Broadcast Your Past: Analysis of a German Former Right-Wing Extremist's YouTube Channel for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Crime

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Abstract

Recently, former extremists and offenders have begun providing online initiatives in addition to their offline enterprises (e.g., in-school talks, TV productions, autobiographies). They often present these initiatives as designed to prevent and counter violent extremism and crime. Strikingly, while formers' online narratives are increasing and usually receive positive coverage, research on them has been limited. This study applied a structure analysis to systematically explore a former right-wing extremist's YouTube channel as a case study. The analysis was based on the formal channel criteria and 421 videos published between May 2017 and May 2020. This is a full survey during this period. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate this phenomenon. Examining the YouTube channel provides valuable evidence for: (1) a focus on detailed narratives and visualizations from the extremist and criminal past, (2) using YouTube as a business model, and (3) distributing content and behavior that is inappropriate for children and youths (e.g., depicting violence, alcohol consumption, and [e-]cigarette use). The results indicate that such online initiatives' content and other relevant aspects (e.g., content creators' self-presentation) require more critical attention and reflection before they, for example, are promoted as suitable tools for young people.

That is why we developed this idea relatively early on that he should go into prevention, because there

he can be effective on the one hand, achieve something, but also get the stage he needs to be able to

function stably.

The prison psychologist about the prevention work of the German former right-wing extremist and leader of an outlaw motorcycle club in a TV documentary about the former's life (August 13, 2019; from 33:10:00).[2; 3]

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[2] This and all following direct quotes from German original sources were translated by the authors.
[3] To avoid advertising or discrediting the former right-wing extremist, proper names and sources were anonymized in this paper. The source publication dates are given as a reference.

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Introduction

Children's and young people's lives are undoubtedly shaped by the Internet and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, and their frequent use on mobile devices. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 71% of 15- to 24-year-olds worldwide were online in 2017, compared to 47% of the total population. Approximately 33% of Internet users worldwide are under age 18 (UNICEF, 2017). In Europe, 94% of 16- to 29-year-olds used the Internet daily in 2019, significantly higher than the overall average of 77% (Eurostat, 2020). A representative survey of 12- to 19-year-olds in Germany showed that 89% used Web 2.0 daily, and 97% used it several times a week in 2019. Online use was related to entertainment (30%), communication (33%), games (26%), and information searches (10%) (MPFS, 2019). Further studies have noted that knowledge- and information-oriented online activities are associated with impulses and demands from the performance sector (DIVSI, 2018; Berg, 2019).

YouTube plays a particularly important role in social web use. In July 2021, this media sharing platform had 2.29 million active users worldwide, second only to Facebook (Statista, 2021). Various studies have provided clear evidence of the relevance of YouTube and the challenges it poses for children and young people. For example, the above-mentioned 2019 survey demonstrated that this video platform was the favorite online offering (63%) (MPFS, 2019). Between ages 14 and 24, 96% of those surveyed said that the video portal was important in their everyday lives, especially for entertainment and information, and almost half of respondents believed that influential YouTubers gave good suggestions (46%) (DIVSI, 2018). International reception research underlines the key roles that viewer-ascribed credibility and trustworthiness play in YouTubers' content (e.g., Xiao et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). In addition, recent studies clarify influencers' importance as role models and potential guides for identity, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Furthermore, children and adolescents feel connected to Internet celebrities "as they move in the same networks as their friends, which can lead to a blending of social and parasocial relationships" (Brüggen et al., 2019, p. 113; see also Schuegraf & Wegener, 2017).

Considering this, Schuegraf and Janssen (2017) pointed out that YouTube "has a significant relevance in terms of media socialization and pedagogy" (p. 555).

In this context, Hugger et al.'s (2019) qualitative study with 15- to 24-years-olds concluded that there seems to be a connection between assessing political and societal video content as credible and assessing a YouTuber as authentic (perceived individuality and autonomy). The relationship between young users and their Internet experience is also of particular importance. Zimmermann et al. (2020) confirm and extend these findings. In this quantitative study, the 15- to 24-years-old participants "ascribed YouTubers an important role model function and a high awareness of their influence" (p. 12). However, the participants believed that YouTubers posting videos on political and societal topics seemed to be hardly aware of their role model function. Furthermore, they considered these videos to have only a small influence on their political and societal learning (Zimmermann et al., 2020).

The results from Gebel et al.'s (2019) study with 11- to 14-year-olds provide further insights. In addition to external attractiveness, good mood, and success, young people particularly admire YouTubers' with personality traits such as honesty, self-confidence, and self-determination. However, often the young people did not realize that there were also inappropriate options of orientation. Apart from naive receptions, for example, of free product distributions from their advertising partners to the community, the respondents saw through some of the methods used to attract and retain users (e.g., inclusion of pets as an instrumental use of audience-generating elements, clickbait,[4] and raffles). The young people understood that YouTubers were "primarily concerned with getting clicks and subscriptions to increase their visibility and ultimately generate revenue" (p. 2). However, the young people predominantly viewed only the content creators they did not admire, critically or negatively in terms of profit orientation and credibility. In contrast, they were rather uncritical of their favorites. This differentiated view of YouTubers has already been observed in 10- to 12-years-olds (Oberlinner et al., 2020). Channels of YouTubers who, for example, conveyed knowledge and information, live-streamed often, did not use clickbait, and drew on their own experience were seen as particularly credible. Furthermore, some of the respondents criticized the fact that

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[4] For further information of clickbait on YouTube see e.g., Zannettou et al., 2018.

content unsuitable for children and young people was not marked with age restrictions. In their opinion, some of the YouTubers did not represent positive role models; their videos displayed disturbing and frightening content (e.g., violence, sexual, and scary content), behavior that is harmful to health, disregard for socially valid values and personal rights (by e.g., insulting and ridiculing people), and the suggestion of danger to others and oneself.

Moreover, research has repeatedly highlighted further unfavorable aspects of social media content creators. For instance, increased representations of stereotypical role models (reproduction of traditional gender roles) and a consumption-oriented lifestyle can be observed. Furthermore, there are discriminatory attitudes as well as behavior crossing ethnic and legal lines, for example, in dealing with advertising labeling and the personal rights of others (e.g., Schuegraf & Wegener, 2017; Brüggen et al., 2019; Frühbrodt & Floren, 2019; Enke et al., 2021).

It is undisputed that Internet content has a profound influence on children and young people's socialization, political opinion-forming, and personality and identity development (cf. Frühbrodt & Floren, 2019; Griese et al., 2020). Apart from the diverse potential for educational processes, communication, leisure activities, and creative and participatory action, the digital world also harbors risks. In addition to general challenges, such as cost traps, disinformation, hate speech, filter bubbles, and echo chambers, children and young people can encounter unwanted content and forms of communication that do not correspond with their age and stage of development. For example, depictions of violence, pornographic content, cybergrooming, and cyberbullying represent potential developmental impairments and risks to young people (e.g., Staksrud et al., 2009; Stoilova et al., 2021). Potential confrontation with extremist and terrorist content and communication structures also plays a significant role (e.g., Hassan et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2019).[5] Extremists and terrorists consciously use the potential of the Internet and social media with target-group oriented offers: "Among other things, they use these channels to target youngsters by using smartly crafted messages and

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[5] According to Materna et al. (2021), extremist content is defined as "deviating from the liberal democratic constitution. This means that it contradicts human rights, the principle of democracy and/or the rule of law or aims to weaken them. It often is accompanied by the postulation of absolute truths, radical demands and the construction of enemy images" (p. 7).

slick videos promoting their ideas, with the aim of shaping the perceptions of these youngsters and recruiting them to the cause" (van Eerten et al., 2019, p. vi). There is abundant evidence that YouTube has been heavily used by extremists to share propaganda, network, and recruit new supporters (e.g., Conway & McInerney, 2008; Munger & Phillips, 2020). Research has shown that YouTube's recommendation algorithms, 1) repeatedly present users with extreme content after viewing corresponding videos (e.g., O'Callaghan et al., 2015; Whittaker et al., 2021), and 2) such materials are recommended without prior consumption (e.g., Alfano et al., 2020; Spinelli & Crovella, 2020). Similarly, studies have found that children and young people come into contact with extremist content on social networks, online news sites, and video platforms (e.g., Grizzle & Tornero, 2016; Reinemann et al., 2019; Costello et al., 2020). This was confirmed by Stecher et al.'s (2021) survey finding that 12- to 14-year-olds encountered videos through the recommendation algorithm "that they would rather not have seen" (p. 24). In 2020, the second largest proportion of offenses harmful to minors on Germany's social media services involved political extremism (21%; Glaser, 2021).[6] Although previous research does not suggest that online contact with extremist content and narratives alone can trigger radicalization, such contact can amplify radicalization processes (e.g., Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017; van Eerten et al., 2019; Herath & Whittaker, 2021).

Online counter- and alternative-narratives (C/ANs) have been increasingly used to prevent and counter extremists' and their supporters' online influence, alongside other strategies, such as blocking online content and access or filtering and removing content. CNs are two-sided messages that are explicitly directed against extremist narratives and aim to deconstruct them. ANs are one-sided messages that focus on promoting positive content, such as human-rights-oriented and democratic values and participation opportunities. C/ANs combine different efforts (e.g., campaigns, person-to-person interventions) and formats (e.g., videos, texts, and video games), and are initiated by different actors (e.g., government, civil society,

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[6] A total of 5,056 offenses harmful to minors were registered on the Internet, of which more than half (*n*=2,805) were found on social media services such as YouTube (14%). These offences related to sexual violence (41%), pornography (14%), self-harm (12%), violence (9%), and cyberbullying (3%) (Glaser, 2021, p. 22).

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and individuals) for diverse target groups (primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention)[7] (e.g., Briggs & Feve, 2013; Braddock, 2020; Carthy et al., 2020). Personal messages, reported as stories by real people in the first person, play a central role. Survivors of extremism or family members of extremists are suggested as messengers (for an overview see, e.g., van Eerten et al., 2019). In particular, however, former extremists are described as credible and powerful voices (e.g., Neumann, 2015; RAN, 2015; Braddock, 2020; Samuel, 2020). To illustrate, for example, the European Union's Radicalisation Awareness Network mentions formers presented in online preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE)[8] offers as "often well placed to discredit extremist propaganda, prevent radicalization, contribute to disengagement and deradicalization, and, through reliance-building, support those who chose to leave a violent extremist movement" (RAN 2021, p. 8).[9] In this vein, formers have recently been used in online C/AN campaigns;[10] some former German extremists also run their own YouTube channels.

The current study investigated one of these YouTube channels, that of a former German right-wing extremist and former leader of an outlaw motorcycle club, who promotes the channel in school seminars. As the evaluation study conducted by the authors showed, a host of students followed the former on social media after his school interventions (see paragraph Background). Based on a structural analysis of the channel, we systematically observed what children and young people are exposed to when consuming the former's channel.

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[7] "Primary prevention focuses on protecting people from developing a given problem. [. . .] Secondary prevention focuses on halting progress of a given problem [. . .]. Tertiary prevention encompasses the remediation of a problem among those who concretely manifest a given problem." (Williams et al., 2016).

[8] "CVE is a realm of policy, programmes and interventions designed to reduce the terrorist threat through non-coercive approaches that directly address its root causes. CVE focuses mainly on countering the activities of existing violent extremists. Preventing violent extremism is broader than CVE, focusing on preventative approaches allowing for programming to take a broader approach to the underlying drivers that create vulnerabilities to VE." (Holdaway & Simpson, 2019).

[9] In accordance with Horgan (2009), radicalization is "the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology" and disengagement refers to the behavioral level whereas deradicalization describes changes regarding attitudes (pp. 151).

[10] Examples from Germany: https://www.bpb.de/lernen/digitale-bildung/bewegtbild-und-politische-bildung/reflect-your-past/; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2U1UZoe1Vc; Examples from other countries: https://www.connectfutures.org/films/; https://www.lifeafterhate.org/media (all accessed 10/07/21).

Former extremists' role in preventing and countering online extremism

Using narratives[11] in counter- and alternative-messaging initiatives is based on a robust body of communication research on "the persuasive effectiveness of narrations, [which] affect people's beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors in several domains" (Braddock, 2020, p. 8). Narratives' attractiveness depends decisively on their and the messengers' authenticity through mechanisms such as psychological transportation, evoked emotions, identification, and feeling connected with the narrative character (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; van Eerten et al., 2019; Braddock, 2020).

In this regard, and in view of the communication science finding that case studies are more accessible to recipients than bundled descriptions of reality (e.g., Lefevere et al., 2012), former extremists are commonly ascribed a uniquely powerful role as persuasive messengers. Their narratives are promoted as particularly effective in off- and online P/CVE (for an overview see, e.g., Koehler, 2020; Lewis & Mardsen, 2021; Morrison et al., 2021). According to van Eerten et al. (2019) "[j]ust as with former criminals, former alcoholics or former drug addicts [it is] believed that 'formers' are more likely to be perceived as 'street credible,' as they have experienced the life as an extremist first-hand" (p. 75). According to the assumptions, these points and the accompanying "insider knowledge" justify the special authenticity and credibility assigned to formers, who have also been described as role models (e.g., RAN, 2017).

The main focus in P/CVE initiatives is the former's well-being and safety (e.g., Briggs & Feve, 2013; Hedayah & ICCT, 2014; RAN, 2015). Recently, however, critical points have been raised regarding the challenges, limitations, ethical concerns, and preconditions for use of formers as well as their individual motivation for getting involved in P/CVE (e.g., RAN, 2017; Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20, 2021; Koehler, 2020; Schewe & Koehler, 2021; Lewis & Mardsen, 2021). Concerns include: Incomplete disengagement/deradicalization, lack of or inadequate (pedagogical) training, a narrative focus on violence and life in extremist move-

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[11] According to Braddock (2020), narratives are "cohesive, causally linked sequences of events that take place in dynamic worlds subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful action performed by characters" (p. 75).

ments, and danger of generalizations based on individual biographies that do not do justice to the complexity of radicalization and extremism. Additionally, formers active in public are often treated as celebrities, creating incentives for this commitment that run counter to the idea of prevention (e.g., fame, financial gain) and reinforce persisting in the role of a former extremist. In this vein, RAN (2017) noted: "When involving formers in the role of messenger, it should be considered whether describing experiences is helpful for others, or merely a boost in self-importance for the formers. Sometimes, the person becomes the message. For some, gaining attention becomes a goal per se. This poses the risk for the former of becoming one's entire identity" (p. 5). Therefore, van Eerten et al. (2019) recommended "that formers are carefully vetted and selected, before they are supported in engaging in any work in this area" (p. 120).

It is noteworthy that the widespread notion "that former extremists are the most credible agents of counter-radicalization" (Braddock, 2020, p. 60) is not based on hard empirical evidence. Existing research provides only limited evidence regarding the reception, impact, and effectiveness of online C/ANs in general and with formers in particular (Ferguson, 2016; van Eerten et al., 2019; Carthy et al., 2020; Lewis & Mardsen, 2021).[12] To the best of our knowledge, previous research has not addressed school students' reception of online C/ANs from or with former extremists.

However, the existing body of online C/AN research with (young) adults provides interesting insights. For selecting German counter- and alternative video messages in the P/CVE field, Frischlich et al. (2017) found that 1) personal messages performed better than fact-oriented or entertainment-oriented offerings, 2) videos with which respondents could identify were rated more positively, 3) videos that promoted a tolerant and democratic society worked better than CNs, and 4) the effect of C/ANs was more pronounced when extremist content was consumed in advance. Davey et al. (2018) found that formers had positive effects reaching out to at-risk individuals through social media compared to survivors and professional counselors. Three further studies focused on CN videos with IS defectors. In McDowell-

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[12] The same applies for the offline engagement of former extremists in P/CVE (Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20, 2021; Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, in press; Koehler, 2020; Silke et al., 2021).

Smith et al.'s (2017) study, respondents perceived the videos to be authentic and disturbing, and stated that the videos turned them away from the Salafi-Jihadist militant organization. In a focus group survey administered to persons with negative attitudes toward this terror organization prior to consuming the CN video, Speckhard et al. (2020) found no significant impact. Bélanger et al. (2020) reported two main points from a study on CN's effectiveness in reducing support for IS: 1) the source was less important than the content, the most effective content was political narrative, and the IS defector was the most effective messenger, and 2) CNs showed a small positive effect. However, the study observed greater support for IS in individuals at greater risk of radicalization: "Indeed, five out of nine counter-messages produced a boomerang effect" (p. 7). In line with these results, the authors concluded that "the urgency to deploy communication strategies to attenuate the appeal of IS should not be an excuse to avoid rigorous standards to produce evidence based policies because the risk of backfiring and accelerating further radicalization is also real and threatens public safety" (p. 9).

Apart from the lack of an evidence base, the suitability and effectiveness of C/ANs are disputed for other reasons (for an overview see, e.g., van Eerten et al., 2019). Three points seem particularly relevant to our current endeavors. First, consuming counter and alternative messages focuses attention on radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. In addition, C/ANs have the potential to lead to extremist content. In a case study of C/ANs on YouTube, Schmitt et al. (2018) demonstrated, that counter narratives often have the same tags and keywords as videos with extremist intentions. Because of algorithmic entanglement, for example, users of a German Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, bpb) C/AN campaign reached Islamic extremist content after only two clicks following the platform's recommendations. The authors described this as "problematic because the 'recommendations' provided by the YouTube algorithm can be interpreted as social cue stimuli, especially by younger media users, meaning that younger users potentially trust and follow them" (Ernst & Schmitt, 2020, p. 28). Moreover, they found that extremist content can result from video users' comments (Ernst et al., 2017), where social media's structural conditions result in the intended positive intention being reversed (Ernst & Schmitt, 2020; see also van Eerten et al., 2019). This last aspect is in line with a second critical point of online C/ANs: Imple-

menting a target-group oriented P/CVE. Freely accessible online offers always carry the risk that they will be received by people who do not correspond to the actual target group. Who consumes the C/ANs and how they are interpreted by individuals with different experiences, attitudes, and demography cannot be controlled. Therefore, the actual target group may not be reached or the intended effects may not be achieved; instead, incompatible content can trigger counterproductive effects in other users (Ernst & Schmitt, 2020; Braddock, 2020; Carthy et al., 2020). As van Eerten et al. (2019) stated, this is particularly relevant to young people:

> Dealing with younger age groups (e.g., adolescents) may further complicate sugges-tions as this particular developmental stage is characterized by increases in aggres-siveness, sensation seeking, and risk behavior, during which emotional appeals and warnings may easily backfire. (p. 71)

Third, theoretical considerations and previous research indicate that reaching and in-fluencing persons who already sympathize with extremist attitudes and extremists has limited success because of, for example, reactance and boomerang effects. The fewer attitudes there are about a topic, the more the recipient can be persuaded (van Eerten et al., 2019; Braddock, 2020; Carthy et al., 2020). In their long-term study of various online CNs, Silverman et al. (2016) found that contact was occasionally made by people wanting to leave an extremist community (eight of over 200,000 consumers), but only on those CNs that offered a personal opportunity for intensive digital exchange.

These points illustrate that C/ANs are complex and challenging tasks. Simply publish-ing a narrative as a C/AN is not expedient. Likewise, a credible messenger with a "good" sto-ry is not enough. The importance of five factors has been repeatedly pointed out in the litera-ture. C/ANs should: 1) be theory- and concept-based, 2) pursue a concrete and realistic goal, 3) have a precise definition and understanding of the target group, 4) be focused on the target group, and 5) be continuously evaluated regarding content, messenger, and content presenta-tion/narrative style and for achievement of desired goals and (undesirable side) effects (e.g.,

Briggs & Feve, 2013; Tuck & Silverman, 2016; Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Frischlich et al., 2017; van Eerten et al., 2019; Braddock, 2020).

Background

The link between former extremists' school-based and online activities

The use of formers in P/CVEs has increased internationally for several years (Koehler, 2020). In Germany, formers have appeared in public and are active in various P/CVE initiatives since the early 2000s (e.g., Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20; Gansewig & Walsh, 2020). Some formers who are active in school-based P/CVEs also operate in other public activities both off- and online. The online presence is important to involving formers in school settings, since classroom implementation introduces students to the formers' story. This, as well as the possible reference to corresponding web-based activities, could raise their interest in following the former on social media. This is in line with Valentini et al.'s (2020) argument, that the digital and "real" world are to be considered hybrid environments influencing and determining each other rather than separate entities.

Some providers directly offer social media outreach to students in the aftermath of the intervention. For example, a German provider of school measures against right-wing extremism (RWE) stated that formers "are encouraged to follow up via Facebook if they want to" (Walsh & Gansewig, 2021). In the primary prevention school-based seminar conducted by a former right-wing extremist investigated by Walsh and Gansewig, the former advertised his YouTube channel as a contact option for the students at the end (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, pp. 343). The evaluation study's findings showed that, on average, six months after the intervention, half of the 490 students (*n*=231; average age: 15 years) surveyed said they started following the former on social media, with girls following significantly more often than boys (♀: 63%; ♂: 47.5%; Pearson's Chi² (1) = 10,426; p = 0.001; Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, pp. 343).[13, 14] Apparently, the former aroused interest in his person among some of the students

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[13] For further information on the prevention seminar and the evaluation study see, e.g., Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20; Gansewig & Walsh, in press.

beyond the school intervention. Therefore, following up on the results of the evaluation study, we took a closer look at what children and young people find on the former's channel.

The former and his engagement in (online) P/CVE

The former extremist whose YouTube channel was examined for this study was born in 1978 and completed vocational training as a wholesale and external trade merchant.[15] According to his own statement, he lived in various violent subcultures for over 20 years. For about ten years he was active in various right-wing extremist environments. For example, he founded a neo-Nazi group and pursued different fields of activity, such as dealing in legal and illegal right-wing rock music and clothing. He shifted fluently into the criminal rocker and red-light milieu, where he established an outlaw motorcycle club and was involved in various branches of organized crime (e.g., arms and drug trafficking).

He stated that he distanced himself from RWE and crime because of disputes within the respective subculture, as well as psychological and physical impairments, and described this as "gangster burnout." While serving a prison sentence of two years and ten months, he entered psychological treatment to continue his distancing process, but did not undergo a professional disengagement/deradicalization program. The prison psychologist encouraged him to become active against RWE and criminality after his release from prison in January 2016.

Since then, he has been offering various P/CVE activities, either freelance or within the framework of the non-profit association he founded for this purpose in spring 2018. For instance, he offers "educational work" in schools and refers people who want to leave a right-wing extremist movement and contact him via social media to professional exit programs.[16] Since May 2017, the former extremist advertised a YouTube channel as online prevention,

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[14] 8% of the students (*n*=37) contacted him in this way, in particular to give him feedback on the intervention and on himself, as well as to ask him questions (e.g., "I told him that the way he told the story was really cool, and then the pictures too;" "[T]hat he's really a cool guy!"; "I wanted to know something more about some tatoos [sic].") (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, pp. 343).

[15] The following information are based, i.a., on the information on the website of the former's non-profit association (accessed 06/20/21) and from the TV documentaries about him (02/11/19; 08/13/19; 05/11/21).

[16] Moreover, he completed training as an anti-violence and skills trainer. This training is intended to "qualify trainers in dealing with ideologized violent offenders in juvenile detention as well as in exit programs" (https://deref-gmx.net/mail/client/xKw07TfZ_Vw/dereferrer/?redirectUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vpn-akademie.de%2Fvpn-weiterbildung%2Fakt-ausbildung%2F, accessed 06/20/21).

deradicalization, and anti-violence work. On his association website, he described the aim of the online activities as follows: "Through my Internet blog on YouTube and Facebook, I try to prevent juveniles and adolescents from getting involved in the first place. With the blog, however, I also want to spread hope for those willing to change and would like to be a first contact for them here" (accessed 06/10/21). In the context of an award nomination—sponsored, inter alia, by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth—to be assigned in December 2021, he depicted the association's activities as follows:

> The association carries out online deradicalization and anti-violence work at schools, in youth facilities and, juvenile detention centers. [The association] acts as the first anonymous point of contact for those seeking advice and those wanting to leave. The target group is radicalized young people prepared to use violence. With its social media channels, the association reaches several thousand young people every month. Every day, [the association] receives between 150 and 200 inquiries via Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or e-mail. In this way, around 20 young people a month willing to leave can be referred to local exit programs [...] (accessed 10/13/21).

He has been increasingly present on radio and television, in print, and on social media since 2018, reporting in detail, mainly about his past.[17] His activities are also positively represented by some government educational and prevention agencies. For example, in 2019, he spoke at a conference on "Youth Endangerment in the Context of Political Extremism" organized by the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young People. The bpb recommended his YouTube channel as an "educational channel" in a 2020 booklet on RWE, part of a publication series "specially developed for work with young people."[18]

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[17] In July 2019 he established a second channel on YouTube, where he gives private insights into his current life. Since spring 2020 these insights include family life with his girlfriend, her son, and their dogs.
[18] The publication series consists of a booklet for young people and an accompanying handout for educators. It "aims to raise young people's awareness of current issues in civic education with an age-appropriate format, an appealing graphic design and a personal, emotional and lifeworld approach."
(https://www.bpb.de/shop/lernen/was-geht/ accessed 09/16/21).

Study aim, material, and methods

This study aimed to systematically investigate the YouTube channel to gain insight into the online prevention, deradicalization, and anti-violence work advertised by the channel. In this respect, we deal with the following three research questions:

RQ1: What is the formal structure of the channel?
RQ2: What topics are addressed, and how are they presented?
RQ3: Can anomalies be identified?

These questions were answered by analyzing the channel based on structural features and all 421 videos published between May 29, 2017 and May 30, 2020. Most information on the channel, such as advertisement placing and offensive text warnings, is based on November 28, 2020 sighting. Information collected on December 22, 2020 (YouTube registration) and June 19, 2021 (e.g., total views) was marked accordingly.

The explorative web format examination of the YouTube channel employed a structural analysis based on Schuegraf and Janssen's (2017) work. They argue that conducting a web format analysis of YouTube is challenging, as it integrates various functions and forms of use and is characterized by a multi-layered and complex structure. Therefore, it requires an analytical separation of individual levels of investigation. Hence, they propose a three-stage analysis approach: 1) structure analysis (descriptive level), 2) video, character, and interaction analysis (interpretive level), and 3) context analysis (discursive level). The structure analysis aims to "gain an overview of the website, describe its layout, linking and interaction structures, and record data and user numbers" (p. 556). It thereby takes offer and formats (e.g., overview/home page, links, favicons, and playlist titles), aesthetics and design (e.g., channel banner, profile picture, thumbnails, and logo), channel popularity (founding date, subscriber count, and view count) and channel professionalism (e.g., other channel of the same YouTuber, links to other websites that are relevant to the promotion of the YouTuber, and product placement) into account. Additionally, topics and contents require investigation (Schuegraf &

Wegener, 2017). However, since YouTube is a complex and multimedia texture, a YouTube channel analysis is usually limited. Depending on the busyness of the YouTuber as well as the channel success, the complexity, variety, linking and hypertextuality vary immensely. Therefore, conducting a comprehensive analysis is hardly possible. Taking this into account, the structure analysis offers a channel overview and classification (Schuegraf & Janssen 2017).

The analysis included three inductive steps, as shown in Figure 1. The first step identified the formal aspects of the channel and the videos. In the second step, the 421 videos were categorized according to topic or biographical period covered and video type. Thematic/biographical categorization was based on video titles and a content review. This step was guided by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strübing, 2014) and was characterized by continuously categorizing and comparing the data from the time of data collection. The content review formed the basis for further thematic/biographical sub-categorization, and in the third step, served to identify and categorize further aspects (e.g., setting and media use). The analysis was characterized by openness and reflection and was guided by a four-eye principle (cf. Flick, 2014; Lacy et al. 2015).

Figure 1: Analysis Steps
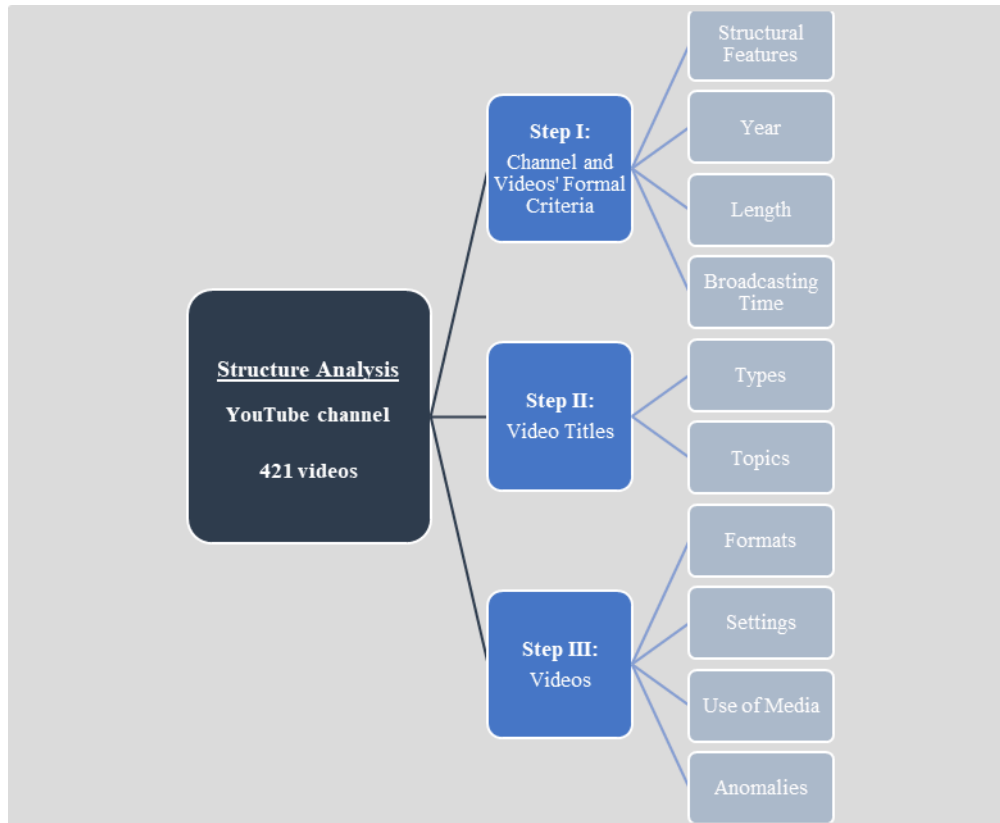
Results

Formal channel structure (RQ1)

The YouTube channel, whose name is composed of the former's name, references to his life in various subcultures, and mention of this being a matter of the past, was founded on September 16, 2016 and the first video was uploaded on May 29, 2017. As of June 19, 2021, the channel had 105,000 subscribers[19] and 20,334,572 views.[20] The channel's homepage was spanned by a channel banner comprising three photos of the content creator—two from his life as an extremist and criminal rocker and one from life after his exit—plus the cover and

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[19] As of November 28, 2020, the channel had 80,900 subscribers.
[20] The following channel descriptions refer to information from June 19, 2021.

title of his autobiography (published in spring 2020) accompanied by the note "My biography. Now available everywhere." Five favicons in the banner included *own mail-order business, tipeeestream, PayPal,* and *private channel on Twitch, Instagram*. A four-minute, 40 second channel trailer with an introductory commercial was available on the homepage, uploaded on February 9, 2020. After a short introduction and a statement that there are photos and videos from his past on the channel, the YouTuber described the channel's aims: "to dissolve the myth in extremism, the myth in rocker gangs, in criminal gangs. What does it really mean to be in prison and so on." He also addressed viewers directly and encouraged them to look around the channel, become a subscriber, and give a thumbs up and comment. He concluded with: "If you just think it sucks, find yourself a new channel." This 40-second intro is followed by a four-minute series of images from his criminal and extremist past accompanied by rock music. The overview page also contained the latest uploads, popular channels, and a "short."

There were five subpages in addition to the overview page. While all uploaded videos could be found in *videos*, some were sorted thematically into *playlists*. In the *community* section, he addressed his community directly, for example, by starting polls or pointing out new photo or video uploads from his criminal past for channel members (see paragraph Monetization). The *channel* page displayed both subscribed and popular channels. In *channel info*, the content creator describes his channel as follows:

Neo-Nazi, skinhead, hooligan, red-light milieu, drug dealing, rocker club & jail, the stations of my life! Now arrived in life 2.0 without hate, violence, and xenophobia! Far too many rabble-rousers and haters on the net report how cool everything is, but are they honest with themselves and others? I try to pass on my experiences of things I have lived with people and subcultures. This blog has no claim to truth, it is my truth, not the truth! So that no one misunderstands, I am against violence & extremism (political & religious). ***[association name] the non-profit project behind it***

Additionally, the content creator listed here various links to his other social media appearances (e.g., Instagram, Twitch) and his mail-order business.

Table 1 provides an overview of the number of videos, broadcast time, and average length during the study period.[21] A continuous increase in videos and, consequently, broadcasting time is evident. From a total of 421 videos, about five videos per month were posted on the YouTube channel between May and December 2017; this number increased to 16 videos in the first five months of 2020,[22] and the average video length similarly increased, from approximately five minutes in 2017 to approximately 51 minutes in 2020. The total broadcasting time during the review period was approximately 15,395 minutes.

Table 1: Overview of formal channel criteria

Year	Video Count	Broadcast Time	Video Length Ø
2017 (from first upload on May 29th)	32	02:56:00	00:05:30
2018	107	41:01:20	00:23:00
2019	202	143:38:49	00:42:40
2020 (until May 31st)	80	68:59:28	00:51:45
Total	**421**	**256:35:37**	**00:30:44**

We identified two types of videos: single and series. Single videos had no direct connection to other videos, whereas series videos were connected. In the following, a series is understood to be at least two connected videos, which are also designated as such in the title. Series also included pre- and/or post-production discussions with the community in Q&As of interviews, TV features, etc. Of the 421 videos, 58% belonged to a series (*n*=244), and 177

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[21] The overview refers to information from November 28, 2020.
[22] Regarding the number of videos per month remaining constant between 2019 and the end of May 2020 (17 vs. 16), it should be noted that the former has been running another YouTube channel (see footnote 17). Accordingly, since 2019, the former has a higher overall presence with videos on YouTube.

were single. In 2017, most videos (28 of 32) were single; however, beginning in 2018, most videos were part of a series (2018: *n*=58, 54%; 2019: *n*=133, 66%; 2020: 49 of 80).

Topics and their presentation (RQ2)

Topics

We explored the addressed topics in two steps. First, to provide an overview, we created a word cloud based on the video titles, excluding, for example, filler words, names of persons and places. Furthermore, the YouTube channel and organization names biographically linked to the former have been anonymized.[23] A total of 829 words were included in the analysis. Figure 2 presents the 100 most frequent words used in the video titles.

"Prison" and "Red-Light-Milieu" are the two most frequently used words in the video titles, with 67 and 63 mentions; followed by "neo-Nazi" (*n*=54), "Rocker" (*n*=48), "Entry" (*n*=46), "Right-Wing Extremism" (*n*=46), and "Questions" (*n*=44). Two aspects in particular stand out when looking at the word frequencies in the titles: The titles focus on involvement in the subcultures and on the milieus themselves as well as the presenter's engagement in them (e.g., "Brothel Raid-Axes Ready/Red-Light Milieu and criminal rocker" 01/09/20; "Send Combat 18 to the doom—neo-Nazi Mail-Order Business Right-Wing Extremism" 10/08/19). In contrast, the word "Former"[24] is used twice and "Exit" once.[25] Other P/CVE-related words such as "Prevention," or "Deradicalization," do not occur in any of the 421 video titles.

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[23] Correspondingly, e.g., "Right-Wing-Extremist-Group" and "Outlaw-Motorcycle-Club" replace the names of his former group and club. Equivalently, "YouTube-Channel" substitutes the name of the objective YouTube channel.

[24] "Former neo-Nazi" (*n*=1), "Former Potentially Dangerous Person" (*n*=1).

[25] The prefix "EX" is used 40 times: "(EX)-Jihadist-Islamist" (*n*=7), "(EX)-neo-Nazi" (*n*=7), "EX-neo-Nazi" (*n*=4), "EX-Nazi" (*n*=4), "EX-neo-Nazi-Leader" (*n*=3), "EX-Nazi-Leader" (*n*=2), "EX-Addict" (*n*=2), "EX-Antifa" (*n*=2), "EX-Islamist" (*n*=1), "EX-Nazi-Brawler" (*n*=1), "EX-neo-Nazi" (*n*=1), "EX-neo-Nazi-Leadership-Cadre" (*n*=1), "EX-neo-Nazis" (*n*=1), "EX-Prison-Rocker" (*n*=1), "EX-Right-Wing-Extremist" (*n*=1), "EX-Right-Winger-Rocker" (*n*=1), "EX-Prostitute" (*n*=1).

Figure 2: Word frequencies for the video titles (Tag Cloud)

In the second step, we conducted thematic categorization both inductively and bio-graphically, from which we extracted 12 main categories and various subcategories, as shown in Table 2, including the upload year, type, and number of videos in each, and the broadcast time. We will take a closer look at eight of the categories in the following.[26]

The 28 videos in the *Entry: Right-Wing Extremism* category form a series, which the presenter named "My entry into right-wing extremism & neo-Nazism," published in 2018 and 2019, respectively. This series describes the content creator's talks about his turn to and early days in right-wing extremist environments. For example, he discussed his family and school circumstances (09/07/18) or "his Kalashnikov" (01/03/19), and the violence he used (e.g., 09/19/18).

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[26] Because of limited space and relevance, we will not go into detail about the categories *YouTube channel*, *Several Topics*, *No specific Topic,* and *Others*.

The *Life: Right-Wing Extremism* category contained 43 videos and gave a detailed and multifaceted account of the content creator's time and activities in RWE. Forty-one of the videos were from 2019 (n=25) and 2020 (n=16), with 38 videos from series named "My group [name]—Right-Wing Extremism/neo-Nazis"[27] (n=20) and "My neo-Nazi Mail-Order Business/Right-Wing Extremism" (n=18). Both series discussed the respective founding (e.g., 04/14/19) and establishment (e.g., 04/19/20) and other factors, such as selling right-wing extremist clothes and music, violence, purchasing weapons, and police work[28] (e.g., 04/28/19; 03/08/20; 02/16/20; 06/18/19).

Most of the 31 videos in the *Entry: Red-Light Milieu/Outlaw Biker* category were from 2019 (n=26; 2020, n=5). The content creator reported on his transition from RWE into the criminal rocker and red-light milieu, and his early days there. The series "Red-Light Milieu, My Entry! The business with Sex" contained 29 videos with topics such as "buying a woman" (11/27/19), firearms and violence (e.g., 09/23/19), or his first visit to a prostitute (02/02/20).

The *Life: Red-Light Milieu/Outlaw Biker* category includes 22 videos. As in the series on entering the red-light milieu, the recipients receive detailed insights into the presenter's life as a criminal rocker with his various fields of activity. In five videos from 2018 and 2019, the former reacted to a TV production of the outlaw motorcycle gang he founded (e.g., 10/25/18). Furthermore, in the series "My Multicriminal Career—Organized Crime"[29] he described structural processes and methods such as "interest extraction" (e.g., 05/28/20) and violence (e.g., 03/22/20) in 11 videos from 2020.

The 46 *Prison* category videos were published in 2018 and 2019 and focus on the content creator's experiences of prison life (e.g., 02/10/19). 40 of them belonged to the series "Prison."

The *Life after Exit* category includes seven series and 52 individual videos that address the presenter's life after distancing himself from extremism and crime. The videos are spread

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[27] This series had not yet ended during the period under examination.
[28] Here the presenter describes in detail—based on his experiences—how police act, e.g., during house searches and regarding wiretapping.
[29] This series had not yet ended during the period under examination.

across all four years of the study period and present different topics, with most referring to the past (*n*=43). The topics addressed range from what he called his "haters" (*n*=8; e.g., 01/25/18), his P/CVE activities (*n*=7; e.g., 02/05/19) and his autobiography (*n*=4; e.g., 04/01/20). Sixteen videos were exclusively related to his current life (e.g., 09/25/19).

Eighty-six videos, which are spread across all four years of the study period, belong to the *Other Topics addressed* category. It includes seven series and 79 individual videos in two subcategories. In 45 videos, the majority of which are from the years 2017 and 2018 (*n*=42), the presenter addresses general topics and aspects regarding extremism, crime, and violence. In two series ("Gangster Life! Show & Bling!"; "Violent Offenders") comprising of three and four videos respectively, he talked about the propagated group cohesion versus what he experienced (e.g., 06/13/18) or the consequences of violence (e.g., 06/14/17). Other topics, such as that in his experience one should not speak with right-wingers (07/03/19) or that a transition from extremism to organized crime is not uncommon (09/15/19), are addressed in 38 individual videos. The other subcategory brings together 41 individual videos from 2017 to 2020, most of which were published in 2019 and 2020 (*n*=36). Here, the presenter talked about both current events and topics (e.g., terrorist attacks [e.g., 06/20/19]).

The *Biographies (Interviews)* category includes 16 interview series with 74 videos; that is, there are several episodes for one interview partner and the community could usually help select the questions beforehand and ask questions after the interviews (e.g., "Interview with an EX-prostitute—I ask her your questions" 02/10/20). Additionally, three individual interviews were conducted. The videos were published between 2018 and 2020, with the majority from 2019 (*n*=54). Of the 19 interviewees, two were former Islamic extremists (*n*=10), and one each was a former antifa supporter (*n*=2) and a former right-wing extremist (*n*=7)[30]. In all these interviews, the respective environment is discussed in detail, and in some cases, the respective music and visual material etc. are included (e.g., 02/22/19). The RWE topic is further addressed in 13 videos from the perspective of two victims of right-wing violence

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[30] This series had not yet ended during the period under examination. This former runs his own YouTube channel. Furthermore, he is affiliated in the presenter's association and holds the following functions there according to his self-description: "Lecturer and speaker, brand ambassador and contact person for interested people, people willing to leave and experts" (accessed 07/26/21).

(e.g., 01/16/19). Moreover, the channel user received, for example, insights into criminals' (*n*=13; e.g., 03/27/19), drug addicts' (*n*=10; e.g., 04/02/19) or a prostitutes' lives (*n*=4; e.g., 03/11/20) through earlier life stories.

Table 2: Topic (sub-)categories

Topic (categorized)	Year				Type		Total	Broadcasting time (~minutes)
	´17	´18	´19	´20	Series video	Single video		
Entry: Right-Wing Extremism	-	16	12	-	28	-	28	557
Life: Right-Wing Extremism	-	2	25	16	41	2	43	1,101
Group	-	-	4	16	20	-	20	497
Mail-Order Business	-	-	18	-	18	-	18	380
Demonstration	-	-	3	-	3	-	3	213
Single video	-	2	-	-	-	2	2	11
Entry: Red-Light Milieu/ Outlaw Biker	-	-	26	5	31	-	31	780
Life: Red-Light Milieu/Outlaw Biker	-	5	6	11	16	6	22	1,042
Outlaw Motorcycle Club	-	4	1	-	5	-	5	356
Multi-Crime	-	-	-	11	11	-	11	286
Single video	-	1	5	-	-	6	6	400
Prison	-	29	17	-	40	6	46	1,223
Life after Exit	9	16	27	7	7	52	59	2,558
With Reference to the Past	5	11	21	6	7	36	43	2,141
Without Reference to the Past	4	5	6	1	-	16	16	417
YouTube channel	-	3	-	3	-	6	6	232
Several Topics	-	-	7	1	-	8	8	515
No specific Topic	-	5	3	2	-	10	10	625
Other Topics addressed	23	24	24	15	7	79	86	2,964
General Topic Reference	19	23	3	-	7	38	45	463
Current social and political Issues	4	1	21	15	-	41	41	2,501
Biographies (Interviews)	-	6	54	17	74	3	77	3,440
Others	-	1	1	3	-	5	5	358
Total	32	107	202	80	244	177	421	15,395

The findings of the second analysis step support the results of the previous one: the focus lies on life in respective environments. The different categories' broadcasting time correlated predominantly with the number of videos; therefore, the three categories with the fewest videos had the least broadcasting time. Correspondingly, the three categories with the most videos had the longest broadcast time. Within the scope of the interviews, the drugs topic represented 1,016 minutes of 3,440 minutes total broadcasting time. In contrast, the broadcasting time for interview partners who have distanced themselves from RWE (227 min.) or who had become victims of right-wing violence (387 min.) was significantly shorter. Figure 3 shows the broadcasting time by the topic (sub-)categories.

Figure 3: Topic (sub-)categories and broadcasting time (May 2017-May 2020)
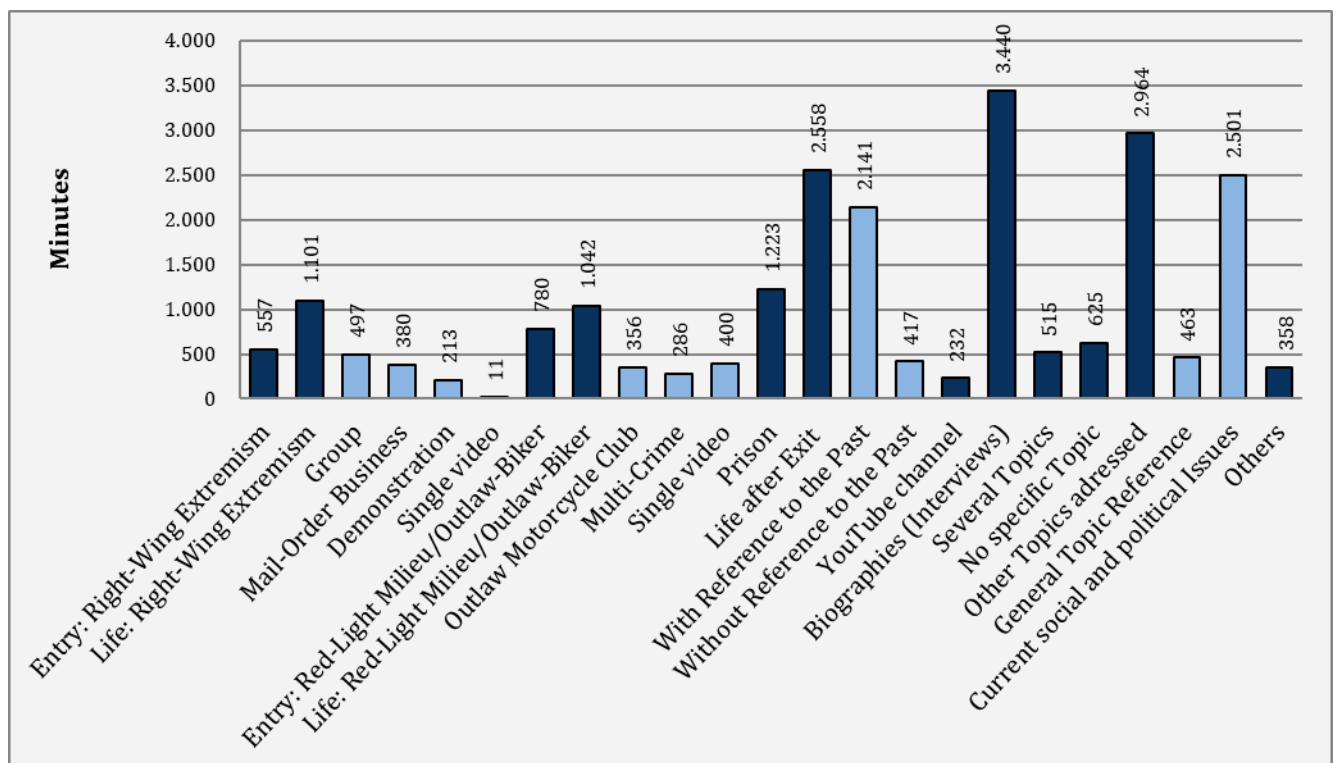
Format and setting

Fifty-four percent of the videos were monologs (*n*=227) and lasted approximately 17 minutes (2017: Ø ~5 min.; 2020: Ø ~24 min.). Most of them belonged to a series (*n*=154, 68%). Since

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August and November 2018, the presenter has also been interacting with others in livestreams (*n*=127, Ø ~70 min.) or interviews (*n*=64, Ø ~40 min.).[31, 32] The dialog format included 104 individual videos. Monologs were the dominant format in 2017 (30 of 32) and 2018 (75%); this changed beginning in 2019 forward, with dialogs—livestreams in particular—predominating (2019: 59%; 2020: 45 of 80). Regardless of the format, he consistently used the same greeting and farewell phrases. Moreover, he was in intensive contact with the community. For example, he thanked users who donated, responded to individual questions in the live chat, or encouraged viewers to leave a comment and give a thumbs up (e.g., "Give a thumbs up, or #[his label]. What's wrong with you guys? I'm drooling over here again, and I only have half a glass of water […]" 01/09/19). Recorded materials and live recordings were used for all formats.

The content creator was at the center of the channel and, through his presence, determined video structure and content communication, including during the interviews. He and his interview partners usually faced the camera and made direct eye contact with the audience. The video setting locations comprised four categories: *Private home*, "*YouTube studio*," *Outdoor or on-site recordings*, and *Various settings combined*. Most of the 421 videos were shot in his private home (often with his dog) and until January 2019 exclusively on the balcony, in the kitchen, or in the living room (*n*=319, 76%). Since then, he has also broadcasted from his workroom where he added a sign with his non-profit association's name, and other advertisement (see paragraph Anomalies) were visible in the background. Beginning with September 2019, 25 videos were created in the so-called YouTube studio,[33] 64 were shot in nature, at occurrents (e.g., schools, TV productions) and in places from his past.[34] He filmed himself or had himself filmed.

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[31] Two videos from 2017 and one video from 2020, such as participation in an online talk, were assigned to other dialogue formats (Ø ~32 min.).

[32] While the content creator acted as interviewer in 61 cases (*n*=53 offline; *n*=8 online), he was the interviewee in three videos.

[33] The studio and mobile interview equipment etc. were co-financed by his community through donation appeals during his livestreams (e.g., 11/15/18).

[34] Thirteen videos had different settings.

The broadcasting devices used during the study period included mobile phones (*n*=215), notebooks/PCs (*n*=128), professional cameras, and sound equipment (*n*=77).[35] Until August 2018, only mobile phones were used. From then on, recording was done with notebook/PCs and, since November 2018, inter alia, with a professional camera and sound equipment.

Thumbnails and titles

Since 2018, the channel has had special design features for thumbnails and video titles. Of the 421 videos, 57% had user-generated thumbnails (*n*=240), and 181 had automated thumbnails. Automated thumbnails predominated in the first two years of the channel (2017: 32 of 32; 2018: *n*=93, 87%), then the ratio reversed in 2019 (*n*=46, 33%; 2020: 10 of 80). Most videos with user-generated thumbnails belonged to series (*n*=168, 70%), such as those on living in RWE and entering the red-light milieu.

The presenter used both photographic material from his time in the extremist and criminal environments and from the life after his distancing, or a combination of both for the user-generated thumbnails. The same was true for his interview partners. Overall, 43% of the material referenced the past (*n*=104), and 30% did not (*n*=73). Combinations were used for 63 thumbnails. A total of 202 thumbnails (84%) showed the content creator himself; 101 displayed photo material, for example, of an erotic dancer (*n*=31), (il-)legal drugs (*n*=18), holding a baseball bat (*n*=14), and firearms (*n*=9).

Overall, three title types were identified in terms of their wording. Slightly more than half of the video titles were neutral (*n*=222, 53%; e.g., "EX-Antifa meets EX-neo-Nazi in Livestream!" 05/21/19; "My France Trip-Work in Prison and with Youths" 02/05/19); 132 were lurid (31%; e.g., "My Entry Right-Wing Extremism & neo-Nazi 'my new horny Nazi girlfriend'" 03/03/19; "Prostitute unpacks—The business with Sex" 03/03/20). Sixty-seven titles were formulated as appeals or in the sense of a positive message (16%; e.g., "Hate, Vio-

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[35] Since one of the 421 videos uploaded was a TV documentary, only 420 videos are included in this part of the analysis.

lence & Xenophobia! Change, away with it!' 08/22/17; "Tattoos in the Group! Nazis, rockers, and streetgangs! Don't do it!!" 07/26/18).

In 2017, most videos had an appeal-like title with a positive message (29 of 32), but this type of titles steadily decreased in the following years (2018: *n*=27, 25%; 2019: *n*=10, 5%; 2020: 1 of 80). Lurid titles have increased since 2018 (2018: *n*=19; 2019: *n*=69), accounting for just over half of 80 titles in 2020 (*n*=44). Eighty-one percent of the related thumbnails were user-defined (*n*=107), of which 57 thumbnails (53%) had photographic material with, for example, firearms, (il-)legal drugs, erotic dancer, right-wing music labels, and middle fingers. Fifty-five percent of the thumbnails from videos with neutral titles were user-defined (n=123) and 37 (30%) showed—like the thumbnails of some lurid titles—photos of the presenter with a pixelated Hitler salute, baseball bats, firearms, and right-wing music labels, among other images. In contrast, most videos with appeal-like titles had automated thumbnails (n=57).[36] Twenty-four videos with lurid titles and 29 with neutral titles referenced offensive text (18% and 13%, respectively) (see paragraph Warning notices). In contrast, none of the videos with appeal-like titles carried such a reference.

Media use

Since 2018, the content creator used images, videos, and documents in his videos (20%; *n*=84). This applies to 15% of all videos in 2018 (*n*=16), 25% in 2019 (*n*=51) and 17 of the 80 videos in 2020. This involved public material, such as newspaper articles about him, TV contributions he reacted to, or social media presence from—as he calls them—haters (*n*=18; e.g., 01/07/19; 03/16/20). This also concerned private photos, videos, and documents from his life (e.g., the criminal rocker club's prohibition order, documents from his investigation files; *n*=42), and from the interview partners' lives (*n*=13). In the 42 videos in which he presented autobiographical material, it referred to his time as a right-wing extremist and as a criminal rocker in 12 videos each. In these videos, as in the channel trailer, mainly the lifestyle of these environments is presented. Weapons and violence play specific roles. For example, the presenter showed photos of the weapons he owned at the time (e.g., 05/07/20), or played a video

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[36] Five of the ten custom thumbnails display photos with firearms, baseball bats and middle fingers.

of an arranged one-to-one fight with quartz gloves in a car park.[37] Eighteen videos referred to life after leaving the extremist and criminal milieus. In these, inter alia, he gave insights into his activities at schools or TV productions (e.g., 02/05/19; 07/15/19).

Anomalies (RQ3)

We identified three categories of anomalies based on the YouTube channel' 421 videos.

Warning notices

Thirteen percent of the 421 videos (*n*=53) had the following warning at the start of the video as of November 28, 2020: "Warning. This video may contain an offensive text." This includes 20 of all videos from 2018 (19%) and 33 videos from 2019 (16%). Twenty-two videos each belonged to the categories *Entry: Right-Wing Extremism* and *Prison*, five were assigned to *Entry: Red-Light Milieu/Outlaw Biker*, and four to *Life: Right-Wing Extremism—Mail-Order Business*.

For three of the 421 videos, registration with YouTube was necessary as of December 12, 2020.[38] First, this concerned a single livestream video on terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka (04/21/19). Second, it affected a livestream video in which he interviewed a former crystal meth addict (04/14/20). This video is the first part of a three-part series focused on this person.[39] The third video was a live-streamed single video from the category *Life after Exit— With Reference to the Past* (03/16/20). Here, the content creator showed Facebook pages of

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[37] The video shows the entire fight scene, including a part in the end where the content creator hits the other person's upper body and head with so-called "hammer blows" at the end (02/10/19). According to the former, the video recording had to be stopped because he could not stop hitting the other person. He states to use this video for his work with young people "to warn them." In addition, he mentions that the video was still moderate, "because there is no blood to be seen and so on" and that the other person "got away with a broken arm" (02/10/19).

[38] Here the notice appeared: "You must log in to view this video. This video may be inappropriate for some users."

[39] The interviewee has also published an autobiography, is active on YouTube and visits schools to narrate about his past as drug addict. In this first series part, the interview partner goes into detail about, i.a., drug prices, how long the effects of crystal meth last depending on the amount one uses, and the effects compared to using cocaine. The third part of this interview—in which the two persons, e.g., tell each other in detail what it was like when they used certain substances—cannot be found in the respective playlist for this interview series (accessed 06/22/21).

people who left unwanted comments on his social media appearances; he made remarks about them and called them his "haters."[40]

Alcohol and (e-)cigarettes

Alcohol, cigarettes, and e-cigarettes play an important role in the YouTube channel. In addition to addressing, for example, that the presenter "likes to drink gin," he presented the liquid-aroma for the e-cigarette he was currently consuming and promoted the respective company (e.g., 06/25/19).[41] These legal drugs were consumed in videos, both of the content creator himself and with others, such as interview partners.

Since August 2018, liquor (e.g., beer, gin) was consumed in 35 videos (8%); in some cases, he openly mentioned the manufacturer (e.g., 10/29/18). The videos were spread across 2018 (n=17), 2019 (n=16), and 2020 (n=2). In doing so, he actively involved the community, for example, by toasting them (e.g., 11/15/18). In addition, he occasionally commented on his alcohol consumption (e.g., "Two beers are allowed" 03/05/19; "I've earned that" 11/15/18).

Since January 2019, (e-)cigarette consumption was also on display (e.g., 05/14/20), accounting for 22% of the videos (n=94). In 2019, 92 videos fell into this category (2020: n=2), accounting for almost half of the videos published in 2019 (45.5%). Fifteen of the 35 videos displaying alcohol consumption also contained smoking.[42] All except one of these (2020) were published in 2019.

Monetization

In March 2018, the presenter implemented various monetization options on his YouTube channel. A total of 70% of the 421 videos contained advertising in various forms (n=294). In 65.5%, advertisements were displayed before and/or during the videos as of the due date 11/28/20 (n=276). Of these, 242 videos comprised additional advertising. While none of the

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[40] This is not the only video in which he calls out his "haters" (e.g., 03/07/19; 04/30/20).

[41] In addition to naming the company of the currently consumed liquid, corresponding liquids of the company can be seen in the background of the workroom and "YouTube studio" (e.g., 07/18/19). Furthermore, he took part in an event organized by a YouTuber streaming on the topic of e-cigarettes and received a €15,000 donation for his non-profit association from the "steamer community" (e.g., 08/03/19).

[42] In his second YouTube channel (see footnote 17) (e-)cigarette and alcohol consumption also plays a role.

videos from 2017 contained paid advertising, paid advertising appeared in 49.5% in 2018 (*n*=53), 86% in 2019 (*n*=174), and 49 of the 80 videos in 2020. Advertisements were noted in 77% of the 244 serial videos (*n*=187) and in 89 of the 177 individual videos (50%). Except for one video each, all videos in the *Entry: Right-Wing Extremism* and *Entry: Red-Light Milieu/Outlaw Biker* categories had advertisements (*n*=27; n=30). Similarly, most *Life: Right-Wing Extremism*, *Life: Red-Light Milieu/Outlaw Biker,* and *Prison* videos enclosed advertisements.[43]

The content creator runs a label with a corresponding logo. Since March 2018, he wore clothes with this logo in the videos (*n*=120; e.g., 03/24/20), as did some of his interview partners (e.g., 05/19/19). To sell these and other items, such as masks, caps, and bags, he runs an online shop that is directly linked to his YouTube activity: "Through your purchase, your donation, you enable us to do our part against hate speech and extremism on the Internet" (accessed 04/13/21). The logo was displayed as a banner in 186 videos since September 2018 (44%; e.g., 05/16/19). In addition, in 49 videos from November 2018 to March 2020, an introduction that included the label was played (e.g., 02/07/19). In 65% of the 421 videos, reference was made to his label (*n*=272).

Additionally, he used the YouTube channel to promote some of his other online and offline activities. For example, since September 2018, some of his social media presence (e.g., Instagram, Twitch) was displayed in 117 videos (28%; e.g., 12/22/19). Since November 2019, his autobiography was promoted in 58 videos by inserting the book cover. Prior to publication, he announced the book in 37 videos with, among other things, the note "Book with dedication and [his label] shirts. Only with pre-order until March 15, 2020, for 39.90 euros" or "The book to the story" and mentioned the bookshops where it could be bought (e.g., 11/21/19; 12/19/19). Since its publication in April 2020, the book was visually advertised in 21 videos with a corresponding order reference ("My book. [Title]. Available from April 1 at [...]" e.g., 05/07/20). He promoted his non-profit association by inserting the name with logo as a banner in 15 videos since February 2020 (e.g., 03/22/20).

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[43] Smoking/steaming was found in 83 of the monetized videos (30%) and alcohol in 21 (8%). Of the 53 videos that have a notice for offensive text, 50 videos include advertisements. The three remaining videos without advertisements belong to the series "Prison" (11/10/18; 12/14/18; 03/31/19).

Since October 2018, 100 videos advertised subscriptions to the channel by displaying a banner (e.g., 12/30/18). For example, all 20 videos in the series "My group [name]—Right-Wing Extremism/neo-Nazis" had this banner. Furthermore, if people subscribed to the channel during the livestream and/or supported it monetarily with donations, their usernames stood out and the presenter thanked them (e.g., 01/20/20).

Between January and May 2019, 35 videos included closing credits that called for people to become channel sponsors on the crowdfunding website Patreon (e.g., 03/05/19),[44] and the sponsor names were shown. Sponsors received additional background information and materials: "Exclusively for patrons, pictures, documents, videos, audio messages and internal explanations only at Patreon.co." Currently, there are six different ways to become a patron, ranging from €2 to €216 per month (accessed 07/12/21).

Since February 2020, 19 videos advertised channel membership (e.g., 05/24/20): "Become a member! Emojis, badges, exclusive content, videos, pictures, and files, from 1.99." In addition, the three variants of membership are explained (basic membership for €1.99/month, membership plus for €4.99, and "#honourable man of the channel" for €24.99), and a button to "become a member" was provided. In a video from 02/07/20, the content creator explained why "channel membership makes sense," mentioning six points: 1) "That we become more professional," 2) "that we can continue the interviews like this," 3) "we want to make a YouTube studio," 4) "you will get exclusive interviews, exclusive parts," 5) "to give people a voice, to do interviews with a depth," 6) "we try to protect this democracy, a peaceful coexistence, do anti-violence work, clear up the myth of right-wing extremism, clear up the myth of rockers, gangs, crime, red-light."

In addition to promoting activities, social media appearances, or autobiographies of his and his interview partners (e.g., 11/20/18), he promoted third-party products. For example, he commented on and showed which brand of chocolate he ate and which tonic water he used for gin and tonic (e.g., 10/27/19; 03/03/19). He also promoted dog biscuits, sports nutrition, and supplements for bodybuilding, workouts, and fitness (e.g., 10/24/19). Since April 2020, a banner with the name of this company, partly with a discount code, was showed in eight vide-

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[44] In addition, this call is regularly posted in the livestream videos and verbally submitted (e.g., 02/10/19).

os (e.g., 04/26/20). Figure 4 summarizes the anomalies listed in the development of the investigation period.

Figure 4: Anomalies (May 2017-May 2020)
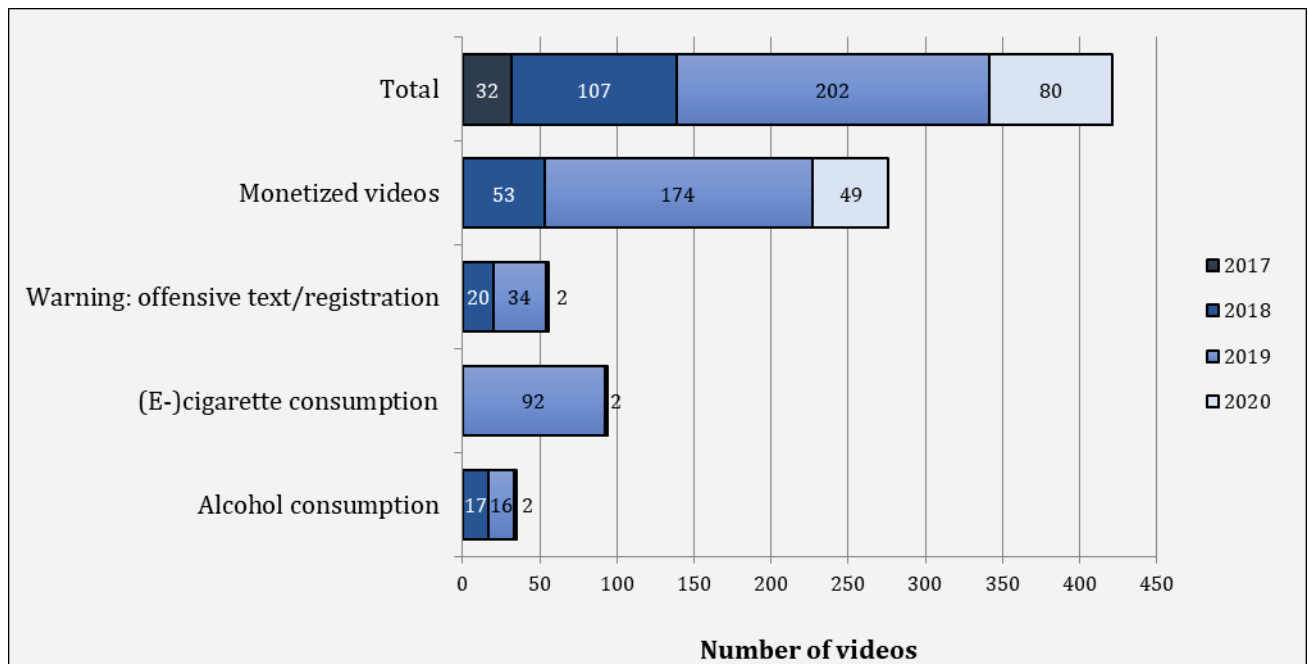
Discussion

Of special interest to this research is the growing international popularity of off- and online P/CVE interventions by or with former extremists, "but the effectiveness of these interventions remains poorly understood" (Lewis & Mardsen, 2021, p. 4; see also Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20). This study aimed to advance a better understanding of online P/CVE activities by formers.

In today's digitalized world, there is no clear distinction between on- and offline (cf. Valentini et al., 2020). Principally, all media reception influences personality and identity development, and has identification potential. Previous research demonstrates the potential strength of YouTubers' influence on children and young people (cf., e.g., De Veirman et al.,

2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The influence on the recipients is individual and varied and affected by different factors, such as preconceptions, motivation, and use situations (Eveland & Schmitt, 2015; Sukalla, 2018). The link between school-based prevention measures and subsequent social media following was demonstrated by Gansewig and Walsh's evaluation study (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020, pp. 343), which showed that half the school students followed the former extremist on social media after the school measure. This suggests that the number of followers increased after each school visit. In addition, other studies indicate that school impulses and online activities cannot be separated (cf. DIVSI, 2018; Berg, 2019). Consequently, formers invited into schools can digitally continue connections from the classroom into children's rooms, an often unprotected and unsupervised space.

This study aimed to shed light on this connection between the classroom and the children's room and to investigate what young people could find when they access former extremists' social media presences, using a specific former extremist's YouTube channel as a case example. To our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind. Structural analysis of the channel revealed three key points.

1) Since the upload of the first video in May 2017, the channel established itself, with the number of subscribers and views indicating that the channel has a considerable reach. According to the content creator's self-statement, he reaches "several thousand young people every month," and approximately "20 young people a month" contact his association because they want to leave an extremist movement.

2) The findings demonstrate that children and young people are sometimes confronted with questionable content and behavior that is not appropriate for them. As in the primary prevention school intervention (Walsh & Gansewig, 2019/20), the channel focuses on detailed descriptions of extremist and criminal environments, presenting them in series formats. For example, video titles and user-generated thumbnails often did not clearly delineate extremist content and frequently had references to violence. Trigger warnings and videos requiring registration also suggest that the identified critical points are evident in more than just thumbnails and titles. Even if the portrayal of violent affinity within right-wing extremist and criminal milieus may have a certain relevance in prevention work, it should remain within clearly set

boundaries so as not to prompt sensation-seeking. Gansewig and Walsh's evaluation study found that detailed narratives of violent acts are apparently not necessary for knowledge transfer and awareness raising; school students in both the intervention and control groups were equally aware of violence within right-wing movements (Gansewig & Walsh, 2020).

Remarkably, however, the former's distancing from right-wing extremism and crime is not addressed in own series. In addition, terms like "Prevention" or "Deradicalization" are not found in the 421 video titles. Previous research showed that consuming online CN videos can lead to confrontation with extremist content through recommendation algorithms (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2018). Accordingly, one must question whether the stated goal "to prevent juveniles and adolescents from getting involved in the first place" can be achieved through this channel. Rather, given the channel content, the peril of exposure to content unsuitable for young people could be exacerbated and affect other areas. For example, some of the interviews dealt with critical content, such as descriptions of obtaining and using illegal drugs. International research explicitly warns against confronting children and adolescents with such content; it has the potential to encourage them to use drugs rather than prevent them from doing so (EUSPR, 2019). In this regard, the identification potential of messengers and their narratives must be taken into account, which poses a high risk when presenting content and behaviors that are not appropriate for young people. Considering this, the choice of interview partners must be viewed critically, as some of them operate YouTube channels with content that is less suitable for young people. This could exacerbate the above-mentioned challenge of displaying further questionable content by means of recommendation algorithms.

3) The presenter claims that his channel is directed against hate speech and encourages his viewers to support him by donating and/or buying his merchandise. However, a discrepancy between the supposed goal of the channel and the content creator's statements to his so-called haters became apparent. This discrepancy could be described as "do as I say, not as I do." Clearly, this is questionable and contraindicated not only in the context of hate speech.

In addition, this analysis revealed other critical aspects. First, the lack of a specific target group. As the online C/ANs literature shows, definition and conceptual adaptation to a specific target group is essential, for example, to avoid boomerang and stigmatization effects

(cf., e.g., Tuck & Silverman, 2016). Echoing Lewis and Mardsen (2021) "[t]o be effective, the content of messages must resonate with the target audience" (p. 7). According to its description, the YouTube channel has multiple target audiences: Not involved juveniles and adolescents, as well as those willing to change. In this respect, the intention is to have a primary, secondary, or tertiary preventive effect. This is accompanied by a dilemma: Addressing members of right-wing extremist and criminal environments (for example, by means of relevant tags in the video titles and thumbnails with weapons or the pixelated Hitler salute) carries the risk of fascinating people who have not previously encountered such content or associating them with extremist content through recommendation algorithms. This is also worthy of criticism in view of the findings from other areas of communication science and the state of research on counter-measuring campaigns. Accordingly, it is limited to individuals who already exhibit a certain degree of radicalization to be reached by such campaigns. Conversely, people who do not yet have any fixed attitudes are more easily approachable and influenceable (e.g., van Eerten et al., 2019; Braddock, 2020; Carthy et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the results demonstrate that the YouTube channel alignment changed significantly over the four years of the investigation. This was observed at three points. 1) Originally, some videos with short, positive appeals partly had the characteristics of ANs. However, as early as the first year, a change toward lurid titles, long videos, and increased preoccupation with information and content from the extremist and criminal environments was noted. Critical aspects, such as consumption of alcohol and (e-)cigarettes, were also not noticeable until 2018. 2) Professionalization of the YouTube channel design was observed (e.g., video quality, equipment, logo/label, series type, community management, and user-generated thumbnails). 3) The change is further reflected by the increasing commercialization, which the analysis revealed was a channel priority. In view of the numerous monetization components, it appears that this YouTube channel functions as a business model. Based on current knowledge, the identified aspects appeared to manifest themselves after the study period.

This development underlines the importance of researching the motives behind formers' involvement in off- and online P/CVE (Gansewig & Walsh, 2021a; Schewe & Koehler,

2021); this is also in light of the prison psychologist's quote mentioned at the beginning. Conversely, it shows that corresponding online offers can change and therefore require continuous expert review and should by no means be assessed and/or recommended in a blanket-positive manner. In particular, it is questionable when such a blanket recommendation is made by the highest state authority for civic education, as happened in Germany in 2020 with a bpb-booklet "specially developed for work with young people." This begs, inter alia, the question: Which learning goals are intended with this recommendation? Given the publication year, it cannot be stated that the channel orientation was less critical at that time. Concludingly, and more importantly, it seems that in a digitalized world not only media and digital literacy, critical and reflective thinking, and critical consumption skills of children and young people need to be strengthened, but especially those of educators and people who create learning materials for young people (cf., e.g., Jeong et al., 2012; Grizzle & Tornero, 2016; Brüggen et al., 2019).

Although the presenter addressed and commented on current social and political issues (e.g., conspiracy theorists [05/09/20], clan crime [01/31/19], and conviction of a sex offender [01/09/20])—in part with other former extremists—the YouTube channel has a strong biographical reference to the past. This can also be seen in the *Life after Exit* category, where videos are predominantly related to the past. In general, the content creator has established himself with his on- and offline activities as a former in the public eye. This persistence in the past could indicate that being a former extremist and criminal rocker forms his new identity (cf. Schewe & Koehler, 2021, p. 173). The literature on formers in CVE clearly argues against establishing an identity and career as a former (cf. Koehler, 2016, 2020; Mattsson & Johansson, 2020). For example, this contrasts with the RAN "[d]os and don'ts of involving formers in PVE/CVE work," which explicitly warns not to "make the fact of being a former a career path or new identity in itself. Do not allow formers who may be attention-seeking or self-important to disrupt the CVE/PVE goals" (RAN, 2017, p. 6); or, as Schewe and Koehler (2021) put it: "At a minimum, formers should find their engagement in P/CVE inherently satisfying without being financially dependent on it" (p. 174).

Conclusion

Based on our study findings and the literature review, we are inclined to conclude that some offers of online C/ANs are not necessarily appropriate, especially for young people. People working with children and juveniles for prevention and education purposes have a special responsibility that goes beyond the classroom and is intensified by increasing media publicity (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, 2021b). To echo Frühbrodt and Floren (2019), "whoever wants to rise to the status of a public figure must also assume social [...] responsibility" (p. 70)—even if one may reject it. Such responsibility, of course, rests not only on the respective former himself, but also on supporters. Oberlinner et al.'s (2020) study revealed that even 10- to 12-year-olds appeal to responsible behavior on YouTube; in particular, they urge YouTubers who target children and adolescents to be guided by the age of their audience and to adapt their content accordingly, as well as to place an age limit on certain videos (p. 32; see also Zimmermann et al., 2020).

We would like to explicitly point out that we have respect for people who distance themselves from extremism and criminality and build a new life. It is a core task to reintegrate them into society. We think that, under certain conditions, they could provide support for secondary and tertiary prevention and contribute to the peace process in conflict regions. However, primary prevention with children and youth is a different matter in our view (cf. Gansewig & Walsh, 2020). In this regard, of course, not all formers in P/CVE should be questioned in general, yet it is essential to take a close look at the individuals, their behaviors, the content, and the messages they convey.

There is no question that effective (online) P/CVE measures are needed. However, as in all other prevention fields, doing the wrong thing can be fatal because it could have the opposite impact of what is intended (cf., e.g., Petrosino et al., 2000), thereby nullifying the important work of others in P/CVE. This danger must be realized and faced.

Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations. First and foremost, the YouTube channel of one male former right-wing extremist was examined. However, this specific channel was chosen following up on the results of the evaluation study conducted by the authors, which revealed that half of the school students surveyed started following the former on social media after his school interventions. Hence, we decided to take a systematic look at the YouTube channel. Second, the analysis was conducted for a limited time period. Consequently, the study is explorative, and its results cannot be generalized. In general, YouTube channel analyses are regularly limited because of the fast-paced changes of the channels (Schuegraf & Janssen, 2017). Nevertheless, Schuegraf and Janssen's structure analysis offers a solid approach to draw on a first examination. Future research should employ Schuegraf and Janssen's (2017) web video analysis model to further examine this and similar channels by conducting interpretative and discursive analyses. Furthermore, the current analysis cannot make any statements about effects (short- and long-term) of the channel on the audience. Therefore, sound reception research is required. Data on the number of subscribers and views can identify user demographics and the reach of an offer, but they say nothing about whether the intended audience and the intended impulses regarding attitudes and behavior are reached.

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