

# “THANK YOU FOR SHARING THIS FANTASTIC PERFORMANCE”: MEANING AND FORM IN TRANSMEDIA PERSONA CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTUBE DRUMMERS

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## ABSTRACT

*YouTube is one of the most important music media in the world today. Musical practice is reflected there in a variety of forms, from sound recordings to music videos to tutorials. The media environment that YouTube creates as a platform inscribes itself – to some degree – in the actions of those who use it. This is also the case with the YouTube drummer phenomenon, which this article examines in more detail in terms of the interplay between persona construction, music-making, media presentation, and transmedia content concatenation. The thesis is pursued that the practice of YouTube drummers creates a singular interference space of conventions, modes of action, and social roles, which in some places has novelty value with regard to music-related persona constructions and their implementation in platform-based audiovisual media, and which transcends media boundaries. The specificity of the persona construction essentially results from the mediating position of the drum-playing actors: they are not only performers who, like social media influencers, push into the light of publicity, but at the same time musical experts and instructors, quasi-curatorial music communicators who select, prepare, and present music of the past, and intermediaries of the corporeality of popular music. The analyses presented are based on exploratory investigations of the YouTube drummer field itself and a case study.*

## KEY WORDS

Musical Persona; Drumming; YouTube; Popular Music; Transmediality; Audiovisual Media; Rock Culture

## INTRODUCTION

YouTube has undoubtedly become a central music medium in the nearly 20 years since its inception. This has been made possible by the range of functionality provided on the platform – from the simple uploading of clips to interaction options to personalised recommendation chains based on algorithms and AI – but also by agreements with traditional music market institutions such as record labels and collecting societies. In the interdisciplinary field of music, media, and cultural studies, hardly any researcher today will deny that YouTube, alongside other platforms such as Spotify and TikTok, has significantly shaped the creation, distribution, and perception of music worldwide. It is probably not far-fetched to argue that the profound incision online media have made in relation to music cultures is not so much along the introduction and social establishment of browser-based applications in the mid-1990s, but along the triumph of social media starting in the mid-2000s.

In this article, I want to look at the phenomenon of YouTube drummers and explore the question of how a specific kind of persona construction emerges in the interplay of music-making, media presentation format, and transmedia content concatenation. The term “YouTube drummer” seems to be at best vaguely defined in musical practice itself, in the field of journalism, and in academia; rather, it triggers a bundle of associations, which is not uncommon for terms that originate in and are mainly used in areas of everyday life communication.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the sense of a working definition, I propose to understand YouTube drummers as people playing drums who use YouTube with some consistency and align their activities with prevailing trends and behaviours there (setting up a channel including concise and salient titling, regularly uploading clips, adopting styles of audiovisual composition, etc.). This definition does not preclude the relevant individuals from consistently pursuing their drumming on other platforms as well as offline.

Alongside the YouTube drummers, there is an almost unmanageable number of musicians active on the various platforms who put other instruments typical of pop music (especially electric guitar and electric bass) at the very centre. By focusing on drumming videos, it was possible to narrow down the field of investigation. However, practical considerations were not entirely decisive. Drumming videos are particularly interesting from an analytical perspective, since they highlight an instrument that tends to operate in the background in both the sonic worlds and the visual worlds of popular music and make it become the protagonist, if you will, which implies an interesting disruption of perceptual patterns.

The analyses I present are exploratory and are intended to capture the field of YouTube drummers itself in its multifacetedness, which also seeks to make it distinguishable from other fields of music practice on YouTube; this is combined with a case study. Central to my reflections is the thesis that the practice of YouTube drummers creates a singular interference space of conventions, modes of action, and social roles, which has novelty value in some places regarding music-related persona constructions and their realization in platform-based audiovisual media. Given that a cultural field is itself being staked out, it seems sensible to me to link my reflections to fundamental questions of meaning and form, interpreting the former as the meaning potentials of the products (videos) that spring from this practice, and the latter as formal aspects of the products derived from the media used. This is structurally reflected in the analysis section via three thematic areas: expertise and self-presentation, repertoire, and audiovisual production.

## **POP STAR PERSONA, TRANSMEDIALITY, AND YOUTUBE AS MUSIC MEDIUM**

The nexus of music and persona has been the subject of lively discussion in the humanities and cultural studies for some time. Important preliminary work in this field deals with questions of how personal qualities are inscribed in musical performances and products and in which economic, technological, and socio-cultural contexts and dynamics they are embedded (Fiske 1989; Shuker 1994). One of the first contributions to deal decisively and in a comprehensive manner with the role of personality both in the musical creation process and in the reception situation is by Simon Frith; however, he uses the concept of persona rather *en passant*. Frith construes performance as something intended for the eyes and ears of others: thus, what is perceived by the audience as a personal quality (of the performance) is often a result of a deliberate performance choice by the performer. In terms of the musical event, Frith (1996, p. 212) speaks of a double enactment: the performers enact their star personality (or image) and a song personality.

This model was further elaborated by Philip Auslander, who introduces the concept of musical persona. Auslander (2009, p. 303) takes up Frith's double enactment theorem and fundamentally distinguishes three layers of performance: the real person, the performance persona, and the character. Elsewhere, he highlights the epistemological consequences of a persona perspective, which specifically consist of turning away from the traditional (musicological) understanding of music as a work or text: "the direct object of the verb to perform need not be something – it can also be someone, an identity rather than a text (Auslander 2006, p. 101)". In his view, there are thus similarities to the film medium, and musical personas would therefore operate in ways that are similar to those of movie stars, in the sense that the audience's perception of the music is mediated by its conception of the performer as persona (Auslander 2006, p. 102).

What can be distilled from Frith's and Auslander's work is that in the areas where (popular) music is actually created, the actions of all those involved (musicians, producers, A&R managers, etc.) are aimed at initiating and establishing a (star) narrative in which the respective artist or band can be read as interesting, exceptional, unique, etc. This sort of "star branding" serves as a guide for the sale of the corresponding products. In other words, it is a central motif in the production fields of popular music to establish an identity construct for the public space that conveys a coherent and plausible, but not necessarily true, image of the (private/real) person.

A large number of works start from this theoretical core and shed light on different facets of music-related persona constructions or outline new relevant areas of investigation in this field. Allan Moore (2012, pp. 179–181), for example, following on from Auslander as well as developing his approach in musicological terms, distinguishes three levels in the sonic object itself (the song), performer, persona, and protagonist, and claims that these are always identifiable, even if their relationship to each other is not necessarily obvious. Philip Tagg (2012) takes a similar perspective, locating persona constructions at the sound level. He is particularly interested in vocal performance, for the analysis of which he introduces the notion of "vocal persona" (Tagg 2012, p. 344), which he argues may at times take the form of (theatrical) role-playing, but in any case, should be understood as any aspect of personality as shown to or perceived by others through the medium of prosody or the singing voice. Tom Cochrane (2011, p. 211), in turn, uses the concept to explore ways in which complex emotions in music can be analysed, concluding that whenever a listener gains direct access to the qualitative nature of an emotional feeling, the persona acts as a frame that unifies or endorses the emotional feeling. Giovanni Formilan and David Stark (2021, p. 39) also build on the frame idea in their empirical study of DJs and producers in electronic dance music by assuming that personas have an autonomous reality, that is, that they exist independently of the person. The relational structure in which identity work takes place thus consists of a third variable in addition to the person and the audience.

In a rather comprehensive way, Charles Fairchild and David Marshall (2019) approach the nexus of music and persona, which is also reflected in the editing of a thematic issue on this very nexus in this journal.<sup>2</sup> In relation to the topic of my article, their following claim is significant:

We will need an expansion of the kinds of sources from which we might draw our understandings of the existing discursive formations, material forms of mediation, and symbolic content of contemporary musical persona. These might include: websites, magazines, fanzines, social media feeds, trade publications, specialist blogs, museum displays, brand associations, product sponsorships, curated playlists, awards shows, and the many forms of popular

narrative non-fiction written by journalists, historians, artists, industry executives, managers, and producers reflecting on the entities, events, and social relationships we call the 'music industry'. (Fairchild & Marshall 2019, p. 11)

What is made clear here is that the processes through which a persona is constructed are embedded in a complex field of institutions, organizations, media types and genres, and semiotic resources, and that figuring out how these domains interact in persona construction is a central analytic task.

Kai Arne Hansen (2019) takes up this idea and raises the question of how, in the case of pop stars, the various elements of a persona can be held together in the interplay of media and, above all, presented effectively. In a sense, this is where the concept of transmediality connects to that of the persona. By now lively discussed among cultural researchers, two trends in the definition of transmediality can be distinguished. The first trend reflects a rather broad perspective and entails an effort to designate related processes in the media and to point out their affinity. Following this understanding, different types of media may share basic characteristics capable of producing similar effects on the part of media users (Elleström 2019). The second trend is expressed in a rather narrow definition that refers to the appearance of a particular theme, aesthetic, or discourse in different types of media, without the need or ability to identify a particular source medium (Rajewsky 2002). "Transmediality" thus characterises the migration of aesthetic elements across media or the coupling of these. Hansen argues in line with the former trend, concluding that pop personas are a genuine transmedia phenomenon, and that the analysis must be concerned with working out how multiple texts and narratives combine to form a larger whole, the persona (Hansen 2019, p. 502). This conflicts with the second definitional approach, which would instead suggest viewing pop personas as a cross-media phenomenon and tracing the specific aesthetic orientation or discursive framing of the individual persona construct.

In the research practice on music and personas, the transmediality approach seems to be still significantly underexposed, which underlines the importance of this thematic issue, but also studies on the nexus of transmediality and persona without reference to music are only available in a manageable number so far. With some frequency, topics from the field of political communication (cf. Hernández-Santaolalla 2020) and marketing or branding (cf. Bengtsson & Edlom 2023) are addressed. The transmedia angle is also sometimes taken up in celebrity studies (cf. Chaplin 2020; Mendes & Perrot 2019). Another tendency that is currently emerging is to relate the "wandering" of persons and personas in the media to a specific aspect of media present, namely the major platforms: YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and the like (cf. Masanet, Márquez, Pires & Lanzeni 2020; Löwe 2019). This is a commendable approach, as these very platforms and the technology companies operating them form widely networked sociotechnical ecosystems that organise larger social contexts on the Web (Dolata & Schrape 2022, p.12). In turn, this calls for a comprehensive investigation of the competencies, strategies, and behaviours of users that are adapted to these media environments in terms of "platform practices" (Duffy, Poell & Nieborg 2019).

This leads me to the platform that constitutes my object of investigation: YouTube (already the term "YouTube drummer" indicates that media environment and human action are somehow intertwined). YouTube has rapidly developed into a highly frequented communication and self-presentation environment and subsequently into an indispensable link in the value chains of popular culture. Treated today as a kind of universal medium in which just about anything can be found, from instruction manuals to historical film documents, it is by its original conception a video platform. The original motto, broadcast yourself, got to the heart of the idea that the platform should offer a kind of habitat for user-generated content and DIY practices (Burgess & Green 2009). However, it is part of YouTube's (still short) history that professional providers were also able to place their products, which followed classic

commercial interests and led to the establishment of an asymmetrical relationship between users and the industries involved, which was exactly the intention of YouTube's founders from the very beginning (Vonderau 2016). YouTube has thus also functioned as a kind of mass medium with a feedback channel (meaning the comment section) and, of course, with a kind of integrated machine market observation tool (Dolata 2021).

YouTube quickly developed into a music medium, probably one of the most important of our time, and the reasons for this are firstly the communicative reach that the platform offers content creators, secondly the degree of use worldwide, and thirdly the variety of forms in which musical practice manifests itself. As mentioned at the beginning, the prerequisite for this was that various legal agreements were reached with established institutions of musical and cultural life. Varieties of musical practice include sound recordings, music videos, cover versions, parodies, tutorials, and more. In a way, most of these clip categories play a role in the YouTube drummer phenomenon, in the sense that partial aspects of them can be found in the corresponding videos, but none of them may quite serve as a model or prominent interpretive framework. Appearing as a drummer on YouTube thus seems to be determined to a markedly high degree by a hybridity of form, which corresponds with the basic premise that hybridization is a fundamental feature of YouTube aesthetics (cf. Vernallis 2013). The construction of personas in this field is correspondingly complex.

## **YOUTUBE DRUMMERS' PERSONAS AND THE BLURRING OF MEDIA GENRE BOUNDARIES**

The YouTube drummer phenomenon has its origins in the creation of non-corporate user-generated content. To what extent this accurately reflects contemporary practice is difficult to verify. One can assume that, as in other creative practices tailored to YouTube, the transitions between user-generated content (or DIY) and professionally organised, commercially oriented activity with industrial actors pulling the strings are fluid. For better orientation, I will briefly outline characteristic features of drumming intended for the eyes and ears of YouTube users.

The object of consideration are videos in which individual instrumentalists play well-known songs with the help of a playback track in which the drum part is missing or has been turned down by filters; as mentioned above, similar videos can be found in the field of playing guitar or bass. The instrumentalists shown are most likely also active offline as musicians. At the same time, their actions are noticeably adapted to the forms of presentation prevalent on YouTube or in social media, which – in one way or another – is transferred to their overall image as musicians and leads to them being perceived as “YouTube drummers”. In other words, the focus is not on music tutorials, music videos, or videos with cover versions of popular songs, but rather videos, usually elaborately produced, that show a musical performance, but performed by a single person and usually filmed in a rather “untheatrical” setting, often a rehearsal room or a (home) recording studio, in other words, in places that mirror the day-to-day activities of musicians.

When producing such videos, drummers have to adapt their learned role portfolio (rehearsing, performing, recording, teaching, etc.) to a “new” constellation of requirements (selecting a song, performing, filming, editing the video, uploading it, and responding to user comments). Another requirement may be to effectively present one's own actions in a transmedia context. This can refer, as noted above, to the coupling of activities transported across different platform accounts/channels, but can equally encompass presence in more traditional media forms such as sound recordings, music videos, live recordings, and paratexts such as interviews (audiovisual and text-based).

In what follows, I reflect on persona construction in light of the phenomenal abundance of drumming on YouTube and the cultural dynamics in which it is embedded and connect this to descriptions and interpretations of a specific case: the YouTube channel “sina-drums”. Behind

this is Cologne-based musician Sina Doering (\*1999), who is active as a professional drummer in various formations. This approach via a case study, like all methodological approaches, is able to shed light on certain aspects, but not on others, which is why I also name facets of the addressed phenomenon for which the chosen example cannot apply and refer to alternative analytical approaches. In order to illustrate the scope of the YouTube drummer phenomenon and the regularities that occur, I will cite other channels and videos as examples in a few places.

### **Expertise and Self-Presentation**

YouTube drumming videos enjoy great popularity, which is expressed in high view numbers that are frequently in the high seven-digit range. One reason for this success is the expertise of the people performing. You watch “experts” at work and can enjoy their special skill or expressiveness. They are also the ones who create a new visual approach to the performance of a song, while the sonic structure changes only marginally compared to the original recording. Thus, for the actors, i.e. the drummers, the core challenge seems to be to come as close as possible to the original drum part in an all-encompassing way, that is to say, in terms of the notes played and the sound. And as a spectator, you are in the comfortable situation of being able to observe whether the respective person succeeds in doing this or not.

By expertise I mean the range of performative musical skills and the ability to activate them in public. The videos present people who have obviously already gained some experience in playing drums. In addition to the particularly complicated movements and beat combinations, this is evident from the timing. Everyone who plays or has played in a band knows from personal experience that timing is an unmistakable sign that you are approaching or have internalized professional standards. On the one hand, correct or incorrect timing is subliminally noticeable – it can be defined as a micro rhythmic phenomenon – and on the other hand, it permeates the entire sound layering or sound texture of a song. In popular music culture, an often-quoted expression – and widely held sentiment amongst musicians – is that “a band is only as good as its drummer”. For the performers in question, correct timing doesn’t seem to be a challenge at all, nor are many notes played in rapid succession or acrobatic combinations of beats. All of this catapults them into the world of professional popular music, even though they are framed as peers or at least as approachable individuals by their personal YouTube channel and cannot be considered famous in the traditional sense like pop stars. So already on the level of expertise an interesting clash of different cultural patterns of orientation becomes apparent, which is not without consequences for the way the actors in this field work on their personas and which suggests that they act at a certain distance from culturally ingrained modes of representation.

The sina-drums channel is indeed exemplary in this respect. In addition to the actual play-along videos, there are also self-produced clips that give insights into the “private life” of the channel owner, for example, her career or current events (such as the relocation of her home studio), as well as drum tutorials and clips that show collaborations with other musicians; taken together, the latter give the impression of a scene or a network of friends. All of these clips ultimately revolve around Sina’s advanced drumming and the various roles associated with it, and yet they present a person who constantly acts in a gesture of informality and in this respect makes no discernible effort to come up with a set of salient and distinctive personality traits typical of pop star and social media influencer images. Like many YouTube drummers, Sina presents herself as an accessible, down-to-earth master of her craft.<sup>3</sup> This too can be read as impression management that attempts to conform to certain conventions and expectations, in the sense of deliberately avoiding appearing aloof. From the clearly visible absence of conventional star behaviour (or star appeal), it can be read that the actors have a kind of media sensitivity. No matter how good their playing skills are, no matter how good their reputation is in the music scene and in the user community, as long as the main way or one of the main ways to get public attention is YouTube, they will take in the mode of the musician next door.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of habitual aspects, another point stands out. Most of the actors are dressed very casually and many tie in with clothing styles and vestimentary practices that are generally associated with pop culture and its representatives. In this context, it is noticeable that the practice behind the term “Youtube drummer” is almost exclusively in the hands of adolescents and young adults. This may or may not be surprising, depending on one’s point of view. On the one hand, one could object that there are probably many older musicians with an affinity for media-based self-presentation. On the other hand, one can refer to the findings of youth studies, according to which young people, compared to other social groups, tend to use media primarily as a training ground for identity work (cf. Lange & Xyländer 2008). Whichever argument one chooses, decisive for my topic is the effect that comes from the accumulation of young drummers. For, according to this view, self-presentation can be read as a link to the embodiment of a key cultural concept, namely that of juvenility. Many of the now familiar body practices of popular music developed in the youth cultural movements of the 1960s, which stood in opposition to existing notions of morality and decency, or at least sought to articulate an alternative to them. The fact that popular music performance became an art form in its own right had much to do with a normative framework centred on the premise of appearing as cool, relaxed, spontaneous, and accessible as possible. It can be argued with Milton Singer (1972, p. 71) that these qualities have merged over time and now form the core of a collective, meaning *cultural performance* of juvenile informality. The videos at issue confirm this normative horizon, but with regard to their potentials of meaning (see fundamentally Smith 2021), it can be seen that they link this horizon to the representation of musical expertness.

This results in an interesting cultural re-alignment: the activity spectrum of popular music actors who are not stars or celebrities has been theorised and described in the past using concepts such as consumption, fandom, appropriation, or everyday life (cf. DeNora 2000). The everyday performance of popular music now takes on a form that accentuates epistemic structures, bringing them to the surface, as it were, and making them an element of the aesthetic experience. This can be seen in many videos (including “sina-drums”). For example, quite often, all physical activities, meaning the movements of the feet and hands, are depicted with the help of a split screen or picture-in-picture effect.<sup>5</sup> The individual song is thus re-framed as manifestation of a specific knowledge culture, which can be read as an enhancement of popular music’s standing in society. The knowledge orientation of the videos should thus be understood not only as an aesthetic feature that draws its appeal from its novelty value, but also as a mirroring of a profound change in cultural values. By handing down the epistemic foundations of popular music on a broad social basis, its legitimacy is plausibilised and reinforced to a considerable degree; this, of course, takes place alongside an ongoing institutionalization of popular music in the form of exhibitions, collections, courses of study, and conferences (Bennett 2022). From this I would conclude that YouTube drummers are not only young, amicable, and down-to-earth masters of their craft, but also act in a mediating role similar to that of a curator. They select, prepare and present popular music of the past, and the quasi-curatorial activities become part of individual persona construction.

And the latter is not necessarily limited to the “YouTube” communication channel but fits into a transmedia concatenation of media content. The case studied is an impressive example of this. In 2018, Sina Doering was asked to be an expert on Keith Moon’s drumming style as part of the British media company Sky’s series *The Art of Drumming*. The reason for this invitation was surely the already great response to her drumming videos, especially to a video in which she replays the drumming part of *Pinball Wizard* by The Who.<sup>6</sup> In the short feature, she performs this very song and is interviewed. She gives profound information about specific characteristics of Keith Moon’s style and the depth of her reflections indicates that she fulfils her expert role very conscientiously. The situation seems to convey that here is a person who, despite her relatively young age (Sina Doering must have been 18 or 19 at the time of recording), knows how to decipher the manifold creative paths that individual pop musicians have taken in the past. Something similar is transmitted by way of an interview feature in the

German-language specialist magazine for drums and percussion *Sticks* from 2020. In addition to statements about personal role models and famous representatives of the percussion profession, there are also profound reflections on questions of preparation and presentation of the selected pieces.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, she reflects on her own role as somehow singled out pop music mediator.

## Repertoire

The meaning potentials attached to the actions of YouTube drummers are essentially related to the question of which pieces are performed. The concept of repertoire addresses the social and cultural mechanisms that lead to certain pieces of music being played more often than others at a certain time and place. The question of how repertoires form and solidify over time is closely tied to the constitution, development, spread, and acceptance of music genres, which refer to communities of memory that ensure that individual musicians and bands as well as certain forms of music-making are held up through a variety of communication channels; this occurs in a multi-layered interplay with other cultural forms of articulation and social practices (Jost 2018).

The quasi-curatorial “interventions” of the YouTube drummers are part of this musical-cultural memory landscape. In a first, rough interpretation, one could say that the majority of the artists represented in the performed songs can be found in most recent written histories of post-war Western popular music. The general direction becomes clear: the focus is on rock music (large subsections are “classic rock”, hard rock and heavy metal). This insight is based, however, on a rather unsystematic observation of the (virtual) field; larger sample-based evaluations are still pending. Moreover, the “rock” focus does not exclude the possibility that current hits or songs that stem from or reference electronic pop music genres are also played and that individual performers specialize in these areas. Regardless, it seems that gender or background of the performers do not or not significantly affect the selection of bands and songs. Thus, I would conclude that a large number of YouTube drummers help to reproduce rather than undermine existing patterns of cultural orientation. The orientation pattern at issue here is clearly rock culture, more precisely white, male, Anglo-American rock music.

Given the history of Western popular music, this may not seem overly surprising. Most of the international superstars and cultural icons come from English-speaking countries, and most of them are male. Collective notions of how to perform with a drum set (or electric guitar or electric bass) are largely associated with masculine agency (Leonard 2007, pp. 23–42); only in the singing field is the situation different. As for the Anglo-American aspect, it is crucial to note that the influence of rock music from the U.S. and the U.K. was once far-reaching and went beyond the realm of aesthetics (Regev 1997, pp. 131–132). In the late 1950s to early 1970s, the music also stood for modernity and social liberalisation. In the course of the following decades, rock music and the experiences connected with it have become part of the collective memory work worldwide, participating in the formation of cultural identities. In contemporary popular music culture, there seems to be something like a topos of the “Anglo-American”, which can be considered exceedingly powerful because of its position in identity-forming processes.

The case study raises a number of questions against the backdrop of the aforementioned cultural orientation pattern and, more specifically, the aspect of masculine agency. Sina Doering is a young person read as female who is involved in creating images of rock performance that stand in difference to the collectively remembered imageries of rock (on the gender imbalance in popular music drumming see Brennan 2020, pp. 222–242). In this respect, her actions can be linked to the question of whether and in what way she addresses this difference; emphasis is given to this question by the fact that there are already platform networks dedicated exclusively to women drummers (MacAulay & Andrisani 2021). Consequently, it seems relevant to investigate in which way the work of female drummers (or other instrumentalists) in the history of popular music is represented by her song selection. The observations in this regard



can be summarized in a few words: her videos are consistent, gender aspects do not seem to play a major role. However, for the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that the URL of her official artist website does refer to gender aspects, and in a way that can be read as emancipatory: *girls-got-groove.com*. Also, it cannot be ruled out that the videos, which exist in exuberant numbers on her various platform channels, occasionally refer to the role of women in the production of popular music.

But regardless of this, it seems that she primarily counters the prevailing memory patterns with her own agency, and a look into the field reveals that many other drummers who are read as female do the same. In this context, the interview that *Sticks* magazine conducted with her is also informative. In it, she describes how her choice of music is largely based on her music-related childhood memories, which were shaped by the musical preferences of her father, himself a professional musician. Her own positioning as a drummer on the basis of gendered self-attribution and attribution to others thus remains a blank space, incidentally one that is not closed by the interviewer either. This may certainly be due above all to the topic of the conversation and its dynamics. Nevertheless, a repertoire like hers and the non-thematisation of gender inequality perpetuate the idea of a music scene in which male instrumentalists naturally set the tone, as it were (cf. Davies 2019). So, in this and other cases, persona construction operates in a peculiar field of tension between the reproduction of cultural orientation patterns and disruptive image production. While it cannot be verified for this particular case, it can be surmised in general with regard to the performance of women on YouTube that their peculiar reticence in dealing with questions of representation of gender and identity is due to self-made or passed-on experiences with sexist hostility by male users (cf. Döring & Rohangis Mohseni 2019).

### **Audiovisual Production**

YouTube, as mentioned above, has been of great interest to musicians with a wide variety of skills and professional goals from the beginning. A large and important sector that emerged in this context, and which was also partly responsible for the cultural impetus of YouTube as a participatory medium, was non-corporate practice. From today's perspective, two phases of this practice can be distinguished. Characteristic of the first is that the clips were mostly produced with the help of a digital camera or a cell phone; the forms with the highest degree of dissemination at the time were cover song videos, tutorials, and parodies. In the majority of cases, the people making the music were in private surroundings and the most common means of sound production were vocals, guitar, piano or keyboard.

This kind of self-documentation anchored in everyday life is subject to some changes in the second phase, which is adequately described by the term professionalisation and basically includes the entire field of non-corporate video production on YouTube; the phenomenon of YouTube drummers can be placed in this phase (however, some clips are still produced with cell phones). Now sound, performance, and image composition are visibly oriented toward qualitative standards and aesthetic figurations that have emerged in the professional production worlds of the mass media. This includes the fact that various elements of presentation, such as hard editing, cross-fading, different shot perspectives as well as split screen and picture-in-picture effect, indicate a long post-production phase. The same is true for the sound level. A reasonably trained listener can quite easily recognise that conventional sound recording techniques such as equalising, multi-tracking and sound effects are used in the production of the presented soundtrack. Generally speaking, it seems that the elaborate audiovisual production has become a prerequisite for gaining recognition as a YouTuber drummer.<sup>8</sup>

If we take a closer look at the way YouTube drummers make their videos, the idea of a blurring of media boundaries becomes tangible. The keyword "covering" has been mentioned several times above, which refers in the broadest sense to replaying pieces of music and thus

also appears to be applicable to the actions of YouTube drummers. However, the use of playback tracks, in many cases based on mixes or edits of the original recordings, suggests that the practice in question cannot really be called covering, even if the actors quite often use that term (the case of *sina-drums* is no exception in this respect). The songs are performed, but not covered in the conventional sense, because this would entail a deviation from the original, which may or may not be strong, but would in any case be audible. In contrast, the drum performances here are based on playing along with preexisting audio material and aim to be as close as possible to the original recording, down to the smallest detail, as it were. These clips have more in common with a historical reenactment, at least on a sonic level, than with most forms of covering (with tribute bands the similarity is probably greatest). Another aspect that speaks against the equation with covering is the dissecting character of the performance. Only one of the means of sound production heard on the original recording is extracted and made the expressive centre of the audiovisual product. This probably also led to the statement from a user that I quote in the title of this article, which reflects the attitude of many other users who comment on a video: “thank you for sharing this fantastic performance”.<sup>9</sup> Even when covering a song with just vocals and acoustic guitar, the point is to capture the overall character of the song, that is, the interplay of melody, harmony, rhythm, and sound. And that is definitely not the case with YouTube drummers. If you will, they only zoom in on a section of the sonic events that constitute the recorded song.

By focusing their performance on a clearly identifiable goal, namely the accurate imitation or rendition of a recorded drum part, the actors also give their persona a basic direction. They act in a sportive way, namely in the sense that the idea of challenge is behind their actions. Either they succeed in a musically accurate imitation of the original part, which captivates others, the audience, or they do not succeed or succeed only in a weakened form. The consequence of this is that technical aspects of the performance are placed in the foreground, for example in the way that the degree of difficulty of the performance must always be visually comprehensible. In this way, it is not possible, or only possible to a limited extent, to work on a concise image that is somehow original and arouses interest, as is strived for in the field of music video productions, for example.

But the audiovisual production touches on the persona construction of the YouTube drummers on yet another level, namely on the level of corporeality. The videos focus on the instrument of the classic rock band lineup, the playing of which is perhaps most strongly associated with physical exertion (cf. Smith 2021), something that has been thematised in pop culture itself in many places, for example through the character of “Animal” in the Muppet Show series. They make something visually tangible that until then had basically only been transmitted in auditory terms, namely via the sound recordings. For even though drumming is part of the iconography of popular music, it clearly takes a back seat to the other instruments in live events, music videos, concert films and other audiovisual media. At live events, this is related to the visual “disappearance” of the drummer behind the drum kit, and in music videos the focus is often on star showcasing, and this usually involves singers or guitarists. At most, concert film might be considered a genre in which drumming is made visually accessible with some consistency and in longer segments, but it could be argued here that the genre itself does not achieve the same cultural impact as live events and music videos. YouTube drummers’ videos thus compensate for a scarcity of visual sources in popular music that clearly focus on drumming. It’s not too far-fetched to see this as another reason for the great collective response to these videos.

The majority of videos, including the example, do not seem to be about reenactment in visual terms, as pursued by tribute bands. Here, too, it becomes apparent that the role that YouTube drummers take on, or rather constitute through their actions, has no direct model. Aiming for the acoustic but not the visual reenactment, they become a screen for projecting the physicality of recorded popular music. This in turn suggests that persona construction in their case is much less focused on contouring a combination of visual features than in comparison to

traditional pop stars or social media influencers. Their mediating role is once again revealed: they acquaint the audience with a specific form of bodily experience in the production of popular music.

## CONCLUSION

The way YouTube drummers work on a persona can be characterised as a complex phenomenon between music, performance, media, and knowledge culture. By using YouTube to broadcast their performative skills to the public, the drummers create a distinctive role profile composed of various socially established roles (performer, teacher/instructor, content creator) augmented by quasi-curatorial activities. This hybrid element can also be cited as a reason for the fact that their personas seem strangely undecided. On the one hand, their appearance and behaviour correspond to pop-cultural codes in the age of social media; on the other hand, they lack the mix of salient personality traits typical of YouTube stars and traditional pop stars. In this respect, the personas seem to be an articulation of the mediator position that YouTube drummers occupy in the aesthetic worlds of experience in popular music. Through their actions, YouTube drummers open up a visual channel of perception for the playing of an instrument typical of rock music, which traditionally stands quite practically as well as symbolically in the background. In a certain sense, it is the drumming itself, from which a fascination certainly emanates not only for large parts of the audience, but also for practiced instrumentalists beyond the percussive domain, that pushes into the limelight. As the example of sina-drums shows, this has consequences for the very core of the persona construction, namely that a coherent and plausible, but not necessarily true, image of the private/real person is created. Sina Doering provides insights into her private routines, but essentially only into those that have to do with playing the drums. The image that emerges in this way is coherent and plausible and very likely also contains many true elements, but in the end, it is strangely artificial. It stands for an entity that could be described as a “thematic” or “drum” persona.

The case example has also shown that it is important to return theoretically to the more classical sociological concept of the social role as a critical complement to recent interpretations of the persona concept in the field of music research. The major platforms have created a media environment in which almost all activities relating to the creation of music can be turned into a product, i.e. videos themselves. This means the roles that musicians take on in the course of content creation potentially become part of the persona construction.

In addition, the YouTube drummer phenomenon is still interesting from a media theoretical perspective. It is a powerful example of how media participate in changing expectations about artistic forms of expression. The familiar song, hit, or evergreen becomes a vehicle for effective and, in many cases, demonstrably appealing self-expression, but one that departs, as shown, from conventional concepts of artistic self-expression. When watching such videos, are we witnessing an amateur musician, a professional, an aspiring pop star, or a successful online instructor? All of these categories play a role in one form or another but cannot be used as a frame of reference standing alone. The YouTube drummer phenomenon represents the ongoing breaking and redrawing of boundaries, between media genres and artistic forms, as is generally typical of late-modern media worlds and frequently discussed under the header of media convergence or convergence culture.

However, finally, it seems worthwhile to connect this insight with the question of who or what is actually “popular” in popular music today. One answer to this could be that not only stars or individual aesthetic objects are popular, but also – and increasingly – aesthetic forms, and media-induced forms at that. A video platform like YouTube is not only a huge virtual stage, but also a highly efficient pattern recognition and regrouping tool due to the algorithmic systems that are applied. At its core, this is true of any of the major platforms, which is why it can be argued, with some degree of exaggeration, that platforms embrace classification. However, the systems of classifications that emerge in this way cannot be stable after all,

because platforms are part of popular culture and the consolidation of aesthetic typifications within it would quickly lead to questioning popular culture as a field of generating experiences. Thus, at this point, it becomes clear that all platform-using content creators act within a constantly readjusting system of machine-gridded creativity. The platform economy still seems to be about new stars being born in large numbers, but this is being expanded to include the constant birth of new forms that can then be easily recognised and reclassified automatically. Researchers have only begun to properly understand the formative impact of this system on musical-cultural terrain.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is also the term “Instagram drummer”, which – quite understandably – refers to drummers who mainly use the Instagram platform for their purposes. A comparison of both phenomena has the potential to provide insights into the influence of the platform on music-making, audiovisual presentation and the portfolio of video types combined in one channel. For reasons of scope, this cannot be pursued in this article.

<sup>2</sup> *Persona Studies* Vol. 5 No. 1 (2019). Available at: <<https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/ps/issue/view/120>> (Accessed 31 July 2023).

<sup>3</sup> See also the channel of Lindsey Raye Ward. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/@LindseyRayeWard/featured>> (Accessed 27 November 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Sina Doering is also active on other platforms, specifically Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Soundcloud, and uses them in a way that broadly corresponds to the prevailing modes of use in each case. This is: on Instagram, primarily everyday experiences are shared in a “behind the scenes” mode, on Facebook, dates are announced, news is communicated, and current YouTube videos or offbeat actions such as a fundraising campaign are placed, on TikTok, seemingly unrelated actions with a curiosity factor are presented, and Soundcloud serves as a virtual showcase for her recordings (though she has currently uploaded just two tracks there).

<sup>5</sup> See also “RUSH - SUBDIVISIONS - DRUM COVER by CHIARA COTUGNO”. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BybyFS3CpSc>> (Accessed on 27 November 2023).

<sup>6</sup> See the video “Sina’s Tribute to Keith Moon - The Art Of Drumming (Sky Arts Documentary 2018)”. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cz-d-030qeo>> (Accessed on 31 July 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Another example of a person who has outgrown the YouTube universe and gained recognition as a “drum expert” is Luke Holland. See his channel “Luke Holland Drums”. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/@LukeHollandDrums/featured>> (Accessed on 27 November 2023).

<sup>8</sup> The complex production setup becomes the actual content in some videos. See, for example, “How To Create Drum Covers | Video + Audio Editing Tutorial For Beginners”. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCie40RsKOM>> (Accessed on 29 November 2023).

<sup>9</sup> The statement comes from user @davidfortini9157 and refers to the clip “Walk Of Life (Dire Straits) • Drum Cover” uploaded on the channel sina-drums on 16 June 2023. The full comment reads: “I love this band; this song brings back so many memories. Thank you for sharing this fantastic performance.” This kind of thanking can also be read as evidence that the quasi-curatorial facilitator role of the drummers plays no small part in the reception situation. Via the

acknowledgement, the users address the instance that made the “new” experience with the “old” audio material possible for them (see also the discussion on the corporeality of popular music below).

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