I reconnect my findings with the talent theories

discussed in this study. Working with my online data confirmed and expanded, but also complicated, the cocreating powers surrounding musical talent, and the important role of catalysts as also advocated by diverse talent researchers—though with varying degree, and with or without acknowledging innate talent (Bickford, 2016, 2020; Gagné, 2004; Gagné & McPherson, 2016; Ruthsatz et al., 2014; Shavinina, 1999; Stabell, 2018). The complications identified in this study, including diverse staggering ideas on child prodigies' place in society—as expressed in the data of comment rooms—and the media industry's economic interests, resulted in conflicting values. As an example, these challenges involve the ideal of youthification striking against the notion of amazement when witnessing "adult" maturity in talented children.

Modeling the cyborg and talentification processes into a pedagogical conceptualization, I anticipate that all conflicting aspects will progress and need to be negotiated and worked with. Moreover, I expect the concept of cyborg talentification to provide the following three main impulses for a discussion of existing talent discourses: Apart from (a) adding authority to informal learning strategies and extending existing vocabulary for talking about talent, the musical cyborg and cyborg talentification as matters of becoming (Jonasson, 2020) rather than remaining fixed, are set to (b) encourage students to focus on potentials and possibilities rather than preconceived norms or "assumptions of talent" (Stabell, 2018). Also, as online talent, in my data, was found to be neither self-evident nor self-sufficient but rather a cocreated product of hybrid bodies, the question is raised (c) whether the musical cyborg entering the music education research field could provide an equivalent offline "body." As observed in the talentification synthesis of a physical live concert and a YouTube video, the talenting performance took place in, and was perceived by, the same body but in unique "modes" and with differing results (Compare Section 5.1.2.). I forged this offline mode into an individual and collective[95] *musical body*—a conceptualization I will consider from different perspectives throughout this chapter. The three main contributions of cyborg talentification are thus imagined to be as follows:

- Cyborg talentification adds authority to pedagogical practices of a more informal character, and it extends the musical vocabulary available for talking about talent
- Enacting cyborg talentification gives students a sense of accomplishment by engaging in processes of talent bereft of normative talent conceptions

[95] Individual: one subjectivity. Collective: an accumulation of bodies, a performance even or a project.

- The notion of the cyborg offers multiple subject positions online and offline and thus a more flexible test ground for students talenting explorations, replacing personal exposures with experiences of the individual and/or collective musical body

Recent research following Green (2008) and her experiments with regard to informal learning was found to problematize the effects of informal learning strategies in classrooms (Källén, 2014; Onsrud, 2015). Onsrud (2015) found that "informal learning situations in which the pupils choose and control the activities help reproduce stereotypical gender patterns" (p. 82), and subsequently emphasized the importance of teacher involvement (p. 83). I align with these considerations by emphasizing that the conceptualization of cyborg talentification and talenting activities is connected with a durable working process where teachers and students continuously redefine and cocreate. Accompanying these redefining and cocreating processes are discussions on the capacities of the cyborg, which again have to be conducted and adapted with regard to students' ages and their available vocabulary.

### 7.1.2. Boundary breakdowns, questioning abilities, and the musical body

As I have discussed throughout the current study, cyborg theory has at its core "three crucial boundary breakdowns" (Haraway, 1991, p. 151) that align animals–humans–machines on an intermingling, democratic, non-hierarchical continuum. Coupled with a Derridean deconstructive perspective, the questioning and dismantling of traditional boundaries are subsequently a methodological need (Bernstein, 2008; Caputo, 1997; Derrida, 2006; Dyndahl, 2008). The signalment of the breakdowns initiated by Haraway (1991) implied further consequences, such as argumentation for a "politics rooted in claims about fundamental changes in the nature of class, race and gender" (p. 161), and the ideological questioning of the inherent traditional hierarchical dualisms in these concepts (p. 163). To more profoundly understand the questioning in Haraway's myth, and to outline its influence on my discussion, I first present some of the critical voices (Mansoor, 2017; Short, 2005; Wilkerson, 1997) opposing it. Haraway (1991) herself was adamant about the importance and sustainability of her vision of a gender- and even race free world, although she admitted that her visions were mostly futuristic (Penley & Ross, 1990). Expectedly so, Haraway's ideas triggered heated controversy and skepticism, and scholars critiqued that her cyborg myth "evaded the very issues of race and sexuality which it seems to be addressing" (Wilkerson, 1997, p. 164). Short (2005), in her extensive research on cyborg imagery, claimed that Haraway's (1991) ideal of the cyborg for signaling a way out of the maze of dualisms and "particularly its presumed

potential to do away with paradigms of the past. … has not proven to be the case" (p. 188). Mansoor (2017) also strongly opposed Haraway's ideas, pointing at how "technology ha[d] always been interwoven with cultural narratives that articulate the broader relationships between bodies and technologies" (p. 6). Identifying herself as a woman of color, Mansoor (2017) anticipated that white arrogance permeated Haraway's construct, parallel to Wilkerson's (1997) concern as to whether "white feminists have enthusiastically taken up the cyborg myth precisely because of what it does *not* say about race" (p. 170). Therefore, though appreciating Haraway's (1991) work, Wilkerson (1997) argued it to be "vitally important to keep tensions of race and sexuality present rather than to blur the boundaries" (p. 172), an argument I perceive as firmly grounded in the realities of life and history, yet which I also imagine might be a matter of focus and perspective. Aware of the criticisms and of the many fractured understandings of cyborg imagery, I still decided to utilize the "cyborg's contradictory nature" (Short, 2005, p. 188) as an asset in my investigations. Also, as I have argued with regard to my choice of adopting the cyborg myth, this study does not intend to be derogatory, ignorant, or defiant, of pressing gender and color issues, destinies, and experiences. Rather, it intends to place its interest at a different location, and to make use of the *objectifying, questioning*, and *deconstructive* ability of the cyborg where the idea of a body constructed devoid of *the original sin*—"because Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall" (Haraway, 1991, p. 175)—is possible. In a similar way to which Dyndahl (2008) believed that deconstruction in music education might provide a torch to identify what had been ignored in music education research and praxis (p. 141), I anticipate that cyborg talentification as a concept can deconstruct and question the traditional, often as hierarchical binaries presented in pairs, such as those already debated in my text—*talented–not talented*, *mind–body*, and *public–private* discourses—but also those of *man–woman* and *black–white* (Haraway, 1991, p. 163). Considering research question four, the last two couplets are especially important to consider, since they continue to play heavily and persistently into judgements of talent, both professional and popular, and thus also boycott music students'—free, as in ungoverned—explorations of musical subject position.[96] Importantly, deconstruction in a combined cyborg–Derridean manner is set to raise awareness and conceptualize what I identified as an offline mode of the cyborg, a non-hierarchical space, a different mode, which I termed the *musical body*, equipped with, referring to Barthes

[96] This is further discussed by Källén (2021), in "Binary opposition and third spaces: Perspectives on the interplay between gender, genre practice, instrument and cultural capital in upper secondary schools in Sweden."

(1977/1990) and Vetlesen (2007), qualities that are depersonalized but individual, vulnerable, and existential.

To imagine the deconstructing cyborg facilitating a musical body might trigger visions of a robot, an altered human being, or a musical Sofia.[97] Yet, in this investigation, the musical body is not designed to serve as a *physical*–visual clue but rather as a *conceptual*–visual clue, a way of signifying *multiplicity, communication, deconstruction, questioning*, and *process*. These terms have in my context been discussed as *multiplicity* equaling varieties of subject positions, *communication* signaling connection and exchange, *deconstruction* and *questioning* signaling boundary breakdowns, and *process* implying development regardless predefined innate abilities. In this sense, the perspective taken is not to investigate how "music engenders myriad socialities" (Born, 2012, p. 266), but rather to explore the process the other way round, considering how (new) socialities engender a musical body where the ideological and physical controversies of gender and race are not in the purposive field of communication. These socialities are thus imagined as constructed without a historical burden (Haraway, 1991), incorporating various realities, communications, aptitudes, and hybrid positions. Such a construct might sound enticing and other-worldly at best, or provocative and naive at worst. As Penley and Ross (1990) specified in an interview with Haraway, the cyborg's subject positions described by her myth were both in the present *and* the future, gendered *and* un-gendered, and with *and* without race at the same time, and, I suggest, utterly disrespectful of traditional timelines. Penley and Ross (1990) figured Haraway's myth to be a "new, actually existing, hybrid subjectivity [offering] a polemical, utopian vision of what that new subjectivity ought to be or will be. In other words it's something actually existing now but also an image" (p. 13). In this fashion, I model the musical body as a developing entity, engaging in the present but receiving impulses from future embodiments. The musical body provided by the cyborg represents a fluctuating and pulsating space of identification, appearing and disappearing, and both apart from and integrated in the student. It is imagined to open up a realization linked to Foucault's (2000) pondering of whether refusing one's inherited subjectivity might be the actual aim (p. 336). As I have discussed earlier in this text, in order "to promote new forms of subjectivity" (p. 336), Foucault suggested imagination. To further support this quest, Short's (2005) research on how cyborg narratives might help shape an awareness of a "being-in-the world" (p. 52) is extended by a comment on the cyborg's potential ability of questioning a more precise description of existence in the twenty-first

[97] Sofia, the First Robot Citizen. Watch https://youtu.be/Io6xuGmS5pM

century (p. 52). As thought moves away from the narrow subject positions available in traditional discourses, the cyborg discourse is anticipated to allow for a wider span of subject positions beyond those embedded in binaries. The deconstruction performed by, and inherent in, the cyborg is expected to trace the marginalized within the music education field, representing “a way of exposing the implicit presence of what is absent in the things we normally accept as natural and rational” (Dyndahl, 2008, p. 128).

In moving the cyborg into the field of music education research, I want her to investigate the, by Dyndahl mentioned “implicit presence of what is absent” with the musical body that can enter where the gendered and racial body could not. In this ideal, utopian world (Penley & Ross, 1990, p. 13), students and scholars might—conceptually, but also practically—explore music and engage in talenting beyond preconceived musical roles; roles that, traditionally, have been bound up to gender and ethnicity in intricate and not always quite obvious, but ever so much fixed ways (Askerøi & Vestad, 2021; Bickford, 2020; Källén, 2021; Whiteley, 2003).

My basic argumentation that reassembles cyborg talentification into a pedagogical concept is thus founded in the objectivity and the new spaces mediated by the cyborg, supported by and linking back to a new subjectivity that Løvlie (2002) identified as the replacement of the “I” at the interface (p. 191). The discussion is further accompanied by selected scholars (Almqvist et al., 2021; Angus et al., 2002; Barthes, 1977/1990; Cayari, 2018; Corsaro, 2018; de Mink & McPherson, 2016; Folkestad (2006), Green, 2008; Hall, 2018; Haraway, 1991, Hull et al., 2010; Kiberg, 2019; Klafki, 2000; Kvaal, 2018; Løfberg, 2003; Løvlie, 2002; Merkelbach, 2014; Moore, 2002; Short, 2005; Vetlesen, 2007; Willberg, 2015; Wolfgang, 2016; Qureshi et al., 2020).

### 7.1.3. Informal learning in formal learning situations—*Fagfornyelsen*

As this study is embedded in a Norwegian discourse, and supported by Folkestad (2006) suggesting that “teachers might be able to create learning situations in which informal learning processes can appear” (p. 143), I venture to tentatively place cyborg talentification on the new Norwegian 2020 curriculum, called *fagfornyelsen* (Utdanningsdirektoratet, n.d.),[98] taking an informal learning stance within a formal system.

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[98] The Norwegian page: (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p. 7).

There are a couple of strategies implemented in the *fagfornyelsen* for grades 1–10 that I expect to be effective communication channels for playing into cyborg talentification as an innovative concept for talking about and working with talenting processes. None of these strategies represent particularly new ways of working pedagogically, and—maybe not in combination with each other, but separately—they have been practiced by teachers, including myself, over several decades. The point of describing them here is to embed the informal concept and processes of cyborg talentification into a combination of approaches within a formal setting, and thus to prepare a frame for the tracing of realistic learning outcomes.

The first strategy involves three interdisciplinary pairing themes that have been incorporated into the *fagfornyelsen*. For music teaching, this concerns the two couplets *health and life skills*, and *democracy and citizenship*. As formulated in the music curriculum, the first couplet, in short, is implemented to help students recognize music as a resource for understanding their own and others' emotional lives and expressing positive and more challenging thoughts and feelings. The second pair is used to raise students' awareness of how music and aesthetic forms of expression, can, and have been, used to support democratic processes (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2020). As I will reflect on in this section and Chapter 8, I anticipate that "cyborg eyes" (Angus et al., 2002) will provide perspectives and means to unpack processes of de-democratization and discrimination, not only on social media but also in offline settings. The second strategy entails *in-depth learning*, which, in the *fagfornyelsen* context, is used to foster creative thinking and to enable students to independently expand and apply subject-specific knowledge to other settings and to understand and reflect upon connections between subjects and their wider contexts and consequences. Creativity, independence, and reflection represent qualities that, to my understanding, are most efficiently fostered by combining formal teaching with informal approaches, such as working with the concept of cyborg talentification. These qualities also indicate a renewed striving towards *Bildung* in primary and secondary education. In order to instrumentalize cyborg talentification as a concept and praxis in a music-pedagogical context, I suggest pairing in-depth learning and interdisciplinary themes with *project-based* work.

Project-based work is here understood as investigating and working with a particular idea over a longer period of *time*—several weeks or a couple of months—with learning happening in different *space*s—classrooms, YouTube, Spotify, digital tools—and in varying types of *engagements*—singular, in groups, and varying hybrid subject positions—and through exercising different types of *communication*—including talenting in all forms.

Projects naturally carry an inherent aim, be it a performance or a presentation of some sort, that allow for multiple musical personae to emerge, not only in the process towards the aim, but also in the moment of *sharing* and *audience participation*. As audiences and vlisteners participate, they create narratives of the performance, comparable to star narratives as identified by Hansen (2019). Subsequently, I propose that the performances themselves receive "artistic personae," or within the cyborg perspective defended in the current study, the project becomes a collective musical body and a space of action and experience all participants will remember and relate to. Kvaal's (2018) research on intercultural music performances called "Kaleidoscope" (*Fargespill* in Norwegian) investigated aspects of this phenomenon as she identified the music itself "that emerges in Kaleidoscope. … as psychosocial and microdiscursive events where negotiations aim at harmonizing personal and collective projects within music" (p. ii). These negotiations, I suggest, do not evaporate as a project is accomplished, they are not closed in the sense of forgotten, but rather they are breeding grounds for further processes that develop what has already been worked on and experienced. Described differently, I suspect the collective musical body of the project to live on in the students as achieved skills, experiences, accomplishments, and tried subject positions, which can be described as a production of *Bildung*.

Kvaal (2018) learned through her research that Kaleidoscope participants experienced the performing act to be the best part of the project: the being together on stage, sharing the production with an audience. As Kvaal observed, these positive feelings were strongly connected to the audiences' reactions and their enthusiasm, applause, and tearful appreciations (p. 192). The audiences' affirmative reactions that resound in the performers' appreciative emotions related to these illustrate a kind of double need for authentication, I suggest, both the ones on stage and the ones in the hall. When Moore (2002) discussed what he called a premature dismissal of the notion of authenticity (p. 209), he identified three reasons for this impetuousness. The third of these Moore described as a longing for the authentic due to the "social alienation produced under modernity" (2002, p. 210), which he also thought to be the ideological source of a longing towards the authentic. As Moore observed, this third motive has become ever more evident in recent times. I suggest that it is mirrored by social media practices, such as the mutual appreciation that occurs between commenters in the process of sharing, for example, likes (see Section 4.3.2.). Moore further argued that authenticity did not prevail within the music heard but, rather, that it was a "construction made in the act of listening" (p. 210). As I have argued in the introduction to

Chapter 2, listening has been a prerequisite for this study without being discussed in-depth due to its complexity, and also, as in this work, due to the fact that the act of appreciating a music video was identified as vlistening, presuming a synthesis of viewing and listening. In project work with cyborg talentification, I suggest that an awareness and the practices of *listening*, *viewing*, and *vlistening* at all stages of the process are vital. This includes getting to know the material, its auditory and visual aspects, and, at all times, listening and vlistening to the groups' reflections as various takes are shared. Listening abilities have also been described as strengthening susceptibility to musical experiences, as attentive listening can open a room beyond time, in which musical experiences can unfold (Merkelbach, 2014, p. 75).

This notion is supported by Green (2008), who weighted listening as an important skill to foster nuanced music appreciation (p. 67); Frith (1998), who identified listening as performative (pp. 203–204) and therefore vital in star authentication as described by Moore (2002); and also Barthes (1990), who favored listening beyond the soul in order to reveal the grain in the voice. Thus, I argue that a central part of working with cyborg talentification involves the development of a wide spectra of listening modes as these strengthen and activate the individual and collective musical body and further extend the working musical vocabulary as developing emotions and authentications are described and shared.

The roles I imagine the interdisciplinary themes integrated in the music curriculum in the *fagfornyelsen* to play in the discussion of cyborg talentification are both inherent and practical. They are meant to imbue all processes of the talenting project, the musical body, and the listening modes and, with these, also the building and understanding of stardom in a cyborg–pedagogical setting. As I defend it, the value of cyborg talentification as a concept lies in its capacity to convey objectivity, cocreation, and communication about, within, and beyond musical matters—such as talent and artistic personae—and their produsers. I further support this claim with the cyborg's ability to deconstruct "the logic that links identity to a biological hierarchy of abilities and dispositions" (Short, 2005, p. 37). In a music pedagogical context, this could be used to remodel inherited hierarchical differences between individuals, their abilities, gender, and race. Subsequently, and based on the two alternatives of cyborg domination (Haraway, 1991, p. 154), to which I will come back to in Section 8.1., I anticipate that work based on the (utopian) ideal of cyborgian equality and objectivity can be used to trace how democracy and citizenship, health, and life skills can be protected and fostered, but also how they can be staggered and destroyed. I further imagine that a discussion of cyborg

talentification will allow for a dynamic cocreation of stardom. During the process of tracing and conceptualizing cyborg talentification in my online data, I was reminded of my own experiences in music classrooms with children and youths and, particularly, of the observed phenomenon of class groups forging talent in specific students. Perhaps understandable as traces of an interpretive reproduction of experienced similar power strategies in the adult world (Azmitia, 2002, p. 358), these group dynamics would naturally happen at the expense of, and result in the exclusion of, individuals who were maybe just that bit shier or less popular, or those that were more boisterous and deliberately uncaring, denying any inclination for music to avoid the risk of being socially exposed. As the "consciousness of exclusions through naming is acute [and] identities seem fractured, partial, and strategic" (Haraway, 1991, p. 155), I imagine these inclusion and exclusion processes to be remodeled in the musical bodies forging stardom across and beyond stereotypes, fixed roles, and discrimination. Regarding an example mentioned earlier on in the current study, I link back to Section 2.2.3. and the, theoretically so-far only assumed, unique quality of a children's or youth choir performing pop songs. Bickford (2020, personal communication, May 20, 2021) suggested a kind of *democratization*, as he observed how the masses of children's voices, like those in Kidz Bop, replaced the individual voice of the pop singer, achieving what I have chosen to describe as a unique *children's choir sound*. I suggest that this sound carries a particular, *universal grain* of a collective musical body that is devoid of the erotic notion emphasized by Barthes (1990). An understanding and conceptualization of this universal grain could serve as an additional illustration of cyborg talentification of, in this case, not only the involved singers and produsers, but also of the *pop song itself*, cocreated by the collective musical body.

In these paragraphs, I have not elaborated on how I imagine the four levels of cyborg talentification—motivational, narrative, discursive, cultural cosmopolitan—to be transferred to work in educational praxis. This, I suggest, extends this study's preconditions and aims, and should, rather, be focus in a future investigation.

To round off the discussion on cyborg talentification's possible impact on the field of music education research and praxis, I reconnect and problematize the discussed issues with regard to *Bildung* on YouTube and other social media based on the findings in this study and relevant scholarship (Almqvist et al., 2021; Cayari, 2018; de Mink and McPherson, 2016; Hall, 2018; Hull et al., 2010; Kiberg, 2019; Klafki, 2000; Løfberg, 2003; Løvlie, 2003; Qureshi et al., 2020; Willberg, 2015; Wolfgang, 2016).

### 7.1.4. Online *Bildung* revisited

When first situating YouTube as an informal learning platform for *Bildung*, I based my presumptions on Klafki's (2000) argument of how *Bildung* in the twenty-first century necessarily embraces all layers of "humane capacities" (p. 104). Further, I used Klafki's (2000) and Willberg's (2015) four markers of *Bildung*—*emancipation*, *self-determination*, *co-determination*, and *solidarity*—and the political aspect of *Bildung* emphasized by Klafki (2000), supporting the democratization of society. YouTube as a grassroots platform promising equal opportunities has, in this study, been found to provide arenas for practical democratization. Yet, as this study also shows, these practices are consistently challenged by power structures such as echo chambers and algorithms. Also, the four markers of *Bildung* presuppose *critical thinking*, which is a trait that is difficult to trace in YouTube comment rooms and participatory mechanisms. At the same time, the discursive differences spotted in the comment rooms, and the level of discussion in The BlackSheeps' spaces, indicates a certain degree of self-determination which, admittedly, is challenged by the deconstructive approach that redefines the high intensity in The BlackSheeps' rooms as drowning out individual voices rather than celebrating them (Section 6.3.1.). Yet, as I compared my data with existing scholarship and theory (Foucault, 2000), I discovered that all the described power mechanisms could play themselves out in (at least) two ways—either in favor of or against *Bildung* qualities. For example, algorithms forging personalized content could be found to be an asset offering progressive *Bildung* (Almqvist et al., 2021), or a restriction, leading to conformity that favored commercialized music (Kiberg, 2019). Further, anonymity was described as empowerment for minorities and other vulnerable informants (Løfberg, 2003; Wolfgang, 2016), but also as a threat forging extremism (Qureshi et al., 2020). Also, netizens' desensitization to talent perceptions, which was described in de Mink and McPherson's (2016) research as consequential to the exposure of hundreds of biography channels of young musical children (p. 149), opposed ideals of *Bildung*. Indeed, desensitization of this kind, I suggest, might stagger netizens' ability to "think critically, constantly evolve and be creative and imaginative" (Willbergh, 2015, p. 345). At the same time, the creativity observed on YouTube by Hall (2018), Hull et al. (2010), and Cayari (2018), and Løvlie's (2003) idea of technological *Bildung* at the interface, again portrayed YouTube as an engaging, enlivening, and sensitizing, informal platform of *Bildung*.

To conclude, when making the informal and online concept of cyborg talentification interact with formal, offline situations, I expect the particular and ambiguous nature of online *Bildung*

to progress with it. In the scenario of the *fagfornyelsen* I have just described, it can be supported by developing modes of listening, by the creativity emerging from in-depth learning, and by the suspected democratization processes mediated and afforded by the individual and collective musical body—the space provided by the cyborg.

In Chapter 8, I further discuss and critically evaluate the effect of cyborg theory on this study's topic, which includes a consideration of the two alternatives of cyborg domination as described by Haraway (1991, p. 154).

# 8. Conclusions

In this thesis, I have developed the idea of the cocreation of musical talent and termed this process *talentification*. Introducing cyborg theory, the concept was extended to *cyborg talentification*, consequently recognizing the influence of cyborgs on the talentification process, specifically in online environments, such as YouTube. This conceptualization was then engaged in a dialogue with existing discourses on talent, diverse scholarship, and the findings from the empirical data and was also placed in offline environments to answer the fourth research question. Parallel to Hansen's (2019) understanding of pop personae as being constructed by a "continuous interweaving of multiple texts, discourses and narratives" (p. 525), cyborg talentification was recognized as not just the endeavor of a singular individual but a cocreation of multiple agents. The cocreation showed itself to be motivated by and triggering musical experiences explainable through and based on motivational, discursive, and narrative processes enforced by cultural cosmopolitan and interpretive reproduction strategies. At the same time, I found, mainly based on interview materials retrieved from YouTube, that society's perceptions and constructions and the media's merchandizing of talent again influenced netizens' experiences as well as child celebrities' performances, products, and, subsequently, their musical careers. These findings were similar to the assumed notions of talent coloring the type of learning offered in junior conservatories described by Stabell (2018). In this way, the makers of talent, the cyborgs, not only sent out but also received impulses from society at large. These, again, allowed them to forge their specific cyborg talentification within their own "walled gardens" (Dander et al., 2021, p. 1), instrumentalized by the mechanisms of the cyborg system—the convergence media of YouTube, which is the hotspot and point of departure for this study's investigations.

As described in 6.1.3., both data and scholarship (Lange, 2019) indicated that through child stars' participation in virtual life, their child star time became "everlasting" due to YouTube's dual archival system, which stores and redistributes their early musical manifestations. Thus, even after the artists have grown up and left their child star career behind, their virtual childhood effigies will continue to participate and impact their physical lives and, consequently, their artistic futures. In that sense, I suggest that the cyborg talentification processes that cocreated their child star careers also live on, though in uncontrolled and hidden ways. I suppose that a reconciliation between child stars' musical futures and their

musical pasts has thus become an even more intricate question now than in times before the internet and participatory platforms.

## 8.1. Ethical, methodological, and theoretical contributions of this study

### 8.1.1. Considering strengths and limitations

Overall, the ethical, methodological, and theoretical approaches I pursued in this study, bear both strengths and limitations—and in that sense, also provide a particular focus. Concerning ethics and methodology, the combination of using common produsers' reactions to visible music videos, and the media's and child stars' views as available in visible interview footage, was a design that aspired to follow the idea of viewing plus listening of publicly available materials.

The ethical set up of this study was thus designed bearing in mind the challenging meeting points and crossovers between online private and public materials, which are blurred by netizens' anonymous identity and time-independent presence. The decision to conduct this study online without any physical or textual interactions proved in itself to be a valuable research aspect, offering insights into what materials were openly shared and made available to the common individual and to the ethics-focused researcher. On the other hand, this approach limited my research, excluding in-depth analyses of individual voices. Likewise, my choice to treat online articles and reviews as background materials, merely conveying content, had its limitations, but also its strengths, as it, again, conveyed public materials as viewed through the common netizen, and not analyzed academically.

The blend of a qualitative–netnographic approach with aspects of deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics was a risky one, as there were, to my knowledge, no such combinations in current research that could have guided and inspired me. Being a netnographic *hermeneutic-deconstructionist* (Feldman, 2000, p. 65) was thus a pioneering job description. I do feel the approach was fruitful even though I was operating it at the apprentice level, and I am subsequently aware that the full potential of this alliance has not yet been realized. However, a path has been staked out, which I defend and hope might inspire other scholars to perfectionate. The approach felt liberating in the sense of its inherent dynamics, which not only allowed but also *called for* a continuous shift in perspective—from a close, but objective hermeneutic understanding, to distancing and finding the not-mentioned through

deconstruction, to engaging more personally in an emotional and intellectual netnographic manner. Balancing this threefold dance was the most challenging part, and, when critically investigating my analysis, the emphasis in this study might possibly have been on the first seven steps of the analysis, supported by the narrative style and the tracing of cultural cosmopolitan as well as interpretive reproduction strategies in the material. Still, my attitude with regard to never treating a text as closed was inspiring, and I propose it gave some interesting insights that might otherwise not have been addressed (Section 6.3.).

The suspected tight connection between the context and the content of the material, together with my ethical considerations, also shaped my theoretical framework. Here, and to encompass the context of the human–machine entanglement, cyborg theory was chosen. What strengthened my interest in cyborg theory were the controversies, the dismantling of boundaries, and the outspoken futuristic perspectives inherent in its design. The cyborg lenses were useful in many ways, as has been discussed throughout. Considering the overall result of using cyborg theory, it effectively conceptualized the tools, the genre of commenting, the non-verbal clues in cyborgian language, the diverse catalysts, and the online environment of YouTube. Moving the cyborg into offline settings revealed even more colors and abilities. Paradoxically, when placing the cyborg and cyborg talentification within physical music education research, it also seemed to move closer to social life. As I was trying to make sense of this observation, I recalled Haraway's (1991) presentation of the two alternatives of cyborg domination. In the first alternative, Haraway pictured the "final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, … the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defence, … the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war" (p. 154). In the second alternative, the cyborg's social, political, and individual liberating aspects (discussed in Section 3.2.4.) are in focus, and they are the ones that Haraway emphasized in her cyborg myth and that were also followed up in my study. Still, though Haraway (1991) used dramatic and sci-fi vocabulary to describe her first alternative, looking at YouTube through such cyborg lenses possibly paints a more realistic picture than her second alternative. For beyond, behind, and beneath the grassroots-and-equal-opportunity ideology of YouTube, I identified the dominating power mechanisms of, for example, echo chambers supporting the human inclination for homophily (Quershi et al., 2020; Wolf, 2016), the intermedial influences of commenting on each other, and the development of excluding—because of including particulars—discursive patterns. In the extreme, a cyborg system like YouTube could trigger the collapse of human democracy, independence, freedom of speech,

gender and racial equality, and the peaceful coexistence between individuals of all species (Haraway, 1991). Yet, I suggest that it might just be the keen eyes of the cyborg that again can be used to trace the very same dominating mechanisms in both online and offline settings and offer learning and development alternatives, as described in Section 7.1. This reflection is embedded in a critical posthuman thinking where "the supposed 'uniqueness' of humans" (Nayar, 2014, p. 93) and the boundaries between species are deconstructed, and consequently, the conceptual cyborg will favor *connections* rather than authorities and dismantle power built on constructed superiority. Overall, cyborg theory was found capable of illumining the connection between all the parts of this study, but it was at first sight less suitable for explaining gender and ethnic issues. But, through evoking the utopian alternative—a society devoid of judgements and prejudices—it crystallized and deconstructed the contrasts and challenges inherent in its present existence and opened up a space that I modeled into the musical body.

Still, as I did not assume one theory to be able to cover all areas of my research sufficiently, the theoretical framework also included Foucault's (2000) concept of power structures, and the theory of cultural cosmopolitanism (Burgess & Green, 2018; Papastergiadis, 2018; Regev, 2007, 2019). The latter was enforced by interpretive reproduction (Azmitia, 2002; Corsaro, 1992, 2018).

Foucault's conceptualizations of power, his idea of governmentality, and his vision of future subjectivities permeated much of what has been discussed, and, possibly, his contributions could have been accentuated even more. I defend the scope of my discussions of his materials as being in service of the data produced in my empirical materials rather than the other way round. The theory of cultural cosmopolitanism and the conceptualization of interpretive reproduction were mainly used on the content of YouTube comments and videos in order to understand the cultural diversity in online settings, the individual embodiments of the child celebrities artistic personae both locally and globally, and to trace how child stars appropriated and interpretatively reproduced pop music and pop culture.

Other theoretical approaches might have been chosen for this study, such as the framework selected by Almqvist et al. (2021), who based their project on Heidegger's being-in-the-world (p. 92). Taking a *Bildung* perspective, they found "Heidegger's way of describing the ontological process of the becoming being. … especially fruitful" (p. 92) for their analysis of the triangular merging of humans–machines–music. To my understanding, Almqvist et al. (2021) followed and focused on *human* subjectivity and anticipated this human subject as

*thinking-with* and *learning-with*, which they used to describe the possibilities inherent in the human subject commonly overlooked by "the calculative thinking in modern society" (p. 93). Following Almqvist et al., the developing possibility in the subject was also *devoid of the judgmental sphere of values*. In this respect, Almqvist et al.'s approach overlapped to some degree with the interests in this study, but they placed little or no agency on other involved subjectivities, which represented an essential part of this study.

Also, playing into the forms of capital as conceptualized by Bourdieu (2011) could have opened a path into the material of this study. Stabell (2018) integrated Bourdieu in her theoretical framework, and I suppose that moving Bourdieu into the field of social media could disclose additional layers that consider and analyze the cultural, social, and economic capital of all the agents involved.

### 8.1.2. Answering four questions—or more?

On a micro level, the four questions posed at the outset of this study provided me with important signposts in the thematical thickets of the chosen topic. Their formulations offered clear assignments that I followed and found to be answerable. Research question one, asking how child stars appropriate and interpretatively reproduce cultural cosmopolitanism and popular music on YouTube, and how these practices and the mechanisms of the platform influence the processes of cyborg talentification, was pragmatically answered in Chapters 6 and 7. The theory of cultural cosmopolitanism (Papastergiadis, 2018; Regev, 2007, 2013, 2019) was paired with understandings of YouTube as a cyborg system and a cultural cosmopolitan arena (Burgess & Green, 2018; Hall, 2018; Hull, 2010). Combined with the actual empirical data, case-specific cultural cosmopolitan traits were identified, as described in Sections 5.3.4., 5.4.4., and 5.5.4., in Chapter 6, and summarized in Section 6.3.2. Research question two was interested in tracing cyborg talentification categories, discourses, and perspectives in fans', critics', and the media's communications with and about child stars on YouTube, and how these negotiated child stars' positionings in society. Based on the turning wheel developed by this study's methodological principles, I traced motivational, discursive, and narrative levels in the empirical data, which were used together with the fourth, theory-developed level mentioned above to identify both general and case-specific characteristics and the forging of case-specific cyborg talentifications. In close engagement with existing scholarship, answering research question two showed how the interaction between commenters' impulses with each other, the musical material, and the artistic personae of the

stars identified stars' talent as innocent equaling authentic. This was discussed throughout Chapter 5. Research question three asked how child stars' futures are perceived by fans and critics on YouTube and the child stars themselves, and how these perceptions might affect the processes of cyborg talentification and child stars' futures. These issues were addressed mainly in Chapter 6, based on interview materials available on the convergence platform of YouTube and posted and shared by their fans or the stars themselves. Research question four, which concerned the possible impact of cyborg talentification on the field of music education research, was addressed and answered in Sections 1.3.,1.5.1., and 5.2.4. and Chapter 7.

On a conceptual level, my inquiries have been successively debated in all the chapters, quite understandably so when presenting existing scholarship, but also in my ethical, methodological, and certainly my theoretical considerations and in my subsequent choice of frameworks. On a macro level, and as inherent preconditions of all four questions, it were the concepts of *talent* and *child prodigy* and their problematizations, deconstructions, and discussions that constituted the leitmotif that has fueled and inspired the research investigations of this study.

## 8.2. Thematical contributions of this study

### 8.2.1. Relevance of the specific child stars for cyborg talentification

Apart from having to align with the general framework of DYNAMUS to situate this project within the Norwegian context, the criteria for choosing The BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus, and Angelina Jordan were based on indicators that I suspected would produce rich and well-balanced data. As to whether or not these cases were specifically suitable for demonstrating cyborg talentification was not a point of consideration, but was on the contrary, one of the exciting things to unpack. As shown in Section 5.2., I worked with four specific levels of cyborg talentification that shaped the analysis of each case. Themes other than talentification might have been chosen as focus points in this study, such as matters relating to consumption, authenticity, celebrity personae, and taste. Yet, my intention was to explore processes of making talent. For this endeavor, I chose individuals already described as child stars as I thought that starting with "blank" personalities would align this study more with a psychological experiment than a socio musicological study. Thus, and by using material produced over a certain time span, this study investigated the cocreation, maintenance, and futures of talent in living child stars. Due to the nature of YouTube, the study's context

immediately expanded from its local embedment to include global participation outside the stars' Norwegian–Scandinavian setting. This again allowed for parallels with regard to international stars, such as Justin Bieber and Miley Cyrus, and existing scholarship on music phenomena, such as the tween moment (Bickford, 2020) in the USA, and their influence on European views of children's engagement in popular culture and music. It also highlighted social media's and media industries' views of and influences on child celebrities, as well as talent discourses in the parts of the world with access to YouTube.

### 8.2.2. Talent, talentification, and cyborg talentification

In my study, the question of innate talent was—apart from by presenting theorists such as Gagné (1998, 2004) and Ruthsatz et al. (2014)—mainly addressed through fans' perceptions, and, if it was to exist, it was understood as a catalyst among the many talenting agents. Still, it has hovered somewhat unredeemed in between the lines, and, although I intend to leave it like this, I want to briefly comment on it in this conclusory section. In my introduction (Section 1.1.), I reflected on talent conceptions across time and across cultures. I referred to Freeman (2005), who has conducted extensive studies on gifted children and who noted a fundamental cultural difference in expectations regarding talent in young children. Freeman found that Western cultures generally viewed genetic influences as most vital, whereas

> in the Far East, environmental influences are generally accepted as dominant. Every baby is seen as being born with similar potential; the main difference in children is in the rate of development, which to a large extent is in the power of each individual to fulfill through hard work. (p. 86)

The different effects of such opposing approaches that Freeman (2005) observed were interesting, though not startling, as high expectations concerning children are—when executed in the right balance—found to motivate children to exceed,[99] whereas a lack of teacher expectancy might make children indifferent and less self-confident. Freeman dedicated her life to researching talented and gifted children, their child and adult lives, the challenges they faced, and their successes. One of her core findings was labeled the *quality of giftedness*, a "special quality among the gifted" (Freeman, 2012, p. 14), which she identified as a recognizable characteristic found in very few individuals. This quality, Freeman insisted, was real in the sense that it could be identified, though only by those sensitive enough to spot

[99] See, for example, *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement* (Hattie, 2009).

it. As Freeman admitted, not all were able to perceive this quality, including professional judges, and in doing so, she again left space for the mystery of the innate, the spark of something beyond the explainable.

In the current study, the excitement of witnessing a young child perform technically and emotionally advanced music (Shavinina, 1999) has been identified as a convention in society, which, when supported and driven by media industries and economic interests, serves a personal need in the perceivers. This study showed how perceivers' experiences are intensified the more children's and adults' worlds are specifically and separately constructed by society. This insight was slightly puzzling since clear distinctions between adults and children were found to conflict with the analogous observed trend of *youthification* (Bickford, 2020)—with adults striving to stay youthful and small children being drawn to teenage habits while still in preschool (Rasmussen, 2001, p. 35)—leading to hazy age borders that are amplified by the online environment (Bickford, 2020; Kozinets, 2020). This paradox of, on the one hand, constructing ideas about childhood as the state *before* adulthood to make young talents seem even more amazing and of, on the other hand, wiping out distinct generations for the sake of everlasting youthfulness, was mirrored by the contradictory perspectives on child celebrities found in the data. These discourses seem incompatible yet they exist alongside each other, each with a marketing industry backing it up, as they identify talent—and consequently child prodigies—as something worth investing in.

The timeline binding and separating child and adult proved a brittle affair; at times, it was a necessary commodity for lifting and viewing the prodigy, whereas at other times, it was an obstacle as much as an illusion, blocking the musical autonomy and development of the juvenile artist. Both the traditional institution of the child prodigy (Gagné, 1998, 2004; Gagné & McPherson, 2016; O'Connor, 2009; Shavinina, 1999, 2016) and renewed ideas of the same, identifying talent as childishness (Bickford, 2016), counterworked a "free" development of juvenile artists. Also, importantly, child celebrities' online engagements that leave digital footprints and their virtual selves to be shared and commented on for eternity (Lange, 2019) were identified as stumbling blocks on the way to an adult artist career.

As shown by de Mink and McPherson (2016), talent exposure on YouTube could push contributors into a predetermined corner as being a child prodigy in YouTube niches requires compliance to specific rules. This was found to be especially true for those children who only performed on the YouTube platform and who had been placed there at very young ages by a wanting adult world (de Mink & McPherson, 2016). Using YouTube as the sole scene of

cyborg talentification appeared to create an anonymous, predictable, and reproducible personality with a focus on variances of name, gender, nationality, instrument, and technical accomplishment. This presented a variant of cyborg talentification–subjectivity that was somewhat contrary to the cyborg talentification cases in my study that allowed for musical individuality. My cases stood out on several occasions from de Mink and McPherson's (2016) prodigies, whose data showed little or no individualistic traits. One reason for this could be the difference in genre—de Mink and McPherson's project investigated classical child prodigies, and mostly pianists, whereas my study investigated vocal pop-rock musicians. Another reason might be the choices made and the strategies followed by the stars and their agents—possibly due to the children being older, their privileged situations, and again, their genre—and by me as a researcher. I investigated the variety of characteristics found in the discursive, motivational, narrative, and cultural cosmopolitan levels and placed these into a scholarly conversation (Bickford, 2016, 2020; de Mink & McPherson, 2016; Stabell, 2018; Vestad, 2014; Vestad & Dyndahl, 2017; Whiteley, 2003) where normative ideas of talent and the child prodigy were deliberately and continuously discussed. I suppose that this strategy helped to open a door through which the individual voices could be heard, and The BlackSheeps', Marcus & Martinus's, and Angelina Jordan's recognizable differences in their interpretive reproduction could be traced. In that way, analyses revealed how intricately connected the cyborg talentification levels found in the data are with the strategies and enactments of the artists, and vice versa. They also indicated how cyborg talentification strategies (are) reinforced (by) artists' own expressions, performances, and lyrics. The common denominator, facilitator, or ostinato in the symphony of cyborg talentification processes was cyborg-mediated musical experiences and, along with these, the ability to touch and be touched (Vetlesen, 2007).

Importantly, in my data, I found that perceivers and commenters on YouTube identified child stars' talent as authentic and innocent, creating a threefold dependency between talent, authenticity, and innocence. The link between child pop stars' perceived authenticity and innocence could be seen as an extension of Moore's (2002) research, where he showed how constructions of authenticity in the 1980s were "allied to constructions of 'innocence', and an unreserved embrace of the 'pop' to which it was so antithetical twenty years earlier" (p. 214). What Moore here described as an embrace of pop culture was in Bickford's (2020) research effectively developed and extended to include child demography in popular culture, with the consequences that implied (see Section 2.2.3.). Also, just as Moore (2002) identified more

recent authenticity markers to no longer entail the "denial of commercial processes" (p. 213), Bickford (2020) identified talent, as in the case of Bieber, as being measurable by commercial success. By focusing on YouTube comments, the commercializing processes were viewed through netizens' perceptions and, consequently, have also been colored by the meaning condensations and interpretations and the choices made by me as a researcher (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The marketability of talent-as-innocent-and-authentic was thus expressed by fans' comments highlighting these aspects as motivations for their infatuation and passion.

### 8.2.3. Cyborg talentification and musical experiences

In the introduction, I identified my fascination with musical experiences and musical talent as a central motivation for this investigation, wondering how and whether these two might be connected. As the analysis showed, talent would not exist without a medium or recipient, and it further indicated that (perceived) musical talent and musical experiences could well be two sides of the same phenomenon. This interconnection was not limited to a specific type of musical experience, but all facets were found to contribute to and enrich the cyborg talentification process. Musical experiences also occurred independently from the object but in relation to other comments and products. Certain keywords—"soul," "Angel," or "the Best!"—were found to trigger the feelings of the next commenter, either confirming something already felt or awakening something of what the other was not yet aware. These mediated relationships and clues also fathomed macro topics, such as loneliness, homosexuality, and braveness. Here, the power of algorithms reentered the scene as they remembered, predicted, and anticipated the data on commenters' computers, ultimately personalizing their content.

Gagné (2004, 2016) identified an encouraging environment as a vital ingredient for helping talent potential, be it innate or not, to unfold. This part of his theory was confirmed and expanded on by the patterns of cyborg talentification. This happened first and foremost by altering its premises and including a wider group, rather than solely including the top 10 percent of the most gifted children. Additionally, as the catalysts were not only parents, education, and physical–economic environments, but also the social media mediated by fans' and critics' voices, algorithms, and technological processes of all kinds, the focus on the catalysts identified these not only as *catalysts* but also as being the central nodes in the cyborg talentification process. These were found to be characteristically driven by vlistening, experiencing, sharing, living with, reacting to, liking, discussing, sorting, and commenting on.

As discussed earlier, the described practices illustrate vividly how with no one listening, reacting, supporting, paying, or performing, no talent would be possible. This rather banal insight had a sharper feel to it in the physical world of live concerts than in the textual world of YouTube.

## 8.3. Social media and future music education research

Closing this study, I repeat my introductory reflections from Chapter 7 of how working with social media repeatedly challenged my own, and my data's, positioning and place, making me question normative ideas of informal versus formal and popular versus academic interests. I extend this notion of a formal–informal and popular–academic blend to be necessary working conditions and frames for future music education research and praxis and for securing innovative development in music education research and its adherent vocabulary. Thus, I suggest that the knowledge gained from research on informal social media platforms ought to be integrated, translated, and developed in formal, offline settings and in the wider field of music education research. As Cayari (2018), whom I introduced in Section 2.4.3., recognized in his research, teachers can foster meaningful musical experiences for their students by "connecting participatory culture practices and synchronic musical traditions" (p. 373), such as the virtual ensemble techniques described by him. Importantly, and also emphasized by Onsrud (2015, p. 82) and Hull et al. (2010), this did not imply simply opening an exciting, new, informal tool box for students to express themselves with, but maintaining a certain amount of teacher guidance. Folkestad (2006) remarked that "teaching is always teaching and in that sense always formal" (pp. 142–143), yet he also underlined that the planning, structuring, and executing of a lesson did not evade or exclude informal processes, but might even improve these. I also suggest that not only in practical areas of music education research but also in theoretical musicology, social media offer conceptual possibilities that affect all aspects of musical involvement.

In the following, I attempt to outline places of interest for future investigations situated at the mingling interface of formal–informal, offline–online, physical–textual, and realistic–utopian.

### 8.3.1. Future investigations and concluding remarks

One of the themes arising from my research that I imagine could be followed up, and which was already addressed in Sections 7.1.3. and 7.1.4., is the matter of listening. As explained in the introduction to the second chapter, the complex nature of listening—and sound—was the

main reason for accepting it as a compound precondition of my data without in-depth instrumentalizations. Also, the intertwined relationship of listening and viewing in my context, as well as the fact that I was not in contact with the commenters themselves, favored saving an in-depth analysis of listening and vlistening modes for future studies. As I gathered the data, I often wondered *how* netizens were listening, *what* they were hearing, how they related to the sounds mediated by their computers or smart phones, and in which ways visuals were affecting them. Shuker (2016) observed that “listening is a physical process situated in social contexts and mediated by technology” (p. 85). Several researchers also confirm the existence of different types of listening (Chion, 2019), and how listening as a skill might be in need of practice (Green, 2008). Green (2008) investigated what she named pupils’ ordinary listening and found it likely to be “very passive, inattentive or undiscerning” (p. 73). In her research, Green discovered that pupils developed a more *purposive* listening through actively engaging in informal learning projects. I envision a future project to trace the modes and effects of listening to YouTube videos and voices, preferably over a longer period of time. Here, the effect of differentiated and purposive listening on musical experiences, and the influence of sound quality on listening skills, could be the focus. By including visuals, another perspective could investigate the relations and effects between listening/vlistening skills, sound quality, visuals, and musical experiences in children and adolescents. Some indications of listening practice on YouTube and the influence of visuals were found in the data, as this commenter explained:

> **Commenter:** Someone made a suggestion to me that I should listen without watching the video, just listen. I was not really expecting much difference, but I was shocked, and amazed, they were right. It is like listening to the best singer in the world for the first time. If you heard it for the first time, not knowing who was singing, you would swear it was some famous legend.

The absence of visuals is above described as a talentification catalyst, obscuring the importance of the age marker, which was found to be vital in my material. Or, on the contrary, it illuminates the matter from another angle. Considering talent shows like *The Voice*, which combine the judges’ not-seeing-only-hearing with the audiences’ seeing-and-hearing, could cast an interesting light on the above-described phenomenon. The audience shows obvious delight as they witness the judges’ reactions when these turn around and are clearly shocked to see how their audial experience does not match the visual. I suppose, that the point of listening without viewing, must be to be able to listen without the interference of

preconceptions about age, gender, personality, and looks. Yet, as the judges turn around, they see the person who has been singing, and their faces mirror the possible mismatch of their audio–visual images. Their astonishments might reflect the performer's age, personality, gender, or race, and the judges only express their personal "shocks" through body language not in words, and thus, their effect might be even more powerful as each individual in the audience will interpret the judges' expressions within their own horizons, though enforced by the communal feeling and the gasps for breath in the audience.

Apart from the continuous work of tracing talent discourses in formal and informal settings, another topic arising from this research are teachers' and students' conceptual and practical engagements with cyborg talentification—in the *fagfornyelsen* or other formal settings—including investigations of the musical body. Also, projects illuminating child celebrities' individual voices in a globalized world and an analysis of existing talent discourses and power structures in musical talent shows for children might prove interesting. Connected to this topic could be an investigation of adult musicians working with child celebrities, as the mentioned guitarist Mendez in the Jordan narrative or Madcon and Derulo in the Marcus & Martinus enterprise. Another project could have at its fore tracing the influence of children's and youths' social media music sharing practices on formal teaching, focusing on mapping YouTube's place and the effects of online *Bildung* in music classrooms. Also intriguing, and based on internet research of online participation, would be an investigation into the impact of virtual anonymity (Løfberg, 2003; Markham, 2008) on students' sense of achievement and empowerment. The most personal project I will outline would entail following up—using observation, participation, video filming, and interviews—the suggested democratizing of pop songs through children's voices as suggested by Bickford (personal communication, May 20, 2021), and the universal grain in children's choirs put forward by myself in this study (Sections 5.5.3. and 7.1.2.).

In the early stages of this project, I followed the working title: *Online perceptions of musical talent. YouTube as a facilitator of fan- and stardom.* By and by, layers were added and demarcations were made, and insights, gained from the data, shaped and reshaped the design of the current study. *Online* proved to be an ambiguous concept and an environment that not only had significant ethical and methodological consequences, but also the power to rearrange content, space, and time, making these overlap in physical and textual worlds. The facilitator role of YouTube was revealed to be more intricate than first anticipated, both in matters of its cyborgian mechanisms and systems, but also in its position as a *hotspot* that gathers, mediates,

and distributes impulses across national, cultural, economic, and social borders. Not least, the cases of cyborg talentification, encompassing the whole spectra of child celebrities, artistic personae, musical experiences, the media, musical products, and oral, visual, and cyborgian communications incited by The BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus, and Angelina Jordan, became a matter of intense intellectual and emotional engagement. These unpacked young Norwegian artists' musical careers to be part of a local, European, and even global system of musical prodigiousness.

Overall, the narratives of commenters', the media's, and child stars' cocreations of talent viewed through cyborg talentification processes in the cyborg system, opened trajectories into multiple childhood and prodigy discourses, consumer practices, and universal interests. On YouTube, a social environment was unpacked that engaged in current and futuristic enactments. I suspect that these practices and their arising conceptualizations might have the power to not only affect the common produsers' actions and engagements, but also the future field of music education research.

*“Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are.”*

*Michel Foucault (2000, p. 336)*

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# Appendices

All song lyrics were retrieved from YouTube videos and transcribed/ translated from Norwegian where necessary.

## Appendix 1: Selected song lyrics—The BlackSheeps

### 1.1. Oro Jáska Beana (2008)

Oro Jáska Beana/ Be quiet, dog!

The little dog was called Kamilla
It loved herring and tortilla
Kamilla was a round dog
One couldn’t say that she was healthy
One day, just as Kamilla was going to eat
Her food mother told her: “Don’t make a mess!”
Kamilla was so offended that she barked

Oro Jáska Beana/ Be quiet, dog!

When it got winter and cold
Kamilla was almost suffocated
She had too much fat on her body
And she was also dumb in her head
Her fur blended with the snow
And, thus, Kamilla got stuck in the door
Kamilla howled like a stabbed pig
So her food mother gave her lots of ice cream
One day it was over
Kamilla had no more power to go on
Her blood pressure was far too high
Because she was so very fat
Her food mother sobbed:

“Cuoccas bajàs ja ruohta/ Get up and run.”

Jenát viehá beana / Make a sound, dog!

**Source:** The BlackSheeps – emne (2018). My translation from Norwegian/Sámi.

## 1.2. Edwin (2008)

You lock yourself inside and let no one in
Everyone is trying to find out something about you
But please Edwin listen to me
It's not dangerous to get out of the closet now

*Edwin, Edwin wanted to be a girl*
*Edwin, Edwin, do you wanna get out?*
Listen to me now, Edwin,
Get out of the closet now!

Edwin went shopping with his mother
He found a department with a bikini
He went to the rehearsal room, with money in his pocket
But the bikini was not for a boy

*Edwin, Edwin wanted to be a girl*
*Edwin, Edwin, do you wanna get out?*

One day, the sun was shining
And Edwin went to his mum's closet
He took a skirt and matched it with a pink high-heels
Everybody else was using black, and they thought Edwin had turned crazy

*Edwin, Edwin wanted to be a girl*
*Edwin, Edwin, do you wanna get out?*

**Source:** TheBlackSheepsBand (2009). My translation from Norwegian except for the phrase: *Edwin, Edwin, wanted to be girl. Edwin, Edwin, do you wanna get out?*

# Appendix 2: Selected song lyrics—Marcus & Martinus

## 2.1. To Dråper Vann (2012)

Two, two, two, two … two drops of water

In the hospital a late February night

Something extraordinary came about

Like two drops of water we appeared and said hello to the world

That was cool!

Now time has passed and we know what we do

We have chosen to take life with humor and (fot)ball

So let's all together sing:

Oh, oh, oh like two drops of water

Yes, we know each other as well as just that . . . two, two, two . . yeah

Football is life for both of us

Like two drops of water we got the same faith

That the future for us will be the green field

With the ball between us we are at our best

Oh, oh, oh like two drops of water…

*Rapping:* We are two boys who are much alike

There is no doubt about that

At school the teacher looks at both of us

To find out which one needed the loo

And girlfriends might despair

Because who was it again they should go out with on a date?

**Retrieved from:** Eivor (2012). My translation from Norwegian.

## 2.2. Elektrisk (2015)

*Marcus & Martinus:* Oh…Everything you do makes me go into a trance

I am happy when I feel my body dance

That's not just anything

Feel ignited when you come towards me

I get all crazy about that

And my heart jumps up and down

We storm to the breach

And the sun makes us warm

If you want to hold my hand

I will show you my charm

You are electrical

You give me electric shocks when I think about you

You are fantastic

Do I have a chance when I smile at you? Oh

*Katastrofe sings:* I had bought myself a canoe

A box of root beer and a travel radio

They gave me a travel-alone-sign, hi Tenerife

Walked around alone, was not one of the cool guys

Never been kissed and twenty one years old

You? Why are you so grumpy?

How many girls have you had at thirteen?

I'm hanging alone on the beach

Using sun-factor 50 (that one is slippery)

so no-body wants to hold my hand – I'll move to Gran Canarias (but you, bye then)

*Marcus & Martinus repeat chorus*

**Retrieved from:** Cool Bruh Lyrics (2017b). My translation from Norwegian.

# Appendix 3: Selected song lyrics—Angelina Jordan

## 3.1. Amy Winehouse: Back to Black (2006)

He left no time to regret
Kept his dick wet
With his same old safe bet
Me and my head high
And my tears dry
Get on without my guy

You went back to what you knew
So far removed
From all that we went through
And I tread a troubled track
My odds are stacked
I'll go back to black

> We only said goodbye with words
> I died a hundred times
> You go back to her
> And I go back to
> I go back to us

I love you much
It's not enough
You love blow and I love puff
And life is like a pipe
And I'm a tiny penny
Rolling up the walls inside

> We only said goodbye with words
> I died a hundred times
> You go back to her
> And I go back to

**Retrieved from**: Andrea FernándezTH (2013). My transcription.

### 3.2. Angelina Jordan: Back to Black ( 2016)

I have gone mad by your love

crazy, sick, and mad

I laugh, I cry, I love

When I see you with others I cry

with strangers you are high

Alone and with no one I cry

I'm thinking of you and I cry

in loneliness behind this lie

From this fun part of life

Every night I become a star and I live with stars, shame they get it so afar

    I'm the one who speaks to the moon, I didn't want to be in love

    But I fall back to, I fall back again, I fall back again

Oh, I love you so, I laugh at you

I have no warmth but the wind

I have gone away so many times

Just to forget 'bout you back on love with you, again

    I'm the one …

Laugh…

I still laugh at

    I'm the one

    Love

**Retrieved from:** Angelina Jordan Official (2016). My transcription.

### 3.3. 7th Heaven (2021)

Oh, you know a lot of bitterness

There is nothing to do about it

Life should be, life should be

Lived with hope

Oh, you know a lot of bitterness

There is nothing to do about it

Don't give up, don't give up

'Cause it's right in front of your eyes

Seventh heaven on my shoulder falls heavy

Sometimes I feel all my dreams are slowly fading

I see myself in the mirror

I wanna love the person looking back at me

Seventh heaven on my shoulders falls heavy

Sometimes I wanna be powerful

Gotta find the strength within me

Sometimes you look for miracles

But there's nothing in you

Sometimes you have to let go

And get lost in the moment

Sometimes you wanna be careless

And let go of sadness

Seventh heaven on my shoulder falls heavy …

Oh, you know a lot of bitterness

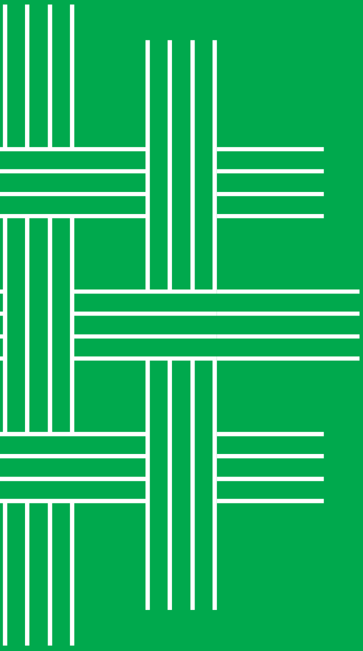
There is nothing to do about it

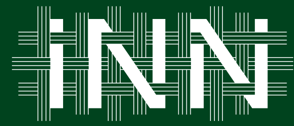
Life should be

Life should be

Lived with hope

**Retrieved from**: Angelina Jordan Official (2021c)






Seeing and hearing children perform music at extraordinary levels has fascinated audiences throughout history, generating both myths and scholarly theories on the musical talent involved. Recognizing YouTube as a popular scene for child popstars' promotion, this dissertation is interested in users' perceptions of stardom and it suggests that online musical talent may be the result of a cocreation, conceptualized as cyborg talentification. The various layers of the cyborg talentification process are unpacked through an analysis of texts from YouTube comment sections and a discussion of music and interview videos of the Norwegian child popstars The BlackSheeps, Marcus & Martinus, and Angelina Jordan. The entanglement of human and machine that is prevalent on YouTube, the availability of anonymity, and the blurring of clear demarcations between, for example, private and public, online and offline, child and adult, black and white, and man and woman—among others—are identified as characteristics of online communication. The author discusses the ethical and conceptual conflicts and possibilities arising from this deconstruction of traditional categories and investigates their possible impact on cyborg talentification in a music educational context. Here, the concept of a cyborgian musical body is presented as a realistic and utopian enterprise that allows for musical encounters and experiences of mastery beyond racial roles, gender, and the traditional understandings of musical talent.

Overall, this dissertation shows how YouTube produces specific ideas about child popstars' talent and their mission in society and how these constructions influence child celebrities' status and impact the development of their careers. It raises the question to which extent these discourses reflect or further advance the wider society's attitudes and subsequently identifies the informal learning platform of YouTube as a subject of international interest for music education research.