

## Chapter 14

# Revolution of the Dispossessed: School Shooters and their Devotees on the Web

Nils Böckler and Thorsten Seeger

Rampage school shootings, involving the planned killing of numerous people by students or former students, are one of the forms of violence that stun and distress entire societies and give rise to intense public, political, and scientific discussions (Böckler, Seeger, & Heitmeyer, 2010). Especially since Columbine, school shootings have become recurrent subjects of extensive media coverage (Frymer, 2009; Muschert, 2007; Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004). The theme also features in various products of popular culture—video games, TV series, movies, and theater productions as well as in rap, pop, and rock songs (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011a; Muschert & Larkin, 2007). Highly emotionalized interpersonal communication about school shootings is observed on the internet, in online discussion forums, Facebook groups, YouTube videos, MySpace comments, and Twitter messages (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011b; Lindgren, 2011; Palen, Vieweg, Liu, & Hughes, 2009; Sumiala, 2011). Despite their rarity, these specific acts of violence become huge media events, sometimes while they are still in progress and certainly in the hours and days that follow (Kellner, 2008; Sumiala & Tikka, 2010).

School shootings probably provoke such an enormous media echo because these “spectacular” and often particularly gruesome acts of violence apparently appear from nowhere and initially seem peculiarly devoid of motive (Altmeyer, 2002). But if we consider the specific characteristics of the deed and its staging by the perpetrator, it becomes clear that there is a complex prehistory (see the contributions in parts II and III of this volume), and that, in many cases, the performative script of violence is deployed deliberately as a means of communication (Larkin, 2009; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010). It is precisely these media-conveyed messages (appeals, ideologies, justifications, world views, self-images) that make it possible for certain adolescents to feel solidarity with school shooters—and in some cases even regard them as idols (Böckler & Seeger, 2010). This can create fertile ground for

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N. Böckler (✉) • T. Seeger  
Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence,  
University of Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany  
e-mail: nils.boeckler@uni-bielefeld.de; t.s.5@web.de

identification and imitation effects that play a significant role in origination (Schmidtke, Schaller, Stack, Lester, & Müller, 2005). In their precrime self-testimony, some adolescent rampage shooters express both great admiration for their predecessors and the hope that they themselves will become equally iconic models for potential imitators through their own rampage (Robertz & Wickenhäuser, 2007).

## 14.1 School Shooters as Idols of a Radicalized Milieu?

The central subject of this contribution is the self-narratives, self-stagings, and self-glorifications of school shooters and the reactions, appropriations, and communications of adolescents who consume and discuss these messages left behind by the perpetrators and circulated by the media.

We will focus first on the staging of self and violence by perpetrators (Sect. 14.1), examining the typical forms of action scripts, and ideological components, and exploring the functionality of these communicative-expressive elements in generating a group identity or sense of cohesion between perpetrators. The analysis is based on a survey of the relevant international research literature and the findings of our own qualitative study which used individual case studies to identify specific motives and recurring topoi in the self-narratives of perpetrators (Böckler & Seeger, 2010).

We then move on to examine the phenomenon of “virtual fan communities” that gather around the issue in the World Wide Web (Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011b; Sumiala, 2011). Although it has been widely noted that numerous adolescents around the globe feel represented by the opinions and actions of school shooters (for example, Larkin, 2009; Muschert & Larkin, 2007; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010), concrete empirical data has been lacking. Section 14.2 describes the theoretical and methodological framework and Sect. 14.3 the findings of the first study investigating the reasons that lead adolescent internet users of the interactive video portal YouTube to pursue an intense interest in school shooting events and actors.<sup>1</sup> The following research questions were addressed:

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<sup>1</sup> YouTube was selected as the field of research because it is the world’s largest and most intensely used portal of its kind, with about 60 h of video material uploaded every minute and about four billion video views per day. Numerous media self-presentations by school shooters can be found on YouTube, including Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, Sebastian Bosse, Seung-Hui Cho, Pekka-Eric Auvinen, and Matti Saari, uploaded by the perpetrators before the shooting or later by others. Numerous documentary reports and films about school shootings are also available on the site. The search term “School Shooting” returns 55,200 results on YouTube, with 12,900 videos for “Columbine” alone (as of February 11, 2012). Lindgren gives a general overview of user discussion relating to school shootings (2011), demonstrating that in comments on video clips showing images and texts from Seung-Hui Cho or Pekka-Eric Auvinen, for example, YouTube users refer above all to the issue of bullying as a possible reason.

- To what extent do portrayals of school shooters in the media provide a crucial frame of reference for certain adolescents in developing, articulating, and protecting their own identities?
- What are the different psychological and social functions of the appropriation of the topic of “school shooting” via the internet?
- What are the psychosocial characteristics that cause recipients to identify strongly with the perpetrators and the world-schemas and self-schemas they provide?

We were thus able to gain insights into (a) why adolescents see school shooters as models or even heroes and (b) what psychosocial circumstances condition such admiration. The findings suggest that particular adolescents who find themselves socially disintegrated through repeated experience of contempt and powerlessness in the family, school, and peer group find a meaningful point of reference for shaping and formulating their own identity in school shooters’ media presentations of self-image and world view (Böckler & Seeger, 2010). This leads straight to the next question: Must school shooters be regarded as the idols or avant-garde of a radicalized milieu in which fundamental social values of solidarity, equality, and nonviolence are no longer shared and recognized, but instead begin to erode where participation and integration are blocked? After dealing with this question, we conclude in Sect. 14.4 by summarizing the central findings, discussing the limitations of the study, and proposing some avenues for future research.

## 14.2 Communication with the Audience: Expressive Elements in School Shootings

### 14.2.1 *The Group Identity*

According to Larkin, post-Columbine school shooters deliberately plan for media effectiveness, not only in a quest to avenge the humiliations and affronts they have suffered, but also in the belief they are acting in the name of a greater collective (2009).<sup>2</sup> In the perception of these adolescents, the violent deed is a subversive act of rebellion carried out by proxy for millions of others who share their outsider status, their pain, and their experience of victimization (see also Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011a; Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010). This perpetrator ideology is largely sourced from Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who called for a “revolution of the dispossessed” (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). After analyzing twenty-three post-Columbine shootings, Larkin (2009) is able to demonstrate empirically that this appeal was understood, with about 60% of perpetrators citing Harris and Klebold or referring to their call to revolution (see Table 14.1).

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<sup>2</sup>On the relevance of marginalization and bullying experiences as causes of school shootings see Larkin, Madfis, & Levin, and Newman in this volume.

**Table 14.1** Violence in the name of a larger collectivity: statements by rampage shooters

1999 T.J. Solomon	One big Question everybody's probably wondering about now is <i>WHY?!</i> Well, for the sake of my brothers and sisters related to the trench coat mafia [...] I have been planning this for years, but finally got pissed off enough to do it (cited from Sullivan & Guerette, 2002, p. 50)
2006 Sebastian Bosse	I'm not a copy of REB, VoDKa, Steini, Gill, Kinkel, Weise or whoever else! <sup>a</sup> [...] Is a village priest just a "copycat" of the Pope? No! Of course not! He believes in the same thing as the Pope, but he's not emulating him. He has the same take on things. He is, like the shite Pope, a part of a whole [...] I want to do my bit for the revolution of the dispossessed. (translated from Böckler & Seeger, 2010, pp. 123–4)
2007 Seung-Hui Cho	I didn't have to do this. I could have left. I could have fled. But no, I will no longer run. It's not for me. For my children, for my brothers and sisters that you fucked, I did it for them. [...] Thanks to you, I die <i>like Jesus Christ</i> to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people. (cited from Böckler & Seeger, 2010, p. 126; see also Dewan & Santora, 2007)
2007 Pekka-Eric Auvinen	If we want to live in a different world, we must act. [...] I can't alone change much but hopefully my actions will inspire all the intelligent people of the world and start some sort of revolution against the current systems. (cited from Langman, 2007)
2007 Mathew J. Murray	Like Cho, Eric Harris, Ricky Rodriguez and others, I'm going out to make a stand for the weak and the defenseless this is for all those young people still caught in the Nightmare of Christianity for all those people who've been abused and mistreated and taken advantage of by this evil sick religion Christian America this is YOUR Columbine (cited from Meyer, Migoya, & Osher, 2007)
2011 Wellington Menzes de Oliveira	The struggle for which many brothers died in the past, and for which I will die, is not solely because of what is known as bullying. Our fight is against cruel people, cowards, who take advantage of the kindness, the weakness of people unable to defend themselves (cited from Gomes, 2012)

<sup>a</sup>Bosse is referring to Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, Robert Steinhäuser, Kimveer Gill, Kipland Kinkel, and Jeffrey Weise (for data on these and all other cases mentioned see the list of incidents in the appendix to this volume)

Even the attack plans suggest a strong identification with their predecessors: Sebastian Bosse wore a long dark trench coat, the trademark of the Columbine killers, during his 2006 rampage in Emsdetten, Germany (Böckler & Seeger, 2010); Steve Kazmierczak wore a T-shirt bearing the word "Terrorist" during his 2008 rampage at Northern Illinois University and had a tattoo reading "FTW" (Fuck The World) on his left middle finger (Northern Illinois University, 2008).

Such (explicit) communicative elements (Muschert & Ragnedda, 2010) are often an essential part of the *modus operandi*: before his rampage in April 1999, Eric Harris had already chosen a shirt bearing the words "Natural Selection" (Larkin, 2007). These

specific visual and/or organizational characteristics can be interpreted as “performative protest codes” (Fahlenbrach, 2008, p. 100)<sup>3</sup>: Meaningful symbols and gestures designed to express a particular message, while a mimetic staging of violence expresses a sense of belonging among the perpetrators. This construction of an imaginary group identity is also reflected in many media presentations by perpetrators (see Sect. 1.2).

Findings from violence research show that adolescents largely turn to violent groups for a feeling of support and belonging (Böttger, 1998). This search for social integration is often based on a lack of recognition and emotional reciprocity in the family, school, and peer group, which the violent group compensates through what is to some of its members a completely new experience of cohesion and shared values (Sitzer, 2002). Because school shooters suffer considerable integration and recognition deficits in family and peer group (Böckler et al., 2010; McGee & DeBernardo, 1999), their needs for community and participation remain, one can conclude, chronically unsatisfied.<sup>4</sup>

The imagined community (and shared destiny) of the school shooters and the transferred cultural script of school shooting (Newman & Fox, 2009) obviously offer a fatal way out of their misery, where (imaginary) membership in a group of fellow-sufferers subjectively eases the feelings of social disintegration and emotional powerlessness and grants a new meaning to life.<sup>5</sup> A school shooting can thus also be viewed as a student’s desperate attempt to gain or regain control over their own social identity: The shooting turns an erstwhile nobody into a “deviant superstar” (Robertz, 2004, p. 181) and gives him the hope of achieving ultimate, historical recognition of his hitherto marginalized personality (Newman et al., 2004; Böckler, Seeger, and Sitzer, 2012).

### 14.2.2 *The Ideology*

In an earlier publication (Böckler & Seeger, 2010), we examined the extent to which the free availability of rampage shooter testimonies (circulated by mass media or available on the internet) provides materials for recipients to emulate and identify with.<sup>6</sup> We conducted in-depth analyses of the self-reflective and

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<sup>3</sup> The term is borrowed from protest research, where Fahlenbrach uses it to identify particular social processes among participants in street demonstrations.

<sup>4</sup> While school shooters generally come from outwardly inconspicuous white middle-class families, their family relationships are often dysfunctional and characterized by emotional indifference (Fast, 2008; O’Toole, 1999). In some cases the perpetrator is loosely attached to a clique of outsiders, but this does not function adequately as a “surrogate informal recognition structure” (Sitzer, 2002) and therefore *cannot* protect them from feelings of hopelessness and identity threat (Böckler & Seeger, 2010; McGee & DeBernardo, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> For Heintz, imagined communities form “symbolic substitutes for real world ties that are lacking, where semantics and symbolism create a sense of togetherness that bridges all differences and allows real spatial and social distance to be forgotten. In this connection, the disseminating media and unity-generating symbols play a central role” (translated from 2003, 188–189).

<sup>6</sup> Considerations of space here preclude more detailed discussion of the details of the methodology, which is described in full elsewhere (Böckler & Seeger, 2010).

communicative components of highly frequented video material produced by Eric Harris/Dylan Klebold, Sebastian Bosse, and Seung-Hui Cho and found that the perpetrators employed characteristic techniques of self-representation, thereby constructing some sort of ideology behind their deed. In a second step, we contrasted the identified categories with available self-depictions of other shooters (e.g., self-staging on video or photo). The core elements of self-representation were as follows:

- *Between vulnerability and hate, powerlessness and fantasies of omnipotence*: On the one hand, the perpetrators openly or symbolically report their often precarious social experiences (typically experiences of contempt at school and in the family or peer group) which are accompanied by strong feelings of powerlessness, despair, and anger. On the other, these revelations are contrasted with self-definitions in which the future perpetrators depict themselves as heroic, martial, and omnipotent avengers.
- *Condemnation of the condemners*: The perpetrators use their self-portraits to attract public attention to the subjective injustices they have experienced. Those whom the perpetrators perceive as harming them by denial of recognition are condemned and severely denigrated according to self-defined moral yardsticks. The social environment becomes the object of blame for the perpetrators' own desolate psychosocial condition and is portrayed as repressive and unjust. While "condemnation of the condemners" (Sykes & Matza, 1957) is partly a neutralization technique for the purpose of justifying the perpetrator's violent intentions, it would also seem to take on the status of a central aspect of identity in the minds of the perpetrators, allowing them to redefine themselves by a demonstration of supremacy and dominance.
- *The call to a "revolution of the dispossessed"*: For the perpetrators, these self-representations appear to serve as justification for their own actions on the one hand and as a means of mobilizing potential successors on the other. They contain elements that may be regarded as appeals to members of their own group—in other words, to those who, like the perpetrators, feel themselves to be outcasts experiencing social exclusion, denigration, and contempt. Thus, the school shooting is propagated as a justified means of protest directed not only against the personal tormentor specifically, but *globally* against a (youth) culture and society that treats them as humiliated losers.

Our assumption is that both the self-representation of the shooters and the communicative outreach to their "fellow-sufferers" cause the perpetrators' self- and world-schema to become a possible identity model for other adolescents who likewise perceive themselves as despised rejects.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, identifying with persons who provide a cognitive world-schema of this kind may result in affiliation with a social group in which thoughts of retribution and vengeance can be articulated.

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, we cannot claim that the described ideological components and feelings of group belonging are part of the motivation and self-perception of *all* school shooters. While the academic discourse to date assumes that there is no uniform perpetrator profile (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010), the findings described here could possibly be paradigmatic for a certain subtype existing within a phenomenon that is as a whole heterogeneous and requires closer empirical scrutiny and definition.

## 14.3 Reception and Appropriation of the Shooters' Messages: Exploring a Research Gap

If we are to understand why certain adolescents pursue such an intense interest in the self-presentations of school shooters and draw on these as the interpretative frame for their own lifeworld and experience, the empirical approach must be based on a subject-oriented concept of media appropriation that takes systematic account of the individual dispositions of the recipients (needs, views, interests, social status, etc.) (Krotz, 2001; Wegener, 2008).

### 14.3.1 Theoretical Framework: Identity and Media Appropriation

New developments in internet-based communication offer enormous scope for identity, relationship, and information management, of which adolescents make especially active use in the course of their socialization (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Rhein, 2011). We define socialization as the productive processing of the individual's internal and external reality, thus building on a concept whose central point of reference is a subject capable of reflection and confronted with age- and gender-specific psychobiological development tasks and societal and institutional demands (Havighurst, 1974; Hurrelmann, 2006; Mansel, 1995).

Particular forms of appropriation, evaluation, and processing give rise to a reciprocal socialization process between the individual and the environment, in the course of which a stable experience of identity on the part of the subject emerges from the synthesis of successful individuation and integration processes. Social networks (in the case of adolescents, mainly family, school, and peer group) must be attributed central importance in this connection: On the one hand, social resources can be used to develop competences for dealing with central life challenges and to compensate competence deficits in particular fields; on the other, the social environment also represents the foundation for confident interaction between individual and environment (Hurrelmann, 2006). In the interactionist tradition we draw on here, it is argued that conscious human identity can only develop within a peer group: only where individuals are perceived, recognized, and reflected by others as unique psychophysical entities can they arrive at a conscious experience of their singular self and enter into a reflexive *self-relation* (Goffman, 1990/1959; Honneth, 1994; Mead, 1987). Emotionally appreciative and supportive intersubjective recognition is of existential importance for the emergence and maintenance of a consolidated and fundamentally *positive* sense of self and identity (Keupp et al., 2008).

Alongside the social and societal systems of meaning that provide the subject with cognitive, normative, and aesthetic categories for developing an understanding of self and world (Bachmair, 2005), the media have become increasingly central mediators between internal and external reality, with the possibility of reflection or even relocation and reconception of identity occurring in the interaction with particular media content (Charlton & Neumann-Braun, 1990; Neumann-Braun, 2005).

The various different forms of media appropriation are outlined in the following and serve as points of reference for the empirical analysis.

#### 14.3.1.1 Identification and Projection

Cohen defines individual identification with media figures as “an imaginative process invoked as a response to characters presented within mediated texts. . . . While identifying with a character, an audience member imagines him- or herself being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and role as audience member with the identity and role of the character within the text” (2001, pp. 250–251). Either recipients find their preexisting personal dispositions confirmed (preferences, views, values, etc.) or they modify these in the course of the interaction with media models (Hoffmann, 2004). Wegener distinguishes three forms of identification, which can be regarded as specific acquisition patterns (2008):

- *Confirmatory identification*: Identification with the media reference person provides the recipient with new justifications and/or motivators for maintaining pre-existing personal patterns of thought and behavior.
- *Corrective identification*: Identification with the media model leads the recipient to modify their own patterns of thought and behavior and adapt them to the media model.
- *Generative identification*: Identification with the media model leads the recipient to develop completely new patterns of thought and behavior.

Compared with this, in projection processes the media reference person in a sense becomes a representative of the recipient’s own self. This means that the media figure can both function to provide external relief and security and serve as a projection screen for emotions and unfulfilled needs, or as legitimation for the recipient’s actions (Wegener, 2008).

#### 14.3.1.2 Parasocial Interaction

In certain respects, the appropriation mode of parasocial interaction resembles the modes of identification and interaction, “with the primary conceptual distinction being that, under parasocial interaction, media characters are still seen as ‘other’ and the consumer cognitively ‘interacts’ with them as if they were an external entity” (Sestir & Green, 2010, p. 275). According to Horton and Wohl, the attraction of parasocial interaction can be summarized in terms of the following aspects (1956):

- *Continuity*: The continuous media presence of a persona can provide a continuity of interaction that gives the recipient a feeling of dependability.<sup>8</sup> In the context of the present study, the characteristics of internet-based media are of particular significance

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<sup>8</sup> Horton and Wohl also designate a media person as a persona (1956).



here: adolescents can pursue their interest in school shooters and their media legacies via numerous websites, video portals, and chat forums at any time of day or night.

- *Narration*: Where a recipient follows the media presence of a persona over a longer period, a shared history arises in the course of time. This also occurs through secondary media, where a recipient learns details about the life, interests, and personal opinions of a media actor via background reports, interviews, etc. The World Wide Web offers a multitude of information about school shooters and their deeds.
- *Intimacy*: The style of media formats can create an atmosphere that recipients interpret as intimate or personal between themselves and a media person. For example, some school shooters recorded video footage in their home or bedroom that grants the viewer a vivid insight into their living arrangements.

### 14.3.1.3 Communitization

The appropriation mode of communitization involves communicative processes in which a media person forms the starting and reference point of interaction and communication processes between media users (Charlton & Neumann-Braun, 1990). Furthermore, interest in a particular media person can function as a “vehicle of social communitization” for recipients (Wegner, 2008, p. 67), with the possibility of forming fan communities. In such a fan group, the media person (who may be a specific musician, actor, sports star, or, in our case, school shooter) represents a symbolic point of reference through which fans communicate and which they use for personal identity construction.<sup>9</sup> Membership of fan communities is especially attractive for adolescents, because they provide a framework within which to experiment with new roles and behavior patterns. Moreover, adolescents can satisfy their needs for contact, belonging, and entertainment in fan communities (Baacke, 1996; Fritzsche, 2003). The creation of fan communities does not per se depend on direct contact and increasingly takes place via internet-based media. For adolescents, the new computer-based communication technologies are increasingly “the crystallization point for scenes and fan cultures that have their own rules, rituals, and forms of belonging” (Vogelgesang, 2003, p. 4, translated).

## 14.3.2 Research Design

In order to do justice to research questions exploring the preferred modes of juvenile interaction with the subject of school shootings, we needed a methodology that allowed us to reconstruct both the subjective perspectives of actors and the latent meaning of their activities. To this end, the study is based on the paradigms of inter-

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<sup>9</sup> In this connection, Sumiala writes of “networked communities of destruction,” which she describes as “virtual global communities held together by a social imaginary constructed around the visualization of texts of death and violence” (2011).

pretative social research and rests on the methodological pillars of grounded theory.<sup>10</sup> Survey participants were selected by theoretical sampling, with a sample initially defined by criteria of relevance and variability (Flick, 2007).

The *criterion of relevance* referred to the YouTube user's perceptible interest in the subject of school shootings, as indicated by:

- Active participation in group discussions relating to the issue
- A personal channel that made direct references to school shootings or shooters
- The subject's own production and publication of videos on school shootings

The *criteria of variability* comprised:

- Attitude to the issue
- Mode and intensity of presentation of opinions
- Age, gender, and nationality

Relevant cases were added until the criterion of “theoretical saturation” was satisfied (Strauss & Corbin, 1996).<sup>11</sup> The sample ultimately comprised 14 females and 17 males aged 15–24. An overview of their central socio-demographic characteristics is provided in Table 14.2.

The use of online interviews appeared to be an appropriate means to generate profitable interactions with recipients.<sup>12</sup> They allowed us to gain authentic access to the research subjects, because the spatial and temporal disjoint inherent in computer-mediated communication meant that participants responded from within their familiar environment and without disruption to their daily rhythm and routines.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>This is an inductive-deductive method characterized by a permanent search for a balance between theory-driven work and empirical openness (Rosenthal, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1996; Strübing, 2004).

<sup>11</sup>In connection with the present study, this refers to the point at which, after an exhaustive case comparison, no additional cases could be identified on YouTube that presented identifiable but hitherto unobserved facets of reception relating to the media self-presentations of school shooters. However, it must be pointed out that social interaction patterns on YouTube are not fixed, with numerous new users joining every day while others terminate their activities. Thus, this virtual community is in permanent flux, and here more than anywhere we cannot expect to identify “final and conclusive” empirical results.

<sup>12</sup>We joined YouTube and created a special user's channel for the purpose of contacting subjects. The research process extended over a period of 18 months (06/2008 to 11/2009). In the initial pretest phase, data was collected in synchronous chat interviews. The subsequent e-mail survey used a qualitative questionnaire that allowed the adolescents to have only minimal contact with the researchers if they so wished. In some cases, however, communication extended over a period of several months by exchange of e-mails.

<sup>13</sup>Within open/communicative qualitative social research, there is a widespread tendency to tie the value of qualitative data to a personal encounter between subject and researcher (Früh, 2000). In some respects, especially with regard to central principles of qualitative social research (naturalistic and communicative inquiry) this would appear to be outdated, especially considering the expansive societal mediatization processes of past decades (that are so important for adolescents) (Baacke, Sander, & Vollbrecht, 1990; Krotz, 2007). Computer-mediated communication using structured online interviews appears to satisfy this paradigm especially well, because e-mail is one of the most internationally prevalent communication tools of the twenty-first century (van Eimeren & Frees, 2011).

Table 14.2 Overview of the sample

No.	User name	Sex	Age	Country	Occupation	Housing
01	False	M	19	Germany	Unemployed	Parents
02	SophieX	F	20	Germany	Unemployed	Mother
03	Moviator	M	19	Germany	Student	Mother
04	HateInVain	F	24	Germany	Student	Alone
05	XIncognito	M	19	Germany	Military service	Barracks
06	Angel92	F	16	Israel	Student	Mother
07	Charlie C.	M	16	United States	Student	Mother or father
08	Jordon	M	19	Germany	Unemployed	Parents
09	Totentanz	F	18	Germany	Student	Parents
10	Karakara	F	16	Finland	Student	Parents
11	Didimonkey	F	21	Canada	Employee	Husband/daughter
12	Graveyard89	M	17	Germany	Student	Parents
13	DarkImperium	M	15	Scotland	Student	Mother
14	FireBird	M	19	United States	Student	Dormitory
15	Sora	F	23	Germany	Housewife	Partner
16	SuddenDeath	M	16	Germany	Student	Parents
17	MasterFro	M	15	Germany	Student	Parents
18	Helena L.	F	21	Sweden	Student	Parents
19	VodkasArmy	M	16	United States	Student	Parents
20	TheSnake	M	17	Germany	Student	Parents
21	BomberPilot	declined	declined	United States	Unemployed	Parents
22	UnwantedOutcast	F	18	United States	Student	Parents
23	LadyReb	F	21	United States	Unemployed	Parents
24	TPO	F	22	Poland	Student	Alone
25	DirtySunshine	F	21	Germany	Apprentice	Alone
26	Pechsträhne	F	20	Germany	Student	Parents
27	SneakersGuy	M	17	Germany	Student	Parents

(continued)

**Table 14.2** (continued)

No.	User name	Sex	Age	Country	Occupation	Housing
28	BBT	M	16	Germany	Student	Parents
29	Masochist3	F	21	Germany	Unemployed	Father
30	Sergio	M	24	Panama	declined	declined

*Note:* Personal details and user names have been anonymized. Emphasis and errors of spelling and grammar in quoted interview passages correspond to the originals

It also provided us with the possibility of reaching a geographically very diverse sample quickly and directly (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Chen & Hinton, 1999; Houston, 2008; Mann & Stewart, 2000).

The textuality, anonymity, and asynchronicity of computer-mediated communication appeared especially promising for an exploration of the planned interview themes (including attitudes to serious acts of violence and personal experience of victimization in the school context), as the addressees were plainly adolescents who specifically sought the anonymity of the internet to pursue and discuss their (sometimes controversial) views, psychosocial problems, and aspects of the self. We thus shared an interest with the participants in creating an open and trustful communication climate, in order to gain authentic results (Flick, 2007). We made compound use of the “online disinhibition effect” (Suler, 2004): respondents were able to respond to the largely open-ended questions anonymously, invisibly, in their own time, and in the form of their choosing (freely associated or well considered), and were able to do this without fear of rejection, condemnation, or any other reaction that would be experienced as unpleasant or invasive.

The survey focused on the following themes:

1. User behavior on YouTube, especially whether respondents had produced their own videos on the subject of school shootings and to what extent they watched other users’ videos on the same subject.
2. The extent to which respondents were more generally interested in school shootings and their contexts (also outside the internet). Here we sought information about whether respondents believed school shootings to be justified and how they felt about media reporting on the issue.
3. The personal situation of respondents, focusing especially on school experiences, family situation, and leisure activities.

The data was evaluated in accordance with grounded theory, using processes of open, axial, and selective coding to produce a differentiated picture of respondents’ individual appropriation patterns in relation to school shooters’ self-presentations.<sup>14</sup>

#### 14.4 Defining the Audience: Reception and Appropriation of the Shooters’ Messages

Through repeated minimal/maximal case comparisons among the 31 respondents (comparing and contrasting the most similar and most different cases), we were able to distinguish and characterize group-specific modes of reception. We turn first to

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<sup>14</sup>The multistage coding and analysis process of grounded theory was applied as follows (Strauss, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1996): *open coding* to conceptualize specific appropriation patterns concerning school shooters and their media legacies; *axial coding* to examine the situative contextual conditions (individual psychosocial and biographical constellations) of the recipients in relation to their individual appropriation patterns and develop initial reception types; and finally *selective coding* to continue axial coding at a higher level of abstraction. Using the key category of “*identification*” allowed us to differentiate and compare the identified reception types.

the “identification group,” beginning by illustrating the characteristics of affective, identificatory appropriation processes with a single case that prototypically exemplifies the phenomenon. Then we compare and contrast the other respondents in that group, using minimal contrasting to systematically draw out commonalities and subtle differences. Finally, we move on to the cases or groups where, for various reasons, *no* identification with school shooters and their views was found, highlighting the basal differences and maximal contrasts between identificatory and nonidentificatory reception.

### ***14.4.1 Identificatory Modes of Relatedness to School Shooters***

#### **14.4.1.1 Introducing the Prototypical Case: “VodkasArmy,” a Reject Searching for Fellow Sufferers**

At the time of the survey VodkasArmy was 16 years old, living with his parents and two sisters in the United States, and attending high school. His YouTube membership was primarily for “entertainment and research” (F19–133), he said. He predominantly watched video material dealing with his favorite music groups and video games, as well as with school shooters and shootings.

Before examining data from the e-mail questionnaire, we will begin by describing VodkasArmy’s virtual self-presentation: (a) his personal YouTube channel and (b) the videos uploaded there.

(a) *Personal YouTube channel*: VodkasArmy’s channel features a personal logo composed of two machine guns and two knives, above which “Pain Productions” is written in red letters on a black background. His introductory text describes the channel as follows:

Hey there. Welcome to my channel. [...] This is my new one since my last time it was deleted after last school shooting. If you want to talk to me, add me on msn. My videos will be mostly about school shooters. Why you might ask, because I know how they feel. I know what it feels like to be kicked down, how it feels like when no one in the world likes you. When everyone despises you, even tho you only want two things.....love and happiness. They never got theirs, and I feel like I won’t either...

Here we can already identify several various aspects of individual appropriation of school shooter self-depictions. In connection with a clearly articulated interest in shootings and shooters, VodkasArmy makes an explicit offer of communication to other YouTube users. This also expresses his wish for communitization. There are also significant indications of strong identification with school shooters: he regards them as figures who, like himself, feel excluded, ignored, and humiliated. VodkasArmy makes it absolutely clear that he sees himself as an outsider who is desperately lacking in social resources and suffers massively as a result.

(b)*Uploaded videos*: At the time of the research, VodkasArmy had uploaded three videos, all of which relate directly to school shooters and their acts of violence:

- In “Eric Harris” VodkasArmy presents various quotes from Harris’s diaries and internet presentations in the form of an artistic film montage. The final sequence shows photographs of the crosses for Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold that are part of a memorial to the victims of the Columbine attack, above the words: “GONE. R.I.P REB. R.I.P. VODKA. YOU WILL LIVE ON, IN GLORY!”
- “Weapons” shows an advert for an American metal detector manufacturer suggesting that the introduction of metal detectors and school uniforms that make it difficult to hide guns could play a decisive role in preventing acts of armed violence.
- The third video is a documentary on the phenomenon of bullying and postulates a connection between experiences of bullying and the motivation of school shooters. Quotes from Luke Woodham, Eric Harris, and Cho-Seung Hui are used to back this up. The closing sequence of the video calls on parents, teachers, and pupils to be more caring and empathic with one another.

In short, the way VodkasArmy presents himself on YouTube suggests intense, emotionally sympathetic processes of identification with the perpetrators. We now turn, using data from the e-mail questionnaire, to his home life and other aspects of his appropriation of perpetrators’ media self-presentations.

#### **14.4.1.2 Personal Background: From Rejection to Hate**

VodkasArmy complains of lacking emotional support within his family. He repeatedly complains that he has nobody within the family to support him in coping with his personal problems: “Family is supposed to be where you feel safe, comfortable and where you could be at and not be judged and actually be happy but sadly that’s not what happens in my family” (F19–137). This quote makes two things clear: Firstly, his wish to find more emotional empathy in the family system, and secondly, the existence of interpersonal conflicts in which he feels looked down upon and judged. His relationship with his siblings is especially conflictual: “I don’t have a future, as so kindly said by my sisters” (F19–137). This debasing comment about his personal prospects appears to severely hurt the respondent and provoke strong feelings of sadness, anger, and disappointment.

VodkasArmy’s experiences in the school and peer contexts are characterized by equally grave feelings of stress and frustration. According to his reports, these stem from a multitude of negative social experiences which he finds extremely burdensome. Asked what problems he is confronted with at his high school, he answers: “Bullying from friends, and from classmates ignoring you always calling you stupid, always saying that you were fat, always calling you names just because you thought differently” (F19–136). Given that he plainly does not connect these nega-

tive social experiences with personal fault, he has no constructive possibility for escaping these aversive interactions of his own volition. In the past, as he reports himself, this has repeatedly led him to adopt the role of the bully: “I’ve experienced it all. On both sides, the bully and the bullied. I only was the bully because I had so much anger in me, I just couldn’t keep it to myself” (F19–136).

These statements suggest that repeated attacks on his feeling of self-worth generated considerable feelings of aggression that almost inevitably demanded an escape valve. But to VodkasArmy, this form of letting off steam plainly failed to adequately compensate the numerous emotional and moral transgressions he suffered. At the time of the survey, he appeared transfixed by the idea of bottling up his anger for a final as yet undefined catharsis: “I still have anger, much more than before but I just learned to save it for the day when I can release it all” (F19–136).

#### 14.4.1.3 The Parasocial Relationship with Dylan Klebold: Feelings of Sameness and Affinity

VodkasArmy became aware of the topic of school shootings through the Columbine case, and he immediately showed admiration and approval: “I thought it was cool, I thought that’d be the way I’d die if I popped my top at school. Kill all these people” (F19–134).

The primary basis for his identification was Dylan Klebold’s diary, which the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office published on the internet in 2001 together with the writings of Eric Harris:

I just find it interesting because when I look at what VoDKa [Klebold] wrote in his book of existence, I know what he was feeling then. When I first read his journal, it was like someone saw inside of me and knew what I was feeling and wrote it down for me. I do engage on it outside, my sister calls me a weirdo and a freak for talking about it. And everyone else at school thinks so too, those fuckheads (F19–135).

To VodkasArmy, Klebold’s words plainly succeed in expressing that hopeless yearning for belonging and confirmation for which he himself finds no words. Here, he uses Klebold’s self-revelations as a projection screen to gain awareness of his own feelings:

I feel like as if we felt the same feelings. Like VoDKa said, *My existence is shit to me, how I feel that I am in eternal suffering.*

Me is a god, a god of sadness  
 Exiled to this eternal hell  
 The people I helped, abandoned me  
 I am denied what I want,  
 to love & to be happy  
 Being made a human  
 without the possibility of BEING human  
 The cruellest of all punishments  
 To some I am crazy  
 It is so clear, yet so foggy  
 Everything’s connected, separated  
 I am the only interpreter of this.



I'd rather have nothing than be nothing.  
 Humanity is the same thing I long for  
 I just want something I can never have..  
 The story of my existence.

That was made by VoDKa, it's pretty accurate of how I feel. It's so accurate that I can't believe it. I am called crazy at school, and most the friends I once helped have left me. Some just ignore me until they need me again (F19–136).

VodkasArmy's recognition of a fellow-sufferer in Klebold is associated with an intense feeling of parasocial connection. This also makes Harris and Klebold's thoughts and actions highly attractive as a frame for asserting his own identity: They show him a potential way to end his own situation, which he experiences as unbearable, and channel his agonizingly bottled-up emotions into a final act of retribution against his tormentors:

*Interviewer:* What do you think are the motives for a young person to attack his mates and teachers?

*VodkasArmy:* Revenge, and a release from all their troubles. It'll be finally a way for them to show people all the anger, all the emotions that they've kept. And then it'll be ended so no one can judge them while their alive.

*Interviewer:* Do you perceive any commonalities between the perpetrators?

*VodkasArmy:* Anger, so much of it (F19–135).

#### 14.4.1.4 Admiration and Solidarity

Through the continual experience of psychosocial denials of recognition, VodkasArmy has plainly lost any hope of being able to change his situation through his own efforts. Here, too, he recognizes parallels to the school shooters, interpreting their protesting public self-representations as essentially desperate cries for help:

*Interviewer:* According to your opinion, why did the perpetrators announce their plans in the internet or other media?

*VodkasArmy:* To get help. Help as in for someone to come and talk to them. Someone to see past all that violent talk, past all of that and for someone to see that they need help. Or for someone to just tell them that their life does mean something and that they shouldn't do anything as glorious as that (F19–134).

Although VodkasArmy recognizes the school shooters as persons who are, like himself, extremely powerless with respect to their environment, he nonetheless regards their deeds as “glorious” and the perpetrators as martyrs whose actions draw public attention to grave social grievances. On the basis of his own experience he unhesitatingly evaluates the shootings as justified:

*Interviewer:* Could you please describe what kind of thoughts and emotions were evoked in yourself while watching the “farewell-video” of Cho Seung Hui or that of another school shooter?

*VodkasArmy:* Disbelief-I thought this is one of us and he's getting *his* message out. And at the same time apprehensive, people could see this and what would others say about it. What if they start looking for people who have said they wanted to shoot their school (F19–134).

## 14.4.2 *Characterizing the Identification Group: Comparisons of Minimal Difference*

### 14.4.2.1 **Precarious Lives: Severe Problems in Family, School, and Peer-Group**

All respondents who identify with school shooters report fundamental dissatisfaction with their family situation. With one exception (Charlie C.), none have a reference figure in the family who provides the desired empathy and support, and they feel left alone with their problems large and small. All the respondents perceive this emotional detachment in family relationships as a deficit or burden; some are also distressed by intra-family interactions that make them feel actively rejected and devalued (SophieX, VodkasArmy, Charlie C.). Thus Charlie C., for example, who experiences only the relationship with his older sister as positive, describes the general family atmosphere as exceptionally conflictual:

*Charlie C.:* My family has nothing but fighting, and it doesn't help when you go to talk to someone and the other's fight over you wanting to know what it is you said (F7–47).

Overall, however, the family atmosphere appears to be characterized by indifference and lack of parental empathy:

*FireBird:* My parents are nice but I find it hard to talk to them about things that matter to me or my problems because they are very religious and their religious beliefs conflict with anything that I might tell them about how I feel (F14–93f).

At school pressure to achieve is less of an issue than everyday social interactions with fellow students and teachers, which are perceived as torment:

*SophieX:* The other students picked on me terribly, day in day out, and even the class teacher. Just because I weighed more than others back then. There was not a day without bullying (F2–10f., translated).

*SuddenDeath:* I myself was beaten, spat on, and humiliated [...] In my case, they took all my clothes and even my towels away in the pool changing rooms and filmed it all with their cell phones (F16–116, translated).

*SneakersGuy:* At 13 or 14 I was overweight, my main hobby was computers, and I was shy. The perfect formula for a victim of bullying. I was often bullied, insulted, beaten up (F27–187, translated).

*Charlie C.:* I get picked on because I'm Atheist, because I don't want to accept what most people believe. And I get called a "Freak." (F7–46)

All the respondents from the identification group, without exception, report having experienced repeated verbal and/or physical slights and harassment by their fellow students.<sup>15</sup> They possess little in the way of positive connections to peers; some report having no contact at all to peers outside the context of school. Those who do report loose inclusion in cliques (SuddenDeath, SneakersGuy, False, and FireBird) indicate that these relationships are generally superficial in nature and

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<sup>15</sup> It is conspicuous that, in most cases, teaching staff were not perceived as helpful or supportive, and consequently school as an institution was characterized as an unjust and threatening place.

therefore offer little in the way of deeper friendships. Only two respondents (SneakersGuy and FireBird) have a friend within the peer group with whom they maintain a close and trustful relationship. LadyReb said: “i feel alone, but for me this is how i want it. Because nobody would understand” (F23–159). This ambivalence reflects a significant moment in the experience of the affected adolescents: while painfully missing contact with peers, they at the same time openly or subtly complain that their peers are lacking in understanding, intolerant, or “stupid.”

#### 14.4.2.2 Cut to the Quick: Fatally Threatened Identities

We found different sequences and coping styles concerning individual problems in family, school, and peer group. At the time of the survey daily experiences of exclusion and contempt in the school context were still acute for two respondents (VodkasArmy and Charlie C.). While such occurrences may have been things of the past for the other respondents, they still had considerable impact on their current experience and action. In five cases, problematic social experiences had had a significant impact on respondents’ personal lives. SophieX quit school without qualifications because she was “mentally at the end of her rope” (F2–11, translated). Comparable tendencies of deep psychoemotional exhaustion in direct connection with school experiences can also be inferred from the responses of FireBird, False, SneakersGuy, and LadyReb, whose state of mind at the time of the survey was largely characterized by feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and powerlessness. The result is a feeling of threatened identity:

*SophieX*: I don’t have a life anymore, no future, no nothing. I’m useless for everything. Because my school hated me, because I had no support in my family, and because I had no friends (F2–11, translated).

*False*: I have more than enough experience of [bullying] myself. It’s almost a miracle that I’m still alive after all these years, I’ve been in therapy for over a year and I take anti-depressants, but none of it really helps, I have no idea why [...] at the moment I’m doing nothing, because I can’t (social inhibitions), if I went to school or got a job I definitely wouldn’t feel comfortable with it. [...] I don’t think there’s anything interesting left in store for me in my life, for me the whole thing’s just grey and depressing and that’s the way it’s going to be forever (F1–5, translated).

*SneakersGuy*: I don’t think there’s much that’s nice about life (F27–188, translated).

VodkasArmy and Charlie C., who were still experiencing personal harassment at school, also demonstrated actively aggressive tendencies toward fellow students and bullies.

#### 14.4.2.3 The Search for Relief: Media as Retreat

The respondents’ experiences of victimization, restricted peer contact, and dysfunctional family relations are associated with a social withdrawal that is also reflected in their leisure activities. These center on the use of various media, especially

computer-mediated information and communication technologies. In part, this type of intense media use represents an attempt to flee a situation of social deficit in which needs and desires for belonging and emotional recognition remain unfulfilled:

*Interviewer:* Do you have anyone close with whom you can speak about everyday or special problems?

*AngryBe:* No. I unload my problems in forums, or if need be I write things down. It doesn't help in the long run, but it's better than letting everything stew inside (F31–212, translated).

*SophieX:* No I don't. I've only got my computer and internet (F2–12, translated).

*FireBird:* There is one close friend that I can talk to about my issues. I actually meet her on the internet as a result of making videos for YouTube (F14–94).

For most respondents, the anonymity of computer-mediated communication makes it easier to establish social contact and express personal opinions openly and authentically. This gives them the feeling of being able to assert their own real personality more strongly than in real-world social contexts.

#### 14.4.2.4 Recourse to School Shooters' Media Self-Presentations

Respondents report pursuing their interest in school shootings above all via the internet, because only there do they find like-minded partners and only there are they able to communicate their opinions unfiltered. Their interest in shooters and shootings is fed in the first place by their own negative social experiences:

*FireBird:* This topic is interesting to me because of the things in common that I have found with the perpetrators of such events. I share many of the same interests, likes, dislikes, and thoughts of people like Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. I don't talk about this topic outside of the internet because it would not be socially acceptable to do so (F14–91).

*SneakersGuy:* Many parts of Bastian Bosse's past match mine, so I can relate to it pretty well. If I had met him I think we would have become pretty good friends (F27–185, translated).

*SophieX:* He [Bosse] was a wonderful person. Someone who was just as much an outsider (F2–8, translated)

On the basis of their perceived biographical and psychosocial commonalities, the recipients demonstrate great empathy with the fate of the perpetrators and show solidarity with their views and violent acts. Conspicuously, they experience this parasocial contact exceptionally intensely:

*VodkasArmy:* I look at what VoDKa [Klebold] wrote in his book of existence, I know what he was feeling then. When I first read his journal, it was like someone sw inside of me and knew what I was feeling and wrote it down for me (F19–135).

*FireBird:* I can still remember the way I felt as I read Eric's journal entries slowly (his hand writing was poor and I had to read each line carefully). [...] I felt simply amazed at what I was reading. It was like all my bottled anger and contempt that I could not express was being poured out by Eric [Harris]. It just felt amazing to read his words and realize that I felt the same way; I just could not express it (F14–94).

The school shooters not only share similar social experiences, like exclusion and victimization, but describe the psychoemotional consequences of those experiences

in a manner in which the respondents precisely recognize their own feelings. These shared patterns of perception are significant components of a sense of *parasocial belonging* on the part of the respondents. Through this sense of belonging, they appear to a certain extent to experience the emotional recognition that is largely denied to them in the real-world context. Their turn to the media presentations of school shooters thus plainly serves to create meaning and assert identity: the perpetrators offer a frame within which to reflect personal burdens and their causes. The figurations of identification are confirmatory, but also corrective or generative. In extreme cases, the identification may be so strong that no distinction is made between self and perpetrator:

*Interviewer:* Do you think the shooters had anything in common?

*SophieX:* Yes, we do. We were all bullied and treated unfairly and worse too (F2–10, translated).

Individual identification is also expressed in performative elements, of which three principal forms can be differentiated:

- (a) *Video productions on the subject of school shooting:* All the respondents in the identification group had produced at least one video on the subject, with which they attempt to correct what they perceived to be a distorted and inappropriate public image of the perpetrators. They see themselves as mediators seeking primarily to show the public the everyday, human, and vulnerable facets of the perpetrators:

*FireBird:* I wanted to make videos that portrayed the perpetrators as humans, not as heroes or villains. [...] I think that by doing this, people will come to better understand what happened (F14–94f).

*SuddenDeath:* Mainly I showed the images where they look like absolutely normal people. That included photos as children with their parents, or simply just their homes and bedrooms (F16–110, translated).

*LadyReb:* I want to obtain it so people can realize there is more to them than what is put in the media, such as what kind of people they were [...] how they were feeling (F23–156).

The strong emotions experienced by all the respondents while producing videos on the subject suggest that this is also accompanied by intense processes of self-reflection:

*Interviewer:* What feelings accompanied the work of producing your video or videos?

*SuddenDeath:* I was glad to finally be able to make videos that I had been thinking about for so long (F16–110, translated).

*Charlie C.:* At first I did it for fun, but then I realized that I knew a lot on the topic (F7–43).

*LadyReb:* awe, admiration, sadness, sorrow (F23–156).

*SophieX:* Mainly sadness, hate for the people who drove him [Bosse] to it (F2–8, translated).

The school shooters are in many respects treated as surrogates for the self, publicly articulating and representing views that had hitherto been kept very private. This appears especially attractive in a context where the uploaded videos generally

become the point of reference for diverse communication processes with other YouTube users.

(b) *Self-presentation on YouTube*: Central elements of self-presentation in the respondents' personal YouTube channels are conspicuously associated with the theme of school shootings:

- User names are in some cases directly connected with perpetrators, drawing in particular on the internet pseudonyms of Eric Harris (Reb) and Dylan Klebold (VoDKa) (for example, LadyReb, VodkasArmy).
- Respondents refer to negative school experiences or address these in their videos. The issue of bullying is prominent.
- Overlap between respondents and particular perpetrators is also found in music, film, and video game preferences, although this may simply be a product of general youth culture trends.

(c) *Real-world adoption of behavior patterns*: Whereas for most respondents in the identification group the elements of performative appropriation remained largely restricted to the virtual persona, they were also transferred to the real-world context in the cases of VodkasArmy, AngryBe, FireBird, and Charlie C.:

*FireBird*: When I learned that Eric and Dylan were fans of bands like KMFDM and Rammstein, I checked out their music and really quite liked it. [...] I also tried to watch as many of the movies that they liked as I could. In essence, I tried to become like them in many ways. I even considered, though I did not act upon, thoughts about doing what they did (F14–94).

*Interviewer*: Tell us about your leisure activities.

*AngryBe*: Well here I'm not writing anything direct. Find out what the hobbies of Robert [Steinhäuser] and Bastian [Bosse] were. – Macabre, but that's how it is (F31–212, translated).

In the cases of VodkasArmy, FireBird, and Charlie C., changes in self-presentation inspired by intense appropriation processes were also increasingly registered in the immediate social environment.

*FireBird*: During that summer, my parents noticed my changed behavior and were very alarmed. They took me to a doctor and he prescribed an antidepressant medication. I actually wanted to be on some sort of antidepressant because I knew that Eric Harris had been on Zoloft and Luvox (F14–94).

One special peculiarity is found in the case of Charlie C., who already felt stigmatized by teachers and students as a potential school shooter. According to his reports, he got into considerable trouble with the school authorities after speaking with a tutor about school shooters and saying that he could definitely comprehend their motivations. The situation escalated after classmates drew the attention of teaching staff to his YouTube channel and his interest in Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. Thereafter he was regarded as a "time-bomb" (F7–45) and reminded of this on a daily basis at school. He felt so provoked that he had once threatened to really bring a gun to school. This had again only drawn the ridicule of his fellow students, who at the time of the survey still regularly greeted him, he said, with the mocking words: "Oh damn there's Charlie! He's gonna blow us away!" (F7–45).

### ***14.4.3 Maximal Comparison: Identificatory vs. Nonidentificatory Relatedness to School Shooters***

The findings outlined earlier demonstrate the connection between specific psychosocial constellations, characterized specifically by dereliction or violation of social recognition needs, and a resulting growing identification with school shooters. If we now compare these findings with those respondents who pursue an interest in perpetrators' media self-presentations but do *not* identify with their patterns of perception and interpretation, the question arises: What are the characteristics of the forms of reception and the psychosocial context factors in the case of "nonidentification"? A maximum-contrast juxtaposition of affective identificatory vs. nonidentificatory appropriation patterns provides further verification and validation of the robustness of the findings.

Respondents in the "nonidentification group" demonstrate diverse social backgrounds and widely differing individual lifeworlds and living situations. Alongside cultural differences (places of residence included United States, Central America, and eastern and central Europe) they exhibited widely diverging psychosocial characteristics, with experiences in the family ranging from sexual abuse in one case through to broadly helpful and emotionally supportive scenarios. In the crucial spheres of peer group and school, we also found a diversity of situations, with some respondents integrated in a stable and extensive social network and others perceiving themselves as excluded, isolated, or neglected. It is notable that almost all the respondents in the nonidentification group also reported some kind of experience with bullying.

What distinguished these respondents from their counterparts in the identification group is the following: Despite apparently grave problems in one or several spheres in certain cases, almost all the former were integrated in relationship networks that they experienced as adequately positive and supportive; problems in certain social spheres were balanced by relevant help and coping resources in others. Respondents in the nonidentification group—in contrast to the identification cases—were thus able to compensate contempt and recognition violations (especially victimization in the school context) through the feeling of belonging, reciprocal esteem, and emotional recognition within the family or peer group. As a result, the individual experience of identity does not appear to be impaired and threatened to the same extent as it is in the identification cases. In this context, school shooters offer *no* attractive parasocial relationship satisfying a psychoemotional need to reflect negative social experiences and address them in online networks of like-minded individuals.

The decisive difference between identificatory and nonidentificatory reception thus lies in the individual needs and interests that prompt adolescents to turn to perpetrators' media presentations. The interest of the nonidentification group is driven less by the need to process their own problematic experiences. Instead, their available social contacts are sufficient for coping. These adolescents' interest in school shootings stems from other sources: appropriation patterns that can be largely characterized as information-, entertainment-, or discourse-led, as outlined below.

### 14.4.3.1 Reception and Socially Critical Reflection

For some recipients, the subject of school shooting is primarily a matter of interest in politics and society; these recipients primarily interpret the shootings as indicators of social grievances. Where the recipients themselves suffer to some extent as adolescents, as school students, or as nonconformists, they are perhaps able to comprehend the personal problems of the shooters, but differ from the identification group in placing a clear distance between themselves and the perpetrators. They may feel sympathy for their highly individual suffering, but they explicitly disassociate themselves on the moral plane:

*UnwantedOutcast*: I have watched videos like that but I don't find them appealing. I find them sad that that person felt so depressed, hated and bullied, that this is what they had to resort too. Videos made by actual school shooters make my blood run cold and my heart break, it's like you're watching them die inside their own minds. It's heart-wrenching. [...] People need to OPEN their pretty eyes and look the hell around (F22–152f).

*HateInVain*: I find these videos very interesting because they express best what the perpetrators felt. People always ask what the reasons were for these deeds, although you can mostly find the answers in the videos. [...] They [the perpetrators] wanted attention because it seems everyone ignored them. [...] Fortunately I didn't have this problem (F4–24ff).

*TheSnake*: That shows me how broken society is. I see how they are isolated and rejected. This person's environment and relationships are totally screwed up (F20–140).

Here the reception of such content does not lead to identification; instead these adolescents feel that their personal socially critical position is confirmed by the fate of the perpetrators.

### 14.4.3.2 Fascination for the Morbid and Inexplicable

A second reception pattern that can be identified in the sample feeds on the almost cineastic fascination of these tragic incidents and their apparent inexplicability. Thus, XIncognito said that his interest in his “favorite school shooter” Sebastian Bosse stemmed primarily from his general predilection “for the whole realm of human depravity” (F5–31, translated):

*XIncognito*: Bowling for Columbine and the original CCTV recordings are paradigmatic. I feel much too much all at the same time when I think about it. If their plan had worked out a lot more people would have died. [...] I have sympathy for all the victims and their friends and relatives, but all the same I would really like to know more about what the shooters were thinking” (F5–33, translated).

The respondents are visibly impressed by the performative elements. Rather than using them as a means of self-reflection, they assess the perpetrators' self-presentations for their suitability as entertainment. In contrast to the identification group, these assessment patterns clearly point to an emotional distance between recipient and shooter. Sergio sees the videos exclusively in terms of the possibility to pursue his enthusiasm for firearms, while the 21-year-old Masochist3 enthuses above all about the violence they show:



*Interviewer:* By what criteria do you decide whether another user has produced a “good” school shooting video?

*Masochist3:* Hm, well of course first of all I decide according to the technical quality of the video, and then the content. But really what I want to see in such a video is violence. After all I don’t play censored games either (F29–198f., translated).

As a rule, the entertainment value for the recipient is greatest when detailed information is provided about the events or original footage of the location is shown. For these recipients, violence-related content generally appears to feature prominently in the context of media use.

### 14.4.3.3 Reception Driven by Anxiety

The media self-presentations of school shooters generate strong feelings of fear, worry, and insecurity in some of the respondents in the nonidentification group, who believe it not unlikely that they or their friends/relatives could themselves become the victim of a school shooting:

*Didimonkey:* I have a daughter who will one day be in school... and it terrifies me knowing that there are people out there who could / will take actions into their own hands and use violence [...] I always keep in mind that anything could happen at any moment. I work just on the outskirts of a University Campus, and the potential of a shooting is a very real possibility to me (F11–71ff).

Although these respondents can certainly empathize with the school shooters and their plight, and suspect underlying social problems, they massively condemn and reject their views and actions. Instead, with these respondents we find sympathy and *identification with the victims*. As *Helena L.* says: “Those kids died and their last minutes in life most have been such a complete terror. It’s awful to think about” (F18–129).

YouTube contributions by these predominantly female respondents seek to commemorate the victims, for example by producing videos listing the names of students killed at Columbine High. The specific social backgrounds of these respondents create an interesting picture, as they come from social circumstances that they largely evaluate as positive:

*Helena L.:* Family to me is where I can feel safe and be myself. I am happy with the situation in my family. I also have a lot of friends that feels like family to me, plus my friends’ parents who I can talk to about important things as well as with my own parents (F18–131).

These statements stand in stark contrast to those made by respondents from the identification group, who all expressed grave problems relating to a *lack* of social inclusion. The contrast between these two specific recipient groups (“identification” and “worry”) confirms the hypothesis that adolescents who feel severe threat to their sense of identity are predisposed to identification with school shooters (through precarious social relations and associated recognition violations setting in motion a turn to media models who suffered a similar fate).

## 14.5 Résumé and Outlook

### 14.5.1 *Summary of Results*

We opened this chapter by considering the communicative-expressive elements of school shootings. A literature review and comparative case analysis identified shared patterns in the public self-presentations of perpetrators and in the *modi operandi* of their acts of violence. This revealed the importance of identification processes between school shooters and allowed us to identify a typical perpetrator's identity construction constituted by the articulation of subversive political fragments of ideology in media-staged narratives and performative protest codes. It became clear that, in advance of their acts of violence, most perpetrators had experienced what they subjectively perceived as extremely grave violations of recognition in their immediate social environment. Many school shooters plainly found a new sense of meaning in the self-presentations and deeds of their predecessors; they were able to perceive themselves as part of a group whose ideology and content allowed them to reinvent themselves as "omnipotent avengers" and thus assert their own ideas against a hostile social environment. Ideology and action scripts were thus reproduced from case to case.

In the second part, we moved on to examine the virtual fan groups that pursue their interest in school shootings on the internet. Whereas the role of identification processes has hitherto generally been reconstructed only in retrospect through the comparison of perpetrator self-presentations, our study produced empirically founded insights into broader qualitative dimensions of these identification figurations. We hypothesized that the expressive-communicative elements in particular would lead to specific forms of appropriation and identification under particular circumstances. Analysis of a survey of 31 adolescents showed that parts of the sample felt represented by the world views and self-interpretations of the perpetrators, regarding school shootings as morally justified acts directed against injustice in school and in society at large. According to our data, such affective-identificatory reception is rooted in grave psychosocial stresses in the socialization context. On the basis of perceived commonalities between their own life and the perpetrator's biography, recipients develop a psychologically highly significant parasocial interaction. This can also be understood as an elementary component of a strategy of identity assertion by which these adolescents respond to continuous experiences of harassment and powerlessness. In contrast to other appropriation types we identified, affective-identificatory reception occurs as the result of a social withdrawal process where no emotionally supportive resources appear available, in order to satisfy personal needs for belonging and recognition. While it would require large-scale representative surveys to determine whether this phenomenon is not limited to the individuals who participated in our survey, the qualitative findings presented here certainly point to a radicalized youth milieu where school shooters not only function as spokespersons for a larger group, but in a sense become the forerunners of a "revolution of the dispossessed."

### ***14.5.2 Limitations of the Study and Avenues for Future Research***

Our focus on exploring the *commonalities* between the media self-narratives of various school shooters meant that the *differences* between perpetrator narratives fell by the wayside, along with the possibility of systematically categorizing, for example, diverging types of staging or case-specific peculiarities. Such a research focus would be useful to answer the still unresolved question as to whether some perpetrator personalities, individual life histories, or media-communicated views are more relevant than others for certain specific (groups of) recipients. Do particular forms of media (such as videos vs. diaries) or particular messages (for example political vs. religious) differ in the strength of their attraction, and do they lead to different forms of appropriation among adolescents?

More broadly, our findings on the importance of perpetrator self-presentations for the identity construction of identifying recipients represent merely a snapshot. The extent to which these adolescents will continue to turn to school shooters and treat them as fellow-sufferers and self-surrogates remains unclear. Such parasocial relationship and identification processes are quite possibly transient or specific to a particular developmental phase. Longitudinal studies would be necessary in order to analyze the biographical development of individual relationships to school shooters. Only thus would it be possible to draw empirical conclusions and judge whether perpetrators' media self-presentations represent enduring reference points for individual identity production through into adulthood. Where does affective-identificatory appropriation of these media lead? To increasingly radical interpretations of self and world? To subversive activism and violence? Or does self-reflexive interaction with the theme of school shootings help adolescent recipients to cope in the long term with their precarious psychosocial state? Do other themes and media models become more attractive through age-related maturing processes or significant changes in the lifeworld?

From the perspective of education science and socialization theory, it would certainly be counter-productive to stereotype the members of the virtual fan communities that form around school shooters as *dangerous* and use computer-based screening to search the web for potential perpetrators—as proposed by Veijalainen, Semenov, and Kypö (2010). Equally, in the light of the evidence presented here, banning or censoring perpetrators' media self-presentations would appear to be short-sighted and ignore the underlying problems. The recipient survey clearly shows that identification with school shooters is favored where adolescents suffer massive impairment in their experience of self and identity as a consequence of repeated experiences of violation and powerlessness. School shooters' self-presentations convey a sense of understanding because they report similar experiences and similar existential feelings of being *not* recognized by their social environment, but rather humiliated, rejected, and alienated. The aspiration to successful participation in social life (social relations, career perspectives, etc.) is first abandoned and ultimately rejected. Feelings of anger and hate arise, radicalized attitudes and violence-affirming ideologies take root. Nonetheless, both the perpetrators and their young admirers reveal a deep need for communication and integration that has been consistently overlooked and ignored. It would be productive to take a preventive approach and meet the adolescents with the recognition and empathy they have otherwise been so painfully denied.

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