Abstract: The discourse surrounding transgender people has for a long time been influenced by certain narrative practices necessary to authenticate people’s trans status to medical professionals. This conventional narrative (master narrative), based on ideals of hetero- and cisnormativity, has led to stereotypical representations of trans identities. These largely continue to exist today. Nevertheless, counter-discourse to these stereotypical representations is becoming more prominent. Particularly YouTube has become an increasingly popular platform for counter-discursive action. The current case study therefore focusses on two transgender YouTubers who challenge the normative ideals by creating their own counter-discourse. The YouTubers address four major topics of stereotypical representation: the ideal of binary gender, heterosexuality, the wish to transition in order to pass as cisgender, and the belief that transgender people have always identified as the other gender. The two creators recognise the discursively reproduced stereotypes and use a combination of five different strategies to refute them: INVERSION, PARODY, COMPLEXIFICATION, SHIFT, and PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. Making use of these strategies, the subjects’ positive discourse aims at presenting a multi-faceted representation of transgender identities.

Keywords: counter-discourse; Positive Discourse Analysis; transnormativity; YouTube

1 Introduction

The discourse surrounding transgender people has for a long time been influenced by certain narrative practices necessary to authenticate people’s trans status to medical professionals (Dame 2013: 43). The conventional narrative, largely based on ideals of heteronormativity, has led to stereotypical representations of trans
identities and normative ideals believed within the community. These continue to exist today.

Currently, YouTube is one of the most prevalent platforms for trans people to exchange ideas and information on transgender issues. However, even a lot of the videos found there often show conventionalised narratives, representing normative expectations. This kind of discourse may make some trans people feel misrepresented and marginalised.

Nevertheless, there also exist other videos that provide a counter-discourse to these normative ideals. The two YouTubers that are the subjects of this study share such videos on their channels. The data will be approached from the perspective of Positive Discourse Analysis, focussing on how the four normative ideals presented above can be challenged. Specifically, I ask the question: Which strategies are used by the two YouTubers to construct counter-discourse to the normative ideals typically represented in transgender YouTube videos and to authenticate non-normative identities (including their own)?

To answer this question, I first discuss the connection between identity and language, focussing specifically on the expression of gender and normative ideals surrounding transgender discourse before detailing previous work on counter-discourse (Section 2). Section 3 explains the method used for this analysis, while Section 4 shows the results and discussion. Lastly, Section 5 summarises the main points.

2 Transgender discourse

2.1 Identity and heteronormative discourse

Bucholtz and Hall approach identity as “constituted in linguistic interaction” (2005: 585) and define it as “the social positioning of self and other” (2005: 586, emphasis omitted). They make sense of identity in interaction by way of five principles, which are interconnected: the EMERGENCE PRINCIPLE sees identity as emerging in and through interaction (2005: 588). The POSITIONALITY PRINCIPLE describes identity as the positioning of a speaker in different roles and categories during interaction (2005: 592). The INDEXICALITY PRINCIPLE explains how an identity can be indexed, i.e., signalled, by several processes in language, such as the labelling of identity categories (2005: 594), which is one of the most overt ways in which identity is expressed in communication. Other processes include “implicatures and presuppositions” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 594) to signal one’s identity and position oneself in relation to others. The RELATIONALITY PRINCIPLE assumes identity to be constructed through relations between different identity categories and other people, e.g., whether they are similar or different from one another (2005: 598). In interaction, identity can never be represented as whole,
only localised. The last principle outlined is the **Partialness Principle**, which explains identity as being made up of several partial construction processes, rather than one specific one (2005: 606).

Schneider (2001) makes a point for people possessing a “structure of identities” (*Identitätengefüge*; 2001: 36). This structure of identities is made out of several dimensions of identity and group belongings (e.g., ethnicity, social class) as well as several identity roles in social interaction. In all of this, gender is assumed to be one of the most important dimensions that make up a person’s identity (cf. e.g., Bucholtz and Hall 2010: 590). It is defined as a concept apart from anatomy (Feinberg 2006: 205) and considered to be a cultural construct (Stryker 2008: 11). Sex, on the other hand, is often considered biological (e.g., DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2014: 10). While in arguably most people, both concepts align (i.e., a person who is assigned female at birth grows up to be a woman), this relationship is neither necessary, nor deterministic (Stryker 2008: 11). People whose gender is congruent with the sex that they were assigned at birth are often called cisgender (Stryker 2008: 22). People whose gender identity does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth are referred to as transgender.

Many people take this to mean that transgender people identify with the opposite (i.e., other binary) gender (cf. e.g., Stone 2006: 22). This idea is part of a heteronormative viewpoint, which is defined as “those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary” (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 55). Heteronormativity, therefore, assumes binary gender and heterosexuality (Motschenbacher 2014: 244), excluding the possibility of non-binary genders, when it has been shown that, in fact, there is a multitude of gender categories which cannot simply be explained by a simple binary: “Numerous conceptions of gender confront one another in a multi-dimensional space, each of them proposing a different alternative to male and heterosexual norms” (Beaubatie 2021). With all these different gendered possibilities, the importance of agency and self-identification is increasingly stressed (e.g., Borba and Milani 2017: 16).

While the social and legal sphere concerning the LGBTQ+ community has changed a lot in the 21st century (e.g., legalisation of same-sex marriage, anti-discrimination laws, the declassification of transgender as mental disorder), transgender people still find themselves struggling for access to resources: “These resources […] allow those in the dominant position to impose their conception of gender as being the only legitimate one” (Beaubatie 2021). In consequence, transgender people often still find themselves in the position of needing to authenticate their transgender identities to medical professionals in order to gain access to clinical assistance to medically transition (Dame 2013: 43; cf. also Cromwell 2006).

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1 But see, for instance, Stryker (2008: 11) for a discussion on sex also being culturally determined.
Not only do transgender people need to produce such a life narrative at all, this story also often is expected to follow a very stereotypical pattern, as aptly summarised by Zimman (2012: 12–13):

[A] trans person knows from a young age that they are not meant to be a boy/girl, despite others’ perception of them – perhaps there was some kind of mistake. They likely spent each night hoping that they would wake up the next morning with a different body. They always found themselves romantically and sexually attracted to members of the ‘same’ sex, while preferring the friendship and activities of members of the ‘opposite’ sex. The earlier these patterns emerged, the stronger the patient’s claim to an unchangeable gender identity. […] For the true transsexual, intense distress over the gendered characteristics of the body create a desire for hormonal treatment, genital surgery, and any other procedure that might be needed to produce a normative male or female body.

This narrative delineates what is considered the norm for transgender people. The four main points considered are: a) the self-identification with the other binary gender than assigned at birth, which might be based on the fundamental belief that there are only the two binary genders; b) heterosexuality, with transgender people identifying as homosexual before the recognition that they are actually the other (binary) gender than assigned at birth; c) the need to ‘fully’ transition (i.e. undergo hormone treatment and surgeries) in order to pass;2 and d) the idea that people who are transgender have always known they identified as the other gender. Raun (2014: 371) calls this the “archetypal story of transsexuality”.

Hausman (2006) stresses this narrative’s importance for the transgender community as it can help others to navigate “the strict protocols of the gender clinics” (2006: 337). However, these normative ideals can also be harmful, as they are based largely on heteronormativity and other features of cisnormativity, such as the consistency of gender identity (cf. Vergueiro 2015, as discussed in Borba and Milani 2017: 9), especially since they not only exist as ideals in society in general, but are also partially assumed within the transgender community as well (cf. Jones 2019) and continue to exist today.

### 2.2 Counter-discourse (on YouTube)

The data in this study are approached with Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA). PDA is related to the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, with which it shares the assumption that language can assert power. However, PDA shifts the focus from how inequalities

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2. Passing means to be recognised by others as the gender one identifies with and chooses to live as (most commonly in association with a binary gender) and, sometimes, to actively hide the fact that one is transgender (e.g., Cromwell 2006: 511–512).
are reproduced to texts that “seek [...] possibilities for transformations which can overcome or mitigate limits on human well-being” (Fairclough 2013: 14). The driving factor behind PDA, then, is to analyse texts that are positively connotated (Martin and Rose 2007: 315). It assumes that the way the world is represented in discourse can – positively – impact and change the way people see the world by providing a counter-discourse (cf. Macgilchrist 2007: 75) to the mainstream representations. “These stories, or counter-stories [...] help to document, and perhaps even validate, a ‘counter-reality’” (Andrews 2004: 2). Counter-narratives are said to relate back to master narratives – i.e., the prevalent stereotypical narratives – and are sometimes created by first presenting the master narrative in order to subvert it later on (2004: 1–2). DeFrancisco and Palczewski refer to this act of counter-discourse as “talking back”, which “is not mere talk but talk with a political consciousness” (2014: 118).

Many young transgender people use the internet to gain information and knowledge on trans issues (Jones 2019: 86). These online resources have become increasingly used to discuss relevant issues such as “gaining access to medical care, ‘passing’ guides, the nature of trans as an identity category, as well as performing advocacy on these issues” (Dame 2013: 45). Not only do these kinds of videos offer trans individuals a way to simply express their identity, but they also offer them the opportunity to challenge and complement typical media representation of transgender people, i.e., to provide counter-discourse. Horak (2014: 574) therefore also views such videos (vlogs) as “a form of political action” in that they provide a self-authoritative media outlet to represent transgender experience and gather communal support. Especially YouTube gives everyone the chance to ‘talk back’ (Raun 2012: 11) as well as find a community of support.

Nevertheless, some of these YouTube videos, Jones (2019: 86) argues, still show “clichéd and homogenized representations, with young amateur broadcasters following a seemingly fixed approach to both creating and editing a transition diary”. Jones addresses this prevalence of normative ideals within transgender discourse by focussing on two transgender YouTubers who make claims of authenticity for their own identity by abiding to transnormative representations. Her subjects, for instance, claim authenticity “by drawing an essential link between heterosexual desire and gender identity” (Jones 2019: 98) and make reference to passing as cisgender being desirable, normal, and typical (2019: 91). This shows the subject’s stance towards “what is acceptable or legitimate in terms of transgender identity for her viewers” (Jones 2019: 92).

In these videos, creators often position themselves as experts, a concept often at the core of transgender identity discourse (Dame 2013; Meyerowitz 2006). Expertness can be achieved through personal expression, i.e., through story-telling or in the form of advice to the viewers (Dame 2013: 42). People who give advice online often
tend to establish their qualification as advice giver by referencing personal stories and experience (Morrow 2006: 542). While many trans people will identify strongly with the normative script (i.e., the master narrative), “those who do not align with it may feel marginalised or inauthentic due to its prominence” (Jones 2019: 88; see also Garrison 2018 on not feeling “trans enough”).

The videos analysed in this study represent a particular part of the counter-discourse. The vlogs considered in this study actively challenge the normative ideals existent within the typical counter-discourse itself, therefore representing an even more marginalised part of the community.

Other studies have considered this specific part of counter-discourse before. For example, Dame (2013: 58–59) discusses extracts from a YouTuber who clearly states that not every transgender person identifies as binary as well as the fact that some people might not want to transition and/or pass as cisgender. Garrison (2018) presents interviews with trans people who report on the feeling of not being trans enough based on “their atypical life-history and transition narratives” (2018: 626). Crowley (2022) looks at legitimising discourses of non-binary YouTubers and finds that in the videos analysed, ‘personal feeling’, ‘lexical definition’ and ‘historical fact’ were used as legitimising strategies for non-binary identity, which supports the idea of the trans person as expert on the lived experience. What sets this study apart from these mentioned above is the specific focus on the discursive strategies used by the YouTubers to achieve their argumentative goal.

While this kind of discourse can indeed be found online, we should also not forget that this deviation from the master narrative “may be available only to those who are privileged by other identity vectors (being white, middle class, partnered, and able-bodied, for example)” (Rondot 2016: 547), and not the majority of trans people.

3 Methods

3.1 Subjects and data

Two YouTubers are the subject of this paper: Ryan³ indexes himself as a ‘trans guy’ and ‘trans-masculine’ who is not binary. Ryan uses he/him/his pronouns and

³ A pseudonym used in this paper for anonymity. While both creators discussed in this paper choose to appear as public persons and put their content online, I am following conventions of anonymising people who may “be potentially vulnerable and, as such, it is appropriate to protect their identities through the use of pseudonyms” (Jones 2019: 90).
identifies his sexuality as queer. Jess⁴ is non-binary, pronoun-indifferent⁵ and identifies as bisexual. The two creators are friends and collaborate on videos from time to time. Both subjects are middle-class, white North-Americans and therefore represent the most widely acknowledged demographic group on YouTube (cf. Horak 2014: 576). Nevertheless, it should also be noted that these two individuals hardly represent the entire community that engages in counter-discourse to normative ideals within transgender discourse. Rather, they shall be seen as one example of the kind of counter-discourse that people may come across.

The data for this study are 13 YouTube videos collected from the YouTube channels of the two creators, of which three are collaborations between the two. The videos are roughly between four and 20 minutes in length (with most of them between nine and 15 minutes). In their videos, Jess also experiments with including pictures and writing and has other guest appearances. All videos chosen were uploaded in the year 2018 and selected based on the criteria that they address issues relating to the four main topics relevant for the analysis. The four overarching topics are as follows: a) Gender, b) Sexuality, c) Transitioning and passing as cis-gender, and d) Questioning one’s identity.

The videos were transcribed by first downloading the subtitles automatically generated by YouTube, and then checking those transcriptions for correctness (including the addition of pauses and stress markers).⁶

### 3.2 Coding and analysis

The approach to data coding is adapted from the framework of PDA, as described by Macgilchrist (2007). She makes use of the concept of framing – derived from cognitive linguistics – where a frame is defined as the “background knowledge ‘activated’ by one particular word (concept)” (2007: 75). However, in her paper, she uses the idea of reframing only as part of her strategies for counter-discourse. I propose to regard reframing as the general aim of counter-discourse. Using Macgilchrist’s definition of frame, the aim of counter-discourse is to allow for more possibilities of “background knowledge” (2007: 75) than represented by the master narrative, and therefore to reframe a concept either partially or in its entirety. In order to achieve this goal, counter-discourse then makes use of several strategies (cf. Table 1). All these

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⁴ A pseudonym.
⁵ In this paper, I will refer to Jess with the singular use of they/them/their to distinguish clearly between Jess and Ryan.
⁶ The transcription conventions were adapted from Jefferson (2004).
discursive strategies may occur on their own, but more often occur in combination with each other.

The transcribed data was first sorted according to topic (whereas some topics, naturally, overlapped). After the topics were assigned, the data was coded according to the five counter-discursive strategies. Cases in which the strategy was not immediately apparent were discussed with another researcher. While discourse on gender and sexuality cannot always be categorised as counter-discursive and other dimensions of discourse might appear more often in other contexts, the data analysed here mostly presented the identities spoken of as conflicting with normative representations, making the counter-discursive nature of this particular data explicit. Furthermore, the two YouTubers approach the topic mainly as an issue of identity—often with a focus on their own experience—and discuss other socio-political dimensions of impact only rarely, unless it is part of their own experience.

For the analysis, mainly linguistic strategies were considered. However, as the data is video data, other modalities than speech, e.g., gestures and writing, could not be entirely disregarded. The different modes of communication are often understood “as intimately connected, enmeshed through the complexity of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INVERSION</strong></td>
<td>Clearly state that assumptions and frames represented by the mainstream are not true Present your own point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Macgilchrist 2007: 76)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARODY</strong></td>
<td>Activate common knowledge to catch audience’s attention but question said knowledge at the same time Often ironic tone and/or use of POLYPHONY(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Macgilchrist 2007: 77)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPLEXIFICATION</strong></td>
<td>Include aspects of the story which are usually omitted from mainstream discourse, offering a more “nuanced or detailed picture of the situation” (Macgilchrist 2007: 78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Macgilchrist 2007: 78)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SHIFT</strong></td>
<td>Shift the issue away from usual topic; search for other explanations or parts that lie beneath the most obvious explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Macgilchrist 2007: 80): part of the strategy ‘partial reframing’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PERSONAL EXPERIENCE</strong></td>
<td>Establish qualifications and expert status by referencing personal experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Dame 2013: 40–41): ‘expert status’ and (Morrow 2006: 542): establish qualification by referencing personal experience</td>
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\(^a\)Polyphony is defined as an utterance which expresses several voices and therefore several points of view, which allows a speaker to not only “echo […] a point of view which [they] manifestly (do) not assume” (Roulet 1996) but also to exert their own point of view.
interaction, representation and communication” (Jewitt 2009: 1; see also Bucholtz and Hall 2016) and therefore aid in meaning-making. The gestures considered here present merely a small part of those that could be considered in a fully multimodal study; explained in detail are those needed to understand the linguistic utterances. These are metaphorics, which are often used to express abstract concepts, as well as deictic gestures, which are used to “point to a location in gesture space that stands for an abstract concept” (McNeill and Pedelty 1995: 65).

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Gender

The normative representation of binary gender has several facets to be considered here: one of those is the fact that some people deny the existence of non-binary people (JESS: “they don’t believe what I’m saying. […] it’s just that like (.) non-binary people don’t exist”). Another is the idea that non-binary people should not be considered under the transgender label. Ryan discusses this point in Example 1:

(1) RYAN: [...] there’s a lot of things that happen in this community. A lot people that like (.) like gatekeep or like give attitude to people who are non-binary and say that non-binary people shouldn’t be under the trans umbrella and you should just be non-binary or trans, like you can’t (.) be [...] together.

In order to counter these stereotypes, the two subjects first allude to them in order to make people aware of these norms, creating their counter-narrative in relation to the master narrative (cf. Andrews 2004: 1–2).

The stereotypes are countered by way of a very open and broad gender conceptualisation and by Jess and Ryan explaining their own gender experience. The subjects explicitly state that there are more gendered variants than just the two binary genders usually recognised. To conceptualise these different genders, both YouTubers make use of complexification, as will be shown in Example 2 in combination with Figure 1.

(2) RYAN: [...] let’s say, as an example, that (.) gender is binary. @ [...] L o l. Male and female on this side. ((Picture 1)) This is how I imagine it in my head, and there’s a middle. ((Picture 2)) That’s how I see it. I am in the middle, but more on the man side. ((Picture 3))

7 Cited from video-transcripts. Transcripts can be made available upon request.
The excerpt starts with an instance of **parody**, where Ryan mocks the fact that people assume gender to be only binary. He indicates the parodic meaning by laughing ("gender is binary. @"), and saying “lol”. Then, he goes on to conceptualise gender as a spectrum with the two binary genders (male and female) on both ends and other identities existing anywhere on the spectrum. This is a **complexification** of the issue, as it makes room for other possibilities of gender identities than just the two binary genders (cf. Borba and Milani 2017: 15; Richards et al. 2016: 96). This statement is underlined with **personal experience** when Ryan locates his identity “in the middle, but more on the man side”.

**Figure 1:** Gestures used while talking about Jess and Ryan’s gender conceptualisation (anonymised versions of video screenshots).
This representation is aided by his gestures (cf. Figure 1): First, Ryan indicates the two binary end points of the spectrum. He then moves one of his hands to indicate the middle, and moves it again into the direction of his left hand (which is indicating the male point). This shows a combination of metaphoric and deictic gestures: He uses his hands to indicate how he conceptualises gender metaphorically (an abstract concept) and combines this with deictic gestures and language to indicate a point on the conceptualised spectrum (e.g., “on this side”). The conceptualisation of genders – first by Ryan and then also by Jess – makes use of orientational metaphors (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 14–21), both in gestures and speech, as a way to anchor the abstract concept of gender categories in space and also to contrast different categories (e.g., the two binary genders as two poles). Even though his own conceptualisation of gender is quite specific, Ryan also leaves other options of conceptualisation open by saying “that’s how I see it”.

Jess then uses complexification even further by stating that other conceptualisations of gender could also be possible and that different identities could exist in different locations than those indicated by Ryan. In order to do so, they make use of Ryan’s gesture space, and construct their conceptualisations on top of Ryan’s by moving their hand above the spectrum indicated by Ryan and then moving their hand below the spectrum. Again, these gestures are both metaphoric and deictic in nature. Jess also uses deictic language that accompanies the gestures by stating that people could “exist like up here […] and down] there”.

They then complexify the issue even more and state that the “gender map” could exist in one place – indicating the map in Ryan’s gesture-space which includes Ryan’s spectrum – and “somebody is not even on it”. Ryan agrees with Jess’s conceptualisation (“a:bsolute[ly]”), and even goes a step further by saying “this doesn’t even exist”. This indicates Ryan’s awareness that these conceptualisations are just an imagination and do not exist as an actual space. These different kinds of conceptualisations exemplify the idea that there is a vast amount of gender categories and identities that could exist (cf. Borba and Milani 2017: 15–16). Ryan furthermore mentions that his identity shifted over time:

(3) Ryan: Okay. And ar- I- a long time ago, I went to like the doctor and I tried to get like diagnosed and like […] get to the programme and I said (.) I- this here, I literally showed them that in my head it’s like, it’s like this, this, I’m in the middle, but in the middle of the middle. But now it’s different.
Jess: Oh now it’s not even in the middle [of the middle. Is it =
Ryan: No. no no.]
Jess: = like the middle of the middle and the middle and the middle?
While he now identifies more towards the middle of the spectrum, a few years ago he identified more towards the male pole of the spectrum. This questions the
unchanging nature of gender (cf. Vergueiro 2015, as discussed in Borba and Milani 2017: 9).

This COMPLEXIFICATION of his own identity is also presented from the perspective of PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. Ryan not only argues against the stereotypical representations as an objective observer, but also authenticates his point of view by infusing it with his own experience. This is related to the relationality principle by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). However, as opposed to what Bucholtz and Hall discuss, in this case, the authority is not granted by way of “institutionalized power and ideology” (2005: 603), but by the idea that transgender people are to be regarded as experts on the lived trans experience (cf. Dame 2013; and Meyerowitz 2006). This authority then gives credit to Ryan's arguments.

Ryan indexes his identity with several labels (“trans-masculine”, “trans guy”), and openly refuses to take on other specific labels (“binary”, “non-binary”). This relates to the indexicality principle, as mentioned by Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 594). In doing so, Ryan positions himself as a non-normative person. In a similar vein, Jess indexes their identity by using several labels, which they then also evaluate: “I recently came out as: genderqueer as trans as non-binary as a whole bunch of squiggly cool words.” This self-description is an instance of PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. After Jess uses the labels above to describe their identity, the conversation continues as follows:

(4)  RYAN: ((ironic tone)) But wait.
    JESS: Mhm?
    RYAN: ((ironic tone)) But wait.
    JESS: Yes?
    RYAN: ((ironic tone)) Did you just say trans (.) and non-binary?
    JESS: (.) That – that is me.
    RYAN: What [the:?

Here, Ryan uses PARODY to talk about Jess's identity by invoking the norm that non-binary people should not identify under the trans umbrella (i.e., trans people are always binary), and turns it around by mocking this idea. Since Ryan and Jess are friends, Ryan is fully aware of Jess's identity. The question “Did you just say trans (.) and non-binary?” therefore serves as exemplification of what people might stereotypically think when they hear Jess describing themselves with those two identity markers. Ryan uses polyphony to convey irony in his parodic performance, imitating a person who is of the opinion that a non-binary person should not be considered trans. This process is described as denaturalisation by Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 601–602), in which speakers may use parodic performance to create a false image of their own identity (or ideological stance). Ryan uses this strategy to
position himself as a person who does not condone such normative thinking (see positionality principle, Bucholtz and Hall 2005).

However, afterwards, he also seemingly feels the need to clarify his position on the issue, using inversion: “today we’re gonna talk about how you can identify as non-binary and as trans at the same time? And how that’s okay”.

On another occasion (Example 5), Jess again uses personal experience to express their own identity. In this segment, they make their claim to authority on the issue of their non-binary identity based solely on their own experience. This therefore exemplifies a rare occurrence of personal experience without the co-occurrence of another strategy.

(5) JESS: [...] At the end of the day, I’m not a boy, ‘cause I’m just not. [...] Same goes for entirely simply girl. I’m not a girl. I’m not just a tomboy. ‘Cause I’m just not. I don’t know what to tell you. I know I’m genderqueer the same way you know what and who you are. I just do. That’s really all there is to it.

4.2 Sexuality

Sexuality is not discussed as much in the videos chosen for the analysis as the topic of gender. However, the two YouTubers still show an awareness of the fact that sexuality is often represented heteronormatively in discourse, even if this is sometimes not explicitly named. Especially Ryan talks about his own sexuality and his journey to finding his sexual identity. He was confronted with stereotypes by his family who assumed that (after coming out as trans) he “still only wanted to be with women, and [...] wanted to be with lesbian women” as well as the fact that they “expect you to like women forever”. This seems to be related to the ideal of an unchanging identity, similar to what Vergueiro (2015, as discussed in Borba and Milani 2017: 9) describes for cisnormative ideology.

It is important to notice, however, that this norm was reproduced by Ryan’s family members, who are not part of the trans community. In fact, the videos analysed do not contain any mention of these stereotypes being reproduced within the community. It is possible that this is indicative of normative heterosexuality not being as prevalent anymore within the trans community. In any case, the stereotypes reproduced outside the community still have an impact on the perceived norms within the trans community. In his videos, Ryan talks about his sexuality very openly and introduces his own story on finding and accepting his sexuality. His own journey starts off with a very stereotypical narrative representation:
RYAN: [...] I realised that I like girls when I was twelve. [...] And there was like no representation, there was nothing [...] I did not know that it was okay for girls to like girls.

This narrative, as Zimman (2012: 12) describes it, is very normative: trans people identify as homosexual before their realisation that they are trans, and identify as heterosexual once they come out. However, after this initial part of his story, Ryan quickly diverts from the master narrative:

RYAN: [...] when I came out as trans, I was like ‘I still like women, so I guess I don’t know how to identify myself, I’m a lesbian’. But here’s the thing, okay, I:-(.) I feel like I have (.) repressed so much of: who I was, because I wasn’t (.) happy with how I was presenting, and (.) I wasn’t out as trans, and people did not see me as male, that I felt like I was repressing so much that, when I came out and I was finally able to be seen as who I am inside, and I felt (.) so comfortable with my body, I was able to say ‘Yo, you know you know what, I actually also like men’. So I like men, and I like women. And I also like people who are in between and people who have no gender at- it literally doesn’t matter to me. Because (.) people are people.

In Example 7, three different strategies are represented: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE is used to describe Ryan’s own identity. By relaying his personal story, Ryan can give credibility to the arguments he makes, since his own experience in this area makes him an expert on this issue (cf. Dame 2013: 44). It is furthermore a case of COMPLEXIFICATION, since he is stating that he is not only attracted to women and men but also to other genders, e.g., non-binary people, and that to him “people are people”. It is therefore not only a COMPLEXIFICATION of the topic of sexual orientation, but also of gender identities. Finally, this example can also be seen as a SHIFT: Ryan proposes that the way he identified his sexuality when he was not out as trans was not actually his real sexual identity – instead, the way he felt and presented came about because of his repressed feelings of actually being male. He SHIFTS the issue from his identity as being attracted to women (i.e., being heterosexual, or, before being out as trans, indexing himself as lesbian), to the topic of his own comfort level with his gender identity and the way he is perceived by society. Once he was seen as the person (and gender) he actually is, he finally had the opportunity to express his sexuality truthfully.

Similar to the conceptualisation of gender, sexuality is represented very openly in the videos analysed, often with the metaphor of a spectrum. This spectrum, however, does not only include sexual orientation, but also represents other dimensions of a person’s sexual identity, e.g., concerning asexuality or polyamory. This leads to a multifaceted representation in terms of the “structure of identities” (cf. Schneider 2001: 35–36), for which even this one part of identity – sexuality – is made up of several entities and group belongings.
The spectrum that Jess and their video-guest describe for sexual orientation in another video is conceptualised as the “range between things”, which can have “multiple points”. This is a case of complexification, since they describe sexual identity as consisting of several layers, as opposed to just one which indicates two identities, hetero- and homosexuality. Jess does not make clear reference to their own sexual identity in the videos chosen for analysis. They only mention it implicitly once, while using inversion to state that “bisexuals are wonderful”. While Jess does not explicitly refer to themselves here, they use both their hands to caress their face while saying this, signalling that they are talking about their own identity. Therefore, it also counts as a personal experience, even if it is just implicit. By stating this, they also not only index their own identity but position themselves as someone who thinks positively about untypical identities.

4.3 Transitioning and passing as cisgender

The stereotypical representation of transgender people includes that everyone wants to transition and pass as cisgender. This normative ideal is referenced in the videos several times. For instance, Ryan recalls that transitioning used to be represented in a very specific way. This normative narrative was reproduced online as well as offline and other forms of transitioning, or the option of not transitioning, were not accepted:

(8) RYAN: [… ] you go on hormones (.) two years later you have top surgery, then you have a hysterectomy, then possibly bottom surgery. This was the- this was the view that I had seen and in that time you get your name and your gender marker changed. These normative representations and ideals are called into question by both Ryan and Jess. For instance, in Example 9, Jess uses inversion to counter the idea that every trans person wishes to transition. They furthermore address the fact that transitioning is not a defining feature of trans identity:

(9) JESS: […] physically transitioning doesn’t make a person trans. It’s not (.) a requirement. There are tons of trans guys who don’t want, for example, bottom surgery and they’re still guys. And trans feminine folks who may want to start estrogen but can’t afford it are still trans. If I were to change my mind about top surgery, I’d still be trans because I don’t identify exclusively as the gender I was assigned at birth. And that’s all it takes to be trans. (.) Boom.
Jess explicitly mentions that a person’s transition status does not determine their trans identity. Jess furthermore explicitly states that there are several people who do not want to, or cannot afford to, undergo certain steps in the transition process. Example 9 therefore also represents the strategy of COMPLEXIFICATION and Jess especially pays attention to people’s self-determination in the transition process, since the individual transition process might include certain steps in transition, or it might not. It is also a PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, though, since Jess talks about their own transition journey and is able to validate their own trans identity with the definition they provide. They therefore clearly position themselves as a member of the trans community.

Agency over one’s own body is another topic in both Jess’s and Ryan’s videos. In Example 10, which represents overall a PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, Ryan describes why he does not want to have a cis-looking body and how he feels in his own body:

(10) RYAN: [...] I didn’t have any agency over my body (.) for years. A doctor said “it’s a girl”, I was forced to put on dresses and makeup and be socialised as female when (.) I was not. And it- it’s painful to talk about, honestly. And (.) I’ve had to kind of realise that oh my god I now have agency over my body. So for me, having agency over my body means to embrace my body and to love the body that I’m in. [...] it is super important (.) for me to understand that I have this body. This is the only body that I have. I can absolutely modify this body, I can have phalloplasty, I can have metoidioplasty. I have had top surgery. And yes, it is to make my body appear more masculine. But here’s the thing, it’s not because I wanna look cis, all right. It’s because I wanna be comfortable in my own skin. And having a flat chest (.) absolutely was something that I needed, [...] So kind of like going off of that, it’s really important that I make the distinction that I had top surgery ’cause I wanted a flat chest and it wasn’t. I don’t think, related to I’m a boy I need a flat chest. [...] I would love to have phalloplasty in the future and it’s not because I wanna be a man. It’s because it’s something that would make me more comfortable and it doesn’t make me more of a man to have phalloplasty or not, doesn’t make me more of a man to wear a packer or stand to pee, it doesn’t. What makes me more of a man is that I don’t say it makes me more of a man. That’s not a thing that I say. I’m more me. I’m more Ryan. [...] I’ve always just wanted the body that I felt comfortable in, and not the body that someone else was telling me (.) that I should feel comfortable in.

Ryan begins with describing that he used to feel like he had no agency over his body. Because of the high amounts of dysphoria that he experienced due to having no agency, he wanted to change his body to appear more masculine. However, he did not do it because he wanted to appear cis. Instead, he chose to undergo surgery (and take
testosterone) in order to feel comfortable in his own body. He therefore shifts the issue away from the ideal of transitioning in order to pass as cis to taking steps to ensure that he feels comfortable in his body, whatever those steps are. While Ryan does admit that the body he wishes to have is a masculine body, he explicitly states that his reason is not that he believes that his body appearance determines his gender (also representing an inversion). He therefore clearly rejects the norm that a cis body is the “ideal body” and explicitly states that he does not wish to follow the path that is represented by the master narrative.

Nevertheless, Jess and Ryan also realise that some trans people might want to pass as cisgender and might want to transition in a normative way:

(11) JESS: Yeah, but you don’t have to do that at all, you can follow whatever path you want. (Screen reads: ‘follow YOUR path :)’) Also, you can follow the most traditional [path in the world].

This can be seen as a further complexification, since both Jess and Ryan accept parts of the two frames presented, i.e., they accept that there are people whose identity does align with the typically represented norms as well as people whose identity does not. They furthermore recognise all these identities as valid, and also specifically pay attention to assuring every individual that they should transition the way they wish by emphasising “follow YOUR path” in writing, therefore aligning themselves with the view that self-identification and self-determination are important (cf. Borba and Milani 2017: 16).

### 4.4 Questioning one’s identity

The last normative representation to discuss in this study is the idea that every transgender person is expected to have known that they are not the gender assigned at birth from a young age. The stereotype also includes the view that everyone who does not fit this ideal or is questioning their gender as well as everyone who is hesitant regarding transitioning is not really transgender. This is recognised by the two YouTubers in several ways. Ryan, for instance, explains:

(12) RYAN: […] when I was younger, I […] questioned myself constantly. […] and because I questioned myself so much, I was like ‘Ah, I can’t be trans. Trans people don’t question themselves this much.’

This clearly shows that Ryan was influenced by the representation of transgender people not being allowed to question their identity. Because of this representation, Ryan believed that he was not transgender for a long time. Jess makes explicit reference to representation on YouTube:
(13) JESS: [...] when folks do come out as not cis on YouTube, it’s usually an assured proclamation, followed by their plan of action. Something like this ‘I need to tell you all that I am a trans guy, and I’ve already been on hormones for almost two weeks now. This is who I am and you need to know because changes are coming quick’. Or ‘I am a trans woman, I’m totally sure, I’ve always known from a very young age and I’m starting my medical transition as soon as I can. It’s going to happen, welcome to it’.

These instances above clearly show what people perceive to be the norm. Jess talks about this very assured representation again in Example 14, addressing the fact that it is actually common for people to question their identity as well as their transition process:

(14) JESS: [...] And it turns out, and I didn’t know this, that a lot of people, trans-guys, trans-masculine people, non-binary who-people who want surgery, a lot of people who: think about having surgery are not totally sure at first. And I didn’t think that was the case. I used to think that all trans guys, like, always knew they wanted top surgery and they never questioned it, and they did it as fast as they could and as soon as the surgery was done they felt amazing. It was like euphoric and fantastic. But so-so much of that is (.) inaccurate. *Surprise*, I learned that the trans narrative isn’t the same for everyone.

Jess mentions how the representation online influenced the way they perceived the reality of being trans, namely thinking that trans people were never wondering, questioning, or doubting themselves and what they wanted. However, Jess counters this view by using INVERSION, stating explicitly that there are a lot of people who “are not totally sure at first” and addressing their impression of the stereotypical narrative often being “inaccurate”. They also use a combination of INVERSION and PARODY when they say “*Surprise*, I learned that the trans narrative isn’t the same for everyone”. The parodic effect is created by referencing the stereotypes in the master narrative which give people the impression that every trans person has the same story. Their mention of “*Surprise*” indicates that they actually were surprised to find out some trans people do question themselves (because they also had had the impression that they did not). However, it also shows that they now feel foolish for having believed that the trans experience actually was the same for everyone. This indicates the power that the master narrative can have over people.

Ryan’s story of how he found out that he is trans starts out similar to the master narrative, but he also says he questioned himself a lot:
RYAN: [...] And I knew that I was somehow somewhat trans but I didn’t even know what that meant. And I kept going back and forth there so: long ‘yes, I’m trans; no, I’m not; yes, I am; no I’m not.’ [...] So I think that the reason why I know I’m trans is because of the back and forth. And because of the repressing my trans identity so much that it kept coming back so hard.

Ryan uses this personal story to invert the master narrative (the questioning being the reason for his self-discovery). He does so by referring to personal experience, stating that it is not only normal but that it is actually good to question oneself, since it can help someone come to the right conclusion.

Furthermore, both Jess and Ryan use shifts to represent the issue of questioning and doubting. Jess uses an instance of personal experience and recalls that they did not identify as trans for a long time, and were also not able to accept their identity as non-binary. This was, however, not due to the fact that they truly doubted their own identity, but more so because the stereotypical representations found in the master narrative made them feel that their identity was not valid. That is the reason why they were not able to accept their own identity and come out for a long time:

JESS: Well, just like [...] internalised what would you call it? Non-binary phobia? = [...] Or would you call it I mean I guess it would just be called (.) if you considered non-binary under the trans-umbrella then it would just be like [transitively] transphobia.
RYAN: ‘Transphobia.’] Yeah.

Jess explains that the reason why they felt like their identity was not valid was because of internalised transphobia and that they struggled with accepting their identity: “for a long time I convinced myself that I just wasn’t comfortable (.) using the word trans [...] I didn’t feel trans enough”. Jess describes how the normative ideals represented in transgender discourse influenced the way they perceived themselves. They did not only fear indexing their identity as trans when talking to others, but also to admit it to themselves. Even though they had, in a way, accepted their gender identity, they did not feel comfortable labelling their identity in this specific way. It therefore shifts the issue from Jess actually doubting their identity to a fear of accepting and expressing this identity because of the representations they were surrounded by. Jess uses this personal experience to also give their story credit. Since they experienced it this way, they can directly oppose the people who criticise their identity.

The feeling of not being trans enough is a topic that is mentioned quite often in the videos analysed and seems to be a re-occurring feature of non-binary trans discourse in general (cf. Garrison 2018). Ryan experienced this feeling with his doctor who told him that he is “not trans enough (.) to get into the program to transition”.
Jess and Ryan posit this representation of trans people’s identity being only valid when they adhere to the normative ideals as the reason that someone might doubt their identity. Ryan explains this shift in Example 17:

(17) RYAN: […] But, (0.5) okay, it is completely normal to doubt yourself and doubt (.) your identity. Because, the thing is that I don’t feel like people doubt themselves. I think that they doubt the process of figuring out who they are. Because you’re not born and you know what trans people are and you’re not born and- and you’re socialised to understand different identities and things like that. So I feel like, (.) what you end up doubting i:s (0.5) like your (1.0) acceptance of your identity. And (.) you can doubt your identity absolutely, like, am I trans, but deep down, inside, if you are trans, uhm, (.) I feel like there’s no: (.) like denying that, no matter how (0.5) doubtful you might be?

First, Ryan uses inversion to state that doubting yourself is normal. Then, he shifts the issue so far that he says people do not doubt their actual identity, since “there’s no: (.) like denying that”. By stating this, Ryan comments on the validity of transgender identities in general: since cisnormativity posits transgender people as deviant and unnatural (cf. Borba and Milani 2017: 9), people might assume trans identities to not actually exist. Ryan uses this point to argue for the opposite – there is no denying an identity. The reason for feelings of doubt is a different one: people are influenced by society to think that being trans might not be a valid option. Ryan actually sees people who question themselves not as being in doubt about their identity but believes that they instead “doubt the process of figuring out who they are”.

5 General discussion and conclusion

Generally, both Jess and Ryan provide counter-narratives to the mainstream discourse by addressing the master narrative directly. They show awareness of the topics in focus and how they are typically represented. In 2018, normative ideals surrounding transgender people were still reproduced online, as can be clearly seen in some of the examples presented in Subsections 4.1 through 4.4. This explicit mention of the normative representations supports the idea that counter-stories are usually produced with an awareness of the master narrative and may be created by referring to it in order to subvert it (cf. Andrews 2004: 1–2). In fact, the counter-discourse created by the two YouTubers heavily relies on their own personal experience with the normative stereotypes and how they were used to marginalise them.

The research question regarding the strategies used for creating counter-discourse was addressed by focussing on four topics of stereotypical representations of trans identities: identification with the other binary gender than assigned at birth,
heterosexuality, the wish to transition in order to pass as cisgender, and the belief that people who are transgender have always known they identified as the “other” gender (cf. Cromwell 2006: 511, 514; Zimman 2012: 12–13).

The concepts of gender and sexuality are represented very openly by the two YouTubers. For both identity dimensions, Ryan and Jess present their own conceptualisations, but also leave room for ideas by other people. This is not only shown in their speech, but also in visual representations such as metaphorical and deictic gestures. Ryan and Jess especially pay attention to people’s self-identification (cf. Borba and Milani 2017: 16).

The two subjects also subvert the master narrative by arguing against stereotypical representations about both the topics of transitioning in order to pass as cis and the idea of questioning one’s identity. Both Jess and Ryan specifically mention self-determination and agency (cf. Zimman 2017: 92) as valuable factors in a person’s transition. Furthermore, they present the process of questioning one’s identity as positive, since it can help people make the right decision. This way, the two YouTubers reframe the discourse surrounding gender and sexuality to offer up more possibilities for background knowledge than can be found in the master narrative and thereby create an open online space for people in the community who feel misrepresented by the stereotypical story. Their wish to provide a platform for transgender people who might feel marginalised by the mainstream discourse is voiced by them explicitly.

The counter-discourse described above is accomplished by a combination of five strategies. The YouTubers use INVERSION to explicitly state that the norms usually represented do not constitute the full truth. By using PARODY, Jess and Ryan activate knowledge of the master narrative by imitating and mocking the views represented in it, often making use of polyphony in doing so. COMPLEXIFICATION is used to uncover aspects of trans identity which are usually omitted from mainstream discourse. In SHIFTING the issue, the two subjects address the fact that the stereotype usually represented is not actually the issue of importance, but that other explanations take precedence. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE is used to express the two YouTubers’ personal story, which serves as an authentication strategy, similar to what Dame (2013) describes as expertness.

All of these strategies might be used independently, but most commonly occur in combination with each other. They serve to oppose and supplement the mainstream representation, but also to validate non-normative identities, which is achieved especially in relation to the value of self-identification and self-determination (Borba and Milani 2017: 16; Zimman 2017: 92). This can be seen again explicitly in instances in which the YouTubers make general statements on this topic such as “[there] is no right way to trans” (JESS).

However, both YouTubers also acknowledge that, over time, stereotypes concerning transgender people have changed. For instance, Jess and Ryan emphasise
the fact that there are more options for transitioning available for people who do not identify with the normative script now than there were a few years ago. In Example 18, both are discussing Jess's top surgery which they had without taking testosterone:

(18) RYAN: [...] If we go back to eight years ago, that wouldn't be a possibility because there was [...] no surgeons that I knew that
JESS: [Yep.
RYAN: would've] done that. Maybe Doctor [name omitted] or some(one) like that.

Insofar, both recognise that there are not as many “strict protocols” (cf. Hausman 2006: 337) concerning transitioning anymore. However, they also agree that the master narrative is still prevalent within the transgender online community. Despite this prevalence, Jess and Ryan manage to authenticate their own as well as various other trans identities without following the normative discourse.

Furthermore, both Jess and Ryan do not make any reference to normative representation of sexuality within the trans community. While they both recognise that stereotypes still exist in society in general – or at least did when they grew up – this stigma seems to not be as prevalent anymore in 2018. This could well be an indication for changing social norms, making sexuality not an issue to consider in being transgender anymore.

Since the topic addressed in the study at hand had not been considered from this perspective before, the current analysis can only act as a case study that aims at exploring counter-discourse existent in the transgender community on YouTube. Both the time-frame (2018) and the focus on just two individuals (both white middle-class North-American) make it relatively narrow in focus and there can be no claim for the results to be representative of counter-discourse in the transgender community at large.

Nevertheless, the analysis has proven to be fruitful in showcasing strategies occurring in this type of counter discourse, and future studies could benefit from making use of the present framework. It would also be especially interesting to see how this kind of counter-discourse is received by viewers. This could be addressed by analysing the comment section of such counter-discursive videos. Furthermore, the data of this study could be used for experimental research designs testing to what extent these strategies can be deemed successful in making people aware of other identities than those proclaimed by the master narrative. Finally, the present

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8 As already mentioned in Subsection 2.2, counter-discourse may only be safe and even possible for “those who are privileged by other identity vectors” (Rondot 2016: 547), which is the case for Jess and Ryan.
findings could be used as departure for an analysis of counter discourse on other topics and on other channels of communication.

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