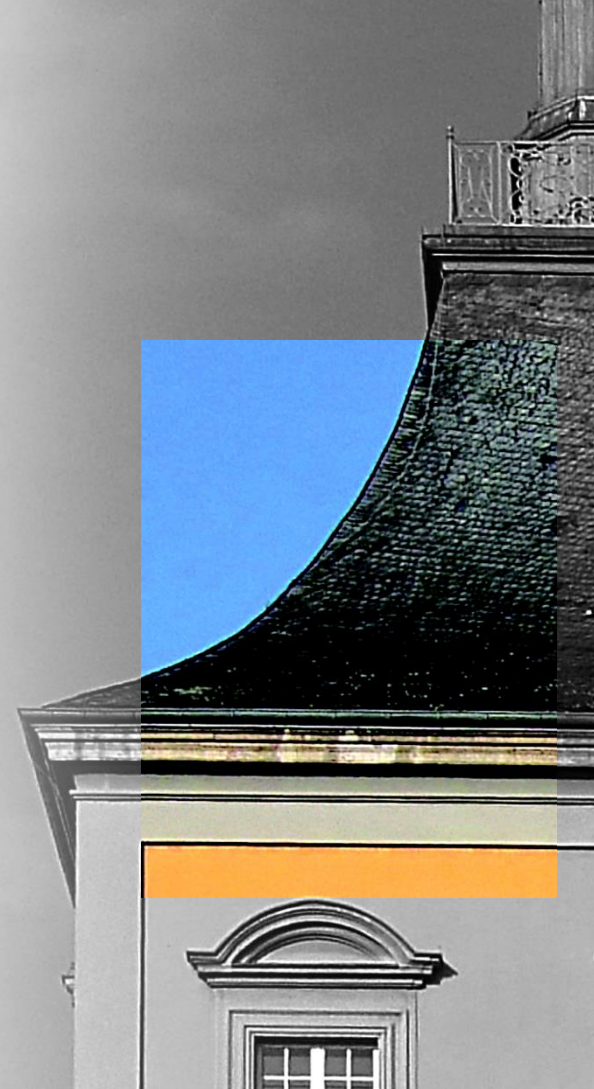


Performing and Communicating Queer Identities online: YouTube Coming Out Videos

Prof. Dr. Svenja Kranich & Hanna Bruns





OVERVIEW

1. Introduction & Previous Research
2. Research Questions
3. Data & Methods
4. Results
 - (1) Topic Analysis
 - (2) Appraisal
 - (3) Everyday Narratives
5. Conclusion and Outlook

INTRODUCTION & PREVIOUS RESEARCH



COMING OUT

- 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 am’ or at least for who I say I am” (Bacon 1998: 251)
- How is this *persuasive appeal* realised linguistically?

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)

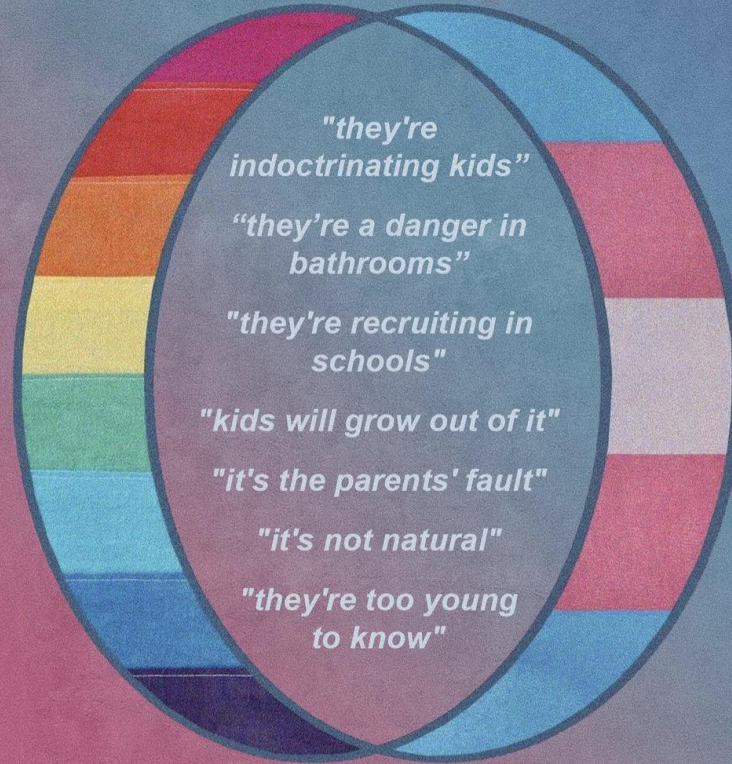
Pre- vs. Post-transition 

- 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)

1970s
HOMOPHOBIA

2020s
TRANSPHOBIA



Bernstein (2024, April 16)
@mattxiv

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Which common features and structures exist between different coming out YouTube videos? Which moves appear to be "genre-specific" (cf. Swales 1990)?
2. Which strategies are used by the content creators to *appraise* their own identity and the coming-out process?
3. What role do everyday narratives play in constructing queer identities?
4. Are there differences concerning the communication of sexual identities vs. gender identities (cf. also Zimman 2009)?

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)

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)



YouTube Videos 'story time coming out ...'



Gay



Lesbian



Bisexual



Asexual



Genderfluid



Trans female



Trans male

RESULTS (1)

Topic Analysis



COMING-OUT TO...



Self	(X)	(X)	(X)	X		(X)	(X)
Family	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Friends	X	X	X	X	X		X
Partner			X		X		
Online	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**



COMMON TOPICS – 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




the very next day Dan [another YouTuber] **came out.** [...] I've said it already but **it really really helped me** come to terms with a lot of stuff.


COMMON TOPICS – 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**



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

COMMON TOPICS – 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.

RESULTS (2)

Appraisal



COMMON EXPERIENCES – NEGATIVE EVALUATION



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



I was **upset**. I knew I was trans but I didn't want to admit it as it seemed **traumatic**

COMMON EXPERIENCES – POSITIVE EVALUATION



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@”




I'm **still getting there**, but I'm **so much better** with it now

COMMON EXPERIENCES – 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**

 I got so much like a lot of sup- **so much support** and like it was insane I didn't expect this **many people to care**

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.



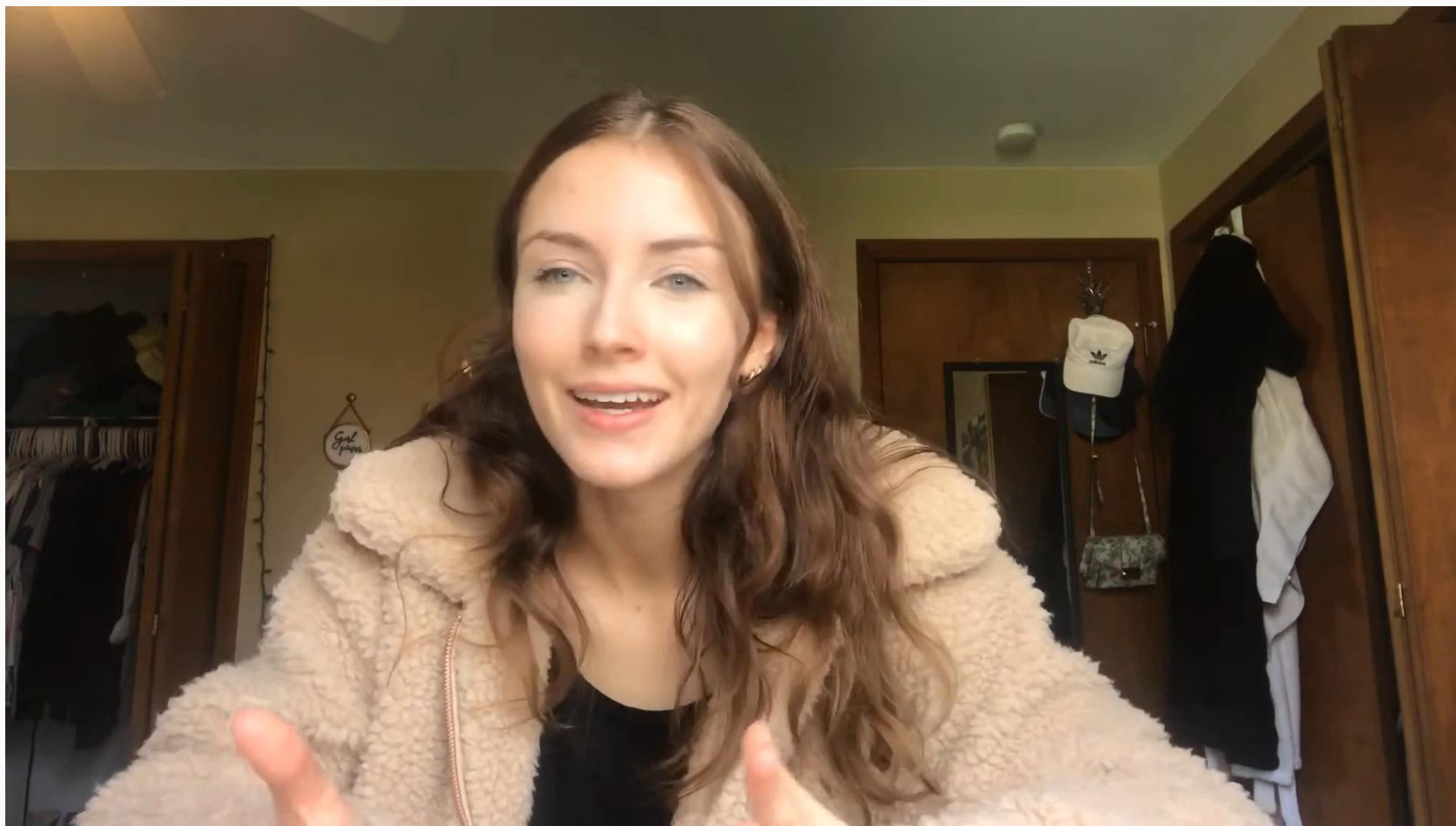
[...] I told her mom, okay, fair enough, I'll just tell you I'm genderfluid. And then I try to explain to her what it was. My mum's just like "oh yeah it's **probably just a phase** you'll grow out of" and I was like "yeah fucking hope so"


So, I cut my hair, stopped wearing girl's clothes and came out to my friends and family. Finally, right? And my family **only started using the right name and pronouns like a year after** I came out so that was, like, the- I think that was the biggest struggle in this whole thing.

Acceptance was, like, all I wanted from my friends and family but, like, I knew that **my family didn't take me seriously** and the whole thing.

Thankfully about a year later my mom and dad were kind of like shit, this is **actually real, he's not just faking it**. [...] they thankfully started referring to me as EJ







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.**

RESULTS (3)

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.)
- Double-role of the narrator: as person of the story and as current narrator of the story → serves argumentative function of the narration

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)
- Number of scenic everyday narratives: 17

EVERYDAY NARRATIVES – STRUCTURAL 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 – SCENIC 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





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 AND OUTLOOK



CONCLUSION

- Common features in videos:
 - Timeline of coming-out process (Self – Friends/Family)
 - Evaluation of situation as negative before coming out, as positive after coming out
 - Positive reactions by family and friends
 - Reference to online content

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)
 - 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 in print).
- 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

REFERENCES

- Bacon, J. (1998). Getting the story straight: Coming out narratives and the possibility of a cultural rhetoric. *World Englishes*, 17(2) 249–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-971X.00098>
- Bernstein, M. [@mattxiv]. (2024, April 16). Time is a flat circle.
- Bruns, H. (2023). “That’s all it takes to be trans”: Counter-strategies to hetero- and transnormative discourse on YouTube. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 283, 53-76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2023-0002>
- Bruns, H., & Leiting, S. (to appear). Using gender-inclusive language in German? It’s a question of attitude... In: F. Pflanzgraf (Ed.), *Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language: A multinational perspective*. [Language and Social Life], De Gruyter Mouton.
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2006). Gender, sexuality and language. In *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics* (pp. 756–760). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/03024-8>
- Dym, B., Brubaker, J. R., Fiesler, C., & Semaan, B. (2019). Coming out okay. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 3(CSCW) 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359256>
- Fairclough, N. (2013). Critical discourse analysis and critical policy studies. *Critical Policy Studies*, 7(2) 177–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2013.798239>
- Gülich, E. (2008). Alltägliches erzählen und alltägliches Erzählen. , 36(3), 403-426. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ZGL.2008.034>
- Herdt, G. H. (1992). 'Coming out' as a rite of passage: A Chicago study. In G. H. Herdt (Ed.), *Gay culture in America: Essays from the field* (2nd ed., pp. 29–67). Boston Mass.: Beacon Press.
- Jones, L. (2019). Discourses of transnormativity in vloggers’ identity construction. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2019(256) 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2018-2013>
- Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative Analysis: oral versions off personal experience. *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, ed. June Helm (Seattle, 1967).
- Levon, E. (2021). Sexuality as non-binary: A variationist perspective. In J. Angouri & J. Baxter (Eds.), *Routledge handbooks in applied linguistics. The Routledge Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (pp. 37–51). London, New York: Routledge.
- Liang, A. C. (1994) ‘Coming out’ as transition and transcendence of the public/private dichotomy. In Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, Laurel A. Sutton and Caitlin Hines (eds) *Cultural Performances: Proceedings of the Third Berkeley Women and Language Conference* 409–420. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group.

REFERENCES

- Lucius-Hoene, G., & Deppermann, A. (2002). Rekonstruktion narrativer Identität. Ein Arbeitsbuch zur Analyse narrativer Interviews. Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 285-318.
- Macgilchrist, F. (2007). Positive discourse analysis – Contesting dominant discourse by reframing the issues. *Critical Approaches to Discourse Across Disciplines*, 1(1) 74–94. Retrieved from <https://publications.goettingen-research-online.de/handle/2/98223>
- Marciano, A. (2014). Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating transgender identity in cyberspace. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(4) 824–838. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12081>
- Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2007). *Working with discourse: Meaning beyond the clause*. London: Continuum.
- Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230511910>
- Motschenbacher, H. (2010). Female-as-norm (FAN): A typology of female and feminine generics. In M. Bieswanger (Ed.), *Language in its socio-cultural context: New explorations in gendered global and media uses* (pp. 35–67). Frankfurt am Main: Lang.
- Savin-Williams, R. (1998). *And then I became gay: Young men's stories*.
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (2001). *Mom, dad, I'm gay. How families negotiate coming out*. Washington: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10437-000>
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (2005). *The new gay teenager. Adolescent Lives Ser: v.3*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings. Cambridge applied linguistics series*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr.
- Wood, Kathleen M. (1994) Life stories as artifacts of a culture: lesbian coming-out stories. In Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang, Laurel A. Sutton and Caitlin Hines (eds) *Cultural Performances: Proceedings of the Third Berkeley Women and Language Conference 777–786*. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group.
- Zimman, L. (2009). The other kind of coming out: Transgender people and the coming out narrative genre. *Gender and Language*, 3(1) 53–80. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.v3i1.53>
- Zimman, L. (2012). *Voices in transition: Testosterone, transmasculinity, and the gendered voice among female-to-male transgender people*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder.

Many thanks to
Thomas Esser
Ragnhild Hinderling
Lisa Lubomierski
Corinna Schrömges





“thank you very much for
listening to my story”

Svenja Kranich
Hanna Bruns

skranich@uni-bonn.de
h.bruns@uni-bonn.de

