Yes Homo: Gay Influencers, homonormativity, and queerbaiting on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

Considering the 'It Gets Better' network of videos and recent reversal of censorship on queer content, this paper looks at how gay Influencers on YouTube perform intimacy, care, and attachment with their followers alongside practicing activism. Specifically, it considers what happens when the discursive activism of gay networks become entangled with the publicity-driven initiatives of Influencer commerce, and how in-routes into diversity and inclusivity are undermined by intersectional marginality and networked power of the status quo. This paper focuses on networks that centre around three gay-identifying Australian YouTubers: Troye Sivan, Jake Bley, and Fraser Green, considering their posts and comments from followers between 2013 and 2017, with a heavier focus on Sivan's videos. All statistics presented were last recorded in August 2017. A grounded theory approach was adopted in the content analysis of data from digital participant observation. The paper observes the entanglement of brand capital, relational intimacies, and activism performed by gay Influencers, as they use their status to promote discursive activism, constitute networks around their internet celebrity, and grow their careers.

Since they first debuted in the early-2000s, Influencers have progressed from hobbyist home-based webcamming and desktop publishing to extremely lucrative full-time careers. So viable and attractive is their craft that the industry has grown rapidly, with followers intensifying in brand loyalty to their favourites, wannabe Influencers attempting to mimic after successful exemplars, and businesses clamouring to tap into the following of these notable icons. Influencers are now capitalizing on their high visibility in digital spaces to propel themselves into other mainstream media industries including television, cinema, music, publishing, and fashion. Many Influencers are also engaging in social justice ecologies, using their lifestyle narratives and platforms to personalize and promote causes pertaining to politics and LGBT advocacy. These queer Influencers are important nodes in LGBT networks on the internet, especially as they have become ambassadors for various queer-related community and corporate services, amplify crucial health and wellbeing messages as informal sexuality educators, and continue to foster a sense of community and loyalty among their young followers.

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While Influencers are now established across social media platforms and old/new media, under the historical legacy of the It Gets Better network of videos that first debuted on YouTube in 2010, queer Influencers on YouTube operate with distinct cultural repertoires and community vernacular. In instituting and enacting the narrative tropes of queer confessions on YouTube – such as coming out, struggling with depression or self-harm, the processes of transitioning, confirming a relationship, or announcing a breakup – queer Influencers on YouTube tend to adopt the stance of responsibility, care, and advocacy when addressing young followers, especially those they imagine to be closeted, struggling, or looking for guidance.

Gay influencer publics on Youtube

To investigate the narrative structure of coming out stories, cultural studies scholars Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser have studied memorial accounts and contemporary coming-out narratives, arguing for a five-step rhetorical structure that has emerged among young queer men. However, coming-out narratives for queer persons are not as truncated in the age of the internet, especially when utilized by Influencers as a biographical device to establish their public personae and self-brand, to build solidarity and trust with followers, and to set up a viable narrative canvas to which brands and clients may peg products and services. Considering this, I offer a more graduated and extended cycle of coming out narratives for queer Influencers on YouTube who sit at the intersection of queer publics and microcelebrity publics. Using Cover & Prosser's (2013) narrative cycle as a skeleton (in the left column), I indicate the differentiated and graduated stages queer Influencers display through self-reflexivity and self-branding techniques in the digital age (in the right column):

Queer Influencers on YouTube experience different pressures in narrating their coming-out narratives, involving the social capital of their microcelebrity, their affects with followers, their obligations to sponsors and clients, the participation in Influencer networks, and their accountability to their queer networks. Drawing on the work of sexuality politics scholar Dennis Altman, Cover & Prosser write that narratives on coming out as gay were 'essential for those practicing non-heteronormative sexualities to ... develop[e] of a sense of community ... for the sake of the personal as well as for the political' (2013, 83). To this, I add that queer Influencers hyper-visibilise and perform the milestone of the coming out vlog in order to accumulate social capital among their followers through self-disclosure, cultural capital among the network of queer Influencers through collective branding, and economic capital with potential clients and sponsors through an expansion of their marketable personae. In other words, the 'mediated coming outs' of queer Influencers contribute in converting their 'non-normative sexualities into commercially lucrative labour within the YouTube celebrity economy' (Lovelock 2017, 98–99), wherein their queer identities are a 'potential resource' for a 'successful self-brand' (Lovelock 2017, 100). As such, their coming out narratives are more graduated and extended, including extensive padding and preparation to create anticipation, milking the peak of attention cycles to extend their shelve life and cultivate more viable digital estates, and long-tail closure and aftercare to conscientiously wrap up a season of self-branding and transit into the next.

To illustrate, Sivan tells viewers that after consulting various resources on YouTube, he was gay. In the second arc of this recount, he divulges his coming out experience to

Cover and Prosser (2013) Coming out narratives

(1) 'Feelings of isolation or loneliness as a young boy'

(2) 'Self-perceiving as masculine but as not meeting expectations of hegemonic or hyper-masculinity'

(3) 'Having always known one is gay as a child but not necessarily knowing the name for it'

(4) 'A moment of bravery in either a first sexual encounter or in disclosing and confessing a non-heteronormative sexual identity'

(5) 'Typically coming to a sense of belonging to a community or online community or through a coupled relationship'

Lifecycle of YouTube Influencers' queer microcelebrity publics

+ Framing this isolation in relation to subjectivities in school (with friends 'in real life') and in digital spaces (with friends on tumblr, YouTube for instance)

+ Expressing sense of falling short through comparisons with imagery or anecdotes from popular culture, digital culture

+ Turning to the internet to search for answers, at times with the assistance of close friends who broker introductions to specific digital spaces (such as sexual minorities on tumblr or networked queer vloggers on YouTube)

+ Learning the lexicon of queer vernacular and feelings through sexual minority discourses on the internet, often through tumblr, YouTube coming out vlogs, discussion forums, or queer resource websites

+ Realizing that one belongs to a gender or sexual minority and identifying with the nomenclature of the group

+ Coming out to oneself and accepting your own gender or sexuality

+ Coming out in hierarchical stages, first to highly trusted and personal social circles (such as immediate family, best friends, and supportive online network), then to intimate others (such as extended family, close friends, and digital community online)

+ Coming out to a YouTube audience through the milestone of a coming out vlog

+ Collecting reactions from viewers, including followers, fans, haters, trolls, and the internet public

+ Amplifying of coming out story through coverage by the popular press, tabloids, and mainstream press

+ Receiving affirmation from followers and fellow Influencers as a general sign of acceptance

+ Enshrining of coming out experience as inspirational by the YouTube community, followers, and the press more generally

(6) Taking on new public responsibilities as an out queer Influencer, usually through a more public discourse of one's personal gender and sexual life as a form of discursive activism

+ Taking on queer-celebratory or queer-targeted brand collaborations, usually to promote mental health, social support, or sexual health

(7) Hinting at the potential of a romantic relationship, usually through the YouTube Influencer vernacular of couple baiting

+ Confirming a romantic relationship, and subsequently conjoining two digital estates if partner is also a queer Influencer, if not then practicing "proximate microcelebrification" (Abidin 2015) such that lesser known romantic partner eventually becomes groomed into microcelebrity status

+ Formalizing the coupling as a brand through brand collaborations and merchandizing

(8) Falling into a lull as a couple, evidenced on YouTube either through decreasing coverage on one's romantic life and partner

+ Receiving comments from astute followers who pick up on the cues and speculate the health of the romantic relationship

+ (potentially) Milking the attention economy of speculation by producing more couple bait

(9) Announcing official separation of the couple

+ Eroding of the couple as a brand through gradual or immediate rhetorical demise

+ Responding to follower queries through Q&A

his family, beginning with his father. The language is emotive as Sivan recounts the events of three years ago, attempting to describe his corporeal and emotional sensations as viscerally as possible:

> "I don't know if this only happened to me, um, anyone else who has had to come out or say something really nerve racking, let me know if this happened to you as well, but I felt a literal physical locking of my throat, and I couldn't speak." (Sivan 2013)

The climax of this story comes to a resolution as Sivan recalls his father's immediate and complete acceptance of him: 'He just wanted to make sure that I was okay, that was literally his only worry in the world. To him it did not make the slightest slightest difference in his life' (Sivan 2013). He recounts how his immediate family were also informed, through to his 'inner circle' of friends, and eventually the rest of his social circle (Sivan 2013).

Building coherence back to his milestone coming out video in 2013 in which he spoke about struggling to speak to his family, Sivan uses a later video in 2017 to remind viewers of how far he has come:

> "I remember being so so petrified to tell my parents that I wanted to go to Pride. And I was like, 'Dad, there's the pride parade in Perth. Do you mind giving me a lift?' Turns out my whole family like, piled into the car on Sunday. I remember somebody having and putting a rainbow flag around my dad. I probably exaggerate in my head but I remember the wind blowing through the cape and my dad looking like some sort of gay superhero. This guy that I was petrified to tell that I was gay, not even a year prior, I just felt that unconditional love that day." (Sivan 2017).

In recognition of their leadership within networked communities, queer Influencers like Sivan are also often approached with queries from questioning youth. In a vlog in which he responds to viewers' FAQs, Sivan states that perhaps one of the most contentious search queries was: 'Is it easier to get HIV if you are gay'. To this, 20-year-old Sivan presented a thoughtful and careful response:

> "Good question. This is about to get really really graphic. I'm sorry. It is riskier to do certain sexual acts. For example, anal sex is a riskier sexual practice than vaginal sex. Combine this with the fact that gay and bi guys are probably more likely to have anal sex than straight guys, you're not like automatically at more risk if you're gay. Plenty of straight people have anal sex as well and so they are also at more risk when they have anal sex versus vaginal sex" (Sivan 2015).

Such digital networks premised on vulnerable self-disclosure, peer-led knowledge sharing, and networked friendship is important for marginalized young people. In Australia, an example of similar queer network is populated by gender diverse young people on tumblr. A group of interdisciplinary researchers led by Brady Robards and Brendan Churchill, comprising Benjamin Hanckel, Son Vivienne, and Paul Byron launched the 'Scrolling Beyond Binaries' project in 2016 to understand 'social media use amongst young LGBTIQ+ Australians' (Scrolling Beyond Binaries 2016). In this project in which more than 1,300 LGBTIQA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual) young people between the ages of 16–35 were surveyed, the researchers found that tumblr affords the 'platform vernacular' (Gibbs et al. 2015) 'long-form, image-centric' content sharing that is 'personal', comprising varied content in the name of 'creative freedom' and as such was the 'perfect venue for queer and questioning youth to hang

out' (Byron and Robards 2017). The researchers also discovered the 'community norm' (García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes 2017) of 'safety, community, identity, and friendship' where young gender diverse people can use tumblr for 'safe explorations of identity and a sense of self' (Byron and Robards 2017).

In a similar vein, this paper is an attempt to understand queer networks on YouTube, focused on gay Influencers as one example of key nodes in the network. More specifically, this paper focuses on the emergence of a queer microcelebrity publics through which Influencers have to calibrate their personal queer identities, their microcelebrity portfolios, their obligations to clients and sponsors, and their sense of responsibility to their large viewership of (potentially queer) young people. Queer microcelebrity publics have grown convoluted and increasingly tangled with commerce, especially since YouTube launched its partner programme in 2007 that 'allows content creators to monetize their videos by enabling advertisements' (Potts 2015, 166).

More recently in March 2017, YouTube changed its algorithms to render queer content on its platform 'invisible', by categorizing videos with queer content under 'restricted mode' (Hunt 2017). As such, videos with queer content and by queer Influencers no longer appeared on the landing page and did not rank during search queries. Users responded by taking to Twitter to trend the 'YouTubeIsOverParty' and '#YouTubeRestricted' hashtags, on which they called out the platform for censorship and mobilized other users to respond in solidarity (Hunt 2017; Shu 2017). After the hashtag brought public attention to the new algorithmic sorting, YouTube responded to the press stating: 'The intention of Restricted Mode is to filter out mature content for the tiny subset of users who want a more limited experience'. LGBTQ+ videos are available in Restricted Mode, but videos that discuss more sensitive issues may not be. We regret any confusion this has caused and are looking into your concerns' (Hunt 2017). Prominent queer Influencers on YouTube – including UK-based Rowan Ellis who is married to her lesbian partner (Shu 2017), US-based Tyler Oakley who identifies as gay (Associated Associated Press 2017) – also used their prolific social media platforms to call out YouTube, resulting a several bouts of virality and new trends to amplify the incident to the larger public and exert pressure on the corporation. Eventually, YouTube released an updated press response promising to rework their platform change: 'The bottom line is that this feature isn't working the way it should. We're sorry and we're going to fix it' (Shu 2017). Evidently, this is one instance of community norms being enacted as 'gate-keeping', as vernacular mechanisms co-constructed and laterally surveyed by users emerge as the critical discourse above and beyond corporate governance and the interests of commercial stakeholders (García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes 2017).

Homonormative coupling narratives

Gay Influencers on YouTube adopt the stance of responsibility, care, and advocacy when addressing young followers, especially those they imagine to be closeted, struggling, or looking for guidance. Highly visible and normalizing discourses of gay coupling can constitute feelings of community through networked 'homosocial intimacies' (Abidin 2017, 506). Coupling narratives usually include the backstory, including moments of self-doubt, uncertainty, and struggles (Figure 1). These less glamorous aspects of the usually highly celebratory tone of prolific Influencer relationships on social media invite viewers
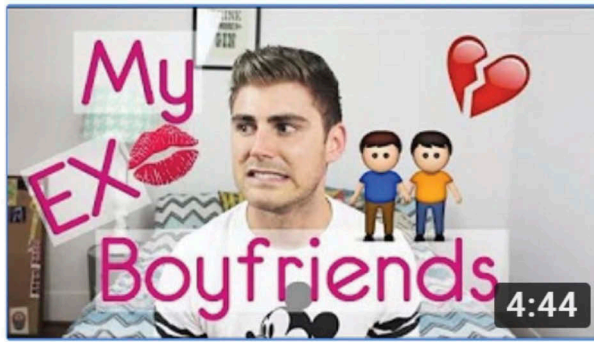
Figure 1. Jake Bley recounting failures in his past relationships.
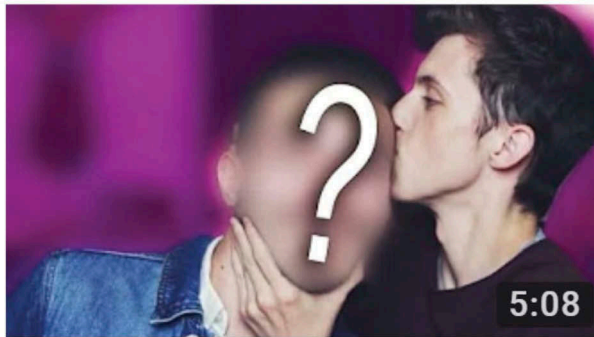
Figure 2. Troye Sivan responding to viewer queries on his romantic life.

to be invested in the narrative (Figure 2), the couple, and queer struggles, thus humanizing a political issue as a personal act of intimacy.

In vlogs where queer Influencers discuss dating and relationships, and even in those that constitute romance bait through 'are they dating, are they not' rhetoric, highly prolific discourses of queer coupling can further constitute feelings of community through networked 'homosocial intimacies' (Abidin 2017, 506). In their study on lesbian intimacy on YouTube, gender studies scholar Sam McBean demonstrates how one lesbian couple's shared YouTube channel produces 'representation[s] of contemporary lesbian intimacy online' and cultivates a sense of community and attachment among viewers who may not all be queer themselves (2014, 284). Citing the work of digital media scholar Adi Kuntsman who studied the politics of emotions in digital spaces, McBean writes that such articulations of feeling 'resonat[e] strongly

with the ways emotional intensities operate in today's digital cultures, obsessed with pre-servation, saving, recording, and storing … ' (Kuntsman in McBean 2014, 285). In front of a watchful, eager audience, these 'digital archive[s] of feelings' constitute a 'community, emotion, and public investment' through viewers who consume these visual representations and discourses on YouTube (McBean 2014, 295).

Akin to the Influencer milestone of formally announcing a new relationship on a digital platform, coupling narratives publicized by queer Influencers often include the backstory of the new romance, including moments of self-doubt, uncertainty, and struggles. These less glamorous aspects of social media-prolific relationships invite viewers to be invested in the narrative, the couple, and queer struggles, thus humanizing a political issue as a personal act of intimacy (Abidin 2017, 503). In these moments, readers have been known to congregate on Influencers' blogsites to 'share in the joy of [the] new relationship', as a form of vicarious consumption, expression of aspiration, or out of curiosity (Abidin 2017, 504).

One particular personal vlog by Troye Sivan, titled ' … Moving In?', and has accumulated over 2,400,000 views (Sivan 2014). In this comedic sketch, Sivan tells viewers that he has been 'missing my YouTube friends a lot recently' and begun imagining what life would be like to live with them (Sivan 2014). Sivan calls upon viewers to picture what life would be like if he lived with another openly gay YouTube Influencer, Tyler Oakley. Using camera work to clone himself, Sivan role-plays himself and Oakley lying in bed on their laptops deep in conversation. In the sketch, he also imagines living with other straight and ambiguous-queer YouTube Influencers such as Alfie Deyes, Zoella, Caspar Lee, Mamrie Hart, and the Harries Twins better known as Jack and Finn. In this final sketch, Sivan role-plays himself as well as Jack and Finn. The camera points to Sivan as 'Jack' and 'Finn' topless in bed under sheets. Jack turns to Finn to ask 'When do you think Troye's coming back to bed?' To this, Finn replies, 'I don't know Jack, but I hope soon'. The camera that cuts to Troye in a corner of the room watching on in awe, before exclaiming, 'Alright, fine, I'll come back', as he proceeds to remove his t-shirt. The scene then cuts from the sketch back to Sivan's talking head vlog to viewers, where he admits: 'Okay, maybe that last one was kind of a push … ' (Sivan 2014). Such vlogs where Sivan playfully toys with the innuendo of romance bait – 'Are they dating? Are they not?' and queer bait – 'Are they queer? Are they not?' would eventually become one of his trademarks.

Mainstreaming homosocial tactility

In the visual displays of their genders and sexualities, queer Influencers have the opportunity to enact strategic 'visibility labour' (Abidin 2016, 87) – 'the work enacted to flexibly demon-strate gradients of self-conspicuousness in digital or physical spaces depending on intention or circumstance for favorable ends' – and carve spaces for non-hegemonic and non-orthodox presentations of the self.

Sociologists Max Morris and Eric Anderson analyzed the videos of four 'successful male video-bloggers' in Britain and found that their performances of 'inclusive masculinities' were a major factor comprising their popularity on YouTube (Morris and Anderson 2015, 1201). There visual displays include being 'non-aggressive', 'emotionally open', 'embracing of their femininity', 'display[ing] homosocial tactility' (Figure 3), 'support[ing] gay friends' (Figure 4), and 'promot[ing] a more egalitarian perspective on the status of women' (Morris and Anderson 2015, 1201). Citing criminologist Jo Goodey, Morris & Anderson write that publicizing and sharing vulnerability was a strategy for male vloggers to display 'behaviours traditionally

stigmatised among men' (Goodey in Morris and Anderson 2015, 1211). Such role-modelling from Influencers can have a trickle-down effect to followers and other YouTubers, as evidenced by research from linguistics scholar Amanda Potts.

Potts studied the behaviours of Minecraft gamers and fans on YouTube, and found that the 'nonheteronormative discourses' produced by 'prominent gamers' constituted a 'self-policing fan community that advocates acceptance and rejects bigotry' (Potts 2015, 163), and can 'positively influence the discourses of adolescent audience' (Potts 2015, 184). Moreover, such queer-positive discourses serve as 'instructional texts' (Cover and Prosser 2013, 89) that have been found to 'bond gay and straight youth together' (McCormack in
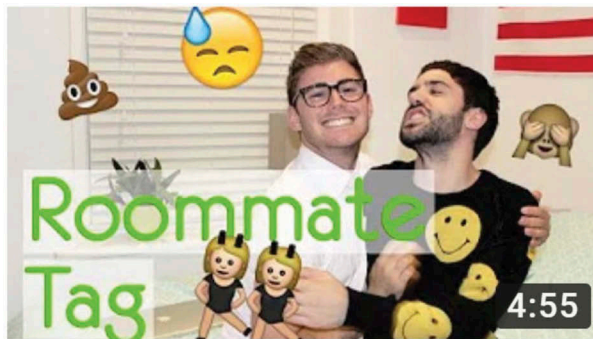
Meet My New Roommate!

27K views • 3 years ago

Figure 3. Jake Bley introducing his new roommate to viewers, with full-body hugs and cuddles.

Gay Drag Transformation (feat. Roly)

4.8K views • 1 year ago

Figure 4. Fraser Green completing a drag transformation challenge with Roly, with prolonged and intimate tactile exchanges.

Morris and Anderson 2015, 1203). These discursive interactions among viewers serve as a feedback loop back to Influencers, who when motivated by their consumer market, are obliged to be 'receptive' to audience preference and 'reflect or debut populist sexuality discourses' (Abidin 2017, 506–506) more widely and consistently (Figure 5).

However, reactions from YouTube viewers are not always favourable. At times, commentators may use the comments section in the vlogs of prominent queer Influencers to offer opposing views, evangelize their own beliefs, express hate speech and homophobia (Cover and Prosser 2013, 89), or even troll. The discursive spaces established by queer YouTube Influencers thus also serve as 'a communicative space .. . in which alternative viewpoints have potential to circulate and be negotiated' (Uldam and Askanius 2013, 1190). To this Influencers often convert these 'attacks into teachable moments' against cyber-bullying (Johnston 2017, 85), choosing to affectively reiterate their personal politics towards queer advocacy, respond in cordial rebuttals, and as a final resort ignore and contain the opposition should they become too aggressive and unamenable to persuasion. These commentators thus engage in a form of 'discursive tactics' or 'tactics focused on communication' (Clark 2016, 790) as opposed to completely shutting down the opposition as a first instinct. When they do adopt their last resort, this 'exclusion is required to enable counter-hegemonic discourses to develop ... to allow debate to develop in non-hegemonic ways ... and undermin[e] hegemonic consensus' (Shaw 2012b, 47).

Nevertheless, rarely are such discursive reactions a solo effort as networks of followers and fans chime in to support each other in extensive comment threads (Figure 6). In her extensive works on discursive activism in digital spaces, media and communications scholar Frances Shaw asserts that 'conflict or provocation can also be productive of a discursive politics in which a political community is able to define itself in opposition to others' (2016, 9).

Evidently, when queer-friendly commentators and fans of the queer Influencer simultaneously express amplified affective support towards each other and counter the perceptions of opposing commentators, they are involved in both the ''*maintenance* of social movement networks' and the 'political aim of *changing* discursive perceptions, norms and ways' (Shaw 2012a, 382, emphasis mine). Such queer networks around

Figure 5. Fraser Green encourages USA viewers who responded to his video in celebration of marriage equality in Australia.

Figure 6. Viewers ('Danny Philipsen', 'Steph19', '_Naoko') respond to homophobia from one viewer ('Omarr Taylor') in Jake Bley's video about marriage equality in Australia.

Influencers and their microcelebrity on YouTube can serve as a form of 'cultural visibility' through 'affirmative images', a 'growing legitimation', and 'validation', thus 'prepar[ing] the ground for ay civil rights protection' (Hennessy 1995, 31–32).

Queerbaiting on Youtube

Fundamentally, the three strategies of queer and gay Influencers on YouTube can be triangulated to support their microcelebrity and their standing in their marginalized communities (Figure 7).

The 'queer microcelebrity publics' that they conscientiously craft constitute the central core of their early online identities and personae, focused on the collective community experiences of 'Knowing & Coming out', and 'Struggling & Transitioning'. This core is flanked by two Influencer practices: Firstly, the 'Homonormative coupling narratives' that they display constitute the Influencer trope of sharing 'Coupling & Uncoupling' narratives that continue to interest loyal followers; and secondly, the 'Mainstreaming homosocial tactility' that they play with constitute a potential longtail of 'Speculations & Collaborations' that bait followers into imagining both homoerotic and inter-brand collaborations. Once these three elements are in place, such streams of content are then able to support queer and gay Influencers' participation in the economy of 'Advertorials & Ambassadorships'. However, gay and queer Influencers who use their marginalized sexualities to self-brand and commodify themselves have to carefully thread between their sincere solidarities within their communities and their enterprising endeavours: Any behaviour that over-extends their 'Advertorials & Ambassadorships' focus will risk destabilizing the delicate balance of all four elements,
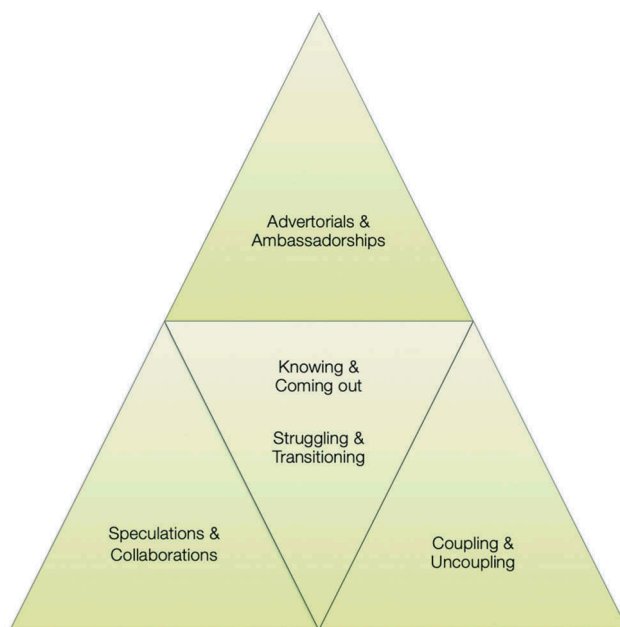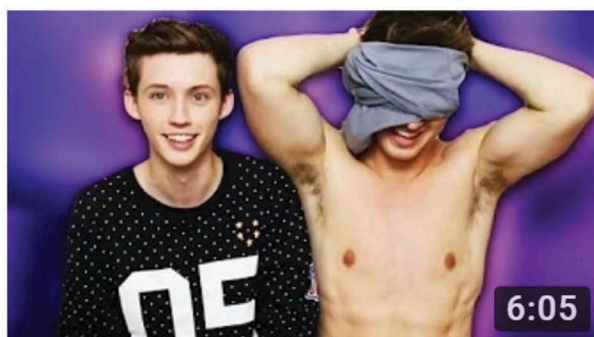
Figure 7. A framework for queer microcelebrity publics.

Figure 8. Troye Sivan with straight YouTuber Marcus Butler, performing a YouTube challenge while playfully fondling each other, instigating viewers to 'ship' them.

and their membership and affinity with their followers and online networks could be revoked.

On some level, queer YouTube Influencers' strategic production of queer content can come across as a commercially motivated endeavour, especially as this sub-genre is

growing saturated and more Influencers are indulging in queer bait. Vlogs in which not-(yet)-out Influencers display 'homosocial tactility' (Morris and Anderson 2015, 1201) and overt discursive intimacies with same-sex Influencers are sometimes deliberate attempts to fan viewer speculations about an Influencer's sexuality (Figure 8). Over time, this has accumulated into a YouTube culture in which not-(yet)-out Influencers engage in traditionally feminine activities such as cosmetics and fashion, perform non-hegemonic male behaviour such as crying on camera or being overly emotional, or raise suspicions from the lack of mention of an opposite-sex romantic interest as preemptive padding to their milestone coming out videos. Such emblems 'typecas[t] … gay men in [the] media' by using visual, textual, and discursive narrative devices to 'draw innuendos of gay culture' (Choong 2008, 1) (Figure 9). Other straight Influencers may also harness the cultural capital of queer bait on YouTube by referencing gay typecasts such as cosmetic use on the one hand, but frame their practice as 'health, hygiene and repair work' on the other hand to diffuse suggestions that they are concerned with 'beautification' (Hall, Gough, and Seymour-Smith 2012, 222). In this manner, they 'inoculate themselves against potential charges of being "gay"' (Hall, Gough, and Seymour-Smith 2012, 209) by 'reproduc[ing] notions of heterosexual prowess and self-respect' (Hall, Gough, and Seymour-Smith 2012, 222).

The highly profitable consumer market fostered by queer YouTube Influencers who make hyper-visible the posturing and milking of their gender and sexual publics is an

Face Painting with #Troyler (ft Tyler Oakley)

4.7M views • 4 years ago

Figure 9. Troye Sivan with fellow gay YouTube Tyler Oakley, in one of the several videos where they displayed tactile intimacies, fueling viewer speculation about their relationship.

extension of the pink dollar or the high potential spending power of the queer consumer market. Also known as the 'Pink Pound' in the UK or the 'Dorothy Dollar' in the US (Quest 1998), news reports from the last two years around the globe emphasize the consumer potential of the queer market. In the US, the 'combined buying power of … lesbian, gay,

bisexual and transgender adults' was reportedly '$917 billion' in 2015, and continues to rise after the legalization of gay marriage (Green 2016). Corporations have revealed that 'they're primarily motivated not by politics but by business concerns', given reports that corporations that 'support gay employees do better in the stock market' (Green and Higgins 2016). Turning to the Asia Pacific, in China, companies are clamouring for the '70 million LGBT people' in the country reportedly worth '$300bn per year', and are working to plug the 'gap' for queer markets who desire to ally with 'LGBT-friendly' services rather than generic ones (Fullerton 2017). Hong Kong bid to host the 2022 Gay Games that is expected to 'bring in pink tourism dollars estimated to total HK$1 billion' (Sun 2017); investors there have called upon the tourism industry to recognize the 'business opportunity' of 'building a good LGBT reputation', and encouraged the community to support initiatives for 'a share of the gay tourism market' (Sun 2017).

In Australia, market research firm Roy Morgan Research (2016) reports that 'Australians who identify as homosexual tend to … be more engaged with shopping than straight Aussies'. Sponsors of the country's largest pride parade, the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, have also admitted to the 'brand value' of the event, with ANZ bank's head of marketing Carolyn Bendall revealing in an interview that their sponsorship makes their brand 'distinctive' and generates 'valuable' publicity (Burton-Bradley 2015). As marriage equality legislation was being debated in recent years, market researchers calculated the potential 'wedding spend' to be 'as high as A$600m' (Mercer 2015) and 'worth at least $500 million a year in additional weddings' (Farr 2015). However, such phenomena are not new. Even as early as in 1995, scholars have observed that increasing queer visibility was 'aimed at producing new and potentially lucrative markets' where 'money, not liberation, is the bottom line' (Hennessy 1995, 32).

Fundamentally, it appears that the motivation for many corporations in practicing and performing care towards queer persons and the queer community stem out of fiscal motivations, whether they view queer youth as potential consumers to boost corporate sales, as attractive and loyal employees to maintain corporate production, and as potential amplifiers and allies to demonstrate their political-correctness as corporate branding. In other words, queer visibility is reduced to a practice of commodification (Hennessy 1995, 31). Such corporations risk 'not acknowledging gay rights or issues' but merely 'attempt to lure the "pink dollar"' (Choong 2008, 2), and in so doing, encourage 'a form of LGBTQ visibility marked by the depoliticized activity of consuming products and building lifestyles branded as gay' (Duguay 2016, 3). This opportunistic capitalization upon on the potential social and financial capital of a queer consumer base – and especially so with a stereotypical financially-elite male gay consumer base – suggests that overgeneralizes queer persons as 'consumer subjects but not as social subjects' (Hennessy 1995, 32), as "already a privileged group, who need no further civil rights protection" (Hyman 2008, 115).

While queer baiting for commercial ends can be an effective self-branding and business strategy for some Influencers, coming out (whether actual or as bait) is a privilege not equally accorded to everyone. In some societies and Influencer subcultures, queer Influencers who desire to publicize their sexuality and romantic relationships have to exercise self-restraint in order to maintain their personal safety or preserve their heteronormative self-brand and commercial interests, resorting only to 'token

mentions' to ambiguously express this aspect of their private lives with the safeguard of plausible deniability (Abidin 2017, 503).

Despite this, through their sustained and interactive engagements with followers, queer Influencers on YouTube can cultivate queer membership, solidarity, and discursive activism in their follower networks in several ways: Soliciting viewer participation through personal storytelling; constructing community attachment and consumption through coupling narratives; and performing inclusive queer genders and sexualities by role-modelling non-hegemonic behaviour.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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