

# **‘My Coming Out Story’: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Identities on YouTube**

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## **Abstract**

Videos in which young lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people discuss their experiences of coming out are highly visible on YouTube. Whilst work from Cultural Studies perspectives has long explored how LGB youth construct and articulate their identities online, few studies have focused on YouTube. Through a study of 35 YouTube coming out videos, this article argues that through these texts, LGB youth are able to articulate what it feels like to be queer in a straight world, and produce and circulate strategies for negotiating a contemporary cultural context defined by increased visibility of LGB identities, alongside the continued dominance of heteronormativity. These strategies, I argue, correspond with broader imperatives to ‘authentic’ self-representation which traverse contemporary social life, and which are emblematised in practises of YouTube video production. As such, YouTube coming out videos offer a unique vantage for exploring how the medium specificities of YouTube, and broader norms of selfhood, shape how LGB identities become intelligible in the digital arena.

## **Key words**

lesbian, gay, bisexual, youth, young people, YouTube, digital media, coming out, identity, selfhood

## Introduction

In 1990, Rich Savin-Williams described gay and lesbian youth as 'a forgotten, invisible minority' (1990: 1). Over two decades later, this assertion is no longer tenable. A search for 'Coming Out' on the digital video-sharing platform YouTube yields over 19 million results. The majority of these consist of lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) adolescents and young adults verbally sharing their experiences of coming out, and offering advice, guidance and support for others who may be struggling to do so.

My own experiences of growing up and coming out as gay in the early years of the twenty-first century, in a small town in the West Midlands of England, offered no such affordances. The lone desktop computer of my teenage home, with its slow, boisterous, dial-up internet connection, was scarcely a viable resource for seeking out mediated points of sexual identification. For LGB youth occupying a contemporary social context, developments in digital technologies have profoundly expanded both opportunities for accessing the self-representations of other LGB people, as well as offering new possibilities for making oneself visible as a young bisexual, gay or lesbian subject.

One of the central imperatives of Cultural Studies has been to interrogate how selfhood is 'made' through 'an ensemble of techniques and practises enacted on an everyday basis' (Probyn, 1993: 2). From this perspective, to come out as lesbian, gay or bisexual is not merely to reveal a pre-existing sexuality/self, but to actively *make* this self through discourse (Sedgwick, 1990). A growing body of research has examined how the production and circulation of images, videos and written text in and through digital media has become integral to young people's constructions and enunciations of their sexual identities; yet, little of this work has addressed

YouTube specifically. Where YouTube has been analysed, studies have largely interrogated videos in which adult gays and lesbians speak to imagined queer youths, particularly in relation to the 2010 'It Gets Better' Project (discussed below) (e.g. Goltz, 2013; Grzanka and Mann, 2014; Walters, 2014). In contrast, the ways in which LGB youth have taken to YouTube to construct, represent and make sense of their own identities remains largely unexplored.

Rob Cover (2012), drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, has argued that far from simply mediating a pre-existing 'offline' self, self-representation on social media is an embodied and discursive process through which this very self is brought into being (how it is 'performed', to use Butler's (1990) influential terminology). Digital media has therefore become central to the 'performance' of sexuality in contemporary social life, particularly for young people (Drushel, 2010). Yet, it is important not to collapse the many different digital contexts through which young people construct their sexualities into one homogeneous regime of self-performance. A prime, collective insight of existing research has been to demonstrate how young people's performances of sexuality online are inextricably bound up with specific 'platform vernaculars' (Gibbs et. Al., 2015); shaped by the specific technical features and communicatory norms of individual digital platforms, be this the geo-location technology of Grindr (Albury and Byron, 2016), the anonymity of message boards (Addison and Comstock, 1998; Driver, 2010), or the tick-box categories of sexuality available on Facebook (Drushel, 2010; Rubin and McClelland, 2015).

This article builds upon current scholarship by exploring YouTube coming out videos as an increasingly prolific way for young LGB people to performatively craft their sexual identities in the contemporary moment. In particular, I examine how the narratives of LGB life made intelligible through YouTube coming out videos are shaped by the discursive and aesthetic

specificities of YouTube self-representation: intimacy, authenticity and the discussion of feelings.

The significance of YouTube coming out videos as objects of analysis is, however, not only located in their status as highly visible cultural texts. This article argues that, taken together, YouTube coming out stories also offer access points to the 'homosexual consciousness' of the present moment. The term 'homosexual consciousness' (which in the parlance of today could be described as a 'gay consciousness') was first employed by Jeffrey Weeks in the 1970s to encapsulate culturally-specific ideas about what it means to be homosexual/gay in particular social and historical contexts, particularly as these meanings are produced by and amongst LGB-identifying people themselves. Seeking to explore this kind of phenomenon in literature, Didier Eribon (2004: 5) has asked, 'What could this description of homosexuality teach us about its society, about the ways in which that society shaped the categories of gender and sexuality' and how these categories 'were perceived and lived out?' a series of enquiries which could be equally applied to the contemporary, digital texts like YouTube coming out videos. However, in pursuing these questions I do not mean to position coming out videos as straightforward 'windows' into the lives of LGB youth in the present moment. Rather, I am approaching these texts as prolific and dynamic sites at which the meanings of LGB subjectivity are produced, shared, negotiated and contested by young LGB people within the digital public sphere.

### **LGB youth and coming out**

The concept of coming out emerged in the Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s, where publicly identifying as lesbian or gay was configured as a political act: a self-conscious rejection of heteronormativity and a means of forging solidarity and community with other gay people

(Cover and Prosser, 2013). Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser (2013: 83) have argued that in the mid-1990s the meanings of coming out shifted from the political to the personal, with cultural narratives 'romanticising coming out successfully as therapeutic and remedial' for individual LGB subjects in their quests for 'coherent selfhood, social participation and community belonging.' Further, writing at this historical juncture, Ken Plummer (1995: 35) summarised the modern coming out script as 'a complex process of moving from a heterosexual (and confused) identity' to a 'consistent, integrated sense of self' which 'exists not just for oneself alone, but is also at home in the wider world.' As this quote suggests, coming out is popularly perceived as a 'movement' of LGB sexuality from inside to outside, where self-realisation leads to verbally telling others about one's non-normative sexual identification.

Concomitant with the transition of coming out from a political statement to a personal 'journey', dominant perceptions of LGB youth also changed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Historically, representations of young queer people functioned as 'homophobic cautionary tale[s]' cathecting queerness to suffering and misery (Goltz, 2013: 136). Newer representations have made legible a more viable subject position (Gray, 2009), discursively endowing LGB youth with the *potential* for happiness, at the same time that representations of young queer people have remained 'stuck' (Ahmed, 2004) with associations of unhappiness, suffering and shame (Walters, 2014). The role of digital media in circulating these kinds of depictions is pronounced, and has been discussed at length in the 2010 'It Gets Better' Project – a series of YouTube videos in which adult public figures discussed their experiences of coming out, and offered supportive messages to suicidal or otherwise suffering LGB youth. The It Gets Better videos have been widely critiqued for the ways in which they appeared to position happiness for LGB people as contingent upon various kinds of heteronormative life goals

(marriage, consumption, adoption of children), their glossing over of issues of racial, gendered and class-based privilege, and how, in looking to a 'better' future, the project failed to offer LGB young people strategies for making sense of their lives and identities in the present.<sup>i</sup>

Whilst the coming out videos I address in this article join It Gets Better within a constellation of representations which make up the subject position of LGB youth within the popular imaginary, they differ in that their focus is generally not upon looking outwards to an imagined future, but upon looking *inwards* to the affective contours of the young LGB self *as it is currently being lived*, and to the existential journey which brought this self into being. In their discussions of coming out, the videos offer a space, both to those who produce and consume them, for exploring what it means to live outside the heterosexual norm in the second decade of the twenty-first century. As texts, they proffer strategies for navigating a highly contradictory cultural moment for LGB youth, in which (some) non-heterosexual identities have become relatively normalised, but remain distinctly outside the heterosexual norm. In so doing, these videos work to re-write the meanings of coming out in a way that corresponds with the positions of LGB people in a contemporary context defined by a 'new reality of visibility and inclusion' for sexual minority subjects in the global West (Walters, 2014: 6), alongside a continuing entrenchment of heteronormativity. This article therefore contests the assertions of some researchers that coming out is no longer a meaningful act for LGB youth (Savin-Williams, 2006), and that it has 'receded' as a major narrative of LGB life within the media (Walters, 2014: 36). In their quantitative and qualitative dimensions, YouTube coming out videos emphasise that coming out *continues* to be a defining framework through which LGB youth identities become intelligible in and through media technologies, even as what it means to come out is in a process of transition.

## Methodology

Coming out videos are a distinctive genre on YouTube. Texts within this genre can take a number of forms: a young LGB person making a first public declaration of their sexuality, an already 'out' individual sharing their experience of coming out, and videos in which popular video bloggers (vloggers) come out to their viewers.<sup>ii</sup> The generic conventions which unite these videos are narrative and stylistic: a continuous shot of a young person, alone in a domestic setting, speaking into a static camera about their experiences of growing up and coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual. As I explore below, a defining feature of this genre are discussions about users' personal relationships with their sexualities. Within the videos users will, without exception, reflect upon how they *feel* about being LGB. Importantly, these conventions form reworkings of broader norms of YouTube video blogging (vlogging), where all kinds of personal and emotional issues and experiences are discussed and mediated for public consumption (Strangelove, 2011).

Texts within the coming out genre are generally identifiable by references to coming out within their titles, such as 'My Coming Out Story' or simply 'Coming Out.' To access the videos I searched for 'Coming Out' via the YouTube search tool, with results ordered by relevance, and saved the URLs of the first 35 videos listed.<sup>iii</sup> 35 were felt to be a suitable sample size as this coheres with qualitative studies of other YouTube genres (e.g. Holmes, 2017). Also in line with other studies in this field (e.g. Albury and Byron, 2016), I defined young people as those aged 18 to 29.<sup>iv</sup> However, as it is impossible to ascertain the exact age of a vlogger from their video output, there is a chance that some of the sample may fall outside of these limits. Whilst these videos have been shared openly and publicly on YouTube by their makers (a site which does not require any kind of member account to access), because some of the vloggers may be under 18 I

made the ethical decision to not explicitly identify the videos under examination by name or URL citation within this article. Instead, I have numbered each video (#1 to #35) and specified the vlogger's gender and sexuality.

The individuals who created and feature in the sample videos are predominantly, though not exclusively, white. 11 identify as lesbian, 15 as gay men, five as bisexual females and four as bisexual males.<sup>v</sup> References to specific geographical/national locations are relatively rare in the videos but (from accents, vernacular and occasional geographical references) users appear to be located across the USA, Britain, Australia and the Republic of Ireland, reflecting the inevitable Anglophone bias created by the search terms used.<sup>vi</sup> Video lengths range from six to over thirty minutes, and their view counts from 850 to over 16 million, figures which exemplify the high level of visibility these texts enjoy on YouTube.

It is also important to point out that only a relatively privileged subset of young LGB people are able to mediate themselves on YouTube. The ability to produce and share a coming out video at all is contingent upon various kinds of privilege - access to the Internet, a computer, filming and editing hardware, software and skills (however basic) and a private space in which to film. I have chosen to analyse lesbian, gay and bisexual coming out videos together (rather than focusing upon just one of these identities) partly for methodological reasons - it is difficult to know what a user is coming out as until the video has been at least partially viewed - but primarily because the ways in which young LGB life is narrated within these texts demonstrated far more similarities than differences in relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual identities.

With regard to method, I conducted a discursive textual analysis of each of the sample videos, an established methodology for Cultural Studies analyses of YouTube texts (e.g. Grzanka and



Mann, 2014; Holmes, 2017). I focused primarily upon the verbal aspects of the videos, as this is the primary mode of communication within the texts. Indeed, coming out is by definition a verbal act. As sexuality is not visible on the body and as, in heteronormative society, all individuals are assumed heterosexual unless they indicate otherwise, verbally articulating one's non-normative sexual identification – coming out - is a precondition of becoming publicly legible as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Yet, as YouTube is an audio-*visual* medium, I also paid attention to the role of visual signifiers, including performance, camerawork and setting, in contributing to the narratives and discourses of young LGB life produced and circulated through these coming out videos.

### **Queer feelings**

One of the defining features of coming out vlogs is the discussion of feelings, specifically what it feels like to grow up and exist outside of the heterosexual norm in the twenty-first century, a trope which aligns with broader conventions of YouTube vlogs as spaces for sharing 'intimate actions and thoughts' (Lange, 2007). Feelings, as they are articulated in coming out vlogs, align with Brian Massumi (2002) and Eric Shouse's (2005) conceptualisations of feelings as what follow on from affects. Affects are non-conscious sensations and intensities, which are then 'checked against previous experiences and labelled' to become feelings (Shouse, 2005), which are in turn expressed outwardly as emotions. As I now explore, coming out vlogs play out the translation of queer affects into queer feelings, as vloggers attempt to bring into verbal intelligibility the irrepressible sensations of being other in a heteronormative world.

The feelings evoked within the coming out texts in relation to growing up LGB are almost invariably negative, though they vary from intense emotions like fear and disgust to more subtle

feelings of ‘awkwardness.’ As objects of analysis, YouTube coming out videos thus speak to a recent focus within Queer and Cultural Studies on the role of negative feelings in the formation of LGB subjectivities (cf. Love, 2007). Sara Ahmed (2004) has argued that sexual norms are in part secured through the cultural association of heterosexuality with ‘good’ emotions and homosexuality with ‘bad’. Similarly, Butler has argued that normative, heterosexual subjectivities are constituted in relation to ‘a prohibition that works through delivering the threat of punishment [which] compels the shape and direction of sexuality through the installation of fear’ (1993: 69). Heterosexuality attains its status as normative, in part, through the cultural construction of other kinds of sexualities as fearful spectres which must be repudiated in the formation of a heteronormative self-identity. Because of this, to identify as *not* heterosexual has traditionally been conceptualised within Queer and Cultural Studies as a process of identification *with* a form of personhood which is culturally codified abject and fearful. LGB subjectivities have thus been perceived as forged through experiences of ‘insult, mockery, aggression’ from others (Eribon, 2004: 19), and feelings of ‘shame, despair [...] self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism and loneliness’ emanating from within (Love, 2007: 4) as a result of both self and social identification with the abject.

In consonance with this conceptual framework, in many videos users discussed growing up experiencing fear and disgust in their burgeoning LGB sexualities as a result growing up in an environment where homosexuality was explicitly demarcated as an aberrant form of identity. For example:

[The idea of being gay] scared me so bad because from such a young age I knew that that was a bad thing. [Thinking] that maybe I am that scared the crap out of me [...] At a very

young age I heard the word gay and I knew there was a negative association with it.

People were grossed out by that word, people used it as an insult (#10 bisexual male).

The word gay kind of scared me a lot when I was younger because I knew that that wasn't a 'good' thing (#28 gay male)

At the same time, within the sample, videos like those quoted above sat alongside an equal number of videos which offered alternative narrations of the emotional experiences of contemporary LGB life. After fear, the term used most frequently to describe how it feels to inhabit an LGB subject position was 'awkwardness.' For instance:

I feel pretty awkward and kind of uncomfortable right now because this isn't something I've spoken about openly with like many people (#1 bisexual female).

It's just awkward, it's an awkward thing. And I knew my mum would accept it, I knew she wouldn't be like, 'Ooh you disgusting faggot,' I knew she wouldn't do that, I knew she'd accept it, she wouldn't care, it wasn't really a big deal [...] It's not like I'm embarrassed about it or ashamed or anything. I just feel it's kind of an awkward thing to say. It's just awkward. You're just having a conversation about tea or cupcakes or something and you're like, 'Hey, by the way, I like dick.' It's just kind of awkward (#22 gay male).

In contrast to those who articulated experiencing homosexuality as a prohibition, this second quote describes growing up in an environment where gay sexualities *were* accepted, and the vlogger distances his own experiences from the kinds of insults which have traditionally been perceived to characterise LGB life (Eribon, 2004). Nonetheless, the public articulation of his gay sexuality is still tied to negative feelings, albeit in the more subtle form of awkwardness.

'Awkward' appears to emerge here as a way of describing an affect which the vlogger himself cannot quite make sense of. Indeed, another vlogger stated similarly:

I've always been very comfortable with the fact that I'm gay, but the actual saying the word and wanting to avoid potential awkwardness from a conversation is something that I just...yeah, I dread it and I'm not good at it. If people carry on assuming that I'm straight and I don't say something straight away then it can start to feel a bit strange to have to bring it up later down the line (#6 gay male).

It is telling that in this passage 'awkwardness' around coming out is positioned as analogous to feeling 'strange'. At the same time that both of these vloggers perform their gay subjectivities through emphatic repudiations of shame and embarrassment, their senses of self remain stuck with residual, negative affects which they are struggling to describe. I would argue that the vloggers' evocations of awkwardness and strangeness as characteristic of young, queer experience emphasise how YouTube coming out videos are texts through which young LGB people negotiate and make sense of what it means to identify as LGB within a specifically *contemporary* social context. The homosexual consciousness of the present moment takes shape within a deeply ambivalent cultural framework. Whilst, in the global West, recent years have been marked by exponential increases in legislative rights and cultural visibility for sexual minorities, alongside decreasing homophobic discourses in public culture (in their overt manifestations at least), almost every aspect of social life continues to be structured upon heterosexuality as the default norm of subjectivity. Despite the expanding legibility of lesbian and gay (and to a lesser extent bisexual) identities within popular culture, Adrienne Rich's assertion in 1980 that, 'the ideology of heterosexual romance [is] beamed at [us] from childhood out of fairytales, television, films, advertising, popular songs [and] wedding pageantry' (1993:

213), remains relevant today. As the second vlogger describes, feelings of strangeness emerge from people 'assuming that I'm straight', that is, from the ways in which individuals performatively reproduce heterosexuality, rendering it pervasive and invisible, by automatically assuming that everyone is heterosexual unless they state otherwise.

Gay sexualities, in this context, are relatively *normalised* but distinctly *non-normative*, and this is a crucial distinction. To identify as LGB is to inhabit a complex and contradictory subject position, one which is demarcated as no longer antithetical to social inclusion and acceptance, but which is, nonetheless, overwhelmingly and repeatedly delineated as outside the norm. The very existence of YouTube coming out videos, and the phenomenon of coming out itself, attest to the fact that the subject positions offered by default to individuals within their social milieus remain heterosexual. The vloggers' enunciations of their sexual identities through discourses of strangeness and awkwardness work to associate *heterosexuality* with antonymical feelings like comfort, ease and familiarity. This chimes with Ahmed's (2004: 148) description of heterosexuality as 'a form of public comfort,' whereby an individual's heterosexual identification seamlessly extends into the heteronormative world that she or he inhabits.

Returning to a statement quoted previously, a vlogger's imagined scenario of his coming out interrupting a conversation about 'tea and cupcakes' - light, relaxed and inoffensive paraphernalia of everyday (British) life - with a coarse, sexual colloquialism ('I like dick'), emphasises in hyperbolic fashion how in the age of 'acceptance', identifying as LGB nonetheless involves negotiating an identity which problematizes or breaks away from the heterosexual norm, the 'comfort' associated with this and, by implication, from the imagined life course to which heterosexuality is connected. As one lesbian vlogger described of coming out to her parents:

I kind of knew they'd be fine with it [...] I was just thinking all these things: I'm never going to marry a man and have his children like they thought I was going to, I'm a completely different person, who's going to live a completely different life to the one they thought I was going to live (#3 lesbian).

Coming out videos articulate how this peripheral subjectivity, at once included and othered, gives rise to affects which are difficult to negotiate, understand and express. Vloggers do not feel marginalised or oppressed in any straightforward or obvious way. Rather, they experience inhabiting a non-heterosexual subject position through more vague and elusive feelings: awkwardness, strangeness, difference, hardness. For instance:

[Coming out] was really hard. It was like really hard [...] it should not have been hard but it is. It is *so* hard, like you don't understand (#22 gay male).

In the videos, this difficulty in adequately translating contemporary queer affects into coherent feelings also becomes manifest through the vloggers' bodies. Shouse (2005) has argued that affects can bypass feelings, breaking out into bodily emotion as a means of making tangible what cannot be adequately described in language. Throughout the sample, there are moments when, whilst talking about coming out, vloggers appear to be overcome with emotion, as if the telling of their story has provoked unexpectedly strong emotions within them: crying, stammering, becoming short of breath. In several videos, footage of a vlogger beginning to break down jump cuts suddenly to a shot of the vlogger with a more composed demeanour, as they have sought to edit out moments of excessive emotion and retain a verbal coherency to their story. This disrupts the conventional flow of the vlogging form, where videos are usually comprised of one continuous shot. These uneasy sutures compromise the technical finesse of the videos, working

to communicate a sense of excess, as if the textual conventions of vlogging are unable to quite contain or communicate the affects the vlogger is attempting to express. As a medium of digital self-representation which combines the verbal, visual and embodied, YouTube coming out videos, even in their breaking of standard vlogging norms, offer young LGB people a platform for articulating how the experience of being queer in a straight world cannot be fully captured within the bounds of verbal language or audio-visual conventions.

### **Affective publics**

YouTube coming out videos enable young LGB people to express what it *feels like* to break away from the heterosexual norm and identify as LGB in the present moment. Whilst these feelings may be experienced by young LGB people as personal and individual, sharing and discussing them on YouTube is necessarily a communal and interactive process. Videos can be commented upon by users, shared to other digital platforms, ‘liked’ or ‘disliked’ by the thumbs up/down features, and each coming out video is juxtaposed with a sidebar of hyperlinks directing the viewer to coming out videos produced and uploaded by other users. In this way, the YouTube coming out genre is ‘inter-textual’ (Simenson, 2011: 85), comprised of a networked matrix of videos, likes, comments and links. In the words of one vlogger, making and uploading a coming out video involves ‘becoming part of [a] support system’ which aims to ‘help some other people’ (#3 lesbian). In her study of young people’s uses of social media, danah boyd (2014) found that even on publicly accessible platforms, users tended to construct their identities with very specific target audiences in mind. Similarly, whilst the coming out vlogs I analyse can, in theory, be viewed by anyone, one of the conventions of coming out vlogs is to speak directly an imagined audience consisting specifically of other young LGB people who are struggling to come out, and who are thus in need of help and reassurance. For example:

I want do my bit and show you guys – anyone who’s going through something similar [...] That everything’s OK and that you don’t have to be scared, and to help do what so many videos did for me (#23 bisexual male).

Writing about vlogging more generally, Patricia Lange (2007) has argued that vlogging’s emphasis upon the emotional contours of everyday life can enable ‘personal views [to] transform into political questions.’ Whilst emotions are always bound up with politics (Ahmed, 2004), the common cultural demarcation of feelings and emotions as non/pre-political can belie their social and systemic origin, and their role in reproducing relations of power and marginalisation. In the dialogic economy of YouTube, coming out videos bridge the personal and the political, positioning individual, negative feelings as symptomatic of a *shared* status in relation to heteronormative social organisation. Through the sharing of personal stories, the videos make legible what Ahmed (2004: 146) has called ‘The negative affects of ‘not quite’ living in the norm [...] the costs and damages that are incurred when not following them.’ Collectively, coming out vlogs form a space for exploring how deeply ingrained, everyday political questions around sexual normativity and difference are *felt* in highly personal and emotive ways. YouTube coming out videos call for young LGB people to recognise their own affects, feelings and emotions in those expressed within the texts, and to link these feelings to the social structuring of (hetero)sexuality. Coming out videos and their ‘para-texts’ of comments, likes and links (Simenson, 2011: 85) bring into being a networked public connected by ‘shared or interlocking concerns’ (Burgess and Matamos-Fernandez, 2016) around sexuality and marginalisation.<sup>vii</sup>

This process is paradigmatic of the ways in which YouTube blurs the public and the private, assembling ‘affective publics’ through the broadcasting of private emotions in ways that ‘invite people to *feel* their own place’ within broader ideological structures (Papacharissi, 2015: 4



emphasis in original). This bridging of the personal and the political is enabled by the ways in which YouTube coming out videos not only reflect upon, but seek to instantiate a transformation of *affects* into *feelings*, as viewers are addressed as harbouring the same affects that the vlogger did, and are offered guidance and support in making sense of and overcoming the 'bad' affects of queer existence.

If anyone is going through the same situation that I went through [...] you're not alone and I'm here. I went through the same thing (#20 bisexual male).

YouTube coming out videos are thus engaged in the collective work of producing and circulating strategies for living out sexual difference, offering not only points of feeling recognition, but proffering a variety of solutions for how the negative affects of young queer life may, according to the vloggers, be ameliorated. The solutions put forward by video makers can be summarised as 'be yourself' and 'accept yourself', and it is to an analysis of these that I now turn.

### **Strategies of authenticity**

In every video in the sample, vloggers discussed coming out as a process of making public an authentic 'truth' of their self-identity. For example:

It's just something that I've always known from like my earliest memories [...] It's not something I chose, it is something that is part of me and has always been part of me (#30 lesbian).

Comments like this position LGB sexualities as innate, essential and unchangeable: a conception of LGB identity which, in the twenty-first century, has 'transformed into a kind of everyday truth' (Walters, 2014: 168). From the perspective of Queer and Post-Structuralist Cultural

Studies, coming out vlogs therefore work to produce and disseminate a series of discursive norms through which young LGB people come to make sense of their identities, discourses which position LGB sexualities as not discursive at all, but as integral facets of an essential and authentic self.

Crucially, in the videos, an LGB youth subject position defined by notions authenticity and truth is made intelligible through the optic of ideals of authenticity already bound to the vlogging form more broadly. Vlogs are popularly perceived as ‘authentic’ forms of self-representation in which vloggers’ ‘real’ selves are mediated for public consumption (Tolson, 2010; Strangelove, 2011).

In coming out videos, LGB identities become intelligible through a conceptual convergence between normative understandings of both coming out and vlogging as processes of revealing an inner ‘truth’. As claiming an LGB identity is necessarily a verbal act, in coming out videos the apparent authenticity of a vloggers’ spoken claim to inhabiting an LGB subject position is bolstered by vlogging’s broader associations with the authentic. Andrew Tolson (2010) has stated that the apparent authenticity of vlogging is signified by ‘excessive direct address [and] transparent amateurishness.’ Coming out videos adhere to this recognisably ‘amateurish’ visual style. Vloggers are framed in mid-shot or medium close-up (visible from the waist or shoulders upwards), as they speak directly into a static camera, with minimal (if any) editing. Videos are located in domestic settings (usually bedrooms) and many vloggers wear casual outfits of t-shirts or sweatshirts. This aesthetic works to signify the *capture* of an unfolding identity, rather than its construction or performance. These textual elements function as visual metaphors for the claimed authenticity of the selves and life stories articulated within the videos, a semiotic process which, in turn, reproduces the very idea of LGB sexualities as authentic, essential and innate.

Verbally, this essentialism is coded through descriptions of coming out as ‘being yourself’, for instance:

If you know you are gay, do not try to hide it from anybody. Be who you are (#4 lesbian).

It's honestly the best thing ever to be able to be fully who you are, embrace who you are and to be able to love every single part of yourself (#10 bisexual male).

On a macro level, in making LGB identities intelligible through the tropes and conventions of the vlogging form, YouTube coming out videos literalise a *broader* cultural process. The imperative to ‘be yourself’ occupies a vociferous position in contemporary popular culture, and YouTube coming out videos express how this authenticity paradigm has become consolidated as the normative understanding of LGB personhood because it *makes sense* in the context of a more pervasive cultural fixation with the concept of authenticity. According to Michael Strangelove (2011: 68), the imperative to authentic self-representation through vlogging speaks to contemporary anxieties about the ‘fragmentation and uncertainty that are said to characterize the present.’ As religion, local community and other traditional structures for understanding what it means to live a meaningful life have becoming increasingly displaced, to quote Anthony Giddens (1991: 79), ‘The moral thread of self-actualisation [has become] one of *authenticity*, based on ‘being true to oneself’.’ Coming out videos demonstrate how norms of sexuality become intelligible within the cultural field as distillations of broader imperatives towards authenticity within contemporary social life. In the videos, coming out becomes meaningful as a process of fulfilling the cultural mandate of ‘being true to oneself’ addressed to all subjects in contemporary social life, as vloggers express their sexualities as the very stuff of their authentic selves, as defining aspects of *who they are*.

Yet, whilst appearing authentic has become a mandatory condition of participation for all producers in the vlogging community/economy (Tolson, 2010; Strangelove, 2011), in the context of coming out videos, the ideal of authenticity attains an extra layer of signification. In these texts, the notion of the 'authentic' LGB self function as a discursive strategy for affirming the validity of sexual identities defined in opposition to the heterosexual norm, by evoking these non-normative sexualities as a signifiers of one of the most prized cultural ideals of the present moment, the authentic self.

### **Strategies of self-acceptance**

In YouTube coming out videos, coming out is represented as means of affirming the apparent authenticity of LGB sexualities and as a process of validating these non-normative identities through discourses of the authentic. Building on Butler's theory of performativity, Vikki Bell (2007: 26) has argued that for marginal subjects, certain kinds of performativity can function as means of 'survival' or as 'answers' to dominant structures of power and meaning. In this way, in the vlogs, coming out, as a performative process of bringing an LGB selfhood into being, is construed as a trajectory of self-acceptance, a means of speaking back to the heteronormative (and sometimes homophobic) milieus in which the young LGB vloggers have grown up. In this way, coming out as articulated on YouTube diverges somewhat from traditional narratives of coming out in which, as noted previously, the telling of one's sexual orientation to others is conceived as the end-goal of the coming out process (Plummer, 1995; Cover and Prosser, 2013). In coming out videos, YouTube vloggers spend little time discussing coming out to others. In contrast, the majority of each text involves vloggers describing their processes of coming out to themselves, that is, of realising they were LGB and, crucially, their 'journey' to accepting and feeling comfortable claiming this identity. To quote two vloggers:

Usually the beginning for people who are coming out is coming out to yourself. Now this is probably one of the hardest things for me personally, that it was hard to admit to myself that I was gay (#17 gay male).

The last chapter of my life has been [...] me coming to terms with myself (#23 bisexual male).

Statements like these suggest that, on YouTube at least, the dynamics of the coming out paradigm have shifted. To talk of coming out is now to talk equally, if not more so, of self-acceptance of an LGB identity, as it is to speak of social declarations of these identities. The comments of some vloggers imply that this shift in the meanings of coming out is a product of the changing contours of LGB visibility and 'acceptance' in twenty-first century social life. For example:

The only person [coming out is] a big deal to is you [...] [Other people] probably will accept you. Nowadays it's majority accepted in England, America, those countries [...] Most people get accepted. I've been accepted by everyone. I've literally never had homophobic comments (#22 gay male).

Despite its liberatory tone, this passage again evokes the contradictory nature of LGB subject positions in the contemporary moment: normalised yet non-normative. In the above quote, coming out is framed as overcoming a kind of existential dilemma. LGB identities are 'majority accepted' (in certain sections of the global West, at least), yet publicly claiming such identities remains a 'big deal' for individual LGB people. Even in a climate of apparent 'acceptance' for sexual diversity, heteronormativity continues to shape young LGB subjects' senses of selfhood in profound and complex ways.

For other vloggers, however, coming out *was* a ‘big deal’ to other people. One lesbian vlogger, for instance, tells of how homophobia led her to move schools, whilst another, gay male vlogger describes being kicked out of home and cut off financially by his religious parents. He states:

I really tried to keep a relationship going with them going, but in the end I really had to be true to myself and have confidence in who I am [...] It is harder having to support myself now and finish school, but there is so much happiness which comes with being me, and claiming my life, and being able to be me without the criticism and the negativity (2 gay male).

This statement exemplifies a discourse which united all of the vloggers’ narratives of coming out, be these positive or negative: the importance of self-acceptance for LGB youth. For the young gay person quoted above, physical and financial estrangement from his family is construed as the lamentable but unavoidable price for being able to express his ‘real’ self. For all the vloggers in the sample, self-acceptance and the drive to actualising their authentic selves is put forth as a discursive strategy for navigating a heteronormative, and at times homophobic, world, and for forging a sense of selfhood and self-worth in relation to this reality. YouTube coming out videos are replete with self-affirmative statements like:

I accept myself and I want you all to know that it’s ok to accept yourself (#4 lesbian).

I am bisexual and I accept that. I accept every part of me and I refuse to be dishonest with myself anymore (#23 bisexual male)

As the prevalence of ‘I’ within these lines invokes, coming out has come to be defined less as a movement of sexuality from inside to outside, and more as a process of identifying, coming to terms with and accepting one’s *own, authentic*, non-normative sexuality, irrespective of the

reactions of others. Of course, I am not suggesting that these self-representations are straightforward expressions and affirmations of these vloggers' essential, innate sexualities. Rather, the coming out vlogs demonstrate how discourses of authenticity and self-acceptance, so prevalent within the contemporary cultural domain and integral to the platform vernacular of YouTube, have become resources with which young LGB people in a present-day context of normalised non-normativity bring their sexualities into being. In the vlogs, the ideal of authenticity is mobilised as a line of flight, away from the residual negative affects which characterise current queer experience, and towards another state, one of happiness and contentment. Ideals of authenticity, self-acceptance and the happiness associated with these, become strategies through which LGB youth try to make sense of their place within unremittingly heteronormative societies, and claim value and validity in their marginalised sexual identities.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that YouTube coming out videos are central to the ways in which young LGB people forge and articulate their sexualities in the contemporary moment. On YouTube, scripts of LGB life take shape through the specific 'platform vernaculars' of YouTube vlogging, where the sharing of apparently 'authentic' feelings works to bridge the private and the public, assembling an affective public united by shared experiences of being queer in a straight world. Studying YouTube coming out videos has provided an analytical access point to the 'homosexual consciousness' of the present, demonstrating how the structuring of social life through heteronormativity continues to be of define the experience of inhabiting an LGB subject position, in ways that become manifest in a continuum of affects and emotions, from fear to the more subtle feeling of awkwardness. For the young LGB vloggers whose videos I have analysed,

the currency of authenticity on YouTube (and in social life more broadly), has worked to rewrite the meanings of coming out: less a process of self-revelation than a journey to self-validation, functioning as a vital resource for speaking back to heteronormativity and negotiating the contradictory position – normalised yet beyond the norm - of LGB lives in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>i</sup> For further discussion of the debates surrounding ‘It Gets Better’ see Goltz (2013).

<sup>ii</sup> For a specific discussion of this phenomenon see Lovelock (2017).

<sup>iii</sup> This involved discounting ‘prank’ coming out videos (where users appropriate the conventions of an LGB coming out video to come out as ‘an asshole’ or ‘a narcissist’ for example). I also did not include transgender coming out videos within my sample due to the distinct differences between trans and LGB coming outs, particularly in relation to embodiment. For a study of online trans coming outs see Raun (2016).

<sup>iv</sup> This involved discounting videos where users appeared clearer older than 29. In practice, this meant excluding only one video, as the coming out genre is overwhelmingly dominated by young people.

<sup>v</sup> All of the sample vloggers identified explicitly with one of these terms. Alternative labels like pansexual or queer were not in evidence.

<sup>vi</sup> For a study of coming out videos in a Chinese context see Tan (2016).

<sup>vii</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, considering the hostile environment which YouTube can be, the coming out videos in the sample appeared to generate few hostile responses. Whilst I did not undertake a systematic review of the comments beneath the sample videos (as this would have made the data pool unwieldy), comments tended to be almost exclusively messages of support for the video maker.