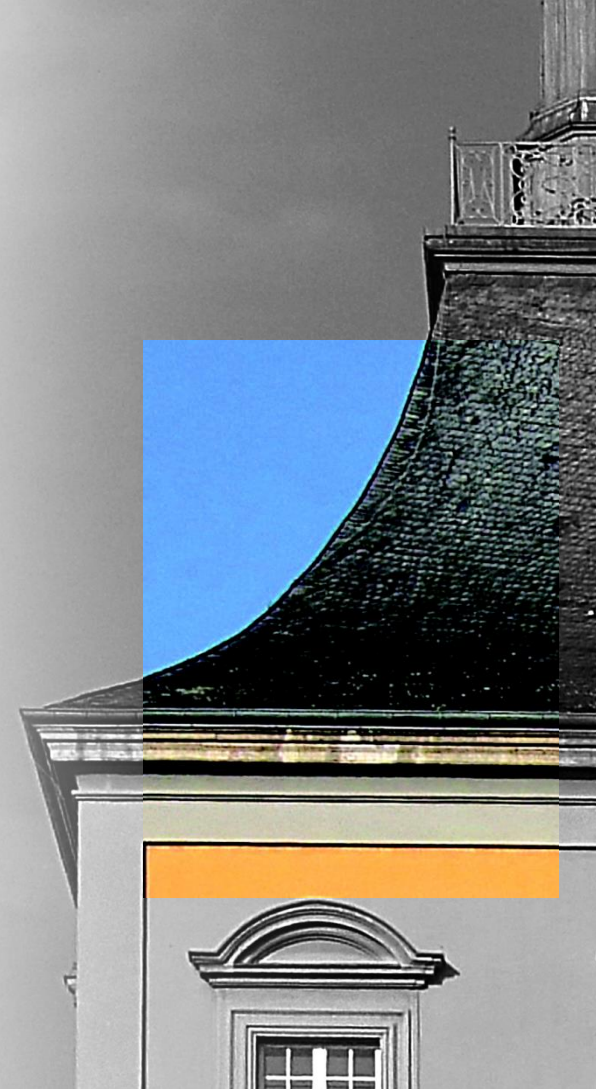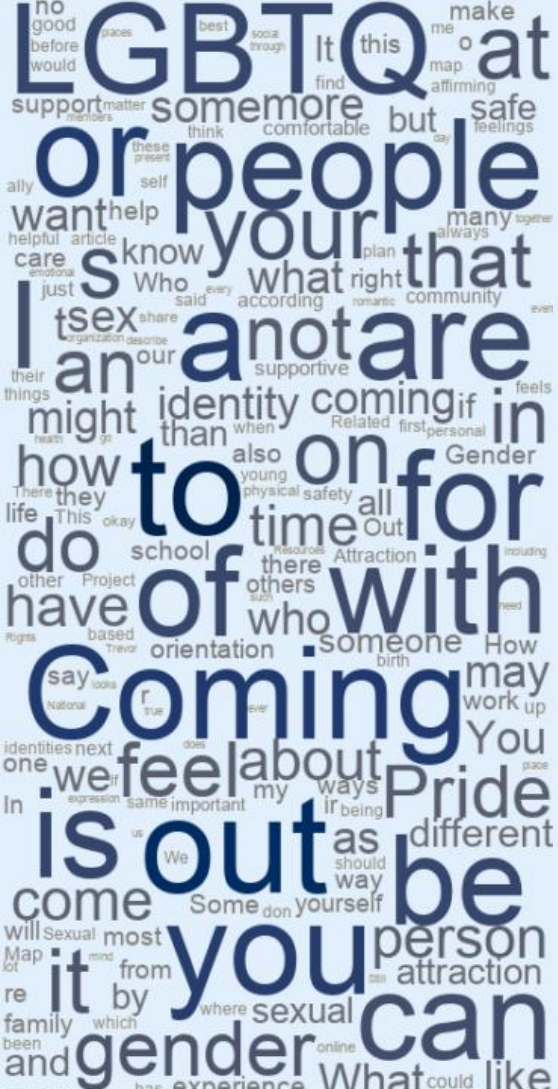# Evaluative adjectives in coming-out narratives on YouTube

Svenja Kranich & Hanna Bruns (University of Bonn)

OVERVIEW

1. Introduction / Previous Research

2. Research Questions

3. Data & Methods

4. Results

    (1) Topic Analysis

    (2) Evaluative Adjectives

5. Conclusion and Outlook

COMING OUT

- Coming out as "simultaneous declaration and construction of an identity" (Sauntson 2007: 162)
- Coming-out can be defined as "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)
- "In this sense, the persuasive appeal implicit in every 'outing' is 'accept me for […] who I say I am" (Bacon 1998: 251)
- How is this persuasive appeal realised linguistically?

INTRODUCTION & PREVIOUS RESEARCH

COMING-OUT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

– Not a lot of research in this area so far

– Online spaces particularly important for marginalised groups, finding others with similar experiences (Marciano 2014: 826)

– Coming out as important pivotal moment in the life story of queer individuals

– Coming out as an individual experience: Differences due to e.g. psychological responses, family reactions, religious and community support (Herdt 1992; Savin-Williams 1998, 2001, 2005)

– Can common experiences and features nevertheless be found?

DIFFERENT KINDS OF COMING-OUT

– Differences between sexual and gender identities (Zimman 2009)

– No homogenous practice throughout the entire queer community (2009: 54)

– 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)

ELEMENTS OF COMING-OUT

– Three main elements of coming out:
    – Self-definition as identity
    – Self-presentation as identity
    – A series of ongoing acts of self-definition, and/or self-presentation (= processuality) (Liang 1997, for non-normative sexualities)

"A key reason that coming out as transgender lacks the processuality […] is that transgender people experience coming out from two significantly different perspectives: before and after transitioning to the preferred gender role." (Zimman 2009: 60)

COMING-OUT VERSUS COMING-INTO-IDENTITY

– In the transgender coming-out narratives collected by Zimman, the focus is on "how the speaker came to live in their current gender role; in fact, this was the clear overarching topic in the majority of these stories" (Zimman 2009: 58) → 'coming-*into*-identity' (vgl. Zimman 2009: 58 & Wood 1994: 777)

Pre- vs. Post-transition

Gender identity ≠ external perception

Gender identity = external perception

– "coming out does not mean revealing a gender identity, but rather a particular kind of gender history characterized by the movement from one gender category to another." (Zimman 2009: 54)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Can we distinguish topics, sequences and patterns that are characteristic of this newly emergent genre?
2. Which role does appraisal play in the construction and communication of identity?
3. Are there differences between the affirmation of gender identities and sexual identities?
4. Are there differences in the type of appraisal in the different sequences and/or the different queer identities?

DATA AND METHODS

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)

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)

Genre Analysis (cf. Swales 1990)

BACKGROUND/FRAMEWORK

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)

– "**JUDGMENT** is deployed for construing moral evaluations" (including normality, capacity, tenacity,veracity and propriety)

– "**AFFECT** is the resource deployed for construing emotional responses ('happiness, sadness, fear, loathing', etc.)"

– "**APPRECIATION** construes the 'aesthetic' quality of semiotic text/processes and natural phenomena ('remarkable, desirable, harmonious, elegant, innovative', etc.). "

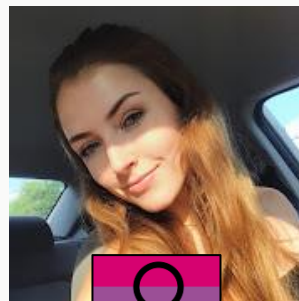(Martin 2001: 145f., Martin & White 2005: 53)

APPRAISAL THEORY

	low degree			high degree
Judgement	competent player reasonably good player	good player quite good player	very good player	brilliant player extremely good player
Affect	contentedly slightly upset	happily somewhat upset	joyously very upset	ecstatically extremely upset
Appreciation	a bit untidy attractive	somewhat untidy	very untidy beautiful	completely untidy exquisite

(Martin & White 2005: 136)

DATA YouTube Videos 'story time coming out ...'

Gay

Lesbian

Bi woman

Bi man

Genderfluid

Trans female

Trans male

Asexual

Agender

CODING

- **Timeline**
  - Where in the coming out process is the evaluation made?
- **Direction**
  - Is the evaluation positive or negative (or ambivalent)?
- **Category**
  - Which category of appraisal is the evaluation (judgement, affect, appreciation)?
- **Degree**
  - How strong is the direction (low to high)?
- **Reference & Evaluator**
  - Is the creator making the evaluation and who/what is referred to?

CODING EXAMPLE

– Example: "I was like repulsed by that side of me"

– Timeline: B (Before Coming Out)

– Direction: negative

– Category: affect

– Degree: high degree

– Reference: CC (Creator to Creator) the Creator is evaluating and referring to himself

RESULTS (1)
TOPIC ANALYSIS

COMING-OUT TO...

	♀	♂					♂	♀	
Self	(X)	(X)			(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	X
Family	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Friends		X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Partner			X					X	
Online		X	X	(X)	X	X	X	X	X

COMING-OUT PROCESS

SELF   It all began with a simple question that I asked myself. […] "**Am I comfortable as a girl?**" And, long story short, the answer was no. I researched transgender, taking as many online tests as I could. I'm watching trans youtubers to educate myself and honestly, I was upset. **I knew I was trans but I didn't want to admit it** as it seemed traumatic and I didn't think I'd be accepted for it.

FRIENDS   I **came out to my friends at the time** and told them that some days I'd use he/him some days I'd use she/her and some days use they/them pronouns depending on how I felt inside. […]

FAMILY […] And then one day in the car I was just sat there minding my own business and **I got outed**. Yaay. So **my mom found out** so I told her mom, okay, fair enough, I'll just tell you I'm genderfluid and then I try to explain to her what it was.

SELF I absolutely prayed with all of my being that it was **just a phase**, but my dysphoria just worsened to a stage where **I just couldn't deny it any longer**. I'm not a girl. I'm a boy. **I'm trans**. And there is nothing I can do about it. Shit.

FRIENDS & FAMILY So, I cut my hair, stopped wearing girl's clothes and **came out to my friends and family**. Finally, right?

ONLINE

I started YouTube to have a safe space for my dysphoria and I did something that I strongly @regret when doing that@, um, I didn't come out, **I said I was cis on the internet** to make myself feel better, so I went stealth basically. [...] pretending to be cis online ended up being a nightmare. [...] to cut a long story short I was **forced out the closet**. [...] people on there were basically arguing with me saying that I'm lying and that I am a disgrace to the trans community for lying and then eventually it got so bad that I just said right you know what yes you're right I am trans but I'm like really like I feel shit about it [...] I was so confused though because people who were **like being stealth is something that trans people do sometimes**

FURTHER CHARACTERISTIC TOPICS

1. INFLUENCE OF ONLINE CONTENT

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**

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

2. COMMUNITY AFFIRMATIONS

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

any other trans folk out there **wish you luck** with everything

3. INDIVIDUAL NATURE OF EXPERIENCE

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**

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**

RESULTS (2)
APPRAISAL

APPRAISAL - JUDGMENT

she was **very accepting** and she said "You know you could have told me" (During coming out, positive, mid high degree, CO)

it's the **best decision** that I ever made. (After Coming out, positive, high degree, CS)

I feel like they might be **a little bit limited in their understanding** of different genders (During Coming Out, negative, low degree, CO)

APPRAISAL - APPRECIATION

I found, you know, ((slightly breathy)) guys **just attractive** (Realisation, positive, low degree, CO)

"oh yeah she's **gorgeous**" (During Coming Out, positive, mid/high degree, OO)

I felt like I wasn't sort of this **invisible ugly duckling** (Before Coming Out, positive, low degree, CC)

APPRAISAL - AFFECT

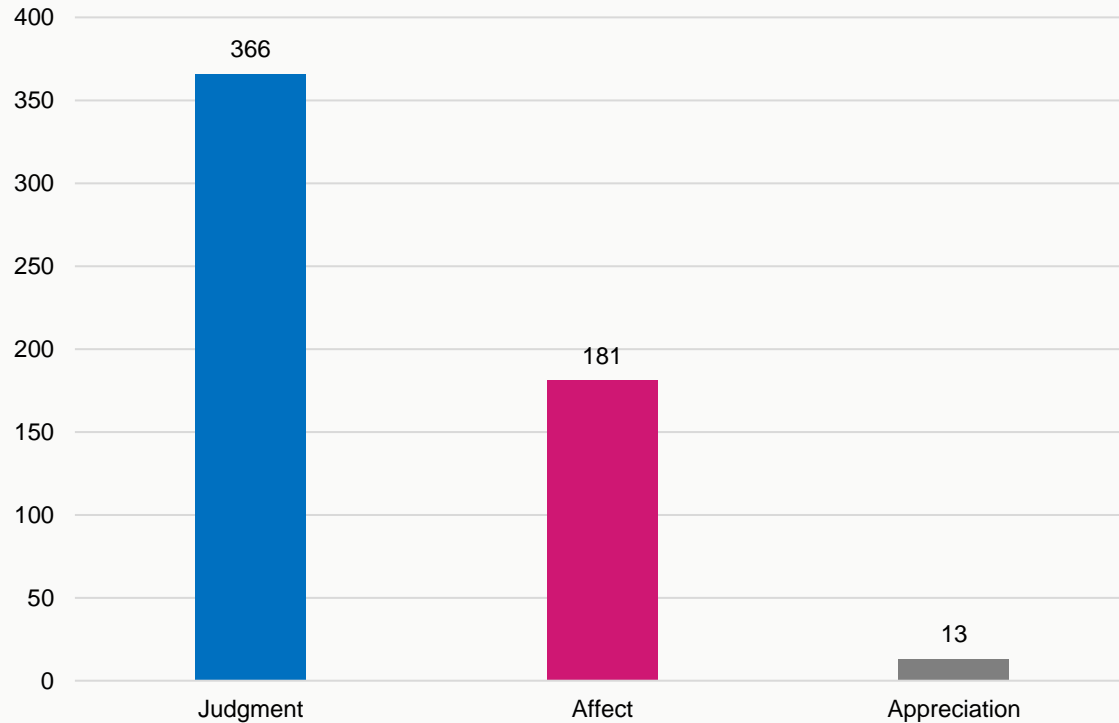I was like **my heart was pounding I was so nervous.** (During Coming Out, negative, mid/high degree, CC)

Feminine terms began to make me **visibly uncomfortable.** (Before Realisation, negative, mid degree, CC)

I think I might be ((pitch rises)) nothing in a way that **I'm 100% fine with** (During, positive, low degree, CS)
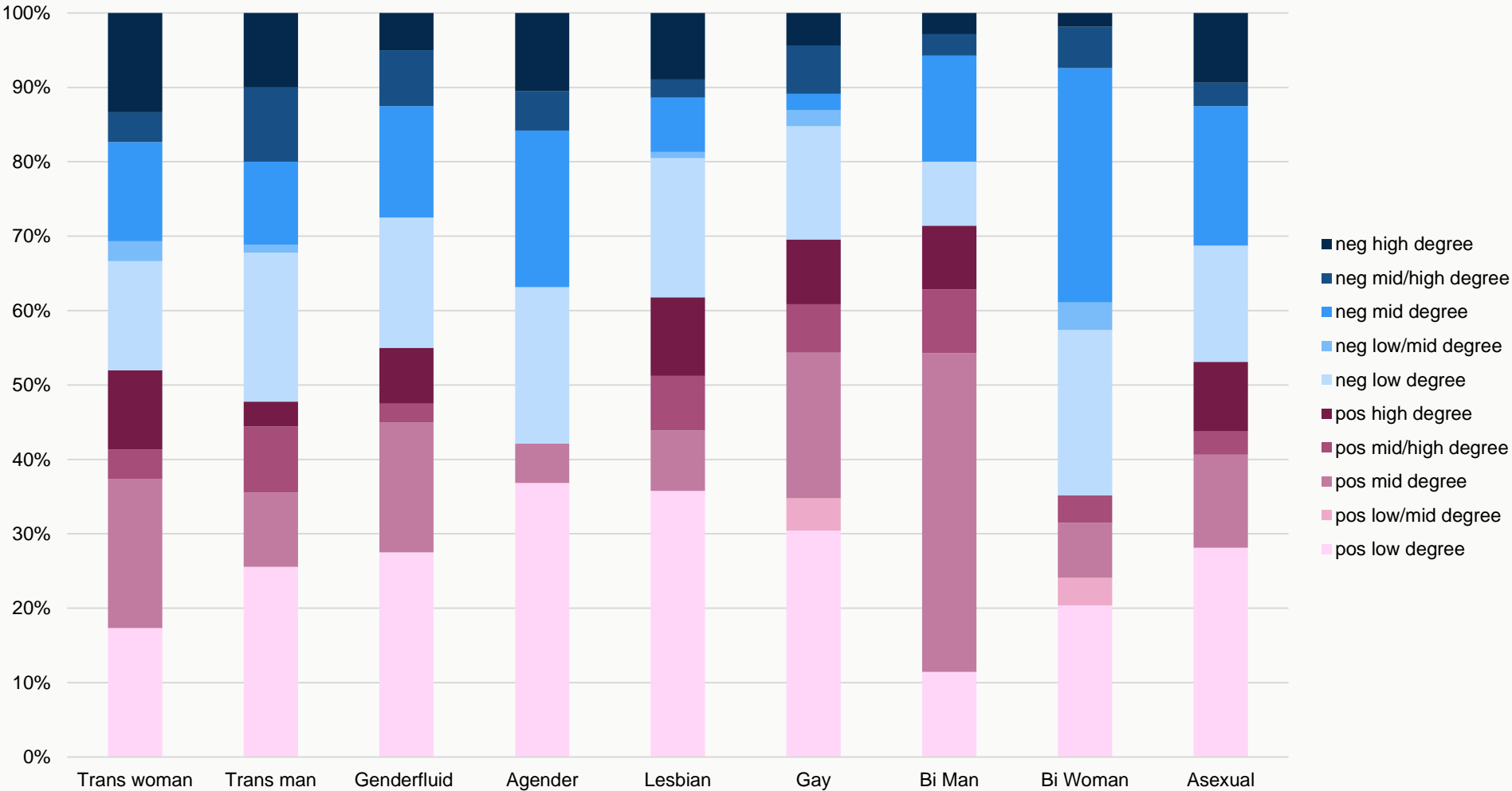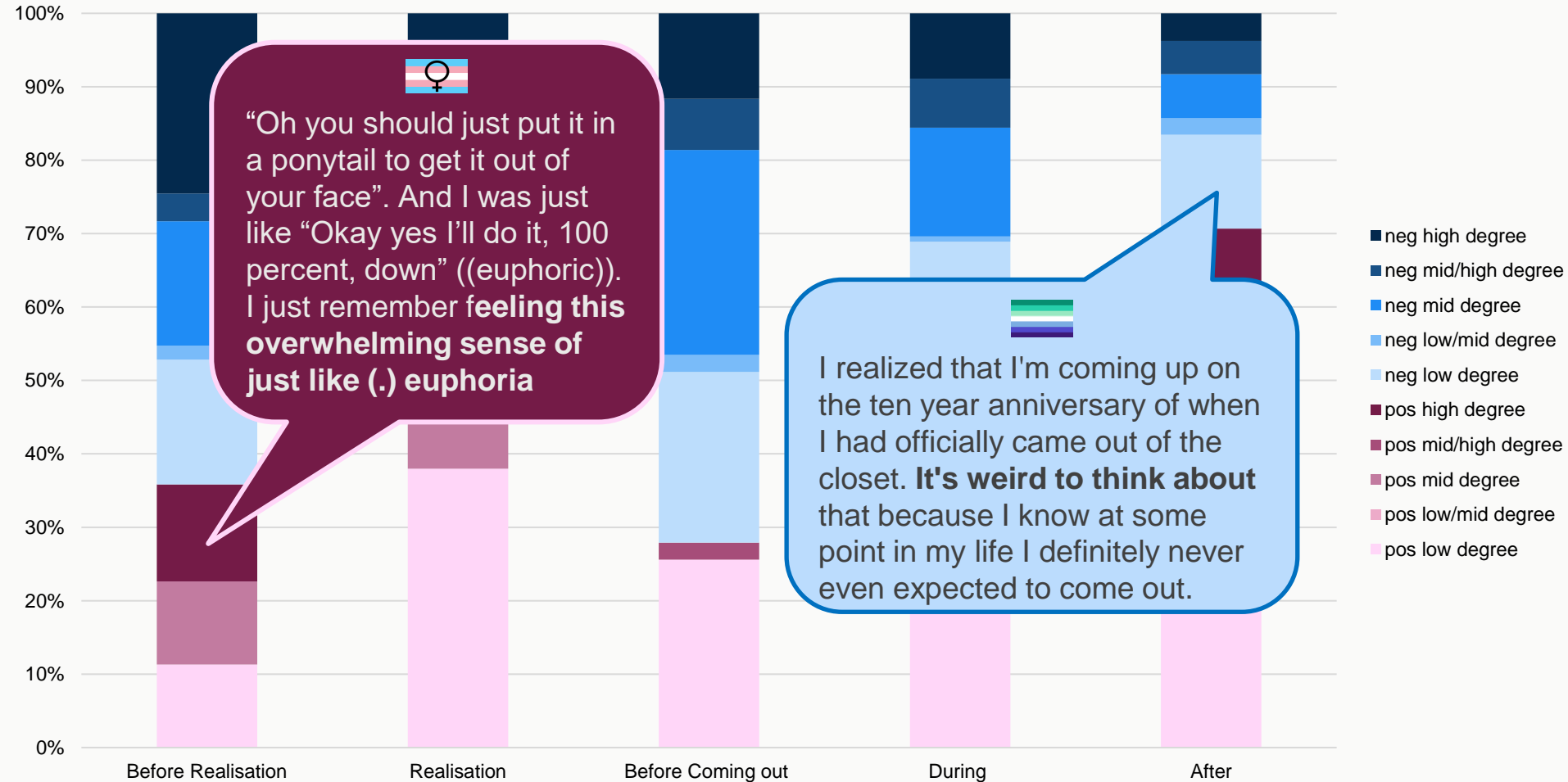
APPRAISAL TYPES: ABSOLUTE FREQUENCIES

Category direction comparison

Legend:
- App amb
- App neg
- App pos
- Aff amb
- Aff neg
- Aff pos
- Judge amb
- Judge neg
- Judge pos

Categories: Trans woman, Trans man, Genderfluid, Agender, Lesbian, Gay, Bi Man, Bi Woman, Asexual
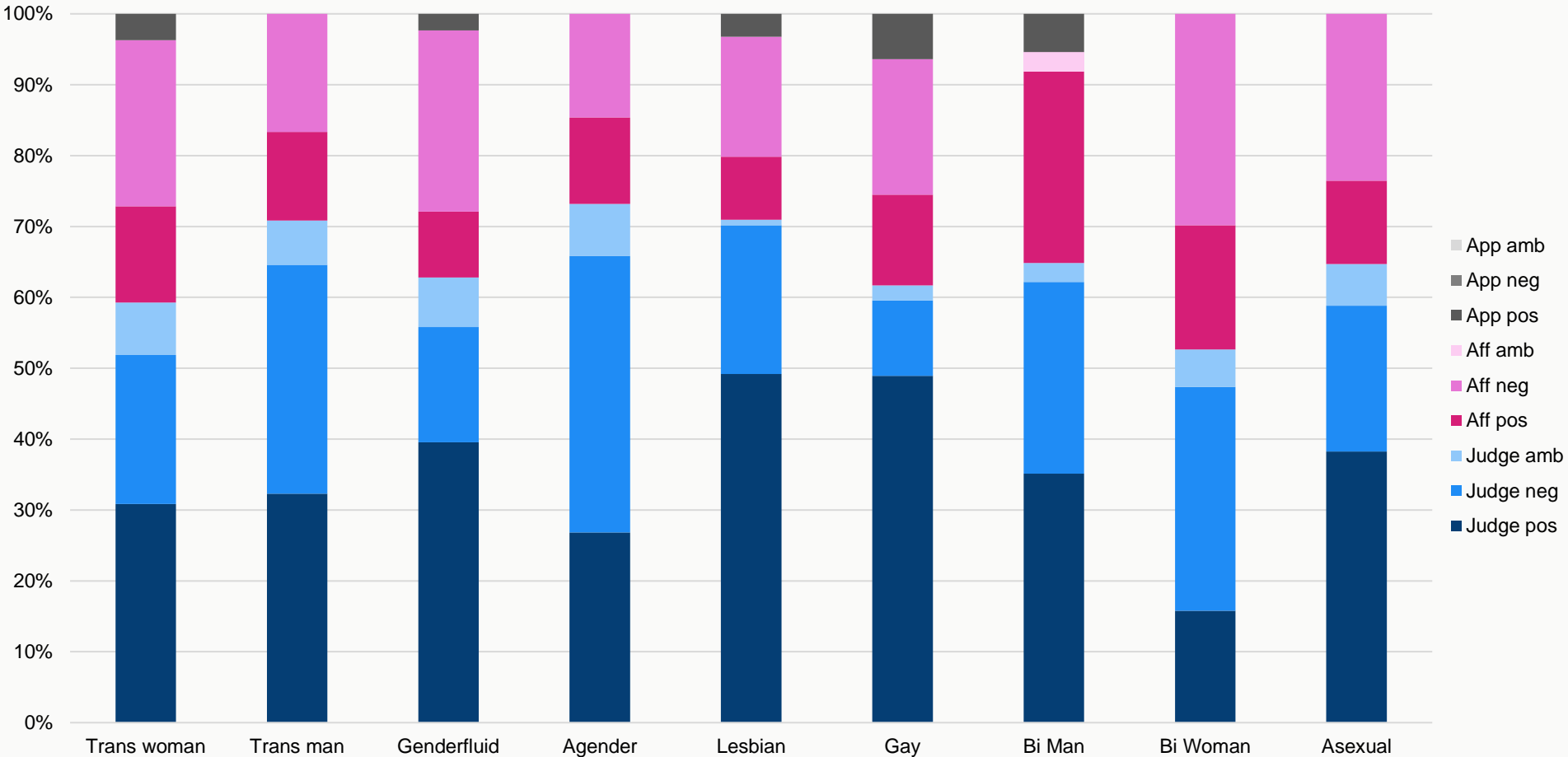
Positive vs. negative appraisal

Timeline: Direction and Degree (Reference to Creator only)

Legend:
- neg high degree
- neg mid/high degree
- neg mid degree
- neg low/mid degree
- neg low degree
- pos high degree
- pos mid/high degree
- pos mid degree
- pos low/mid degree
- pos low degree

X-axis categories:
- Before Realisation — N = 28
- Realisation — N = 27
- Before Coming out — N = 24
- During — N = 52
- After — N = 49
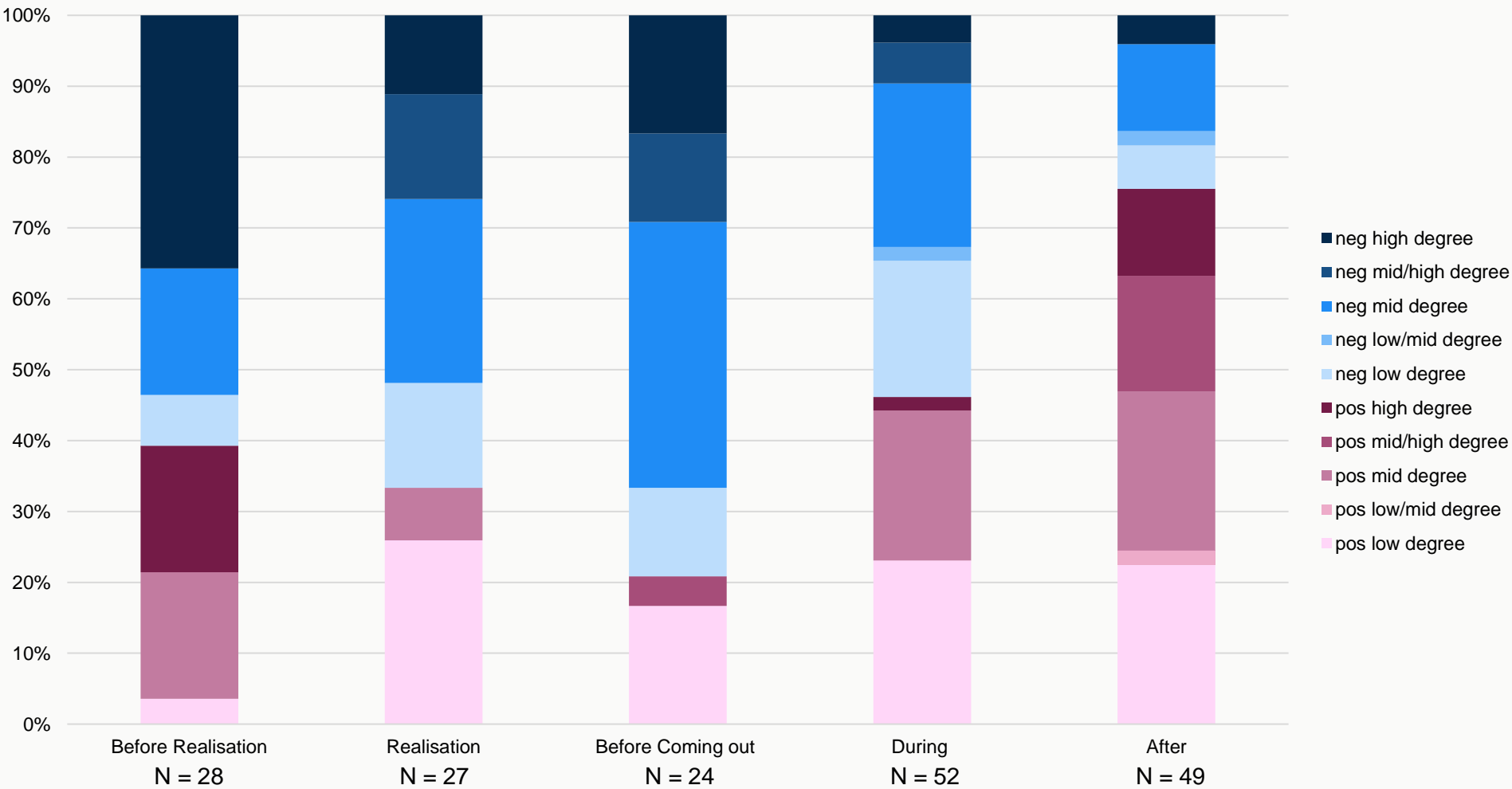
SUMMARY

- Common features in videos:

- Timeline of coming-out process (Self – Friends/Family)

- Reference to online content

- Evaluation of situation more often as negative before coming out and as positive after coming out, but very clear individual differences

- Overall positive reactions by family and friends

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

CONCLUSION

– Differences between gender- and sexuality focused coming-outs
  – Trans videos focus on different topics than others, partially because of the different stages in the transgender process (e.g. mentions of transition steps, revealing gender history)
  – Appraisal types and directions show commonalities with regard to time-line (before coming out more negative evaluation, after more positive evaluation), but also clear individual differences

OUTLOOK: PLANS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

– Creating a bigger and more varied corpus of coming-out discourse on online platforms: which strategies do speakers use to find and establish their identities in various outlets

– Diachronic/contrastive perspective: Use of appraisal strategies and common collocations to understand the history of queer identities in the U.S. and Germany. Creation of corpus based on the San Francisco and Berlin archives

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"thank you very much for listening to my story"

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