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Transgender YouTubers and the Power of Coming Out: Existentialism, Gender Performance, and Self-Actualization

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Abstract

The transgender community has historically faced discrimination and oppression.
However, the internet has emerged as a preeminent resource for transgender people to
seek community and visibility, with YouTube acting as an especially valuable visual
repository of self-representation. The present research is concerned with examining how
transgender YouTube creators use the platform for self-actualization through the lens of
existentialist and gender performance theory. Employing a qualitative content analysis of
gender disclosure videos to explore this problem, this study shows how transgender
YouTubers seek personal authenticity and self-disclosure, especially with the help of and
in relation to their audiences. Further, having come out as transgender on YouTube, these
creators use their content to help others in their community with their self-representation
to promote positive change. This research adds to an increasingly rich body of knowledge
of the trans community more generally and their use of YouTube more specifically.

Keywords

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1

1 Introduction

In the last decade, research and scholarship in the realm of transgender studies has flourished, contributing to an increasingly multi-faceted understanding of the experiences of transgender people (Raun, 2016; Schilt & Lagos, 2017). In particular, far from the highly medicalized paradigm which characterized research on transgender people for much of the 20th century, the voices of the transgender community and the issues they face have been progressively incorporated into the academic canon (Schilt & Lagos, 2017). These strides toward greater inclusion and awareness of gender divergence have meant that the representation provided by this research holds promise for helping improve the conditions faced by the transgender community, one of the most marginalized groups in wider society (Bauer & Scheim, 2015; Stotzer, 2009).

It has long been apparent that the internet has had a crucial role to play in helping transgender people learn more about themselves, connect with others like them, and feel supported in a world that often does not provide these opportunities offline (Cavalcante, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Raun, 2016). While the early years of the internet's development saw transgender communities thrive with the help of chatrooms, listservs, and websites (Hill, 2005), new social media have been an especially important resource for the transgender community in offering more immediate, visual representation and connection for often geographically disparate individuals (Jenzen, 2017; McInroy & Craig, 2015). More recently, scholars have begun to look at YouTube.com, the internet's largest platform for video sharing (Hussain, 2015), and how it continues to gain influence as one of the preeminent resources for transgender representation online (Raun, 2016).

Research has been conducted on the transgender community on YouTube from many different fields and from many different angles. Some scholars have looked at the ways in which transgender people use the platform to track their medical transition and the meaning-making surrounding this public documentation of bodily change (Eckstein, 2018; Raun, 2016; Stein, 2016). Others have examined the political implications of transgender representation on YouTube, notably in how normative standards of broader society are reinforced or in how these standards can be discursively challenged (J. F. Miller, 2017; Reinke, 2017). Transgender "vlogs," or video blogs on YouTube, have been the subject of analysis for their impact as a specific genre of media (Horak, 2014), for their ability to position the often-discredited transgender voice as one of expertise and authority (Dame, 2013), and more recently, how transgender content creators leverage intimacy for self-commodification (Raun, 2018). Indeed, over the past few years especially, scholarship has begun to shed light on this digital repository of transgender self-representation for the richness of experience and empirical possibility it contains.

Within an established community on YouTube, transgender creators are able to use content creation to meet a variety of personal or professional needs. Therefore, it is important to begin developing knowledge on the major trends within transgender people's usage of the platform and how it has the potential to positively impact the lives of the members of this community. To that end, the present research aims to shed light on how the creation of online content, specifically in posting public "coming out" or gender disclosure videos, is a major method through which transgender YouTubers achieve self-actualization and connect with their communities in lifting others up through their own bravery. Many published studies of transgender people's use of YouTube involve interviewing trans users themselves to derive meaning from their own experiences.

However, it is just as crucial to broaden the scope of inquiry through content analysis to assess shared experience between many users, which the present research seeks to do.

In the following pages, I aim to show how transgender coming out videos on YouTube fruitfully link theory on existentialist ethics and relational gender performance to allow for self-actualization, authenticity, and a deep connection to community on the part of transgender YouTubers. In Chapter 2, I provide an overarching empirical and theoretical context for the present study. I detail the major theoretical underpinnings of my approach, how they coalesce with the existing literature on the status of transgender people in society, the transgender community's use of the internet and social media, and the opportunities afforded by YouTube as a platform. I then expose the gap in the literature which the present research seeks to fill in my content analysis of coming out videos and the uniqueness of my analytical lens before providing my three major research questions.

In Chapter 3, I explicate my research methodology. I detail my sampling method, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and all other avenues of data collection before explaining my data analysis strategy. While noting that the methodological process leading to my findings involved several stages of revision, I illustrate how my grounded theoretical approach ultimately shed light on the relevant themes and experiences which required attention. I provide the demographic details of the members of my sample, including given pseudonyms for easy reference. Finally, I discuss the necessity of reflexivity in both the fact that my sample tended toward users who were relatively young and who were more likely to be white, and how my own self-awareness as a cisgender woman necessitated constant analytical vigilance. I also discuss limitations inherent to this study.

   In Chapter 4, I provide the results of my data analysis. Representing the common themes and ideas present across the sampled videos, I expose a common narrative of hardship, fear, bravery, self-actualization, and community. I emphasize the importance of authenticity to the members of my sample and the role of the audience in helping these creators reach that authenticity. Chapter 5 expands on these results in more detail and how they link with my overarching theoretical interpretation of these individuals' experiences, demonstrating how I have resolved my research questions. I offer suggestions for future research before drawing to a close.

Chapter 2

2 Context

This chapter introduces the major concepts and themes associated with the present research and where it falls within the extant sociological and theoretical literature. I begin by anchoring the present discussion in the major theoretical work of the existentialist movement, highlighting the importance of authenticity in the pursuit of a well-lived life. I then outline the conceptual underpinnings of gender as well as the different elements to consider when unpacking how it manifests, is reproduced, and is internalized. I move on to discuss how many presuppositions of the present gender binary system are challenged by the transgender community. While there is an inherent bravery associated with challenging this status quo through gender variance, a consideration of the incredibly harmful treatment of transgender people in society illustrates the importance of the internet and specifically YouTube as a space where trans people can tell their own stories and engage with a community which helps to validate their identities. I consider how this platform allows for unique opportunities for trans people to enact affirming relational expressions of gender, or alternate forms of gender performance. Finally, I conclude by identifying the importance of the present research and how it opens new possibilities for inquiry and theoretical linkages.

2.1 *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and Self-Representation

Ideas of authenticity and freedom of expression in a human lifespan have been grappled with in the theoretical literature for decades, especially within the existentialist school of thought. The works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in particular shed light on these fundamental human issues and, in the case of de Beauvoir, attempts to

resolve ethical prescription in a world void of pre-determined meaning. This personal authenticity, according to existentialist thinkers such as Sartre and de Beauvoir, comes down to the agency and personal experience of the individual and how they choose to make meaning of their lives.

Fundamental to understanding existentialist thought is the idea that existence precedes essence. By this, philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre believe that humans exist independent of any prescribed purpose ordained from supernatural forces or otherwise. Human beings emerge into the world, and only then discover what this existence may mean. As Sartre (1989) suggests, "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards" (para. 10). In this view, life is inherently meaningless in isolation; it is through self-definition and, further, the desire to accomplish self-defining futures for oneself that one reaches any kind of determination. Because of the meaninglessness of life external to one's own self-definition, it falls squarely to the responsibility of the individual to exert this fundamental freedom of expression afforded to us by our nature; Sartre (1989) goes on to argue that "man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does" (para. 13). One's actions and what one chooses to accomplish in one's lifetime speak louder for the pursuit of a well-lived, authentic life than do expression of sentiment void of substance, for, at one's core, one must come to terms with the fact that existence is absolute freedom and absolute responsibility to manifest that freedom. However, critics of this philosophy argue that existentialism offers no moral guidance of how one *should* behave given that one is alone to define proper conduct. De Beauvoir (1994) argues that the central dilemma within existentialist ethics is that "it is not impersonal universal man

who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself" (p. 17-18). If humans are subjectively isolated from one another rather than bound by some external essence given by forces greater than human beings alone, how might one reconcile ethical interpersonal behaviour, to say nothing of the material realities inhibiting some individuals from pursuing total freedom by virtue of oppressive social structures?

An answer to the gap left by this philosophy of personal choice in the face of meaninglessness is offered by Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1994). While individual choice of assigning meaning to one's life is paramount to accepting the agony of being fundamentally free, de Beauvoir addresses certain structural limitations inherent in the social world and the ways in which one can orient their choice in the interest of true interpersonal, external ethics. Simply put, humans do not exist in isolation from one another, but instead are always influenced by and in turn influence a web of social connections both personal and impersonal. The desires and freedoms any individual may wish to pursue can only be possible through the existence of other people and their influence:

> if it is true that every project emanates from subjectivity, it is also true that this subjective movement establishes by itself a surpassing of subjectivity. Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men. (de Beauvoir, 1994, p. 72)

Because of this interconnectedness, de Beauvoir (1994) argues that the struggle against oppression and the limiting of our fellow beings under its weight must be at the forefront of our engagement with the world:

> …my freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of

tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved, then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing. (p. 82)

In this way, de Beauvoir maintains that it should be just as much a priority to lift others up and to encourage others to pursue their own freedom as it is for individuals to self-actualize for their own sake. Especially in the case of direct oppression and suffering, humanity as a collective must rally against social forces and oppressive entities in order to make possible the existentialist meaning-making established by Sartre.

True freedom and the pursuit thereof, then, leads one to a state of core authenticity and dedication to one's desires and dreams. With the abolishment of oppression and objectification comes the opportunity to exist authentically, or in a state wherein one can express themselves subjectively (Mirvish, 2003). One's body and the circumstances thereof, such as in the imposition of gender or race, may cease to be that which inhibit one from experiencing their lives fully, and instead one can attend to their own projects and dreams in the wider world without always being conscious of their ascribed condition (Mirvish, 2003). A free subject, de Beauvoir (1989) writes, "asserting [themselves] as above and beyond the duration of things, can check all decay" (p. 602) associated with being bound to any material or otherwise external source of actualization. Instead, one can seize full creative control over the course of their lives. This, in the existentialist view, is paramount to experiencing a life well-lived; when one is free to make whatever choice they wish regarding their future, taking full responsibility for its meaning and any failures encountered on the path to self-defined goals, one's authenticity as a human in constant creative flux is validated (Hayek, Williams, Clayton, Novicevic, & Humphreys, 2014).

As we shall see, the social concept of gender and how it manifests structurally can be considered a major arena in which issues of oppression, personal authenticity, and interconnected definitions of freedom and self play out and impact the lives of all who exist under its suppositions.

2.2   Gender, Society, and Power

Gender is one of the predominant social constructs which inform one's self-identity and one's interactions and experiences in the social world. Thrust into a preordained frame of gendered expectations from birth, one must navigate and make sense of what one's gender means and how it may define the trajectory of one's life. For many, the integration of gender identity into one's overall self-concept is a process that entails very little internal tension; for many more, it is a process that may entail no conscious consideration whatsoever as one accepts and slides comfortably into one's designated gender category. Some of the most basic principles upon which Western society is built rely on the assumption that the gender binary of men and women is the true and natural social order. However, peering more thoughtfully into the contradictions presented by reifying binary gender categories allows one to see just how ill-suited these categories are to the realities of many individuals in society today.

Gender can be defined as the categorization of individuals based on social, cultural, geographic, and temporal parameters of the roles and norms imposed on the individual by virtue of their biological sex (Iantaffi, 2015). More specifically, the cultural presuppositions upon which gender is based hinge on the idea that biological sex and social gender are necessarily intertwined and immutable (Devor, 2004). Mainstream Western society presently endorses only masculine or feminine genders as being fully

socially acceptable (Tauches, 2009). As Devor (2004) summarizes, cultural and historical conditions have manifested in an understanding of gender wherein "under 'normal' circumstances persons' gender classifications are unchanging and can be determined by casual visual inspection of persons in everyday social situations" (p. 44). This creates what Rahilly (2015) calls a type of Foucauldian "truth regime" of the gender binary in which the predominant cultural discourse associated with it becomes the basis for rendering social expectations of gender a legitimized anchoring point for identity.

Introduced by West and Zimmerman (1987), the concept of "doing gender" has proven to be theoretically and empirically fruitful in understanding how the gender binary manifests and is perpetuated through social interaction among individuals and within social structure. West and Zimmerman (1987) propose the idea that the performative aspects of being a woman or a man in society play an important role in the personal experience of gender as an iterative process, even in one's internalized gender identity. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender involves "managed properties of conduct that are contrived with respect to the fact that others will judge and respond to us in particular ways" (p. 140). In this light, gender "is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 140). From birth, individuals are encouraged to behave in ways that are congruent with their assigned gender, upholding an interactional basis for the self-concept one develops as a result of reaffirmation of this social identity (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This in turn serves to naturalize gender differences in binary terms, leading many to unreflexively presume these specific embodiments stem from biology alone (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). As Butler (1999) suggests, gendered self-concept is just as much a product of institutional discourse as it is

personal experience: "the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (p. 23). Correct perceptions others may hold about one's gender identity serve to fuel a sense of "achievement" of proper decorum surrounding who one is, which itself is derived from the messages one receives about the correct embodiment of gender as an ascribed status. In light of the complex interplay between personal and social identity, it appears as though the management of gender identity, in many cases, involves a level of external validation along normative discursive lines, which then bolsters one's sense of self-authenticity.

However, it is also true that the gender binary itself is highly restrictive to many and inherently entrenched in inequality. Those who identify as being outside of these expectations of gender normativity and for whom the integration of discursive prescriptions for assigned gender simply does not "fit" often experience confusion from others as well as within themselves. When one person is unable to identify another's gender with any amount of certainty, that person cannot call upon the heuristic measures used to judge the other's behaviour and to assess how to interact with them (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Gender as a social structure influences the institutional, interactional, and individual level, shaping the ongoing practices of social life and the power dynamics among social actors (Tichenor, 2005). Yet, individual gender identity exists as a personal psychological experience of one's own gender, something that is necessarily only indirectly perceived by others (Buck, 2016) even if interpersonal validation plays a role in its shaping. What, then, may be said of those who are not served by society's ideas of gender and its embodiment?

The term "transgender," which emerged in its current form in the early 1990s, refers to individuals whose gender identities do not align with the sex-based categories assigned to them at birth (Tauches, 2009). It is important to note, however, that this simplified definition of transgender people has been criticized by the transgender community and gender scholars alike for its homogenizing connotations (Buck, 2016; Erickson-Schroth, 2014; Stryker, 2006). More accurately, "transgender" is commonly used as a category encompassing a diverse range of gender-variant people; there is a wide array of identity labels adopted by individuals across the gender spectrum, including MTF (male-to-female), FTM (female-to-male), transmen, transwomen, non-binary, androgyne, and genderqueer, all falling under the "transgender" umbrella (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). These identities defy traditional assumptions that sex and gender are inherently intertwined, and a critical interrogation of the concept of gender as a whole opens up new possibilities for identity and expression. Indeed, as I have illustrated, those who resist gender resist one of the fundamental power structures of society (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). As Stryker (2006) notes, the notion of being transgender directly confronts "the fact that 'gender,' as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity" (p. 3). Additionally, from the perspective of theorists of gender performance, the connection of the concept of gender itself to being rigidly masculine or feminine mainly serves to enforce the social norm of this selfsame binary rather than expose inherent truths about it (Butler, 2004). As Butler (2004) suggests, "gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized" (p. 42). While pinpointing historical examples

of non-normative gender identities should be done critically and with caution, there is nevertheless little doubt that individuals have existed across a spectrum of gender rather than solely within a rigid binary for as long as gender itself has been a meaningful concept.

2.3 Witnessing and Mirroring: Achievement of Self Through Reaffirmation

The work of Aaron Devor (2004) on transgender identity formation has explored the impact of reaffirmation of identity and, in particular, the interplay between personal experience of gender identity and the achievement of accurate perceptions thereof on the part of others. Woven into Devor's (2004) fourteen-stage model outlining the process of self-understanding for trans individuals are the alternating concepts of witnessing and mirroring in the performance and integration of identity. For Devor (2004), being "witnessed" occurs when one is seen by those unlike oneself as being who they are; that is, individuals who are different from each other in some way may give some appraisal as to the nature of the other and, if successful, this contributes to the positive reinforcement necessary for many kinds of social identities, including gender (Devor, 2004). On the other side of the coin, mirroring occurs when one is accurately seen by those similar to oneself, thereby reflecting kinship between members of an identity category. As social beings, the processes of witnessing and mirroring reaffirm one's self-concept and feelings of normality and authenticity in interacting with others. However, Devor (2004) writes that, when these processes are nonfunctioning, the results for the individual can be catastrophic: "when the messages which one receives back from others do not match how one feels inside, various kinds of psychological distress and maladaptive behaviours can

result," manifesting, in extreme cases, as suicidality (p. 46). The impact of being "chronically unwitnessed" (Devor, 2004, p. 46) on a macro level is evident in the history and treatment of people within the transgender community and is illustrative of wider issues of oppression and gendered power structures propagated *en masse*.

2.4   The Underpinnings of Societal Transphobia

Rather than supporting transgender individuals in forging new possibilities of identity and expression for all people across the gender spectrum, society and its constituents have historically responded to transgender identities with backlash against those who defy certain core principals of social organization. Overwhelmingly, research has shown that transgender individuals face an increased risk of discrimination, harassment, and assault due to prejudice based on their gender identity (Bradford, Reisner, Honnold, & Xavier, 2013; Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010; Grant et al., 2011; Stotzer, 2009). In a review of American data on violence against transgender people, Stotzer (2009) reports that transgender people face a high prevalence of physical and sexual assault, perpetrated both by individuals known to the victims as well as by strangers motivated to commit transphobic hate crimes. In one cited study, 75% of those who reported having been a victim of violence and/or a crime believed at least one of these experiences was related to their gender identity (Stotzer, p. 174). As Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, and Malouf (2001) argue, violence based on gender "results in an environment in which covert if not overt permission is given to society to 'punish' people for gender transgression" (p. 91). The fact that, in 2016, more trans people were murdered in the United States than any previous year serves to reflect this societal-level disregard

for the safety and wellbeing of trans people (Wahlert & Gill, 2017) and increased backlash against gender variance.

In the Canadian context, the national Trans Youth Health Survey found that, among 923 trans respondents aged 14 to 25, two-thirds reported experiencing discrimination based on their gender identities and 70% reported experiencing sexual harassment (Veale et al., 2015). In Ontario specifically, the subtler or "everyday" nature of societal transphobia was experienced near-unanimously by participants of the Trans PULSE Project: "96% had heard that trans people were not normal, 73% had been made fun of for being trans, and 78% reported their family had been hurt or embarrassed [by their gender identities]" (Bauer & Scheim, 2015). While legal protections and civil rights for transgender people continue to move forward in Canada, what remains to be seen is the length of time it may take for societal attitudes to change to such a degree that transgender people no longer feel stigmatized.

Broadly speaking, no small part of this societal-level prejudice may be attributed to the influence of negative media portrayals on perceptions of transgender people (Davis, 2008), since, as Raun (2016) notes, "most people's knowledge of trans people is built through mainstream visual representations" (p. 21). A study from the United Kingdom of transgender people's experiences with media found that participants overwhelmingly felt that media portrayals of transgender people were inaccurate or highly inaccurate, and that the media represents transgender people negatively (Trans Media Watch, 2010). Further, this study reported several detrimental repercussions of negative media portrayals: participants associated the ridicule they received from the general public with negative stereotypes depicted in the media, and participants cited negative experiences at work,

within their families, and from service providers that they attributed to items in the media (Trans Media Watch, 2010).

In fictional visual media such as television and movies, transgender representation often reinforces transphobic ideas that trans people are pathetic or pitiable, inherently deceptive, or are otherwise mentally ill (Raun, 2016). Transgender characters in mainstream media are often portrayed by non-transgender, or cisgender, actors; the case of casting cisgender men as transgender women, for example, this serves to reinforce the perception held by many that trans women are not "real" women or are only "men in dresses" (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018). Casting cisgender actors to play transgender people also neglects the influence of the medical transition process, such as prolonged use of hormone replacement therapy or undergoing different surgeries, on the social embodiment of gender over time, thereby representing trans people as universally living in an early-transition state (Raun, 2016).

News media can also be highly problematic in its portrayals of transgender people and their stories. A study of American mainstream newspaper coverage of the transgender community found that a significant amount of the admittedly very little substantive coverage over the research period used delegitimizing language such as improper pronouns or misnaming of a trans individual, sexualization, and even the use of transphobic slurs in some cases (Billard, 2016). Further, it is often the case that transgender people are given the platform to speak about their experiences only through satisfying the curiosity of a cisgender interviewer or audience, which frequently entails giving explicit details about their genitals, their sexuality, or their emotional trauma (Namaste, 2011). To reduce a transgender person to their physical bodies or the tragedies of their past neglects the diversity of experience and the human dignity of trans people

beyond sensationalism. However, Billard's (2016) study was conducted prior to the emergence of what Cavalcante (2018) calls the transgender tipping point, a moment in history marked by a proliferation of transgender representation in the media, named after the title of a 2014 *Time* magazine issue featuring transgender actress Laverne Cox.

While traditional media as a whole can be said to reinforce heteronormative views of sex and gender and render nonbinary identities practically invisible (Billard, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2015), the fact remains that society is in a period of rapidly increasing visibility for transgender people in popular culture (Cavalcante, 2018). Whether this explosion of transgender representation in traditional media today will single-handedly enact major cultural change remains to be seen; as Cavalcante (2018) writes, "media visibility does not necessarily indicate wider cultural understanding or progress on the ground… visibility is not equality; representation is not care; and acknowledgement is not understanding" (p. 65). The disproportionate rates of assault against transgender people despite this cultural tipping point speak directly to this sentiment.

2.5   New Possibilities: Emergent Media and the Trans Community

When one factors in the influence of the internet, however, greater strides toward understanding of transgender experience and imperatives for change become far more evident. As McInroy and Craig (2015) note, the internet has emerged as a preeminent resource for nuanced representations from the perspectives of trans people themselves, without aforementioned sensationalist, mediated effect of traditional media. There is strong evidence to suggest that humanizing media representations of transgender people, increasingly accessible in online contexts such as social media, may have major

repercussions toward improving the condition of transgender people in society. For many, the type of personal contact between majority populations and transgender people required to reduce transgender prejudice is often difficult or impossible in the offline world; second-hand portrayals therefore become the basis upon which people form their opinions (B. Miller, 2017; Raun, 2016). In the case of online media, readily available first-person portrayals of transgender people can act to destigmatize transgender identities in lieu of in-person contact (B. Miller, 2017). This assertion is consistent with empirical research showing how mediated intergroup contact increases positive feelings surrounding group interaction with sexual minorities (Oritz & Harwood, 2007). With respect to transgender people specifically, research by Tompkins, Shields, Hillman, and White (2015) found that participants who watched a short documentary about the life and family of a transgender girl and completed a perspective-taking writing activity afterwards reported more favorable attitudes towards transgender people than those participants who only received education about transgender identity. Thus, the wealth of positive representation online may challenge transphobic attitudes held by the members of the general public. Furthermore, given the importance of representation for the LGBTQ community in forging and understanding identity for themselves (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Zimman, 2009), the internet provides transgender people with the opportunity to identify with the stories and experiences they learn about online. In a study conducted by McInroy and Craig (2015), transgender youth noted "the wealth of resources and information available for [them] online to support their identity development and provide a sense of community and representation" (p. 613). Additionally, the social support afforded to individuals through internet communities can have a major impact on reducing feelings of isolation or ostracism.

As a mechanism of self-actualization, mirroring, as per Devor's (2004) framework, is evident in the communities of transgender people flourishing in online spaces, reducing the distance between individuals in physical space and ameliorating the social isolation often felt by transgender people. However, in many ways, the internet also provides ample opportunity for transgender people to be witnessed by non-trans inhabitants of online space. The case of YouTube and the nature of this platform provides a fantastic example of shifting the locus of control back into the hands of trans users, making visible their experiences in a way which helps bolster their personal authenticity through the assumption of an authoritative role over their own identities. And while traditional, naturalized binary gender performance is challenged by the consideration of gender as a spectrum upon which trans people can identify, this type of witnessing can be thought as a different kind of legitimizing gender performance or activity of gender expression; the audience has a major role to play in responding to transgender performance appropriately through this visibility.

2.6   Trans on YouTube

There is a sturdy basis in the existing sociological literature showing that trans people take on the role of interpreters of transgender experience for each other (Dame, 2013; Raun, 2016), as well as for cisgender individuals (Cavalcante, 2017), with YouTube acting as an especially useful platform for trans people to disseminate and acquire knowledge (Horak, 2014; Kosenko, Bond, & Hurley, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2015; B. Miller, 2017). Indeed, research by B. Miller (2017) found that, in a content analysis of YouTube videos by popular transgender creators, the majority (53.5%) of the sampled videos provided education on trans-specific issues or topics. This is consistent

with findings in a study by Green, Bobrowicz, and Ang (2015), in which 81% of sampled

videos in their content analysis of LGBT[Q] and bullying-related YouTube videos were

on the topic of "information relating to the wider areas within the context of LGBT[Q]

issues… which [included] statistical findings and laws" (p. 708). In essence, this is no

different from the kinds of roles YouTube content creators adopt more generally, which

can range from teaching others about their favourite hobbies (Choi & Behm-Morawitz,

2017) to expressing their perspectives on sociopolitical issues (Phelps-Ward & Laura,

2016; Thorson, Ekdale, Borah, Namkoong, & Shah, 2010).

However, as noted above, YouTube allows transgender people to assume the role

of expert of their experiences and identities in a world where they are frequently

discredited (Reinke, 2017), and to turn this expertise toward a community of peers (Raun,

2016). While Dame (2013) argues that "the acquisition and presentation of expert

knowledge has long been central to the creation and maintenance of a transsexual or

transgender identity" (p. 40), the nature of YouTube as a platform, namely its focus on

broadcasting the self (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012), is particularly salient in the

consideration of trans creators as educators and expert "talking heads" (Horak, 2014). In

fact, transgender "vlogs", or video blogs, have become an established genre in and of

themselves. Vlogs, "characterized by a talking head speaking straight to camera about

domestic and personal politics," (Raun, 2016, p. 4), facilitate the adoption of a multitude

of roles, subjectivities, and spaces for renegotiation of identity in a way that is markedly

personal and accessible to creator and viewer alike. As Raun (2016) goes on to argue,

"although data is scarce, there is little doubt that, today, YouTube provides the most vivid

visual culture of trans self-representation, and is the archive that many – trans or not –

turn to for information" (p. 6). Extensive work by Raun (2016), a major contributor to the

as-yet modest body of work on transgender YouTube creators, speaks directly to this issue in greater depth and has provided crucial insight into this phenomenon.

Between 2009 and 2012, Raun (2016) conducted field research constituting "the first extended study on trans people's use of digital media" (p. 2). Raun provided case studies of eight transgender vloggers after an extended period of familiarization with the media landscape of trans vlogs. Raun, though primarily interested in how these creators experienced the transition process, developed these case studies from analysis of footage and participant interviews to examine the opportunities afforded by YouTube for self-representation and community building and how vlogs allow for "(new) possibilities for the visualization and communication of affective politics" (p. 2). Raun's study illustrated the transformative potential of audio-visual documentation for transgender people, especially through creative expression and reclamation of their own voices. In particular, many of Raun's participants described vlogging as a therapeutic act, encouraging them to process complicated emotions, share personal triumphs and struggles, and attract a like-minded community with whom they can share their experiences. In providing trans people with a platform to expose "the everydayness of cissexism and compulsory heterosexuality" (Raun, 2016, p. 141) through free affective expression in an inherently visual sense, YouTube is markedly unique in its potential for vloggers to build a personal rapport with their audience, simulating face-to-face contact through speaking directly to a camera. As defined by Connell (2010), this constitutes a different kind of "doing gender" in the form of "doing transgender," or the development of a feminist orientation toward gender issues and inequalities through the unique relational experiences of being trans. Additionally, Raun argues that the vloggers in his study work with the parameters of digital media to build their own identities as a form of "screen birth," or renegotiation of

trans identity in the documentation of self-discovery, particularly through the transition process. Again, I argue this constitutes a form of transgender performance whereby the expression of the transition process itself and the visibility of trans identity becomes the basis upon which being trans is made intelligible and, ultimately, vloggers can feel accurately witnessed (Devor, 2004). As Raun (2016) writes, transgender vlogging, as evidenced by the experiences of his participants, can be seen as a "digital autobiographical act, taking advantage of the multimodality of the media to tell stories of trans [people] that can animate and motivate others to be visible or to claim a trans identity" (p. 138). While Raun's work is considered to be seminal and has spurred considerable research in this field, the intensity of his fieldwork as part of a doctoral dissertation necessitated a relatively small sample size, inhibiting the reach of his conclusions.

The general research in this area is very recent, and scholars from many different fields are just beginning to look at how transgender creators on YouTube are finding their own spaces and using this social media platform to connect with communities of like-minded individuals. It is evident that, with the cultural transgender tipping point gaining momentum over the past few years (Cavalcante, 2018), it has become increasingly necessary to develop an empirical analysis which seeks to understand how self-created media within the trans community can have a major positive impact on the wellbeing and sense of personal authenticity for trans people. To my knowledge, no published study has delved into this subject with the same depth as Raun's (2016) field research and at the same scale as a broad content analysis, nor have the theoretical areas of existentialist ethics and gender performance been linked in the consideration of this issue. To that end, this study seeks to build on Raun's (2016) study by looking at how transgender

YouTubers connect with their audiences through authentic self-expression and in reaffirmation of identity.

The current study is an exploratory qualitative analysis of the ways in which transgender YouTubers make meaning of their presence on the platform in tandem with their audiences. Thus, my research question(s) can be defined accordingly:

1. How do transgender YouTubers use video creation for self-actualization?

2. What is the nature of the relationship between transgender YouTubers and their audiences?

3. How can one understand this phenomenon through the lens of an existentialist notion of authenticity and ethics?

Chapter 3

3   Methodology

To answer my research questions, I conducted a content analysis of YouTube videos produced by transgender creators declaring their transgender identity – commonly referred to as "coming out" as transgender – to their audiences. I analyzed both the content of the videos themselves as well as data collected on subscriber count and other related characteristics. Below I summarize my specific methodological approach in more detail, explaining my sampling technique and data analysis strategies.

3.1   Data collection

YouTube.com's search function allows users of the site to search for videos based on key terms. By default, the search engine returns results based on an internal mechanism which lists videos based on relevance and on popularity, the latter of which is denoted by, among other characteristics, comment or view totals (Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz, 2012). Though this default search option is likely most commonly used by YouTube's userbase, users also have the option to filter their key term search to return videos based on a number of characteristics including upload date, duration, and view count. I searched for and sampled user-created videos, as differentiated from reposted content from corporations or documentaries, of transgender individuals declaring their transgender status to their audiences, or "coming out" videos. This type of video was selected for analysis for the purpose of consistency of content and general format, as well as the fact that it is highly likely that these types of videos will feature creators speaking directly to their audiences and giving explanations as to why they have chosen to declare this part of their gender identities. Directly addressing an audience is a common format

for YouTube videos in general, but given the sensitive nature of coming out videos, the audience-creator relationship is especially salient. As Horak (2014) notes, "despite the public nature of YouTube, trans vloggers often act as if they and the viewer are the only ones in the room" (p. 575). These videos are typically titled and/or tagged as some approximation of "I'm Transgender," though sampled videos were checked for relevant content prior to formal inclusion of the sample.

For the sake of differentiation from my day-to-day personal browsing activity and YouTube use, I opted to conduct all sampling through Google Chrome, a separate browser. During the sampling process, two search queries were used: "I'm Transgender" and "Coming Out Transgender." The reason for the use of two search queries is because, upon conducting a few exploratory searches in the development of methodology, certain coming out videos appeared in one query but not the other, signalling that I would need to tap into as many relevant tags as possible using the above two phrases. Parody videos, response videos (videos which refer to and discuss other gender declaration videos), videos wherein transgender creators talk about their personal narratives of coming out after already having been out to their audiences, and videos wherein transgender individuals have recorded their coming out to friends or family were not included. In order to hone in on the specific research interests of this study, namely the audience-creator relationship, only those videos which feature a single individual speaking directly to their audience about the nature of their gender identity were included in the sample. Further, only those people who had not been out to their audiences or had not spoken about being transgender on their YouTube channel prior to the posting of the sampled video were included. Though the inclusion criteria remained specific, this type of video manifested in a number of unique ways: some creators chose to come out to their

audiences via performing a song cover (n=2), creating image montages without speaking

for all or part of the video (n=2), or by simply presenting audio with no visual content to

their video (n=2). The majority (n=33), however, followed the format of a single

individual speaking directly to an audience in person. Only videos produced in English

were sampled, but creators could be of any nationality. In terms of verification that the

sampled videos were true accounts from actual trans people, even though studying online

content comes with inherent risks of false information, I argue that if a video meets the

requirements set out above and the user in the video appears to be consistent with

information provided on the user's YouTube channel page, this is sufficient for inclusion

in the sample. I can only receive and understand videos in the same way that audiences

would, and if a content creator is received by audiences as authentic, I can only go by the

construction of authenticity that the user presents. It is precisely this construction of self

as perceived to be authentic by others which is the focus of the present study.

Two sampling probes were used to collect videos for analysis based on methods

outlined by Mosemghvdlishvili and Jansz (2012). When using the search function on

YouTube, results are ordered based on several adjustable filtering options in descending

order (see Figure 1). This was my starting point to adapting Mosemghvdlishvili and

Jansz's (2012) sampling method. First, using the search query "I'm Transgender," a

selection of the top 10 videos sorted by the default relevance option were sampled due to

the fact that the most popular videos on the site are sorted in this fashion and are thus the

most likely to be seen by interested site users. Sorting by relevance allowed me to sample

the most popular or viewed videos from any year, and I was therefore able to access

videos featuring creators with higher subscriber counts. No specific date range was

applied to this search as I was interested in collecting videos which would be readily

accessible to anyone who may be searching using this query, but the collected videos for this session were posted between May 13, 2015, and March 18, 2018.This sampling period occurred on January 7 and January 15, 2018. During this first sampling period, I learned that YouTube's default search return sometimes yields a different ordering of results between sessions based on the aforementioned internal algorithms, inhibiting a certain degree of purity of my sample. For this reason, each subsequent sampling session occurred in one day and through one search only. Because sampling videos, checking that they met my inclusion criteria, and completing tabulation of data for all variables of interest proved to be a lengthy process, I opted to conduct sampling session days in dispersed intervals rather than conducting all sampling for the study on one day. Additionally, due to the ever-changing nature of internet research and data, noting sampling dates was deemed especially important.

Second, I used the same search query to sample 10 videos based on upload date, again in descending order from the first result. I conducted sampling of videos appearing at and before January 28, 2018, the session date, sampling in reverse chronological order. Doing so allowed me to access creators with a much smaller audience than those within the default search frame. Redundant videos from the first probe as well as those not meeting the inclusion criteria were not selected for sampling. Thus, for the first search query "I'm Transgender," I sampled 20 videos in total using these two probes.

Then, using this two-probe method, I collected another 20 videos from the search query "Coming Out Transgender," yielding a total sample of 40 videos. During the third sampling period (occurring on February 13, 2018) wherein I searched for "Coming Out
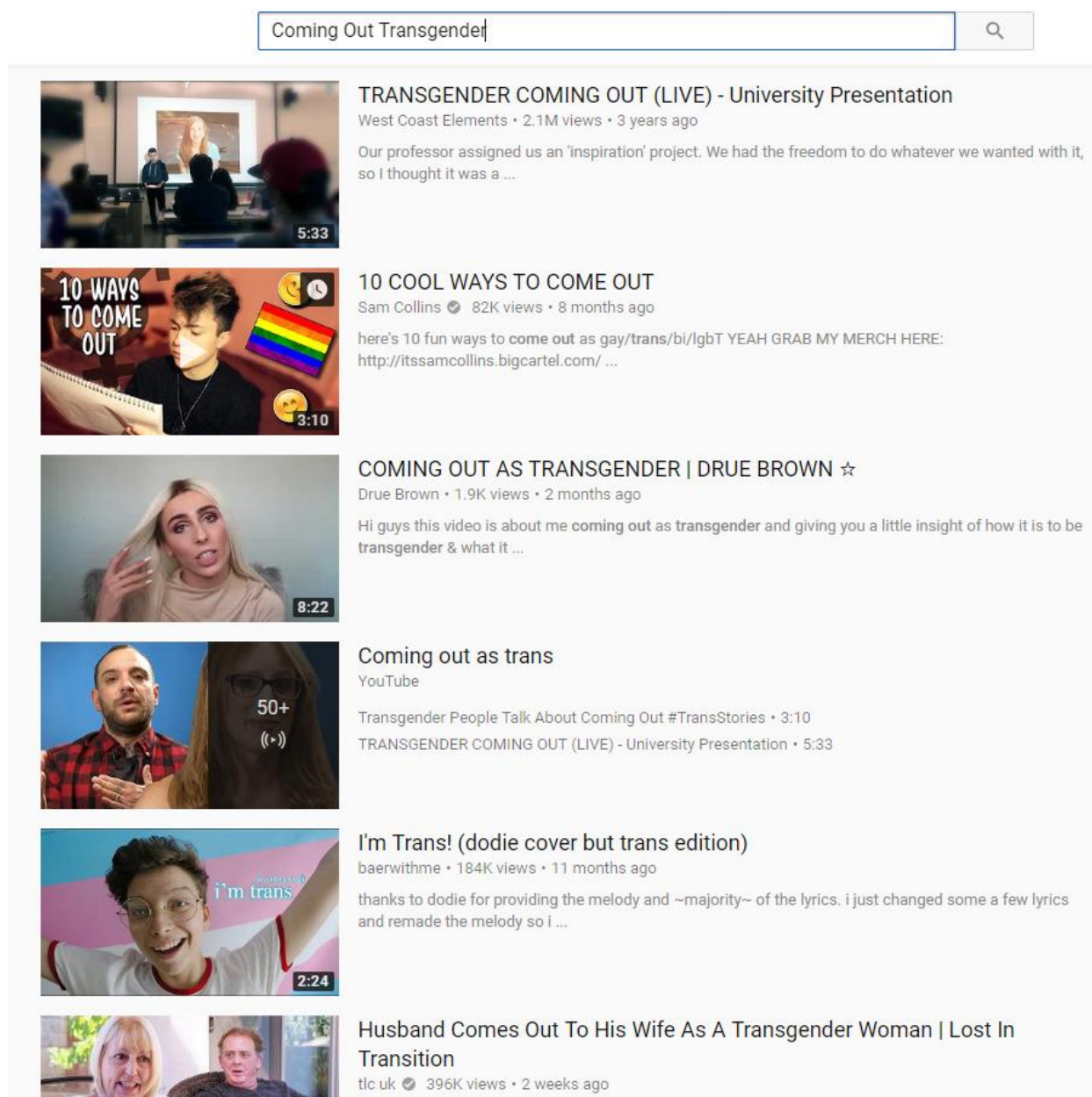
Figure 1: An example of a typical search result within YouTube's search function, sorted by the default relevance option, captured June 16, 2018.

Transgender" by relevance, I discovered that I had made an error in determining one video's eligibility for inclusion in the sample. I therefore had to remove this video from my sample and collect a replacement on February 17, 2018. Additionally, during this session, one video was sampled that had a runtime of nearly three hours, and, due to time constraints, this video was ultimately excluded from the sample once data analysis began.

The fourth sampling session, using the query "Coming Out Transgender" and sorted by date, occurred on March 19, 2018. Videos were sampled by bookmarking their addresses on Google Chrome for later processing. Forty was chosen to be a manageable but reasonably rich sample size for the purposes of the intended study, but due to the exclusion of aforementioned lengthy video, the final analyzed sample was 39 videos.

As my initial inquiry was interested in user subscriber totals at the time of posting for the sampled videos, relying on subscriber totals at the time of sampling alone was identified to be methodologically problematic if significant subscriber growth had incurred following the posting of the video. Thus, I used the online tool Social Blade (www.socialblade.com) to acquire subscriber data for specific points in time for given YouTube creators. Social Blade "compiles data from YouTube… and uses the data to make statistical graphs and charts that track progress and growth", gathering information on over 16.7 million YouTube channels (Social Blade, n.d.a). Approximate subscriber total at a specific time period is included in the type of data Social Blade compiles.

There are several limitations to using Social Blade, however, that required careful data cleaning and the exclusion of certain YouTube channels. First, some users have a privacy setting on their channel such that their subscriber counts are not publicly available, and therefore Social Blade cannot provide data in these instances. Such users were excluded from the sample at the point of data collection. Second, Social Blade does not always allow one to access specific dates in relation to subscriber totals. This is because data on specific YouTube channels is updated "based on how frequently their statistics page [on Social Blade] is visited" (Social Blade, n.d.b). In these cases, Social Blade provides subscriber numbers at more dispersed intervals, such as at the first of every month. If the collected sample of videos included channels for which Social Blade

data is sporadic, I collected subscriber data as close as possible to the upload date of the

sampled video, never drawing data from after that date. This did not prove to be a

significant limitation: only a few (n=6) channels did not have subscriber information

available for specific dates upon which the sampled videos were posted, but instead had

data from one day prior. For example, a sampled video was posted by the creator on

November 14, 2017, and while Social Blade did not have data for that date, I was able to

collect a subscriber total for November 13, 2017, instead. Channels that did not provide

data close enough to the upload date to be viable or only began collecting data after the

sampled video was posted were excluded at the point of sampling. However, there were

two exceptions to these criteria: two channels within the sample had zero subscribers at

the time of their video's posting, but they were also extremely new channels in and of

themselves. One of these channels had been created the day before the sampled video was

posted. The other channel had no information available as to when it was created, but the

sampled video was the first one posted on their channel, and the content of the video itself

suggested that it was an introductory effort. I therefore opted to include these two

channels despite not having Social Blade data available and listed their subscriber total as

zero during data collection.

Due to the ephemeral nature of social media data in general, the data collection

procedure for this study was careful and precise once the sample was collected. Videos

were transcribed in their entirely, taking careful note of information such as lengthy

pauses, jump-cuts in video editing, or times where the creator laughed, gestured, or cried

on camera. Videos were transcribed from the live post and the transcription date and time

were recorded. To ensure accuracy of each transcript, I conducted a secondary quality-

control step of processing wherein I watched each video a second time following my

transcript, checking for errors. This usually occurred on a separate date than the transcription itself. Downloading videos, whether in video or audio format, is prohibited by YouTube's Terms of Service and was not a possibility for my research (YouTube, 2010, June 9). However, a screenshot of the browser was taken during sampling to ensure accuracy of information collected from the video's web address. Indeed, as I will elaborate further below, all internet-based data points were screenshotted and saved.

In addition to the sampled videos and subscriber totals, other kinds of data were collected in order to maximize the potential for analysis and to acquire demographic information on the individuals within my sample. For each YouTube channel in the sample, the nationality and age of user were collected where available. This information is sometimes explicitly provided by the user on their channel web pages. At other times I was able to collect this information through watching other videos on their channels, visiting their public social media pages which were often linked to their YouTube channels, or inferring based on content of the sampled video. An example of this latter case occurred when the creator explicitly mentioned that they were "underage," or mentioned presently attending school, leading me to approximate that the creator was under the age of 18 at the time that the video was posted. Similarly, nationality of the creator was sometimes inferred based on their accent. Despite these efforts, in some instances, it was impossible to collect data on nationality or age, and in these instances these characteristics were coded as missing. Information on nationality was thought to be useful during the analysis process because although discrimination against transgender people may be more severe in some countries than in others, YouTube acts as its own virtual space for geographically dispersed individuals to seek community and support (Raun, 2016; Shapiro, 2004). Information on age was used to define patterns in content

production and YouTube's userbase. Lack of information for either of these categories were thought to be suggestive of other patterns of disclosure or privacy on the part of creators.

I also noted the age of YouTube channels maintained by sampled videos' creators. Social Blade includes the date of creation of YouTube channels as part of their data, though this information is also available for viewing on the YouTube channel pages themselves. I also noted the date of their first video posted on their channel, which was not always the sampled video for my research. Gathering this information served a similar function to noting the channel's age; even though an individual may have created an account at a certain point in time, they may not have begun to upload content to their channels for months or even years. Additionally, the length of each sampled video as well as the date of the video's publication were collected for analysis. Finally, I noted the gender identities of the individuals in my sample. Throughout the sampling process, I took digital notes as part of the tabulated spreadsheet for the data as well as personal handwritten notes regarding anything of interest within the content of a video, the character of a creator's channel, or decisions made with respect to the research at hand.

Although the nature of internet-based research is such that ethical considerations of anonymity need not be as rigorous as with live interaction with research participants, I have chosen to anonymize the usernames of those collected in my sample. The data that I collected is considered to be public data in that it is feasibly accessible by any interested parties and therefore not necessarily considered private, but it must be said that this topic is, in our current sociopolitical climate, inherently a sensitive one. While the individuals in my sample have chosen to associate themselves plainly with their usernames and the content of their videos, several have a very small number of subscribers and three have

ultimately chosen to delete their videos some time after I had transcribed them. In one case, the trans individual explicitly stated that she was not, at the time of posting her video, openly out to her family with whom she lives. It is therefore not my right as an observing researcher to publicly draw attention to their content through my work and potentially put their comfort or safety at risk by identifying them. Even though individuals with higher subscriber counts may not be as concerned with their anonymity in posting their videos publicly on YouTube, I believe that, just as one would protect the identities of participants in real-world research efforts, so too do my sampled creators deserve the same consideration, especially given that they are not aware of being a part of my study. For the purpose of the present research, all members of my sample have been given a series of initials with which to identify them in Table 1 along with their demographic characteristics.

3.2   Data Processing and Analysis

Once the sampling process was completed and key data points were tabulated and organized, transcripts were imported into NVivo 11 Pro data analysis software. Initially, my interest was in themes related to leadership, activism, education, or outreach. However, these themes did not emerge as notable during the data analysis. What did seem primarily important were the stories of the individuals in my sample, and the meaning(s) behind each individual creator's decision to film a coming out video and post it on YouTube. Therefore, my approach to data analysis developed dialectically between the data itself and the theory and patterns which emerged from it (Mason, 2002).

Grounded theory as a methodological tool has a longstanding and rich history of use in the social sciences. Simply put, grounded theory allows for the generation of

theoretical links within the collected data itself rather than generating new knowledge solely from deductive verification of pre-existing concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). At its inception, grounded theory was meant to counterbalance what Glaser and Strauss (1968) called the "opportunistic use of theories that have dubious fit and working capacity" (p. 4), namely the process of imposing logically deduced theory onto data after the research has been completed. In this way, my analytical strategy is reflective of this desire to allow the members of my sample to speak for themselves rather than deeming the data null having not verified my pre-existing hypothesis. My approach to data analysis through this grounded theory lens can best be described as constructivist as discussed by Charmaz (2006), assessing how and why the members of my sample constructed meaning in their unique situations and how these meanings overlap between individuals. Understanding the context of the data and my interpretation thereof rather than assuming objectivity in the data and my analysis was crucial to my research process. Therefore, reflexivity on my part was necessary, and, at times. I went back to the live video postings on YouTube.com to reassess the context and emotional charge of passages I used in my analysis.

I thus began an inductive, grounded theory-based, thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) of my sample. Having spent a great deal of time with each video during the transcription and quality-control phase, I engaged in a further close reading of the data, looking for emergent patterns, themes, and commonalities. Where significant thematic overlap occurred between transcripts, passages exemplifying a common thread or idea were mapped to the nascent theme. NVivo Pro 11's user interface allowed me to track the frequency of each theme; I looked at both the number of references, or the number of times a specific theme occurred across the entire sample, as well as the number of cases,

or transcripts as units, in which a given theme occurred. In this way, I was able to grow a list of emergent themes, sorted by descending order of prevalence, to assess overall trends of content within the data itself. While this is certainly not to say that themes for which there were a smaller number of references are less important than those reoccurring across the sample, the most prominent themes allowed me to reassess my analytical approach and to "hear" exactly what each creator had tried to convey with their coming out video. For example, notions of authenticity and "living a lie" featured heavily in many of these videos, which lead me to explore the concept of self-actualization in relation to a creator's real or perceived audience. Finally, upon further assessment of the data, certain themes could be broken down into sub-categories of their expression, usually based on the frequency or volume of that theme's occurrence. Through this method, I was able to link what was occurring within the content of the videos to existing literature and develop my analysis from that point of departure.

As with any social scientific endeavor, engaging reflexively is paramount to representing the data as truthfully and as respectfully as possible. As a cisgender woman, I am acutely aware of the fact that I cannot truly understand the lived experiences of those who are transgender. Furthermore, I would never presume to speak over the stories of trans people or to give my interpretation of these stories without heavy self-reflection and utmost respect. In the analysis of my transcripts, I have endeavored to understand the meaning-making associated with being trans on YouTube as closely as possible without imposing on this already highly marginalized group.

3.3   Demographic Details of Sample

GIVEN PSEUDONYM	AGE	NATIONALITY	GENDER IDENTITY
FF	15	Norway	Trans girl
BI	~25	United States	Non-binary
KX	25	Canada	Trans man
FT	20	England	Trans woman
TT	19	Canada	Trans woman
TD	20	United States	Trans man
BW	18	United States	Trans woman
UJ	20	N/A (US/Canada?)	Trans woman
PT	N/A	N/A (US/Canada?)	Trans woman
NB	15	United States	Trans girl
NT	~38	United Kingdom	Trans woman
UU	N/A	N/A (US/Canada?)	Unknown
KK	N/A	United States	Trans man
BE	~15	United States	Trans girl
OO	34	United States	Trans woman
NQ	N/A	Slovenia	Trans woman
UO	~21	New Zealand	Trans man
LH	17	United Kingdom	Trans boy
LO	19	United States	Trans woman
KC	N/A	United Kingdom	Trans woman
OG	18	United Kingdom	Trans man
SP	<18	N/A (United Kingdom?)	Trans girl
NK	N/A	Canada	Trans man
KD	~21	United States	Trans woman
KE	N/A	United Kingdom	Trans woman
KF	25	United States	Trans man
BC	22	United States	Trans man
LK	N/A	United Kingdom	Trans woman
TH	~13	United States	Trans girl
OE	26	N/A (US/Canada?)	Trans woman
RN	19	United States	Trans woman
JC	N/A	United States	Trans man
GW	20	Italy	Trans man
ET	N/A	United States	Trans man
LU	<18	United States	Trans girl
US	24	Australia	Trans woman
BH	N/A	United Kingdom	Trans man
BX	~18	Australia	Trans woman
QV	21	N/A (United Kingdom?)	Trans man

Table 1: A summary of the 39 members of my sample, including their designated pseudonym, age, nationality, and gender identity.

The above table outlines the demographic details of all members of my sample.

As noted, solid information regarding age and nationality was not always readily

available or given by the creator. I have therefore designated estimates of age and

nationality. In terms of age, often the creator would mention on other platforms such as Instagram or Twitter their ages on a specific date. If no actual birth date was given, their age at the time of posting could be either that age or one year older. For the sake of consistency and simplicity, I opted to include the earlier age in the above table with a designation of approximation. Similarly, spoken accent was used to approximate nationality if no data was given.

The age composition of my sample is predominantly young; the mean age of all members falls around 20 years old, though this number may lean younger given the two members of my sample who were admittedly underage but who did not give their exact age. Additionally, given the fact that age was undetermined for 10 members of my sample, it is entirely possible that this number could lean older as well, though based on the life experiences and visual appearance of many individuals, I surmise that the mean age would not raise substantially if all ages were given. Despite this, based on the available information, it is safe to assume that the cohort in question has a particular relationship with the internet as opposed to older cohorts. Their experiences must also be considered in relation to not only their individual points in the life course but also the wider cultural attitudes and predispositions that may have had some influence in bringing them to a point of coming out on YouTube.

Moreover, the racial composition of my sample must be addressed. While I would not presume to know how each member of my sample identifies and I maintain great caution in assigning racial or ethnic labels without any input from them, I nonetheless assessed the ratio of white individuals to visible minorities, albeit reflexively. The vast majority (74.4%) of individuals in my sample were white, while 23.1% could be identified as visible minorities. One person, LU, could not be identified as her video

included only audio with no visual content, displaying a black screen while she spoke, and she did not otherwise give any indication of her racial or ethnic identity. As we shall see, intersectional consideration of race became an important topic for at least one creator in their coming out video.

3.4　Limitations of the Present Study

With the execution of this study, several limitations require explication. First, although a sample size of 39 was deemed to be reasonably thematically rich for empirical conclusions to be drawn, it cannot be considered representative per se. As the internal algorithm which yields search returns produces a different ordering of results at different times, and as the database of videos is constantly in flux with the addition and deletion of videos, my sampling method cannot be perfectly replicated. This research is a qualitative exploratory study and is aimed at understanding the experiences of transgender creators coming out on YouTube rather than a controlled experiment or survey and therefore the limitations inherent in this kind of work should be acknowledged. Furthermore, it is impossible to determine whether the accounts given by each creator are accurate, though as mentioned previously, I can only go by how any viewer might receive these videos.

Finally, as noted above, the members of my sample were predominantly young and the majority of them were white (or so I ascertained through watching their videos). This perhaps speaks to a very specific kind of experience in society or to the accessibility of content creation on the internet as a whole, given that this is an endeavor which would require an understanding of how to use this platform and a regular internet connection. Furthermore, as J. F Miller (2017) argues, YouTube's search parameters, particularly through its Search Engine Optimization for boosting specific content to be accessed via

the search function, gravitate toward transnormative content and users. J. F. Miller (2017) writes that transnormativity is a "systemic process by which a hegemonic trans narrative is created and then used to inform trans people of the correct ways [they] should look, think, and behave" (p. 6). YouTube's search algorithm perpetuates a predominant narrative of whiteness and of binary trans identity in the promotion of videos featuring these creators in addition to content from major media companies such as National Geographic and ABC News (J. F. Miller, 2017). While this is not to say that the experiences of those in my sample are invalid in their embodiment of their identities, it must be noted that the nature of the sample I gathered could have been impacted by the propensity of the platform to make trans users who may not fit with the transnormative narrative less visible (J. F. Miller, 2017). Noting these particularities, it again should be recognized that the members of my sample are not necessarily representative of a broad range of experiences in the transgender community.

Chapter 4

4   Results

In the following section, I map the major themes present in the sampled coming out videos as per my inductive analytical process. I begin with a discussion of the major challenges faced by these creators before introducing the impact that the audience, and YouTube itself, has had on the creators' ability to face these challenges. I explore these creators' conceptualization of the act of coming out as trans on YouTube as an embodiment of true authenticity. I then link evidence of the relationship between audience and creator through their given reasons for making a coming out video. An exploration of the major topics incorporated into a trans YouTuber's coming out video, an inherently sensitive type of video to make, illustrates coming out online as a process of self-actualization, bolstered by a real or perceived audience and the public nature of the act itself.

4.1   Discrimination, Bullying, and Transphobia

Fifty-one per cent of all cases in my sample (n=20) saw trans creators incorporating a discussion of discrimination, bullying, and transphobia into their coming out videos, and these topics were discussed from many different angles.

4.1.1 Personal Experiences at School, at Home, and Professionally

Firstly, many individuals spoke of personal experiences with transphobia and bullying in framing their feelings about coming out or in relaying their past hardships in arriving at their present moment of disclosure. These YouTubers often described being bullied or mistreated by peers and teachers in school, both in the past and presently,

depending on their age. While these individuals were, at the time that their videos were posted, at a range of different stages in their transition process, what appeared to unify their experiences of discrimination or bullying was the fact that they were punished by those around them for not conforming to expectations of their assigned gender. As BW, an 18-year-old American transgender woman who was attending her final year in high school at the time she posted her coming out video, recounted, "I do see, you know, the smirks and the side-stares and the shit-talking behind my back, 'oh, that's still a man. Oh, did you see that tranny in third period? Oh, you'll never be a woman, let's call it an it.'" FT, a 20-year-old trans woman from the United Kingdom, described being "constantly tormented as a child for being <air quotes> the gay boy, and being <hand gestures> the freak, and the weirdo that no one wanted to go near" simply for being different than her classmates, which, after she socially transitioned at a young age, went from being primarily homophobic bullying in nature to being blatantly transphobic. KX, a 25-year-old Canadian trans man, said that, in his past, "going to school every day was torture, teachers didn't understand, [he] was bullied, [and he] was marked." These experiences were echoed among those who chose to speak about being bullied at school, either directly or behind their backs. BE, an American transgender girl around 15 years of age, expected negative repercussions for having recently begun her social transition, but she appeared at ease and compassionate toward her potential detractors:

> I know there's gonna be talk, and I'm not expecting that hundred percent, and I'm not expecting everybody to be okay with it because everybody's different, and that's okay to be different.

BE mentioned that she planned on using a gender-neutral washroom at her school to avoid making other people feel uncomfortable or having them think she was "gross" for using her preferred washroom.

Others talked about a lack of acceptance from family members as being part of their personal history. When discussing her past accompanied by a photo montage, PT, an American transgender woman, said:

> My family wasn't supportive of how I was. They always said it was a phase, and then I started thinking, "maybe it is a phase," until the day I dressed as female going to school one day, and I got in so much trouble. My dad found out as well, and he immediately cut my hair. I was devastated. I did not want to be on Earth, I just wanted to just call it quits. It hurted [sic] me so much. So, from there, you know, my dad did not support my decision.

JC, an American trans man, had a similar experience with his mother, who discouraged his experimentation with and preference for men's clothing for fear that this meant he was a lesbian woman:

> There was a point where [she] threw away all of my boys' clothes and bought me girly clothes, skinny jeans, tight tops, bras, she got rid of my sports bras, […] because she was worried that I would be a lesbian. That was her worry, was that I would come out as a lesbian.

I surmised through the way JC spoke about her, as being "the woman who birthed me" and referring to her by her first name rather than calling her a mother, that they either no longer had a relationship or that it was very strained. As with others, there appeared to be further conflation of homosexuality and non-normative gender presentation.

Two members of the sample discussed being discriminated against for their identities in their professional pursuits. PT, a professional dancer, recounted:

> I actually remember gettin' an email from a popular rapper, well it was his management group who contacted me to be in his video shoot, to actually dance in his video shoot. So, I'm like, "yes, I'm down! Like, this is my moment to shine, like, I'm ready." So, then they found that I was transgender, and, unfortunately,

the job was taken away from me. So, I'm like, "ah, I'm giving up, like, this just so hard." Like, people just discriminate, just because of the way you are. Like, I am talented. Seriously, I can, like, slay your video shoot for you. Like, why not give me the job?

US, a 24-year-old Australian transgender woman, shared a similar experience as a musician. In her coming out video, which was a reposted Facebook livestream, she expressed concern about being public about being a trans woman given an incident she had experienced wherein individuals opted to withdraw from working with her on musical projects for presenting as a gay man; US worried that she would go through the same withdrawal of professional connections for being open about her transgender identity.

4.1.2 Transphobia and Hatred Online

Several members of the sample, when discussing transphobia, made explicit mention of the internet as being a hot-bed of hatred against trans people and some recounted their direct experience with online harassment. LH, a 17-year-old trans boy from the United Kingdom, addressed his audience: "so, why did I find this difficult to actually come out to you guys for? Well, because mainly the [hate] comments." He displayed on-screen some of the hateful comments he had received on his YouTube videos, while telling his viewers,

> I've gotten so many comments being like, "I'm glad [American President Donald] Trump's sorting you guys out," and, "you're just a girl, ta-ta." And all of these comments, they're really, really stupid. And I've been getting so many of them. All the time on, like, all of my videos. It's the same comments. And they can be quite distressing.

Another YouTuber, OG, an 18-year-old trans man from the United Kingdom, described his experiences with privacy and disrespect of his gender identity online:

…hasn't happened a lot recently but there's a fuckload of people that pry into my private life. There's been people who've been stalking me on Facebook, stalking my parents on Facebook, stalking my family members on Facebook to try and find old pictures of me when I hadn't <air quotes> transitioned, you know what I mean? Like, pictures of me when I had long hair for, like, that one year I long hair. Pictures of me where I'm not binding [my chest]. Pictures of me where— you know what I'm getting at? Like, pictures where it's captioned with my birth name and shit like that. And these people will make <air quotes> exposed pages where they post these pictures, they tag me in them, they just spurt hate, like, "look, she's a fucking girl." I'm not a fucking girl.

The only person in the sample who identified as non-binary, BI, an American around 25 years of age, discussed how they had been afraid to announce publicly that they were trans, in no small part because of the potential backlash from "frightening, aggressive, obsessed people who hate when non-binary folks call themselves trans […] Some even go as far as making entire [YouTube] channels dedicated to <air quotes> the cause." Having internalized this form of transphobia against non-binary people, BI expressed that they had tried to repress their trans identity for fear of the hatred they might receive. Another YouTube user, KK, a teenage American trans boy, dedicated the second half of his coming out to reading the hateful comments he had received online, which primarily centred around his trans identity.

4.1.3   The Status of Trans People in Society and the Media

When discussing transphobia and bullying, many members of the sample were aware of the stigma a transgender identity holds in society and the discrimination associated with it.

For those who were coming out at the very beginning of their transition process, there appeared to be an awareness of the danger associated with living freely as a trans person in society today. The trans women and girls of the sample were more likely to

speak on this issue than the trans men; as BE put it, "I live in America, but in America, like, there's a huge target on transgender women's backs and that is on my back." Similarly, KD, an American trans woman around 21 years of age, expressed her expectation that she would be condemned for coming out as trans, and foresaw her own future within the wider context of how trans people are treated in society:

> What happens now is really a luck of the draw. As a trans person, I am dealt the stress that not only are some of my friends going to be either killed or kill themselves through suicide, I have the risk of being murdered.

BX, another trans woman from Australia around 18 years old, expressed feeling fearful over her identity and the process of coming out given societal attitudes towards women like her: "there's such— so much stigma behind coming out, I was so terrified, well, because we know the world's only just starting to accept the gays let alone trans." Similarly, UO, a transgender man from New Zealand approximately 21 years of age, mentioned that he was relieved that he has received support from his family and friends in his transition because one often hears "horror stories of trans people […] being kicked out of home or being abused or discriminated against."

TT, a 19-year-old Canadian trans woman, wove a discussion of societal discrimination and violence into her own personal narrative of self-discovery. She noted that, in the pursuit of authenticity and transitioning to become the person they've always known they were, many trans people face increased hardship, especially as it relates to an intersectional consideration of race. Of transitioning and of trying to align one's inner being with one's outer expression, she mentioned that "the process is extremely difficult, and, in many places, very expensive, and, in most places, dangerous just to exist as a trans person. The murder rate for trans women, and especially black trans women is astronomical and just horrifying." Keeping with this theme, she dedicated a segment of

the video to showing a clip of herself presenting as male to satisfy the curiosity of her

audience and to illustrate the difference in her own personal clarity and happiness.

However, she cautioned that cisgender people should never expect all trans people to

provide this kind of information about their past and urged them to understand that trans

people may not be presenting as their true selves in their daily lives for fear of

discrimination. She said,

> feeling like I had to put on the beard and the <lowers pitch> deep voice just to go
> to work and just to feel safe, that is a cage. That is— I can't— I can't let myself
> go back to that, and a lot people have to, a lot of people have to, you know, revert
> to their <air quotes> assigned gender just to feel safe and to go [through their]
> day-to-day lives […] if somebody tells you that they're trans, and that they have
> always felt like a girl and that they are a girl, even if they have to grow a beard,
> even if they have to wear dress-shirts and suits every day, they're still a girl.
> Okay? And it's important for you not to dismiss that or to think that they're <air
> quotes> faking it just because they cannot pre— present themselves every day of
> the year. It's— It's— It's dangerous. There are so many murders, again,
> especially of black trans women, especially in the United States of America, it's
> like, I— I don't even know the numbers, but I know it's way too high, I know it's
> astronomically higher than cisgender people being murdered by people.

TT connected the personal journey she was about to embark on to the broader experiences

of transgender women in society: "there is so much faith in people that we have to have

[in coming out to people], and it's hard to have it when you are one of the most

marginalized groups on the planet." TT, like BE, cited America as being an especially

dangerous place for the transgender community. Similarly, LH discussed being deterred

from moving to the United States to pursue a desired career path due to societal

transphobia as well as contemporary President Donald Trump's anti-transgender

legislation.

Finally, there were two members of my sample who discussed societal attitudes

towards trans people through mass media. As part of her personal narrative, FT described

the fallout of her family allowing her to socially transition as a child and, particularly, the attention this received from the media. Because the idea of transgender identities was not readily discussed or understood by mainstream media during her childhood, there was a lot of misrepresentation and blatant transphobia present in the coverage of this young woman's early years. Of this, she said,

> I have a lot of trauma from that, because everything I had ever been called was then written down on a newspaper for a lot of people to read. Stories about how my parents were brainwashing me to become a female, then it wasn't just affecting me, it was affecting my family. And we had to get police involved because it was too much.

In this instance, I was able to learn about a young trans woman's direct experience with targeted negative media coverage and how it can be unequivocally harmful to specific transgender people. More indirectly, though, the influence of negative media portrayals was felt by KF, a 25-year-old American transgender man. Like many other members of my sample, he recounted narratives of childhood and his journey to the point at which he was coming out on YouTube. KF expressed that he believed his platform on YouTube obligated him to provide positive representation of being transgender and educational content related to this subject, a theme which will be discussed on its own later in this chapter. This desire to educate stemmed directly from the "lack of information and poor media representation" of trans people having "a horrific and long-lasting effect" on him through his life. KF spoke about the perils of poor or nonexistent media representation and how it left him feeling scared and alone:

> There was no information available to me, there was no one like me on TV. The few examples I saw of anything were sensational headlines and crude, one-off jokes. Characters that were heavily stereotyped and existed only as pathetic punchlines. That representation told me that I was a freak. A mutant. And that I should do everything I could to hide how I felt or else I'd be, at best, never taken seriously, and, at worst, locked up somewhere or even murdered. There was no

positivity. There was no example of nuance or complexity, there was no basic
education.

The media has a profound role in shaping public perception of a host of societal issues,
and in these two cases, the harmful depictions of trans people in the media had both direct
and indirect negative impacts on young transgender people themselves.

4.2   YouTube and YouTubers for Self-Discovery

Though perhaps not the most frequent of themes in my sample, what emerged
from analysing the transcripts was that YouTube as a platform and other YouTubers on
this platform had facilitated the self-discovery and education of those individuals now
coming out themselves. A discussion of specific transgender YouTubers or the trans
community more generally on YouTube was present in 13% (n=5) of cases, though this, I
believe, does not imply a lack of importance of trans representation on YouTube per se.

Common among all iterations of this theme was the idea that those transgender
YouTubers, either specific individuals or more generally, who had been the first to
establish themselves on the platform and who had created strong representation for the
transgender community went on to inspire those within the sample to accept and better
understand themselves. In some cases, YouTube was their first point of entry into
understanding transgender identity and mirroring their own personal experiences. As NB
said at the beginning of her video, "YouTube is what has gotten me through my
transition. It is— it's what even introduced me to transgender people, and if YouTube
didn't exist, and there was [sic] no transgender YouTubers, I would not be where I am."
NB hoped that, in sharing her own story, she could help someone just as she had been
helped. UO also recounted the point in his personal narrative wherein he discovered
transgender identity via YouTube and, in particular, through the work of prominent trans

YouTuber Gigi Gorgeous. Gigi Gorgeous, as of June 2018, has nearly 2.8 million

subscribers (Social Blade, n.d.c) and is arguably one of the most prominent transgender

creators on the platform. Of her and her own coming out video, UO said,

> I was on YouTube and saw a video by a girl called Gigi Gorgeous, who I'm pretty
> sure you know. I didn't know she was trans, but I was just watching one of her
> videos and I was reading the comments. and someone was saying something
> horrible like, "uh, I can't believe," like, "she has a dick," and "I can't believe
> she's a, like, a dude," and whatever, and I was like, "what?" So, I went on to her
> channel and I saw a video that said, "I am transgender." I'd no idea what that
> meant at all, I'd never heard of that word, but I watched the video. Everything
> clicked, and I knew in my heart of hearts that that is exactly how I was feeling. So,
> for the next two weeks I locked myself in my room and researched everything I
> could about what being trans was and I looked at a lot of, um, FTM trans guys on
> YouTube, and it's like, this switch just flicked on, and I was like, "holy shit."
> Like, I felt like I had just— like, God had just told me every secret of the universe.
> I was like, "what the fuck?"

Though UO had struggled for years with his identity and feeling "wrong", the moment in

which he finally understood himself fully and felt the initial relief of having a name for

his experiences was directly brought on by Gigi Gorgeous and the presence of a vibrant

trans community on YouTube. TH, an American trans girl around 13 years of age, had a

similar experience after first seeing Jazz Jennings, a teenage reality television star and

transgender advocate, on TV. TH went to YouTube for more information and, quite

notably, began watching videos made by another member of my sample as well as Gigi

Gorgeous. Her name is omitted in the following quote by TH:

> I just kept watching, like, --- videos […] and I just watched all these videos. Gigi
> Gorgeous, everyone. Like, I watched all these transgender people, and I was like,
> "I know I'm transgender. Like, this is who I am."

TH had mentioned prior to this moment that she began watching YouTube content at a

very young age about the American Girl doll line as a means of exploring her gender

identity and, in turn, used her own American Girl doll to express her gender before she

was able to do so for herself, so it appears to me that it was natural for her to turn to YouTube for more information about Jazz Jennings and transgender identity. This perhaps speaks to the accessibility of YouTube as an educational, first-hand resource for many other young people today. Again, Gigi Gorgeous was mentioned as an important figure in the YouTube trans community. Gigi was mentioned once more by TD as being someone who inspired him to be open about who he was. He took time toward the end of his coming out video to thank her:

> She's just really brave, with— everything I've seen. I've watched her videos in the past and it inspired me, basically, to make this video, because seeing someone so brave who's basically the same as you, it inspires you. I can't explain the feeling.

TD also thanked Connor Franta, another YouTuber who came out as gay, for inspiring him to come out as well. Finally, BE mentioned another member of my sample, though this person is different from the YouTuber cited by TH. BE mentions that this person is one of her role models and has helped her understand herself in a new, more accepting light:

> She is, hands down, a great person. Like, she— I haven't met her, but I've watched her for a— at least, like, a month now since […] coming out. Like, she's been a real help for me. And she helped me kind of, like, see that being transgender's okay, and it's not, like, "wow, this is some alien," or, "oh my goodness," like, "who are you?"

What this section suggests is that not only is YouTube a helpful resource for trans people to learn more about themselves and understand their experiences, but that the trans community on YouTube is comprised of a network of individuals striving to represent themselves authentically in a way that lifts others up and encourages others to be who they are. In turn, this gives both the creator and the viewer, whether within the trans community or external to it, the permission to exist authentically, exactly as they see fit.

4.3   Love and Support from The Audience

Another prominent theme which reoccurred across 31% of my sample (n=12) was

the fact that the creator's audience served as a support for them in their lives, and that the

love they received from their audiences had a major impact on their confidence and

wellbeing. This appeared most commonly in the form of taking the time to thank their

audience for the support they have shown the creator, which, in some cases, had

emboldened them to come out. For example, KF, a public advocate in his own right,

spoke to the crucial relationship he shares with his audience toward the end of his coming

out video:

> All of you have been so supportive of me recently, even though you haven't had a
> clear idea of what's been going on with me. You are the ones that have given me
> the courage to come out. […] And hearing your stories and seeing your own
> journeys when you come up to me at conferences and stuff, that's a big part of
> what has given the strength to get to this point. And I know that, no matter what,
> at least in my core community online, I have a supportive and safe space.

Similarly, TT said that the love that she has received from her audience in the form of

positive YouTube comments was "a big part of what's made [her] able to understand

[herself] this way and to come forward." She went on to discuss how being able to

express herself on YouTube and to develop a community where she feels loved had made

a world of difference in her life:

> I can't picture myself now without all of you to talk to, and to come to with my
> feelings and my rants on, you know, social issues, and even just sharing my love
> for beauty, it's— it's such an outlet and it's so warm, and it's something that I
> look forward to constantly, and it's something that's always in my mind.

BW also expressed that her audience was a "big support system" for her.

There was a clear, common sentiment across this theme that the audience held a

great deal of meaning for the creator. In the case of KX, he went to great lengths to

emphasize how the relationship he had with his audience had allowed him to hang on to life when his circumstances were dire due to his identity not being understood or accepted in his offline world. He said,

> I wouldn't have been able to get this far without you. It's— it's been a struggle, I mean, over the last few years, I mean, there's [sic] years where I barely made any videos because I was… <pause> I was so depressed, and so unhappy. And you guys kept me going. Sometimes you were the only thing that kept me going.

OO, a 34-year-old American trans woman, said quite directly that her audience and the support she received from them helped her overcome her desire to commit suicide: "thank you all so much, again, for supporting me and donating […] I— I needed that in my life to not kill myself." Where offline love and support is not always available to transgender people, their audience can help satisfy this emotional need and give them a safe place of self-expression, which, in turn, motivates a reciprocal engagement between audience and creator.

4.3.1   I Love You All So Much

In addition to coding specifically for instances wherein the creator spoke of the love and support they received from their audiences and the impact this has had, I also opted to create a category which was thematically similar yet did not encompass the same level of detail or depth as the former theme. This category was called "I Love You All So Much," because, even if the video may not have contained any lengthy discussion of what the audience meant to the creator, there was a tendency of creators to conclude their videos by expressing love for their viewers, such as when OO said, "I genuinely love you guys," or when QV, a 21-year-old trans man ostensibly from the United Kingdom due to his accent, said, "I just have to keep on smilin', keep on doin' my stuff for you guys. I

flippin' love you guys." While there was indeed some overlap between the category "Love and Support from The Audience" and "I Love You All So Much" in that both themes could sometimes be found within one video, this certainly was not always the case. This discrete category comprised 31% of my sample (n=12). Whether the tendency of creators to finish off their videos with this message speaks to perhaps a formulaic approach to making YouTube videos and acknowledging the importance of the audience as a whole, or whether it relates more so to a loving connection between creator and audience, is something I am unable to concretely determine. It is worth noting that, for many YouTubers, content creation has become a major source of revenue which would not be possible without audience engagement (Raun, 2018). However, the fact that there was an aforementioned overlap between "Love and Support from The Audience" and "I Love You All So Much" allows the more loving interpretation to hold some merit, especially given the often sensitive nature of the coming out video as a genre.

4.4   Seeing the Creator for Who They Really Are

Four creators, comprising 10.25% of my sample, took the idea that the presence of their audience had a positive impact on their wellbeing in a different direction. As an explanation for the reluctance they had for coming out as trans, these YouTubers made specific mention of how happy it made them feel to be seen as simply a man or a woman, or, more generally, for who they really are, rather than as someone who is transgender. To be validated in their gender identity by their viewership without the potential hardship associated with being *trans*gender proved to be a defining motive for a few creators to continue making content as a whole.

OO, OG, and NK, a Canadian trans man, shared similar feelings of wanting to

have a space where they were seen for their true selves, away from the stressors in their daily lives, and the validation they received by being seen as a "normal" man or woman. To quote NK, who began making content related to performing song covers and dancing and who never addressed his gender on his channel prior to his moment of coming out,

> I remember the very first comment on my YouTube channel that talked about me being a guy and that person used the pronoun "he." That person has no idea how my life changed after that comment. I— I gained hope, hope that, one day, I will be able to live as a man and people will see me as the person I want to be seen as. And you guys made that dream come true for me without you guys knowing. Each and every comment, with or without the pronouns "he," "him," or "his," each and every comment that has a little bit of positivity in it, helped me a lot in my life and how I see things and just became happier in general. People started to gain more curiosity in me. There have been people asking whether I'm a boy or a girl […] And I tried to ignore those comments and I would really call myself selfish for ignoring those questions because I wanted to have a space where I could be myself and people would see me as the person I want to be seen [sic], and so I never really talked about it. And, at the time, my main motivation in making videos was knowing that people would comment about me being a guy. That— that was it.

OG expressed similar motives and similar feelings towards the way his audience saw him and creating his own space online:

> Uh, there are a few reasons why I didn't tell you guys that I was trans. Uh, one was that it was just nice having people just, like, respect me as a dude. Like, they, like, they see me as a dude, they automatically use "he" pronouns, which is great, like, <thumbs up> those are my pronouns.

OO also mentioned that being able to create content and be purely herself online, and to be seen as nothing other than a woman, was something that helped her get through a very dark period of her life. Thus, being able to create an online community and safe place to validate their gender identities proved to be a powerful tool for coping with the dysphoria associated with being transgender in the wider, offline world.

More broadly, KX talked at length about producing YouTube videos and being

well-received by his audience as being a lifeline during a time when he experienced

external pressures to repress who he truly was. While KX did not mention the validation

of his gender as a specific motive for creating content in the same way OO, OG, and NK

did, he nonetheless wove ideas of authenticity in self-expression into his discussion of

this topic:

> when I started posting [my] videos, I don't think you guys will ever truly
> understand what that did for me. Trying so hard every single day to tell the people
> around me, "this is who I am," and to get online, and to have people see me for
> who I am, no questions asked, and to get online and… I was able to be myself…
> <pause> something that everyone wouldn't allow me to do. Everyone said I was
> crazy, everyone said that… this is not the way the world made me. And it fuckin'
> sucked. But to get on YouTube and— I'm trying not to get emotional, but to get
> on YouTube and for you guys to care about me, and love and accept me exactly
> for who I am when nobody else would was just… absolutely… incredible.

Being transgender and not being accepted for that identity was a source of tremendous

pain for KX, and he mentioned elsewhere in his video that he had been severely

depressed as a result, but that beginning to post content online and for that content to be

appreciated by unknown others online was what had helped him come out of his

struggles. While KX was sure to tell his audience that it had taken him a great deal of

time to reach a point where he loved and accepted himself as he was, the fact that he had

YouTube as a creative outlet in no small part allowed him to escape the pain in his offline

world and connect with a supportive, loving audience who valued him and his content

without the stigma associated with his identity. As KX put it, his audience "changed [his]

entire life."

4.5   Being Trans Does Not Define Me

Interestingly, several creators wanted to make it clear to their audiences that

coming out as transgender would not impact the content of their YouTube channels, and

that being transgender is not a defining identity for them. Fifteen percent of people in my

sample (n=6) discussed the idea that being transgender does not define them, their desire

that their presence on YouTube not be anchored solely in transgender issues, or that they

would prefer not to be seen as largely different from others by virtue of their gender

identities.

Ostensibly aware that this might mark a crucial moment in their YouTube

channel's history, some creators chose to bring attention to their regular content and the

fact that it would resume as normal after coming out. For example, KC, a trans woman

from the United Kingdom, focused her channel primarily on video game-related content

and livestreaming, and she opted to come out as trans only because she had not been able

to upload content during a time where she needed to travel to receive gender-confirming

surgery. She said, "being trans is not, by any means, the focus of my life, I just need to

get [coming out] out of the way, um, so I can deal with more important stuff like career

and video games." Here, she is referring to disclosing an element of her identity about

which she is open to all other parties in her life save for her audience, and, in coming out,

she will then be able to create videos related to her main interests. OO also focused her

creative efforts on livestreaming and video games, much the same as KC, and, after

coming out to her audience, she stressed the fact that nothing about her approach or her

content would be changing:

> if you're just a viewer who's enjoyed my videos, then I'm not changing. If you've
> watched for any amount of time, you'll know that I try and make gaming the
> centre stage of my videos. It's a gaming channel, I want the gameplay to shine
> through. My personality should come second. And that's not changing. I am
> exactly this person.

It appeared to me that OO wanted to be very clear with her audience that being trans is

not the major focus of her online life, and that she hoped that her audience would not see

her any differently after this disclosure. Earlier in the video, she mentioned that her

audience accepted her gender as a woman at face value, which was something she

allowed to continue for many years before coming out. She mentions afterward, on being

seen as a woman — "some chick that played video games" — "I'm still that person, like I

said earlier. That's still exactly who I am." LK, a trans woman from the United Kingdom,

felt similarly to KC and OO in wanting to let her interests be the focal point of her

creative work:

> I just kinda wanna make videos about old games and old people and gaming stuff
> in general. You know, the stuff that I've— do and have been doing. So, I guess
> this next, um, thing to move on to is, "well, good lord, you're— you're
> transgender, h— how will this affect your channel?" Well, it hasn't affected my
> channel all that much yet, has it? I mean, I've been making videos the same as I
> ever have, in fact, better than I have mostly, for, again, about a year now.

As she mentioned here, LK's videos centre around video games and making

documentaries. Along the same lines, KX hoped that his full range of interests would still

be the central focus of his channel:

> I really hope that [being trans] isn't, like, the main thing people know me for, and
> I've always wanted you guys to know me for my music, […] for my crazy random
> videos and my creativity and just all of the things that make up who I am and all
> my passions, you know?

At other times, creators expressed not wanting to be defined as unique solely by

virtue of being transgender. LO, a 19-year-old trans woman, mentioned that she felt it

was "a little stupid" to make a video coming out as trans because it differentiates

transgender people from everyone else: "'cause you have to say, 'I'm this! Look at me,

I'm different.' I don't like that. […] I just wanna be like every other person." A few

creators even expressed that they wanted to be seen as their gender instead of as

transgender. For example, OG mentioned,

> I know I'm not one of these people, and I'm sure a lot of you aren't these people, but some people see trans guys and cis guys as, like, separate entities. They're not just all dudes, they're different kinda dudes, which is bullshit. Like, trans guys are— they're guys. Like, it's not— it's not that difficult to understand.

Similarly, OO said that she did not want people to see her as transgender, but rather as simply a woman.

This sentiment speaks to what Cavalcante (2018) has identified through his fieldwork as a struggle for "the ordinary" in the lives of many transgender people. Many trans individuals are distinctly othered in society and therefore have fewer chances to anonymize themselves in what is deemed "normal," a luxury taken for granted by many cisgender people and, more broadly, those outside of the LGBTQ community (Cavalcante, 2018). It is entirely possible, then, that YouTube became a place where the above creators did not need to feel as socially marked as they would be had they divulged their transgender identities sooner and could instead engage with "the potential to be invisible in everyday life — seen as ordinary and unworthy of being marked" (Cavalcante, 2018, p. 150).

4.5.1   Rejection of "Social Justice Warrior" or LGBTQ Stereotype

For some of the above-mentioned creators, embedded within the sentiment that being transgender was not a defining identity for them was the idea that a trans identity inherently aligns with a stereotypical view of gender variant people as hyper-aggressive activists, or "social justice warriors." Massanari and Chess (2018) describe the term social justice warrior (hereafter SJW) as having emerged in online contexts and has been constructed

not just as a person concerned with the optics of appropriate identity politics, but as someone whose emotional and psychological fragility [requires] trigger/content warnings and safe spaces. Here, the character of the SJW [is] more of a caricature than an actual person or representation. (p. 528)

Four creators explicitly rejected the idea that being transgender in general may somehow align them with this caricature, since it is often associated with gender non-conformity and feminist movements. For example, OG made his feelings clear on this topic:

I'm not some kind of social justice warrior about [being trans], if you think that's something that I am just 'cause I'm trans. It's not true. I know a lot of people will think I'm fuckin' gonna get offended at everything. I'm not. Just a normal dude, you know? I'm not gonna cry over every fuckin' thing you say to me.

KC also alluded to the caricature of social justice warriors having identities deemed socially unintelligible in her personal rejection of this perceived stereotype:

I'm not a snowflake. I'm not a helicopter-kin, I am not the soul of a twinned and dying star. I consider myself female because, uh, my brain developed female, but you're welcome to call me whatever you want. I'm— I couldn't care less.

Similarly, LH wanted to redact a previous claim to a pansexual identity in favour of a bisexual one since, to him, pansexuality, as well as his previous genderfluid identity, seemed "a bit snowflake-y," making him a "special SJW snowflake."

Though not directly related to the idea of the trans SJW stereotype, OO wanted to assure her audience that her content and social media pages would not "change to hearts and unicorns and rainbows overnight" after having come out as trans, implying an association of LGBTQ identity with this type of imagery. She said,

I know you may have known trans people or gay people, lesbian, whatever, that, like, they come out and they just flip the script and all they talk about is being trans, gay, lesbian, whatever, that's not me either. If that's you, that's fine. Do you. I'm not criticizing it, that's just not me.

I perceive this theme as progressing somewhat naturally from rejecting transgender identity as being a defining characteristic for these creators, albeit more distinctly associated with a specific stereotype about what that transgender identity might entail. Again, I believe the struggle for the ordinary plays into these sentiments (Cavalcante, 2018). Alternatively, elements of internalized transphobia may also have contributed to this rejection. Internalized transphobia is an emergent term meaning "internalization of negative social messages in transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals" (Rood et al., 2017, p. 412), and, according to a qualitative study by Rood et al. (2017), can cause many trans people to feel ashamed about their gender identities. Therefore, it is not farfetched to think that internalization of transphobic messages and ideas, at least in part, may have something to do with the conflation of transgender identity and mean-spirited stereotypes on the part of some members of my sample, especially as these messages are prevalent in online spaces.

4.6   Living a Lie

One of the most prominent themes among the members of my sample was the idea of living a lie leading up to coming out, whether that be in their offline worlds or in front of their YouTube audiences. 43.5% of cases in my sample (n=17) contained a discussion of topics and feelings along these lines, and this idea could be categorized in a few different ways.

4.6.1   Repression and Inauthenticity

For many members of my sample, living a lie meant trying to fit into the expectations of gender presentation based on their biological sex and the struggles

associated with repressing their true selves. Many of these creators shared a history of hiding behind a façade of normative gender performance to manage the internal stress they experienced and the external pressures of their peers. To name one example, BW shared,

> I would try and sag my pants, wear big shirts, get a hair cut every couple [of] weeks, and wear Nikes, just trying to pull a front, being someone that I was not. Like, nothing… like that was me. And every single time that I looked in the mirror and saw myself that way, I— I just— I felt like I saw a woman, just screaming at the top of her lung[s], wanting to escape my body. Like, that's not who I was. I just— I had to suppress so much shit because of what other people thought of me.

NB also mentioned wearing masculine clothing which she remembered "always hating," and she was told to hide her interests so that she would fit with the expectations of her assigned gender: "I was just expected to be this masculine man that everyone expected me to be, but that just wasn't me, and I knew it for my entire life." Though it appears as though, unlike BW, NB had no choice in this matter and was forced into embodying this masculinity, the mismatch of authentic self and outward expression through repression is, in my opinion, analogous.

Several members of the sample mentioned exploring romantic relationships as a means through which they attempted to mitigate some of the dysphoria associated with their gender identities in performing quintessential heteronormative scripts of gender and sexuality. KF, JC, and QV all explained feeling as though enacting heteronormative behaviours could potentially mask what they were feeling and "fix" their perceived problem of not identifying with their assigned gender. Notably, QV shared his coming out video as part of ongoing anxiety about his gender and discovering the truth about himself. He said, of his current experience,

> I've also been putting myself in a lot of situations where I am forced to act like a girl, and I'm forced to be female, such as, makin' out with guys and further, simply because, ah, I want to feel like a girl. I want to force myself to be female, because, um, I mean, dealing with this whole gender crisis is really difficult.

KF also described, in his teenage years, learning how to "play the game" of performing femininity to the standards of society and behaving as a "pretty girl" would, wearing certain clothes and actively dating young men. But, KF said, "in a lot of ways, it was great, but it wasn't me. It didn't feel like me. It felt like a game. A game I was winning, and which gave me a lot of pride to be winning, but I wasn't playing the game as me."

KE, a trans woman from the United Kingdom, took a long-form narrative approach to her coming out video, which was rooted in a quest for more general authenticity. She elaborated on past internet fame and attempting to fit into the mould of other popular YouTube creators as part of an overarching movement toward being her true self. For this reason, she described her previous videos as not representing who she is and living a lie in that regard:

> It was very hard for me to be my authentic self behind a camera, and I realized that the more videos went on. Um, by the time I was watchin' my videos back, I was actually cringing at, um, the person that I was trying to be.

Although not explicitly tied to her gender, she uses this as a jumping off point for her progression through withdrawal from social media and the internet, moving across the world, and coming to terms with her gender identity, culminating in coming out to her audience.

It is apparent from earlier discussions of transphobia and transprejudice that coming out and accepting a transgender identity is a tremendously difficult process due to the constraints of society today. As such, it is no wonder that, for these members of my sample, attempting to repress this part of themselves would be thought of as a potential

"solution" to how they felt in order to better fit in with society's expectations of how they should identify. Despite this, it is worth noting that all members of my sample overcame this repression in posting their coming out video publicly.

4.6.2   Hiding from Audience

Another motif which emerged in relation to the creator's audience specifically was the idea of "hiding" one's true self from the audience, a relationship characterized by honesty and transparency (which will be discussed in a later section). Many creators who described "living a lie" did so in connection to their viewership, in not being one hundred percent honest with them about the nature of their gender identities. NK commented on the growth of his channel and the increasing size of his audience making him feel far more pressure to be honest about who he is:

> there's just so much pressure in gaining subscribers, especially if you know that you haven't really been a hundred percent honest with your subscribers. And the more I gained subscribers, the more scared I was to [come out] because I know that there are gonna be more people who will feel like they've been lied to or they might be disappointed.

TD also described wanting to be "a hundred percent" with this viewership, as creating content had become an important part of his life and he felt the need to share this aspect of who he is: "This is something that I should be doing. I feel like I need to be doing this, and I just haven't been, so."

For OO, this was a source of constant agony up until the point at which she came out. She mentioned trying to maintain hypervigilance in the editing of her videos, which were audio-only video gameplay, in making sure it was not obvious to anyone watching that she was transgender:

I felt shitty every single day because I feel like I was hiding from you all. I was always worried about some kind of tell where people would find out, "oh, [OO's] transgender, it all makes sense." Or, <laughs> one ex— specific example is, those Walking Dead videos I put up where I had— I'd burped, like, super loud. I was so scared that people would clock me on those. That's why I don't burp or cough, and I edit those things out if I can. They don't sound hyper-masculine or anything but that's how inside my head I was. I couldn't let anyone find out anything about me, which is why I kept everyone at arm's length. I didn't let people get close, I didn't really make very many friends, really close friends, and if I did, it's very likely that I didn't tell you about me being transgender because if I did, I have no guarantee that you're not going to just blab. And I was scared that that would ruin me.

OO was aware that many people would not be accepting of her identity or that people would see her much differently once she came out, but the pressure of maintaining this level of secrecy became too great. She said, "It was time, and I didn't wanna keep up… I almost said, 'lie,' but it's really not a lie. I didn't wanna keep up the charade? Even that's not true. It's not a charade, it's me." OG expressed similar feelings about maintaining "stealth," or nondisclosure of transgender identity through being readily accepted as their true gender: "it's a bit fucking depressing having to hide all this shit." Several others echoed these sentiments, painting a portrait of the creator as someone who confides in their audience, who is honest about who they are, and who should not keep important facets of their identity secret from them. KF said that he was tired of "the constant second-guessing and fear and this running track in the back of [his] mind making sure that people don't find out but also not really wanting to lie about things." LU apologized twice in her video for "lying": "I'm sorry I lied but I just wanted to take my time."

Though this topic will be discussed further below, my interpretation of this sub-theme hinges on the audience motivating the creator to be accountable for their self-presentation online and, in particular, the responsibility they claim to be honest about who they are to the people who invest time into viewing and interacting with their content.

Additionally, factoring in the loving relationship many creators have with their audiences and expressing regret at "hiding" from them suggests a level of intimacy bound up in expectations of honesty and connection.

4.7   Authenticity

Overwhelmingly, the most prominent theme in the entirety of my sample was the idea of authenticity. Comprising 64% of my sample (n=25), creators tended to centre their coming out videos around the notion of living honestly, coming into alignment with their true selves, and throwing caution to the wind with respect to the potential consequences of being openly trans in society. Creators expressed the idea that they did not want to hide themselves any longer, and that they are proud of who they are and their narratives of self-discovery.

4.7.1   Living Honestly

For many, coming out as transgender meant being open and honest about who they are, especially as it related to their viewership. In opposition to the idea of living a lie, coming out was an opportunity to stop hiding themselves and to remove any barriers holding the creators from their audiences. ET said, of coming out, "I just felt the need to finally be honest and share my true self with you guys." Similarly, SP, who came out as a transgender woman but preferred to be referred to with gender-neutral pronouns, said that they were "just trying to be honest," that they didn't "wanna lie anymore" about who they are. The idea of pretending and of hiding was prominent in this regard, to the extent that many members of my sample even used similar wording to describe these feelings. In the words of BH, a trans man from the United Kingdom, "I'm not gonna pretend to be

something I'm not." Again, I believe the audience's presence impacts the creators'

conceptualization of living honestly, which, moving forward, may have an impact on

many other aspects of the creators' lives.

4.7.2   Alignment with True Self

By and large, a sentiment that was echoed again and again by those who spoke of

authenticity was seeing themselves as who they really are and being their true selves. As

BE put it, on the subject of coming out fully, "I'm still me but, like, now I can be 'me'

me." Depending on the stage of their transition and whether this was the first time they

were coming out in their lives or whether they had been out in other areas of their lives

aside from YouTube, the idea of being true to themselves and feeling connected to who

they are prevailed, whether in retrospect or in the present moment. For QV, who was in

the midst of discovering his truth over the past year,

> I feel like I have a long way to go, but it's like, for once, I finally felt— god. I
> finally felt happy with who I am, and I feel like I don't need, um, to be anyone
> else besides myself, which is weird because I still wanna change, like, my— my
> sex and I want to change the whole association with me and female, I wanna
> separate them. So, I guess that's still changing, but […] I just wanna be myself.
> And that's something that I've never felt, but for the last six months, that's exactly
> how I felt every single day. I just want to be myself and I feel like this is who I
> am.

Likewise, for UO, who was also at the beginning of his transition journey, being openly

transgender helped him feel "right": "it's all happened so fast but it's so exciting and I

just feel right. I feel like me." And for TD, who had begun his transition years earlier but

had not come out to his audiences until that point, he described the moment at which he

finally saw his true self shine though once he began transitioning: "It was just a great

feeling, you know, when you look in the mirror and you're happy with what you see, it's a really good feeling."

For these creators, whether they were in the process of becoming themselves or in revealing themselves more openly, the alignment with the "me" cited as being at the core of who they were proved to be a crucially important element of self-expression and self-actualization. Though many cisgender people may take this for granted, the processual centering of inward identity and outward expression thereof experienced by trans people can be, as evidenced by these creators' stories, incredibly powerful and liberating. In other words, getting to the root of who they truly are, and then taking the outward steps to embodying and expressing that core, can be a life-changing endeavour in a society which does not yet give ample opportunity for self-recognition of gender variant people.

4.7.3   Pride and Defiance

In spite of the fear and the transphobia many of the members of my sample had experienced in their lives, these individuals expressed pride in the person they were. They made it clear that they were not afraid to be who they were despite the trials and tribulations they may face. For example, KF talked about the freedom he felt in who he was as a trans man regardless of naysayers:

> It's like, being open with yourself is some sort of miracle drug. And most importantly, I'm not ashamed anymore. I used to be so scared of being embarrassed by people knowing this about me. But I'm not anymore. It's just who I am, and I have no reason to be ashamed about it.

LU openly expressed defiance toward those who would direct hatred toward her or any other trans person by virtue of their identities;

> …for anyone who hates on people like myself, I have a question for you: was life ever a crime? Was it ever? I'm just being myself. I'm living the way I want to,

and if you're a hater, please, you can just not watch the video. I'm sorry I'm not sorry. It's just, this is who I am…

She later concludes her video by saying, "am I not allowed to be myself? Because I'm gonna stand up to people who, like, try and go against me. I am who I am. […] I am myself. I am who I am. No one will change it." PT recounted her experiences with her unsupportive father and her need to renounce his unacceptance of her and find the strength she needed within:

> I didn't give a fuck, I didn't care what he had to say. I knew once I got older I was going to do what I wanted to do. and I was gonna live in my truth. I didn't care who had something to say, I didn't give no [sic] fucks. Excuse my language, I really did not care. I was like, "this is me, take it how you want it, or leave." Simple.

Some YouTubers framed their pride for who they are within the struggle that it took to reach that moment. For BW, this meant overcoming the fear of how people would treat her or what they might say about her and being true to herself. She expressed excitement at being able to look in the mirror every morning and see the manifestation of her inner self: "I can finally recognize the girl in the mirror, who I like to call my reflection. The reflection of how hard I worked to become that girl." Others, like KE, proudly declared that, after the whirlwind of coming to terms with who she is and the formative experiences that led up to that moment,

> I am transgender, and I will be transitioning to be female. This is who I am, and I feel so proud to sit here and say it and I feel so proud that I have had the support that I've had from the people around me.

She noted that the friends she has made have had a major impact on the confidence she had gained and her ability to accept herself fully.

Overall, those who expressed pride in themselves for being who they are and for being trans in a world that is as yet explicitly difficult for transgender people as a whole

spoke directly to the idea that one must live authentically. Despite the challenges they may face in the future, the members of my sample chose to post a public video on YouTube declaring their identities openly and honestly, speaking volumes for their bravery and their dedication to the pursuit of their own happiness through deep authenticity.

4.8   Plans to Make Trans-Related Content in the Future

As part of their coming out to their audiences, 36% of all cases in my sample (n=14) specifically mentioned that they planned on making more content related to being transgender and transgender identity in general in the future. The different topics or styles of video proposed by these creators can be broken down into several categories, but it should be noted that individual cases sometimes mentioned more than one of these.

The most common (occurring in seven cases) type of video series cited as being something the creator hoped to make in the future were medical transition updates, or, more generally, the documentation of their transition as a whole. For some, this meant documenting their transition process for their own sake; as OG put it, "I might be postin', like, testosterone updates 'cause that'll make me happy." Others, such as BX and OE, a 26-year-old trans woman from North America, mentioned wanting to document their "journey" or "progress," which I interpret as being a project of self-reflection and celebration of the changes to come. However, in a few cases, the creator's motive for providing transition updates was to share this journey with their audiences. While it can be said that any publicly posted video is an act of sharing with an audience, creators such as KX were excited to bring their viewers in to this next phase of lives:

I want you guys to be apart of this. The next year of my life is gonna be absolutely insane. I don't— Ah! I don't think you guys understand, like, I've waited for this for like, 10 years. […] I'm finally here, it's finally happening, and I want you guys to be a part of it so bad.

OG also believed documenting his transition would coincide with the reciprocal relationship he had built with his audience:

I've had DMs from people saying that I helped them come out or I helped them realize shit about themselves that they wouldn't have done otherwise. So, I feel like I kinda owe it to you guys, and it will be nice to kind of document all this shit and see how I get happier, hopefully.

The second most common type of video creators mentioned wanting to make or were thinking of making were videos answering viewer questions about being transgender, occurring in five cases. Creators invited their audiences to ask them questions via their YouTube comments or their other social media platforms, after which they would make a question-and-answer (Q & A) video. For example, after coming out and discussing his personal narrative, TD, a 20-year-old American trans man, concluded his video by saying, "so, if you guys have questions, I'll answer them down below, or I can even make a whole video, depends what the question is."

Third, other creators (four cases) were eager to be able to share their past, present, and future experiences as a trans person with their audiences now that they are out in the open about their identities. KF expressed, "I might be talking about gender a lot more now. In fact, there are a lot of videos specifically that I want to make because now that I can talk about my experiences uncensored, there is a lot that I want to say." For others, for whom their coming out video is the first on their channels, their videos served to share their lives transparently with their viewers. NQ, a transgender woman from Slovenia, said,

> I decided to make this video to introduce myself, and to announce, uh, a few other videos that I'm planning to do. Um, a lot of people have ask [sic] me if I'm on hormones or I— if I'm planning to be on hormones. I'm not on hormones so I will make a video why I'm not on hormones. So, stay tuned. <wink, click>

Similarly, OE, in addition to wanting to document her transition journey, said, "I want to also share the experiences I have with people, um, specifically my background," being Middle Eastern.

In two cases, the creator mentioned posting trans-related videos on a second channel that they either had already created or were considering creating. KF included mention of the name of his second channel and said, "[this second channel is] where I'll be posting a whole bunch more trans stuff, probably. I don't know, this is new. I don't really know what I'm doing yet, okay, guys?" Another creator, LK, was more reluctant to make videos related to being transgender, but mentioned, "I am thinkin' about, or I have often thought about, makin' a second channel. Which would perhaps go into more personal trans stuff." She was clear, however, that trans-related content would likely not appear on her main channel.

Finally, one instance of discussing plans to make trans-related content in the future occurred in the form of providing educational information on the transition process, specifically the effect of hormones. NB, a 15-year-old American trans girl, made this clear in tandem with other motives when she said, "when I start hormones I wanna document it, I want to make an entire video explaining what it does and then my experience. So, once I start hormones, you guys will know, I will make a whole entire video about it, explaining it." While she noted documentation of the transition process as well as sharing her personal experiences, it seems clear to me that there is an educational component present in her planned content.

4.9 Reasons for Making Video

As I began to sort through a broad category created to encompass all the mentioned reasons why a creator made and posted their coming out video (occurring in 38 of 39 total cases), I noticed that these reasons could be grouped into three columns: first, reasons pertaining to the audience, which I called "For You"; second, reasons pertaining to the creator themselves, which I called "For Me"; and, finally, reasons that fell somewhere in the middle, linking the audience and creator together in a group which I called "For Us." Each of these three categories are discussed below. It is important to note that some videos contained more than one reason, sometimes placing one creator in more than one of these categories.

4.9.1 For You

Reasons for making a coming out video which centred on the benefit this video might have for the viewer were pulled into this category. This signified to me that the creator could see how their video may honour some need on the part of their audience, or even for someone stumbling on their video without having subscribed to their channels or being familiar with the rest of their content.

4.9.1.1 Audience Curiosity

One case, JC, mentioned that he wanted to post his coming out video for the simple reason that his audience was curious about an identity mentioned in passing: "I'm about to talk about something that I said I would not talk about in not one, not two, but actually three separate videos, and then realized that, actually, you guys kind of wanna know." JC had put up a poll on his public Twitter account asking his audience if they

would be interested in learning more about being transgender, and they responded very positively. Thus, for JC, catering to that curiosity was enough for him to discuss his being trans and many trans-related topics in a video with a nearly 30-minute runtime.

4.9.1.2   Clarify for Audience

For a substantial number of creators in this category (n=11), the given motive for coming out was to provide clarification of their gender and their preferred pronouns. For some, this was a casual affair; as FF, a 15-year-old trans girl from Norway whose coming out video already had several million views at the time of sampling, put it,

> because, like, probably some new people are coming to my channel when I make this video, I hope… yeah, I hope… […] I really just wanna introduce myself and let everyone know who I am and… that I am transgender, because… it's easier that way so I don't have to, like, explain [myself] to every single [person].

Far from an emotional narrative of hardship and self-discovery, the tone of FF's video was humorous, upbeat, and positive. Others, like BC, a 22-year-old trans man from the United States and one-half of a couple who posts daily vlogs on their channel, wanted to iron out the proper way for their audience to orient themselves toward them and their content. BC mentioned very briefly toward the end of his video, "I just had to let you guys know so you guys will know not to call me a 'she,' because I'm— yeah." Some people wanted to clarify previous statements they had made on their channels about their gender, such as LO and LH, confirming their gender status as being trans rather than bigender or genderfluid. For most of the people falling into this subtheme, it became a matter of making sure their audiences were on the same page as the creator and as the people in the creator's offline worlds; as, for example, OG mentioned, "I recently come [sic] out to everyone at school, uh, everyone in my family, like, everybody knows now,

which is— is good, everyone's callin' me [OG] and 'he' and stuff like that, but I hadn't told you guys." In a world where gender variance is not accepted as the norm, clarification of one's identity as trans naturally follows in conveying information about oneself and ones experiences.

4.9.1.3 Coming Out Story

For two creators in the "For You" category, their reason for making their coming out video was to provide to their audience their personal narrative or backstory. TH mentioned that it was "really, really requested [for her] to do [her] transgender story." RN, a 19-year-old trans woman from the United States, her "coming out story" served as an introduction to her channel and her story, being one of the first videos to be posted on her channel which related to her as an individual rather than posting music videos and music-related content. It appeared to me that posting this kind of "coming out story" allowed the creator to share their story with their audience as a reference point for what the creator hoped to be able to do in the future on their channels.

4.9.1.4 Positive Representation

Finally, the subtheme most obviously related to benefitting the audience related to the idea that, in posting their coming out video, their representation could be of some help to someone else going through the same struggles. Four cases fell into this grouping, and it was clear to me the meaning that this motive held to the creators. For example, FT's coming out video was very personal in nature and detailed the trauma and hardship that brought her to the present moment. She had previously been ashamed of being transgender and had attempted to hide it completely, but ultimately recognized that it was

a part of who she was and felt proud of everything she had been through. To anyone watching her video, she gave this parting message:

> if anyone can listen to my story, and this has been a very condensed story, obviously it's been a bit vague, I haven't gone into true details, but if I can help someone realize that being trans isn't the worst thing in the world, and there can be some happiness and joy in life, then that's my fuckin' goal done. And it's so cliché to say, "if I can help one person," but, it's true.

KF felt similarly, in that he wanted to make himself visible because he hoped to serve as representation for others questioning their gender identities: "if even one person can see themselves in me or get a bit more comfort and understanding in their own identity or just feel less alone, then it's worth it." KF said that he did not have that kind of representation when he was younger, and that he was not going to "continue to be part of the problem." NB wanted to help others in the same way that she was helped by transgender creators, and UJ, a 20-year-old trans woman ostensibly from the United States whose coming out video was a photo and video montage set to music rather than a video that featured her speaking, was motivated to share her journey in transitioning to inspire as many people as she could. Ultimately, these creators all hoped that, in sharing this part of themselves, they could help someone else who might need to see others like them to feel less alone. I believe that, here, there is something to be said for the consideration of cohort in using the internet as a tool for offering and seeking support. Further, as it relates to the creator, recognizing the impact one can have by providing much-needed representation to many young people for whom YouTube is a major resource for information speaks volumes for its importance as a platform as a whole.

4.9.2   For Me

The majority of recorded reasons why a creator wanted to post their coming out video could be categorized as being directly helpful to the creator themselves. As noted, by no means were these reasons always emergent in complete isolation of other reasons, but the positive impact of coming out to their audience on the part of the creator directly appeared to drive many of the individuals in my sample.

4.9.2.1   Reintroduction and New Beginnings

For a few creators, posting a coming out video served to begin their journey to becoming who they were meant to be, whether explicitly through the medical transition process or otherwise. OE mentioned specifically wanting to document her transition for her own personal interest. Others, like BX and UU, wanted to come out as a reintroduction of their true selves in cases where they had previously created content without being open or aware of their gender identities, thereby reaching a level of personal authenticity. BI's coming out video was centred around the freedom associated with owning their identity online, after which point they could focus on exploring themselves openly and authentically. Others, namely KD and LO, were eager to begin to create content after having been stifled by the weight of coming to terms with who they are; as LO mentioned,

> I just wanted to come out and say that— that I am transgender just so that everyone knows on here, on my little YouTube platform, so that way I can feel like I can fucking move on, because sometimes I don't wanna make a video because I'm just, like, dealing with this anxiety and this depression about it. And I'm just, like, I don't know what to fucking do, and my creativity goes down.

For them, introducing a "new normal" meant returning to making content and expressing their creativity without fear or internal blockage.

4.9.2.2　　Transition Points and Crossroads

Coming out as trans on YouTube also serves as a personal transition point in other ways. For two creators, US and KF, it marked a point at which they could "rip the Band-Aid" off in terms of having to come out: coming out, once and for all on a large scale, was noted as being easier than having to come out continuously to many individuals. As US put it: "there is only so much anxiety I can take. And I've told enough in person to last me a good while, you know, with the anxiety situation. So, this here, this is just me being effective, you know. I've already put in a lot of effort, so this is just me kind of finalizing things." KF noted, "believe it or not, coming out is kinda hard. And I wanted to cut down on how many times that I had to do it by just making this video and pulling off the Band-Aid in one go." More unfortunately, coming out meant saying goodbye for one creator. SP, overwhelmed at the thought that they would never pass for being the woman they knew they were inside, decided to disclose their truth as a way of letting go of "that side" of them;

> <crying> I just kinda wanted to make this video just to say goodbye to, um, that side of me […] I just know I'll never be able to pass and, like, I'll never be seen as, like, a woman, so what's the point? […] I'm trans but I'm not— I'm not gonna do anything about it so it's not really important information but I just had to get it out and, oh, say it.

However, a more hopeful turning point within this cluster was FT's second reason for making her video, to find personal liberation in exposing her identity to the world:

> …although I am incredibly nervous making this video, and to upload it to the internet where you can't take it back, I'm hoping that being this open will allow me to finally feel free. Free of anxiety, free of depression. Not completely, I know that that's unrealistic to think, but there's a huge chance that being open will allow me to open a new chapter of my life where I'm not disgusted by the word trans.

Though she had spent a portion of her life trying to hide the fact that she was transgender

in her day-to-day life, this video served to give herself permission to live henceforth fearlessly and with full self-acceptance.

4.9.2.3   Emotional Release and Support

Finally, one creator, KK, very briefly mentioned that he wanted to make his video for his own emotional release and seeking support from others through expressing himself online. Though his video was short and markedly unedited, filmed using YouTube's "live" function rather than pre-filmed and edited, KK used his video as a confessional to tell his story and to express something he would have rather not keep locked away. He said, "I don't even know what I'm doing this for. 'Cause I feel like I've been trying to keep it away from awhile, but I feel like I'm not supposed to, like, just keep it locked up inside." Through this self-expression and emotional release, he later reflected once more on his motives for making his video and said, "I guess I just want the support, 'cause I want somebody to support me," though he noted that he did have a bit of existing support online already.

KK was not the only creator who sought support: QV and SP both cited the support they might receive from their viewers as motivating them to come out. QV's perspective on processing the truth of his gender identity involved not having to do so in isolation, particularly from an audience whom he loves. In introducing his coming out video QV said, "this video will kind of be explaining why I've been really down recently. I think that it's important that I'm not alone in this." Additionally, as discussed above, SP expressed that they had no intention of transitioning to be a woman, so they wanted to try and release that part of themselves. In letting go of their trans identity, SP needed emotional support to cope with this difficult process and to express their emotionally

painful secret:

> the reason I wanted to film this video now was just because these kinda thoughts have been going on and on inside my head for, um, well years, but lately they've just been gettin' too much and I physically can't go any longer without telling someone. So why not tell thousands of people?

In many ways, this category serves to complement or reinforce the pre-established love and support from the audience that many creators mention. The creators appear to be using YouTube as a vehicle for catharsis and, in turn, expect that their audience will meet that catharsis with support, which is, in most cases, what occurs.

4.9.3   For Us

What appeared in the overlap between "For You" and "For Me" was "For Us," a cluster identifiable by its representation of the audience-creator relationship. This category illustrated the unique nature of the creator's perception of their audience and the creation of something entirely new between the YouTuber and their viewership. What emerged was the notion that the audience was an entity similar to a close friend to whom the creator had a responsibility to be honest and with whom they were excited to share their inner selves.

4.9.3.1   Intimate Sharing

This sense of intimacy between the creator and their audience was evident in TT's reasoning for making her video. In introducing her intentions for her video, she begins:

> I just wanna talk to you, one-on-one, and I— you know what? I hear this a lot when people make videos like this, because I think everybody wants to make it a big deal and make something that they can really artistically be proud of, but when it comes down to it, you just have to speak, and you just have to talk about it, because that is what is important. You need to be heard, not to be shown.

As mentioned previously, TT shared a close bond with her viewership and a deep appreciation for the love and support they had shown her. Making the decision to share this newly-discovered part of her identity with her audience appears to have hinged on her desire to speak with them "one-on-one" in a way a close friend would with someone they cared about. While she mentioned prior to this quotation that she had attempted to create a more artistic version of her coming out, she ultimately decided on speaking freely and being heard by her audience, just as one would to a close friend or loved one. Together, TT and her audience had created a safe space for expression between them, benefitting TT immensely and helping her to come out as trans.

4.9.3.2 Sharing Transition Journey

For KX, his reasoning for making a coming out video also hinged on the relationship he had with his viewers, particularly in how he was excited to be able to share his transition journey with them. KX was about to begin the process of acquiring a prescription to begin taking testosterone, and he expressed elation at being able to bring his viewers along with him in this process. Like TT and as discussed above, he emphasized his deep love and appreciation for his audience elsewhere in the video, and, here, in giving his reason for coming out, he connected to the positivity that has manifested in his life:

> I don't even know where to start, but there is a couple of reasons why I'm making this video. It's— it's not just to tell you, there are things that are happening that I'm so excited for, and my life is just finally, it— it feels like it's finally falling into place. And I just really, really— I feel really good right now, and I want to talk about this with you, and I want to share a bunch of things with you that I just can't believe that I am, not because I never thought that I would, but because I'm actually… I love and accept myself to the point to where I finally can talk about this.

He later said,

> I want you guys to be a part of this. The next year of my life is gonna be
> absolutely insane. I don't— Ah! I don't think you guys understand, like, I've
> waited for this for, like, 10 years. Since before YouTube, since— before
> everything. This is something I've known that I've wanted, and it's been the
> craziest journey to get here, but I'm finally here, it's finally happening, and I want
> you guys to be apart of it so bad. You guys are the reason why I'm still here, and I
> want to show you what you have done for me and how happy I am, and I want
> you guys to experience everything with me.

KX's desire to have this audience with him every step of his upcoming journey taps

directly into the powerful relationship he had cultivated with his audience, as a group of

confidants, friends, and supporters. To a less-detailed extent, US began her video by

stating that she had something to "share" with her audience, connecting to the

performative aspect of coming out.

4.9.3.3   Liberation

Liberation came into play within the "For Us" category in one case, that of LU.

She had a relatively low number of subscribers (59 at the time of sampling) and

mentioned in her video that she knew most of them personally. As part of her reasoning

for coming out to her audience, she said, "I feel like the only way I can make myself less

nervous is telling all you people." While this speaks in part to her desire to overcome her

anxiety about being transgender and the coming out process, what was intriguing to me

was the fact that she chose to post the video to bare her soul to an audience specifically

and to anticipate relief from the weight of that disclosure as a result. As part of her video,

she mentions how she plans to change the name of her channel to reflect her newly

chosen name rather than her masculine birth name. Both factors, especially the element of

liberation through being witnessed within the nexus of audience and creator, contribute to

identifying the unique nature of the audience-creator relationship.

4.9.3.4   Transparency and Honesty

Finally, for a large number of creators (n=9), their reason came in the form of seeking transparency and honesty, whether it was related directly to how their audience viewed them or more generally for the internet — and thereby, the world — to see. For a few of these creators, this theme emerged with relative simplicity; they appeared to want to be true to themselves and to share their stories with their viewership for their own sake as much as their audience's. Introducing his video, which was a cover of a song which described themes related to being a transgender man, ET said,

> I just wanted to do something important that I've been wanting to do for awhile. And I came across this music video and this song the other day. It was so relatable and touching, and I just felt the need to finally be honest and share my story and share my true self with you guys.

For KE, this was a far more emotional affair; in a moment of naked self-actualization, she proclaimed,

> I'm feeling right now and the way I've been feeling is that I need to just— I need to <air quotes> come out. Like, I need— I don't even like the term but I just need to be myself and— <sighs, crying>.

Being oneself and being true to that self stood at the forefront of this cluster. As GW, a 20-year-old Italian trans man, put it, "I think it's time to say who I really am."

For those who sought transparency more explicitly for the sake of their audience, an interesting pattern emerged wherein there appeared to be some sense of obligation felt by the creator to be perfectly honest and open about every aspect of their lives. BW discussed this at the beginning of her video:

> Now, I've been keeping a secret for a couple of months now, which I have been feeling very selfish about, because I know that when you guys subscribe to my

channel, you guys want the "in" on everything in my life, and it's honestly really unfair to you guys that so much has been going on and I haven't been telling you guys anything, and I've just been keeping you guys, like, in limbo. I honestly just want my viewers to feel out and open with themselves, but how am I supposed to do that if I'm not even open with myself about a lot of things?

The point she made about feeling selfish for not sharing her transgender identity or transition process with her audience was echoed by others, such as NK, PT, and KF. As KF said, upon discussing his appreciation for the messages he has received thanking him for the positive impact he has made on his audience:

I've almost felt like a fraud. You know, you're being so open with me […] but I don't ever get real with you. And I think an important part of growing and learning together is sharing stories, and I could share so many more funny and awkward stories if I let myself get a little real with you. So that's what we're doing today.

PT shared a similar sentiment to BW and KF in that the mutual growth that had occurred as a result of their audience supporting them and following them for any length of time obliged the creator to be completely transparent:

I do wanna apologize, just because a lot of you guys have been following me since day one and you all got— kinda got to see my journey over the internet. And it's kinda unfair for me not to talk about this, 'cause you guys kinda grew with me, you know what I'm sayin'? So, I felt the need to do this video, just so you all can get a better understanding of me, and I hope this may help someone in the future.

Indeed, what is apparent among these YouTubers is that the audience occupies a space in the creator's life similar to a close group of friends; honesty, keeping each other updated, and transparency are top priorities. In this way, the creator and the audience create and share something unique and intimate, driving the creator to express their true selves to the best of their ability for the sake of their supporters and the bond shared between them. Similar to the idea of living a lie discussed above, as well as seeking authenticity, the

audience simultaneously bears witness to and inspires the creator to come out and be who they truly are.

Chapter 5

5.1 Discussion

Though each coming-out video was unique in its own right, and though each individual creator had their own way of expressing this disclosure, there appeared to me a clear thread running through these experiences which painted a picture of revelation, bravery, authenticity, and reciprocity. I begin by summarizing these themes and how they coalesce before situating my findings within the broader literature, speaking to how my study illuminates the interplay between audience, creator, platform, and wider world.

First and foremost, it was well-established by the members of my sample that being transgender in society is fraught with difficulty on a micro, meso, and macro level. These trans individuals shared their interpersonal experiences with transphobia, often conflated with homophobia. They were frequently the target of discrimination on a very personal level from peers, family members, and professional contacts, and many noted how difficult existing as a trans person can be when faced with a barrage of hatred on a daily basis. Given the salience of the internet to the present study and to the cohort making up my sample, the hatred for trans people prevalent on the internet could be just as impactful as offline instances of transphobia. Indeed, the repercussions of not conforming to the expectations of their assigned gender often resulted in great personal pain for the members of my sample. In addition, much of this discrimination occurred endogenously in institutional structures, whether within the school system or as reproduced by the media. This speaks directly to the broader transphobic leaning of present society. One creator drew attention to transphobia as it intersected with issues of race, compounding the risk of violence and, often, murder for trans people. Overall, the

decision for many members of my sample to discuss issues of transphobia and oppression, whether more personally or as part of a discussion of societal-level problems, reflects an awareness of how frightening being openly transgender in society can be. In this light, it is unsurprising that coming out and living freely as a transgender person is an incredibly daunting task, and that creating a coming out video was often a highly emotional process.

As a result, many of these creators felt the need to "live a lie" with respect to their gender identities. At best, many creators lacked the option to be openly trans due to the cultural unintelligibility of gender variance. At worst, openly expressing their identities was a dangerous endeavor within their homes and communities and there was little support for them and their growth. Many YouTubers attempted to assimilate into wider heteronormative culture, repressing their true natures in favor of performing gender in a way deemed socially acceptable. Whether embodying their assigned gender through exaggerated gendered behaviour or through pursuing heteronormative romantic relationships, many creators felt the need to hide who they truly were. Furthermore, as the audience's presence was introduced and acknowledged in these coming out videos, the concept of hiding from or lying to this viewership took shape. Interestingly, it was this accountability that spurred many creators to feel guilty for not being "honest" with their audiences about who they were. Ultimately, though living a lie with respect to their gender identities may have been a safe option for these creators, repression can be a highly destructive force, one which people can live with only for so long before a breaking point is reached; in the words of many of the members of my sample, it was "time." While it should be noted that not all creators expressed experiencing emotional hardship with respect to their coming out on YouTube, and, for many, it was a matter of

simply clarifying a point of confusion for their audiences, for many more, this coming out constituted an act of bravery and of casting off the lie they were living.

Repeatedly, what proved to be the most prevalent theme was that of authenticity. In spite of the difficulty these individuals may face and in spite of whatever may lie in their future, the notion of coming out promised to bring authenticity to both their personal lives as well as their relationship with their audiences. To live in such a way that the ascribed circumstances of one's being, in this case the stigma associated with transgender identity, may no longer inhibit the pursuit of happiness is to live authentically and freely. That is precisely what these creators have striven to do.

In coming to terms with their identities, these creators felt that they could move forward honestly and truthfully, being exactly who they are. In coming out publicly on YouTube, not only did they starkly declare their nature for the world to see, but they were able to experience personal liberation as a result. For many, this dedication to being truly authentic for themselves and for their audiences meant being openly proud to have gone through the experiences they have and proud of who they have become. While several creators delineated their authenticity in terms of what they were *not* as it was associated with stereotypes about the transgender community, it is nevertheless true that their coming-out videos allowed them to define who they are and how they want to be seen by the wider world.

From the perspective of existentialist philosophers, this is paramount to a life well-lived: because there is no external essence to define human beings, one is always in the process of self-fashioning and making one's life exactly what it is (Sartre, 1989). Dedicating oneself to one's actions means accepting the responsibility for one's life and understanding that one is nothing *except for* one's actions, for nothing else exists. In this

way, one must strive to fashion a self that one can be proud of, and it is exactly that which the members of my sample have done by coming out as trans for their audiences and for the world to see. I believe it should certainly be acknowledged that pinning full responsibility for one's freedom of expression and meaning-making on a marginalized group, for whom many opportunities for self-actualization are not available, is a highly problematic suggestion; there are very real structural issues at play when considering how existentialist philosophy applies here which making coming out as transgender a dangerous affair, as noted above. However, for the members of my sample at least, there appeared to be a real sense that this first step into being exactly who they are constituted the kind of radical freedom espoused by existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre. To again quote FT,

> …although I am incredibly nervous making this video, and to upload it to the internet where you can't take it back, I'm hoping that being this open will allow me to finally feel free. Free of anxiety, free of depression. Not completely, I know that that's unrealistic to think, but there's a huge chance that being open will allow me to open a new chapter of my life where I'm not disgusted by the word trans.

When considering the act of coming out on YouTube specifically, this sense of achievement of authenticity is supported by the performative elements associated with this act. As relational beings, our social identities are tied, at least in part, to the interactional affirmations we receive about these identities. YouTube, then, becomes a place where the affirmation of transgender identity is achieved in a number of ways. First, it provides a space where there is already a vibrant community of trans creators and wherein trans people can engage in the kind of relational gender performance so often denied them in the offline world. In accordance with Devor (2004)'s framework of witnessing and mirroring for validation of inner self, trans YouTubers can both see

themselves mirrored in other trans creators, such as the oft-mentioned Gigi Gorgeous, as well as be accurately witnessed by non-trans viewers. Moreover, the process of coming out as trans can be regarded as a unique form of doing transgender more generally, as it is often seen as a necessary disclosure in a society were hetero- and cisnormativity is the presumed default. To come out publicly online where their videos can be viewed by thousands of people globally has the potential to support a transgender coming out in a way that may otherwise be inaccessible in the wider world. This is particularly evident in the stories of many members of my sample who noted their lack of support offline and, in some cases, the fact that they were not out to their family and friends at all despite coming out publicly on YouTube. Finally, in the overt love and support received by many audiences, these trans creators had the opportunity to enact the kind of gender performance that allowed them to feel authentic to themselves in a space where they would be well-received. Those members of my sample who liked to be seen as "just a guy" or "just a woman" by their audiences, even if it meant keeping their transgender identity private at first, experienced the relief of being witnessed accurately and the hope that this may continue in the future as their transition progresses. The relational confirmation of gender identity is achieved through this recognition of self by the external, thereby strengthening and allowing for true authenticity to flourish. Additionally, in the recognition of this self on the part of the other, the other may draw inspiration to achieving their own self-affirming practices.

Indeed, for many creators in my sample, the audience was at least in part to thank for the strength it took to come out as trans and to pursue authenticity in the face of fear. The unique relationship many trans YouTubers had built with their audiences became a source of love, support, friendship, and safety, especially important for the young and the

vulnerable. In building a following on YouTube and a viewership in support of their

creative expression, they had also built a community and a support system which allowed

them to be able to come out about who they are and gave them the courage to express

themselves openly and honestly. The potential for content creation on YouTube to create

this kind of environment should not be ignored. And, if a direct relationship with the

audience was not a crucial part of a creator's motive for or conceptualizing of their

coming out process, the audience nevertheless bore witness to their self-expression and

validated many of the personal or emotional needs cited in the subcategory which I called

"For Me."

   These strides toward self-actualization and authenticity, in no small part driven by

the presence of an audience, come as a result of having made the decision to come out

publicly on YouTube. Recognizing that this may not be available to all members of the

trans community, and, in some cases, reflecting on the hardship they themselves had

faced when coming to terms with their gender identities, many creators expressed the

desire to be able help other people by being open about their stories. As KF put it,

> I've decided to be open about who I am because if even one person can see
> themselves in me or get a bit more comfort and understanding in their own
> identity or just feel less alone, then it's worth it. Because I didn't have that for a
> long time, and I'm not gonna continue to be part of the problem.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, KF was especially attuned to the fact that

mainstream media representation for transgender people is especially harmful and can

hinder full self-acceptance and understanding. In his own self-representation, then, he is

able to fill the gaps left by many other media channels. This connects directly to de

Beauvoir's (1994) existentialist ethics: if one, firstly, bears the responsibility for their

own freedom and the pursuit of self-actualization, the interconnectedness of human

beings in social space requires that others must also be free in their pursuits. In having the platform to be openly trans and express who they truly are, many creators felt the need to use their voice to help others reconcile with their own gender identities and have hope that, if they are currently struggling, the future holds promise that things will get better. In taking strides toward authenticity and self-love, these creators recognize the platform they have to provide positive representation for those like them as well as helping cisgender people understand their journey. Overall, it is hardly a coincidence that the wording for this sentiment was almost identical across videos: in the words of BX, on the transition journey she was about to embark on publicly, "you know, whether […] a lot of people see it, at least one person can look back and watch the journey. And if I can help someone like that, that's all I need."

5.2   Contributions

This research adds to the growing body of literature on the transgender community on YouTube, on the internet, and, more broadly, the trans community as a whole while building directly off Raun's (2016) seminal work. Further, in linking existentialist ethics with the framework of gender theory and gender performance, this research provides a unique perspective on the ability of social media to further self-actualization efforts for marginalized groups and the impact a following or viewership has on these efforts. While Raun's (2016) work certainly set the stage for many of the present inquiries on the trans community on YouTube, my research provides a more contemporary look at the processes at play between audience and creator, in the creator's self-positioning within the wider "trans vlog" genre, and in YouTube as a particularly fertile space for self-fashioning and fearless self-expression. Through reciprocity between

trans creator and viewership, transgender YouTubers are given the opportunity to engage with authentic self-expression as validated by the presence of a supportive audience, which then can serve as a ripple effect in inspiring others to be able to do the same. In doing so, this process not only has the potential to positively change the lives of trans creators themselves, but to contribute to changing societal perceptions of transgender people for the better. In the vulnerability writ-large in coming out on YouTube, the seed of social change through humanization, mutual support, and understanding lies ever-ready to bloom.

To return to my first research question as given in Chapter 2, I have demonstrated that transgender YouTubers use video creation, specifically the creation of gender disclosure videos, as a means of self-actualization. In striving for authenticity in self-expression in spite of hardship, these creators represent themselves as they wish to be seen rather than through any societal imposition of how they should be. In coming out publicly as trans, a major facet of their identity is represented for the world to see.

Naturally, as relational human beings, this affirmation on the part of the individual must be met with affirmation of identity from the other. This speaks to my second research question regarding the nature of the relationship between creator and audience. I typify this relationship to be reciprocal, supportive, and a contributing factor to the well-being of the creator, as evidenced by my results. Yet, further, the accurate witnessing of transgender performance on the part of the audience means that this relationship holds just as much affirmative power as the overt support. In affording the creator the space to express their gender identities, and to have the audience receive and affirm this performance, the relationship between the two within the safe space it has created is crucial to the coming out process a whole.

Finally, one can clearly make links with the above research and an existentialist notion of authenticity and ethical conduct. In defining the parameters of who they are for themselves and behaving in accordance with that authenticity, these trans YouTubers exemplify the kind of existentialist meaning-making as outlined by philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Yet, moreover, one can connect de Beauvoir's notion of existentialist ethics to the intention on the part of the creator to provide much-needed representation of transgender identity to others in the trans community. This representation and its hopeful depiction of authenticity in trans identity can help to address societal oppression through humanization, understanding, and potential mobilization for change in the offline world. As de Beauvoir would argue, this is paramount to creating a world in which every individual has the opportunity to define their own future and the opportunities that await.

5.3   Directions for Future Research

After a consideration of the present work and the parameters thereof, several avenues for future inquiry come into view. The present research was conducted via content analysis, and future research may use more direct qualitative measures such as participant interviews, focus groups, or open-ended surveys to gather data which would perhaps speak more directly to a creator's perceptions of their place on YouTube. Or, if further inquiry is conducted on coming out videos, one might choose to analyze the content from a new angle: for many of the members of my sample, these videos involved some discussion of their biographical experiences, teaching their viewers what "transgender" means and proper terminology, their childhood struggles, or how they ultimately came to know they were transgender. However, for the purpose of the present

inquiry, such themes were not addressed. Future research may map these narrative conventions more substantively. In addition, though this research began to uncover the intersectional nature of transphobia and transgender experience, future research can analyze the relationship race, and even age, has on a creator's self-positioning on YouTube and the reciprocity of creator and audience.

5.4   Conclusion

This research serves to underline how truly important YouTube is in providing the support and resources allowing members of the transgender community to thrive, both in the creation and consumption of content. Yet, even further, I have illustrated how there is a unique relationship that can be built between a creator and their audience, one which can have an immeasurable impact on an individual simply desiring to be seen as who they know they are. The importance of YouTube, then, cannot be ignored: there is something truly special that occurs when one is given the opportunity to express themselves publicly for the world to see, and for that expression to be seen and reaffirmed. This is something which certainly warrants further inquiry in the coming years, especially as the platform develops.

Without question, social media and the internet will continue to hold considerable influence over the way society is shaped. Moreover, as each upcoming generation comes of age submerged in internet culture and the saturation of online media, shifts in perspective as a result of the propagation of a multitude of voices and perspectives may go on to make major emancipatory change in the wider, offline world. While it is certainly enough for the presence of social media to have a positive impact on the lives of marginalized groups such as the trans community, through exposure to stories such as

those in my sample and the bare authenticity and bravery they illustrate, people may gain

a better appreciation of one another's experiences, thereby making the world a more

understanding and perhaps less hateful place.

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