



universität
wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

„Out of the Closet and Onto YouTube:

Negotiating the Performance and Publicness of a Queer
Identity in YouTube Coming Out Videos“

verfasst von / submitted by

Katharina Strnadl

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2021 / Vienna 2021

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 066 844

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Masterstudium
Anglophone Literatures and Cultures UG2002

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Sylvia Mieszkowski, MA

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to express my gratitude towards my supervisor Univ.-Prof. Dr. Sylvia Mieszkowski. Your invaluable feedback and support pushed me to become a better writer even when I doubted myself. Thank you also for replying to e-mails in record speed despite your already full schedule – I still do not know how you do it.

Thank you to my friends, especially Sunny and Laura, who not only provided me with distractions when I needed them but were also always happy to let me discuss (read: rant about) whatever it was that was currently a source of stress for me. I promise I will talk less about coming out and YouTube now.

Thank you to my mother for helping me organise my thoughts to figure out what I actually wanted to say and discussing sex and gender from a cultural perspective with me despite coming from a biology background (we can stop talking about Butler now). Of course, also thank you to my father for pointing out where I could dig deeper and always offering up his personal library to me.¹ Thank you both for supporting me in every way imaginable throughout the process of writing this thesis.

¹ Sorry for barely ever using it. You get your much-wanted footnote in return though, so that evens it out I would say.

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	6
List of Tables.....	7
Introduction.....	9
1 Coming Out of the Closet.....	16
1.1 Definition of Coming Out	18
1.2 History of Coming Out	19
1.3 Definition of the Closet	24
2 Models of Coming Out.....	27
2.1 Stage Models	27
2.2 Career Models.....	31
3 The Performative Nature of Sexual Identity.....	34
3.1 YouTube as a Platform for Performance.....	35
3.2 Types of Coming Out Online	36
3.2.1 Talking Heads.....	38
3.2.2 Live Reaction.....	42
3.2.3 Song	45
3.2.4 Miscellaneous	48
3.3 Constructing Sexual Identity on YouTube	56
3.3.1 Essentialist Notions of Sexual Identity.....	56
3.3.2 Strategies of Disclosure	61
4 Privacy Matters	65
4.1 Definition of Secrecy and Privacy.....	65
4.2 Depictions of the Closet on YouTube.....	67
4.3 Navigating Privacy on YouTube.....	75
4.4 Discussion	83
Conclusion	88
References.....	93
Appendix A: Abstract	103
Appendix B: Anti-Plagiarism Statement	105

List of Figures

Figure 1. Connor Franta's setting is his own living room (00:09).....	40
Figure 2. Dawson's setting in front of a white wall, muted lighting and a low-quality webcam (00:01).....	40
Figure 3. Nilsen tears up as she relates her sexual identity formation (06:27).	41
Figure 4. mallow610 places the camera on a tissue box on top of the refrigerator to hide it, framing the shot from above (00:03).	42
Figure 5. Matthewac1 crying in his mother's arms after he comes out to her (10:12).	43
Figure 6. twaimz in a Peppa the Pig costume to illustrate his father's joke that twaimz looks like the character (02:43).....	45
Figure 7. Graceffa as a prince who kisses another man (03:18).	46
Figure 8. doddleoddle's video shows Skittles arranged to spell out "IM [sic] BI, a coming out song" (00:05).....	47
Figure 9. Daniel Howell divides his video into five chapters, drawing on a bible reference here (02:09).	49
Figure 10. Howell inserts a picture of himself as a child (02:42).	50
Figure 11. jessiepaage using rainbow lighting (12:30).....	50
Figure 12. Howell's background is black, but he has a green light on his left side (17:50).....	51
Figure 13. The green light wanders to the right side and is joined by a purple one on the left (32:40).....	51
Figure 14. Yang is sitting in relative darkness with his family (00:04).	52
Figure 15. The lighting turns hazier and softer when Yang starts dancing with another man and woman (02:13).....	52
Figure 16. Howell demonstrates that he has the privilege of a white man, but not that of a straight, white man. He uses small font to joke about it (31:00).	53
Figure 17. ElleOfTheMills uses text to temporally situate her narrative (02:17).....	53
Figure 18. Mikin ends her coming out story with a call to subscribe, which is also animated (10:03).....	54
Figure 19. ElleOfTheMills faces the camera (00:03).	55
Figure 20. Eugene Lee Yang performs a different choreography than the other attendees of the church, here represented by six identical benches, a lectern and two candelabras (01:20).....	68
Figure 21. After correction by the priest, Yang moves in sync with the others (01:29).	69
Figure 22. mallow610's channel showcases typical style elements employed by YouTubers (accessed 23 Aug. 2021).	76
Figure 23. ElleOfTheMills crying as she talks about coming out (02:23).	78
Figure 24. jessiepaage crying as she is on the phone, debating whether to come out (00:27).	78
Figure 25. The Rhodes twins crying as they come out to their father via a phone call (03:40).	79
Figure 26. Graceffa is seen kissing his acting partner (03:18).....	81
Figure 27. Bria and Chrissy kiss at the end of their song (03:36).	81
Figure 28. Mikin's drawing of herself (00:03).	82
Figure 29. Search results for covers of Graceffa's coming out song.	86

List of Tables

Table 1. Overview of categories of coming out and analysed videos.	37
---	----

Introduction

After decades of secrecy, queer lives are more visible than ever today: On TV, lesbian relationships as in *Killing Eve* (2018) or gay ones as in *Schitt's Creek* (2015) are audience hits and films about queer relationships are increasingly made, e.g. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) or *Booksmart* (2019), which centre queer people as protagonists as well as fully fleshed-out side characters who are no longer just the “polluted homosexual” (Seidman 126). Moreover, in real life, LGBTQ* people are gaining rights, for example with same-sex marriage now being legal in 29 countries (Human Rights Campaign n.p.). As a result, queer people are not expected to conceal their sexual identity any longer in many parts of the world (Sullivan 130). Today, “homosexuals claim publicly that they are gay” (ibid.) and are granted the same or similar rights as heterosexuals. Still, LGBTQ*² people live in a heteronormative world, in which heterosexual people are afforded a “privileged, superior status that is secured by the state, social institutions, and popular culture” (Seidman 6). As nearly everyone is assumed to be heterosexuals, queer people are expected to announce their divergent sexuality by ‘coming out’ to others.

The term ‘coming out’ already implies that something previously hidden is made public. It is part of the metaphor ‘coming out of the closet’ and denotes disclosing one’s own non-heterosexual sexuality. Despite its wide-spread use today, the metaphor of the closet has only been employed since the 1960s. While gay men did liken their hidden sexuality to a “double life” or “wearing a mask” (Chauncey 6), ‘coming out’ in the early 20th century indicated coming out into a gay society/world at enormous drag balls, similar to how women were introduced into society as debutantes (Chauncey 7). By the 1930s, the US introduced laws to suppress drag balls and prohibited the employment of gay people, essentially forcing them into a nation-wide closet, thus creating the basis for the metaphor. Only in the 1960s, the intended audience of coming out shifted from other gay people to predominantly straight ones (Chauncey 8). Being in the closet then means that queer individuals hide their sexual identity in the central areas of life, i.e. with family, friends and at work. They may even go so far as to marry someone from the opposite sex as to avoid exposure (Seidman 25). This shift of

² For ease of reading, I have opted to not use the more encompassing abbreviation LGBTQIA*. Instead, I employ LGBTQ* to denote lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and, more broadly, queer people. The asterisk is included to account for any other sexual or gender identities such as pansexual, asexual or intersex, which are not explicitly named.

meaning has been retained until now, ensuring that the metaphor is still applicable: Without a coming out most queer people are assumed to be straight.

Nonetheless, the closet itself has changed as have the people coming out of it. Steven Seidman terms the closet a “life-shaping social pattern” (8), as it not only involves the construction of a public life that is contradictory to one’s own sense of self and feelings, but is also created by “heterosexual domination” (ibid.), which upholds gay oppression through legal, familial and cultural actions (ibid.). Nowadays, however, this oppression has lessened and where queer individuals used to migrate to cities to escape their hostile rural hometowns, today they may do so to find people who share their lifestyle (Seidman 11), rather than to escape danger. Seidman also points out that LGBTQ* people, who choose to conceal their sexual identity only in specific areas of their lives, are not automatically in the closet. Instead, they are making informed choices who to tell based on their own preferences (Seidman 8). Moreover, queer individuals are coming out up to ten years earlier than 30 years ago, and amongst 13 to 18-year-olds approximately 5-6% identify as LGBTQ* (Mehra & Braquet 402). Even so, the closet continues to exist and is a part of LGBTQ* people’s lives.

Despite being created by an oppressive power, the closet is also a space of performance. Michel Foucault argues that the truth of one’s sexuality is tightly interwoven with external powers that work to suppress it. Rather than seeing truth as something that would always be able to surface freely were it not for some form of power subduing it, society has adopted the ‘confession’ as a deeply ingrained mode of discourse during which the truth simply bursts out of us as it can no longer be contained. In fact, however, confession not only needs a speaking subject, but, more importantly, an interlocutor who is put in a position of power by being allowed to judge the confessing subject. Foucault thus argues that the act of confessing does not happen naturally but becomes an obligation in our society (60-62). Similarly, hiding one’s sexuality by staying in the closet is not a completely autonomous choice but rather the result of external powers suppressing one’s personal truth. By coming out, queer individuals become the ‘confessing subject’ and invite their interlocutors to judge them. While it may seem as if this puts them in a completely passive role, closeted individuals actively shape how they perform their identities. To avoid suspicion or even exposure, they monitor the sexual nature of everyday things and actions such as clothes or accessories as well as walking or talking (Seidman 31), thus being in a constantly heightened state of attentiveness. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes that this “closetedness” is its own type of

performance that begins with a silent speech act, which is defined in relation to its particular surrounding discourse (3). Analysing these “relations of the closet” (ibid.), i.e. the relation between what is known or made explicit and what is not, can reveal new aspects of speech acts (ibid.). Therefore, uncovering the relationship between power, the closet and performance is of immense importance to the coming out process.

Previous studies have defined coming out as a linear progression with a definitive end, i.e. an LGBTQ* individual goes through certain stages to finally reach complete acceptance. One of the most influential models depicting this is Vivienne Cass’s: She proposes six stages, namely, ‘identity confusion’, ‘identity comparison’, ‘identity tolerance’, ‘identity acceptance’, ‘identity pride’ and ‘identity synthesis’ (220-235). Only the disclosure of sexuality in the ‘identity acceptance’ stage lets gay men fully accept themselves (Cass 231-232). Similarly, Eli Coleman draws on Cass but suggests a five-stage model, consisting of “pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, and integration” (470). When LGBTQ* individuals reach the ‘integration’ stage they are fully out and accepting of their own sexuality (479). However, these models all relegate coming out to a singular event in time, which is over once it is performed. They also imply that it is possible to come out to everyone at the same time or, at least, in close succession. Apart from the fact that it is unclear who is included in ‘everyone’, it is also unlikely that an LGBTQ* individual is able or even wants to simultaneously disclose their sexuality to family, friends, work colleagues etc. In fact, there might be numerous reasons for staying in the closet depending on the situation and different audiences (e.g. from coming out to work colleagues to close family). Additionally, if queer individuals come out to, for example, their family and friends but not to their colleagues it is debatable whether the stage model would still view this as a “full, outward disclosure of one’s sexuality” (Guittar & Rayburn 337). These models, while helpful in pointing out common denominators, thus lack the possibility to account for the ways in which people come out to different audiences or in different contexts.

Rather than subscribing to distinct stages of coming out, newer theories emphasise more elaborate strategies. In these theories, coming out is not a process with a clear ending but rather a lifelong career that has to be continually managed (cf. Orne 2011; Lewis 2014; Guittar & Rayburn 2016), for instance by deciding if and how to disclose one’s sexuality to others in different situations. By employing a “strategic outness” (Orne 692), LGBTQ* people choose specific strategies and tools such as “direct disclosure, active concealment [and] indirect clues

or speculation” (ibid.). In addition to that, Michele Eliason and Robert Schope propose that instead of following rigid stages, common themes related to coming out should be defined, such as feeling different from heterosexual people, exploring an identity (20), labelling oneself (21) or internalising oppression (22). These theories seem to better capture subtleties of coming out as they raise awareness for the fact that it involves far more than can be comprised in a simple stage model. By highlighting the fact that coming out is a lifelong process, they also remove the notion that coming out should be the ultimate goal for LGBTQ* people.

Both stage and career models, however, imply that sexual identity – at least, minority sexual identity – is something to be managed. This ties in with Judith Butler’s argument that identity is “an *effect* of discursive practices” (*Gender* 24 [original emphasis]), meaning it does not exist on its own. Specifically, Butler coined the term ‘gender performativity.’ She suggests that performativity is “a repetition and ritual” (Butler, *Gender* xv) which is only naturalised in a bodily context (ibid.), and states that gender consists of the repetition of acts within a normative frame (*Gender* 45). The concept of performativity can also be applied to a sexual identity as heterosexual subjects consistently aim to repeat “normative sexual positions” (Butler, *Gender* 166). For LGBTQ* individuals, coming out can be seen as a different performance in which they break with societal expectations of heterosexuality, but, simultaneously, still comply with society’s demand of disclosure.

The performance of coming out has drastically changed over the years with the availability of digital ways of coming out, such as via YouTube. Since its creation in 2005, the video sharing platform has become one of the biggest social media websites: It has two billion monthly active users (Spangler n.p.), more than 31 million channels (Funk n.p.) and hosts over five billion videos (Aslam n.p.). Its main purpose is to produce video content for a mostly un-paying audience and interact with it. LGBTQ* people increasingly use this way of communication to disclose their sexuality online and coming out videos have even become a distinct genre (de Ridder & Dhaenens 55). They typically generate many views (de Ridder & Dhaenens 55) irrespective of the form of disclosure, which can range from creators outing themselves for the first time to their viewers or coming out live to family members to divulging how their previous coming out unfolded (Lovelock, *My Coming Out* 73). The videos generally follow the elements of digital storytelling as defined by Joe Lambert, namely, they all offer a personal point of view (e.g. narration in the first person), a dramatic question which structures their story, emotional content and an emphasis on voice as well as music (45-59). Their self-

professed purpose is to offer a positive representation of LGBTQ* people, who are able to live happy and fulfilled lives, as well as encourage their viewers to be true to who they are (cf. for example Sivan 2013; Franta 2014; Nielsen 2015). They echo the idea that the presentation and reception of authentic stories “will help heal the wounds of social division” (Poletti, *Stories* 5). It seems that despite LGBTQ* rights becoming more mainstream, creators still want to emphasise the positive effects of coming out, thus alleviating their viewers’ possible fears and educating them in the process.

Previous research on coming out videos on YouTube has largely focused on analysing the performativity of sexuality. Mostly, this has been done with regard to the ‘talking head’ format where the narrator is shown in a close-up and speaking directly to the camera, while other types of coming out have been largely neglected. In terms of performance, these videos all share generic conventions to present a narrative “in which the storyteller constructs a linear progression towards an essential gay identity” (de Ridder & Dhaenens 50) consisting of influential moments in their lives (Cover & Prosser 89). Drawing on Butler’s concept of performativity, Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser find that the production of such a “linear, coherent, essentialist self” (87) reinforces and stabilises the idea of an essentialist non-heterosexual identity, which disguises the performative nature of sexual identity (ibid.). This positions queer sexualities as innate and essential (Lovelock, *My Coming Out* 79). So far, little attention has been paid to innovative ways that individuals have started using for sharing their sexuality with their audience and to whether the various forms of disclosure affect the performativity of sexuality. LGBTQ* people are no longer only talking to their viewers, but may also express their coming out via song, dance or in a live announcement to family members.

In a naïve reading of the commonly assumed dichotomy of public vs. private places, coming out on YouTube is an act that publicises private matters. After all, few things seem more public than making a YouTube video visible to the whole world, especially one that discloses intimate details about its creators (Berryman & Kavka, *Crying* 95). However, Susan Gal proposes the concept of a ‘fractal distinction,’ stating that the differentiation between public and private can be infinitely projected onto narrower or broader contexts: While, for example, the house may be private in comparison to the street around it, once the focus lies on the inside of the house, the living room becomes relatively public (Gal 81-82). Patricia Lange builds on this concept and applies it to YouTube videos: In a broad context, YouTube is public, but on the site itself creators are able to determine the degree of this publicness, for instance by choosing

not to promote a video or using cryptic tags to make finding it harder (Lange 369). The same is true for the content of coming out videos as creators often refuse to give detailed backgrounds on their relationships or sexual experiences. Additionally, which information is deemed private and which is not can also be related to whether its surrounding context classifies it as appropriate to mention it or not (Nissenbaum 143). Thus, although the creators talk about a very private matter, namely sexuality, it is still possible to draw boundaries and withhold information that is considered too personal in coming out videos.

My research relies mainly on a close reading and qualitative comparison of different types of coming out videos by individuals identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual/pansexual. I have chosen not to include transgender videos as coming out as trans poses problems that are not mirrored in coming out as LGB. For example, trans people have practically no choice but to disclose their gender identity post-transition to social contacts who knew them before. LGB people do not face such hurdles (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull 1173) and the inclusion of trans coming out videos therefore might turn the data non-homogenous.

I have chosen to distinguish between four types of coming out as the use of specific media informs the queer creators' narrative. In reading Karen Barad's theory of agential realism in relation to autobiography, Anna Poletti posits that the medium chosen by the autobiographer is essential to the "form the autobiography will take [...] but also the epistemology and metaphysics of the process itself" (*Stories* 63). In the same vein, the YouTube creator telling their story is the autobiographer who actively chooses a certain way of presenting it. The first type of this presentation is the 'talking head' format, which I include to investigate whether it favours a certain coming out model, i.e. stage or career, as this has not yet been analysed. It will serve as a base line for the comparison with the other formats. 'Live reaction' denotes a coming out on camera to family members or friends, while 'song' means producing a song and/or music video to come out. So far, both of these types have not been discussed at all in research. The type 'miscellaneous' was created to take videos into account that do not fit into any other format but are, nonetheless, very popular on YouTube, including, for instance, performing a dance or combining different formats.

My corpus consists of six videos for each category besides the miscellaneous one, where I will analyse seven. As jessiepage's video is divided into two parts for reasons of length, I have elected to treat it as one, bringing the total number of videos to 25. Typically, the videos range between three to ten minutes, with the exception of two videos below three minutes and one

with 45. The videos were found by searching for the terms ‘coming out’, ‘coming out song’, ‘coming out dance’ or ‘coming out live reaction’ in the search bar on YouTube. The results were then filtered according to the number of views. As a result, all of the exemplary videos have been chosen based on the number of their views. Even if numbers vary widely between categories, they are still the most watched ones within their respective type.

In my thesis, I propose that LGB people no longer limit themselves to the talking head format to come out to their viewers on YouTube but have created new ways to share their sexuality. These inform how they perform their sexuality, depict the closet and share selected aspects of their lives. I aim to answer the following research questions: Firstly, I will investigate the structure of the videos as well as how it influences the creators’ claims to authenticity. Furthermore, I will examine the interplay between the presentation of coming out as an authentic expression of the self and essentialist understandings of sexual identity as well as to what extent the actual performance of sexual identity can be related to a stage or career model of coming out. Secondly, I will focus on the depiction of the closet, namely whether it changes depending on the coming out type and what common themes exist across the types. Finally, I will examine the degree of publicness that creators allow in their performance of sexuality by highlighting the creators’ strategies to preserve their privacy despite coming out publicly. In terms of methodology, I will rely on a close reading of the videos’ transcripts as well as an analysis of their visual dimension.

In chapter 1, background information on coming out of the closet will be provided. As critics are divided over what the phrase ‘coming out’ actually entails, I will first compare its different definitions in 1.1. In 1.2, I will provide the history of coming out in the U.S. and, more generally, in Europe to show how coming out can be and was used as a powerful tool to gain visibility and rights in a heteronormative society. Finally, in 1.3, I will turn to the closet and discuss how it is a vital part of any queer experience of sexuality and in how far it still shapes LGBTQ* people’s lives today. The different models of coming out will be highlighted in chapter 2. In 2.1, I will discuss the similarities and differences between the most influential stage models as well as the problematic aspects of understanding sexuality formation as a linear process. To showcase the progression to less rigid notions of this formation, I will turn to career models in 2.2, which stress the importance of viewing coming out as a continuing process.

Chapter 3 discusses the performative nature of sexuality as a whole by particularly drawing on Butler’s performativity theory. In 3.1, YouTube as a platform for performance will be

examined. Here, the focus will lie on the construction of online identities and communities. In 3.2, I will explain the different types of coming out videos and to what extent the creators claim that their self-presentations are 'authentic'. In 3.3, I will also analyse whether the actual performance of sexuality can be related to an essentialist or constructivist understanding of sexuality as well as in which ways it corresponds to a stage or career model of coming out.

In chapter 4, the issue of privacy will be foregrounded. I will provide definitions of secrecy and privacy (4.1) before delving into the depictions of the closet on YouTube. Namely, I will investigate whether it changes depending on the type of video as such an analysis has been neglected so far. I will base my interpretation on Sedgwick's concept of 'closetedness' as its own type of performance. In addition to that, I will draw on Foucault's argument that the form of 'confession' has become so prevalent that we perceive truth as just surfacing freely, rather than being constrained by an external power (60). This combination of confession and power is suitable to the analysis of the closet as it helps to discuss the power structures that keep people in the closet and also force and/or help them to come out of it, highlighting that secrecy sits at the core of power. Finally, I will examine the degree of publicness that creators allow in their performance of sexuality (4.3). Here, I will employ Lange's and Nissenbaum's discussions of privacy and analyse in which ways creators still have power over their private information. In the final section, 4.4, I will compare the different categories of coming out and discuss creators' possible reasons for choosing a particular type of presentation.

My central claim in this thesis is that, in the videos, the performance of coming out not only offers insights into how a queer identity is made visible or claimed, but also into how the experience of the closet and its – often forced - privacy affect a queer identity. I argue that choosing a specific type of presentation for coming out impacts the extent to which the closet is mentioned and private matters are shared with an audience. By highlighting the importance of multiple types of presentation of coming out and their respective characteristics, my research offers an in-depth look at the possibilities LGBTQ* individuals have for managing the disclosure of their sexual identity in an increasingly digital world.

1 Coming Out of the Closet

The history of the phrase *come out* can be traced back to the early 20th century. Nowadays, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines *to come out* as "to acknowledge or declare openly

that one is homosexual” (Hilton n.p.). The roots of this explanation are found in the 1940s, when obscure gay slang guides explained it as “to become socially or sexually active within homosexual circles; [and/or] to realize that one is homosexual” (Hilton n.p.). Referencing the custom of women being introduced into society as debutantes at balls, gay men came out into a gay society at drag balls (Chauncey 7). By the 1960s, coming out no longer implied a primarily gay audience but shifted to a straight one (Chauncey 8) and in 1989, the *OED* formally defined it as we understand it today.

Coming out is also intricately tied to the existence of the closet as in the metaphor *coming out of the closet*, which seems to have originated in the 1960s. While the phrase is originally only associated with making a negatively coded sexuality public, by the late 1970s, the *OED* finds that it can also mean making any “public declaration in support of or against something specified; to declare oneself a supporter of, or act as an advocate for, a particular cause” (Hilton n.p.). In 1969 and 1970 respectively, the terms *gay liberation* and *gay pride* also appear in the *OED* (ibid.) for the first time, suggesting that coming out has become possible on a wider scale than just at drag balls.

The act of coming out can also be related to speech act theory. In any utterance, John Austin distinguishes between three dimensions: Firstly, the ‘locutionary act’ denotes the meaning of an utterance in its most conventional sense. Secondly, the ‘illocutionary act’ describes the force of the utterance, i.e. whether it informs, warns, orders etc.. Thirdly, the ‘perlocutionary act’ is the effect the utterance has on listeners as it can, for instance, convince or persuade them (Austin 122). When LGBTQ* individuals come out, the locutionary act describes their homosexual identity, the illocutionary one discloses or reveals it (Chirrey 29) and the perlocutionary one creates “a gay self [in which] an individual alters social reality by creating a community of listeners” (Liang 293). It follows that coming out is more than a simple description of a state as it can induce real change. This makes coming out a “performative utterance” (ibid.). What is especially interesting here is that the perlocutionary act of coming out is entirely dependent on the listener’s own world view and expectations as coming out can be interpreted as neutral information, but also as a shameful confession. Therefore, coming out can cause a discrepancy between the speaker’s intended meaning and the hearer’s understood message (Chirrey 31-32). It is important to consider these dimensions of coming out as they have to be routinely managed by LGBTQ* individuals. By disclosing their

non-straight sexual identity, LGBTQ* people are not only vocalising a fact of life but performing a new identity.

1.1 Definition of Coming Out

Despite the seemingly straightforward definition of coming out by the *OED* as acknowledging or declaring oneself as homosexual, critics disagree on the details of that definition. While Butler defines coming out merely as an “act of dangerous communication” (*Excitable Speech* 116), others stress the importance of it being a process in which a set of parameters has to be met before it is completed (Guittar & Rayborn 337). These parameters differ for individual critics (cf. Cass 1997; Coleman 1982; Troiden 1989), but in all approaches coming out is not just about either the acknowledgment or the declaration of one’s non-heterosexual sexuality anymore, but about ultimately merging the two (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull 1149). This suggests that coming out is not completed until one has come out to other people rather than just to oneself, which is only possible after having gone through certain steps.

One parameter of coming out on which everybody seems to agree, however, is that it only has meaning within a hetero-normative context. Seidman points out that even if homosexuality is accepted, our current world order still prioritises heterosexual people. He calls this practice “heterosexual dominance” (Seidman 6), arguing that coming out does not challenge a hetero-normative culture if it is not accompanied by a demand for equal rights for LGBTQ* individuals (ibid.). Thus, at the basis of gay life lies the contradiction that while living an ‘out’ life is possible, LGBTQ* people are still part of “a world where most institutions maintain heterosexual domination” (ibid.). Additionally, if heterosexuality is always assumed, LGBTQ* individuals will have to declare their divergent sexuality throughout their lives to acquire visibility (Urbach 69). As such, being queer is constantly placed within a power relationship that favours heterosexuality, which makes coming out a necessary act.

Moreover, coming out is always reliant on its surrounding discourse and context. The act of divulging one’s sexuality to others either happens through discourse, e.g. by saying “I am gay”, or through actions, e.g. by kissing someone of the same sex in public (T. Adams 93). Both of these types of coming out are contextual, however: Not only can labels denoting queer sexualities change, but actions seen as LGBTQ* can, too, depending on the situation. The latter is particularly true for acts that rely on gender inversions to assess whether someone is queer or not. For example, a woman dressing in a masculine fashion for Halloween will most likely

not be considered a deviation from the norm as it happens on a special occasion. If she continues to transgress her gender, e.g. by dressing or acting in what is considered a masculine manner outside of such special occasions, others might start to question her heterosexuality (T. Adams 89). Precisely because coming out is an unstable term dependent on its context, Tony Adams posits that people need to confirm their LGBTQ* identity intelligibly, preferably in a discursive manner such as saying, “I am a lesbian” (ibid.). While some examples are harder to read than others, e.g. two women kissing in a club are often interpreted as queer, but also as wanting to gain attention, coming out should not only be relegated to distinct statements. Doing so robs LGBTQ* people of a multitude of forms of coming out that are only possible because the term is loosely defined.

Indeed, contrary to Adams’s belief that coming out primarily needs to occur through a declarative utterance, people can use context to come out without actually voicing their sexual identity. Folke Broderon finds that queer people can use gay-connotated symbols to ease the burden of coming out. In his analysis of a teenage girl’s coming out, he argues that her practice of decorating her room exclusively with posters of female football players and rainbow flags affords her more power over her coming out. As she lets others, primarily her mother, decide for themselves what these posters mean, she redirects the responsibility of answering probing questions to those who pose them in the first place (Broderon 9-10). Such a strategy allows her to illustrate that her lesbianism is not only defined by the absence of heterosexuality, but that it is an assemblage of her person complete with rainbow flags and pictures of female football players. Thus, she refuses to be simply categorised as gay, but instead presents her gayness as just another part of her identity (Broderon 11). By manipulating the instability of coming out, LGBTQ* individuals are able to gain as much agency as possible within a heteronormative society as they can share the task of coming out with their interlocutor. To do so, LGBTQ* people must be aware of the changing contexts surrounding coming out and queerness, which is made evident in the next chapter, where the history of coming out is discussed.

1.2 History of Coming Out

The way people come out as well as the timing and frequency of the disclosure is related to LGBTQ* people’s rights and visibility. In the U.S., gay life flourished in the form of drag balls in the early 20th century. These balls celebrated drag artists, i.e. one gender dressing in clothes

typically worn by the opposite one as well as performing mannerisms associated with it, and coming out at such a ball was seen as an initiation into gay society (Buckner n.p.). By the 1930s, however, those balls were suppressed by state laws. In addition to this, the employment of gay people was prohibited, and the nation essentially became a huge closet, as it forced gay people to hide (Chauncey 8). As a result, coming out was not easily possible during that time, especially not to straight people, as LGBTQ* individuals would often face harsh repercussions for doing so. Gay life was thus relegated to a subculture.

After the Stonewall Riots³ in New York in 1969, coming out became a powerful tool for LGBTQ* activists to demand rights. In the earliest publication by the *Gay Liberation Front*, the opening lines read “Come out of the closet before the door is nailed shut” (Bobker 196). By stressing the importance of coming out, queer activists hoped to gain recognition and rights. Coming out was further employed as a strategy to become recognised in the 1980s and 1990s in the course of the AIDS crisis. As the AIDS epidemic wrecked the gay community while the U.S. government refused to acknowledge the disease’s existence, LGBTQ* activists began demanding media coverage of the spread of the virus. Most prominently, the activist group ACT UP (*AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power*), founded in 1987 in New York City, worked to fight against AIDS (Schulman 45) and developed the slogan “silence = death”. It was displayed next to their logo, an upward-pointing pink triangle which was based on the downward-pointing one used by the Nazis to denote homosexual people in concentration camps (Schulman 611). The logo refers to the fact that in the 1940s a nation’s silence led to the death of thousands of gay men, stressing the repetition of this relation with regard to the AIDS crisis (Ayoub 41). Coming out therefore became a powerful way to make visible not only the existence but also the suffering of a whole community and demand counter measures.

By coming out *en masse* in the US in the 1990s, gay people were also able to find themselves part of a national community which made fighting for equal rights easier. According to Alexandra Chasin, the first time gay people found their common strength was the “nationwide, gay boycott of oranges and juice from the Florida Citrus Commission, whose spokeswoman, Anita Bryant, led a campaign against gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Florida” (92; qtd. in Sender 5). Coming out allowed LGBTQ* individuals to unite and exert

³ The Stonewall Riots refer to the time when the New York City police raided a gay club in Greenwich Village, which led to six days of protests, including violent clashes with police. The riots are widely seen as sparking the gay rights movement in the U.S. (History.com Editors n.p.).

power as an entity. Doing so also resulted in LGBTQ* activists' involvement in local and national party politics (Bell 59). By the early 1990s, the first effects of this community-building could be seen in the beginnings of a change in public opinion. As a result of ever more people coming out, straight people became increasingly aware of LGBTQ* individuals, be it within their family or friendship circles or just acquaintances (Garretson 3). In 1987, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a mental disorder from the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Cabaj n.p.) and in 1990, same-sex sexuality was also no longer classified as a psychiatric disorder by the U.S. Department of Justice (Bell 9). The formation of a gay community not only helped gay people find each other then, but, even more importantly, made straight people realise their existence, which, in turn, paved the way for increased rights for LGBTQ* individuals.

In Germany, gay activism started to form at the beginning of the 20th century. Already in 1897, Magnus Hirschfeld, a doctor, founded the "Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (SHC)" (Dose 41). Its main goal was to repeal Paragraph 175 of the German penal code, which criminalised homosexual conduct (ibid.). Moreover, the SHC also developed a sex education programme and published scientific essays in journals and books (Dose 42). A little later, a rival gay rights organisation was founded by Friedrich Radszuweit: the League for Human Rights (*Bund für Menschenrechte*). It also lobbied for the repeal of Paragraph 175, but, in addition to that, produced a publishing imperium. In the 1920s, its various gay magazines flourished in the Weimar Republic (Samper 39). By 1924, the League for Human Rights had a self-reported membership of 100,000 people (Samper 49) – though others put the number at half that much (Dose 47). It encouraged the readers of its magazines to view and use coming out as a political act (Samper 52) in the hope that this would help in decriminalising homosexuality (Samper 54). However, Paragraph 175 remained in place. By 1926, the decline of these magazines was brought on by a new law censoring "trash and smut" (Samper 91) texts, which disproportionately affected the sale of homosexual magazines (Samper 103). After Hitler's accession to power in 1933, the decriminalisation of homosexuality was no longer possible and by 1934, "the severity of sanctions against male same-sex acts" intensified (Samper 161). Still, despite these obstacles, the gay rights movement campaigns in Germany and the U.S. employ similar strategies to affect a change in public opinion.

After the second world war and at the same time as Stonewall in the US, gay activism in Europe reached a peak. The *Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire* staged a public

demonstration in Paris in 1971, while in West-Germany the first gay activist group was founded. In 1978, the leading *International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA)* was founded in the UK. It focused on the European framework as it hoped to get states less likely to address gay rights to follow the lead of more progressive European countries. The uniting credo of these groups was that sexuality had to be made visible for mobilization to occur (Ayoub 48). Thus, outing campaigns similar to the one by the *Gay Liberation Front* were conducted, for instance in Slovakia under “out yourself” (Ayoub 45). In interviews with LGBTQ* activists, Philipp Ayoub finds that people in all EU member states were scared to out themselves, but that a coming out was even more difficult in countries such as Poland, where, in 2000, only 10 percent of the population reported to have met a gay person (48). In spite of the similarities between activists in Europe and in the U.S., the former had and still have to deal with the many differences amongst European states. Therefore, their efforts are more focused on specific countries.

Still, on a global level, the public opinion on homosexuality slowly changed for the better in the 1990s and LGBTQ* people are steadily gaining more rights. The *World Values Survey (WVS)* and the *European Values Survey (EVS)* show that all of Western Europe, Australia, Canada and the U.S. became increasingly liberal towards homosexuality in the 1990s (Garretson 213).⁴ Furthermore, homosexuality was partially decriminalised in the UK in 1967 – although still putting the age of consent at 21, thus considerably higher than for heterosexual sex acts - and completely in 2001 (Dryden n.p.). Similarly, in Austria homosexuality ceased to be illegal in 1971 with the age of consent being 18 until 2003 (Brunner n.p.), while in Germany Paragraph 175 was finally repealed in 1994 (Lesben- und Schwulenverband n.p.). In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court repealed sodomy laws (Savin-Williams, New 14) and, since 2015, same-sex marriage has been legal in all 50 states (Georgetown University Law Library n.p.). In the EU, same-sex marriage is now allowed in 18 member states, which include the majority of Western Europe. Some other states at least offer same-sex civil unions and according to surveys the “majorities of adults in all 15 countries in Western Europe” (Lipka & Masci n.p.) support same-sex marriage. Even as Central and Eastern Europe remain largely opposed to same-sex

⁴ It is worth pointing out that in countries like Russia, China, Southeast Asia as well as parts of Africa and Latin America homosexuality was still found to be less justifiable (Garretson 213). Jeremiah Garretson attributes this phenomenon not to religious or cultural differences, but largely to the fact that a “liberalism toward homosexuality at a national level” is predicted by “the level of economic development of a country” (215), which is usually measured by its GDP.

marriage (ibid.) and the U.S. has introduced many anti-trans laws (Krishnakumar n.p.), on the whole, LGBTQ* people enjoy more visibility and rights than ever before.

The increase in rights also comes with a changed relationship to sexuality and coming out. Today, being queer is not necessarily a 'core' identity anymore around which individuals build their whole lives (Seidman 89). Instead, it is often seen as a 'thread' identity (Seidman 90), comparable to class, gender or race. While it does have implications for their lives, LGBTQ* people's prevailing attitude seems to be "I'm not a 'gay person', I'm a person who happens to be gay" (Savin-Williams, *New* 200). Ritch Savin-Williams finds in his study that young people's attitude towards coming out has also changed, in particular with regard to how they label themselves. He argues that they are less interested in subscribing to labels at all, and, if they do, favour newer ones, which, for example, included "pan-erotic" at the time of the study (Savin-Williams, *New* 1). Indeed, the terms to describe oneself as not straight have proliferated over the years: Labels have expanded to include terms such as heteroromantic, asexual, aromantic, polysexual or pansexual. Coming out nowadays seems to be less of a political statement and more of a personal decision to be carried out according to private predilections.

The more relaxed approach to coming out today compared to 30 years ago is also a consequence of more representation of LGBTQ* people. LGBTQ* politics are discussed openly in the news now and many politicians support gay rights (Garretson 4). Increased visibility can also be found in public figures coming out (most recently, the actor Elliot Page came out as trans) and living their lives openly. Television shows such as *Glee* (2009) or *Modern Family* (2009) foreground gay characters and their stories. This representation is, of course, still not perfect as, for instance, the "normal gay" (Seidman 126) is often depicted as a white man (ibid.) uncritical of heterosexual privilege (Seidman 159). However, this, too, is slowly changing with shows such as *Pose* (2018), inspired by the 1990 documentary on New York's ballroom scene *Paris Is Burning*, tackling stories by queer people of colour. LGBTQ* individuals today are able to find themselves represented in a multitude of ways, which allows them to be introduced to multiple forms of dealing with their sexual identity and coming out.

One additional way of increasing visibility and fostering a new way of coming out can be found on the internet and YouTube in particular. The development of Web 2.0 has ushered in an era in which traditionally marginalized groups are able to see themselves online (Mehra & Braquet 402). This has not only changed the way young people come out but also offers them new

forms for doing so. One such example is the website www.comingout.space, on which anyone can launch their own coming out story or engage with someone else's (Bobker 202). Similarly, coming out on YouTube has also gained popularity in the last ten years, shifting the disclosure to an audio-visual medium (Cover & Prosser 84). Evidently, the situation surrounding coming out has changed for the better in many parts of the world and young people today are constantly working to re-signify what coming out means and how it can be achieved. This has also impacted how the closet itself is experienced, which will be discussed in the next section.

1.3 Definition of the Closet

The *Merriam Webster* dictionary defines the closet as:

1a: an apartment or small room for privacy

b: a monarch's or official's private chamber

2: a cabinet or recess for especially china, household utensils, or clothing

3: a place of retreat or privacy

4: WATER CLOSET

5: a state or condition of secrecy, privacy, or obscurity (*Merriam-Webster.com* n.p.)

In all explanations but number two, privacy is either directly mentioned or implied as is the case for the water closet. Indeed, in the UK, the closet originates in 16th century “palace apartments” (Bobker x), in which it denoted a secluded place. However, this place of privacy was not necessarily only open to one person, but rather provided a safe place for discussing shifting political alliances. With the diminishing power of the monarchy, closets were re-designed to include water closets (as in explanation four) or bathing closets (ibid.). The architecture of closets only changed in the 19th century, when they became storage spaces (Bobker 195). In storage spaces, however, something can be hidden, tying in with definition five. Given its long association with being a private space, coming out of the closet is a fitting term as something previously hidden is now made public, i.e. a non-heterosexual identity.

Being ‘in the closet’ must then denote that someone possesses a hidden and potentially troubling secret. Adams proposes that seven conditions are necessary for the closet to exist in the first place:

1. LGBTQ* people need to be aware of their same-sex attraction and have the language to describe it.

2. They need to realise that their identity is marginal.
3. They need to realise that their identity is devalued.
4. They need to realise that their sexual identity might already be criticised even if it is just being discussed.
5. They must recognise that they are keeping a secret, i.e. their identity must not be easily accessible to them.
6. They need to realise that their attraction cannot simply be willed away.
7. They need to self-identify either as having same-sex attractions and/or as LGBTQ* (T. Adams 59).

As long as these conditions are not all met, the closet does not exist for an LGBTQ* individual (ibid.). The realisation that public and private life are at odds with one another makes the closet “a life-shaping social pattern” (Seidman 8). People are thus forced into a form of privacy in which they constantly have to assess who they are and how they present themselves, making the closet a great effort to uphold.

Deviating from the norm without being able to change this fact essentially forces LGBTQ* people to comply with a heterosexual power system. To gain social respect and integrate into a heterosexual society, they have to continuously manage their identity, often at the risk of their “personal integrity and well-being” (Seidman 55). However, this management presents a paradox as by creating the closet in the first place, a heightened awareness of homosexuality is caused. This has two effects: Firstly, in order to conceal their sexuality successfully, LGBTQ* people are forced to delve into it in more detail, thus paying close attention to what is prohibited. Secondly, rendering LGBTQ* people largely invisible opens up the possibility of everyone being queer (Seidman 58), which threatens heterosexual dominance. Thus, the closet fails to only target LGBTQ* people.

Like coming out, the practice of closeting has a history dating back to the post-war years. In the U.S., Seidman traces the closet’s ‘golden age’ back to the period between 1950 and 1980, where LGBTQ* individuals went as far as defining their queerness as only a “secondary part of themselves” (Seidman 10), even marrying someone of the opposite sex or avoiding jobs that would arouse suspicion (Seidman 25). As a matter of fact, the closet is still a powerful concept today as can be seen by the contemporary example of Colton Underwood. The former

candidate on *The Bachelor*, a reality TV-show in which one man selects a wife amongst dozens of women, recently came out as gay only after successfully competing on the aggressively straight show (Wertheim n.p.). While closeting may be less required nowadays because the attitudes towards homosexuality are more liberal, in a heteronormative society straightness is still always assumed, making compliance with it easier than voicing a deviation from the norm.

The closet is not experienced identically by everyone. Generally, it is about social isolation, which is sustained by being ashamed and/or fearful of one's sexuality (Seidman 30). Closeted individuals might go as far as avoiding other LGBTQ* people for fear of such an association arousing suspicion (T. Adams 76). It follows that they lack "basic rights, [...] opportunities and social benefits" (Seidman 30), such as belonging to a group. However, class or race, to name just two indicators, also play a role in how the closet is constituted. Middle-class individuals have an economic base that provides them with options such as moving to avoid exposure or financially sustaining themselves if they are alienated from their families. In contrast to this, working-class individuals are more likely to be economically dependent on their families and thus have fewer options (Seidman 41). In terms of race, white LGBTQ* individuals are privileged in the gay community, while people of colour can not only experience "a struggle for acceptance in the straight but also in the gay world" (Seidman 42). Therefore, the closet is not only influenced by the norms of a heteronormative society, but also by its privileges.

Regardless of privileges, however, the closet always requires a performance. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms this performance "closetedness" (3). Although it originates in an act of silence, i.e. not saying that one is queer, this silence is meaningful in relation to its surrounding discourse. Rather than coming out, which is often produced by more specific speech acts, the speech acts of the closet are constantly negotiated (ibid.). This performance may also be needed in every new situation, which poses the question of whether to come out to an interlocuter or not. As such, the closet remains a key feature in shaping LGBTQ* people's social life (Sedgwick 68). Seidman argues that to successfully pass as straight, LGBTQ* individuals have to pay close attention to the language they use, the feelings they express and their general behaviour, making them powerful actors rather than passive victims (31). Although maintaining the closet and, thus, the performance of closetedness demands considerable skills, its performance is forced upon its actors. Thus, it fails to be a source of empowerment for them, showing that Seidman's claim is only a positive reframing of inescapable restrictions.

However, not all instances in which LGBTQ* people choose to hide their queerness are equal to being in the closet. While Sedgwick argues that closets are erected whenever LGBTQ* individuals meet someone that they are not out to yet (68), Seidman does not recognise these instances as being actual closets. Instead, he terms them “episodic pattern[s] of concealment” (Seidman 8) in which people manage their sexual identity in specific situations but are not consumed with hiding a core part of it (Seidman 74). Additionally, people can also be out to themselves, i.e. they have accepted that they are queer, but may not (yet) want to share this with others (Savin-Williams, *New* 36). The closet is, thus, not a one-size-fits-all concept but has to be negotiated regarding specific situations and personal preferences. Individual perceptions notwithstanding, the common denominator of all closetedness is its constrictive nature.

2 Models of Coming Out

LGBTQ* people face a unique problem when developing their sexual identity. Usually raised by members of a heteronormative society and therefore lacking positive values about their identity, they are part of heterosexual communities that cannot help them understand their identity or are even openly hostile towards it (Rosario et al. 46). To recognize that they are not heterosexual, LGBTQ* individuals have to perceive “a contradiction between one’s initial heterosexual identity and one’s own psychosocial experience” (Rust 71). This makes LGBTQ* people’s experiences drastically different from those of other minority groups, whose members can teach each other about their identities (Rosario et al. 46). As a result, coming to terms with a non-heterosexual identity can be especially fraught.

In trying to understand the formation of homosexual identity, psychologists have drafted various models for it. Generally, these can be split into two groups: Earlier ones see sexual identity formation as a process in which certain stages have to be passed through, while later ones favour an approach in which arriving at a homosexual identity is seen as a life-long journey. Both of these will be discussed in the next sections.

2.1 Stage Models

In the late 20th century, psychologists and therapists tried to find models for homosexual identity development with many resorting to so-called ‘stages’. In one of the earliest discussions of homosexuality, Sigmund Freud argues that anyone can be homosexual and that

homosexuality is therefore not a psychological deviation, but its own form of sexuality (10-11). One of the first models for homosexual identity formation was developed by Kenneth Plummer in 1975. He posits that gay people begin by examining their homosexuality in a stage called 'sensitization' before accepting it in the next phase, termed 'significance'. At this point, they may still be incapable of public disclosure ('coming out' stage) because of social oppression. If they do manage to come out and completely accept their homosexual identity, however, they are able to progress to the last stage, which is called 'stabilisation'. At this point, though, gay individuals can feel trapped within their identity as part of a minority group (Plummer, *Stigma* n.p.; qtd. in Eliason & Schope 5). By putting the emphasis on stages that have to be mastered, the model assumes a linear progression of developing a homosexual identity, which can stagnate at any point if an individual does not complete the necessary steps. Ultimately, the existence of a non-straight sexual identity is portrayed as something to be managed, with even the final stage offering no respite.

One of the most influential stage models after Plummer's is the one Vivienne Cass formulated. On the basis of her year-long clinical work with gay people (Cass 219), Cass proposes a six-stage model the goal of which is integration into society. Similar to Plummer, each of Cass's stages can be accompanied by "identity foreclosure" (Cass 220), meaning that an individual no longer chooses to progress. In stage one, "identity confusion" (Cass 222), gay individuals become aware of their budding homosexuality, but still view themselves as heterosexual. By stage two, "identity comparison" (Cass 225), they realise that there is a contradiction between how they view themselves and how others see them. As a result of this, they may feel alienated from people around them. Throughout the third stage, "identity tolerance" (Cass 229), gay people learn to tolerate their homosexuality and may seek out other LGBTQ* people to counteract their feelings of isolation. Only in stage four, "identity acceptance" (Cass 231), do gay individuals accept their identity and may immerse themselves into a gay subculture. This leads to the fifth stage, "identity pride" (Cass 233), in which gay individuals become aware that their sexual identity is subordinate to a heterosexual one, leading them to devalue the dominant heterosexuality in order to re-evaluate their own identity in a positive light and become political activists. Finally, in stage six, "identity synthesis" (Cass 234), gay individuals discontinue their activist notions as they are now able to perceive heterosexuals in a more nuanced way. Their homosexual identity is no longer the determining aspect of their sense of self, but rather fully integrated into their complex identity (Cass 235). Similar to Plummer's

model, Cass's also outlines a linear process with the ultimate goal being integration into a primarily heterosexual society. While Cass allows for the possibility that individuals may choose not to progress further, there seems to be no possibility to skip any of the stages. Thus, the development of a non-straight sexual identity is presented as a clear-cut process.

In contrast to Cass, Eli Coleman's stage model stresses that individuals may not pass through each stage chronologically. Like Plummer and Cass, Coleman concedes the possibility of an individual never reaching the next stage, but he also grants that some people "may ascend through a number of stages or move through them so quickly that it is impossible to discern when and if they went through a particular stage" (Coleman 470). Still, his five stages of "pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, and integration" (ibid.) look very similar to Plummer's and Cass's. 'Pre-coming out' can largely be related to Plummer's 'sensitization' stage in which individuals are only subconsciously aware of their homosexuality (Coleman 471). Unlike Cass, Coleman puts the 'coming out' stage before 'exploration', claiming that gay people only experiment with their sexuality after having disclosed it to others. During this disclosure, he stresses that it is important to receive positive responses as otherwise individuals may be stalled in their progress (Coleman 474-475). Interestingly, Coleman also makes 'first relationships' a distinct stage, in which exploration is left behind and exchanged for a stable relationship (477) that leads to the last stage, "integration" (479). Hence, also in this model, the eventual goal is for LGBTQ* individuals to become integrated members of society who are no longer only interested in developing their sexual identity.

All three models have been criticised for their linearity and their support of an essentialist understanding of sexuality. Only allowing for the possibility that individuals may become locked in certain stages or move faster through some is insufficient as individuals often skip some stages altogether or return to earlier ones (McCarn & Fassinger 519). While the models are presented as universal, sexual identity formation is extremely personal as well as culturally or historically contingent, making "variations [...] too common to be considered deviations from the norm" (Rust 67). By suggesting a linear progression as the only possible way of forming a non-heterosexual identity, any deviation from it is viewed as negative and regressive (Weinberg 79; qtd. in Cox & Gallois 5). Additionally, the models do not account for the fact that people may also change or alter their identity throughout their lives (Cox & Gallois 5). As such, they purport that sexuality is fixed and describe individuals who regress into an earlier stage as "denying an 'essential' homosexual identity" (Horowitz & Newcomb 5). In these

models, it is impossible to complete the last stage without accepting one's homosexuality as an intrinsic part of one's identity (Horowitz & Newcomb 10). Thus, there is no space for people who, for example, accept their homosexuality but do not disclose it to others for whatever reasons. As a result, the models only cover a limited way of life for LGBTQ* individuals.

In a critical response to the linearity in stage models, Richard Troiden created a non-linear model that nonetheless features stages. He highlights that sexual identity is learned by following social scripts and, therefore, not stable as its meaning can vary over time and across cultures (Troiden 44). At the heart of his model is the distinction between a 'self-concept', i.e. how people view themselves, and 'identity', i.e. "perceptions of self that are thought to represent the self definitively in specific social settings" (Troiden 46). He conceptualizes homosexual identity formation as a "horizontal spiral" (Troiden 47), in which individuals can move back and forth or up and down through four stages: Once again, the first stage is "sensitization" (Troiden 50) in which a perception of difference is experienced by gay individuals, followed by "identity confusion" (Troiden 53) in which a previously assumed heterosexual identity is destabilized. In the third stage, "identity assumption" (Troiden 59), a homosexual identity becomes both a self-concept and an identity to be presented to others, typically through coming out. In the last stage, "commitment" (Troiden 63), gay individuals accept themselves, but to varying degrees at different points in time (Troiden 68). While Troiden still uses the concept of 'the stage', his model allows for individual differences, making it less rigid than the others. Furthermore, he acknowledges that there are nuances to integration and no longer demands LGBTQ* individuals' complete acceptance of themselves.

Although Troiden's model allows for more variance in the last stage, integration into society is still viewed as an important step similar to earlier models, which is problematic. Especially in Cass's model, the fifth stage makes gay individuals into activists who politicize their identity. To become a fulfilled gay person this stage has to be left behind, however, and one has to integrate into a heteronormative society, i.e. not rebel against heterosexual domination (Cox & Gallois 9). Indeed, gay individuals now perceive themselves "to be essentially the same as heterosexuals" (Kitzinger 54). The consequence of viewing integration as essential is that it upholds the status quo: If LGBTQ* individuals are instructed to pay attention to their inner world and find peace and acceptance within themselves, they are turned away from an oppressive outer world. As a result, no system change is needed but only an individual one (Kitzinger 55). Rather than showing how politicization can affect lasting change, it is delegated

to another stage to be passed through. This implies that stage models do not question society's heteronormative order, but rather describe homosexual identity foundation as congruent with it. Instead of pursuing how LGBTQ* people can use their identities as powerful tools for effecting change, the models restrain them because politicisation is only viewed as hindering LGBTQ* individuals' self-acceptance which severely limits their possible actions to advance gay rights.

Yet another problem in stage models lies in their hardly ever accounting for a bisexual identity. Either it is not considered at all, or it is only referred to as a stage to pass through on the way to homosexuality (Rust 51). Paula Rust finds that people select goals from what they perceive to be their choices in given social constructs. It follows that by not presenting people with the option of a bisexual identity, individuals in search of their sexual identity are faced with a binary decision (Rust 70). Indeed, Thomas Weinberg defines the only model for bisexual identity formation, which comprises four stages: "initial confusion", "finding and applying the label", "settling into the identity" and "continued uncertainty" (n.p.; qtd. in Horowitz & Newcomb 8). While stage models are helpful in figuring out common themes of non-heterosexual identity development, their restrictive linearity, essentialism and lack of inclusion of non-homosexual identities led to a new way of thinking about sexual identity formation. This will be highlighted in the next section.

2.2 Career Models

In reaction to the criticism of stage models, newer models emphasize the social nature of identity formation. Susan McCarn and Ruth Fassinger use a conventional four-stage model, consisting of "awareness", "exploration", "deepening/commitment" and "internalization/synthesis" (521), but introduce the notion that these stages manifest not only in an "individual sexual identity" (ibid.) but also in the context of a "group membership identity" (ibid.). With each new relationship or new setting in which identity or group membership is questioned, individuals may have to revisit any of the four stages (McCarn & Fassinger 522). Thus, the model acknowledges that identity formation is contingent on environmental factors. Similarly, Stephen Cox and Cynthia Gallois situate homosexual identity development within a social context by focusing on how LGBTQ* individuals construct an identity in response to interactions as part of a stigmatized group (7). LGBTQ* people do so through categorising themselves with "normative (prototypical) behaviors [sic],

characteristics, and values associated with the particular group membership” (Cox & Gallois 11) and by comparing their social group to others (Cox & Gallois 13). The advantage of such a model is that it accounts for a range of identities as well as the possibility of change, as social interactions may reshape identity (Cox & Gallois 15). Both models negate the idea that integration is the ultimate end goal for a homosexual identity formation as they draw a distinction between personal and group identity development and highlight that these two can be at odds with one another. In addition to that, they respect the fact that identities may change over time.

By following a social interactionist approach to homosexual identity formation, McCarn and Fassinger as well as Cox and Gallois also destabilise the idea that sexuality is essential. An essentialist perspective stresses that having the same feelings and displaying identical behaviours result in the same sexual identity because these feelings and behaviours express an innate, essential sexual orientation (Horowitz & Newcomb 14). In most stage models, individuals thus can only discover their sexual identity but not actively shape it. For social constructivist models, however, the important factor is the meaning LGBTQ* individuals ascribe to their sexual identity, including their desires and behaviours. This is not to completely disregard biological bases of sexual orientation, but rather to empower individuals in expressing their sexual identity freely (Horowitz & Newcomb 16). By viewing sexual identity as constructed, the models allow for fluid sexual identities that hinge on social structures, interactions and constructs of the self. Stopping identity formation at an earlier stage is no longer termed “identity foreclosure” (Cass 220), but simply recognised as a different expression of sexual identity that does not fit into a framework (Horowitz & Newcomb 17). As a result, these models are able to account for a variety of sexual identities, including, for instance, bisexuality.

However, completely foregoing stages in a model is also possible as Jason Orne shows. He focuses on strategies of coming out, positing that LGBTQ* individuals make strategic decisions on whom they disclose their sexuality to, which cannot simply be summarised in one ‘disclosure’ stage. Instead, LGBTQ* people engage in “strategic outness” (Orne 689), which is managed through multiple strategies: The first one is direct disclosure and consists of using a declarative statement to announce one’s non-heterosexual sexuality. This can be done orally, but also through a text message (ibid.). The second strategy is termed “clues” (Orne 690) and is reminiscent of Broderson’s idea that LGBTQ* individuals use context clues to let others

know about their sexual identity (cf. Broderson 11). For Orne, such clues can, for example, be associating with homosexual groups or exhibiting stereotypes of gay people. Strategic outness also includes not wanting others to know about one's sexuality, which is managed through the 'concealment' of clues and changing one's behaviour, making these actions another strategy (ibid.). Finally, Orne also gives individuals the possibility to surrender their agency in coming out by letting others speculate about their sexual identity instead (Orne 691). By creating a model that acknowledges that LGBTQ* individuals have multiple ways of coming out of but also staying in the closet, Orne stresses the contextual nature of identity formation. In his view, people are never fully out or in, but rather continuously involved in managing their identities. Therefore, the concept of stages does not apply.

Finally, Michele Eliason and Robert Schope in their comprehensive comparison of existing homosexual identity formation models identify popular ideas surrounding the development of a non-straight sexual identity. They propose that only the best parts of stage models should be retained and reformulated as themes which some LGBTQ* individuals may experience while others may not. Some of the most common themes include feeling different from other children or adolescents, being confused at some point because of the contradiction of one's own and others' view of oneself or comparing oneself to others by exploring one's identity. Eliason and Schope also account for the fact that disclosing one's sexual identity may not be a viable option for all LGBTQ* individuals because of possible repercussions (Eliason & Schope 20-21). In contrast to the stage models' unwillingness to recognise politicisation of a homosexual identity as valid, Eliason and Schope highlight that LGBTQ* individuals can form a political identity: They identify "internalized oppression" (Eliason & Schope 22) as a theme wherein negative stereotypes of one's own group are adopted and only overcome in a lifelong process (ibid.). Additionally, individuals may experience "distrust of the oppressor" (Eliason & Schope 21), i.e. LGBTQ* people are suspicious of groups that have historically been discriminatory towards them (ibid.). Politicization becomes a justified reaction to a hostile environment and not just a stage to overcome in this model. By focusing on themes rather than stages, Eliason and Schope remove the notion that identity formation is a linear process and recognise it as a life-long process that can take a variety of forms all of which are to be accepted. Most importantly, their model is one of several models that recognise the difficulties LGBTQ* people may face in a heteronormative society without being prescriptive about how they should deal with them.

3 The Performative Nature of Sexual Identity

Judith Butler conceptualises gender identity as a performative act. For her, gender consists of the repetition of a set of highly regulated acts which, in the course of time, appear natural (Butler, *Gender* 45). Thus, gender is not a state of being, but always a “becoming” (Butler, *Gender* 152) and a “doing” (Butler, *Gender* 34). Its actions may be gestures or movements which are established and presented as expressions of an essential sex (Butler, *Gender* 191). These acts are then cited to become a viable subject in society. For instance, a girl expressing femininity does not do so freely, but to comply with a societal norm in order to attain subjecthood (Butler, *Queer* 23). In contrast, a boy who expresses femininity may face severe sanctions. These norms can change over time, which shows that gender is not a stable category but always contingent on its context (*Gender* 191). Therefore, the attributes that are assigned to it are not expressive of male or female identities, but rather produce them (Butler, *Gender* 192). Heteronormativity further reinforces the notion that gender is essential by setting it up as a pre-existing identity and punishing those who fail to perform in line with this concept (Butler, *Gender* 190). Gender is thus streamlined within society and diverging expressions of it become impossible.

One method of constraining gender identity is to define it in relation to compulsory heterosexuality. When gender is understood as a binary system, the differentiation of masculine and feminine terms is accomplished by coupling them with expressions of heterosexual desire (Butler, *Gender* 30). This leads to a unified “internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire” (ibid.) which is based on an oppositional heterosexuality, i.e. a male gender is classified as desiring a female one and vice versa. Heterosexuality is then assumed to be the original sexuality to which homosexuality is only a copy. Precisely thus, however, it is revealed that there is no original heterosexuality as it requires a derivative to assume its place as the origin (*Acts* 312). Consequently, compulsory heterosexuality can only ever produce the semblance of a natural or original gender identity when, in reality, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, *Gender* 34). As such, compulsory heterosexuality is a practice that seeks to regulate gender identity and render it uniform (Butler, *Gender* 43). The performances of gender and sexuality therefore become intelligible in relation to each other.

However, suggesting that identities such as sexuality are performed is not identical to saying that they are roles that can be freely chosen. Similar to gender identity, sexual identity is constituted through a repeated performance, but also destabilised by it. The subject - the 'I' - is only the effect of a repetition but does not exist prior to the identity that is performed. Indeed, the 'I' is both created and challenged by the succession of performed repetitions. Still, Butler highlights that it is impossible to have a great distance to one's own sexual identity because even if it is categorised as a role to be played, that play is psychically entrenched (*Imitation* 311). Using the concept of performativity emphasises how categories such as sexuality are culturally constructed (Butler, *Agency* 147). The next sections will show that the performative character of sexual identity is also often evident on YouTube, where different creators perform sexual identity in a similar fashion.

3.1 YouTube as a Platform for Performance

YouTube has become one of the most important social networks on which identities can be presented and communities created. While it was originally conceived as a "personal storage facility for video content" (Burgess & Green 4), it is now promoting user-generated content (*ibid.*). Such content can, for example, take the form of sketches, short films, tutorials or, most popularly, vlogs (Simonsen 84). The latter are characterised by the creator directly addressing the audience and inviting feedback in the form of comments (Burgess & Green 54). As a result, YouTube allows anyone with a device that can access the internet to not only present their own identities but also engage with those of others (Burgess & Green 81). Doing so creates communities based on a "sense of shared space, rituals of shared practices, and exchange of social support" (Baym 86). YouTube is thus a space where even marginalised individuals, such as members of the LGBTQ* community, can find representation and like-minded people.

Creating an online identity is not just a representation of a 'real' offline identity, but also a performative act. Following Butler's theory of performativity, Rob Cover shows that identities constructed on social networking sites are performed by modifying one's own profile, e.g. on Facebook or Myspace, and by networking, e.g. gaining friends or subscribers (179). Social networking sites have inbuilt tools for performing a coherent identity as they let users provide information on topics like their gender and sexual identity, political views, biographical information, appearance (with the use of photos), work etc. (Cover 181). By employing these tools, users create a retrospective narrative of their identities to produce "the illusion of an

ongoing fixity of selfhood across time” (Cover 189). They can, however, also create completely fake/imaginary personas. Thus, Cover does not view the information published online as representational, but as “performative acts, which constitute the self and stabilise it over time as the effect of those choices” (181). Having a profile online is therefore another way of identity performance.

While Cover only analysed Facebook and Myspace, YouTube can also be categorised as a space that highlights performativity. In particular when discussing vlogs, Thomas Mosebo Simonsen finds that the primary form of representation there is the “performative” (85). The term is taken from Bill Nichols’s analysis of documentary films, in which the performative denotes documentaries which aim to align their audience with their view of the world, rather than only providing facts. The main message is ‘We/I speak about ourselves/myself to you’ (Nichols 150-153). Similarly, on YouTube, vlogs are focused on the creators’ representative roles (Simonsen 84). In line with Cover, however, I argue that these vlogs are not just simple representations of creators’ identities but produce them by drawing on performative acts such as speech or gestures as well as stylistic devices directly related to the medium YouTube, e.g. camera angle, editing or the use of music. Although creators frequently stress that they want to present an authentic self (de Ridder & Dhaenens 55; Lovelock, *My Coming Out* 79), their videos on YouTube are performative like any other. YouTube’s advantage over the offline world is that it allows creators to exercise a high level of control over their identity performance as they can always re-record parts or edit them out later.

3.2 Types of Coming Out Online

Nowadays, a plethora of ways exists for people to come out on YouTube. The following sections will group them into four categories: talking head, live reaction, song and miscellaneous videos (Table 1). I chose these four categories as the search term ‘coming out’ yielded a variety of coming out videos, which could not all be identified as talking head. Once I established common themes and modes of coming out videos, I specified my search to include ‘live coming out’, ‘coming out song’, ‘coming out poem’ and ‘coming out animation’. Finding enough videos for the miscellaneous category proved to be a challenge as coming out poems and/or animations are typically less popular than the other categories. Still, the videos in my analysis are all the top viewed ones in their respective groups. As YouTube does not allow for any other filtering, e.g. chronological, I had to filter based on views. Each category of

my sample features six videos, with the exception of the miscellaneous one: There, seven videos are presented as jessiepage's coming out is split into two parts, each approximately 15 minutes long, so as not to overwhelm her viewers with one unusually long video. As the second part was posted on the same date and seamlessly connects to the first, the videos are nonetheless thematically coherent. Thus, I have elected to treat this video as one. The total time of footage amounts to 03:57:58 hours.

Type	Explanation	Videos Analysed
talking head	one person is giving an account of their coming out directly to a camera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Coming Out" (Connor Franta) • "Coming Out" (Troye Sivan) • "Something I Want You To Know (Coming Out)" (Ingrid Nilsen) • "I'm Bisexual" (Shane Dawson) • "Coming Out To You" (AmazingPhil) • "I'm Coming Out" (Gloom)
live reaction	coming out on camera to family members or friends with or without their knowing that they are being filmed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "COMING OUT – LIVE REACTION" (mallow610) • "Coming out GAY to my 5 year old brother" (OliverVlogss) • "Twins Come Out To Dad" (Aaron Rhodes) • "COMING OUT TO MY DAD" (twaimz) • "Coming Out to Mom Live" (Matthewac1) • "Coming Out To My Parents (LIVE REACTION!!)" (Nathan Alexander)
song	producing a song and/or music video to come out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm bisexual – a coming out song! dodie (ad)" (doddleoddle) • "Joey Graceffa – DON'T WAIT (Official Music Video)" (Joey Graceffa) • "COMING OUT – THE OFFICIAL SONG" (Ally Hills) • "THE BISEXUAL SONG! YOU CAN SHARE THIS IF YOU'RE COMING OUT AS BI!!!" (happilyeverayanna) • "National Coming Out Song ("Take Me Or Leave Me")" (BriaAndChrissy) • "THE BISEXUAL COMING OUT SONG "I'm Still Me" – Kelsey" (LameLifeOfKelsey)
miscellaneous	performing a dance, combining different formats with one another, providing an animation, performing a poem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm Gay – Eugene Lee Yang" (The Try Guys) • "COMING OUT (ELLE MILLS STYLE)" (ElleOfTheMills) • "Basically I'm Gay" (Daniel Howell) • "Coming Out" (jessiepage) + "Coming Out (Part 2)" (jessiepage) • "My Coming Out Story (animated) Luna Mikin" (Luna Mikin) • "Coming Out Slam" (Holtzy's Hangouts)

Table 1. Overview of categories of coming out and analysed videos.

One limitation of filtering based on views is that the videos lack diversity. As Michael Lovelock points out "the ability to produce and share a coming out video at all is contingent upon various kinds of privilege" (*My Coming Out* 74), including internet access, a suitable device as well as filming and editing knowledge. In terms of sex, this privilege is fairly negligible in my analysis: 13 videos are by male creators and 11 by female ones. This was slightly surprising as

on YouTube in general, there are only four women among the top 30 most successful YouTubers in 2021 (Leskin & Hasch n.p.). My sample is more representative of the situation of race on YouTube, where white creators routinely acquire more exposure:⁵ Only five videos are by non-white individuals, two of them by Asian-Americans (The Try Guys and ElleOfTheMills), one by an Asian-Canadian (Gloom), one by a Palestinian-American (twaimz) and one by a black woman (happilyeverayanna). Luna Mikin's ethnicity is not identifiable but she mentions that she is not a native English speaker. The rest of the videos are all produced by white people, reflecting that sorting by views yields a pre-dominantly Caucasian field of creators. Still, despite these limitations, analysing these videos has merit as they are the top results when searching for online disclosures of sexuality. Thus, examining the creators' performances gives an insight into dominant modes of thinking about sexual identity and coming out.

3.2.1 Talking Heads

Talking head videos are primarily interested in the portrayal of an authentic self, but what counts as such is difficult to define. For Gary Fine, authenticity is connected to "an absence of cognitive understanding, creating an unmediated experience – sincere, innocent, original, genuine, and unaffected, distinct from strategic and pragmatic self-presentation" (155). However, according to Jean-François Bayart, "authenticity is not established by the immanent properties of the phenomenon or object under consideration" (78), but is the result of a certain contemporary perspective on the past (ibid.). YouTube videos, by definition, are always mediated, yet still champion authenticity. Indeed, the creators in the talking head videos are all micro-celebrities who have built their fame, and thus their income, around their personae (Senft 25) and their ability to foster a loyal fanbase. They are often deemed "more 'authentic' and 'ordinary' than traditional celebrities" (Giles 131), precisely because they are not famous for a particular kind of skill but solely for the presentation of themselves. David Giles argues convincingly that rather than YouTubers actually being more authentic, however, they are simply better at performing authenticity. He proposes that authenticity is not an inherent quality, but always relies on "the reproduction of familiar tropes [...] that are understood by the audience, credible manner of speech and gesture, and the context in which

⁵ A group of black YouTube creators even alleged that YouTube's algorithm "has been systematically removing their content" (Albergotti n.p.) based on racial discrimination. Consequently, they sued YouTube for racial discrimination in 2020 and while the suit was dismissed in 2021 (Allsup n.p.), it shows that black creators feel unfairly treated on the platform.

the performance is nestled” (Giles 132). For YouTubers, this means that they need to present their coming out as the unveiling of a real self rather than a mediated performance.

One way the creators convey authenticity is by relying on a simple set-up and minimal post-production. Talking head videos all feature a narrator that is viewed in a medium close-up, i.e. visible from the waist or shoulders upwards, casually dressed and talking directly to a static camera from their homes (Figure 1). Editing only happens sparsely, and, if at all, jump cuts, i.e. splitting one continuous shot into multiple ones, are used, thus portraying the videos as one long take. By disguising their edits, the creators produce the illusion of an undisturbed reality, reminiscent of a documentary (Hickethier 146; qtd. in Zapp 320). This, in turn, enhances the videos’ presentation as a straightforward retelling of a life story rather than a theatrical production. The set-up and technical choices thus produce an amateurishness that has been particular to YouTube videos since their inception (Giles 110) and is verbalised in Shane Dawson’s video:

I woke up this morning and [...] I didn't want to turn on my camera and my lights and [...] I don't want to do my hair. I just wanted to turn on my computer and talk to you guys. (Dawson 00:01 – 00:32)

Dawson’s lack of professional attire and equipment, the latter of which is visible in the bad quality of the video and the rather low lighting (Figure 2), cements the amateurishness of his video. Additionally, his admittance that he only wants to talk to his viewers further sets his video up as spontaneous and draws on the convention of vlogs being conversational to provide audiences with an unfiltered presentation of the self (Giles 136). He, like the other creators, is clearly interested in presenting himself as “an enthusiastic amateur rather than a professional expert” (Giles 150). The choice of talking head videos, rather than a more mediated type of performance, therefore, allows the creators to present themselves as ordinary and authentic.



Figure 1. Connor Franta's setting is his own living room (00:09).



Figure 2. Dawson's setting in front of a white wall, muted lighting and a low-quality webcam (00:01).

Portraying their coming out and themselves as authentic is important for the creators as it allows them to connect with their viewers. Their seemingly spontaneous videos with their simple set-up and little post-production aid in maintaining the intimacy of their messages as does their direct address of the viewers, most commonly as “you guys” (Nilsen 01:06; Franta 00:10; Dawson 00:01; Sivan 00:01; AmazingPhil 00:01). Especially this form of talking to the audience serves to make the viewers feel as if they are part of a small group and, thus, seen as individuals rather than one of many strangers watching the video (Giles 134; Labrecque 136). Consequently, they develop “a parasocial relationship, in which [they feel] a deeper connection to the media personality” (Ferchaud et al. 89). As the creators of this category are all micro-celebrities who pursue YouTube as a career, they rely on the forming of such a bond as having more subscribers results in more profit.

However, being seen as authentic is not only a way to connect to the audience, but can also validate the creators' selfhood. A frequent occurrence in talking head coming out videos is the creators' insisting on the authenticity of their performances. For instance, Ingrid Nilsen states that she "want[s] to live [her] life unapologetically" (18:16 – 18:19) and, similarly, Dawson (14:14 – 14:23) and Troye Sivan (06:52 – 06:58) are both relieved that they no longer have to hide a part of themselves, implying that they are now presenting their 'real selves'. While doing so, they are often visibly fighting tears (Figure 3). This show of emotion is another method to strengthen the bond between creators and viewers as Leah Warner and Stephanie Shields find that the visible portrayal of emotions displays a person's 'inner nature' in Western societies. If the audience determines that the emotions match the creator's expression, they identify them as sincere (Warner & Shields 100). However, because of the tie between authenticity and one's inner nature, if this sincerity is questioned it can easily read as a challenge to "who has claims to selfhood" (Warner & Shields 99). For creators who are coming out to their viewers, it is especially important that their actions and words are viewed as genuine: They are not only vulnerable by disclosing their non-heterosexual sexuality, but also because dissatisfied viewers may question their sexual identity on the basis of it coming as a surprise and, thus, being inauthentic. Therefore, the creators' insistence that they are being true and genuine while they are simultaneously letting the audience know that they have hidden a significant part of their lives from them can be viewed as more than simply wanting to become more famous. For them, it can be a strategy to mitigate possible negative reactions.



Figure 3. Nilsen tears up as she relates her sexual identity formation (06:27).

3.2.2 Live Reaction

Live reaction videos depend on the equation of amateurishness with authenticity even more than talking head ones as they have a significantly lower production quality. The videos showcase a variety of settings, usually within a family home. The camera tends to be static, filming from slightly elevated spots, such as on top of a refrigerator (Figure 4; mallow610, description box), framing the scenes in long shots and some medium close-ups. There is practically no music, the sound quality is frequently too bad to understand what is being said and the actual coming out scenes are largely unedited with even jump cuts being absent. Rather than only coming out to the viewers verbally, here, the creators invite them to watch as they disclose their sexual identity to others. Thus, the videos are characterised by the presence of, at least, two people, namely one who is coming out and one who is the interlocutor for that coming out⁶, typically a family member. This “performance of intimacy” (Giles 134) is commonly read as authentic by the viewers as they witness a moment that is usually deemed private and, hence, understood as sincere and genuine. This is further enhanced as some of the participants do not even know that they are being filmed, which implies that the creators are capturing real-life interactions. As a result of this and the general lack of post-production, live reactions focus even more on the performance of authenticity as the largely unfiltered unfolding of an identity.



Figure 4. mallow610 places the camera on a tissue box on top of the refrigerator to hide it, framing the shot from above (00:03).

Due to the live nature of the videos, the possibility for a dramatic coming out is greater than in a talking head video, which the creators exploit to promote their videos. The promise of

⁶ For an analysis of the power structure behind this set-up see chapter 4.2.

such drama is used to hook the audience with titles such as “Coming out GAY to my 5 year old brother” (OliverVlogss), “COMING OUT – LIVE REACTION” (mallow610) or “Coming Out to My Parents (LIVE REACTION!!!)” (Alexander) and excessive punctuation. Online, capitalising specific words is usually read as someone yelling (Robb n.p.), thus alerting others to it. However, the titles are often just click-bait, i.e. they are dramatized to collect more views. This is especially true for the six videos in this category as all of them show a supportive reception to the creators’ coming outs. Despite this, they deliberately invoke the idea that coming out can be dangerous. Their insistence that the videos are ‘live’, i.e. unstaged, reveals their authenticity as a marketing strategy. While this does not necessarily mean that the creators’ experiences are false, at the very least, it shows that they know how to best exploit their disclosures.

Although the videos portray positive receptions to coming outs, they are still highly emotional, which further helps the creators to connect with their audience. The videos’ emotional content mostly stems from the creators having to deal with the stigma attached to homo- or bisexuality. During the videos, family members frequently break down crying (Figure 5), making the videos both more dramatic and more authentic (de Ridder & Dhaenens 55-56). While tears can, of course, be produced artificially, when they are found to match with the performer’s expressed emotion they are usually read as sincere (Warner & Shields 94). By presenting the viewers with private scenes, the creators “narrow the [...] emotional distance from the audience” (Littler 19). Authenticity does not only help the creators in finding viewers, but also, similar to how it is used in talking head videos, helps in converting those viewers into a loyal fanbase.



Figure 5. Matthewac1 crying in his mother's arms after he comes out to her (10:12).

One video within the live reaction category differs drastically from the others as it is a parody of the format. Titled “COMING OUT TO MY DAD”, twaimz’s video appears to be a regular live reaction one, evident from the use of capitalisation. However, once it starts it becomes apparent that it immediately departs from the norms of other live reaction videos: Rather than in a family home, twaimz and his father are on a car ride, before going on a rowing boat tour; the camera angles feature close-ups, medium close-ups as well as long shots; and not only are the location changes indicated with jump cuts, they are also frequently used to mark the punch lines of jokes so that even laypeople are able to tell that the video is heavily edited. Comedic elements further enhance the video’s parodic nature and, together with its being heavily produced, challenge the “amateur ethic [...] that is at the core of YouTube’s appeal” (Giles 117). Indeed, the video mainly derives its humour from the fast-paced editing that highlights jokes, such as twaimz in a Peppa the Pig costume (Figure 6), by illustrating verbal utterances with staged clips.

The actual ‘coming out’ parodies other live reaction videos, as twaimz seemingly confesses to being straight:

Twaimz: I have a confession to make too.

Dad: Go ahead.

Twaimz: I’m straight.

Dad: No way.

Twaimz: Yeah.

Dad: I’m disappointed. (twaimz 04:48 – 04:58)

Here, twaimz plays with the conventions of live reaction videos: After having already confessed to his desire to have a boyfriend earlier in the video (twaimz 01:11 – 01:33), his assertion that he is straight is, understandably, hard to believe for his father. Still, his father quickly plays along and now performs the role of the disappointed parent, which is teased in so many of the exaggerated click-bait titles, despite being supportive in the next scene and exclaiming, “Viva la LGBT- Q!” (05:32). As twaimz’s father is obviously aware of his son’s sexuality, twaimz’s claim in the description box message that his father was “very shocked” and that twaimz needs his viewers’ “support” is clearly sarcastic. While an audience not well versed in live reaction videos can undoubtedly find the video funny as the relationship between twaimz and his father is entertaining to watch, much of the comedy is derived from playing on established customs: Only if the viewers know and understand these breaks with

conventions, the confession to being straight as well as the description box message can be fully grasped.



Figure 6. twaimz in a Peppa the Pig costume to illustrate his father's joke that twaimz looks like the character (02:43).

Twaimz's parody essentially employs the conventions established by live reaction videos to attract viewers, while simultaneously questioning the authenticity of other live reaction coming outs. While his audience is probably expecting a different video than what they get to see, its click-baiting description still helps twaimz in acquiring a greater reach for his video. By ultimately subverting the prescribed rules, however, he exposes that live reaction videos, despite their claim to authenticity via amateurishness, can also be staged. Twaimz demonstrates great awareness for YouTube as a medium which "incorporates diverse genres within it" (Betancourt 201). His use of extensive editing highlights that even in regular live reaction videos some elements are carefully arranged: A camera has to be set up, simple editing occurs – none of the videos show the creators turning their cameras on or off, presumably because these instances were edited out – and the video has to be uploaded on YouTube. By exaggerating these processes in his own video, twaimz reminds the viewers that every video is staged to some degree. Even if the creators aim to produce authenticity via emphasis on the amateurish and unstaged nature of their videos, their coming out on YouTube is always mediated.

3.2.3 Song

Coming out videos delivered by music vary much more in their level of production than talking head or live reaction ones, which highlights the song videos' performative aspect. They all feature a self-composed song about coming out that is either presented as a music video or a

one-person recital. The former type looks professionally produced and includes frequent location changes, cuts and actors. The latter is more static, as it only features the creator singing in front of a camera, sometimes accompanied by an instrument. Both versions, however, are far removed from talking head videos, as the creators do not rely on (tearful) explanations of their sexual identities but rather embed their experiences in a song. While the lyrics build on their own lives, the songs could, theoretically, be sung by anybody. Moreover, the creators forego presenting themselves and instead turn to acting: For instance, Lamelifeofkelsey impersonates others and echoes their questions about bisexuality only to answer them herself in her song (01:21 – 02:02). Joey Graceffa in his music video even acts as a prince opposite another man (Figure 7). The frequent cuts, which showcase changes in the song structure, e.g. a new verse or location, further emphasise the videos' heavily edited nature. In contrast to the mostly un-edited talking head and live reaction videos, the songs are informed by the YouTubers' life experiences, but the videos do not aim at creating authenticity through an amateurish appearance. Instead, the creators draw the audience in with the promise of a personal story told in an entertaining fashion.



Figure 7. Graceffa as a prince who kisses another man (03:18).

Interestingly, two song videos are produced as promotional content, which implies that coming out is not always primarily about disclosing an authentic self. Graceffa's video works as a teaser for his book. While the video tells his life story through metaphors and the use of a fantasy setting, it ends with an unashamedly commercial reminder to buy his autobiography. He hints that it will feature the longer, more explicit story of his coming out by labelling the video only a "small glimpse" (Graceffa 03:55 – 04:00). Especially in contrast to his highly produced video, his book is implied to be the source where interested viewers will be able to

gain the non-fictitious, i.e. authentic, narrative of his coming out. In the same way that consumers use self-relevant information from reality television to discover their own identities (Rose & Wood 295), Graceffa's viewers are told that his book "should be able to help some of [them]" (Graceffa 03:24). Thus, it becomes an "identity-related source" (Morhart et al. 202), which encourages authenticity within the viewers. Similarly, doddleoddle's video promotes a brand, in this case Skittles. She wants her viewers to buy Skittles as the company is raising "money for Tesco's LGBTQ+ charity partners" (doddleoddle 02:03 – 02:19). Created in cooperation with Skittles, the video heavily features the product (Figure 8). Doddleoddle's marketing strategy is slightly different from Graceffa's as it pertains to "influencer marketing" (Folkvord et al. 79), which profits from harnessing an existing community of followers, i.e. doddleoddle's fans, as consumers. As doddleoddle is a successful YouTuber, she has already attracted a fanbase, and, consequently, the likelihood that her audience will view the endorsed product more positively is high (Folkvord et al. 80). Both Graceffa's and doddleoddle's coming out videos, thus, prioritise the promotion of an object, rather than emphasise the unveiling of a sexual identity, while still drawing on an existing bond with their viewers.



Figure 8. doddleoddle's video shows Skittles arranged to spell out "IM [sic] BI, a coming out song" (00:05).

Although employing their coming out videos as marketing tools can be a successful strategy, it questions Graceffa's and doddleoddle's authenticity. For Graceffa, coming out is no longer only presented as the disclosure of a formerly hidden part of his identity, but also acts a teaser for viewers who hope to acquire more, potentially dramatic, information once they buy the book. It is, therefore, relegated to a marketing strategy that seeks to maximise profit. Similarly, doddleoddle's Skittles promotion can be contextualised with companies' practices of 'rainbow

washing', in which rainbow-themed merchandise is promoted throughout the month of June, i.e. pride month, before conveniently returning to ignoring the LGBTQ* community during the rest of the year (P. Adams n.p.). This kind of support seems to be mainly motivated by money instead of human rights concerns (Abad-Santos n.p.). Coupling a personal story with marketing practices also raises the question of whether the creators specifically timed their coming out so they could use it as promotion and, consequently, makes them appear less sincere than those that only tell their own story without any direct monetary rewards. The creators' goal for coming out has clearly shifted to promote content or a brand.

In fact, presenting themselves might not be the song category creators' main goal. Rather than focusing on their own experience, they want their videos to be tools for helping members of the LGBTQ* community to come out as well. Four out of six creators, including doddleoddle's promotional video, suggest that their videos should be shared so that the viewers themselves can have their own coming outs via these songs. This is made most explicit in happilyeverayanna's title of her video, which reads "THE BISEXUAL SONG! YOU CAN SHARE THIS IF YOU'RE COMING OUT AS BI!!!". Likewise, Ally Hills's sings, "Whoever sent you this told me to say hello, give you a hug and kiss and also wanted you to know they're gay" (00:30 – 00:43). Prompting a closeted audience to use the videos as tools for disclosure is a decidedly different approach to any of the other types of coming out videos. As doddleoddle points out, "whoever's watching this might be a friend of said bisexual person" (01:53 – 01:57). The imagined audience is thus considerably widened from that of talking head videos, which mainly address "other young [LGBTQ*] people who are struggling to come out" (Lovelock, *My Coming Out* 78). Consequently, the creators do not need to spend much time on conveying their own coming out stories in the most authentic way possible. The more explicit the video is in explaining sexual identity, the less need is there for closeted viewers to clarify their own positions/desires/identities when showing it to the people to whom they want to come out, thus perhaps making the disclosure of their own sexual identities easier.

3.2.4 Miscellaneous

The miscellaneous category is difficult to define, but some similarities between its videos exist so that it can be divided into two sub-groups, the first of which is completely different from any other videos that have been analysed so far. Eugene Lee Yang's coming out is a dance performance that is filmed like a music video, featuring elaborate choreographies, costume changes and camera angles while spoken word is completely absent. Mikin's video is an

animated story of her own coming out where she never shows her face and only uses voiceover to narrate what her drawn figures act out. Finally, Holtzy's Hangouts is a recording of her coming out via a performed poem in front of her English class. It is completely unedited, and the camera remains fairly static throughout. Stuart Hall's claim that meaning is produced in a range of different media to "express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural 'things'" (*Representation* 3) is highlighted in these videos. Although the ways of coming out greatly vary within this group, the creators all share a common culture, i.e. they come from a Western cultural background that is intelligible to viewers of the same culture.

The second group at first glance resembles talking head videos. It consists of three videos which feature talking head elements (Howell; ElleOfTheMills; jessiepaage): They use a medium close-up and the respective creators talk directly to the camera for large parts of each video. However, they employ inserted clips, photos or memes as well as text markers to underscore their narrative (Figure 9). The videos are overtly edited and produced and reminiscent of short films or documentaries so that I have decided against categorising them as talking head ones. Like in bona fide documentaries, evidence for what the creators are discussing is provided by including clips and photos (Figure 10). Hall points out that such photographic proof, of course, does not mean that "the camera never lies" (*Representation* 97), but it still offers a "representational legitimacy" (ibid.) for the text and invites viewers to join the process in which the creators present themselves through their experiences (Hall, *Representation* 146). Authenticity is, thus, claimed via corroborating the genuineness of the coming out narrative with photographic evidence.



Figure 9. Daniel Howell divides his video into five chapters, drawing on a bible reference here (02:09).



Figure 10. Howell inserts a picture of himself as a child (02:42).

In all videos, except that of Holtzy's Hangouts, lighting plays an important role in the telling of the creators' coming out stories. Rainbow lighting is employed in flashback clips of jessiepaege's video (Figure 11) while she gives her followers advice (*Coming Out*, 12:30 – 12:35). Daniel Howell uses a completely black background to which colours are slowly added, increasingly illuminating him over the course of the video (Figure 12 and Figure 13).



Figure 11. jessiepaege using rainbow lighting (12:30).



Figure 12. Howell's background is black, but he has a green light on his left side (17:50).



Figure 13. The green light wanders to the right side and is joined by a purple one on the left (32:40).

In Yang's case, the video starts out dark as he is sitting with his homophobic family (Figure 14) but turns lighter once he starts dancing with another man (Figure 15). To use lighting in this way, it has to be set up differently each time, meaning that the shots need to be carefully considered beforehand and then framed. The videos thus forego any amateurish appearance. Instead, the creators draw on a shared "cultural code" (Hall, *Representation* 4), namely the idea that something hidden is automatically in the dark, in this case in the closet. Once the door is opened and the light enters, the hidden information becomes more easily detectable and, in the end, is revealed. By employing this metaphor, creators invite their audience to read their visual cues (ibid.). Rather than suggesting authenticity through amateurishness, now the creators rely more heavily on stylistic devices in order to bond with the audience.



Figure 14. Yang is sitting in relative darkness with his family (00:04).



Figure 15. The lighting turns hazier and softer when Yang starts dancing with another man and woman (02:13).

Indeed, videos in the miscellaneous category emphasise how a relationship with the audience can be fostered even when perceived authenticity through amateurishness is no longer given. One way is to employ textual elements to support the creators' storytelling. Howell, for instance, uses text to make jokes (Figure 16) which draw on well-known memes. In this case, his spelling of "wHiTe" is reminiscent of the "mocking Spongebob meme" (Kircher n.p.), in which a difference in tone is characterised by the alternating lower- and upper-case letters. Additionally, his "aw i was so close" illustrates that he was nearly successful in being privileged in terms of sexual identity, race and sex, but ultimately failed in achieving all three. Sonja Utz finds that using jokes on social media helps in establishing a connection with others as sharing the same sense of humour can "increase perceived similarity, [which is] a central predictor of interpersonal attraction" (4). Textual elements are also used to enhance the drama of coming out (Figure 17) or promote the YouTubers' channels (Figure 18). Usually, the text is

accompanied by a voiceover, which can be characterized as a “testament to [the creators’] fragility and strength” (Lambert 63). Modulations in tone invite audiences to indulge in associative memories (Lambert 64) and, thus, identify with the creators’ storytelling (Poletti, *Coaxing* 78). Identification with the creators is thus not entirely dependent on the presentation of an unmediated self. Stein et al. even claim that viewers identify more easily with YouTubers “in a professionally filmed and edited video” (8). Therefore, although it might seem as if the use of post-production tools is at odds with building a fanbase, YouTubers of this category use them to produce a convincing representation of themselves and their sexual identity. This, in turn, attracts viewers who want to identify with them.

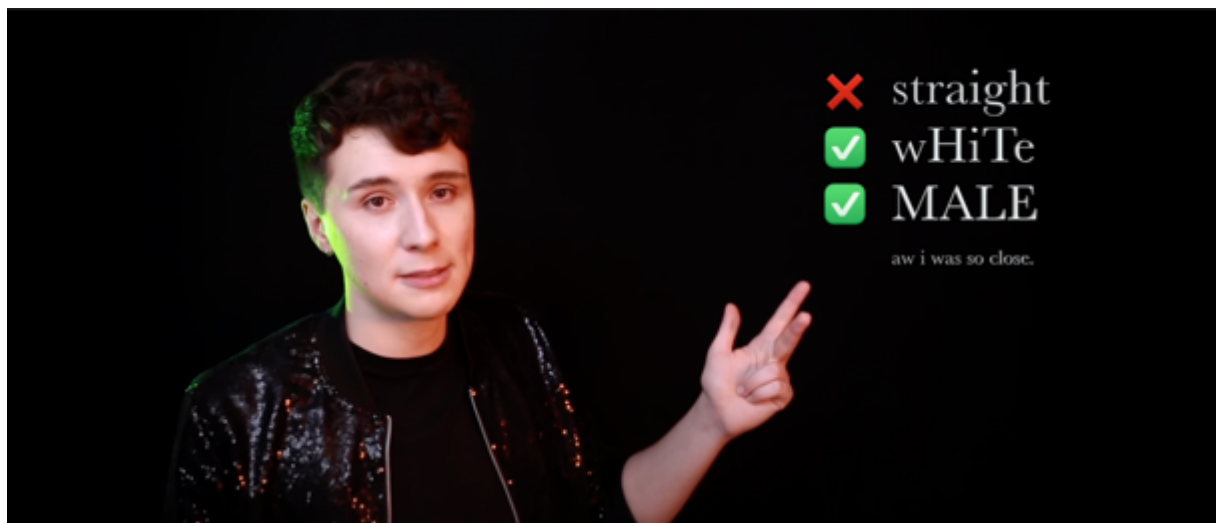


Figure 16. Howell demonstrates that he has the privilege of a white man, but not that of a straight, white man. He uses small font to joke about it (31:00).



Figure 17. ElleOfTheMills uses text to temporally situate her narrative (02:17).



Figure 18. Mikin ends her coming out story with a call to subscribe, which is also animated (10:03).

Nevertheless, authenticity is still the creators' main concern. Howell specifically says that after disclosing his sexual identity he can now "proceed authentically in [his] life" (45:12 – 45:16) and jessiepage professes to leave behind a "double life" (*Part 2* 08:15 – 08:20). The creators' striving for authenticity is also reflected in their use of direct addresses to the viewers either verbally, most often through a simple greeting (Howell 00:01; Mikin 00:00; ElleOfTheMills 00:00), or visually, as they all frequently face the camera as if looking directly at the audience (Figure 19). These narrative and stylistic devices are interpreted as more authentic because, in comparison to traditional TV broadcasting, they are. Whereas traditional broadcasting is constrained by the use of a script and regularly features talk show hosts turning away from the viewers in favour of facing their guests, YouTube coming out videos proclaim authenticity by precisely not doing that (Tolson, *Authenticity* 286). Evidently, the YouTubers have means apart from amateurishness to suggest authenticity, which indicates that authenticity is not static but a relative concept that depends on the creators' and the audience's understanding of it.



Figure 19. ElleOfTheMills faces the camera (00:03).

Regardless of how authenticity is achieved, however, it is always a performance. The creators appeal to their respective audiences by employing different markers of authenticity that are embedded in a larger culture of shared “systems of representation” (Hall, *Representation* 4). While, for some, this includes crying on camera and showing a sparsely edited version of themselves, for others it means underscoring the meaning of their coming out with production tools. Following Hall’s analysis of televisual signs, the example of crying, on a denotative level, demonstrates that someone is emotional, possibly because they are sad or, more rarely, because they are happy. On a connotative level, however, it can also be associated with the idea that crying usually happens in private (Hall, *Encoding* 267-268). The viewers may, thus, infer that because they are witnessing a privately-connotated act, namely overwhelmed creators who cannot perform their celebrity persona anymore, the emotion behind the act must be authentic. I do not mean to suggest that the creators purposefully put on a performance to appear authentic while, in reality, they know they are only acting; rather I want to highlight that there is no authenticity without performance. Even without a camera present ‘being yourself’, as Andrew Tolson terms it, is always “a type of public performance” (*Being* 445), but one which hinges on not being perceived as such (ibid). Including a camera just makes the performance more noticeable. The difference between a candid picture and a staged one is indicative of this: As soon as people know they are being watched, they behave differently. Similarly, the moments YouTube creators turn on their camera, they cannot help but perform. While their performance may be real, it is also “a product of mediated quasi-interaction” (Tolson, *Being* 452). Regardless of how much creators insist that they are being

authentic, their only choice lies in how to best portray the *effect* of authenticity to their viewers.

3.3 Constructing Sexual Identity on YouTube

As discussed in the preceding sections, the four categories of coming out-videos (talking head, live reaction, song and miscellaneous) predominantly favour a presentation of coming out as leading to an authentic life. While chapter 3.2 dealt with how authenticity is claimed through the use of narrative and technical tools, 3.3.1 proceeds with analysing what effects this has on the creators' understanding of sexual identity.

In 3.3.2, I will investigate whether the creators pass through distinct stages while detailing the development of their sexual identities and if so, which stages these are. In addition to this, I will analyse which strategies of coming out they use. That section also discusses how coming out is not perceived as a one-time occurrence, but rather shown to be a continuous process (Orne 692). In general, analysing how the video creators understand and, consequently, present sexual identity offers a valuable insight into dominant modes of thinking about this topic. As the videos have thousands or even millions of views, they can influence how a young LGBTQ* audience comes to understand their own sexual identity.

3.3.1 Essentialist Notions of Sexual Identity

An integral aspect of the genre of coming out videos is to present sexual identity as essential. The videos draw from genre conventions established by literary coming outs, beginning with biographies in the late nineteenth century (Cover & Prosser 83) before moving onto novels (Plummer, *Stories* 84) and, finally, films in the late 20th century, in which coming out was portrayed as an obstacle to overcome (Pavda 357). Putting the focus solely on this event raised the expectation that LGBTQ* individuals need to produce a coming out narrative (Cover & Prosser 85) if they want to experience “social participation” (Cover & Prosser 84) and stabilise their selfhood by correctly labelling themselves (Savin-Williams, *Self-labeling* 155; qtd. in Cover & Prosser 84). Cover and Prosser view this as the reason that all coming out stories are fairly alike because LGBTQ* individuals want to ensure the greatest compatibility with peers, resulting in the presentation of coming out as a linear journey, in which sexual identity is positioned as an essential and innate part of oneself (Cover & Prosser 85). This is also reflected in one of the newest additions to the coming out genre: YouTube videos. In those, the creators' narrative starts from a point of confusion as they realise their difference from

society's norm before constructing "a linear progression towards an essential gay identity" (de Ridder & Dhaenens 50). Here, Cover and Prosser argue that the creators in their analysis often know about their diverging sexuality from childhood (86), which is also shown in my own sample. Nilsen puts it most succinctly, when she says, "[my sexual identity is] just something that I've always known from my earliest memories [...] it's just been there. This is not something that I chose" (01:51 – 02:09). Her stressing that she was unable to choose her sexuality and that it has always been a part of her strengthens the idea that it is a core aspect of herself. In nearly all of the analysed videos, being LGB is presented as an identity that has always existed within the creators' selves and which is unswayable by external influence.

In the process of positioning sexual identity as innate, creators also sometimes blur the lines between gender identity and sexual desire. For instance, Sivan says:

I remember when I was young, I used to lie in bed and picture, like, you know, the signs on the doors of toilets, the female sign and the male sign. And I used to picture the male sign and then put a big cross through it in my head. And I used to picture the female sign with a big green tick next to it. That just kind of proves that [...] I've always been this way and I've always known that something was up. (Sivan 01:28 – 01:57)

He explains his non-normative sexual identity by referring to gender identity as he associates himself with the female sign on a bathroom door. At first glance, this link to gender identity seems to support his being trans more than his being gay, especially because he foregoes any mention of sexual identity. However, this practice of blurring sexual desire and gender identity relies on the idea that "gender inversion" (T. Adams 89), i.e. transgressing the stereotypical expression of one gender, denotes a queer sexual identity. Sivan's mentioning that he "was young" - later comments locate him somewhere before he was 14 - shows that he had already internalised this idea early in life. He interprets his aligning himself with the female sign as "proof" that he is gay because when confronted with societal "binary-based discourses" (Cover & Prosser 86) he chooses the 'wrong' heteronormative sign. Miki employs a similar strategy when she talks about her lack of caring about whether the toys she played with as a child were made for boys or girls and her occasional preference for boys' toys. She views this as a first sign that she is not straight (01:22 – 01:42). While both creators stress their young age in their comments, which would explain why they uncritically believe that differing from masculine or feminine norms is equal to having a non-heterosexual identity (Cover & Prosser 85), they do not challenge the assumption that non-normative behaviour regarding gender identity gives insights into a non-normative sexual one. Neither make mention of the fact that

the assignment of queerness to specific behaviours, such as men crying or women being assertive, is culturally constituted. This seems to be done to streamline their sexual identity into a linear, coherent narrative by retroactively attributing a queer meaning to relevant experiences, in which any sign that their sexuality might not be as essential as they believe is re-interpreted to fit into their story.

One reason for sexual identity being presented and viewed as essential is because of the intertextual nature of coming out videos on YouTube. The creators of the videos I analysed readily admit that they have watched other coming out videos (Franta 04:45 – 04:48; Sivan 03:30 – 03:42; Mikin 04:49 – 05:02; jessiepage, *Part 2* 12:36 – 13:00; Dawson 02:35 – 02:37) before filming their own. Returning to Cover and Prosser's claim that coming out can be a way to participate socially (84), the creators' narratives may all play out similarly precisely because they want to belong to the existing LGBTQ* community on YouTube. To successfully join it, they need to present a coherent self, i.e. one that has always been queer, as norms established by the genre of coming out videos dictate this as the correct portrayal of one's sexual identity and coming out. Cover finds that failing to comply with this desire for a coherent self can result in exclusion from a specific community or even society at large (183). However, not only the creators themselves watch other coming out videos, but in mallow610's case, his mother does so too (mallow610 05:52 – 05:55). This is particularly interesting with regard to the following exchange:

mallow610: Well, I just recently realized [that I was gay].

Mom: You just recently realized? So you're not one of those, when you were thirteen, you know? You didn't know when you were thirteen? [...] [Y]ou only discovered recently ... most people know when they're a lot younger. (mallow610 04:01 – 05:55)

The mother echoes the narrative that sexual identity is such an integral part of oneself that one is immediately aware of it. It is this exact notion that is frequently disseminated in coming out videos, where identity is never seen as something that is constituted by repeating performative acts (Butler, *Gender* 192) but always as an expression of an essential core self. Presumably influenced by those videos, mallow610's mother demands a coherent presentation of selfhood from her son and is confused when he states that he has only figured out his sexuality recently because it threatens her way of thinking about selfhood as a linear concept. By developing the genre of coming out further, YouTube coming out videos generate a mainstream idea of how a divergent sexual identity is detected and lived, which is presented and re-cycled every time another questioning LGBTQ* individual or a family member in need

of support searches for representation on YouTube. Therefore, the infinite repetition of this singular narrative obscures the fact that there are more ways to form a minority sexual identity.

The effects of the lack of an existing narrative for coming out are explored by bi- and pansexual creators⁷. In their videos, they clearly position their sexual identity as different from homo- or heterosexuality (Dawson 01:39 – 01:51; Gloom 05:11 – 05:41; LamLifeOfKelsey 01:21 – 01:48; happilyeverayanna 00:31 – 00:40). Additionally, creators detail common stereotypes about bisexual individuals such as that they are merely confused or going through a phase (LamLifeOfKelsey 01:21 – 01:48). By insisting that their sexual identity is unchanging and essential, they object to the idea that it is seen as a “state of transition” (Savin-Williams, *New* 30) in many stage models. As a result, bi and pan individuals face the lack of a clear narrative for them and their experiences which leads to confusion when figuring out their sexuality:

I thought about it, like, the whole "maybe just, maybe I'm just gay, you know [...] I mean, maybe I'm actually just straight", but I don't know. I think about it and it's like I can't really pick one or the other, it's just kind of I'm, like, right in the middle. (Alexander 08:27 – 08:50)

Alexander overcomes this confusion by positioning himself in-between straight and homosexual. Bi- and pansexual creators have to assert the validity of their sexual identity in a way that homosexual creators do not as their sexual identity is clearly recognised in society and has an established way of being formed. Thus, although more nuanced than a strictly homo- or heterosexual identity, bi- and pansexual individuals' conception of sexual identity seems rigid despite the inherent fluidity of bi- and pansexuality.

Despite their insistence on a seemingly inflexible notion of sexual identity, bi- and pansexual creators still frequently express opinions that allow for a more fluid definition of sexuality. For instance, Dawson stresses that “some people are here in the straight world, some are here in the gay world, some are in the middle” (Dawson 06:23 – 06:27), echoing Alexander's notion that he is “right in the middle.” Their bisexuality seems to be rooted in a perfect middle-ground between hetero- and homosexuality, which Dawson even characterises as completely different “worlds”. This not only highlights the metaphorical distance between the two, but

⁷ The differences between bisexuality and pansexuality are hard to grasp and depend on the individual's understanding of the labels. Here, pansexual is used to denote people who are attracted to others regardless of gender (cf. Hayfield 8), which is also how one pansexual creator (Gloom 06:09 - 06:14) defines it for herself. For a more in-depth discussion of the particularities of bisexuality and pansexuality see Hayfield 2020.

also their binary character, which he obviously still ascribes to. Despite allowing for more fluidity, then, this coming out narrative also “disavow[s] the possibilities of sexualities [...] which are not driven by opposite- or same-sex coupling” (Cover & Prosser 84-85). Instead, it favours depictions of bi- and pansexuality as being a middle-ground between hetero- and homosexuality. Thus, while the creators introduce the possibility of different narratives of sexual identity formation, they also uphold essentialist ideas when they believe that they can pin their individual sexuality to an exact point in the spectrum between the two normative end points.

Overall, however, creators tend to avoid depicting nuances in their sexual identity formation. Instead, they focus on presenting coming out as a gateway to living an authentic life. They posit that their identity is something that they own and can express through certain acts. Lauren Berlant succinctly summarises this concept as “I am my identity; my identity is fundamentally sexual; and my practices reflect that” (17). One reason for this framing of their sexual identity is that attitudes towards homosexuality can depend on whether people believe that sexuality is inborn or chosen. Eliason and Schope find that there is a positive correlation between people’s belief that sexuality is chosen and homophobic attitudes (22). Presenting a non-normative sexual identity as a fixed part of the self can thus be a mechanism to protect oneself against discrimination. This discrimination can also come from within the LGBTQ* community in the form of “secondary marginalization” (Cohen 27), which replicates “a rhetoric of blame and punishment and [directs] it at the most vulnerable and stigmatized in [minority] communities” (ibid.). For instance, bisexual individuals may be targeted for their ability to ‘pass’ as straight and, thus, viewed as not completely belonging to the LGBTQ* community. As this form of gatekeeping, wherein certain individuals are excluded on the basis of others’ prejudices (Owsnett n.p.), is becoming an increasingly relevant topic in the LGBTQ* community⁸, LGBTQ* creators who seek to join the community are even more likely to stress the similarity of their experiences. Thus, presenting only one narrative about sexual identity formation is a newly established norm because otherwise creators are in danger of having their sexuality invalidated.

While the wish prevent discrimination is understandable, the exclusively essential presentation of sexual identity risks that only this streamlined form of identity expression is

⁸ Especially online, people report many instances of gatekeeping (cf. McAlpine 2017; TheNotAdam 2016), which is also reflected in the rise of resources on how to avoid gatekeeping (cf. Owsnett 2021; Jackson 2021).

seen as valid in society. The fact that sexual identity – like any other form of identity – has to be performed repeatedly to gain meaning is concealed to enhance its status as an essential category (Butler, *Gender* 190). This is not to say that sexuality can be changed at will (Butler, *Gender Experience* n.p.); rather it is, in Butler’s terms, constructed as a “deep-seated play” (*Imitation* 311). The problem lies in the fact that in coming out videos the performance of sexual identity is relegated to a single story: In all of them, a queer sexual identity is detected – at the latest – by the creators’ teenage years and their coming out has taken place by their mid-twenties. Diverging narratives, such as individuals who only become aware of their sexual identity much later or whose labels and identities fluctuate over time, are not only absent amongst the most watched YouTube coming out videos, but the creators never even raise the possibility of their existence. Consequently, bi- and pansexual people as well as individuals who cannot easily fit their queerness into this narrative struggle additionally to make sense of their sexual identity as it excludes them. As coming out videos are increasingly used by young LGBTQ* people to come to terms with their own identities (Lovelock, *My Coming Out* 79), establishing the process of sexual identity formation as a natural progression is severely limiting for them. In the same way that LGBTQ* people rightfully complain that they are often, if at all, exclusively represented stereotypically in films or shows, the creators of coming out videos only present a fraction of how sexual identity formation is experienced. This directly contrasts with Butler’s wish for “greater freedoms to define and pursue our lives without pathologization, de-realization, harassment, threats of violence, violence, and criminalization” (*Gender Experience* n.p.). Instead, the singular narrative reinforces the notion that sexual identity formation is a streamlined process that is experienced similarly by all people. As creators continuously repeat the essential narrative of ‘always having been gay’, it not only becomes a norm but also seems to acquire a prescriptive power, obscuring how sexual identity formation is, in fact, a personal development with highly individual experiences.

3.3.2 Strategies of Disclosure

Like in many stage models, the creators highlight the importance of coming out for living an authentic life. However, their accounts of their sexual identity developments cannot neatly be fit into a stage model. While the creators often propose a linear trajectory that begins with their confusion and sensitization to their difference from others, they then continue in different ways: Some immediately repress their sexual identity (Nilsen 05:20 – 05:26), others explore it (AmazingPhil 02:57 – 03:12) or disclose it to someone else to help them make sense

of it (Sivan 02:05 – 02:43; ElleOfTheMills 00:38 – 00:51). Despite Coleman's claim that a coming out has to occur before an LGBTQ* individual starts experimenting with their sexuality (471), the creators do not experience this as a fixture of their identity formation process. In general, the videos express similar themes of confusion, repression, exploration and disclosure, but it is impossible to put these into a chronological order as the stage models are wont to do. There is also frequent changing of sexual identities within the development process, which is most prominent in Howell's case, who proclaims himself straight, then bisexual, then straight, then bisexual again, before finally settling on gay. This practice can be observed in Mikin's video, too. In Cass's model, any movement back to earlier points in the identity formation is seen as regression as it moves LGBTQ* individuals further away from the ultimate goal of coming out (220), but Howell and Mikin present their shifting between different sexualities as important facets of their process of coming to terms with their sexual identities. Thus, the creators' accounts do not conform to the theoretical models. This highlights that the models propose a non-normative sexual identity formation that is too rigid.

Still, the video producers echo one aspect of stage models as described by theorists: They present coming out as the end of a journey of self-discovery. The creators' claims that they can live authentic lives after coming out are reminiscent of the last stage 'integration' that is present in many models (Cass 235; Coleman 470; Troiden 68). For instance, Franta stresses that his sexuality will not define him as it is just a "part of [him] [...], not all of [him]" (04:30 – 04:32), which fits with Cass's claim that in the final stage a homosexual identity has ceased to be the determining aspect of a sense of self (235). Of course, one reason for why this part of stage models is cited repeatedly in the videos may be that it simply resonates with many LGBTQ* individuals. However, Nicholas Guittar and Rachel Rayburn offer another explanation, namely that because the creators are over-exposed to the idea of a linear progression of identity formation that ends with coming out they mirror this model (338). As discussed in section 3.3.1, the creators regularly reference that they watched other coming out videos before filming their own. Therefore, the emphasis placed on coming out might be influenced by others' insistence on its importance, rather than its inherent significance.

Regardless of people's reasons for coming out, it is a pivotal act in a queer person's life that can be achieved by employing various strategies. In the videos, one of them is to reveal one's sexual identity through providing clues or letting others speculate. Matthewac1 simply hands his mother a permission slip that she needs to sign before he can join a gay local youth group's

camp, hoping that “if [he] just gives her the paper, [he] won’t actually have to say the words that [he is] gay” (02:43 – 02:48). While he obviously wants to come out, he is not ready to voice a label and, thus, bets on his mother’s ability to correctly interpret his actions, i.e. that associating with a homosexual group means that he himself is gay (Orne 690). Another way to come out is by employing cultural signifiers which express LGBTQ* association. jessiepaage details how she used props, such as rainbow flags and lighting, in her vlogs to alert her viewers to her non-heterosexuality, hoping that by doing so she would not have to come out verbally (*Coming Out* 13:08 – 13:2). She avoids direct disclosure, instead preferring to “almost [come] out without coming out” (jessiepaage, *Part 2* 00:18 – 00:20). Her performance of identity is not restricted to verbal means but “mapped onto the surfaces of bodies, homes, and workspaces” (Holliday 1607), which highlights the intertextuality of identity identification (ibid). The advantage of strategies that forego verbal disclosure is that they can make coming out less daunting as the interlocutor has to correctly interpret the signs, while the LGBTQ* individual can “abdicate [their] role in the process [of coming out]” (Orne 691). However, for jessiepaage this requires constantly checking whether she is giving her audience enough to speculate but not enough to warrant a verbal coming out, therefore requiring her to shift between visibility and invisibility (Holliday 1614). Thus, this strategy involves constant monitoring to avoid full exposure before one is ready.

The strategy ‘concealment’ also carries the risk of a premature outing. Concealment denotes disclosure in which LGBTQ* people strategically come out to some but not to others (Orne 690). This is highlighted in AmazingPhil’s and Howell’s experiences: Both are outed in real life as their respective profiles on a gay dating site (AmazingPhil 04:08 – 04:19) and on MySpace, where Howell announces his bisexuality (11:36 – 11:45), are found. Believing their internet profiles to be safe from their real-life acquaintances, they misjudge the extent to which they can keep their on- and offline friends separate. Once they are discovered, concealment is no longer possible, and they are instead faced with direct questions about their sexual identity. Evidently, this strategy also involves LGBTQ* people paying close attention to the management of their sexual identities. Paradoxically, the discovery of a previously concealed sexuality does not necessarily lead to an actual coming out but can also force LGBTQ* individuals deeper into the closet as their coping strategy may be to proclaim that they are straight after all, as is the case with Howell (16:52 – 17:11). Thus, while strategies that rely on

an LGBTQ* person's constant monitoring of their secret may be useful for coming out at some point in the future, they can also be accompanied by a loss of agency.

However, YouTube creators do not only produce videos with the purpose of coming out themselves. Rather, the viewers can use these videos as tools to outsource the disclosure of their own sexual identity. This is evident in the song videos: They offer a way of disclosure by proxy as the creators not only make them to come out themselves, but also to be employed by LGBTQ* viewers (Hills 00:07 – 00:23; BriaAndChrissy 00:08 – 00:17). Mikin's video demonstrates that this works as she discloses her sexual identity to her family by sending them Hills' song (08:17 – 08:35). This elaborates on Orne's finding that direct disclosure no longer only occurs orally but can also be through text (689). The song category introduces a new possibility of disclosing one's sexual identity, in which the speech act of coming out is relegated to somebody else. Indeed, one advantage of coming out via sending somebody a song is that it is not necessarily as binding as directly exposing one's sexuality because it can more easily be presented as a joke if the receiver's reaction is negative. Therefore, this innovative strategy allows an LGBTQ* individual greater agency and more flexibility when handling potentially difficult situations.

Ultimately, the different coming out strategies presented in the videos disprove the notion that disclosure is a fixed and easily categorizable stage. The creators obviously manage their sexual identities and, depending on their social contexts (Orne 692) and personalities, may opt for direct disclosure, indirect disclosure, clues or speculation. The only creator who explicitly mentions how the process of coming out is never finished is AmazingPhil:

It's funny, though, you never stop coming out to people because it's not what you do once and then everyone knows and it's no big deal. Every time I make a connection with someone new, I'll have to come out at some point. (AmazingPhil 6:01 – 06:24)

He references the fact that, in a heteronormative society, coming out is a repeated occurrence and whether one discloses one's sexuality or not has to be re-assessed multiple times, which is what Orne terms "strategic outness" (692). Rather than adhere to the idea of stage models that in order to achieve a homosexual identity coming out is the goal, AmazingPhil discusses an issue that is present even for people coming out to millions on YouTube, i.e. that there will always be some people who do not know and who one will have to come out to again. This raises another problem with stage models as their objective of a full integration into a

heteronormative society is, in reality, never attainable because one is never truly out to everyone.

4 Privacy Matters

YouTubers seemingly share their whole lives online. Trying to always present their most authentic and, thus, most private self, they virtually invite their viewers into their homes (Giles 113). Still, they are able to keep some aspects of their lives private. In section 4.1, I discuss how YouTubers handle the concepts of secrecy and privacy, before detailing their depiction of the closet and their related struggles in 4.2. In 4.3, I will examine how creators navigate the degree of publicness they allow in their videos by highlighting that context is important in defining privacy. Although YouTube is a public platform, creators can still construct a private space for themselves on it.

4.1 Definition of Secrecy and Privacy

To define secrecy, one must first define what a secret is. For Georg Simmel, information becomes a secret when it is concealed in some form (462) and enshrouded in silence (472). Contrary to this, Dave Boothroyd posits that only sharing this information with somebody else actually transforms it into a secret; otherwise, the content of the secret is inaccessible to everyone and, thus, irrelevant (47). Indeed, the perception of a secret is also important for Guy Debord's definition of the term, as he argues that secrecy is always related to a spectacle because people are naturally curious (55). While that may be true, Michael Slepian, Jinseok Chun and Malia Mason suggest a different characterisation: For them, having a secret is not bound to the act of actively concealing it; rather, it suffices if one has the intention to conceal specific information (2). This produces circumstances in which "one may *have* a secret but not encounter a social situation that necessitates *keeping* the secret" (Slepian, Chun & Mason 26 [original emphasis]). For example, if one cheats on one's partner while away on a trip but intends to hide this instance of infidelity, one immediately acquires the secret, even though one might not interact with one's partner until the return home (Slepian, Chun & Mason 3). I will also adopt this last definition of secrecy. It is useful since one's sexual identity is usually not actively concealed from the beginning, but, at first, often only a passively kept secret.

Keeping a secret can both be a source of distress and a form of control. For an individual, having to conceal the truth, regardless of the reason, frequently has negative effects. Slepian,

Chun and Mason find that people who have a secret often mind-wander to it (4), which alerts them to the fact that they are not living according to their own values as they are presenting themselves as inauthentic by lying by omission. It is thus not the act of concealment per se which is the harmful part, but rather “having to live with [the secret]” (Slepian, Chun & Mason 25). However, secrecy can also be wielded as a powerful tool. At the state-level, external powers, such as the law, shroud themselves in secrecy to hide that they are, indeed, powerful and capable of forcing decisions (Foucault 86-92). Here, secrecy is performed in “the role of secret services, of popular conspirators, of professional accusers, of fake revealers, in sum a whole host of agents trained in promoting spectacular secrecy” (Bratich 494). Yet, secrecy can also be used to subvert the state’s power such as when activists adopt a “security culture” (Bratich 502) in which they deliberately keep their actions secret to prevent infiltration (ibid.) and to be able to offer safe spaces to marginalized groups (Bratich 503). Keeping secrets to protect oneself from external powers can also happen on a much smaller scale, for instance when teenagers try to escape their parents’ surveillance (boyd 56). Thus, whether having a secret is experienced as a negative state or not is dependent on the context.

In contrast to secrecy, privacy is always viewed as desirable. Privacy is generally experienced when individuals are able to control how much information they can share with others (Sheehan 22). The degree of access people have to another person is not only limited to information sharing, but also includes physical proximity or attention (Gavison 423). As a concept, privacy also “has a collective dimension” (Bratich 506) as, contrary to secrecy, it cannot be experienced by a single individual without another person present. Consequently, privacy “is the voluntary and temporary withdrawal of a person from the general society through physical or psychological means” (Westin 32). However, Poletti points out that while privacy is deemed a right for most people, historically it has been denied to many communities (*Stories* 3). For example, prisoners are awarded much less privacy than free citizens. Even for individuals that can generally decide their degree of privacy, this right is constantly under threat, especially nowadays as surveillance off- and online, in the forms of CCTV cameras or digital data, steadily increases (Hanson 591). Still, while the definition of privacy is always specific to culture, period and setting, people tend to value it highly and express a desire for it.

As privacy is not a static concept, differentiating clearly between public and private space is difficult. One reason for this is that the elements that constitute what is considered ‘public’ or

'private' are not exclusive to one category or the other. For instance, the family is typically characterised as a private institution but can be organised through power hierarchies, which are more commonly linked to public institutions. Conversely, political acts which are viewed as public are also informed by emotions, although those are more often seen as belonging to the private sphere (Gal 78). Another reason for the difficulty in drawing clear boundaries between 'private' and 'public' is that privacy also exists in spaces that are deemed public. Even within a conventionally public space, such as a café, interpersonal conversations are still considered private for passers-by simply because social norms dictate that they are "private by default" (boyd 61). Thus, what is deemed private and what public depends on context, rather than on fixed concepts.

The interaction between privacy and publicness is also of great importance online. Social media are designed to make the spread of information as easy as possible; the default setting for a Twitter, Instagram or Facebook profile is that everyone can view the content shared on it. If one wants to limit the potential audience, the privacy settings have to be regulated accordingly. Therefore, social media encourage a "public-by-default, private-through-effort mentality" (boyd 62), which is in stark contrast to the 'private-by-default' one in the offline world. When participating online, users often seemingly share personal information indiscriminately, despite detailing concerns about their digital privacy when asked. This incongruence has been termed the "privacy paradox" (Poletti, *Stories* 2) by researchers. However, danah boyd finds that at least teenagers do care about keeping sensitive information private. Rather than constricting who can view their content, though, they prefer to switch medium when they want to share something deemed more personal, e.g. they turn to text messages rather than Twitter (boyd 62). Still, even often traumatising experiences, such as hiding one's sexual identity and experiencing the consequences of being in the closet, are discussed on YouTube, a platform that seems overwhelmingly public, which will be analysed in the following section.

4.2 Depictions of the Closet on YouTube

In the videos chosen for analysis for this thesis, the creators often give an account of what their lives looked like before disclosing their sexual identity. Nilsen specifically explains how the closet, or as she terms it the "cabinet" (03:47), was formed as a result of her growing up in a homophobic environment. As she wanted to be accepted and loved, she essentially felt

forced to take her sexuality, “put it in a cabinet and lock it up really tight [sic]” (Nilsen 03:46 – 03:49). Similarly, Howell wants to store everything related to his sexual identity in a box (27:30 – 27:33), while Graceffa likens a closeted life to hiding behind “castle walls” (00:19 – 00:23) as he is waiting “for the world to be ready” (00:34 – 00:49) to accept him. Yang’s dance performance conveys the formation of the closet visually, when he is seen in a setting reminiscent of a church (Figure 20) where everyone but him dances identically until other people force him to move like the rest (Figure 21). Here, Yang is at first able to express himself freely, before he is urged to comply with the norms. In all of these instances, the closet is only constructed once the creators realise that their same-sex attraction is not tolerated by society (T. Adams 47): To exist in a heteronormative world without experiencing negative repercussions, they feel the need to hide their sexual identity. Whether it be through metaphors and similes or visual cues, creators present their experience of the closet as spatial isolation.



Figure 20. Eugene Lee Yang performs a different choreography than the other attendees of the church, here represented by six identical benches, a lectern and two candelabras (01:20).



Figure 21. After correction by the priest, Yang moves in sync with the others (01:29).

However, Yang's performance highlights how hiding one's sexual identity is a task that can never be carried out perfectly. Not only the props in Figure 20 evoke the idea of a church setting, but also the moves: Everyone but Yang performs gestures which draw from a Christian background, most notably hands held in a prayer position. Additionally, the others also cover their eyes and ears while Yang refuses to move in tandem with them (The Try Guys 01:10 – 01:23), seemingly trying to not perceive him and his marked difference. Even after he has adopted their moves, Yang continues to be recognisable as different as his white and orange jumpsuit is a stark contrast to everyone else's more muted outfits. Yang's use of gestures and colours to signal his own difference to his viewers relies on the problematic assumption that someone's sexual identity can be easily spotted. Otherwise, his fellow church goers would not have to cover their eyes when seeing him. While knowing someone's sexual identity on sight is contingent on equating stereotypes with facts, Yang seems to use the metaphor to establish himself as 'other' from his peers without ever uttering a single word. Thus, his continuing protrusion in the crowd emphasises how he is removed from the others even while hiding his sexuality.

Creators still in the closet attempt to fit in with everyone else, for which they constantly need to suppress their sexual identity which, paradoxically, makes them even more conscious of it. They are painfully aware of the secret that they are keeping as it is "eating [...] [and] consuming" (BriaAndChrissy 01:45 – 01:48) them, meaning that they are stuck in a "constant cycle of distraction and suppression" (Nilsen 08:50 – 08:53). By continually having to monitor this secret, the creators find themselves mind-wandering to it repeatedly, even in situations where they do not actively have to conceal it (Slepian, Chun & Mason 3), e.g. in bed at night

where Franta cannot think about anything else (01:29 – 01:43). Slepian, Chun and Mason argue that mind-wandering takes place not only because people spend more time within the confines of their own minds than in social interactions, but also because thought suppression leads to two opposed mental processes. The first one lets people suppress a thought, while the second one is constantly monitoring whether the first is operating correctly or if it has failed (Wegner 37-39). Keeping a secret is thus a time-intensive practice that involves far more than simply not thinking about it. While the creators aim to ignore everything related to their sexual identity, they are unable to do so. This, in turn, traps them in a closet that they have to simultaneously monitor and ignore.

In some cases, the repression is so all-encompassing that the creators are unable to articulate their sexual identity at all. Howell admits that “the word gay scares [him]” (38:18 – 38:19) and matthewac1 cannot bring himself to say gay out loud either, instead opting to give his mother a permission slip for attending an LGBTQ* youth group (02:43 – 02:51). Sivan and Franta experience physical reactions as the former feels a “locking of [his] throat” (Sivan 05:17) and the latter cannot bring his mouth to “utter those words” (Franta 03:04). Both are prevented from naming their sexual identity while in the closet, which affirms Sedgwick’s idea that silence is integral to the performance of closetedness (3). Drawing on Lord Alfred Douglas’s utterance, “*I am the Love that dare not speak its name*” (n.p., qtd. in Sedgwick 74 [original emphasis]), Sedgwick finds that topics such as secrecy and subsequent disclosure are integral to homosexuality in a homophobic society, while they are only rarely associated with heterosexuality (74). Similarly, the YouTube creators may hide their sexual identity so thoroughly that they seem to no longer be able to access even the language to express it. Possibly, this is an unconscious measure to protect them from accidentally disclosing their secret despite constantly mind-wandering to it. Ultimately, the performance of a heterosexual identity renders the creators silent.

The act of keeping a secret, be it through active concealment or the intention to withhold information, can be accompanied by a feeling of inauthenticity. By “holding back part of [themselves]” (Slepian, Chun & Mason 4), secrets keep people from fully connecting with others. Naturally, everybody is entitled to their privacy, but hiding a divergent sexuality is not only a strategy for upholding privacy but may also be one for ensuring safety as the interlocutor’s reaction to a coming out may be negative. Consequently, LGBTQ* people are not always free to choose whether they come out or not, resulting in their being unable to

fully engage in a relationship as long as they are lying by omission. This even seems to be true for YouTube creators, although their connection with their viewers is strictly one-sided. As they are trying to produce the impression that they have an intimate relationship with their audience, disclosing their sexual identity seems obligatory. Indeed, the social penetration theory posits that self-disclosure is integral to “building and maintaining intimate relationships” (Altman & Taylor n.p., qtd. in Utz 2). This is also true for para-social ones insofar as creators experience feelings of inauthenticity because of the discrepancy between their internal life and external presentation.

Both the silence and the feeling of inauthenticity often lead to the creators’ isolation and suffering from mental health problems. While some of them distance themselves from their peers or family members (e.g. AmazingPhil 02:10 – 02:24; ElleOfTheMills 01:07 – 01:08), Howell, in addition to this, does not associate with LGBTQ* topics at all, in order to appear categorically straight (26:57 – 27:15). This is in line with Adams’s finding that the closet is characterised by LGBTQ* people’s withdrawal from others, regardless of whether these other individuals are straight or not (76). At the very least, this isolation makes creators “unhappy” (mallow610 06:52 – 06:59) and “stressed” (AmazingPhil 02:50). More often, staying in the closet produces serious problems such as Dawson’s eating disorder (03:26), ElleOfTheMills’s depression (02:53 – 02:57) and Howell’s suicide attempt (19:34). The creators’ accounts of their mental health reflect a larger trend: LGBTQ* people are more likely to have a lower self-esteem, experience depressive symptoms and have lower life satisfaction (Amos et al. 6). As a result, LGBTQ* adolescents are five times more likely to experience depression and self-harm in comparison to their heterosexual peers (Amos et al. 7). These negative effects are due to the fact that LGBTQ* individuals are regularly exposed to “social stressors related to stigma and prejudice” (Meyer 691), which are what propel them to stay in the closet for a prolonged period of time in the first place. As the creators are unable to experience social belonging, their mental health often deteriorates and, precisely because they are isolated, they are unable to find help from others. Evidently, the closet is still a massive contributor to LGBTQ* people’s mental health problems.

If isolation alone is not sufficient to avoid suspicion, some creators turn to dating members of the opposite sex. While Mikin only kisses boys at social settings to portray heterosexuality (02:51 – 03:03), other creators engage in actual relationships (AmazingPhil 02:30 – 02:34; Nilsen 05:20 – 05:55; Franta 01:48 – 01:51; Howell 18:09 – 18:16), all of them with the main

goal of being “normal” (Franta 01:55 – 01:56). While passing as straight can make them feel safer, because they are less likely to be found out, they are now plagued with guilt: As they are aware of their own insincerity in their relationships, they have an additional problem to face when coming out, namely that they will hurt a person they at least pretended to love. Howell points out how this strategy works: “This was someone who I liked that I was hurting and lying to, but I couldn’t leave as then I’d have no armour” (18:37 – 18:43). By categorising his partner as “armour”, Howell already shows how he is not thinking about her as a person, but rather as a tool in his plan to appear straight despite professing his care for her. Similarly, Nilsen is aware that she “wasn’t giving [herself] fully” (09:34 – 09:35) in her relationships, leading to her also feeling guilty. As a result, the creators have to fear additional repercussions when coming out as they could be held accountable for their “self-protecting practices” (T. Adams 81) by their ex-partners. This, in turn, can keep LGBTQ* individuals in the closet for longer as they want to avoid hurting those closest to them at the expense of their own prolonged suffering.

When the negative effects of the closet finally become too great to bear, leaving it is often characterised as a liberating act. For the creators’ coming outs, a variety of triggers can be responsible: Some YouTubers are inspired by others on the platform or celebrities openly living an LGBTQ* lifestyle (Dawson 06:45; Sivan 03:06), while others stress that they have become tired of hiding such a large part of themselves away (Franta 02:41; Rhodes 00:33; AmazingPhil 03:25). When they narrate the occurrences that lead to their disclosure, they usually classify the truth about their sexual identity as coming out unhindered. Nilsen, for instance, professes that she could do nothing to stop the disclosure (11:55 – 12:06) and even at her “best attempts to suppress it, it was coming out” (17:01 – 17:06). jessiepaegge also suggests that she came out because her mind “just wanted [her] to” (*Part 2*, 02:37 – 02:38). Truth is experienced as a natural progression in the creators’ homosexual identity formation which, at some point, demands to surface, making confessing to it the inevitable and logical next step.

However, Foucault posits that the confession is what actually produces the truth. In the Western world, he traces the confession back to the Middle Ages (58) when it started to play an important role in nearly every aspect of society, be it in “justice, medicine, education, [or] family relationships [...]” (59). As society induces everyone to confess in a variety of situations, Foucault posits that the reason for the existence of a confession is consequently veiled:

namely, that a confession is only needed because truth is suppressed by power which forces people to be silent in the first place. Foucault suggests that “truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom” (60). While power is often expressed through legal proceedings (87), it is, in fact, not a specific institution or a structure, but “comes from everywhere” (Foucault 93) as it denotes all the processes in which power can be supported, confronted, transformed, strengthened or reversed to become part of a system (Foucault 92). Contrary to the creators’ insistence that it is the truth of their sexual identity which breaks free, it is the individual who temporarily disrupts the heteronormative character of society by confessing to a divergent sexual identity. In Foucauldian terms, coming out can, thus, be viewed as a “local and tactical” (12) act, which causes a transformation in discourse. With and through this act the individual claims the freedom to produce the truth about their actual sexual identity.

The confession itself is part of a power relationship between the speaking subject and the interlocutor, who can be the virtual audience. In the speaking subjects, confessing “produces intrinsic modifications in the person” (Foucault 62) as it liberates them. The interlocutor, however, is the one who demands the confession and, thus, has real authority over the subject (Foucault 62) as they verify the subject’s truth by demanding or deciphering it, before forgiving or condemning the subject (Foucault 66). This demand for truth is encountered in the YouTube audience when Howell points out that his sexual identity is “one of the greatest mysteries of our generation” (00:16 – 00:18), referring to fans’ incessant speculation on that topic. Likewise, Gloom is asked to clarify her sexuality by one of her commentators, who states that they will not support her otherwise (01:13 – 01:32). In both cases, once the creators’ actions cannot be exclusively linked to heterosexuality anymore, the viewers notice this incongruence in the creators’ self-presentation. Due to “the continuing Enlightenment imperative of intelligible, reasonable and recognisable subjectivity” (Cover 187), the viewers then require a re-alignment of Howell’s and Gloom’s identities into a coherent narrative, which results in a confession. There is a power imbalance between them and the creators as Howell and Gloom are consequently forced to decide between avoiding the topic of their sexual identity or giving in to their audience’s demand. This instance highlights that despite the creators choosing the moment of coming out themselves, their confessions are still embedded in a system of power and even after the creators have confessed, their viewers continue to hold the power as they are now in the position to react to it.

The power relationship in confessions is best depicted in live reaction videos. Here, the interlocutors often ask questions which shape the conversation and in mallow610's and matthewac1's videos, the mothers talk for a significantly larger amount of time than their sons. After their sons come out, they stress that "I wasn't going to say anything about you being gay" (mallow610 05:23 – 05:25) and "I was never going to ask until you told me" (matthewac1 08:26 – 08:28). The mothers do not give any particular reason for this and the sons do not react outwardly to their mothers' assertions as mallow610 just continues being on his phone and matthewac1 is still drying his tears. Notably, until this moment the women have not tried to exploit the power they hold over their sons by asking about their sexual identity. Both parties' behaviours demonstrate the "polymorphic techniques of power" (Foucault 11): The creators can determine the exact time of coming out, while the interlocutors, here, the mothers, are powerful even when they are silent and not only when they are actively asking for a confession.

By accepting this need to admit their sexual identity, the creators comply with society's demand for confession. Jon Dovey argues that LGBTQ* people's coming out narratives allow them to contest public space by asserting that their "private identities have public rights" (112) and celebrate their difference. Essentially, they are able to make their identities visible in a society that is still largely intent on suppressing them. My analysis supports Dovey's claim as LGBTQ* creators come out very publicly, which ensures that their sexual identities are known to many. However, my earlier investigation of the power relationships displayed in the videos illustrates that creators still succumb to heteronormative rules. This is in line with Ella Kotze's and Brett Bowman's analysis of lesbian coming outs, where participants "describe a sense of responsibility to reveal the 'truth' about themselves" (6), rather than question the need to confess in the first place. Thus, the creators are able to create a space for their non-normative sexual identities, but one that does not fundamentally change heteronormative power dynamics. They highlight their suffering to leave an inauthentic life behind and accept that doing so comes with a loss of privacy, but also seem to feel that they owe their audience this broadcasting of their personal lives. However, the creators are still able to regulate how much personal information they want to share while exposing their secret, which will be discussed in the next section.

4.3 Navigating Privacy on YouTube

Sharing one's sexual identity development, which is usually categorised as an intensely private matter, poses the question why so many creators choose to sacrifice their privacy and come out publicly. Frequently, their self-proclaimed reasons are that they want to provide "resources" (Sivan 07:36) for viewers who question their own sexuality and show them that their present situation "will get better" (AmazingPhil 07:32). Private matters are, therefore, disclosed to help a struggling community. Indeed, many of the YouTubers themselves state that watching the videos of other creators was important in their own sexual identity formation (e.g. Franta 04:45 – 04:48; Sivan 03:30 – 03:42; Mikin 04:49 – 05:02).

While I do not doubt that the creators truly want to be a positive representation for LGBTQ* viewers, I suggest that there is another reason for coming out on YouTube. Sander de Ridder and Frederik Dhaenens in their analysis of coming out videos find that these types of videos tend to be "very popular contributions to the vloggers' YouTube channels" (de Ridder & Dhaenens 55), which is reflected in my own sample: 16 out of 25 analysed videos have a significantly higher view count than the rest of the videos on the creators' respective channels. By detailing an intimate topic, the creators can expect to attract more viewers, which, in turn, aids their becoming known. Indeed, with the exception of matthewac1, Alexander and Mikin, who have only uploaded two, three and four videos respectively, the other creators all either already have or obviously want a career as a YouTuber, as they shared videos before coming out and produced them afterwards as well. Some of the creators are still extremely popular, averaging millions of views (e.g. The Try Guys, Howell), while others have since experienced a drop in views, but continue to pursue a YouTube career. mallow610's channel best illustrates the latter as can be seen in Figure 22: While his uploads are irregular, he uses capitalised titles and customised thumbnails with "eye-catching text in a stylish contemporary font" (Giles 112). Doing so has become a practice on YouTube, which signals that one is either already a famous creator or emulating one. In mallow601's case, his views nowadays are in the low thousands, which is a stark contrast to his coming out video's three million. Although creators never address attracting more subscribers as a possible reason for divulging intimate details, it is highly unlikely for them to be so completely unaware of how YouTube works as to not recognise the positive influence coming out can have on their YouTube career. Thus, their coming out, while an unquestionably brave act, is far from only being a selfless one as the creators use the (expected) beneficial marketing power of this act on YouTube.

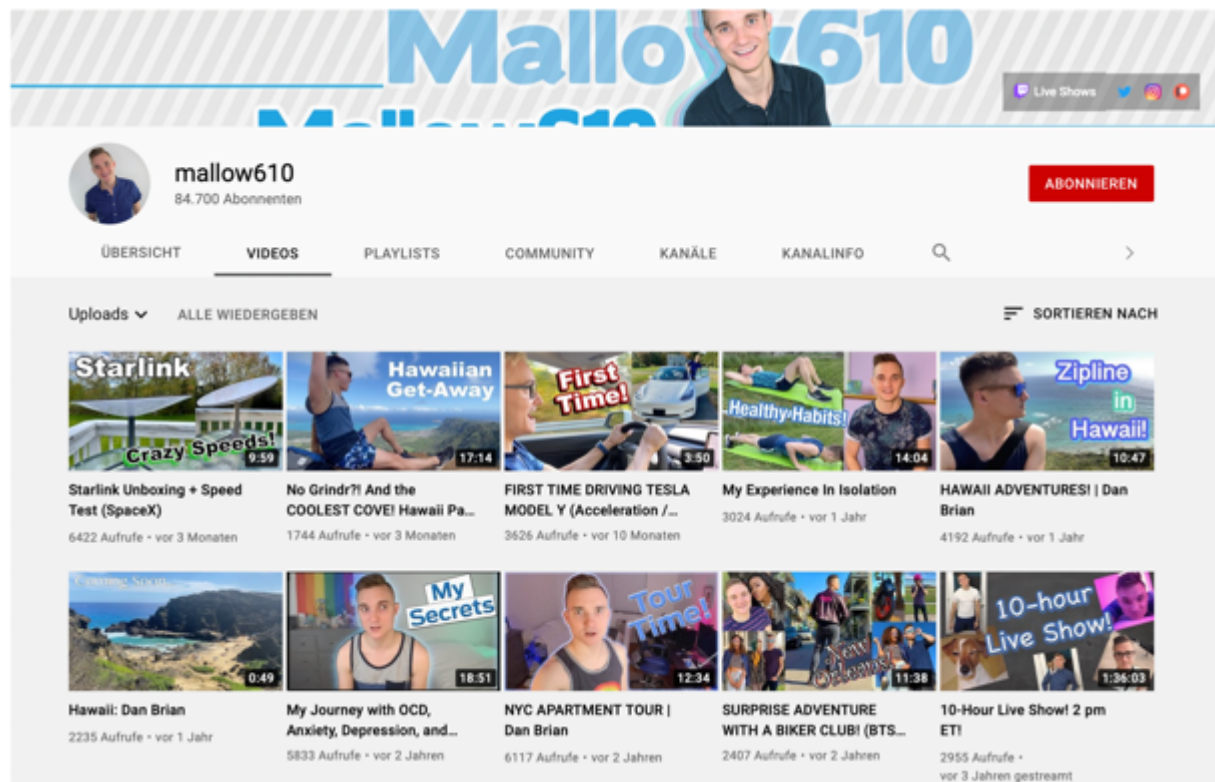


Figure 22. mallow610's channel showcases typical style elements employed by YouTubers (accessed 23 Aug. 2021).

It seems, then, that to become a successful YouTuber, one often has to be willing to let strangers into one's life. Indeed, Michael Strangelove finds that this obligation to share something private is at the core of YouTube vlogs, terming YouTube "a giant virtual confession booth" (72). On it, the audience acts as "an imagined friend, [who] generates a powerful impulse to confess" (ibid.). Creators are, thus, expected to meet this implicit requirement by publicising large parts of their lives as they are unlikely to become popular otherwise. Simultaneously, however, they produce the demand for confession in the first place when they make it explicit by addressing their viewers as 'friends'. For instance, Sivan states that "I feel like a lot of you guys are, like, real, genuine friends of mine" (00:33 – 00:39). As such, the viewers can expect to be told about feelings and occurrences that are normally kept private. Analysing celebrity talk show interviews, Barry King finds that confessions in this setting are less concerned with actually revealing information, but more with controlling this revelation to promote a "fabricated performance that centres on self" (122). He labels these disclosures "para-confessions" (123) as they rely on the selective exploitation and manipulation of the confessional practice (ibid.). Likewise, YouTubers engage in para-confessions when they use private revelations to minimise the distance between themselves and their audience and achieve social intimacy with their viewers (Berryman & Kavka, *Celebrification* 310) in order to

deepen their bond with them (Inness 81). Interestingly, two creators, Sivan and doddleoddle, who have switched from being YouTubers to singers, have largely stopped divulging secrets about their lives and now only upload impersonal music videos. They are what King terms “exemplars” (124), i.e. they are famous for a particular professional service, which renders them “a professional first and an individual second” (ibid.) and maximises their market advantage (ibid.). As such they no longer need to feign proximity to their fans to uphold their status (Senft 26). Sivan’s and doddleoddle’s examples show that once creators have attained a certain status, they are not expected to share their whole lives with their audience anymore, highlighting that privacy revelations seem to be connected to the level of fame. As upcoming YouTubers are still far removed from such status, however, they rely on publicizing private moments to become successful.

The creators fulfil the obligation to share by showing private moments in coming out videos, ranging from mundane conversations with family members to depictions of suffering. In live reaction videos, the audience is allowed to witness the unfolding of a coming out embedded in a real-life relationship between family members. As all these scenes have to be filmed, the creators obviously have their viewers in mind, even as they manage their relatives’ reactions. These relatives sometimes do not know that they are being filmed, as in the case of mallow610 who hides his camera. This further reinforces the idea that the viewers are granted access to what is usually considered “a restricted commodity” (Inness 79). By giving them front-row seats to these scenes, the creators demonstrate that they value their audience highly enough to share private aspects of their lives with it. This explains Alexander’s choice to include a mundane conversation about salad in his video (16:09 – 16:26) as presenting it fosters a “feeling of proximity” (Kavka 2; qtd. in Berryman & Kavka, *Celebrification* 309 [original emphasis]) by granting his viewers prolonged access to his private life. Even more intimately, the videos frequently show creators crying either while still debating whether and when to come out (Figure 23 and Figure 24) or while coming out (Figure 25). Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka find that presenting intense emotions such as crying on YouTube is done to portray the creators’ authentic and un-edited side of themselves (*Crying* 90). Andrea Zapp posits that this is important for attracting viewers as, in a society in which perfect bodies and lives dominate advertisements, people increasingly want to see others’ unvarnished realities to have a way of comparing themselves to these more attainable lifestyles (317-318). Watching YouTubers’ seemingly normal lives, including the experience of negative emotions,

disrupts the idea that they are unattainable celebrities and equalises them with their audience. The creators, thus, comply with the obligation to share by broadcasting various emotional or intimate parts of their private lives.



Figure 23. ElleOfTheMills crying as she talks about coming out (02:23).



Figure 24. jessiepage crying as she is on the phone, debating whether to come out (00:27).



Figure 25. The Rhodes twins crying as they come out to their father via a phone call (03:40).

Still, despite the imperative to publicise their lives on YouTube, there are instances in which the creators refuse to provide details that they might share with their real-life friends. As many YouTubers explain their journeys towards the acceptance and the disclosure of their sexual identity, they often feature accounts of their past dating experiences. These, however, are typically only mentioned briefly: For example, Gloom merely reveals that her encounters with women “remained PG” (04:21), referring to movie ratings in which PG, i.e. parental guidance, denotes films suitable for everyone above the age of six. Thus, although her statement is vague, it implies that her relationships with women were not sexual. Actual past sexual experiences are sometimes also alluded to but only via innuendos as doddleoddle sings that she has “experimented and [she] really, really, really, really, really, really, really like[s] it” (00:52 – 01:11) and Howell says that he “had a lot of fun with many different kinds of people in 2009” (22:02 – 22:08). Here, doddleoddle and Howell use the gap between what they are saying and what they are suggesting similarly to how Gloom does, but the conclusion is the opposite: The implication is that they were indeed sexually active. Moreover, if physical relationships are shown visually, their display is only brief, such as in Graceffa’s music video, which ends with him kissing another man (Figure 26), or Bria’s and Chrissy’s kiss at the end of their song (Figure 27). The creators divulge considerably less about these experiences than, for example, their struggles with mental health, and actively restrict the viewers’ access to more information here. One reason for this reticence may be that people measure privacy in comparison to how public their lives are. Sandra Petronio and Irwin Altman argue that celebrities define privacy very narrowly as large parts of their lives are publicly accessible. Consequently, they become “more protective of the privacy they still own” (Petronio &

Altman 12-13). Additionally, they need to be mindful of the public image they want to broadcast, for which they have to control how much to reveal and when to gain or maintain the audience's attention (King 123). As sex can be a delicate subject, creators need to assess whether they can share revelations related to it. Whereas Gloom's public persona may not be compatible with her having a sex life, Howell's online presence is known for his frequent sexual innuendos, explaining this breach of privacy. Nevertheless, most of the creators as micro-celebrities seem to guard their dating experiences heavily as one of the few remaining private elements of their lives and to uphold their image management.

The creators' insistence on keeping their sexual experiences private can also be explained by looking at the context of their videos. Helen Nissenbaum finds that context plays an important role when discussing whether something is considered a breach of privacy, terming contexts "structured social settings characterized by canonical activities, roles, relationships, power structures, norms [...], and internal values" (Nissenbaum 132). Following this, she posits "contextual integrity" (Nissenbaum 140) as a defining feature of privacy. Privacy is contingent on informational norms which determine whether certain behaviours are appropriate or inappropriate in a specific context. These norms, for example, allow physicians to ask their patients about the state of their bodies but make the same question inappropriate if posed by employers to their employees (Nissenbaum 143). Establishing contextual integrity as a crucial part of privacy explains why people may react badly to the same behaviour in one situation but not in another. The context of YouTube coming out videos is that the creators want to inform their audience of their sexual identity and, in most cases, provide them with sexual identity formation narratives as well as encourage them to come out themselves (Lovelock, *My Coming Out* 79). For this, they may also have to share details about their mental health problems or traumatic occurrences to portray the coming to terms with their sexual identity impactfully. In contrast to this, their dating and sex lives do not have to be detailed as this information is at the fringe or even outside the context of coming out videos.



Figure 26. Graceffa is seen kissing his acting partner (03:18).



Figure 27. Bria and Chrissy kiss at the end of their song (03:36).

As previously discussed, creators are able to determine the amount of publicness in their videos. Interestingly, both limiting access to as well as sharing private information can be tools to retain agency over what is publicised on YouTube. One way to protect the creators' privacy despite disclosing intimate information is to remain anonymous while doing so. Mikin's video is a good example for this as she comes out via an animated comic to protect her identity (Figure 28; 00:06 – 00:07). By not showing herself, Mikin is able to give detailed information about herself without having to fear that someone will immediately connect it to her. Rather than choosing what to share, she achieves "privacy by choosing what not to [share]" (boyd 63). Similarly, the creators can opt to use no or fewer tags for their videos, so that they are not picked up by YouTube's algorithm (Lange 369). Thus, they can be "privately public" (Lange 372) on YouTube by employing strategies to restrict access via carefully choosing or selecting meta data of their uploaded video, i.e. information that is not directly related to their coming

out. Another way to keep some control is to actively determine the timing of coming out and, thus, share private information of one's own volition: Dawson points out that he would rather come out than have his fans question his sexual identity when they spot him on a date with another man (10:14 – 10:25) and the Rhodes' twins echo this sentiment when telling their father that they prefer to personally inform him of their sexualities instead of him finding out from a YouTube video (03:56 – 04:00). Alexander also tells his family because he does not want them to find out and question him in a moment when he is not ready for that conversation (04:18 – 04:38). By determining the time of the disclosure in a setting that they know well, i.e. YouTube, the creators enact agency within this social situation (boyd 60). Although they seem to share everything, they are still able to decide what to keep truly private and off the internet, and, thus, exert a certain amount of power (boyd 75). This shows that the creators have a variety of tools for limiting their exposure, even while active on an overwhelmingly public platform.



Figure 28. Mikin's drawing of herself (00:03).

Before creators can use methods to limit their degree of publicness, however, it is essential that they assess how much they need to share in the first place to fulfil their goals. Consequently, creators must calculate the risks and benefits of sharing private information in their videos (Petronio & Altman 26). In the case of YouTubers, their benefits seem to be both helping others with their coming out as well as gaining subscribers. The latter is important as their status and monetary gain depend on being "seen and heard by others" (Berriman & Thompson 593). As discussed in the introductory paragraphs to this section, coming out videos are frequently the creators' most popular uploads and function as more than the creators' unburdening themselves of their secret sexual identity and presenting an authentic self.

Indeed, as their success hinges on their cultivation of the “self as content” (Berriman & Thompson 593), they need to be able to handle the dichotomy of private vs. public expertly as divulging too much can come with considerable risks.⁹ Therefore, creators manage individual spaces of privacy by navigating a complex array of wanted and unwanted attention as privacy is not only contingent on context but also on what goals one has in mind.

4.4 Discussion

As has been argued in the previous sections, the closet and accompanying insights into the creators’ private lives are a key topic in coming out videos. Especially talking head videos and certain instances of the miscellaneous category are typically marked by detailed descriptions of the mental and physical struggles related to a closeted life, thus granting viewers an in-depth insight into the creators’ psyche. In contrast to this, live reaction videos rarely discuss the closet, but still provide an intimate scene for the audience, despite not sharing personal anecdotes. These outcomes were unsurprising as the talking head category prioritises the creators’ experience, to which the closet is integral, while live reactions primarily navigate the interlocutors’ reactions, to whom the closet is not personally relevant. However, I expected the song category and performance-heavy videos in the miscellaneous category to return to more exhaustive portrayals of the closet as the creators have full control over how to present their coming out here, similar to the talking head category, and could dedicate time to their experience of the closet as it is a defining feature of queer life (cf. Sedgwick 1990; Seidman 2004; T. Adams 2011). Yet, the closet is largely absent and if present at all only to tell a straight audience how relieving it is to leave it behind (Hills 01:35 – 01:58; doddleoddle 00:16 – 00:29; BriaAndChrissy 02:00 – 02:32; LamelifeOfKelsey 02:49 – 02:51; happilyeverayanna 00:23 – 0:30). Consequently, this category is much less personal than the other forms. I suggest that the reason for this is that the type of presentation dictates the depiction of the closet and the degree of publicness.

In light of the importance of the type of presentation of coming out, my previous classification into categories needs to be reworked to reflect that. My labelling of one category as talking head is borrowed from previous research on coming out videos (Raun 4; de Ridder &

⁹ YouTubers are regularly exposed to cyberbullying or, in extreme cases, even stalking on account of their online existence (Aviles n.p.). For an in-depth analysis of how cyberbullying affects beauty vloggers, i.e. creators whose videos deal with topics related to lifestyle and beauty, see Abidin 2019.

Dhaenens 49) and refers to a production aspect, i.e. the camera perspective. However, this categorisation does not reflect the presentation of the coming out, namely as a *story*. Only the highlighting of the narrative element explains why the videos' creators emphasise their closeted experience and, subsequently, share large amounts of their private lives: As they tell a linear narrative that retroactively asserts their always having been gay, detailing their experiences is integral to their presentation of sexual identity and to portraying coming out as a freeing confession. If creators are less inclined to talk about the closet or share parts of their lives not directly related to their immediate coming out, e.g. their mental health struggles, they have the option of filming a live reaction. Here, the presentation of coming out can be classified as *spectacle*. I understand 'spectacle' as an occurrence which attracts an audience to entertain it, demonstrate or prove something to it (Fritz, Frisch & Rieger 13). The viewers watching a spectacle oscillate between immersing themselves in it and interpreting it to create meaning (Fritz, Frisch & Rieger 16). Coming out in live reaction videos can be labelled as a spectacle because the videos show an audience what coming out might look like, thus creating knowledge of it. As a spectacle, the videos do not aim to portray the full narrative of sexual identity formation but focus on the actual act of coming out, which is largely guided by interpersonal family dynamics. In the process, they grant intimate access to the creators' daily lives, but depictions of the closet remain absent, because no family member asks for them. Finally, song videos and the dance and poetry ones are the least public as they enact coming out as a *performance*. While, of course, talking head and live reaction videos are also all arguably a performance, only song, dance or poetry recitals are intended to be read as one. Indeed, where the other categories are characterised by the creators' (emotional) confessions, in performance videos, creators have the opportunity to go beyond narrating the personal topic of sexual identity by actively performing it (Grobe 243), but still remain somewhat removed from it. Thus, the different forms of presentation cover a spectrum ranging from most public (a detailed story) to moderately public (a live spectacle) to least public (a professional performance).

As a variety of presentation types exists, creators are able to choose which one best fits their needs. While the threshold for producing a performance video is higher than the other categories as it requires a certain skill level, theoretically creators can freely select any presentation depending on their goals for the video. One goal for every form, without exception, is to help LGBTQ* youth, which is also the creators' self-professed reason for

producing a coming out video (e.g. Sivan 07:36; AmazingPhil 07:32). To reach a maximum number of people, creators choose a type that they believe best corresponds with their abilities and the degree of publicness they want to relay. For some, this means telling a personal story, for others it involves showcasing a spectacle. Reflecting on the “Twins Come Out To Dad” video in a personal essay, one of the Rhodes’ twins, Aaron, writes that by uploading it they “wanted to [...] inspire those that don’t know how to approach the conversation” (GMA Team n.p.). He highlights that it can provide closeted LGBTQ* individuals with a script on how to come out to family members. Indeed, online coming out stories can help LGBTQ* youth experience what the disclosure of sexuality might look or feel like at a time when they feel unable to come out yet (Gray 1178). Similarly, live reaction videos allow the viewers to witness a ‘real’ coming out and, thus, learn what they can expect. The other categories aid an LGBTQ* community in the same vein: By being accessible from everywhere, the queer community on YouTube allows networking between individuals who may not be able to do so otherwise, either because of social stigma or their geographical location (Green, Bobrowicz & Ang 704; J. Alexander 102). For many LGBTQ* teenagers the internet is a way to discover their own sexual identities because the narratives on YouTube are focused on authenticity and, thus, promise to be more realistic than fictionalised LGBTQ* representation on TV or in books (Gray 1162). Therefore, altruism is a valid and important reason for choosing YouTube as a medium regardless of the individual type of presentation.

Still, the supportive nature of coming out videos notwithstanding, I suggest altruism is not the creators’ only motivation, but maintaining fame is also one which impacts the selection of the type of coming out. In my analysis of talking head videos, the creators were all already established vloggers at the time of their disclosure of sexuality and their coming out videos were popular contributions to their channels. Thus, a video focusing on their personality works as a resource to maintain and increase the commercial value of their existing celebrity status (Lovelock, *Is every?* 94). Similarly, all of the creators in the song category either already had uploaded songs before or were trying to establish themselves as singers. Their choice of a performance may, therefore, be influenced by upholding or creating their brand as artists. As music videos are extremely popular on YouTube, with 93% of the most-watched videos belonging to this category as of January 2020 (Smith n.p.) as well as 74% of frequent search terms relating to music (Liikkanen & Salovaara 112), disclosing their sexual identity in the form of a song is a good way for creators to pursue a YouTube career. Another reason for choosing

to produce a song may be that popular music videos generate a significant number of user-generated content (Liikkanen & Salovaara 116). Those can be covers of the songs, karaoke (Figure 29) or lyrics versions (cf. isitdodieaudiotho 2017) and animations to accompany the songs (cf. Ramos 2017). The videos acquire even greater reach as they are regularly recycled and can become part of a wider music community by bridging the gap between sometimes-niche LGBTQ* content and a more mainstream one. Thus, if the creators can already draw on an existing audience or know the specific area in which they want to establish themselves, story and performance videos are a good choice for them.

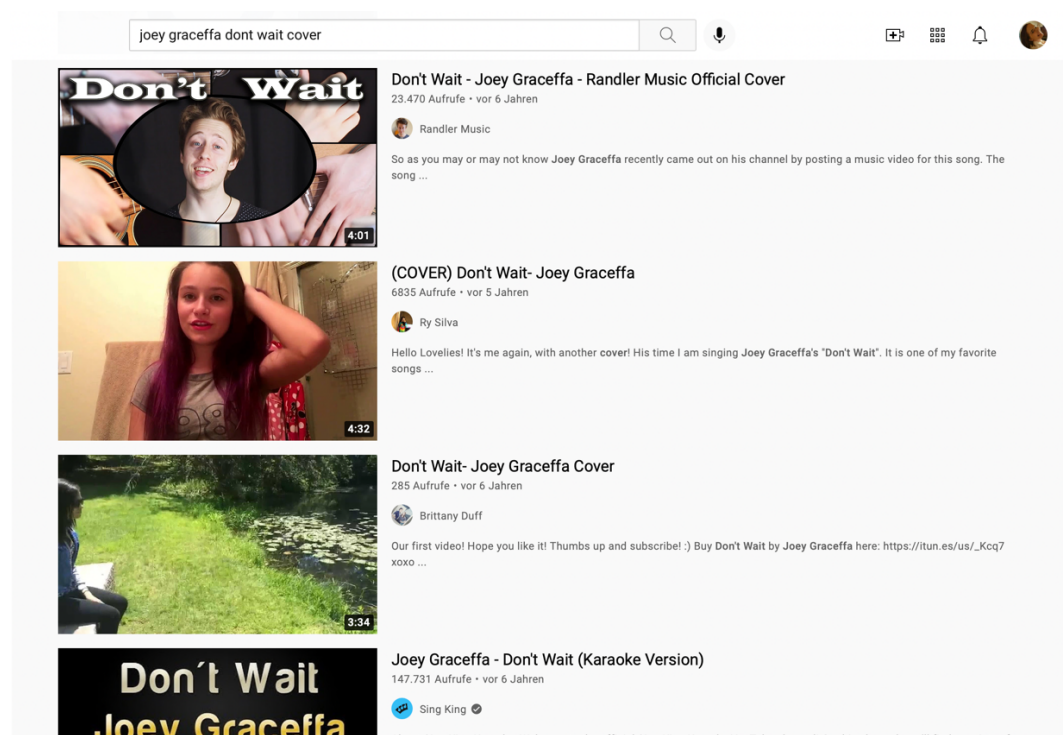


Figure 29. Search results for covers of Graceffa's coming out song.

The third reason to choose a certain type of presentation is the wish to become famous. If the creators are largely unknown on YouTube, the possibility of finding an audience for a simple re-telling, i.e. a story, of their sexual identity development process is low. One of the main attractions on YouTube is to watch less polished and idealised “versions of ourselves and our world” (Strangelove 48) and, consequently, be able to watch sensationalist situations (Rizzo n.p.). The appeal of YouTube is similar to reality TV shows, in which the viewers wait for participants to deliver tearful confessions and “lose it” (King 120). Choosing to produce a spectacle, then, can be a way for unestablished creators to gain fame by exploiting the audience’s proclivity for witnessing dramatic scenes. The efficacy of this is evidenced by the

reception of the Rhodes twins' video which quickly went viral, receiving 700,000 views in less than 24 hours (ABC News n.p.). Similarly, Holtzy's Hangouts's performance of a poem in front of her class, while much less successful, possibly also hopes to find a big audience as other poems have gone viral before.¹⁰ In fact, Anandam Kavoori suggests that producing a viral video is YouTube's defining feature (17). For videos to acquire such a status, they not only rely on high view numbers, but also on other content producers such as mainstream media outlets to share them, making this phenomenon "a collective enactment" (Kavoori 26). Therefore, filming a spectacle or a performance can help unknown creators become popular. Whether creators want to be altruistic, maintain or gain fame, YouTube's appeal lies in the fact that it is built to reach a large amount of people very quickly. Creators only have to choose how to express their coming outs.

Despite the different types of presentation, however, creators share similar understandings of sexual identity development. The overarching narrative is one of authenticity and essentialism, which is in line with what Plummer already found about sexual narratives in 1995, when he wrote that "identities are built around sexuality; an experience becomes an essence" (*Stories* 86). Likewise, the creators propagate an essentialist notion of sexual identity, even if they have to retroactively re-signify moments of their lives to constitute it in the first place. While the types of presentation now cover a broad spectrum, surprisingly, Plummer's prediction that in the 21st century "contested and clashing participant sexual stories" (*Stories* 133) will exist has not materialised, at least not on YouTube. Although the presentation type of coming out has implications for the creators' portrayal of the closet and subsequent privacy boundaries, it has practically none on their understanding of sexual identity. Despite being a rather new mode of coming out, YouTube videos seem to have already become a traditional narrative form. Once this happens, Plummer argues, these narrative forms take on conservative functions (*Stories* 176) and become "new voices of authority" (*Stories* 133). As such, their only presenting essentialist sexual identities enforces a singular approach of how to think about sexual identity. This alienates LGBTQ* persons for whom this does not accurately reflect their own lives. They, once again, lack a narrative, precisely in the place where they are meant to find the most 'authentic' representation of themselves. If diverging narratives exist, they are not amongst the most popular YouTube

¹⁰ For instance, Royce Mann's "White Boy Privilege" (Yuan & Price n.p.) and Olivia Vella's "Why Am I Not Good Enough?" (WYSK n.p.).

coming out videos and, thus, it is doubtful that the people searching for them will be able to find them. Therefore, despite various types of presentation, the essential character of the coming out story has not (yet) changed.

Conclusion

Coming out on YouTube is possible in a variety of ways. While previous research has only dealt with doing so through talking head videos, my analysis has been concerned with showing that there also exist other types, namely coming out to family members live or producing a song/dance/poem to disclose one's sexuality. To better examine the different ways of coming out, I originally grouped the videos into four categories: talking head, live reaction, song and miscellaneous, the latter being for videos which do not clearly fit into one of the other categories but nonetheless amass many views. In my introduction, I postulated that an investigation of these types of videos would demonstrate how a queer identity is theorised and created. Additionally, the choice of video informs whether and how creators depict their experiences of the closet and how much of their private lives they share with their audience.

In investigating the structure of the videos, my analysis has shown that the presentation of coming out relies heavily on conveying the creators' authentic selves. They try to present themselves on camera as genuine by employing different tactics: Talking head videos generally produce the effect of authenticity through use of direct address, seemingly spontaneous talk rather than a memorised script and a simple set-up to uphold their status as amateur films. Similarly, the live reaction category mainly claims authenticity via amateurishness as its videos are of low production quality. In contrast to this, miscellaneous videos draw on shared cultural meanings to establish creators as sincere by carefully manipulating the lighting and inserting photographic evidence for their stories. Song videos are less concerned with authenticity as they have a high production quality and are typically created for closeted LGBTQ* individuals to use as a coming out tool. As such, however, the creators still imply the importance of authenticity as they indirectly encourage their viewers to be 'true to themselves' and come out by using their videos. Thus, regardless of video type, authenticity is a core theme of coming out on YouTube.

The creators' main goal for presenting themselves as authentic is to build or maintain a loyal fanbase. Performing authenticity through sharing intimate parts of one's life or making the

viewers believe that they are unique amongst a crowd of fans – done by direct address and continuous eye contact with the camera – helps foster the audience-creator bond. This parasocial relationship, wherein the creators most often never meet their viewers, but the viewers still feel as if they know the creators well and are treated like friends by them, is integral to the YouTubers' status as micro-celebrities. By ostensibly performing their public personae authentically, they are able to attract an audience and bind it to themselves. However, it is important to note that despite the creators' implied juxtaposition between authenticity and performance, the two cannot exist without each other. As I have pointed out by drawing on Tolson (2001; 2010), authenticity is always only an effect: The creators are able to choose how to portray it, but they are always performing it. They may, however, question this authenticity themselves, notably by using parody as discussed in relation to twaimz's video. As the role of parody in coming out videos remains under-analysed, this would be an interesting topic for further research.

In line with their portrayal of themselves as authentic, the creators also present their coming out as a linear progression toward self-actualisation. Without exception, the YouTubers depict their sexual identity formation as one in which their sexuality is the expression of an intrinsic core self. Either they have always known that they were queer, or they realised it once they had sufficient language for it. Although they mention the periods of confusion they pass through, they all ultimately end at a point where they can confidently say that they are part of the LGBTQ* community. This representation is important for many LGBTQ* youth as is frequently expressed in the videos' comments. There, young queer people often reiterate how valuable it is for them to see an online representation of themselves, especially when they are otherwise isolated from an LGBTQ* community (Lovelock, *Is every?* 101). Producing an easy to comprehend script for coming to terms with oneself is, thus, helpful for many teens.

Still, the ubiquity of sexual identity formation as a linear process is problematic. While creators seem to favour this presentation to prevent possible scrutiny of their stories' coherence, its constant repetition on YouTube makes it increasingly difficult to find any other coming out narratives. Creators insist that coming out is a streamlined process that is nearly identical for all LGBTQ* people, which includes being out by their mid-twenties at the latest. This leaves those individuals behind who may only figure out their sexuality much later or have a completely different understanding of it, e.g. one which allows for more fluidity. The negative consequences of the absence of diverging narratives online can already be seen in the analysis

of bi- and pansexual creators' videos, who experience confusion over not fitting into either hetero- or homosexual narratives. Similarly, it is probable that asexual people also do not feel represented by the narratives of coming out videos as they are not even mentioned.

Despite the creators' essentialist understanding of sexuality, I have demonstrated that they do not adhere to any stage model of homosexual identity formation. The criticism directed against the models is warranted as their rigidity and insistence that all LGBTQ* people pass through distinct stages while developing their sexual identity is incompatible with the creators' presentations of their journeys. While the YouTubers mostly focus on coming out as a one-time event, like stage models do, they never follow a specific order of stages before their disclosure. This is especially telling because, as discussed earlier, they all propose and follow a similar script of coming out, but still emphasise different strategies of coming out, such as providing clues, speculation or concealment. In addition to highlighting those, I have also shown that coming out is a continuing process that is initiated every time a queer person meets someone new and has to come out again as was most prominently argued in relation to AmazingPhil's video.

In the course of their videos, many creators also discuss their experiences of the closet. Here, common themes are detailing the negative consequences of staying in the closet both verbally and visually by describing the toll it took on their mental health, their resulting isolation and their feelings of guilt. All of the creators perceive the closet as spatial isolation as a result of a heteronormative society that forces them to either hide their sexual identity or deal with possibly negative repercussions upon revealing it. In all instances, however, the creators ultimately adhere to what Foucault terms society's demand for confession (60) by coming out. They experience the confession as a natural progression in their sexual identity formation progress in which the truth simply demands to be set free, rather than seeing it as necessary because of external powers subduing the truth. Consequently, this corroborates Foucault's argument that the need for a confession is masked precisely through the suppression of truth (60-62). While the assertion of their private identities in public makes the creators visible to many and, thus, turns them into much-needed representation, it also means they comply with heteronormative rules as they do not go beyond announcing their sexuality.

Lastly, in examining the degree of publicness creators allow in their videos, I have detailed the creators' reasons for and strategies of disclosing parts of their lives. Although it seems as if they are granting the audience access to their lives without restriction, they constantly choose

what to share and what to keep private. One factor that influences this decision seems to be whether disclosure of a particular topic is deemed relevant to coming out. For my analysis, I have used Nissenbaum's idea of "contextual integrity" (140), which explains that the creators' past dating experiences are rarely included in their videos as they are viewed as contextually irrelevant for the disclosure of their sexuality. When YouTubers carefully decide their level of publicness they engage in "para-confessions" (King 123) as they exploit the original confessional practice to only reveal the parts of themselves that are commercially attractive. While sharing is integral to being successful on YouTube as it lets viewers bond with the creators, the creators still limit their own exposure.

Finally, my study has revealed that, depending on their goals, creators can choose different types of presenting their coming outs. The most personal one is that of a story as it is tied to detailed descriptions of the closet and insights into the creators' private lives. If coming out is presented as a spectacle, creators uphold more privacy as mentions of the closet are rare and rather than providing various private moments, they only grant access to their family life once. Presenting coming out as a performance highlights the creators' skills, rather than their private experiences, which makes this form the least personal one. Thus, the type of presentation clearly affects the extent to which the closet and other private matters are discussed. Creators choose the type that best fits their goals, which range from altruistically wanting to help LGBTQ* youth via maintaining their celebrity status to gaining fame in the first place. Rather than only making a talking head video, creators select the most appropriate and effective forms of coming out, thereby demonstrating that they are adept at navigating an online LGBTQ* community. While they still present coming out as a streamlined process in which sexual identity is understood as essential, they at least offer different points of entry for questioning youths. It remains to be seen how the sexual identity formation process is presented on newer media, such as TikTok. There, videos cannot be longer than three minutes, which may impact the presentation of coming out. Further research regarding the presentation of sexual narratives online is relevant as this is where they are increasingly produced and found by today's LGBTQ* youth. As a result, sexual narratives have the potential to shape LGBTQ* individuals' understanding of sexual identity and the varied forms and possibilities of revealing it. Despite the limited variation of offered narratives on YouTube, the platform represents the experiences of many people who feel excluded from a heteronormative society and can therefore educate and help them express themselves. It is

to be hoped that a broader range of presentations will develop in which everyone is able to identify patterns and structures of coming out more congruent with the various ways how individuals identify, relate to, and express their sexual identity.

References

Primary Sources:

- Alexander, Nathan. "Coming Out To My Parents (LIVE REACTION!!!)." *YouTube*, 1 Jan. 2017. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0Os8p8OGk0&t=840s>.
- AmazingPhil. "Coming Out To You." *YouTube*, 30 June 2019. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqXFKSWniVU>.
- BriaAndChrissy. "National Coming Out Song- ('Take Me Or Leave Me')." *YouTube*, 11 Oct. 2013. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WO1Wslw3rc>.
- Dawson, Shane. "I'm Bisexual." *YouTube*, 7 July 2015. 9 Nov. 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPdE3rbqf_Q.
- doddleodde. "I'm bisexual – a coming out song! | dodie (ad)." *YouTube*, 30 June 2017. 9 Nov. 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH_NwvdbecE&t=82s.
- ElleOfTheMills. "COMING OUT (ELLE MILLS STYLE)." *YouTube*, 27 Nov. 2017. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDi7cezk9CA>.
- Franta, Connor. "Coming Out." *YouTube*, 8 Dec. 2014. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYodBfRxKWI>.
- Graceffa, Joey. "Joey Graceffa – DON'T WAIT (Official Music Video)." *YouTube*, 15 May 2015. 9 Nov. 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kcwo_mhyqTw.
- Gloom. "I'm Coming Out." *YouTube*, 7 July 2018. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtI9Nwe2M60&t=173s>.
- happilyeverayanna. "THE BISEXUAL SONG! YOU CAN SHARE THIS IF YOU'RE COMING OUT AS BI!!!" *YouTube*, 2 Aug. 2018. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8reCtBkgrg8>.
- Hills, Ally. "COMING OUT – THE OFFICIAL SONG." *YouTube*, 16 Feb. 2015. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3ECU6xtp68>.
- Holtzy's Hangouts. "Coming Out Slam." *YouTube*, 7 May 2013. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bS1D-i8Vx6M>.
- Howell, Daniel. "Basically I'm Gay." *YouTube*, 13 June 2019. 9 Nov. 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrwMja_VoM0.
- jessiepaage. "Coming Out." *YouTube*, 29 June 2018. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ol6i1FC9qvA>.
- jessiepaage. "Coming Out (Part 2)." *YouTube*, 29 June 2018. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHSjL6pAcNc>.
- LameLifeOfKelsey. "THE BISEXUAL COMING OUT SONG | 'I'm Still Me' – Kelsey." *YouTube*, 29 June 2016. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GseTjp22hvE>.
- mallow610. "COMING OUT – LIVE REACTION." *YouTube*, 23 Feb. 2012. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GESBUIXBCvE>.
- Matthewac1. "Coming Out to Mom Live." *YouTube*, 30 June 2015. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHXbgB0w47Q&t=4s>.
- Mikin, Luna. "MY COMING OUT STORY (animated) | Luna Mikin." *YouTube*, 16 March 2019. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBn1tVs2b0Y&t=169s>.
- Nilsen, Ingrid. "Something I Want You To Know (Coming Out)." *YouTube*, 9 June 2015. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eh7WRYXVh9M>.
- OliverVlogss. "Coming out GAY to my 5 year old brother." *YouTube*, 25 July 2017. 9 Nov. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJfDDb2tMLQ>.

- Rhodes, Aaron. "Twins Come Out To Dad." *YouTube*, 14 Jan. 2015. 9 Nov. 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3K0CJ8usPU>.
- Sivan, Troye. "Coming Out." *YouTube*, 8 Aug. 2013. 9 Nov. 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoL-MnXvK80>.
- The Try Guys. "I'm Gay – Eugene Lee Yang." *YouTube*, 15 June 2019. 9 Nov. 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpipLfMiaYU>.
- twaimz. "COMING OUT TO MY DAD." *YouTube*, 06 Aug. 2018. 9 Nov. 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKHoxv3rKSs>.

Secondary Sources:

- Abad-Santos, Alex. "How LGBTQ Pride Month became a branded holiday." *Vox*, 25 June 2018. 12 July 2021. <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/25/17476850/pride-month-lgbtq-corporate-explained>.
- ABC News. "Video of Twin Brothers Coming Out to Their Dad Goes Viral." *ABC News*, 15 Jan. 2015. 7 Sept. 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/video-twin-brothers-coming-dad-viral/story?id=28249485>.
- Abidin, Crystal. "Victim, Rival, Bully: Influencers' Narrative Cultures Around Cyberbullying." *Narratives in Research and Interventions on Cyberbullying among Young People*. Eds. Heidi Vandebosch and Leila Green. Switzerland: Springer, 2019. 199-212.
- Adams, Peter. "Skittles returns to controversial colorless packaging in honor of LGBTQ Pride." *MarketingDive*, 21 May 2020. 12 July 2021.
<https://www.marketingdive.com/news/skittles-returns-to-controversial-colorless-packaging-in-honor-of-lgbtq-pri/578427/>.
- Adams, Tony E. *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-sex Attraction*. Routledge, 2011.
- Albergotti, Reed. "Black creators sue YouTube, alleging racial discrimination." *The Washington Post*, 18 June 2020. 24 Aug. 2021.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/06/18/black-creators-sue-youtube-alleged-race-discrimination/>.
- Alexander, Jonathan. "Homo-Pages and Queer Sites: Studying the Construction and Representation of Queer Identities on the World Wide Web." *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7.2/3 (2002): 85–106.
- Allsup, Maeve. "Google Beats YouTube Users' Suit Alleging Racial Discrimination." *Bloomberg Law*, 26 June 2021. 12 Oct. 2021. <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/google-beats-youtube-users-suit-alleging-racial-discrimination>.
- Altman, Irwin, and Dalmas A. Taylor. *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1937.
- Amos, Rebekah, Manalastas, Eric Julian, White, Ross, Bos, Henny, and Praveetha Patalay. "Mental health, social adversity, and health-related outcomes in sexual minority adolescents: a contemporary national cohort study." *Lancet Child Adolesc Health* 4.1 (2020): 36–45.
- Aslam, Salam. "YouTube by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts." *Omnicores Agency*, 10. Feb. 2020. 27 Sept. 2020. <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/youtube-statistics/>.
- Austin, John L. *How To Do Things With Words. The 'William James Lectures' delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. 1975. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011. 20 Sept. 2021.
<https://oxford-universitypressscholarship->

- com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198245537.001.0001/acprof-9780198245537.
- Aviles, Gwen. "Influencers dealing with increased online harassment during coronavirus lockdowns." *NBC News*, 14 May 2020. 4 Aug. 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/influencers-dealing-increased-online-harassment-during-coronavirus-lockdowns-n1206261>.
- Ayoub, Phillip M. *Das Coming-out der Staaten: Europas sexuelle Minderheiten und die Politik der Sichtbarkeit*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017.
- Bayart, Jean-Francois. *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*. 1996. Trans. Steven Rendall, Janet Roitman and Jonathan Derrick. London: Hurst & Company, 2005.
- Baym, Nancy K. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Malden: Polity Press, 2010.
- Bell, Jonathan. *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American state since the 1970s*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Introduction: The intimate public sphere." *The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on sex and citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. 1-24.
- Berriman, Liam, and Rachel Thompson. "Spectacles of intimacy? Mapping the moral landscape of teenage social media." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18 (2015): 583-597.
- Berryman, Rachel and Misha Kavka. "'I guess a lot of people see me as a big sister or a friend': The role of intimacy in the celebrification of beauty vloggers." *Journal of Gender Studies* 26.3 (2017): 307-320.
- . "Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, self-exposure and the productivity of negative affect." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24.1 (2018): 85-98.
- Betancourt, Roland. "Genre as Medium on YouTube: The Work of Grace Helbig." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49.1 (2016): 196-223.
- Bobker, Danielle. *The Closet: The 18th Century Architecture of Intimacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Booksmart*. Dir. Olivia Wilde. Annapurna Picturs, Gloria Sanchez Productions, 2019.
- Boothroyd, Dave. "Off the record: Levinas, Derrida and the secret of responsibility." *Theory, Culture and Society* 28.7/8 (2011): 41-59.
- boyd, danah. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Bratich, Jack. "Public Secrecy and Immanent Security." *Cultural Studies* 20.4-5 (2006): 493-511.
- Broderson, Folke. „Strategien des 'I_Gay'. Coming Out und Politiken der Sichtbarkeit.“ *Open Gender Journal* (2020): 1-19.
- Brumbaugh-Johnson, Stacey M, and Kathleen E. Hull. "Coming Out as Transgender: Navigating the Social Implications of a Transgender Identity." *Journal of Homosexuality* 66.8 (2019): 1148-177.
- Brunner, Andreas. „Homosexuellenbewegung.“ *Initiative Minderheiten*, n.d. 30 Aug. 2021. <https://initiative.minderheiten.at/wordpress/index.php/2019/04/zur-geschichte-der-homosexuellenbewegung-in-oesterreich>.
- Buckner, Rachel. "Underground Ball Culture." *Subcultures and Sociology*, Grinnell College. n.d. 26 April 2021. <https://haenfler.sites.grinnell.edu/subcultures-and-scenes/underground-ball-culture/>.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519-531.

- . *Gender Trouble*. NY: Routledge, 1990.
- . "Critically Queer." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993): 17-32.
- . "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. NY: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. NY: Routledge, 1997.
- . "Performative Agency." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3.2 (2010): 147-161.
- . "Judith Butler on gender and the trans experience: 'One should be free to determine the course of one's gendered life'." Interview by Cristan Williams. *Verso*, 26 May 2015. 8 Nov. 2021. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2009-judith-butler-on-gender-and-the-trans-experience-one-should-be-free-to-determine-the-course-of-one-s-gendered-life>.
- Burgess, Jean, and Green, Joshua. *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.
- Cabaj, Robert Paul. "Working with LGBTQ Patients." *American Psychiatric Association*, n.d. 31 Aug. 2021. <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/best-practice-highlights/working-with-lgbtq-patients>.
- Cass, Vivienne. "Homosexuality identity formation: A theoretical model." *Journal of Homosexuality* 4.3 (1979): 219-235.
- Chasin, Alexandra. *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*. NY: St. Martin's, 2000.
- Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. NY: Basic Books, 1994.
- Chirrey, Deborah A. "'I Hereby Come Out': What Sort of Speech Act Is Coming Out?" *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7.1 (2003): 24-37.
- "closet." *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2021. 26 April 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/closet>.
- Cohen, Cathy J. *The boundaries of blackness: AIDS and the breakdown of Black politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Coleman, Eli. "Developmental Stages of the Coming-Out Process." *American Behavioral Scientist* 25.4 (1982): 469-82.
- Cover, Rob. "Performing and Undoing Identity Online: Social Networking, Identity Theories and the Incompatibility of Online Profiles and Friendship Regimes." *Convergence* 18.2 (2012): 177-93.
- Cover, Rob, and Rosslyn Prosser. "MEMORIAL ACCOUNTS: Queer Young Men, Identity and Contemporary Coming Out Narratives Online." *Australian Feminist Studies* 28.75 (2013): 81-94.
- Cox, Stephen, and Cynthia Gallois. "Gay and lesbian identity development: A social identity perspective." *Journal of Homosexuality* 30.4 (1996): 1-30.
- Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. London: Verso, 1998.
- de Ridder, Sander and Frederik Dhaenens. "Coming Out as Popular Media Practice: The Politics of Queer Youth Coming Out on YouTube." *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 6.2 (2019): 43-60.
- Dose, Ralf. *Magnus Hirschfeld and the Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement*. NY: Monthly Review, 2014.
- Dovey, Jon. *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*. London: Pluto, 2000.
- Dryden, Steven. "A short history of LGBT rights in the UK." *British Library*, n.d. 30 Aug. 2021. <https://www.bl.uk/lgbtq-histories/articles/a-short-history-of-lgbt-rights-in-the-uk>.

- Eliason, Michele J., and Robert Schope. "Shifting Sands or Solid Foundation? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Identity Formation." *The Health of Sexual Minorities*. Eds. Ilan H. Meyer and Mary E. Northridge. Boston: Springer US, 2007. 3–26.
- Ferchaud, Arienne, Grzeslo, Jenna, Orme, Stephanie, and Jared LaGroue. "Parasocial Attributes and YouTube Personalities: Exploring Content Trends across the Most Subscribed YouTube Channels." *Computers in Human Behavior* 80 (2018): 88-96.
- Fine, Gary Alan. "Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art." *Theory and Society* 32.2 (2003): 153-80.
- Folkvord, Frans, Bevelander, Kirsten E., Rozendaal, Esther, and Roel C. J. Hermans. "Children's Bonding with Popular YouTube Vloggers and Their Attitudes toward Brand and Product Endorsements in Vlogs: An Explorative Study." *Young Consumers* 20.2 (2019): 77-90.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*. 1976. Trans. Robert Hurley. NY: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Freud, Sigmund. „Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie.“ 1905. *Psychanalyse*. 30 Aug. 2021. <http://www.psychanalyse.lu/Freud/FreudDreiAbhandlungen.pdf>.
- Fritz, Elisabeth, Frisch, Simon, and Rita Rieger. „Einführung: Perspektiven auf das Spektakel.“ *Spektakel als ästhetische Kategorie*. Eds. Elisabeth Fritz, Simon Frisch and Rita Rieger. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2018. 9-34.
- Funk, Matthias. "How Many YouTube Channels Are There?" *Tubics* 31 Jan. 2020. 27 Sept. 2020. <https://www.tubics.com/blog/number-of-youtube-channels/>.
- Gal, Susan. "A semiotics of the public/private distinction." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13.1 (2002): 77-95.
- Garretson, Jeremiah J. *The Path to Gay Rights: How Activism and Coming Out Changed Public Opinion*. NY: NY University Press, 2018.
- Gavison, Ruth. "Privacy and the Limits of Law." *The Yale Law Journal* 89.3 (1980): 421-71.
- Georgetown University Law Library. "A Timeline of the Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage in the U.S." *Georgetown University Law Library*, 12 April 2021. 26 April 2021. <https://guides.ll.georgetown.edu/c.php?g=592919&p=4182201>.
- Giles, David C. *Twenty-first Century Celebrity: Fame in Digital Culture*. Bingley: Emerald Limited, 2018.
- Glee*. Creators Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan. 20th Century Fox Television, 2009.
- GMA Team. "What my viral coming out video taught me about unconditional love." *Good Morning America*, 25 June 2020. 7 Sept. 2021. <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/culture/story/youtube-star-twin-proud-unconditional-love-dad-coming-63793224>.
- Gray, Mary L. "Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming-Out Story." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14.4 (2009): 1162–1189.
- Green, Michael, Bobrowicz, Ania, and Chee Siang Ang. "The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community online: discussions of bullying and self-disclosure in YouTube videos." *Behaviour & Information Technology* 34.7 (2015): 704–712.
- Grobe, Christopher. *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV*. NY: New York University Press, 2017.
- Guittar, Nicholas, and Rachel L. Rayburn. "Coming Out: The Career Management of One's Sexuality." *Sexuality & Culture* 20.2 (2016): 336-57.

- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." 1973. *Essential Essays, Volume 1*. Eds. Stuart Hall and David Morley. NY: Duke University Press, 2018. 257-267.
- . *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage, 1997.
- Hanson, Ellis. "The History of Digital Desire vol. 1.: an introduction." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110.3 (2011): 583-599.
- Hayfield, Nikki. *Bisexual and Pansexual Identities: Exploring and Challenging Invisibility and Invalidation*. NY: Routledge, 2020.
- Hickethier, Knut. *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*. Sammlung Metzler 277. Stuttgart: Springer Verlag, 1993.
- Hilton, Denny. "Release notes: coming out." *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 20 June 2017. 26 April 2021.
- History.com Editors. "Stonewall Editors." *HISTORY*, A&E Television Networks. 26 June 2020. 26 April 2021. <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots>.
- Human Rights Campaign. "Marriage Equality Around the World." *The Human Rights Campaign*, n.d. 28 March 2021. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/marriage-equality-around-the-world>.
- Holliday, Ruth. "Filming 'The Closet': The Role of Video Diaries in Researching Sexualities." *SAGE Visual Methods* 47.12 (2004): 1597-1616.
- Horowitz, Janna L., and Michael D. Newcomb. "A Multidimensional Approach to Homosexual Identity." *Journal of Homosexuality* 42.2 (2002): 1-19.
- Inness, Julie C. *Privacy, Intimacy, and Isolation*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- isitdodieaudiotho. "i'm bisexual - a coming out song! // dodie // audio (lyrics in description)." *YouTube*, 1 July 2017. 6 Sept. 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNDTiO_XFzs.
- Jackson, Chelsea. "How to help stop gatekeeping within the queer community." *HerCampus*, 25 June 2021. 1 Sept. 2021. <https://www.hercampus.com/culture/how-help-stop-gatekeeping-queer-community-pride-beyond/>.
- Kavka, Misha. *Reality television, affect and intimacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Kavoori, Anandam. *Reading YouTube: The Critical Viewers Guide*. NY: Peter Lang, 2011.
- Killing Eve*. Creator Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Sid Gentle Films, 2018.
- King, Barry. "Stardom, celebrity and the para-confession." *Social Semiotics* 18.2 (2008): 115-132.
- Kircher, Madison Malone. "WhAt Is Up WiTh ThAt WeIrD, NeW SpOnGeBoB MeMe?" *New York Magazine*, 17 May 2017. 16 Aug. 2021. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/05/what-is-the-mocking-spongebob-capitalized-letters-chicken-meme.html>.
- Kitzinger, Celia. *The social construction of lesbianism*. London: Sage, 1987.
- Kotze, Ella, and Brett Bowman. "Coming-Out Confessions: Negotiating the Burden of Lesbian Identity Politics in South Africa." *Journal of Homosexuality* 65.1 (2018): 1-18.
- Krishnakumar, Priya. "This record-breaking year for anti-transgender legislation would affect minors the most." *CNN Politics*, 15 April 2021. 26 April 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/15/politics/anti-transgender-legislation-2021/index.html>.
- Labrecque, Lauren I. "Fostering consumer-brand relationships in social media environments: The role of parasocial interaction." *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 28 (2014): 134-148.

- Lambert, Joe. *Digital storytelling: capturing lives, creating community*. 4th ed. NY: Routledge, 2013.
- Lange, Patricia G. "Publicly Private and Privately Public: Social Networking on YouTube." *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 13.1 (2007): 361-380.
- Lesben- und Schwulenverband. „Paragraph 175 STGB: Verbot von Homosexualität in Deutschland.“ *Lesben- und Schwulenverband*, n.d. 30 Aug. 2021.
<https://www.lsvd.de/de/ct/1022-Paragraph-175-StGB-Verbot-von-Homosexualitaet-in-Deutschland#schutzalter>.
- Leskin, Paige and Palma Haasch. "These are the 30 most popular YouTube stars in the world, from PewDiePie to Ryan Kaji." *Insider*, 26. Jan 2021. 24 Aug. 2021.
<https://www.businessinsider.com/most-popular-youtubers-with-most-subscribers-2018-2>.
- Lewis, Nathaniel M. "Moving out, moving on: Gay men's migrations through the life course." *Annals the Association of America Geographers* (2014): 225-233.
- Liang, A. C. "The creation of coherence in coming-out stories." *Queerly Phrased*. Eds. Anna Livia and Kira Hall. NY: Oxford University Press, 1997. 287-309.
- Liikkanen, Lassi A. and Antti Salovaara. "Music on YouTube: User engagement with traditional, user-appropriated and derivative videos." *Computers in Human Behavior* 50 (2015): 108–124.
- Lipka, Michael and David Masci. "Where Europe stands on gay marriage and civil unions." *FactTank*, 28 Oct. 2019. 26 April 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/28/where-europe-stands-on-gay-marriage-and-civil-unions/>.
- Littler, Jo. "Making fame ordinary: Intimacy, reflexivity and 'Keeping it Real'." *Mediactive: Ideas/Knowledge/Culture* 2 (2004): 8–25.
- Lord Alfred Douglas. "Two Loves." *The Chameleon* 1 (1894): 28.
- Lovelock, Michael. "'Is every YouTuber going to make a coming out video eventually?': YouTube celebrity video bloggers and lesbian and gay identity." *Celebrity Studies* 8.1 (2017): 87–103.
- . "'My Coming out Story': Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Identities on YouTube." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22.1 (2019): 70-85.
- Meyer, Ilan H. "Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations." *Psychological Bulletin* 129.5 (2003): 674-97.
- McAlpine, Mary Kate. "Attacked from Within: Gatekeeping in the Queer Community." *marykatemcalpine*, 13 Nov. 2017. 1 Sept. 2021.
<https://marykatemcalpine.medium.com/attacked-from-within-gatekeeping-in-the-queer-community-700d412d2db9>.
- Modern Family*. Creators Christopher Lloyd, and Steven Levitan. 20th Century Fox Television, 2009.
- Morhart, Felicitas, Malär, Lucia, Guèvremont, Amélie, Girardin, Florent, and Bianca Grohmann. "Brand Authenticity: An Integrative Framework and Measurement Scale." *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 25.2 (2015): 200-18.
- Mehra, Bahrat, and Donna Braquet. "Progressive LGBTQ reference: coming out in the 21st century." *References Services Review* 39.3 (2011): 401-422.
- McCarn, Susan R. and Fassinger, Ruth E. "Revisioning sexual minority identity formation: A new model of lesbian identity and its implications for counseling and research." *The Counseling Psychologist* 24 (1996): 508-534.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

- Nissenbaum, Helen. *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Orne, Jason. "'You Will Always Have to 'out' Yourself': Reconsidering Coming out through Strategic Outness." *Sexualities* 14.6 (2011): 681-703.
- Owsnett, Sand. "Why it's time to stop gatekeeping the door." *Bectu*, 10 May 2021. 1 Sept. 2021. <https://bectu.org.uk/news/why-its-time-to-show-gatekeeping-the-door/>.
- Padva, Gilad. "Edge of Seventeen: Melodramatic Coming-out in New Queer Adolescence Films." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1.4 (2004): 355-372.
- Paris Is Burning*. Creator Jennie Livingston. Academy Entertainment, Off White Productions, 1990.
- Petronio, Sandra, and Irwin Altman. *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure*. NY: Albany State University, 2002.
- Plummer, Kenneth. *Sexual stigma: An interactionist account*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.
- . *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. NY: Routledge, 1995.
- Poletti, Anna. "Coaxing an intimate public: Life narrative in digital storytelling." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25.1 (2011): 73-83.
- . *Stories of the Self: Life Writing after the Book*. NY: New York University Press, 2020.
- Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Creator Céline Sciamma. Lilies Films, Arte, Hold Up Films, 2019.
- Pose*. Creators Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuck, and Steven Canals. Color Force, Brad Falchuk Teley-Vision, Ryan Murphy Television, Fox 21 Television Studios, FX Productions, 2018.
- Ramos, Vanessa. "I'm Bisexual-a coming out song (BY DODIE) animatic." *YouTube*, 25 Dec. 2017. 6 Sept. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUUfdznKvAM>.
- Raun, Tobias. *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube*. NY: Routledge, 2016.
- Rizzo, Teresa. "YouTube: The New Cinema of Attractions." *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 5 (2008). 9 Sept. 2021. http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=109.
- Robb, Alice. "How Capital Letters Became Internet Code for Yelling." *The New Republic*, 14 April 2014. 23 Aug. 2021. <https://newrepublic.com/article/117390/netiquette-capitalization-how-caps-became-code-yelling>.
- Rosario, Margaret, Schrimshaw, Eric W., Hunter, Joyce, and Lisa Braun. "Sexual Identity Development among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths: Consistency and Change over Time." *The Journal of Sex Research* 43.1 (2006): 46-58.
- Rose, Randall L., and Stacy L. Wood. "Paradox and the consumption of authenticity through reality television." *Journal of Consumer Research* 32.2 (2005): 284-296.
- Rust, Paula C. "'Coming out'" in the Age of Social Constructionism: Sexual Identity Formation among Lesbian and Bisexual Women." *Gender and Society* 7.1 (1993): 50-77.
- Samper Vendrell, Javier. *The Seduction of Youth*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2020.
- Savin-Williams, Ritch C. "Self-labeling and Disclosure Among Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youths." *Lesbians and Gays in Couples and Families: A Handbook for Therapists*. Eds. John Laird and Robert-Jay Green. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1996. 153-182.
- . *The New Gay Teenager*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Simonsen, Thomas M. "Categorising YouTube." *MedieKultur* 51 (2011): 72-93.
- Schitt's Creek*. Creators Eugene Levy, and Dan Levy. Not a Real Company Productions, 2015.
- Schulman, Sarah. *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux ebook: Apple Books, 2021.

- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. LA: University of California Press, 1990.
- Seidman, Steven. *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life*. NY: Routledge, 2004.
- Sender, Katherine. *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Senft, Theresa. *Camgirls, Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. NY: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Sheehan, Kim B. "Toward a typology of Internet users and online privacy concerns." *The Information Society* 18.1 (2002): 21–32.
- Simmel, Georg. "The sociology of secrecy and of secret societies." *American Journal of Sociology* 11.4 (1906): 441–498.
- Slepian, Michael L., Chun, Jinseok S., and Malia F. Mason. "The Experience of Secrecy." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113.1 (2017): 1–33.
- Smith, Kit. "57 Fascinating and Incredible YouTube Statistics." *Brandwatch*, 21 Feb. 2020. 7 Sept. 2021. <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/youtube-stats/>.
- Spangler, Todd. "YouTube Now Has 2 Billion Monthly Users, Who Watch 250 Million Hours on TV Screens Daily." *Variety*, 3 May 2019. 27 Sept. 2020. <https://variety.com/2019/digital/news/youtube-2-billion-users-tv-screen-watch-time-hours-1203204267/>.
- Stein, Jan-Philipp, Koban, Kevin, Joos, Sarah, and Ohler, Peter. "Worth the Effort? Comparing Different YouTube Vlog Production Styles in Terms of Viewers' Identification, Parasocial Response, Immersion, and Enjoyment." *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* (2020): 7 Oct. 2021. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aca0000374>.
- Strangelove, Michael. *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.
- Sullivan, Andrew. *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality*. NY: Vintage, 1996.
- TheNotAdam. "Biphobia At Pride." *YouTube*, 16 Aug. 2016. 1 Sept. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIkRen9eSal>.
- Tolson, Andrew. "'Being yourself': the pursuit of authentic celebrity." *Discourse Studies* 3.4 (2001): 443–457.
- . "A new authenticity? Communicative practices on YouTube." *Critical Discourse Studies* 7.4 (2010): 277–289.
- Troiden, Richard R. "The Formation of Homosexual Identities." *Journal of Homosexuality* 17.1-2 (1989): 43–74.
- Urbach, Henry. "Closets, clothes, disClosure." *Assemblage* 30 (1996): 62–73.
- Utz, Sonja. "The function of self-disclosure on social network sites: Not only intimate, but also positive and entertaining self-disclosures increase the feeling of connection." *Computers in Human Behavior* 45 (2015): 1–10.
- Warner, Leah R., and Stephanie R. Shields. "Status, gender and the politics of emotional authenticity." *Emotions, Ethics, and Authenticity*. Eds. Verena E. Mayer and Mikko Salmela. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 2009. 91–112.
- Wegner, Daniel M. "Irony Processes of Mental Control." *Psychological Review* 101.1 (1994): 34–52.
- Weinberg, Thomas S. "Biology, ideology, and the reification of developmental stages in the study of homosexual identities." *Journal of Homosexuality* 10.3/4 (1984): 77–84.
- Wertheim, Bonnie. "Colton Underwood, 'Bachelor' Star, Comes Out as Gay." *The New York Times*, 14 April 2021. 26 April 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/14/style/colton-underwood-gay-bachelor.html>.

- Westin, Alan. *Privacy and Freedom*. 1967. NY: Ig Publishing, 2018.
- WYSK. "13-Year-Old Wows Classmates And The Internet With Slam Poetry Performance About Not Feeling 'Good Enough'." *Women You Should Know*, 15 Aug. 2017. 7 Sept. 2021. <https://womenyoushouldknow.net/13-year-old-wows-classmates-internet-slam-poetry-performance-not-feeling-good-enough/>.
- Yuan, Karen, and Lucy Price. "Teen's 'White Boy Privilege' slam poetry goes viral." *CNN*, 14 July 2016. 7 Sept. 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/13/us/teen-slam-poet-white-privilege-hln/index.html>.
- Zapp, Andrea. "Live – A User's Manual. Künstlerische Skizzen zur Ambivalenz von Webcam und Wirklichkeit." *Authentizität. Diskussion eines ästhetischen Begriffs*. Eds. Susanne Knaller and Harro Müller. München: Willhelm Fink Verlag, 2006. 316-331.

Appendix A: Abstract

English Version

This thesis provides insight into the innovative ways in which LGBTQ* individuals present coming out on YouTube. While talking head videos, in which creators sit down in front of a camera and tell their audience of their sexual identity formation, have been analysed in previous research (cf. Cover & Prosser 2013; Lovelock 2019; de Ridder & Dhaenens 2019), newer types, such as coming out to family members on camera or performing a dance or song, remain under-investigated. As these forms can offer a valuable look into how sexual identity is presented and performed online, this thesis investigates their creators' understandings of sexuality, their depiction of the closet and the degree of publicness. The central claim of this thesis is that coming out can be presented as a story, a spectacle or a performance. In all types, the creators express their sexual identity as an essential aspect of themselves, telling a linear narrative in which they have always been gay. Subsequently, their depictions of the closet are tied to their insistence that the truth of their sexuality ultimately 'breaks free' in a liberating confession. Whether the closet and other private aspects of the creators' lives are mentioned is dependent on the type of disclosure: While a story or a spectacle require granting viewers access to the creators' private lives, a performance allows creators to be less public as it foregrounds the product rather than themselves. This thesis offers readers a means to question the presentations of coming out on YouTube beyond popular vlogs and reflect on their impact for navigating sexual identity in an increasingly online world.

Deutsche Version

Diese Masterarbeit gewährt einen Einblick in innovative Arten der Präsentation von Coming Out von LGBTQ* Personen auf YouTube. Während „Talking Head“-Videos, in denen die YouTuber:innen vor der Kamera sitzen und dem Publikum von der Entwicklung ihrer sexuellen Identität berichten, in früheren Studien behandelt wurden (vgl. Cover & Prosser 2013; Lovelock 2019; de Ridder & Dhaenens 2019), sind neuere Arten, wie das Live-Outen vor Familienmitgliedern oder die Darbietung eines Tanzes oder Liedes, weitgehend unerforscht. Da diese Varianten einen wertvollen Blick in die online-Präsentation und -Darstellung von sexueller Identität liefern können, erforscht diese Arbeit das Verständnis der YouTuber:innen von Sexualität, ihre Darstellung des „Closets“ (d.h. die Zeit, in der sie nicht out sind) und den jeweiligen Grad der Öffentlichkeit der Videos. Die zentrale These dieser Arbeit ist, dass Coming

Out als Geschichte, Spektakel oder Performance präsentiert werden kann. In allen Formen präsentieren die YouTuber:innen ihre sexuelle Identität als einen essentiellen Teil ihres Selbst, indem sie ein lineares Narrativ verwenden, in dem sie schon immer nicht-heterosexuell waren. Folglich sind ihre Beschreibungen des Closets eng verbunden mit ihrem Beharren darauf, dass die Wahrheit über ihre Sexualität als ein befreiendes Geständnis aus ihnen ‚herausbricht‘. Ob der Closet und andere Aspekte des Privatlebens der YouTuber:innen erwähnt werden, hängt von der Art der Enthüllung ab: Während eine Geschichte oder ein Spektakel verlangen, dass den Zuschauer:innen Zugriff auf das Privatleben der YouTuber:innen gewährt wird, erlaubt eine Performance den YouTuber:innen, weniger öffentlich zu sein, da sie das Produkt und nicht die YouTuber:innen selbst in den Vordergrund stellt. Diese Arbeit stellt den Leser:innen ein Mittel zur Verfügung, die Präsentation von Coming Out auf YouTube über bekannte Vlogs hinaus zu hinterfragen und deren Einfluss auf die Navigation von sexueller Identität in einer immer mehr online verorteten Welt zu reflektieren.

Appendix B: Anti-Plagiarism Statement

I hereby declare that this research paper was written by me and in my own words, except for quotations from sources. All of these quotations are clearly marked and referenced following the “Style Sheet for Literary and Cultural Studies” of the English and American Studies Department of Vienna.

9th November 2021