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Textbooks, Cell Phones, and Diapers: Being a Dad in Adolescent Fathers' Own Words

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Textbooks, Cell Phones, and Diapers: Being a Dad in Adolescent Fathers' Own Words

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ABSTRACT

This study sets out to investigate YouTube videos posted by adolescent fathers in order to identify the rhetorical and discursive strategies they utilize. More specifically, it aims to provide a description of how these young men represent themselves and construct their online identity with regard to their gender and to their age. This paper intends to shed light on the intersections between masculinity and age discourses, drawing on the premise that they are particularly strong when it comes to teenage parenthood. An ad hoc data set consisting of YouTube videos featuring teen dads has been built and analyzed through the approach of social media critical discourse studies, which combines theories and concepts belonging to the traditions of CDA and digital humanities. Preliminary results indicate that YouTube dads negotiate their identities as fathers, males, and teenagers by trying to reconcile the contradictions and expectations that characterize masculinity, fatherhood, and adolescence/adulthood discourses. Their identity work reveals a strategic alternation between the adoption of the teenage "self" and the adult "self", which serves the purpose of coming across as "good fathers" in spite of being "kids having kids".

Keywords: teenage parenthood, social media discourse studies, fatherhood discourse, teenage discourse

INTRODUCTION: "BABIES HAVING BABIES": TEEN DADS BETWEEN INVISIBILITY AND STIGMA

This paper sets out to investigate teen dads' narratives and aims to contribute to the expansion of current knowledge and research on the category of adolescent fathers, a largely unexplored category.

In the USA, the country which this study focuses upon, the research into teenage fatherhood is severely limited by lack of access; data about men involved in teen pregnancies are often inaccurate. As noted by several scholars (cf., *inter alii*, Martin et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2012; Weber, 2012, 2018), birth certificates possibly represent the primary source of information on fathers, but the latter are not likely to be listed for children born out of wedlock to mothers under the age of twenty. There are various reasons for this: in some cases, dads may simply prefer not to be in their children's lives. In other cases, couples that depend on welfare may keep the father's identity hidden so that he does not have to make official support payments and the mother can collect state benefits. Finally, another important deterrent to declaring the name of the father is fear of legal prosecution; men risk being charged with statutory rape or statutory sex assault if they have had sexual contact and/or intercourse with a minor. In the United States, statutory rape charges can be pressed by victims and their parents and, by most states, too; therefore, officially adding the father's name to birth certificates may lead to significant legal problems (Kiselica, 2008).

These difficulties in accessing data about young dads make it hard for academics to come up with a reliable estimate of their number as well as to contact them for research purposes. Another issue linked with studies on teenage fathers is that this line of enquiry is often limited to the exploration of "policy questions and [...]"

more clinical work on support systems for young parents” since “the focus on vulnerability and social exclusion is common” in this field (Johansson & Hammarén, 2014, p. 368-369). Most literature thus narrows its scope to describing poor young parents’ social and economic milieu and its distinctive hardships (Johansson & Hammarén, 2014, p. 366) and tends to neglect fathers who come from more secure and stable social backgrounds and possess more economic and psychological resources.

Unlike scholarly work on dads, research on moms is quite extensive due to the fact, among others, that data on adolescent girls who give birth is widely available (Scott et al., 2012, p. 1). Teen fathers have been absent not only from academic investigation but also from policies and programs directed at young parents (Kiselica, 2008) and, even more noticeably, from the mainstream media representation of early parenthood (Weber, 2018). Popular TV series such as MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, which illustrate the stories of adolescent mothers before and after pregnancy, ascribe a peripheral role to fathers while detailing the perspectives of the female protagonists (Weber, 2018, p. 2).

The greater attention received by teen moms and “the relative invisibility of fathers” (SmithBattle et al., 2019, p. 186) both contribute to the spread of the stereotype that young dads are irresponsible or absent (Kiselica & Kiselica, 2014). Although adolescents having babies are discursively portrayed in negative terms, irrespective of their gender (e.g., young mothers are also depicted as poor, lone, vulnerable and morally suspect; cf. Johansson & Hammarén, 2014, p. 367), it is worth mentioning that, by investing in motherhood, girls (especially those from the lower classes) are seen as increasing their heterosexual and culture capital (Skeggs, 1999 in Johansson & Hammarén, 2014)¹. On the contrary, boys have traditionally been described only pejoratively and represented as “selfish, predatory, and destined to abandon the mother and their child(ren) with little concern for their well-being” (Weber, 2018, p. 2; cf. also Kiselica, 2008; Neale & Davies, 2015). Some academics go as far as to argue that “the cultural climate for teen fathers is one that generally presumes their failure” and that “the master narrative of father absence espoused in [...] media portrayals and the culture, writ large, is based mainly on the assumption of choice—teen fathers don’t father because they don’t want to” (emphasis in the original; Weber, 2018, p. 2).

However, while acknowledging that adolescent dads still retain a remarkably negative reputation, other experts maintain that things are slowly changing. As suggested by scholars Neale and Davies (2015), the “counterbalance to the rhetoric surrounding “deadbeat” fathers and “problem” youth has been slow to gain ground, but, [...] it is beginning to filter through to policy and practice, and also find its way into mainstream media discourses” (p. 310). Probably due to a general mounting interest in fatherhood (Bunting & McAuley, 2004, p. 296) as well to fathers’ increasing inclination towards sharing their experiences in the media (Johansson & Hammarén, 2014, p. 368), different narratives picturing teen fathers as caring and desiring to be involved in their children’s lives are becoming increasingly more common (c.f., e.g. Roberts, 2013). Social media can be considered to play a part in the gradual evolution of the ‘young dad’ figure in hegemonic discourse; although they certainly mirror mainstream media in their strong focus on teen moms (some of whom have achieved so much popularity that have reached influencer status; cf. Tullos, 2019), they have been hosting a rising number of teen dads’ content. The explosive growth of distribution technologies and low-media production have provided ordinary users unprecedented access to the mediated public sphere. As a result, previously marginalized groups such as adolescent fathers have acquired a certain degree of visibility and have gained the possibility of participating in the discussion on young fatherhood, positioning themselves within this kind of discourse and giving voice to their instances. Social media therefore represent a tool of empowerment for these boys, as these platforms work as echo chambers for their stories, which “serve as powerful arenas in which to perform identity work negotiating the potential stigma of teen pregnancy” (Weber, 2012, p. 901).

Teenage fathers’ accounts of their experiences are deemed particularly interesting and useful by social media consumers who also belong to the adolescent dad category: given their relative invisibility in dominant discourse, it is difficult for them to find narratives with which they can identify and which spotlight their same

¹ Discourse is traditionally defined as language-in-use which represents a form of social action, as sociolinguistic conventions both shape social identities and relationships and knowledge and value systems (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Certain ways of understanding and discursively representing social actors and events prevail in particular contexts and are referred to as ‘hegemonic’ or ‘dominant’ discourses (Gergen, 1995).

fears and doubts. Content creators can thus unknowingly become peer role models or virtual friends, helping other teen fathers feel less isolated in their situation.

Finally, another group that can benefit from social media accounts of young dads is that of academics. Web 2.0 platforms partially allow researchers to overcome the lack of availability of adolescent fathers' data as they feature content generated and circulated by young dads, thus providing unmediated access to their stories and their lives.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHOD

Against this backdrop, this paper analyses teen dads' social media discourse starting from the belief that more scholarly work should focus on young fathers' experiences and needs from their own perspectives (Ashbourne, 2006). More specifically, this chapter presents a case study involving social media content (16 YouTube videos) produced by American adolescent dads and aims to provide a description of how they represent themselves and construct their online identity with special regard to their age. The dimensions of gender and age have been recognized as strictly connected to the construct of parenthood. Recent academic literature underscores that the status of parent and the status of male/grown-up may be considered as discursively performed. Just like "doing parenthood is [...] a way of doing gender" (Walzer, 1998, p. 8), the age factor is also intimately linked to the realization of the father identity, as "[t]een parenthood is a key site where age and gender collide, where we can observe how both gender and age relations are enacted, accomplished, contested, and redefined" (Weber, 2018, p. 7). The study of adolescent dads' social media discourse is thus an interesting object of study as it provides insight into how young men negotiate their self-image and "attempt to reconcile the contradictions within/between youth and the "grown up" expectations that define fatherhood" (Weber, 2018, p. 7).

By means of the analysis of social media content produced by these users, this paper intends to contribute to the body of work that potentially challenges commonly-held conceptions of age; by verifying what kind of representation of this notion emerges from social media narratives of teenage parenthood it may be possible to establish whether age is to be considered as fluid and ductile and or rather as unidirectional, where human beings permanently move from one life phase to another, as portrayed by more traditional research.

The theoretical underpinning of this chapter mostly lies in a constructivist view of language which sees social reality and discourse as constituting each other (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 48); in this light, narratives like those shared on Web 2.0 platforms can be considered as "symbolic systems" and social constructions (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Another-related-presupposition at the basis of the study is that "adolescent fathers use language to re-position themselves" (Frewin et al., 2007, p. 162) with respect to discourses about early parenthood. A discourse-analytical approach which adopts a constructivist perspective on language is therefore appropriate to investigate teen dads' fatherhood discourse, but a methodology that takes the digital context of its production/reception into account is also necessary. As a consequence, the methodological approach of social media critical discourse studies (SM-CDS) (KhosraviNik, 2014, 2017, 2018; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018) has been selected for this analysis. This relatively new method results from the process of adapting discourse analysis (DA) research traditions to the study of computer-mediated interaction. It combines scholarly reflection on the affordances and peculiarities of social media technologies with the problem-orientedness and the emphasis on situated meanings and social/discursive practices typical of DA.

The analytical tools of SM-CDS are applied to an *ad hoc* data set comprised of 16 YouTube videos, where adolescent fathers either narrate or are interviewed about their life as a young parent². In order to have a rather homogenous sample of social media content, it has been decided to collect texts uploaded on the same website, YouTube, in a limited period of time (from 2017 to 2020; cf. [Appendix A](#) for details). The selection of the YouTubers to incorporate in the research has started from the post "Do All Teen Dads Think the Same?" of the channel *Jubilee* (cf. [Appendix A](#)). The video belongs to a playlist called *Spectrum*, which contains content following the same format: a list of statements about a social category typically

² This analysis only focuses on the verbal component of the examined videos: while other semiotic resources and their interaction are undoubtedly important, this study has a primarily linguistic focus.

underrepresented in the media is read to a small group of the members of its category and the latter have to declare whether they (strongly/weakly) (dis)agree with the statements, i.e. they have to choose how they position themselves along the "spectrum" of possible points of view. The episode "Do All Teen Dads Think the Same?" features young fathers that are well-known on social media platforms, therefore it has been included in the data set. Videos about fatherhood produced by *Spectrum* participants who have a YouTube channel (or whose girlfriends have a YouTube channel) have been selected for analysis. Finally, footage uploaded by other popular teen dads has been added to the materials chosen for the study.

At present YouTube is the leading video-hosting platform, therefore its posts can potentially reach vast audiences and arguably offer a good representation of social media discourses. Additionally, YouTube videos include non-elicited teen dads' narratives which are good research material.

As previously pointed out, the topic of early fatherhood has attracted scant academic interest until very recently. To the best of my knowledge, no work has been conducted which offers a linguistic perspective on social media user-generated content, which means that the nature of this study is rather exploratory. The analysis carried out in the next paragraphs will thus help, among other things, establish whether the results of this investigation of Web 2.0 language practices are aligned or differ from those gained from more traditional research (e.g., research relying on interviews).

ADOLESCENT FATHERHOOD AS A SET OF DICHOTOMIES

After an initial glance at the data it is possible to draw some preliminary observations about teen dads' YouTube videos. The first comment that can be made is that two thirds of the posts are either hosted on a teen mom (i.e., the young father's partner) or on a family channel. Boys who manage a parenting channel are still more the exception than the rule, although this might be changing; teenage mothers are a very popular category of users and family channels also attract a fair share of attention on the platform, whereas teen dads are not so popular (or they are so only in relation to their more famous baby mommies). Teen dads' relative invisibility that characterizes mainstream media discourse therefore seems to be reproduced on YouTube as well. Another factor to take into account when examining the videos is that these boys' narratives cannot be considered as totally unmediated, because what they say may be screened out or edited by the mothers/YouTube channel owners.

However, (rather paradoxically but nonetheless strategically) the typical formats in which teen dad videos present themselves emphasize the fact that the footage is a first-hand account of early fatherhood experiences: "Day in the Life" (DITL), "How It Feels to Be a Teen Dad" and "Q&A" are recurring video titles in the selection under study. Anyway, apart from the prominence given to the idea that they are authentic portrayals of the life of their protagonists, teen dad videos cannot be considered as a real genre, in that they do not display a fixed set of features and therefore do not generate a horizon of expectations in the audience. Common communicative purposes may be identified, but they are not different from those of other YouTube videos journaling users' lives: together with more altruistic aims such as providing advice and sharing one's experience, young fathers upload content to try and promote themselves, looking for public exposure and good monetization of their posts.

Another initial remark that can be made on the data set is that young YouTube fathers, just like participants from other studies, seem to "draw on a discourse of dual identities to position themselves as caught between two disparate identities [that of the teenager and that of the grown-up], which at times are in conflict" (Frewin et al., 2007, p. 163). This hardly comes as a surprise, if one considers that hegemonic discourse has historically framed the relation between masculine youth and adulthood as a set of dichotomies (Thorne, 1993; Weber, 2018, p. 5): play/work, dependence/independence, irresponsibility/responsibility (Kimmel, 2008; Weber, 2018). These dichotomies are remnants of the past, where the boundaries between one phase of life and the subsequent one were less fuzzy. Marriage, parenthood, career, and home ownership traditionally indicated entry into adulthood; currently, though, these markers are not so easily achievable nor rigidly structured as they used to be (Kimmel, 2008). Teen dads' YouTube narratives thus report the experience of simultaneously performing the adult identity (because they have babies) and the teenager identity (because in most cases they are still living with their parents and going to school). The main discursive foci emerging from the analysis of the just-described dichotomies include the framing of the notion of teenage fatherhood, the representation

of the possible (in)compatibility of adolescent irresponsibility and adult duties, and finally, the description of the hardships of being a young dad. The following subsections deal with each of these discursive foci individually and more in depth.

Teenage Fatherhood: A Mistake or a Choice?

A prominent focal point of discourses on teenage fatherhood has to do with the possible frames of this concept. As previously underlined, by having children in their adolescence, young dads subvert the commonly shared social norm according to which parenthood is an indicator that the person has transited to the adult phase of life. Rather than conforming to expectations, teen fathers disrupt normativity and hegemonic orthodoxy as far as age identity is concerned. Expectedly, dominant discourses frame adolescent fatherhood as a mistake, thus depicting having children in one's early years as wrong. Some of the YouTube dads considered in this study appear to totally embrace and reproduce this kind of frame. Zenon, for example, interprets his parents' early entry into parenthood as a mistake and confesses his feelings of uneasiness when he had to tell them that he, too, was about to become a young father:

1. My mom and dad actually had me at a young age too but I think for me it was harder to tell them because *they worked so hard, you know, to prevent me from going on that same path as them*. You know they... worked multiple jobs and just for me and my sister, and it was the hardest telling her because I didn't want her to feel like she failed. Yeah she'd done so much for me and allowed me to get a good education, go to university, but in the end *I still repeat the same mistake* [Zenon; emphasis added].

The framing of teenage parenthood as a misguided action repeatedly emerges in the text extract presented here: not only does Zenon use the collocation "repeat the same mistake" which contains the term "mistake" itself and characterizes it as something one should abstain from, but he also relies on the common metaphor of taking the (wrong) path in order to describe the experience of committing an ill-advised act. Instead of learning from his parents' example and efforts to prevent him from having babies at an early age, the young YouTuber has found himself in exactly the same situation.

Whereas Zenon's worries are directed to his mother and father, Andrew's initial concerns had to do with his future baby:

2. When my girlfriend told me she was pregnant, first thing that came to my mind was "Man, I can't be the father. *I am gonna ruin this kid's life*" [Andrew].

Interestingly, both [1] and [2] indicate that the mistake frame is connected to the idea that, by disobeying social norms dictating when it is age-appropriate to have children, teenage dads end up ruining their life or that of their kids. Hegemonic discourse reinforcing the notion of adolescent parenthood as an error also envisages the possibility for young fathers to try and elude the consequences of their behavior and reject the responsibilities that come with parenthood. This kind of dynamics can be observed in example [3], where the YouTuber Josh maintains that he came under a lot of pressure to avoid committing to his baby boys:

3. I knew that I like needed to be in my kids' life and my kids needed me in my [sic] life but it was just difficult in the beginning because I didn't have many influences or people saying that it's a good idea. *Pretty much everyone around me was saying like it's a bad idea or like it's bad* other than the babies' mother [Josh].

These words may suggest the existence of a clash between Josh's frame of his situation and that of other people—presumably family and friends—giving voice to dominant discourses that portray being a young dad as "a bad idea". The use of "bad idea" instead of "mistake" is rather interesting: while alluding to an analogous opinion on early parenthood, the former expression has a more positive connotation than the second. As a matter of fact, whereas "mistake" is a single noun expressing a negative concept, the noun phrase "bad idea" is comprised of the pre-modifier "bad" and the headword "idea", which does not convey a pejorative meaning. This word choice may be indicative of the desire not to adopt strong language with reference to adolescent pregnancy, although the type of frame utilized is that of the error, nonetheless.

Teen dads also highlight the fact that the prevalent view of fatherhood as a mistake also leads to social stigma. In spite of the fact that they may share this view, they lament being judged and criticized. Zenon's statement in [4] is a case in point:

4. I'll be in class and I'll meet new people and we're like "Oh let's go to a study session!" like, "Oh no I can't. I got to go back home and go back with my kid" and they kind of look at me like "Oooh" like "You have a kid" like... and it's like "When is he gonna drop out?" or "When he's...?" *there's a lot of stereotypes with that*, like, you know [Zenon].
5. ... a lot of my friends in football, you know, *they judge me* [...] they will call my girlfriend names ... [Brandon Arnold].
6. I hope you guys are understanding of that or why didn't want to show you immediately, especially me being young *I didn't want to be judged* and stuff like that ... [KyFromDaWoods].

These examples arguably demonstrate how pervasive hegemonic discourse can be: in [6] the user even admits to not having disclosed his parent status for fear of being judged (and probably losing followership). Moreover, all three text extracts describe situations in which YouTubers were stigmatized or stereotyped by their peers, not by grownups; as sad as it can be, this hardly comes as a surprise since, as previously stressed, teen dads themselves often frame adolescent parenthood as a mistake.

However, the investigation of the videos collected for the research indicates that not all YouTube fathers agree with this view; some do not or cannot take a specific stand or position on the issue, whereas others totally reject the idea that having children during adolescence is an error. KyFromDaWoods belongs to the former category; what he says in front of the camera betrays a certain degree of ambiguity and even incoherence:

7. *It's a bad situation* but this is what it is. Things happen and I'm taking this *as a miracle son*. [...] *I would never look at him and see it as something negative*. [...] I'm not gonna stay here and act like I'm sad. *This is actually a blessing*, you know [KyFromDaWoods; emphasis added].

In his monologue, the youngster appears unable to provide a definite and clear frame for his experience, which he defines "a bad situation" and "a blessing" at the same time. He therefore seems oscillating between accepting/reproducing hegemonic discourses and proposing an alternative way of considering teenage parenthood. However, in spite of the discordant feelings he expresses, the young father cannot consider his "miracle son" as a mistake, as can be gathered from his choice of words; whereas the term "blessing" has a significantly positive connotation, the meaning of the expression "a bad situation" is not as negative (cf. ex. [3]).

KyFromDaWoods may harbor conflicting frames (although not to the same extent) about his situation because, among other reasons, he became a father as the result of an unplanned pregnancy. Other teen dads instead proudly claim that they chose to have kids during adolescence:

8. Well I mean like I didn't really have first thoughts on it [my girlfriend being pregnant] because I kind of *knew* that was gonna happen. I was not shocked when the pregnancy test was positive [...]. *I really just wanted to become a dad* [Logan].

The frame of adolescent fatherhood as a the realization of a hope is in total opposition to that of adolescent fatherhood as an error; the former views having babies in one's teenage years as the fulfilment of a desire and a project and, consequently, attributes agency to the young parent. Logan uses two mental processes (cf. Halliday, 1985)–"know" and "want"–to refer to his reaction to the news of his girlfriend's pregnancy which suggest that the boy was in control of the situation. The verb "to know" indicate the awareness of the YouTuber who, far from being surprised or shocked, was expecting to see a positive test. The mental process "want", instead, conveys the idea of volition and emphasizes that the conception was planned. The presence of two intensifiers–"really" and "just"–which pre-modify the verb, further reinforces the impression that being a teen dad represents the accomplishment of Logan's wishes and that he, just like other

young fathers examined in this study, consciously defies and breaches the widespread notion that adolescents should not have kids. Edgar, for instance, explicitly states that he and his girlfriend had been trying to conceive for months when she finally fell pregnant:

9. See, if you've seen our past videos, Chelsea and I literally were forcing each other, well, were forcing it, to get pregnant. We went through all those things of getting an ovulation test, taking a pregnancy test every single month, giving up, getting irritated that we weren't getting pregnant, fighting because we weren't getting pregnant. [...] I was happy because *I've always wanted to be a teen dad ever since I was a little kid. I've always wanted to be, like, you know, "Oh like I'm 18 I'm 17 I want to be a dad."* [...] I want someone to look up to me and, you know, just to this day seeing how my life is going... like it's amazing. I love it [Edgar].

Far from being a mistake or something unplanned, being a young father is the realization of Edgar's lifelong dream. The pregnancy is depicted as the outcome of a deliberate endeavor; the YouTuber illustrates all the actions taken by him and his girlfriend to reach this objective through the use of the rhetorical device of the accumulation ("getting an ovulation test, taking a pregnancy test every single month, giving up, getting irritated that we weren't getting pregnant, fighting because we weren't getting pregnant"). This figure of speech allows him to show how committed to their plan they both were by making a lengthy list of all the steps they took in order to achieve it. Analogously to Logan's, Edgar's example demonstrates that framing teenage fatherhood in terms of choice provides young dads with more agency, differently from viewing them as passive victims of their unwise behavior.

Describing having kids as the result of a decision also portrays teen fathers as responsible, despite not being adult. The dichotomy/interplay between parental responsibilities and adolescence's recklessness represents another crucial discursive *focus* which has emerged from the analysis and is explored in the following section.

Teenage Fatherhood between Dependency and Responsibilities

In her work on male narratives, scholar Eck (2014) maintains that two different phases of masculinities emerge from men's accounts: youth is the period in life in which it is normal and acceptable to be "rogues, delay commitment, and be one of the guys" (p. 148) whereas during adulthood one should settle down, start a family and invest in a career. This categorization of men's life into subsequent stages with distinctive characteristics is at the basis of the equation between adolescent parenthood on the one hand and having one's life ruined on the other; as a matter of fact, those who view age as a unidirectional continuum cannot but consider parenthood as incompatible with the wild and carefree lifestyle of teenage years.

Some of the YouTubers under examination accept and reproduce this conviction in their videos:

10. As soon as I found out that my girlfriend was pregnant I *quit football right away* [Brandon Arnold].

Brandon Arnold regards his status as a father as irreconcilable with leisure activities such as sports, therefore he declares that he dropped football when he found out that his girlfriend was pregnant. His text extract conveys the urgency of such a decision: he did not wait until his baby was born to quit his hobby, but he did it when he got the news that he was going to become a dad. The presence of a time clause introduced by "as soon as" and of the adverb "right away" at the end of the sentence highlights the immediacy with which the young man performed the action of quitting (football). In line with dominant narratives, Brandon Arnold emphasizes how quickly he abandoned the easy-going stage of his adolescent life to imply that he has become a responsible father, a reliable man who can turn away from frivolous things and "wild" behaviors:

11. This Friday I got invited to, like, a senior party, you know, just senior [...] you know, *the temptations that you want to have fun...* but you know I I... *instead of doing that I had dinner with my family* [Brandon Arnold].

However, other YouTubers stress the difficulties of finding oneself between fatherhood responsibilities and teenage dependency, difficulties linked to living arrangements (cf. ex. [12]), money and education (cf. ex. [13]), and even the freedom to go places (cf. ex. [14]):

12. The reason we do not live together is because we're not 18 and *we can't really decide where we live*. His family's in Texas, mine's in Florida and neither of us will move to the other's state. We're kind of stuck [Camryn].
13. The path I chose, like, I want to go to law school and that's a lot more years, like, I won't be able to financially support a child for a little while so... without the help of you know my family and my girlfriend's family [Zenon].
14. For most people, at 15, the biggest challenge is learning how to drive. For me, it was learning to be a father. [...] I ask a friend to give me a ride there so I can see my daughter for the first time. [...] Trying to be a father when the only time you can see your daughter is when people can give you a ride definitely wasn't enough [Andrew].

In [12], Camryn, Landon's girlfriend, gives voice to the couple's inability to live together as a family due to the fact that they are still financially relying on their families of origin. Examples [12], [13], and [14] well illustrate that teen dads are in a stage of life where they are not adults yet, in spite of having children dependent on them: they can't decide where to live, they can't earn money to support their little ones, and, in some cases, they are too young to have a driving license.

Just as they defy the frame of teen parenthood as a mistake, some other YouTube dads challenge the related idea that adolescence is incompatible with fatherhood, too. Two rhetorical strategies have been identified which contest this view. The first one consists in shedding light on the perks offered by being young and being a father:

15. *Being young, the thing that I like about that with being a parent* is that I know once the babies are like one and older like I'm gonna have... so I'm gonna be so willing to just go and run outside and like play any game they want to play or do anything they want to do and like *I'm not gonna run out of energy* [...] [Josh].

What Josh does in example [15] is to discursively reverse the notion that being a teen dad is always and invariably worse than being a grownup dad; by foregrounding the qualities of stamina and physical energy that are more abundant in teenage years, he is able to demonstrate that not only are fatherhood and young age compatible, but that these two elements can synergically work together to the benefit of fathers and children.

The second strategy utilized to subvert the idea that adolescence and fatherhood are incompatible is to put forward the argument that young fathers can either simultaneously perform the identities of the teenager and of the dad or can go back and forth with them. Landon, for instance, describes his situation in terms of fulfilment and happiness, underscoring how the acquisition of the father role—an age marker typical of the adult stage—during another phase of his life has made him feel more complete and satisfied:

16. I am more responsible now *I feel more completed*. [...] Now that I'm a father I feel like, you know, I've said this a lot but *I feel a lot more responsible and I have a lot of responsibilities*. I see *a lot of happiness* and a family later [Landon].

Landon's words openly contradict discourses which frame the acceptance of paternal responsibilities in terms of a loss (i.e. a loss of the benefits typical of the teenage lifestyle); rather than representing being a responsible teen father as connected to the necessity of giving up fun or hobbies (like Brandon Arnold's text extracts [10] and [11] well exemplify), the young man considers dad duties as something that has helped him mature and has enriched his life.

Other YouTubers also reject the notion that different age identities cannot be performed simultaneously or that they are necessarily and strictly sequential (cf. also Weber, 2018):

17. I'm still around a bunch of other teenagers my age and we always hang out still, just on times like at night when Layla's sleeping I'll go out for a little bit, have a little fun [Logan].

18. Don't think negatively about things like losing out on sleep, lack of having a social life - *that will come back*- and also lack of money. [...] So basically yeah, don't think about the negative things 'cos all'll come back -probably not the money- that will probably always be gone- but *your social life will be back, your sleep will be back, and you'll be drinking it in man!!* [Aaron].

Extract [17] indicates that being a responsible young father does not mean having to give up fun and social events altogether, while extract [18] shows that the carefree lifestyle associated with youth can be resumed at a later stage of life. The repetition of the adverb “still” in Logan's example [17] reinforces the idea of continuity; unlike traditional conceptions of age that see ‘having a good time’ as an adolescence marker that has to be abandoned when paternal responsibilities arise, his discourse aims to demonstrate that recreational activities and fatherhood are not mutually exclusive. Aaron's monologue [18] is even more explicit in inviting the audience (presumably an audience of peer teen dads) not to worry about temporary renunciations because being a parent does not mean permanently moving away from the fun and carefreeness of adolescence to settle down as a “serious adult”. The use of an anaphoric construction (“your social life will be back, your sleep will be back”) at the end of his speech in front of the camera make his point even more poignant: there is a time for being responsible and a time for having fun, but these two situations can go back and forth. By claiming this, Aaron is challenging normative narratives which establish an association between life stages and elements defining them and which depict the human experience as an irrevocable transition from one phase to the subsequent.

The next subsection moves from the investigation of the discursive relation between having kids very early and partaking in leisure activities to the connection between being a teen dad and the hardships of being a father; the analysis of this discursive *focus* makes it possible to establish whether all the YouTubers examined in the research reproduce the dominant view that teenage fatherhood is more difficult than adult fatherhood.

Hardships of Teen Fatherhood

A logical corollary to the “young fatherhood as a mistake” frame is that having kids in one's adolescence is much more problematic and challenging than having them when one “is supposed to”. As suggested above, some of the YouTubers analyzed in this research do embrace the mistake frame, therefore it would be reasonable to presume that they would also espouse the argument that teen parenthood is more taxing than adult parenthood. However, the examination of the videos does not validate this hypothesis. Although they mention the difficulties that come with fatherhood, young dads claim that being a father is not as hard as most people believe:

19. You know, you think that my day in the life would consist of me struggling with these ones but no. They're... they're the angels, *they're the easiest part of my day...* huh... *they're the easiest part of my day* and I'm not even lying [Alonzo].
20. *It's really not that hard*, you know. I'm saying you just got to deal with it, you got to keep pushing through and everything will be okay [KyFromDaWoods].
21. It's a whole lot different, like I said. It does get complicated at times, you know, in the beginning, when you're getting used to, you know, having a different person with you, a different human being with a sleeping schedule, you know crying and all that but I mean *it's not hard, like I said. It's really easy thank God* [Edgar].

Alonzo's text extract [19] contains an instance of dialogism (“you think that my day in the life would consist of me struggling with these ones”; cf. Bakhtin, 1981), which is indicative of the acknowledgement that the audience's expectations about his experience may differ vastly from his actual experience. In order to underline how wrong it would be for his viewers to assume that he faces enormous struggles with his twin daughters, the young man repeats the clause “they're the easiest part of my day” twice and reinforces his message by adding the expression “I am not even lying” at the end of the sentence.

Whereas Alonzo opts for the superlative “easiest” to highlight that his daily duties as a dad are manageable, KyFromDaWoods prefers utilizing the litotes “not that hard” (significantly preceded by the intensifier “really”) to vigorously deny that teenage fatherhood is onerous [20]. Edgar's words [21] also stress that adolescent

parenthood should not be viewed as particularly demanding; the rhetorical device that he uses to strengthen this idea is a parallelism consisting of a negative statement (it's *not* hard) followed by a positive one (it's really easy). The theme/rheme position of these statements (cf. Halliday, 1985) and the presence of the intensifier "really" combinedly place more emphasis on the second part of the parallelism.

Other YouTubers do not deny that their lives as teen dads are arduous, but they attribute their difficulties to the fact that being a father is challenging (regardless of one's age):

22. Being a dad at 17 *I admit it's hard, it's hard like parenting is hard in general. It's a big responsibility, it's a big responsibility* [Brandon Arnold].

23. If I'm being honest *I don't really know what it's like being grown up parents. I'm just gonna assume that it's the same, like I don't... I'm being honest. [...]* I know being a teen parent is a little bit more stressful than just being a teen [Logan].

In example [23], Logan admits that he does not have an idea of what it is like to be an adult dad (although the latter is a rather common experience); what he does know from experience is that being a teen parent is harder than being a teen. That is because, just like Brandon Arnold, he also believes that being a father (irrespective of one's age or life phase) is a demanding job.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The investigation of the main discursive *foci* of the teen dads' YouTube videos dealt with in this paper has revealed that dominant narratives which frame adolescent fatherhood as a mistake are partially accepted and reproduced by the users selected for this research. Due to their role as echo-chambers, social media platforms make it possible for the hard-to-reach group of young fathers to contribute to parenthood discourses and negotiate their identity, potentially providing alternative representations of what it means to have kids in one's teenage years. However, this study's findings suggest that the technological potential of video-hosting websites such as YouTube to circulate non-orthodox points of view about adolescent fatherhood does not automatically translate in users' rejection of hegemonic discourse about this topic: only a number of YouTubers openly contest the conviction that young parenthood is an error, while others reproduce it in their posts. In short, the picture that emerges from this analysis is not so clear-cut and neat; overall YouTube teen fatherhood discourse seems to simultaneously challenge and acknowledge the notion of teenage fatherhood as a mistake, although the different users do this to different degrees. Together with a more traditional and mainstream take on early parenthood, the platform hosts a new articulation of discourses surrounding both fatherhood and youth. The boys' dual identity as fathers and as teens represents the outcome of an intense discursive negotiation; in their videos, teen dads display a combination of features belonging to both adolescence and adulthood. In this respect, the definition of "transformed teens", coined by Jaime et al. (2016) in their examination of the talk of unwed young fathers of Mexican origins, seems applicable to the performances of the self realized by the YouTubers selected for this research. The transformed teen identity is connected to an increased sense of control over one's life and stems from the above-mentioned coexistence of adolescent and grownup traits. On the whole, YouTube fathers claim that they feel more mature, experienced and complete because they have children.

At the same time, though, it appears from the videos that the identities of dad and teen are not necessarily enacted at the same time, but that dads often fluctuate between them. As underlined by Frewin et al. (2007, p. 166), "[t]he young father is positioned between the lure of independence and the duties of parenthood" and, through the use of language, he sets himself in relation "to the challenge of dual identities, new expectations of responsibility, and emerging identities as parent as opposed to school-boy" (Frewin et al., 2007, p. 162).

The possibility of oscillating between father and teen identity suggests that the two are not mutually exclusive nor inevitably sequential. The results of this study indicate that certain teen dads' YouTube videos make a compelling case for abandoning outdated notions of age which describe the latter as a fixed continuum where human beings permanently move from one stage to the next. While performing their paternal identity, the YouTubers of the videos selected for this study go back and forth between adolescence

and adulthood, between being a kid and being a kid's father, thus implying that age features a certain degree of fluidity. The findings of this work therefore align and further corroborate those studies which challenge the traditional concept of age as a unidirectional sequence of transitions (cf. §3).

By shedding light on social discourses about teenage fatherhood, this paper has hopefully not only provided a more dynamic representation of the construct of age, but also offered teen dads more academic visibility and, by examining texts created and shared by them, possibly contributed to debunk the rhetoric which invariably depicts adolescent fathers as uninterested in their children's lives. Whether they adopt the dominant frame of early parenthood as a mistake or not, what emerged from the videos here analyzed was their commitment to their kids and their desire to be good fathers.

Given the persistent stigmatization that this category is faced with, it is hoped that more collective attention is attributed to teen dads in the future. Not only can more policies and resources be made available to them, but scholarly work focusing on this (relatively unexplored) group can contribute to lifting of the stigma and conferring visibility and public voice to these fathers.

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APPENDIX A

1. "Do All Teen Dads Think The Same?" | *Spectrum* Dec 11, 2019
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXuvGtB_LOU&t=1s
2. Brandon Arnold, "TEEN DAD AT 16" (*Brandon Arnold*) Oct 22, 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZVekt5W2zc&t=30s>
3. Edgar, "How It's Like Being a Teen Dad at 19 | My Teen Dad Story" (*the Hernandez Family*) Aug 1, 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI7fjIT3eVg>
4. Logan, "Teen Dad Q&A: Choosing Fatherhood at 17" (*Yasmyn Switzer*) Aug 12, 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYPieKzRiGQ&t=21s>
5. Carlos Alvarez, "How It Feels To Be a Teen Dad at 16" (*Carlos Alvarez*) Sept 8, 2018
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tgBn0BLets>
6. "Parents at 15? Interviewing Everly's Dad" (*Maddie Lambert*) Aug 16, 2018
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCfBzuW4bHU>
7. Landon, "Teen Dad Q&A" (*Cam & Fam*) June, 17 2018
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JJ7db9EsS4>
8. Josh, "Teen Dad I Q&A and Relationship Update from his Point of View" (*Sophie Gonzalez*) Nov 3, 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQZE5HfgU9Y>
9. Aaron, "BECOMING A TEEN DAD | TEEN DAD ADVICE!" (*Eva Laetitia*) Mar 21, 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBtdUtS85GA>
10. Andrew, "That Moment You Become a Teen Father" (*SoulPancake*) Jul 25, 2018
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ISMfdpSyWU>
11. Alonzo, "Day in the Life of a Teen Dad / Student Athlete" (*Flo Fam*) Mar 7, 2020
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irCZ1yjtVs8>
12. Diamond Dorian, "Day in the Life as a Single Dad in School" (*Diamond Dorian*) Nov 22, 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPeSafyTbFA>
13. KyFromDaWoods, "I'm a Teen Dad" (*KyFromDaWoods*) October 13, 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZ2Vb-t2fjs>
14. Mayza, "The Truth about Being a Teen Dad" (*The Mayzing Family*) May 19, 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P89qWcAgTo4>
15. Mitchell, "Day in the Life of a Teen Dad" (*Mitchell & Co*) March 30, 2018
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbWY4DqeURg>
16. Brandon, "TEEN DAD Day in the Life 2020 *Realistic*" (*Team Taylor*) Sept 16, 2020
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebNsbKEeo5s>

