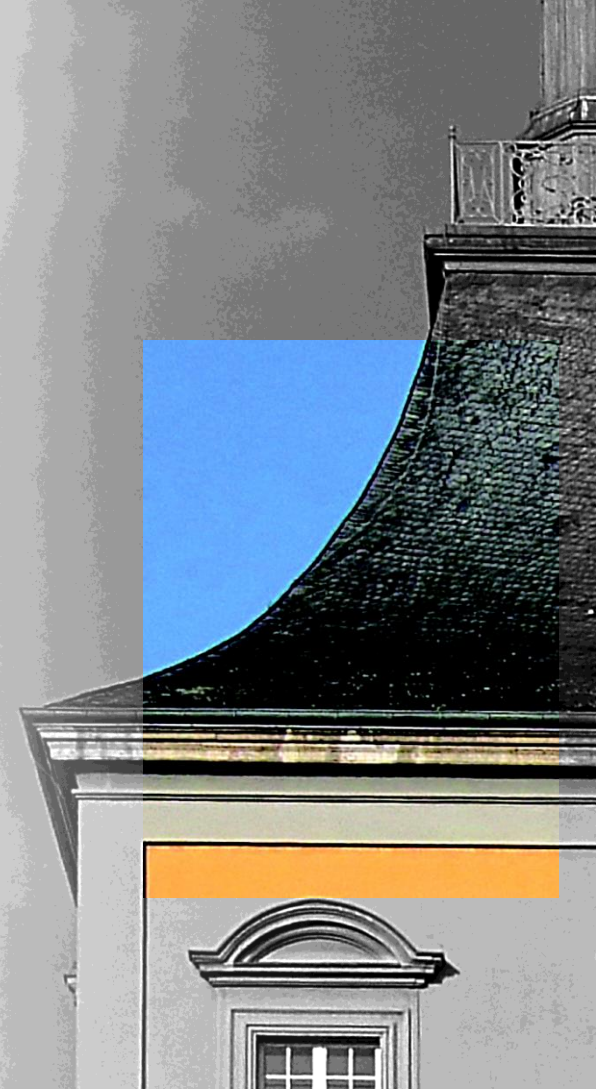


“IT IS A PART OF WHO I AM”

QUEER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ONLINE DISCOURSE

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Ragnhild Hinderling, & Lisa Lubomierski



INTRODUCTION



WHY STUDY COMING OUT NARRATIVES?

- Coming out is an important pivotal moment in the life story of queer individuals:
- “Entering and exiting the closet is a process of managing one’s identity based on time, place, and location.” (Brown 2011: 21)
- disclosure is difficult for some and easy for others. Differences due to e.g. psychological responses, family reactions, religious and community support (Herdt 1992; Savin-Williams 1998, 2001, 2005)

COMING OUT

- Members of queer community feel they “must persuade the public world to accept their queer identities into the cultural imaginary. In this sense, the persuasive appeal implicit in every ‘outing’ is ‘accept me for who I am’ or at least for who I say I am” (Bacon 1998: 251)
- “identity work in which someone articulates, to themselves and the outside world, a part of their identity they had previously concealed or been unable to recognize” (Dym et al. 2019: 2)

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMING OUT

- Differences between sexual and gender identities (Zimman 2009)
- Zimman argues for the “importance of considering transgender individuals and their linguistic practices on their own terms, rather than relying on their apparent commonalities with other queer groups” (2009: 55)
- Online spaces particularly important for marginalised groups, finding others with similar experiences (Marciano 2014: 826)

BACKGROUND/ FRAMEWORKS

Positive Discourse Analysis (cf. e.g. Martin & Rose 2007, Macgilchrist 2007)

- Focusses on texts that “seek[...] possibilities for transformations which can overcome or mitigate limits on human well-being” (Fairclough 2013: 14)

Appraisal Theory (cf. e.g. Martin & White 2005)

- Concerned with “the means by which writers/speakers positively or negatively evaluate the entities, happenings and states-of-affairs with which their texts are concerned” (2005: 2)

Queer Linguistics (cf. e.g. Bucholtz & Hall 2006)

- Aims “to challenge and uncover dominant cultural ideologies surrounding heterosexuality and binary gender which are often hidden or implicit within language use” (Jones 2019: 87)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Which common features and structures exist between different coming out YouTube videos?
2. How are coming out processes narrated? Which strategies are used to affirm one's identity, narrate the process, report on reactions and engage with the video's addressees?
3. Are there differences concerning the communication of sexual identities vs. gender identities (cf. also Zimman 2009)?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

4. What kind of appraisal strategies are used by the YouTubers in order to (subliminally) evaluate their own identity as well as their coming-out experience (including the role of friends, family, as well as the online community and society at large)?
5. How are everyday narratives used for identity construction in this genre?

DATA

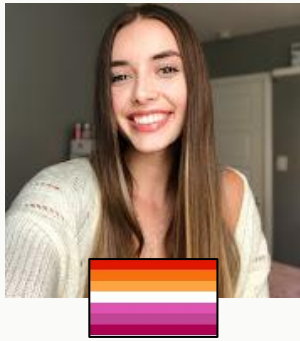




YouTube videos ‘story time coming out ...’



gay



lesbian



bi



asexual



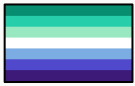
nonbinary/
genderfluid



trans

CHRONOLOGICAL CATEGORIZATION

1. Before coming out
2. Realization moment
3. Coming out moment
4. After coming out
5. General / advice



gay



lesbian



bi



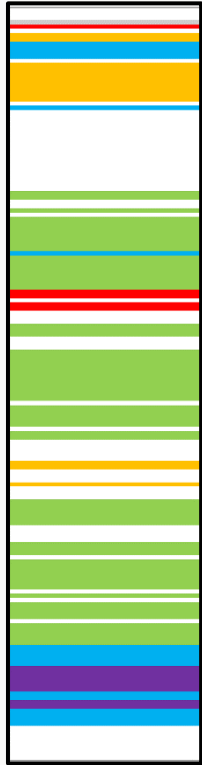
asexual



nonbinary/
genderfluid



trans



COMMON THEMES – NEGATIVE FEELINGS



recognizing that I was gay, and honestly **hating myself** fully for it



so **fucking scary** (.) it was **so scary** and it's like I- (.) for a while was (.) **scared to say** that



I was really **scared of it** and I didn't want to be feeling that way.



this girl who's- who's just turned sixteen (0.5) and (1.0) has been **feeling really (0.5) broken** but without (0.5) really knowing why



I was (1.0) **super nervous** to actually even tell my husband



I remember just being so like **@deathly afraid@** of leaving my friend group of girls to go into the (.) boys bathroom to wash my hands

COMMON THEMES – POSITIVE FEELINGS



it shows that you can live (a) **happy, positive life** as a gay man



it does **feel so freeing** really really fucking does



labeling it (0.7) is what gave me clarity and it's what (.) made me **feel much more confident** in it because I did struggle so long with what it was



it was the **biggest weight off my back** that I didn't even realize was (.) on my back essentially. [...] it's the **best decision** that I ever made.



I honestly feel so: (.) a-**much better**




I was like “This is me! This is what I have to do. This is what's **going to make me happy**, like @finally thank you, thank you@”



coming out as gay I- I did over the next year or so still sort of **struggle with that**. I had what I thought was some sort of attraction to a guy (.) uh (.) within that time period (.) after coming out as gay and I was like **so confused** like “what is happening did I like what what is going on?” [...]

I was I was still (.) going back and forth a little bit and like **a little confused** and there were just situations that kept coming up where I was like not not sure about things and then yeah finally I just (.) I realized (.) that is who I really am



At this point in my life I was **happier than I had ever been**, you know, I was able to **dress more freely**, I was able to **express myself more freely**, and I was also able to **date the gender that I'm most attracted to**. I don't know it was better in the sense that I could finally **express some sort of femininity** without being – or without feeling like I was being [...]

despite being able to **act more freely** and, you know, being **more confident** in myself, I still felt like **something was like missing**. I could wear makeup, I could date boys, all that kind of stuff but it **didn't really address the @ like self-hatred that I felt**. I liked being able to wear whatever I want but I **still hated how everything looked on me**.

COMMON THEMES – ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT



probably good to have had that experience [...] because it showed me that I had an **accepting family**, right.



I'm (.) the luckiest person to have such a **great support system** and (.) **people that are accepting**



I am really grateful for the people in my life that have been so **supportive and accepting** and just cool about it



I've got very lucky in that my flatmates are **really supportive** and they really are willing to- to learn



not everybody's gonna have the **same type of support** that I did



my mom, she's always been **supportive of me**


hinting that she **didn't think that I was trans** and just kind of like, you know, like “Why can't you just be gay” [...] eventually we came to a **diagnosis of gender dysphoria** [with a gender therapist]. This I feel like was kind of the **turning point for my mom**, it kind of set in stone that I am transgender [...]

I **don't really think that my dad believed** anything was actually gonna come from it [...]

my gender therapist actually held an integral role when it came to **getting my dad to, you know, accept (.) what was happening.** [...] he was kind of still like **pretending it wasn't gonna happen**, he was like **pretending it didn't exist** [...]

once I transitioned and once he saw that, you know, I'm still the same person uhm just a lot @happier@, I think that **he really understood** why I had to do it.





Another thing that I got it from a lot of people was (0.5) about me being in a relationship with a guy and I got a lot of people being like, Well, **why are you labeling it**? Like, why even say anything if you're with a guy already, if you're already in a relationship, why (.) even bring it up? What's the point of creating all this issue for yourself? **How does he feel?** How does he feel that people know? [...]

I was just **so sad (.) and embarrassed** almost from getting these comments [...]

I kind of just **closed off** about it and kind of (.) would hope that it never happened, basically. And that's kind of how it felt. Just kind of like, oh, okay, **forget it, @ sorry.**

INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE



this obviously **isn't the experience of a lot of people** [...] it's **not the experience of everybody**.



we all are on **our own timelines** and have **our own journeys** and **it is up to you** when you want to come out and **it's your choice** you know?



Coming out @ {@is@} a **different experience for everyone** and coming out as asexual is gonna be a **totally different experience** to coming out as trans plus or LGB Plus or anything like that it's- **it's all unique**



it's **not always like that for everybody** not everybody's gonna have the same type of support that i did, and **everybody's story is so: different**



I know that this is **not the norm** for a lot of trans people.

COMMON THEMES – ONLINE CONTENT



I was intentionally **tweeting** about boys [...] she's like your father told me because he saw some stuff that you were **posting online**



if you are scrolling through **YouTube** right now like I used to do before I realized who I was and I was looking at so much **queer content**



at the time I did **post about it online** and that post isn't there anymore



I was asking for- for advice and for (0.5) support (0.9) but (0.4) **the comments** that I left (0.3) on **those videos** (0.5) are the **kind of comments** that I (0.5) receive now



start living my life authentically. i decided to come out very very **publicly on my YouTube channel.**



I ended up in like a **rabbit hole on YouTube** [...] I came across Gigi Gorgeous and all of a sudden there was this beautiful, successful, happy trans woman

COMMON THEMES – COMMUNITY AFFIRMATIONS



know that I **love** you [...] you are **cared about**, you are **valid**, you are **loved**



If you are someone that's struggling also, please **feel free to reach out** to me or your friends.



you're **no less valid** than someone who's been out for years



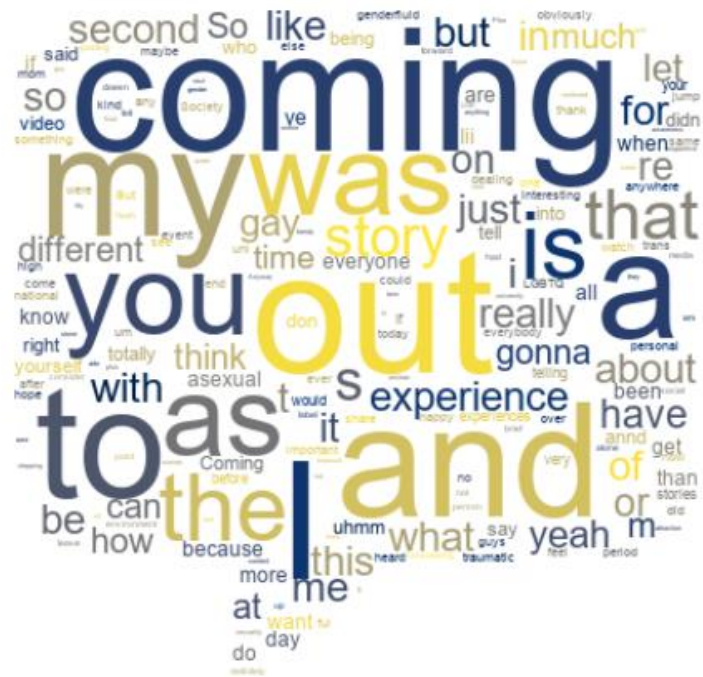
you're **not alone** because you'll have **allies** and **support**.



I **accept you**, I **love you**, **you are valid**, and I know it sounds @so ridiculously cheesy to say@ but just remember that **things do get better**

RESULTS (2)

Everyday narratives



EVERYDAY NARRATIVES

- Typical definition of narrative: the non-ordinary, the unexpected and unusual emphasized as the subject of narration
- Everyday narrative: More or less banal events, experiences and impressions that make up our everyday lives (Gülich 2008: 403)
- ‘Reportability’ (cf. Labov & Waletzky 1967) not based on objective characteristics, but on subjective significance of an event for the narrator (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2002: 127f.)

EVERYDAY NARRATIVES

- ‘ordinary’ events may turn out to be significant: established through context or function of narrative (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2002: 127f.)
- Setting of relevance and narrative value made overt by linguistic, vocal, and physical – especially gestures & facial expressions – means (Gülich 2008: 409)

OVERVIEW

Video						
#	5	2	1	0	0	7
Topic	Coming out	Realization, coming out	Coming out	-	-	Self-hatred, not belonging, gender euphoria, realization, coming out

EVERYDAY NARRATIVES – FEATURES (GÜLICH 2008)

Structure of narrative

Focusing specific memory



I remember I was out to dinner with my friend Jimmy at the time

Memory marker



I remember

Chronology



So it was in high school, my freshman year

Return to the main sequence



Anyways, back to the story

EVERYDAY NARRATIVES – FEATURES (GÜLICH 2008)

Scenic presentation

Quotative



I said "I'm gay"

Direct speech



"yeah I like boys and girls"

Scenic dialogue



she's like, "Yo, what is wrong with you?" Like, "What's going on?" And I'm like, "Yeah, so I'm bi and I'm really scared".

Voice imitation



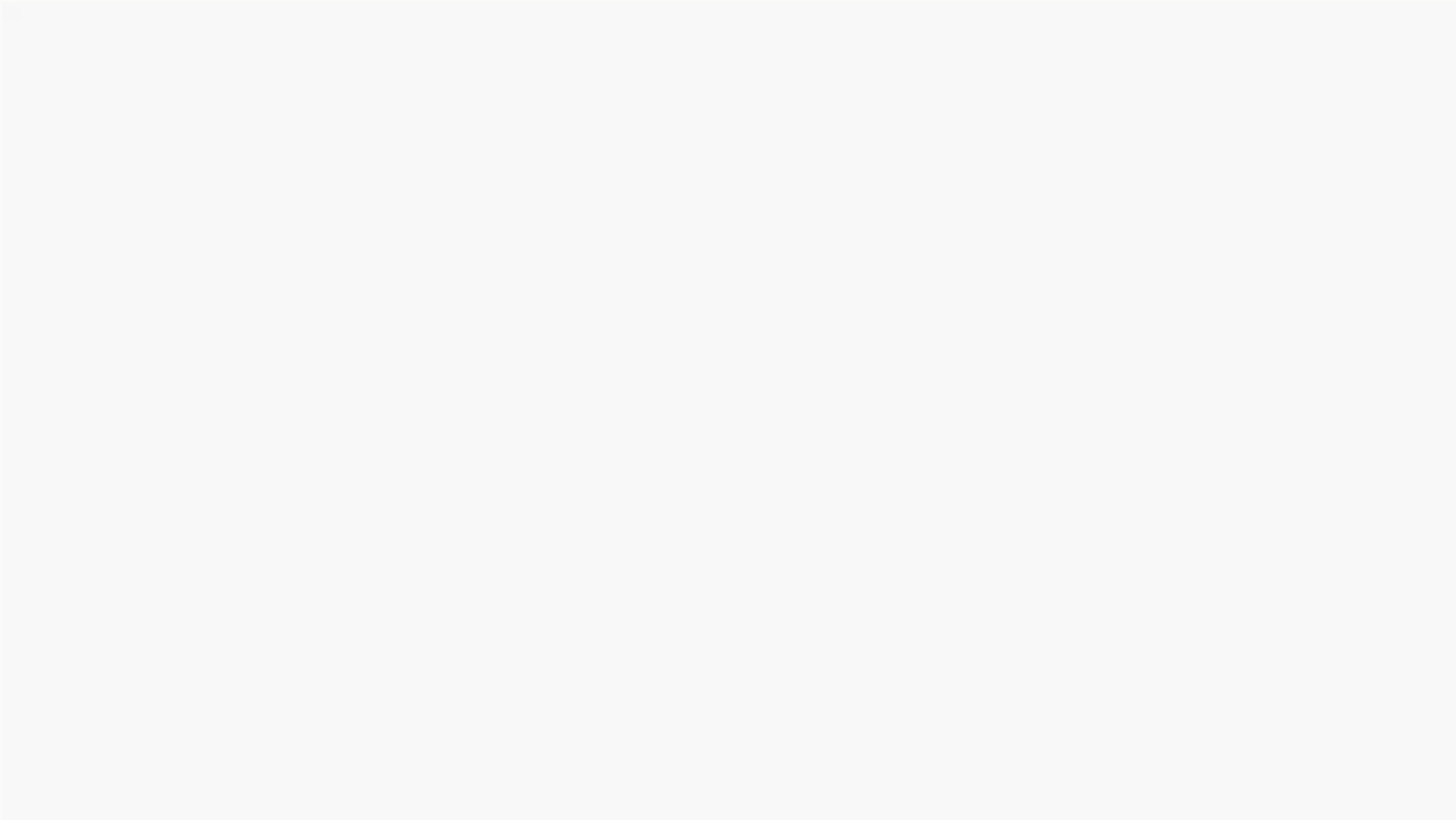
and you're just like "Hey" ((imitating small voice))

Forms of address



"No Mom, I'm not! Like, let it go!" ((imitating sassy teenager))

small-step and detailed reconstruction of events

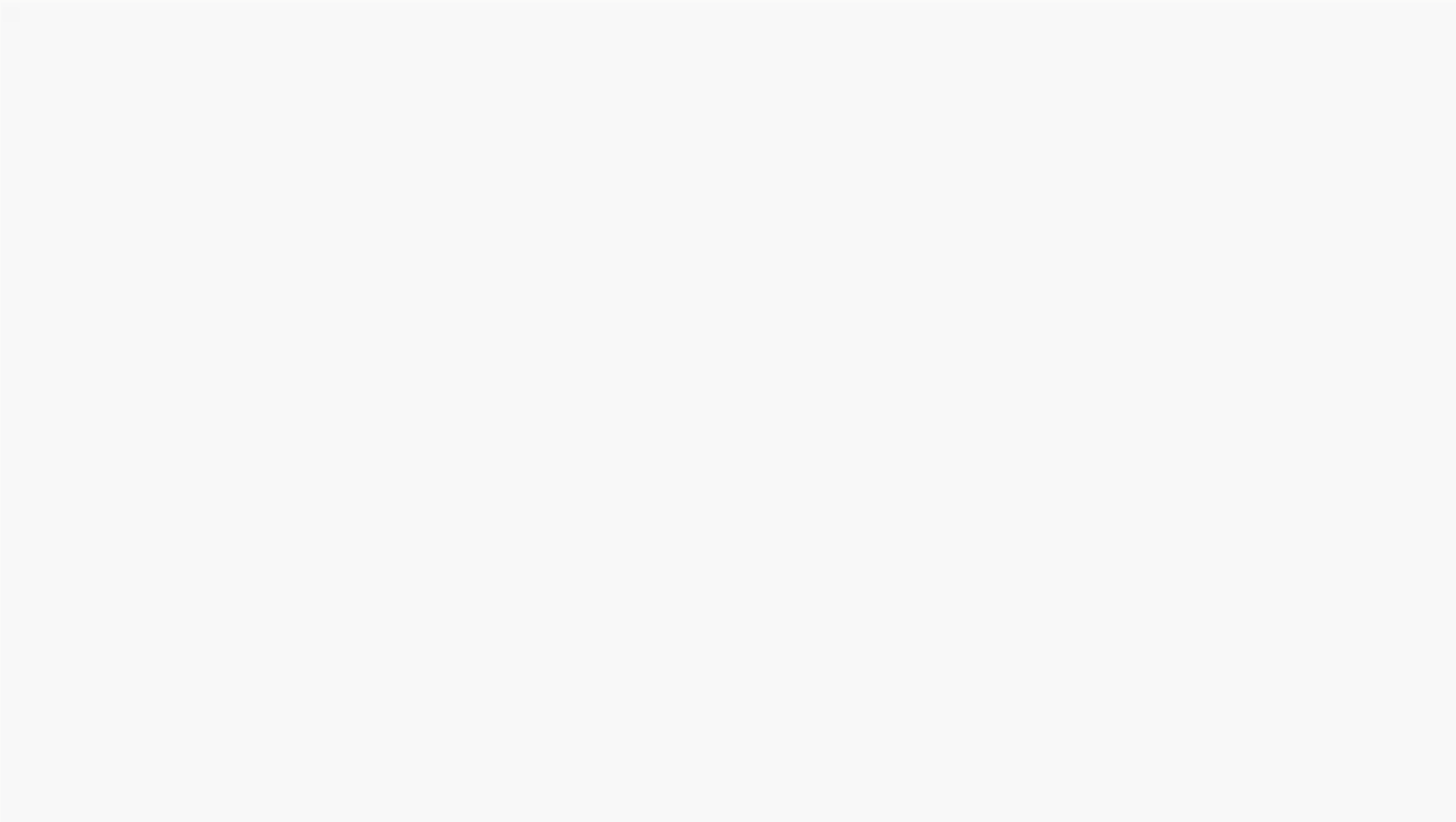





So fast forward to (.) **last year**. Ehm (.) yeah last year wait (.) no, was it two years ago. (.) No, it was last year. **Last () July**, we were having like a party at my house, whatever. Ehm and **I remember** texting one of my friends that's gay and I was like, *“Oh, help”*. Like, *“I think I might be bi”*, like *“I don't know what to do”* ((higher pitch)). Like, *“How did you come out”* all this. And then I had a mental breakdown. (mm). My friend comes in, **she's like, “Yo, what is wrong with you?”** Like, *“What's going on?”* And I'm like, *“Yeah, so I'm bi and I'm really scared”*. And (.) yeah (mm).

[end of narrative]

I'm really glad that my- the first person I kind of came out to and was able to tell were two people that I know were really supportive ehm and that we're going to help me and make me feel supported and accepted.





In **fourth grade** I had my hair down to here and, as **I'm sure you can imagine** with my curly hair, like I didn't have any product in it or anything like that, I didn't know how to style it so it was just a mess, but because it was such a mess my mom was like *“Oh you should just put it in a ponytail to get it out of your face”*. And I was just like *“Okay yes I'll do it, 100 percent, down”* ((euphoric)). I just **remember** feeling this overwhelming sense of just like (.) euphoria, I guess you could say. **I remember in second grade** my teacher s— for whatever reason, like would make all the girls put their hair up into a ponytail and because I had long hair, she would make me put my hair up as well and **everybody was like** *“Oh hahaha, so funny, Sam has put, you know, (.) **their** hair up”*. I didn't care, I thought it was – I was like, I was living the life, you know. **Anyways, back to the story.**

CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION

- Common features in all videos:
 - 5 different parts of coming out story
 - Evaluation of situation as negative before coming out, as positive after coming out
 - Positive reactions by family and friends
 - Reference to online content

CONCLUSION

- Some features not shared:
 - Especially the trans video mentions very different themes to the others
 - This is mirrored in the everyday narratives: a lot more variety of narrative topics; however, these topics are typical of trans narratives (cf. Zimman 2012)

OUTLOOK: INVESTIGATING QUEER IDENTITIES

1) Discourse shaping queer identities:

- Coming-out discourse on online platforms → which strategies do speakers use to find and establish their identities
- Language and discourse can help people to shape and establish their identities (cf. Queen 2014)

2) Queerness in language variation:

- Sociolinguistics: gender often still as a binary category (but: Levon 2021; Bruns & Leiting accepted).
- Sexual orientation also a valuable category (e.g. Motschenbacher 2010)

OUTLOOK: INVESTIGATING QUEER IDENTITIES

3) Diachronic and contrastive perspective:

- Text corpora based on the San Francisco and Berlin archives
- Use of appraisal strategies (cf. Martin & White 2005) and common collocations to understand the history of queer identities in the U.S. and Germany

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“thank (.) you for being here
thank you for being you”

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