

## **Matthew Bailey**

Coming Out on YouTube: Self Disclosure in Online Spaces

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## **Abstract**

Coming out, the act of disclosing a queer identity by an individual, is a new phenomenon that both brings awareness to a marginalized community and allows individuals to self-accept. With the rise of media, coming out has become a more public act where individuals are self-disclosing their identities to mass audiences – especially in online spaces. This research is focused on YouTube users' self-disclosure of identity and how viewers respond. Within the queer community, a disparity between gay and transgender individuals persists, and treatment of these individuals once “out” has differed as well. With YouTube as a highly active platform, the presence of anti-queer language appears on this site, especially in the comment sections. Therefore, with the threat of anti-queer language in mind, a textual analysis was conducted in these online spaces to determine the difference in responses to gay and transgender online self-disclosures.

# Introduction

## Coming Out Televised

Coming out is a monumental step for authenticating marginalized identities within the queer community. "Queer" is a reclaimed term referring to any individual with an identity that deviates from heterosexual and/or cisgender. It wasn't until the rise of electronic media (social media, television, and movies) that coming out transitioned into a public act where people began self-disclosing their personal identities to mass audiences. Coming out is the act of disclosing a queer identity to another person or a collective group of people. In 1997, Ellen DeGeneres played the first major character on television to identify as openly gay. As she recounts these events, she states "This was before Facebook, so if you wanted to announce something, you had to get a sitcom" (TheEllenShow, 00:0:35 – 00:0:42). DeGeneres' coming out was a monumental moment in American television history and greatly progressed queer acceptance. Ellen's coming out showed that representation can lead to awareness and understanding of difference. Bobker states that "one by one, gays and lesbians could easily defeat intolerance, if only brave enough and honest enough with themselves and others" (34).

Coming out is a political act, an act of disclosure that demands changes for a marginalized and un-privileged group, because it not only allows queer people to acknowledge and fully embrace their identities, but it also helps normalize all queer identities as well. Since Ellen's coming out, many shows involving queer characters have taken media by storm, increasing visibility of the community and calling for more understanding. *Glee*, a monumental show for queer visibility, broke down social barriers. Many viewers remember Kurt unabashedly standing before his dad and claiming "What I am is ... I'm gay" ("Preggers"). Television viewers are put right in the middle of an intimate conversation between a father and his son which makes this scene memorable and significant for queer viewers. Caitlyn Jenner's hour-long video interview with Diane Sawyer introduced many viewers to the transgender experience. In this interview, Caitlyn proclaims, "My brain is much more female than it is male. It is hard for people to understand that, but that is what my soul is" (Sawyer). While media presence is increasing and is important, especially for the queer movement, the issue of authentic representation and overall presence for all queer identities remains an issue.

Ang, Bobrowicz, and Green argue that the transgender community continues to lack representation, especially compared to the presence of white gay men depicted in television (609-610). For white, cisgender gay men, representation is available and increasing; however, the presence of

lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals (especially people of color) is lacking. While gay people are becoming more accepted into mainstream society, transgender individuals are not as widely understood and often receive more negative treatment. Even with a disparity, representation is lacking for the entire queer community. Queer people are moving towards online spaces to seek out representation. Fox and Ralston show that the differences in treatment as well as the overall lack of representation that has persisted in television media has led queer individuals onto online spaces not only in search of representation but also community, information, and spaces for self-disclosure (636). Further research needs to be conducted to establish the major effects that these spaces can have on queer individuals.

Issues of homophobia and transphobia exist in these online spaces which can have negative effects for queer users. Queer users are exposed to negative treatment in online spaces; however, social media, and specific sites such as YouTube, are advertised as “safe spaces” for the queer community to “come out,” find community, and gather information on queer topics and issues. Acts of homophobia and transphobia in online spaces can include hateful comments and videos depicting violence and threatening language. For the YouTube site, users can respond textually to videos posted on the site in the comment section of each individual video. The comment section serves as an online space where viewers can interact with the YouTuber as well as other viewers.

### **YouTube and the Coming Out Narrative**

Aside from television media, social media sites such as Tumblr, Facebook, and YouTube are frequently used by queer people in search of representation. For this research, the focus will be on computer-mediated communication (CMC) sites, which I define as any online space where communication through technological devices occurs. Specifically, YouTube is frequently used by queer people in search of authentic representation in video content. I define a "YouTuber" as an individual who has a YouTube channel and posts regular videos there. A "viewer" refers to those who watch a YouTuber's channel. YouTubers often have a stable viewership: an audience of regular viewers who typically watch the YouTuber's videos as they are posted. Videos on YouTube often come in the form of video blogs, or vlogs. Vlogs typically consist of a narration of daily experiences in a confessional setting. This often includes personal disclosures in safe spaces such as family living rooms and individual bedrooms. The confessional setting gives the viewer glimpses into the personal lives of others. The intimate spaces and the personal language used helps create a queer experience that can be more realistic than queer experiences depicted in fictional media.

Szulc and Dhoest do not specifically discuss the trans experience; however, their research, discusses the importance of “authenticity of online LGB representation.” Authentic LGB representation includes content that “is not only about a specific minority group but also created by the group” (351). They also note that the confessional format that is often used by queer YouTubers to come out online creates an authenticity that is more impactful on the viewers because it is created by queer YouTubers. While televised coming out moments are often fictionalized or scripted, YouTube videos are more accessible and provide more authentic people and narratives to serve as representation for the viewers.

YouTube creates an online space where users can share private information to a massive public audience. Therefore, with this access readily available to anyone with a webcam and the internet, television media is no longer needed to make public proclamations or provide representation for marginalized communities. Caroline Dadas refers to this as “publically private” (64), implying that CMC sites blur the lines of offline and online spaces where people can communicate with others and reach mass audiences without leaving the comfort of their own bedrooms. YouTube is an ideal place for queer users to come out since the website can be used to communicate to a larger viewership.

The transition to online spaces becomes clear when looking at the past five years alone. Recently, there has been an increase of well-known people using their YouTube platforms to come out. These users include Joey Graceffa, Ingrid Nelson, Shane Dawson, Tom Daley, Troye Sivan, and Gigi Gorgeous. They all structured their YouTube coming out videos as described by Alexander and Losh:

... an unmediated truth by a confessing subject who seems to be offering a moment of intimate disclosure of an authentic identity hidden by a social mask [and] also emphasizing how gender and sexuality are performed for the camera much as they are staged in offline environments. (25)

Their research highlights the use of video journals for performing gender and sexual identity and indicates that there is a predictable structure to these types of self-disclosure videos.

YouTubers use common narrative structures when disclosing their personal coming out journey via YouTube. Alexander and Losh focus on the narrative structure of coming out stories by examining common components that are frequently found in these narratives. For example, the YouTuber must be able to “supply ... narrative context for this act of disclosure” (24).

This means that the reasoning for coming out must be legitimized by the individual. To do so, YouTubers claim that they no longer want to hide their identities from their viewership. They want to diminish the anonymity that social media often provides users. This exhibits a desire for authenticity not only from the viewers but also from the YouTuber.

Normalizing the queer identity is another common feature within the coming out narratives. YouTubers encourage other users to disclose their identity by normalizing it through their own narrative. In addition, YouTubers often “situate [their] rhetoric within an entire community of similar content-creator[s]” (Alexander and Losh 26). Coming out videos work in a pay-it-forward method where YouTubers acknowledge other users who have come out before them. The acknowledgement of others who have gone through similar experiences further creates community showing viewers that they are not alone. Coming out videos have the ability to not only bring forth more authentic representation, but also bring awareness and normalize marginalized identities.

## **Previous Research**

### **The Use of Online Spaces for Information Gathering**

For queer users, especially youth, online spaces (social media, websites, online chats) are used for learning and gathering information on queer topics. Fox and Ralston explain the three stages of the coming out process: (1) “the sensitization stage,” (2) “the assumption stage,” and (3) “the commitment stage” to establish the significance that online usage can have throughout the self-identification process (635). During the sensitization stage, queer individuals question their identities. In the assumption stage, queer youth seek information regarding queer identities, and finally, in the commitment stage, they self-disclose and seek out same-identified individuals. Therefore, coming out is a journey as opposed to a singular act of self-disclosure. Online access is important during the coming out process because it provides “access to information [as well as] the informal learning that occurs via day-to-day interactions online ... with others on social media” (636). Examples of informal learning include viewers seeking out online role models they can observe and mimic as they learn about their own identities. For example, users learn “from the modeled behavior of their face-to-face friends, online friends, celebrities, and unknown LGBTQ individuals,” and this form of learning most frequently occurs during the “sensitization and assumption” stages where individuals first recognize their difference and seek out more information (640-641). Online spaces can be used by queer users both to perform their identities and to observe the performance of others, both

critical parts of the coming out process.

YouTube serves as an online space where the three steps of the coming out journey can be taken. Fox and Ralston describe YouTube videos as “particularly useful because they provide rich video content and their searchability makes it easy to identify relevant content” (639). With YouTube videos, users can easily view content that focuses on queer topics and find queer YouTubers from which to learn and model behavior. This idea of learning online further impacts the potential use of these spaces for queer people. By performing and self-disclosing queer identity, queer users are embracing their own identities in addition to providing content that could help other users self-identify. In these spaces, users can take what they learn online and apply it to themselves offline. Fox and Ralston present the following testimony from a transgender man:

Somebody showed me this collaboration of trans men on YouTube and they were all on testosterone and I was like ‘Oh my god, I can live a normal life’ .... I was afraid I was going to have to be a sex worker, or just be this oddity and go into porn ... And there were all these normal guys [on YouTube] who you couldn’t even tell were trans. (Fox and Ralston 639)

This personal story exemplifies how online representation serves as a performance that the viewer can reflect on and learn from.

### **Spaces for Community Building**

Queer users can also use online spaces during the coming out process to build community. Websites are frequently viewed as safe spaces where individuals are free to explore different identities. During this process of exploration, users often interact with one another. Both, Fox and Ralston and Szulc and Dhoest studied the significance of community-building in online spaces. According to Fox and Ralston, “during the assumption stage,” queer users “seek out similarly-identified acquaintances, social ties, and role models to learn how to enact their identity” (635). From this, seeking out community online is significant to the queer individual in order to understand their own identity and normalize it. Researchers have shown that queer users are more likely than heterosexual users to use online spaces. According to Szulc and Dhoest, queer youth are most likely to go online to seek information and social connection. Out of the 761 respondents in their data, “60.1% ... visit social network sites” and “42.6%” use the internet to seek “contact with other LGBs” (354-355). Furthermore, they found that internet access for LGB youth is vital for having online friends who have similar identities. One user accounts a desire to “just to be able to talk to



somebody who is experiencing the same thing” (356). Online spaces also erase geographic barriers for queer people seeking out community (349). Queer youth can seek out the experiences of others and compare them to their own internal experiences which helps eliminate the feeling of isolation that many queer people face (Szulc and Dhoest 350). Building individual relationships as well as communities assist in the coming out journey of the user and eliminate isolating feelings that queer identities can inflict.

Similarly, Michaelsen discusses community by examining the video campaign, *It Gets Better*. The *It Gets Better* project was started by a video blog (vlog) uploaded to YouTube by Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller in response to “homophobic violence, in particular bullying in a high-school context” (144). A vlog is a type of video journal in which users record aspects of their day or recount events in a confessional setting. The original video was formatted as a narrative by two YouTubers, Savage and Miller, who recounted their experiences as gay men. The video called for a better future for all queer people and created a space in the online world that inspired others to post similar narratives using the #ItGetsBetter hashtag. The video also began a trend on multiple formats of social media but specifically on YouTube. Michaelsen notes that the campaign provides queer viewers “the promise of both non-aloneness and of a better future” to queer viewers (145). This campaign is significant because queer identities are framed and shared in a positive light.

Unfortunately, while the intent of the campaign is clear, the promise of non-aloneness and better futures cannot always be met, especially for those identifying amongst the transgender and genderqueer communities.

Lots of folks, particularly the gender nonconforming and/or trans, never ‘grow out’ of the kinds of social reprisals for being physically different ... lots of people’s families of origin never accept them, or are too damaged and fucked up for anyone to want to go back, even if they could. (Michaelsen 147)

This quote highlights the danger of promising a better future when looking at the disparity specifically within the queer community. Homonormativity implies that gay people are more privileged within the queer community than those identifying as genderqueer or transgender. This disparity could be due to the difference in representation that exists for these communities. This difference between gay and transgender individuals is important when looking at the experiences of queer individuals because, while they are all encompassed into one community, the rate of societal acceptance and actual experiences are not the same. The realities of homophobia and transpho-

bia, and overall negative experiences of queer users online remains while “the internet and particularly social media [are depicted] as ‘safe’ spaces, providing the means to overcome the dangers and the violence that lurk in the ‘outside’ world” (Michaelson 145). Even with the presence of hostility online, the attainment of community and social interaction in online spaces remains vital for queer users “because aloneness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally unprivileged” (148). Queer users are using spaces to build community and gather information where anti-queer behavior persists.

### **Anonymity Online**

The effects of anonymity online must be addressed when discussing the use of online spaces, especially websites where communication and information-sharing between users is prevalent. Hollenbaugh and Everett compare anonymity in online blogs “to the ‘stranger on a train’ phenomenon, wherein people share intimate self-disclosures with strangers they may never see again” (283). The authors highlight visual anonymity, which is “the extent to which people can be seen and/or heard” (286). The blogger, or the one writing and posting the content, is often the one forfeiting visual anonymity to their audiences. Viewers or commenters, on the other hand, often maintain their visual anonymity since they have the ability to exist in online spaces behind ambiguous usernames and blank profile pictures. The impact that visual anonymity can have on a user needs to be considered when looking further at the information that is self-disclosed by all users.

Hollenbaugh and Everett elaborate on bloggers' willingness to self-disclose personal information despite a lack of visual anonymity. The authors state that this is “likely due to the blogger’s motivations for maintaining their blogs,” and that, “people are motivated to archive and organize their thoughts, to help others, for social connection, to get feedback, to express creativity, and to entertain others” (285).

Users are more willing to disclose personal information and remove visual anonymity for a particular audience, or viewership. Viewers feel a personal connection to the blogger based on the information disclosed and the blogger’s visibility even though the interaction does not occur physically face-to-face. The results from the research also show that “participants who were more visually identified (including pictures of people in their profiles), disclosed a larger amount of private information in their blog entries” (Hollenbaugh and Everett 290). Therefore, if YouTubers can be seen by their viewers, they are likely to self-disclose more information.

However, in these online spaces, the viewers, or users consuming

the content, are often presented more anonymously online than face-to-face. While they have the liberty to possess visual anonymity, these users also have “discursive anonymity,” which is “when a message cannot be linked to a specific source” (Hollenbaugh and Everett 285). Viewers can then comment or respond with little to no consequence. Lapidot-Leffler and Barak show how the possession of anonymity allows users to act without consequence. They state that “the psychological restraints that often serve to block or conceal emotions and undisclosed needs are found to be lowered in cyberspace in various online interpersonal behaviors” (434). Lapidot-Leffler and Barak also explain the term “negative online disinhibition effect ... [which is] usually manifested in aggressive behaviors that apparently would not be exhibited in a similar scenario in the ‘real world’” (434). While anonymity can potentially allow queer youth to find community and information during their coming out journey, anonymity also grants users the ability to express hate online. In these online spaces of self-disclosure, the actions and language used are not met with the same reaction as they would in physical spaces. Aggressive behaviors can be found in “online gaming sites, hate sites, ... cyberbullying, [and] comments on YouTube” (434). Therefore, the presence of hate in these spaces puts queer users at risk. Due to anonymity, users often receive no repercussions for these actions, and there are few restrictions for anti-queer content.

### **Homophobia and Transphobia Online**

Recent research has proven that the overall support for the queer community has increased; however, the problem of bullying and overall hostility against the queer community persists, especially those identifying in the transgender community as shown by Kosciw et al. (10). Bullying, in this sense, includes “verbal and physical harassment and assault, and social exclusion and isolation” (10). A study by Kull et al. found that “LGBT youth commonly feel unsafe in their schools due to high rates of peer victimization ... with over 85% experiencing bullying or harassment in school” (407). While LGBT+ youth are experiencing fear, harassment, and isolation, Christopher Pullen demonstrates how this issue of bullying and harassment can lead to the physical harm of queer people.

Lawrence King, a queer student, was shot during class by a straight, cisgender male classmate after King asked to be his Valentine. Lawrence King identified as genderqueer and was often misgendered by his classmates and faculty. Misgendering is the act of using a pronoun or name to address an individual – typically a transgender individual – that does not accurately reflect that individual's preferred gender identity. This hate crime adds to a

lack of safety that queer people feel in physical spaces which demonstrates why LGBT+ youth are capitalizing on online spaces. There is need for safety and security; however, even though online spaces are depicted as a solution, anti-queer language and behavior still exists in these spaces.

Recently, research conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, one of the leading researchers for queer youth, has established that LGBT+ youth are spending more time online compared to their heterosexual, cisgender peers. On average, queer youth spend 45 more minutes online than non-queer youth (GLSEN 17). This is because queer people are using spaces and social media sites online “to build self-esteem, gain emotional and motivational support, and decrease feelings of isolation” (Braquet and Mehra). Queer youth are using online spaces to affirm and establish their identities which makes online spaces vital to the coming out journey for many youth. The existence of homophobia and transphobia in these spaces, however, remains an issue. GLSEN show that LGBT+ youth are more frequently bullied than non-LGBT+ people in both online and offline spaces (GLSEN 8). “LGBT youth were nearly three times as likely as non-LGBT youth to say they had been bullied or harassed online” (8). With the existence of bullying, in both face-to-face and digital spaces, the effects of negative comments and cyberbullying on queer users need to be explored further.

Previous research shows that the psychological effects can be severe and have long-term effects on an individual even though users are not physically at risk within these spaces. Kull et al. found that the impact for bullying can lead to lower academic achievement, lower self-esteem, and higher depression in comparison to individuals who did not endure discrimination based on gender and sexuality (407). Not only are youth prone to academic and emotional damage, McDermott and Roen note that these youths have “a greater likelihood of suicidal feelings and self-harm,” and that the environment in which queer individuals exist makes them at-risk of self-harm and suicidal thoughts (4). The need for current policies to combat this behavior is demanding with this evident reality of cyber-bullying towards queer users.

Kull et al. identify the emergence of sexual-orientation-inclusive and gender identity/expression inclusive (SOGIE) policies implemented by schools to combat the negative behaviors that exist in these spaces and promote positive environments for students. The presence of anti-bullying policies that use LGBT+ language increases the sense of safety that students feel in their school spaces (408). Students in schools with these existing policies also “reported lower rates of victimization and hearing biased remarks compared to students without such policies” (408). In offline spaces,

specific LGBT+ policies can be effective in decreasing homophobic and transphobic acts and language as well as promoting the overall well-being of queer individuals.

While Kull et al. focus on bullying and discrimination in *offline spaces*, there are also current policies in place regarding cyberbullying in digital spaces such as YouTube. YouTube's policies include regulations for video content and comments:

Hate speech refers to content that promotes violence against or has the primary purpose of inciting hatred against individuals or groups based on certain attributes, such as: Race or ethnic origin, Religion, Disability, Gender, Age, Veteran status, and Sexual orientation/gender identity. (YouTube)

Youtubers can report comments that violate the anti-bullying and discrimination policies, and viewers have the ability to report videos for inappropriate content. YouTube specifically bans discriminatory action and language used against the queer community. While the policy is in place, the overwhelming number of comments and videos posted on YouTube are difficult to regulate. Due to the overwhelming amount of content, homophobia and transphobia remain present on the site.

#ProudToBe shows how the comment sections of YouTube videos can be a toxic environment for queer users. A YouTube-sponsored channel in 2016 released a video titled “#ProudToBe: Coming Out Together to Celebrate Identity.” The purpose of the video was to highlight the use of YouTube as a coming out platform. The channel provides a two-minute video that consists of short clips of Youtubers coming out via video. This video was a reaction to the mass shooting that occurred at a gay nightclub in 2016. Forty-nine lives were ended and fifty-three people were wounded. It was labeled as “the deadliest mass shooting by one person in United States history.” The shooter behind this tragic event was Omar Mateen, and his motives remain unclear. Mateen's father speculates that he “was incensed by the sight of two men kissing in front of his young son” (Barry et al.).

Within two years the #ProudToBe video received close to 10 million views, with 230,000 likes and 298,000 dislikes. Carpenter highlights comments posted in response to this video including: “you're all freaks of society,” “So this is what our troops fight for ... disgusting,” and “there is only three gender(s) 1. Man 2. Female 3. Mental disturbed” (2). Due to the overwhelming amount of negativity that this video received, the comment section was permanently disabled. However, YouTube still describes itself as:

A place where anyone can belong no matter who they are or who they love. That is why today we want to help people honor and celebrate who they're #ProudToBe. (YouTube)

This campaign shows not only how homophobia and transphobia exist in the comment sections of YouTube, but also how these behaviors can be blatantly disregarded by the site on which they occur.

### **The Analysis of YouTube Comments**

Previous research has focused on the viewers' responses to online video posts. Bell's study, for example, looks at messages posted to the comments section of videos focusing on self-injury. While Bell's article does not focus on identity narratives specifically, the focus remains on self-disclosure in an online setting. Bell studied the comment section on YouTube to get a better understanding of the impact these videos can have on viewers. The research focused specifically on YouTube because it was "the third most popular web site world wide" at the time of the study (381). The data collection followed two coding rubrics. The first rubric divided comments into the following categories: 1) self-disclosure, 2) feedback directed toward the person who uploaded the video, 3) factual information, 4) help-related comments, 5) NSSI [non-suicidal self-injury] method and strategies, 6) non-engagement, 7) triggers, and 8) indecipherable (382). Once the comments were categorized, the second rubric was used to determine which type of comment was most frequently used in reaction to the video. Results showed that self-disclosure was the most frequent type of response. The research suggests that "individuals may self-disclose NSSI online to receive validation and acceptance for these experiences ... as well as to get peer support from others who self-injure (384). The research used a bottom-up approach linking the findings in the comment section to more global issues of recovery. This research validates the use of the comment section as a data pool and shows how the response comments can reflect bigger, societal issues to be addressed.

Dinakar, Reichart, and Lieberman focus on the negativity present in YouTube comment sections. The researchers used "a corpus of comments from YouTube videos involving sensitive topics ... [such as] aspects that people cannot change about themselves" (11). For their dataset, they treated each comment independently because "while some of the comments were made as responses to previously posted ones, there were no clear patterns of dialogue in the corpus" (12). The comments they collected were divided into four categories according to topic as follows: physical appearance,

sexuality, race and culture, and intelligence (13). Some of the comments were easy to classify as negative in instances of “abuse or profanity or expressions connoting negativity” (14). For example, one comment stated, “as long as fags don’t bother me let them do what they want” (15). While this comment possesses a slight form of acceptance in the phrase “let them do what they want”, the slur “fags” also implies hostility and a true lack of understanding and sensitivity. The research acknowledges the severity of this language when stating that “comments or posts involving sensitive topics that are personal to an individual are more likely to be internalized by a victim, often resulting in tragic outcomes” (11). With this in mind, the researchers also acknowledge the difficulty in labeling something as negative. Since comments are textual, certain inflections (the usage of sarcasm and euphemisms that are often marked by tone of voice, for example) can be lost through the translation. This research also acknowledges the complexities of categorizing comments by recognizing that the intent of the commenter is not always clear to the researcher. While acknowledging the difficulties when dealing with this type of dataset, the comment section can still give a picture of the struggles, or negative harassment that the queer community faces in online spaces.

Previous research shows an increase of queer users using online spaces to assist in their coming out journeys. Online spaces have shown to help queer users find authentic representation, seek information, and disclose identities. Online spaces also allow users to participate in their coming out journey behind anonymous profiles. Although these positive qualities are present in online spaces, homophobia and transphobia exist in these spaces as well. The disclosures of gay and transgender identities in online spaces will be explored in this research. Comments from viewers will be collected and analyzed to determine the types of disapproval queer users face online, and how these disclosures can assist queer users in their own coming out journeys.

## **Data and Methodology**

### **The Videos**

This research will focus on two coming out videos posted via YouTube and their corresponding comment sections to analyze the ways in which queer users disclose their minority identities and the ways in which other users respond to the disclosure. Two YouTubers, Gigi Gorgeous and Troye Sivan, were selected based on similarities in the format, year posted, and demographics of their coming out videos. Both identify as queer, with Gigi



identifying as a Transgender woman, and Troye as a gay cisgender man. Both identify as White or Caucasian. Troye was born in South Africa, and Gigi Gorgeous was born in Canada. At the time their coming out videos were posted, Troye Sivan was 18-years old and Gigi was 21-years old.

Troye Sivan's "Coming Out" and Gigi's "I am Transgender" were both posted to YouTube in 2014. By 2018, Troye Sivan had received 7.8 million views for his video, and Gigi Gorgeous had received 3.8 million views. Troye Sivan had 6 million subscribers, and Gigi had 2.7 million subscribers. While the 3.3 million difference is significant, both YouTubers have a large viewership which contributes to a wide variety of commentary from the viewers. Since their coming out videos were posted, both YouTubers obtained an element of celebrity status: Gigi starred in her own documentary "This is Everything," and Troye established a successful music career. When looking at their coming out videos, both are relatively short, with Troye's being 8 minutes and 18 seconds long and Gigi's lasting 4 minutes and 9 seconds long. At the time of this study, Gigi's video had received 87,000 likes compared to 4,500 dislikes. Troye had received 520,000 likes and 5,300 dislikes. The comment analysis will further examine the reactions to these videos of self-disclosure.

### **The Comments**

One-hundred fifty comments were pulled from each video. A qualitative analysis was conducted to analyze the ways in which people respond to coming out narratives in online spaces. Comments were divided into three categories: biology, religion, and approval. Within these categories, comments were separated into two sub-categories: individual and general. Comments categorized under "biology" regard the biological state or physical state of the YouTuber. Comments categorized under "religion" make religious references to support their criticism or comment the state of the YouTuber's spiritual soul. Comments categorized under "approval" are those that disclose identities, tell stories, and show support for the YouTuber's identity-disclosure or support for the overall community.

Commenters often react with a focus on either the individual or global aspects. Comments categorized as "individual" are comments that tend to focus on personal one-on-one relationships. Often, the language used directly addresses the YouTuber. Commenters were often found to disclose their own individual identities as well. Comments categorized as "general" tended to focus a more global reaction to sexual and gender identities. The language used calls to a general population or attempts to build community. All comments were categorized once pulled from their respective



videos. Comments that did not appropriately fit into any of the categories were categorized as Indecipherable. These comments include spam, self-promotions, or comments with topics completely unrelated to the specific YouTube video or channel.

## **Analysis**

### **Biology – Individual**

Gigi received a significant number of comments pertaining to this category. A trend of commenters using biology to criticize Gigi's gender identity was found in the data. Commenters show the importance that gender expression and biological anatomy plays in one's identity.

Ex. 1. I feel like I am trans cause all I want is boobs and long hair and nails and everything a gurl has all I want!!!!

With this message, the commenter expresses a personal consideration of what would make the commenter more female, including "boobs and long hair and nails." These factors include both forms of traditional feminine expression and female anatomy.

Within the dataset, Gigi's anatomy was frequently mentioned, questioned, or used to argue or criticize her identity.

Ex. 2. did you cut your .... or u still have it

This comment is an example of the importance that is placed on biological markers in relation to gender identity. Further comments show the interest or focus on biology that Gigi receives in her comments.

Ex. 3. Jesus Christ it's a trap

This comment includes powerful language that lead to implications regarding Gigi's transgender identity. First, the commenter refers to Gigi as an "it" instead of her preferred pronoun "she." This pronoun usage shows how the viewer perceives Gigi as an individual. The commenter also uses the word "trap." This is a slang term used against transgender women. A "trap" in this instance is an individual who dresses as another gender in order to trick people. The term is derogatory and invalidates the gender identity of the individual. Examples 2 and 3 further demonstrate the significance that biological markers play in the validation of gender identity.

Many commenters expressed that anatomy and biological functions that are associated with the traditional female body are most important in regards to gender identity. Many comments demonstrate an attack or deconstruction of the gender identity that Gigi is claiming in her video.

- Ex. 4. Just because you decided to dress up and put make up on your face and play Barbie does NOT make you more woman than me.

This comment serves as a direct statement to Gigi. In the video, Gigi stated “My choice to be a woman makes me more woman than most women” (Gorgeous 00:2:45 - 00:2:50). The viewer’s comment, while directed specifically towards the YouTuber, attempts to invalidate Gigi’s disclosure. Gender expression, “decid[ing] to dress up and put make up on your face and play Barbie,” does not then validate Gigi’s identity according to this commenter.

Specifically, Gigi’s gender identity is also referenced as a choice as opposed to a biological identity.

- Ex. 5. Your CHOICE doesn’t freaking make you a woman, and doesn’t change the fact that you think, and act as a MAN.

With this comment, the poster again addresses Gigi specifically. The commenter describes Gigi’s transgender identity as a “choice” as opposed to something she is born as. Within the comment, the words “CHOICE” and “MAN” are specifically written in all capital letters by the commenter who insists that gender is not a choice and that Gigi is biologically a man regardless of womanly gender-expression. Further comments also exemplify these beliefs.

- Ex. 6. No hun..you aren’t more woman than people actually born woman

Again, Gigi’s identity as a woman is seen as lesser than through the phrase “you aren’t more woman than.” This comment creates a hierarchy of womanhood where Gigi is placed below women who are biologically born with female anatomy. Through these comments, Gigi’s disclosed identity and womanhood are individually addressed and then denied.

To further demote Gigi's identity, one commenter also used an incorrect name.

- Ex. 7. I can also say "Oh I choose to be black so now I'm more black than you" that's not how things work Gregory.

Gregory was the name Gigi received at birth. Gigi is her preferred name. This commenter disregards that preferred name while simultaneously discounting the credibility of Gigi's female identity. Misgendering is considered harmful because it denounces the claimed gender identity of the individual.

A trend also rose in the comments where commenters referenced women they knew in their lives. This was done to provide an example of a real woman to further criticize Gigi's identity.

- Ex. 8. You're "more woman" than let's say my sister who just gave birth because you like makeup and she doesn't?

This viewer compares Gigi to the viewer's sister in this comment. The viewer makes the argument that his or her sister can give birth. This biological marker, according to the commenter, validates the gender identity of the sister and takes away the validity of Gigi's identity.

### **Biology – General**

While many comments within the biology category showed commenters invalidating Gigi's specific gender identity, many viewers also commented in order to establish more general constructs of womanhood that have societal implications.

- Ex. 9. "My choice to be a woman makes me more woman than most women" How offensive to all the women out there.. Give birth to a child and then say you are more woman than me

The comment, "how offensive to all the women out there," references women as a collective group. Womanhood is then validated with the act of giving birth, a validation previously made in Example 8. Here, womanhood is constructed not as a form of expression but a biological performance.

Another comment follows this trend of constructing a general identity of womanhood.

Ex. 10. Will you be able to provide motherly love, breastfeed your child, do you have the motherly instincts that triggers in a woman with her baby?

Ex. 11. However Women have Wombs, Ovaries and monthly periods, Most woman are able to give birth and bare the pain of Birth.

Example 10 lists biological performances such as emotional abilities, the act of breastfeeding, and a “motherly instinct” as necessary in regards to the female identity, and Example 11 includes biological markers such as wombs and monthly periods. While these comments are addressed to the individual YouTuber, both comments feed into a global expectation of female identity.

A few comments within this category used specific language to frame individual opinions as general facts.

Ex. 12. Lmfaooooo have you ever opened a book of biology?

Ex. 13. your genetic code and every single chromosome in your body is that of a male. That’s a fact.

Ex. 14. I am offended that these guys consider themselves to be like our Mothers. This can never be.

Within Examples 12-14, the phrases “book of biology,” “that’s a fact,” and “this can never be” are all used to relate individual opinion to global ideas regarding transgender identities. The use of these phrases shows an attempt to strengthen their arguments by tethering them to established, general facts. The trend shows viewers shifting from individual opinion to global norms.

### **Religion – Individual**

Both Gigi and Troye received comments categorized as “Religion,” and comments from both of their datasets will be analyzed for this section. Within this category, a few comments referred to the YouTuber’s soul and condemnation of the soul. Two commenters from Gigi’s dataset exemplify this.

Ex. 15. I hope you go hell SLOWLY

Ex. 16. you and ur stupid logic, ur fans wont save u when u  
face death

Both comments in a way criticize Gigi's gender identity. However, they do not make assumptions regarding her biological markers, but instead, they regard her soul. Through religion, they directly disapprove of the YouTuber's identity. An example of this is also pulled from Troye's dataset.

Ex. 17. please take him already god, please

Examples 15-17 all show a disapproval for the individual identity of the two YouTubers. As opposed to a general disagreement against a whole community, the comments establish a personal connection between the viewer and the YouTuber. The comments clearly communicate a condemnation of Troye's and Gigi's soul and reference the death of the individual. From the comments pulled, the spirituality of the individual is put into question and completely disregarded by the commenters. Regardless of the YouTuber's personal religious beliefs, the comments assume either that Gigi and Troye are not religious or that their queer identities equate to a state of immorality.

Other commenters are using this space to disclose their individual religious beliefs. While previous examples have demonstrated a disapproval for YouTuber's queer identities, other comments express more positive viewpoints regarding queer individuals.

Ex. 18. I'm Christian and I don't see why people discriminate  
against gays so much

Within this example, the commenter first establishes her religious identity before expressing her opinion regarding the gay community. While religion has been shown to demean queer YouTubers, this commenter discloses religious beliefs first to contrast it with a not-so-common opinion about the gay community.

Another trend within this category shows a recurrence of commenters mentioning individuals in their personal lives who identify as religious. The religious individual, whom they mention, tends to have an impact in the commenter's personal coming out journey.

- Ex. 19. I recently came out to all of my friends and all of them accepted the fact that I'm gay. My family is pretty bound to traditions because we're Jewish, so this is gonna be a hard nut to crack...I've never been this scared and I fear rejection from my mom.

The commenter, while disclosing his own identity in this message, references his Jewish family and his fears of disclosing his queer identity to them. This fear that the commenter has towards his religious family shows the common association with religion and disapproval towards the queer community. Other comments further explain instances where queer individuals actually disclosed their identities to their religious family.

- Ex. 20. I once told my very christian aunt that I'm attracted towards females and she just laughed and thought that I was joking or purposefully saying that just to get attention, because apparently I'm not "one of those".

Here, the viewer recounts her own coming out journey and the specific experience of disclosing her identity to her religious aunt. The comment clearly notes the religious identity of the aunt as "very Christian" which, once again, contrasts with the commenter's identity as queer. The commenter is shown in this instance sharing a very personal, one-on-one interaction with a family member. This shows individual coming out journeys being shared in general, communal online spaces.

### **Religion – General**

While some comments specifically showed disapproval for the individual YouTubers, other comments move towards a disapproval for entire communities of people. In a reaction to the coming out video, commenters use this online space as a space to disclose their own disapproval for a community using religion to validate their criticism.

- Ex. 21. WTF all the gays and lesbians are disgusting god create the man for the women to women and men to men so disgusting

This commenter is proclaiming a dislike for "all the gays and lesbians" and therefore moving away from a specific dislike for Troye or Gigi and towards a general dislike for the entire gay and lesbian community. He also validates his argument with the creation story, a biblical reference, by stating "god create the man for the women." While this comment does, in a sense, disapprove of Troye's individual coming out video, this comment has a

much larger implication for the community, as a whole. This message sends a clear criticism to the whole gay and lesbian community. As the comment is a reference to Troye's coming out video, the commenter only addresses sexual identities and does not include gender identities within the comment.

Other commenters use the online space to disclose their opinions regarding the queer community and use religion to both dispute these identities and strengthen their arguments by connecting their opinions to an established set of religious beliefs.

Ex. 22. that's gross, transgender people are disgusting, they  
make me want to puke #christianvalues

The viewer expresses an individual opinion; however, the comment regards "transgender people" as a collective group, making a generalization. The hashtag "#christianvalues" is an attempt to associate an individual opinion with a set of "values" supported by a religious group. This both conveys a disapproval that is directed to an individual, Gigi, while also making a general comment against a whole community of people.

### **Approval – Individual**

Many posters utilize the comment section to establish a personal relationship with an individual YouTuber. Comments from both Gigi's and Troye's YouTube channels were pulled for this analysis. Example 23 is a comment addressed to Gigi, and Example 24 is addressed to Troye.

Ex. 23. omg u slay girl ... ur the most beautiful girl by looks  
and personality

Ex. 24. you are brave, cute, and have a lot of charisma

These comments show a relationship attempting to be established between the viewer and the YouTuber. The viewers both use positive, complimentary language to do so. One viewer compliments Gigi's physical appearance writing "ur the most beautiful girl by looks and personality." Another viewer refers to Troye as "brave, cute, and charisma[tic]." This shows viewers using an online space to seek out representation and establishing a personal connection through approval and positive affirmation.

Online spaces can serve as spaces for queer individuals to seek out authentic representation and personal connections, as shown in the previous two comments. Specifically, viewers are sharing their own coming out journeys in these messages. These journey disclosures exhibited a common

pattern: commenters first expressed approval for the YouTuber, disclosed their own queer identity, and then asked for help or simply created a space for response.

- Ex. 25. Hi Gigi. I love your videos! I'm sixteen and I am just coming to terms in my own heart and mind that I myself am transgender (male to female, like you) ... I was wondering if you might have any advice for me? I don't know what to do

With this example, the viewer follows the pattern of approval, disclosure, and open-response. Approval is established by stating, "Hi Gigi. I love your videos!" The commenter then discloses their own queer identity as transgender. The commenter reports being currently on a coming out journey by stating "I am just coming to terms in my own heart and mind." The commenter adds, "I don't know what to do." This last statement opens a space for a conversation between two individuals to occur. This allows other viewers, and Gigi herself, to respond to the self-disclosure.

This pattern also occurs within Troye's dataset. Within his comments, viewers were more likely to disclose sexual identities as opposed to gender identities which occurred more in Gigi's comments.

- Ex. 26. im so proud of you troye, you've come so far from here. Im pansexual but I haven't come out to my family yet, but I have come out to one of my closest friends. I plan to do it on may 24th (national pansexual day). Im not sure how to do it though, I don't think im ready. My parents are completely against LGBTQA+ and my mum literally cant even say the word gay. Ugh help me

Once again, we see the same pattern. The viewer affirms the YouTuber with "im so proud of you troye, you've come so far from here." After the affirmation, the viewer then discloses their own identity as pansexual. This is followed by a disclosure of the viewer's own coming out journey – as Troye did in his video. The comment then ends with "Ugh help me" once again opening the opportunity for response. While she is specifically addressing Troye, this allows for any viewer (as well as Troye) to respond. The viewer is establishing a relationship with the YouTuber while attempting to build a conversation. The coming out journey that viewer shares is an intimate one, but the viewer is willing to share it in a public, online space. With the anonymity that YouTube can provide its users, the viewer has the opportunity to disclose this information behind a pictureless profile.



## Approval – General

For the comments categorized under “general,” a similar pattern was followed; however, the commenter, instead of asking for help, states a global call to action or provides more general affirmation or advice for the community. This pattern showed up both with Gigi’s and Troye’s comments.

Ex. 27. male...female...gay...straight...bisexual...pansexual...  
transgender... who cares? in the end we’re all still  
human. and if you judge Gigi, or anyone else for that  
matter, you are wrong for doing that. we love you Gigi,  
male or female. <3

Here the viewer provides an affirmation, but it is less directed at Gigi. The viewer moves towards a more general affirmation towards all who identify within any gender and sexual identity. The viewer provides support for the individual but directs it at a general population. The viewer states, “if you judge Gigi, or anyone else for that matter, you are wrong for doing that.” This type of comment also showed up for Troye.

Ex. 28. Wow... What an incredible story. When my mom  
outed me before my dad, he almost killed me at that  
moment ... So I am very happy for Troye’s story and  
I am sure that it will give an immense inspiration not  
just for my peers but those out there who are still in  
the closet ... there always will be at least someone who  
will support you!

This follows a similar pattern where the viewer affirms the YouTuber. The viewer then discloses their own coming out journey. But, instead of asking for help, the viewer provides an affirmation for anyone identifying as queer, “there always will be at least someone who will support you!” The commenter is speaking with an audience in mind and, therefore, is attempting to build community by addressing a general group. They are relating to anyone within this similar online space who may identify similarly to their coming out journey.

Another comment from Gigi’s comment section shows the significance that coming out videos can have on a community of people who share similar experiences or identities.

Ex. 29. nice to see a TRANSGENDER role model that has  
what it takes to better the world for trans people WE  
NEED YOU GIGI keep it up xxx

The viewer refers to Gigi as a “role model.” This comment signifies the importance that representation can play for queer viewers in online spaces. Coming out videos do not just impact the individual’s journey, but have the potential to “better the world for trans people.” This comment shows a viewer recognizing a more global impact that self-disclosure can have for gender minorities as a community.

A comment within Troye’s data shows a commenter calling for a more ideal world where people are more accepting.

Ex. 30. At some point in their lives people make a choice of who they want to be and that choice should be respected.

As a reaction from Troye’s coming out video, the viewer calls for an action for all people to respect the choices of others. Within this comment, the viewer is less individually impacted by Troye’s self-disclosure. The viewer sees the potential for a more global impact to occur from Troye’s coming out video.

## Discussion

From my data analysis, a conclusion on whether a gay or transgender individual is received more positively on online spaces cannot be determined. However, the analyzed comments show a slight difference in how viewers respond to the self-disclosure based on the three categories: biology, religion, and approval. The fact that Gigi, the transgender, received more arguments regarding her biological make-up is not a surprise. The misalignment between Gigi’s gender expression and identity with her own biological sex is an argument that has been made and researched previously. However, there is an interesting trend that exists which shows commenters evaluating or engaging with her biology. This is found in Examples 2 and 3 where there is a direct engagement with Gigi’s biological markers. Within these comments, the viewer is moving away from a theoretical argument regarding the alignment of identity and biological sex towards a direct personal relationship with an individual. This movement from general to individual also shows up in the criticism based on religion.

Troye received the majority of comments that mentioned religion; however, both YouTubers received comments that used religion to criticize their act of disclosure. Religion, like biology, has been the basis of arguments used against all individuals within the queer community. The comments moved away from addressing a general audience, and instead showed a

personal connection between the viewer and YouTuber. This is seen in Example 15 where the viewer states “hope you go to hell SLOWLY.” The viewer is transitioning towards a personal criticism against Gigi’s gender identity. Example 17 shows a similar personal criticism which states, “please take him already god, please.” Within this category, commenters are not only using this online space to make general comments about religious beliefs; instead, they are specifically directing their criticism towards a queer individual. These comments contain both elements of disapproval and condemnation.

Within the comments, trends in the data show an attempt to form both personal connections and to build communities among those with similar identities and coming out experiences. The data shows that, while people showed approval for the YouTuber, they were also seeking approval from others with their own coming out journey. In “Queer Identity Online,” the researchers show that many queer individuals go online for both representation, information, and spaces of self-disclosure (Fox and Ralston 636). Within the data, viewers are shown seeking and affirming the YouTubers, who serve as a form of representation. Upon watching the video, viewers then replicate the coming out format within their own comments. Finally, they use the online space to disclose their own queer identity.

With this clear increase of queer individuals using online spaces to self-disclose identities, more research is needed to determine the major implications that the language used can have on both individual users as well as whole communities. Clear homophobia and transphobia continue to exist within these online spaces as collected in the data. With further research, more policies can be implemented to control or prevent discriminatory content in spaces that claim inclusivity and acceptance. While there is significant research regarding the treatment of queer people in physical spaces, a disparity remains for the treatment of queer people in online spaces in the research. Creating a safe space and further support for vulnerable teen populations, specifically those who are still within their coming out journey, is necessary. This identified need requires further study and research regarding implications on positive and negative interactions within these spaces.

There were limitations in this research. In my data, I selected two coming out videos based on the demographics and viewership of the YouTubers. More than two videos could be analyzed in further research to see how other YouTubers, specifically those with a smaller viewership, are received by their viewers. Also, further research could focus on YouTubers with different demographics. For example, both YouTubers I analyzed identify

as white. Future research could study how queer people of color are received in online spaces. The two YouTubers also identified as gay and transgender. Many other queer identities were not included in this research. Further research could focus on how varying queer identities are disclosed and received in online spaces. My overall data set was limited to a total of 300 comments. More data could be collected to see if the trends identified would be reinforced within a larger dataset. The comments pulled for my research focused on initial reactions to the video. This study did not focus on viewer-to-viewer interactions within the comments. Research that analyzed these interactions in the comment section could further reinforce how community is built in online spaces.

## **Conclusion**

Coming out is a journey that queer people all experience. While the journey can seem like an individual experience, it is also a journey that people can experience collectively. With the increase of technology to self-disclose and share coming out narratives in online spaces, coming out no longer has a simple individual impact but a global impact on the queer community. Sharing an individual's coming out journey can impact a multitude of others to share their own identities and journeys. Online spaces break down the barriers of isolation that many queer people have faced in the past. Ellen's proclamation of her queer identity was a confession heard across a country, and now, every individual has the potential to make the same type of proclamation. Coming out videos have global effect because they provide representation, not just for queer people but for all people, to see and hear. While coming out videos can serve as intimate relationships between the viewer and YouTuber, the impact of the disclosure does not end there. The impact changes and shapes the way an entire society views a minority group and their experiences.

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