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Gamers for boys and models for girls: An exploration of influencer preferences among Swiss youth

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Abstract
Role models play a crucial part in adolescents' identity development. Given the extensive use of social media platforms in this population, we assume that so-called influencers on these platforms could function as role models. To investigate the types of influencers present in the everyday lives of young people, we asked 1049 adolescents (12–19 years) in Switzerland about their favorite influencers. Of those 1049 adolescents, 637 mentioned at least one name. The characteristics of these influencers were then coded, including their gender, age, and content topics. We then investigated the relationships between the coded characteristics of the influencers and the gender of the adolescents, whereby remarkable gender differences were discovered. Our results show that adolescents not only prefer influencers whose gender is consistent with their own – which is especially true for boys – but also favor content that reflects gender stereotypes. Girls prefer topics related to "How to & Style" and "Music & Dance". Boys have a stronger preference for "Comedy" and "Gaming" content. Both boys and girls prefer influencers who give insights into their daily lives. Overall, it seems that gender plays a crucial role for adolescents when choosing their favorite influencers.

Keywords
adolescents, youth, influencer, role models, preferences, gender stereotypes, gender roles

1 Introduction

Role models play a crucial part in adolescents' identity development. Given the extensive use of social media platforms among youth (e.g., Külling et al., 2022), we assume that so-called influencers on these platforms potentially serve as role models. It is, therefore, a relevant question which influencers young social media users in Switzerland pay attention to. This study gives an overview of popular influencers among Swiss youth, their respective characteristics and topics covered, and how these aspects are related to the gender of adolescents who are potentially inspired by their content. For this aim, this study employs exploratory analyses of descriptive data.

1.1 Identity development and the function of role models

Identity formation and development represent a continuous, lifelong process wherein adolescence is a crucial and defining phase (Marcia, 1980). People are not inherently born with an identity (Ryan & Deci, 2012). Instead, identity is adopted throughout life. As adolescents mature, they increasingly explore their identity (Klimstra et al., 2010). Thereby, identity often aligns with social roles such as "the student," "the daughter," or "the son," along with the normative expectations they entail (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Since the process of finding one's identity can be challenging, role models are of great importance. It is assumed that having role models significantly contributes to psychological functioning. Studies show that adolescents with role models exhibit improved self-esteem, better academic performance, and a stronger ethnic identity (Yancey et al., 2002). Observing the integration of roles within society and their associated values offers valuable insights, as supported by Bandura's (1986) social learning theory.

1.2 The role of media and social media for finding role models

A recent study in Austria (jugendkultur.at, 2021) found that young people primarily view their family members – namely mothers, fathers, grandparents, and siblings – and friends as their most influential role models. However, well-

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known figures such as politicians, athletes, or musicians who often maintain a presence on social media also hold influence as role models. A study examining the social impact of YouTubers and their influence on young people found that between 6.6% and 13.6% of respondents expressed a desire to emulate their online idols (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018). Furthermore, a study in Germany found that eight percent of the surveyed children referred to idols from books and comics, while four percent mentioned characters from video games as their idols (Feierabend et al., 2021).

With regard to young adults, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) showed that they predominantly identified with characters of the same gender from television shows. Gender differences are also evident when it comes to celebrities as role models. For boys, male athletes tend to be role models, often serving as authority figures or mentors. Conversely, girls are more inclined to view actresses as role models, perceiving them more as friends (Gleason et al., 2017).

As adolescents in Switzerland intensely use social networking sites such as Instagram or TikTok (Külling et al., 2022), it becomes evident that they also might find role models on these platforms. So-called influencers hold a significantly larger following than the majority of social media users (Haenlein et al., 2020). The exact definition of an influencer remains unclear within the literature. For instance, Schach and Lommatzsch (2018) define influencers as individuals who have built a substantial reach through their followers, with whom they engage via blogs, video platforms, and social networks. Their focus is primarily on the magnitude of their digital presence. Others, like Freberg et al. (2011), associate influencers with the impact they wield over their followers, stating that "[S]ocial media influencers (SMIs) represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (p. 90). However, most definitions encompass an added dimension: the aspect of monetization and the value influencers bring to companies' marketing efforts through their expansive reach. An example that aligns with this perspective comes from Abidin (2015), who characterizes influencers as individuals with a substantial social media following that they leverage to gain financial resources via advertising. These definitions correspond with the conclusions of Wunderlich and Hölig (2022), who note that German youth perceive influencers as a distinct subgroup of actors in social media dedicated to specific topic areas and earning income through (product) advertising. Though the definitions differ about whether influencers purposefully impact their followers, we assume that influencers serve as potential role models for adolescents, possibly influencing identity development.

1.3 Gender identity and gender stereotypes

While there is no difference between male and female adolescents in the likelihood of having a role model, adolescents frequently identify with individuals of the same gender or ethnicity (Yancey et al., 2002). An essential aspect of identity development is connected to gender, making gender identity a cornerstone of one's fundamental self. Gender identity encompasses an individual's sense of belonging to a particular gender (Steensma et al., 2013). Gender identity development begins in early childhood, with certain steps observable from a young age. For instance, the ability to recognize one's gender or that of others typically emerges between 18 and 24 months (Serbin et al., 2001). Furthermore, disparities in gender identities become noticeable as childhood progresses. For instance, boys often experience more pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. However, they also report higher satisfaction with their gender identity compared to girls (Egan & Perry, 2001).

Gender differences in development continue into adolescence. Perry and Pauletti (2011) provided a comprehensive overview of key aspects during this stage. For example, career choices exhibit gender-related disparities. Variations in interests when selecting future career paths become apparent, with girls often showing a preference for interpersonal occupations, while boys tend to express greater enthusiasm for factual occupations (Su et al., 2009). In terms of self-concept, females are more likely to describe themselves as warmer, more agreeable, more neurotic, and more open to their emotions. Conversely, males often view themselves as more assertive and open to new ideas (Costa et al., 2001). Thus, signs of gender stereotypes appear.

Stereotypes are "beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups. More than just beliefs about

groups, they are also theories about how and why certain attributes go together" (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996, p. 240). Such stereotypes often pertain to culture or ethnicity, but also gender is a common subject of stereotypes resulting in gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes not only describe typical differences between men and women but also prescribe what men and women should be and how they should behave in different life domains (Ellemers, 2018); as core dimensions characterizing gender stereotypes, communion, and agency have been ascribed to women and men respectively. Ellemers (2018) summarizes that women in the Western world are stereotypically expected to prioritize family, while men are expected to work. Accordingly, women are often perceived as caregivers, and men as completing individual tasks. Furthermore, women are expected to show warmth as a typical quality, and men are expected to show competence. Additionally, women are often primarily evaluated in terms of their appearance (e. g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Taken together, gender stereotypes refer to traditional gender roles in Western societies. Despite changes in the participation and acceptance of women and men in different life domains (e. g., workforce, sports, professional education) in the past decades, basic stereotypes about how men and women are perceived to differ remained quite stable (Haines et al., 2016).

1.4 The role of media and social media in conveying gender stereotypes

Media content is considered to have a strong influence on the audience's perception of reality. Therefore, it is important to know how the media portray gender and convey gender stereotypes. One manifestation of gender stereotypes in the media is sexualized portrayals. For instance, girls are depicted as sexual objects, while boys are portrayed as assertive and greedy (Kim et al., 2007). These sexualized portrayals persist across diverse media platforms, including television and music (Cougar Hall et al., 2012; Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). There are also stereotypical patterns and gender differences in social media and online activities. Women are notably underrepresented on YouTube, comprising only about a quarter of the top 1 000 most popular German YouTube channels (Döring & Mohseni, 2019). Consequently, gender inequality is even more pronounced on YouTube than in cinema and television. The study by Döring and Mohseni (2019) further showed that females' predominant content areas are primarily categorized as "Beauty," "Food," "Relationship/Partnership," "Fashion," or "Household," thus representing traditional gender roles. Men's content areas are more varied and evenly distributed. However, they are led by categories like "Music," "Sexuality," and "Media in general." These findings complement the results by Prommer et al. (2019a, 2019b), showing that topics of female YouTubers centered around beauty, food, and relationships. In contrast, the contents of comedy and gaming were most often presented by male YouTubers. Stüwe et al. (2020) found similar patterns when analyzing the 50 most successful TikTok accounts in Germany. Females more often do lip-sync than their male counterparts, who produce comedy content more often. The genre of beauty and fashion was only produced by female accounts.

Regarding explainer videos on YouTube, Honkomp-Wilkens and Wolf (2023) found that protagonists are dominantly male and white, especially in school-related topic areas such as mathematics. Furthermore, adolescents even attributed more competence to male than female protagonists in this area and thus reproduced gender stereotypes. Taken together, gender stereotypes in the online context are still quite clear and based on traditional gender roles. In fact, the emphasis on women's appearance and beauty, at times, appears to be even more pronounced online than in conventional media (Götz & Prommer, 2020).

According to Götz and Prommer (2020), stereotypical gender portrayals on social media can be attributed to various factors. For instance, female influencers are more often targets of negative and hateful comments (Döring & Mohseni, 2020), especially for behavior or content that is not considered typical for women (Prommer et al., 2019c). Female influencers also got fewer positive comments about their personality or video content but more positive comments about their appearance than their male counterparts (Döring & Mohseni, 2020). This feedback could lead to more stereotypical content by the influencers. Furthermore, advertising mechanisms on social media seem to reinforce the portrayal of gender stereotypes. Because of clear target group definitions and, thus, potential advertising revenue, content about beauty and

fashion is more attractive for female influencers who want to make a living from their social media presence (Prommer et al., 2019c). Finally, algorithms on these platforms could further reinforce gender stereotypes through recommendations to the users. Although it is unclear how algorithms on specific platforms operate, evidence of gender bias in algorithms in general has been observed, some with far-reaching consequences (Hall & Ellis, 2023).

1.5 Research questions

In summary, identity development is an essential task for young people, and it also includes the development of a gender identity. The media might play an important role herein, as young people can find role models in the media generally and social media particularly. However, previous studies showed that the representation of gender in online media is biased and that online media often depict traditional gender stereotypes. Against this backdrop, and based on the assumption that influencers may serve as role models for adolescents in Switzerland, we pose the following research questions:

- RQ1: Which influencers are most popular among adolescents in Switzerland?
- RQ2: Which characteristics (gender, age, person-focused vs. topic-focused account, known away from social media, platforms used, number of followers, topic-specific vs. topic-diverse account, content categories) describe these popular influencers?
- RQ3: How do the characteristics of influencers relate to the gender of adolescents who named them?

To answer these questions, this study is based on descriptive data that is analyzed in an exploratory fashion. Thus no hypotheses are proposed. Finally, the results will be discussed regarding potential gender-stereotypical patterns.

2 Method

A survey among adolescents aged 12 to 19 years in Switzerland was conducted between April and May 2022. A total of 1049 adolescents participated in the written survey, which took place in Switzerland's three major language regions in their respective languages (German, French, and Italian). The survey was in paper-pencil format and took place within the classroom. Schools in Switzerland were chosen randomly to achieve a representative sample. Schools involved all types of schools relevant for adolescents aged 12 to 19 years, specifically compulsory schools and high schools at Sekundarstufe I (pupils aged 12 to 15 years) and high schools and professional schools at Sekundarstufe II (pupils aged 16 to 19 years).

2.1 Questionnaire

As part of the questionnaire, the adolescents answered the following question: "Which are your three favorite influencers (whether on Instagram, TikTok, or other channels)?" The participants were allowed to provide up to three responses. The answers to this question serve as the basis for the analysis (see also section 2.3). Additionally, adolescents indicated their gender in the demographic section of the questionnaire[1].

2.2 Sample

The question about favorite influencers was only asked to adolescents who indicated having an account on at least one social networking site ($N_{netw} = 995$). Out of these, 673 adolescents gave at least one answer to the question about their favorite influencers. This sample ($N_{youth} = 673$) forms the basis for the evaluation of the *most popular* influencers. From this sample, 509 adolescents named at least one influencer who was named twice or more in total. These influencers, who were named at least twice, were coded in the analysis. This sample ($N_{youth} = 509$) forms the basis for the evaluation of the *characteristics* of the influencers (see also Figure 1).

Table 1 displays the demographic information of the sample. Due to the disproportional

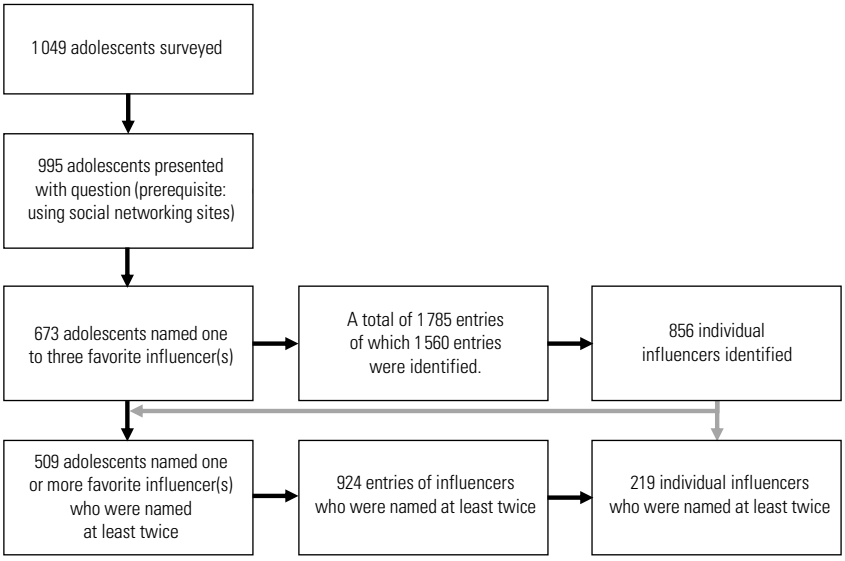
1 While many individuals align with their physical sex characteristics assigned at birth, encompassing factors like sex chromosomes and genitalia, there is a growing number of children and adolescents whose gender identification diverges from the conventional binary classification of female and male. Some may identify as nonbinary or gender fluid, for instance (Diamond, 2020). However, due to the limited availability of data from such individuals in this study, the analysis will focus on the two traditional genders, male and female.

Table 1: Demographic information of the sample

		Participants with at least one favorite influencer (*N* = 673)	Participants with at least one favorite influencer named twice or more (*N* = 509)
Gender	Male	53%	52%
	Female	47%	48%
Geographic Region in Switzerland	German	36%	36%
	French	38%	41%
	Italian	26%	23%
Age Group	12–13	13%	12%
	14–15	37%	40%
	16–17	32%	33%
	18–19	18%	16%

Note: For the survey, the intended distribution of the sample regarding language regions was 40% German-speaking, 40% French-speaking, and 20% Italian-speaking adolescents.

Figure 1: Sample flow (participants and influencers)



sampling approach regarding the three language regions in Switzerland, data from French-speaking and Italian-speaking Switzerland is overrepresented compared to the distribution of the adolescent population in Switzerland (67% German-speaking, 29% French-speaking, 4% Italian-speaking, according to Bundesamt für Statistik, 2022).

2.3 Data preparation and coding

Figure 1 shows an overview of the data preparation process. In the first step, all the information provided by the adolescents was checked, and the associated influencers were identified. A total of 1785 entries were made by the 673 participants, of which 1560 could be clearly assigned to a person or an account (225 entries were not identifiable[2]). A total of 856 different influencers were identified in this step. This information constitutes the data for the evaluation of the *most popular* influencers.

In the second step, additional information was documented for the identified influencers. Due to the vast number of different influencers (856 in total), this additional information was only recorded for those influencers who were named at least twice. This was the case for 219 of the various influencers. They accounted for a total of 924 mentions, which corresponds to 59.2% of all identified mentions. The other 637 influencers who were named only once were not considered in the subsequent analysis of the *characteristics*.

Throughout the analysis, various *characteristics* of the influencers were coded. These are explained in the following section. The coding took place in February and March 2023.

- *Person-focused vs. topic-focused accounts*: Following Wunderlich and Hölig (2022), we determined whether accounts are person-focused or topic-focused. In person-focused accounts, the focus is on an individual's personality. In topic-focused accounts, the focus is on content and topics. This includes, for example, social media accounts of organizations or companies and YouTube accounts that curate humorous videos.
- *Gender of influencers*: This characteristic was documented for person-focused accounts.
- *Age of the influencers*: The age was documented for person-focused accounts. An estimate was made if the exact age could not be determined at the time of the survey (sample date May 2022). Age groups were 16–17 years (minors), 18–24 years, 25–30 years, 31–40 years, 41–50 years, and 51–60 years.
- *Language of the influencers*: The main language used on the account was documented. A distinction was made between the three national languages, German, French, and Italian, as well as the categories English and "other."
- *Also known away from social media*: It was recorded whether people from person-focused accounts are also known or successful away from social media. For this purpose, the categories sports, music, and show business (including actors and actresses, TV stars, models, and comedians) were coded.
- *The platforms used by influencers*: In addition to the social platforms Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, YouTube, Twitch, and Discord, other channels such as audio platforms (including Spotify), personal websites, or own apps were also documented. Furthermore, the category "books" was coded when influencers had published their own books.
- *Number of followers of the influencers*: In the first step, the number of followers on the four platforms Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch, was documented as these platforms represent the leading platforms. Subsequently, based on the highest number of followers, regardless of which platform, the following allocation was made:

  - Nano-Influencers: From 1000 followers
  - Micro-Influencer: From 10000 followers
  - Macro-Influencer: From 100000 followers

2 Entries that were not found via a Google search nor directly on the platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) were classified as "not identifiable". Reasons for non-identifiable names were: First, some of the entries were not specific enough (e.g., Giulia, David), where a multitude of accounts and persons could be meant. Second, some entries seemed very specific (e.g., VCLA, Mikulaschbe, zrax_o2_ytb), but were not detectable online. This might be due to participants errors when writing down the name, due to mistakes when typing in hand-written, not easily readable, answers by the research team, or due to private accounts. Third, some participants wrote "don't know the name" or "my friend".

» Mega-Influencer: From 1 million followers

This allocation is based on the standard benchmarks in influencer marketing in German-speaking countries (Brandentertainment, 2021).

› *Content categories*: Based on a brief inspection of the content or the information in the account description, content categories were assigned. Here, an account could cover several categories. The eleven categories are roughly based on the YouTube channel types used by Socialblade (2023) and are:

» Daily Life (including vlog and family)
» Gaming
» Music & Dance (including lip-sync)
» Comedy (including humor, reaction and memes)
» How to & Style (including fashion, beauty, do it yourself, cooking/baking/nutrition)
» Sports
» Travel & Outdoor (including camping, fishing, survival and hiking)
» Science & Technology (including vehicles)
» News & Politics (including practicing criticism and journalism)
» Acting & Film (including reality TV, anime, and horror)
» Education & Learning (including documentaries)

› *Topic-specific vs. topic-diverse influencers*: Following Wunderlich and Hölig (2022), accounts were coded as topic-specific or topic-diverse. This was based on the previous analysis of the eleven content categories: if only one content category was coded, the account was considered topic-specific; if more than one content category was coded, the account was considered topic-diverse.

In a third step, the 219 influencers and the associated information were merged with the data set of the adolescents. In this way, the *characteristics of the influencers* can be linked to the *demographic characteristics of the adolescents*.

2.4 Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the favorite influencers and their characteristics (RQ1, RQ2). To analyze relationships between the characteristics of the influencers and the gender of the adolescents (RQ3), chi-square tests were performed in SPSS. The significance level was set at $p = .01$. This rather conservative value was chosen because the analysis was rather exploratory, and no hypotheses had been proposed before the analysis was conducted. A statistically significant result means that a characteristic of an influencer (e.g., number of followers) occurs disproportionately often or rarely in male or female adolescents. For the estimation of the effect size, we used Phi or Cramer-V. For the classification of small ($.10 \leq$ Cramer-V $< .20$), medium ($.20 \leq$ Cramer-V $< .30$), and large (Cramer-V $\geq .30$) effects, we refer to the classification of Gignac and Szodorai (2016).

3 Results

In the following sections, results regarding the three research questions are presented.

3.1 The most popular influencers ($N_{influencer} = 856$, $N_{youth} = 673$)

Research question 1 asks which influencers are most popular among adolescents in Switzerland. The top ten most frequently named influencers can be seen in Table 2. Due to the same number of mentions in ninth place, a total of eleven online personalities are presented in more detail in Table 2.

3.2 Characteristics of the influencers ($N_{influencer} = 219$, $N_{youth} = 509$)

Research question 2 asks which characteristics describe these popular influencers. The following results are based on the 219 influencers who were mentioned at least twice, along with their corresponding coded characteristics. The units of analysis are the 219 influencers.

3.2.1 Person-focused and topic-diverse accounts

The majority (92%) of accounts are person-focused (vs. topic-focused), highlighting the influencer's individual presence. Furthermore, a significant portion of the coded accounts (80%) were categorized into multiple content areas (see also section 3.2.6), making them topic-diverse (vs. topic-specific).

Table 2: The most popular influencers and some key characteristics

Rank	Influencer	Frequency	Age	Gender	Language	Known from	Followers
1	Squeezie	49	25–30	Male	FR	*YouTube*	>10M (YouTube)
2	Mastu	30	18–24	Male	FR	*YouTube*	>1M (YouTube)
3	Kylie Jenner	27	18–24	Female	ENG	Reality TV	>300M (Instagram)
4a	Léna Situations	21	18–24	Female	FR	*YouTube*	>1M (Instagram)
4b	MontanaBlack	21	31–40	Male	GER	Gaming	>1M (Twitch)
6	MrBeast	18	18–24	Male	ENG	*YouTube*	>100M (YouTube)
7	Gaia Bianchi	17	16–18	Female	IT	*TikTok*	>1M (TikTok)
8	Cristiano Ronaldo (CR7)	16	31–40	Male	POR	Soccer	>500M (Instagram)
9a	Joyca	15	25–30	Male	FR	*YouTube*	>1M (YouTube)
9b	Kendall Jenner	15	25–30	Female	ENG	Reality TV	>200M (Instagram)
9c	inoxtag	15	18–24	Male	FR	*YouTube*	>1M (YouTube)

Note: FR = French, ENG = English, GER = German, IT = Italian, POR = Portuguese, 1M = 1 000 000. The high proportion of French-speaking influencers is probably due to the disproportionate share of participants from French-speaking Switzerland in the sample.

3.2.2 Gender, age, and language of influencers

Approximately two-thirds (66%) of the person-focused accounts are managed by male influencers. Consequently, accounts operated by female influencers make up around one-third (32%). There are occasional instances where accounts are managed by individuals of different genders or by non-binary individuals. Most accounts are managed by influencers aged 25–30 years (39%) or 18–24 years (35%). Approximately one-fifth (21%) falls within the age range of 31 to 40 years. Only six coded accounts are operated by minors (16–17 years old), corresponding to 3%. Another four accounts (2%) were managed by individuals between 41 and 60 years old.

Overall, the proportions are fairly evenly distributed among the four languages: German (28%), French (20%), Italian (23%), and English (24%). Another language was coded in ten cases (5%).

3.2.3 Also known away from social media

A quarter (25%) of the influencers did not primarily gain their fame through social media. They are mainly recognized in fields such as show business (11%, including actors, actresses, TV celebrities, models, and comedians), sports (9%), and music (4%).

3.2.4 The platforms used by influencers

Almost without exception, the coded influencers utilize multiple platforms. Virtually all of them are active on Instagram, which is valid for 98% of the influencers. Additionally, many have a presence on YouTube (88%). About two-thirds (68%) are engaged on TikTok. Facebook (30%) and Twitch (28%) see comparatively less presence. Approximately 18% are present on audio platforms, including Spotify. Accounts on Discord (9%) or Snapchat (10%) are relatively scarce. Roughly a quarter (26%) possess their own website, 15% provide their own app, and 7% have published their own book.

3.2.5 Number of followers of the influencers

Most coded accounts (77%) are associated with mega-influencers, having more than one million followers. Approximately one-fifth (19%) are attributed to macro-influencers, with follower counts ranging between 100 000 and one mil-

lion. Micro-influencers, with fewer than 100 000 followers, were only occasionally present in the coded sample (3%).

3.2.6 Content categories

The category "Daily Life" was most frequently assigned, with 69% of influencers sharing content from their everyday lives on their accounts. Humorous content is shared on approximately one-third of the accounts (35%). Similarly, around one-third (35%) cover the content area "How to & Style," encompassing topics such as fashion, beauty, cooking, baking, and nutrition. Music and dance are featured in 30% of the accounts. About one-fifth of the accounts (20%) revolve around the topic of gaming. Sports content is featured in 18% of the accounts. Accounts dealing with acting and film account for 16%. Travel and outdoor-related topics are the focal point for 15% of the accounts. Subjects related to science and technology (5%), news and politics (5%), and education and learning (4%) are covered by only a few accounts.

3.3 Characteristics of the most popular influencers by gender of adolescents ($N_{youth} = 509$, $N_{influencer} = 219$)

For research question 3, we investigated how the characteristics of influencers relate to the gender of adolescents who named them. The following analysis encompasses again the 219 influencers who were mentioned at least twice. Of interest here is the extent to which the coded characteristics of the influencers differ depending on the gender of the participants. The units of analysis are the 924 mentions of influencers.

Overall, the 924 mentions considered here come slightly more frequently from boys (52%) than girls (48%). A statistically significant result means that the characteristic of an influencer (e.g., number of followers) occurs disproportionately often or rarely among girls or boys.

3.3.1 Most popular influencers by gender of adolescents

Table 3 shows the most popular female and male influencers of the girls and boys surveyed. While some female and male influencers were named by both genders, some personalities were named exclusively by one gender. The following influencers were named exclusively by boys: *MontanaBlack* (21 entries), *Cristiano Ronaldo* (CR7, 16 entries), *Trymacs* (11 entries), *Elias Nerlich (EliasN97*, 9 entries), *Khaby Lame* (7 entries), *PewDiePie* (7 entries), *Lionel Messi* (6 entries), *Zano XVI* (6 entries), *Sidemen* (5 entries), and *Jakidale* (5 entries). The following influencers were named exclusively by girls: *Feli* (Videozeugs, 11 entries), *Sofia Crisafulli* (7 entries), *Bibi's Beauty Palace* (7 entries), *Nonakanal* (6 entries), *Emma Chamberlain* (6 entries), and *Kim Kardashian* (5 entries).

3.3.2 Person-focused vs. topic-focused accounts by gender of adolescents

Person-focused accounts were named to a similar extent by boys (51%) and girls (49%). Topic-focused accounts were rarely mentioned overall but predominantly by boys (93%, small effect size).

3.3.3 Gender of influencers by gender of adolescents

There is a strong relationship between the gender of influencers and the gender of adolescents (large effect size). Thus, male influencers were mainly mentioned by boys (70%). Female influencers were predominantly named by girls (88%).

An additional analysis showed that 94% of boys and 54% of girls named at least one male influencer, $X^2\,(1,\ N = 494) = 101.4,\ p < .001$ (large effect size), while 11% of boys and 65% of girls named at least one female influencer, $X^2\,(1, N = 494) = 155.5, p < .001$ (large effect size). Thus, boys and girls prefer influencers whose gender is consistent with their own. This is especially true for boys who rarely even mentioned female influencers.

3.3.4 Age of the influencers by gender of adolescents

The gender of the adolescents is related to the age group of the influencers (large effect size). Younger influencers aged 16–17 and 18–24 were mentioned more often by girls (78% and 58%, respectively) than boys. Influencers aged 25–30 years or 31–40 years, on the other hand, were mentioned more often by boys (54% and 72%, respectively) than by girls. Female and male influencers aged 41 and over were rarely mentioned so that no meaningful statements can be made about gender differences there.

Table 3: The most popular influencers by gender of adolescents

Girls				
Rank	Influencer	Topics coded	Gender	Frequency
1	Squeezie	Gaming, Music & Dance, Comedy	Male	27
2	Kylie Jenner	Daily Life, How to & Style, Acting & Film	Female	24
3	Léna Situations	Daily Life, How to & Style, Acting & Film	Female	20
4	Mastu	Daily Life, Music & Dance, Comedy, Sport	Male	16
5a	Gaia Bianchi	Daily Life, Music & Dance, How to & Style, Travel & Outdoor	Female	13
5b	Kendall Jenner	How to & Style, Acting & Film	Female	13
7	Feli (Videozeugs)	Daily Life, How to & Style	Female	11
8a	THEODORT	Daily Life, Music & Dance, Comedy	Male	7
8b	Sofia Crisafulli	Daily Life, How to & Style,	Female	7
8c	Bibis Beauty Palace	How to & Style	Female	7

Boys				
Rank	Influencer	Topics coded	Gender	Frequency
1	Squeezie	Gaming, Music & Dance, Comedy	Male	22
2	MontanaBlack	Gaming	Male	21
3	Cristiano Ronaldo (CR7)	Sport	Male	16
4	MrBeast	Gaming, Comedy, How to & Style, Travel & Outdoor	Male	15
5	Mastu	Daily Life, Music & Dance, Comedy, Sport	Male	14
6a	Inoxtag	Daily Life, Gaming, Travel & Outdoor	Male	11
6b	Trymacs	Daily Life, Gaming	Male	11
8a	Joyca	Daily Life, Music & Dance, Comedy	Male	9
8b	Nicolas Lazaridis (inscope21)	Daily Life, Gaming, Comedy	Male	9

Table 4: Content categories of influencers by gender of adolescents

Content categories	Boys	Girls	Test statistics	Effect size
Daily Life	50%	50%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 5.2, p = .022	n. s.
Comedy	65%	36%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 36.8, p < .001	Medium effect
How to & Style	21%	79%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 187.7, p < .001	Large effect
Music & Dance	46%	54%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 9.3, p = .002	Small effect
Gaming	76%	24%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 83.0, p < .001	Large effect
Sports	65%	35%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 10.8, p = .001	Small effect
Acting & Film	23%	77%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 62.3, p < .001	Medium effect
Travel & Outdoor	49%	51%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 1.0, p > .05	n. s.
Science & Technology	70%	30%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 3.8, p > .05	n. s.
News & Politics	74%	26%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 7.1, p < .01	Small effect
Education & Learning	64%	36%	X^2 (1, N = 920) = 1.7, p > .05	n. s.
Total	52%	48%		

Reading example: Entries of influencers who are active in the comedy topic came from boys in 65% of the cases and from girls in 36% of the cases (the values don't sum up to 100% due to rounding).
Note: n. s. = difference is not statistically significant (p > .01).

Table 5: Percentage of adolescents who named at least one influencer from the respective content category

Content categories	Total	Boys	Girls	Test statistics	Effect size
Daily Life	77%	74%	80%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 2.6, p > .05	n. s.
Comedy	53%	66%	41%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 33.9, p < .001	Medium effect
How to & Style	43%	23%	65%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 95.2, p < .001	Large effect
Music & Dance	48%	42%	54%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 7.0, p = .008	Small effect
Gaming	38%	53%	23%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 48.1, p < .001	Large effect
Sports	25%	30%	20%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 6.5, p = .011	n. s.
Acting & Film	25%	12%	39%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 47.2, p < .001	Large effect
Travel & Outdoor	25%	24%	26%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 0.2, p > .05	n. s.
Science & Technology	6%	8%	4%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 3.7, p > .05	n. s.
News & Politics	7%	10%	4%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 6.6, p = .01	Small effect
Education & Learning	6%	7%	5%	X^2 (1, N = 508) = 1.3, p > .05	n. s.

Reading example: 74% of boys named at least one influencer who features "Daily Life" content, and 80% of girls named at least one influencer who features "Daily Life" content.
Note: n. s. = difference is not statistically significant (p > .01).

3.3.5 Also known away from social media by gender of adolescents

Influencers who are also known or successful outside of social media were named more frequently by girls (61%) than by boys (40%) (small effect size). In particular, personalities from the areas of show business (girls: 87%, boys: 13%) and music (girls: 74%, boys: 26%) were named more frequently by girls than by boys, while personalities from the area of sports were named more frequently by boys (80%) than by girls (20%, large effect size).

3.3.6 The platforms used by influencers by gender of adolescents

A few differences between the genders emerged (see Table A in supplementary material). Female and male influencers with a TikTok account were named slightly more frequently by girls than boys (medium effect size). In contrast, female and male influencers active on Twitch were mentioned more frequently by boys than girls (large effect size). The same applies to Facebook (small effect size) and Discord (small effect size), although the latter platform was rarely present overall. For the other platforms, no statistically significant effects were found. Past research has identified platform preferences between boys and girls that partially mirror these results (Külling et al., 2022): Girls use TikTok more frequently than boys. However, while boys use YouTube more frequently than girls (Külling et al., 2022), we observed no gender difference regarding the presence of their favorite influencers on YouTube. As noted earlier (see section 3.2.4), most influencers were present on multiple platforms. This might explain why the platforms used by influencers do not clearly match the usage preferences of adolescents.

3.3.7 Number of followers of the influencers by gender of adolescents

Mega-influencers with more than one million followers were named similarly often by boys (51%) and girls (49%). Macro-influencers with 100 000 to 1 million followers were mentioned more frequently by boys (62%) than girls (38%), but this difference is not statistically significant. Micro-influencers with fewer than 100 000 followers were named so rarely that no meaningful statement about the relationship with the gender of adolescents is possible.

3.3.8 Topic-specific vs. topic-diverse influencers by gender of adolescents

Topic-specific influencers tended to be mentioned more frequently by boys (60%) than girls (40%), although this difference is not statistically significant. Topic-diverse accounts were named similarly often by boys (51%) and girls (49%).

3.3.9 Content categories by gender of adolescents

Certain content categories were mentioned disproportionately often by girls or boys (see Table 4). Influencers from the field of "How to & Style" were mentioned more frequently by girls than by boys (large effect size). Likewise, influencers from the fields of "Acting & Film" (medium effect size) and "Music & Dance" (small effect size) were named more often by girls than by boys. On the other hand, influencers from the topic area of "Gaming" were predominantly named by boys (large effect size). The situation is similar in the content areas of "Comedy" (medium effect size), "Sports" (small effect size), and "News & Politics" (small effect size). In the other content areas, no statistically significant effects of gender were found.

The analysis so far focused on the characteristics of the influencers as the central criterion divided by gender of adolescents (e.g., 65% of influencers active in the sports topic were named by boys and 35% by girls, summing up to 100%). To substantiate our findings, we conducted additional analyses to investigate the share of boys vs. girls that pay attention to at least one influencer with a specific characteristic (e.g., 30% of boys and 20% of girls named at least one influencer active in the sports topic). Table 5 shows the percentages of adolescents who named at least one influencer from the different content categories. Most of the boys and the girls named influencers with Daily Life content. Further, most girls named at least one influencer from the fields of "How to & Style" and "Music & Dance." The majority of boys named at least one influencer from the area of "Comedy" and "Gaming." Overall, the gender differences in this analysis mirror the results in Table 4. One exception is the category of sports. While we found a difference in the first analysis, there is no significant difference here. The porportion of adolescents who named at least one

influencer from the "Sports" area is similar in boys and girls.

4 Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated which influencers young social media users in Switzerland pay attention to. This is an important question since influencers might serve as role models for youth in today's media environment and thus might play a role in identity development among adolescents. Specifically, this study gave an overview of popular influencers among Swiss youth (RQ1), their respective characteristics and topics covered (RQ2), and how these aspects are related to the gender of the adolescents who named them (RQ3). For this aim, adolescents between 12 and 19 years in Switzerland were asked to name their favorite influencers. This data was then analyzed in a descriptive and exploratory fashion.

Overall, Squeezie (a male French YouTuber), Mastu (also a male French YouTuber) and Kylie Jenner (a female US celebrity, originally known from reality TV) were mentioned most often as favorite influencers. As names might change in rather short time frames, we also looked at the characteristics that the favorite influencers share and that potentially hold value for a little longer time: On average, favorite influencers are so-called mega-influencers with more than one million followers, between 18 – 30 years old and active on Instagram. Most have gained their fame via social media, and sharing content from their everyday lives is the content category that most accounts have in common. Male influencers were named significantly more often (66% of influencers), consistent with earlier results showing that around three-quarters of the top YouTubers in Germany are male (Döring & Mohseni, 2019; Prommer et al., 2019b).

It is worth mentioning that adolescents named a broad variety of favorite influencers. The 1560 entries resulted in 856 different influencers: 219 of these influencers were named at least twice, while 637 influencers were named only by one participant. This observation is consistent with the notion of Wunderlich and Hölig (2022), who stress the highly individualized use of social media platforms and the highly individualized "account repertoire" (p. 23) of adolescents.

Despite this prominent individualization, we were able to identify certain patterns when linking the characteristics of the influencers with the gender of the adolescents. Male influencers were predominantly named by boys, and female influencers by girls. Moreover, boys especially prefer influencers whose gender is consistent with their own: only 11% of boys named a female favorite influencer. Girls named female influencers slightly more often than male influencers, but half of them also named at least one male influencer. That male influencers are mentioned more often might be due to the fact, that men are disproportionally present in online spaces, such as on YouTube (Döring & Mohseni, 2019; Prommer et al., 2019a, 2019b) and therefore are more easily chosen as favorite influencers than women. Additionally, the pattern of gender-consistent preference is also known from choices of role models (Yancey et al., 2002) and from identification with characters in TV shows (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

Gendered patterns were also found with regard to topics represented by favorite influencers. The majority of girls named at least one influencer from the fields of "Daily Life," "How to & Style," and "Music & Dance." The majority of boys named at least one influencer from the area of "Daily Life," "Comedy," and "Gaming." This pattern is consistent with the results of Rihl and Wegener (2015), who found that female adolescents more strongly favor YouTube videos with beauty and lifestyle content than male adolescents, who, in turn, more often prefer gaming content. Thus, both girls and boys prefer influencers with content that reflects gender stereotypes regarding the main topic. This pattern might be mediated by the fact that adolescents choose gender-consistent favorite influencers, which in turn represent gender-stereotypical content. As shown by Prommer et al. (2019a, 2019b), topics of female YouTubers center around beauty, food, and relationships, whereas male YouTubers most often present content about comedy and gaming.

The formation of a gender identity is a central developmental task during adolescence (Marcia, 1980; Oerter et al., 2011). Our results show that gender plays a central role when adolescents name their favorite influencers and that gender identity formation might be linked to the choice of favorite influencers. Because influ-

encers often represent traditional gender roles (Döring & Mohseni, 2019; Stüwe et al., 2020), future research could investigate this relationship to clarify the extent to which adolescents are influenced by influencers in shaping and maintaining traditional gender roles as part of their identity development.

We proposed that influencers could be seen as potential role models for adolescents (see also Wunderlich & Hölig, 2022) and, therefore, play an important role in identity formation. With regard to the role models of adolescents, Gleason et al. (2017) mention that boys tend to choose athletes as role models who often serve as authority figures and that girls, on the other hand, are more inclined to choose actresses as role models who they perceive as friends. This is consistent with our results regarding favorite influencers who are also known or successful outside social media: girls more often mentioned personalities from show business (including actors and actresses, TV stars, models, and comedians) and musicians, while boys more frequently named sports personalities.

A strength of the present approach is that adolescents could name their favorite influencers independent of specific platforms, whereas earlier research often focused on one platform (e.g., YouTube, TikTok) at a time (Döring & Mohseni, 2019; Honkomp-Wilkens & Wolf, 2023; Prommer et al., 2019a, 2019b; Stüwe et al., 2020). Moreover, the data builds on personal preference as an indication of popularity and success and thus complements studies that chose an influencer sample based on numbers of followers, subscribers, or views (e.g., top 1000 YouTube accounts, Döring & Mohseni, 2019; Prommer et al., 2019a, 2019b; top 50 TikTok accounts, Stüwe et al., 2020).

Due to the vast number of different influencers, we restricted our analysis to influencers who were mentioned at least twice. This perspective has one major weakness, namely, that the sample only consists of the 509 adolescents who named one of the 219 influencers who were mentioned twice or more in total (and which were coded). Thus, the results might be different if all the 856 mentioned influencers had been coded, and the sample would consist of the 673 adolescents who gave at least one answer to the question about their favorite influencers. For example, the gender of the 637 not-coded influencers might not be as consistent with the gender of adolescents as in the presented results. Also, topics of the not-coded influencers and their relationship with the gender of adolescents might deviate from the pattern observed with the coded influencers. Nevertheless, the data provides valuable insight into the world of adolescents and their favorite influencers as we analyzed the most popular influencers of youth in Switzerland.

The question of how popular influencers serve as role models cannot be answered with the present study's data. Future research could specifically ask adolescents about their role models, where they find them, and why they chose them. In the case of influencers as role models, it would be especially interesting to see which aspects (e.g., behavior, attitudes, personality) they find most valuable and how much they emulate aspects of their role models in daily life. Additionally, the role of influencers as gender-consistent role models could be investigated in more depth, e.g., by asking adolescents how much they perceive their favorite influencers as typically male or female and how their content inspires gender-stereotypical behaviors or attitudes.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Appendix

Table A: Platforms used by influencers by gender of adolescents

Platforms	Boys	Girls	Test statistics	Effect size
Instagram	52%	48%	$X^2(1, N=920)=6.3, p=.012$	n. s.
YouTube	53%	47%	$X^2(1, N=920)=0.2, p>.05$	n. s.
TikTok	46%	54%	$X^2(1, N=920)=38.6, p<.001$	Medium effect
Twitch	71%	29%	$X^2(1, N=920)=82.2, p<.001$	Large effect
Facebook	63%	37%	$X^2(1, N=920)=14.5, p<.001$	Small effect
Snapchat	42%	58%	$X^2(1, N=920)=5.8, p=.016$	n. s.
Discord	71%	29%	$X^2(1, N=920)=12.4, p<.001$	Small effect
Audio platforms	51%	49%	$X^2(1, N=920)=3.0, p>.05$	n. s.
Websites	55%	46%	$X^2(1, N=920)=0.8, p>.05$	n. s.
Apps	53%	47%	$X^2(1, N=920)=0.1, p>.05$	n. s.
Books	51%	49%	$X^2(1, N=920)=0.1, p>.05$	n. s.
Total	52%	48%		

Reading example: Entries of influencers with an account on Instagram came from boys in 52% of the cases and from girls in 48% of the cases.
Note: n. s. = difference is not statistically significant ($p > .01$).