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Negotiating trans visibility:
identity, hostility and self-representation among trans
influencers on YouTube

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Abstract:

This thesis examines how trans influencers narrate and negotiate identity and visibility on YouTube, a platform where trans people may find recognition and community but also encounter hostility. The study focuses on four trans influencers whose YouTube content addresses transition, gender identity, public visibility and experiences of transphobia. Using thematic narrative analysis, the thesis explores how their narratives construct meanings around visibility, passing, hostility, community and self-representation.

The analysis shows that online trans visibility is deeply ambivalent. YouTube enables trans influencers to build community, produce self-authored representations of gender and offer recognition to other trans people. At the same time, visibility exposes them to transphobic hostility, audience expectations and pressure to perform gender roles in ways that are recognisable and acceptable to cisgender viewers. The thesis identifies five central themes: passing and gender legibility; transphobic hostility as anticipated and structural; community and strategies for managing visibility; identity as an ongoing process; and the conditions under which visibility can become partly self-determined.

The thesis argues that trans influencers do not simply become visible online; they actively negotiate the terms of that visibility. Their narratives position visibility as both a source of empowerment and a site of vulnerability, responsibility and resistance.

Keywords: trans visibility, social media, trans influencers, YouTube, transphobia, passing, gender legibility, narrative analysis, online hostility, self-representation.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent years, trans people have become increasingly visible in digital spaces. Social media has created new possibilities for self-representation, community building and identity exploration, especially for young trans people who may not have access to trans communities in their offline lives.

On social media, trans influencers occupy an important position in these discussions, since they make gender identity, visibility and transition narratable and available to the public. When they share their experiences publicly, they do much more than provide information: they challenge normative representations of gender and make visible the discrimination and hostility that trans people face. Their narratives matter because they show how public trans visibility becomes a practice through which recognition, self-definition and community are negotiated.

At the same time, this increased visibility has taken place alongside a rise in anti-trans hostility online. Social media is not only a space for community and representation, but also an environment where trans people are exposed to harassment and anti-trans narratives. It is shaped by a tension between recognition and exposure, where the same public presence that enables community and self-representation can also make trans people more vulnerable to hostility and control.

These developments make trans influencers especially important to study, because their public narratives are produced at the intersection of trans visibility, self-representation and online hostility. The thesis therefore approaches YouTube not simply as a platform, but as a space where trans visibility is negotiated under unequal social and technological conditions.

1.2 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how trans influencers narrate and negotiate identity and visibility on social media in the context of growing transphobic hostility online.

Research question: How do trans influencers narrate and navigate identity and visibility in a hostile online environment?

This research question is motivated by the position of trans influencers at the centre of two important developments: the growth of trans visibility online and the increase of anti-trans hate on social media. While previous research has shown both the importance of online trans visibility and the growth of anti-trans hostility, less attention has been paid to how trans influencers themselves narrate this tension as part of their everyday public self-representation. This thesis argues that online trans visibility should not be understood simply as either empowerment or exposure, but as a negotiated practice shaped by recognition, hostility, audience expectations and platform conditions.

1.3 Research field

1.3.1 Trans people's growing online visibility

Existing research shows that the visibility of trans people, particularly trans youth, has increased significantly alongside the expansion of social media and online platforms¹. Access to the internet and social media can be central to trans youths' resilience because these platforms provide information, communication and access to supportive resources.² Social media platforms have given users new possibilities for self-representation, which is especially important for groups whose identities have often been named or represented by others.³

A key reason for the importance of social media for trans people is the geographical and social isolation many experience offline, which makes online platforms a vital source of community, information and communication.⁴

¹ O. Jenzen, 'Trans Youth and Social Media: Moving Between Counterpublics and the Wider Web', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24, no. 11 (2017), pp. 1626-1641, p. 1627, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2017.1396204.

² A. Austin, S. L. Craig, N. Navega and L. B. McInroy, 'It's My Safe Space: The Life-Saving Role of the Internet in the Lives of Transgender and Gender Diverse Youth', *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 21, no. 1 (2020), pp. 33-44, p. 35, DOI: 10.1080/15532739.2019.1700202.

³ T. Raun, *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-20.

⁴ Austin, 'It's My Safe Space', p. 35.

An influencer can be understood as a content creator with a large and engaged following whose content shapes the attitudes, knowledge or identities. Trans influencers use their platforms, whether through vlogs, lifestyle content or political commentary, to represent trans life publicly and discuss gender identity, transition and experiences of discrimination.⁵ As such, they can play an important role for young trans viewers by offering recognition, information, and a sense of connection.

1.3.2 Growing transphobia online

At the same time that trans influencers are becoming more popular and visible, there has been a parallel rise in transphobic hate speech on social media.⁶ Transphobia can be understood as a form of minority stress that includes gendered related victimization, discrimination, expectations of rejection and internalised negative attitudes toward trans identity.⁷ Research has shown a sharp increase in academic publications about transphobia and hate speech on social media since 2017, with publications on the topic doubling between 2021 and 2022 alone, reflecting the increasing attention scholars have given to the problem.⁸

A key development in recent years is what researchers call the 'mainstreaming' of transphobia, where anti-trans narratives rooted in extremist ideologies have been gradually repackaged into more socially acceptable forms, making explicitly hateful content harder to identify.⁹ Researchers identify nine distinct transphobic narratives that have undergone this mainstreaming process on YouTube, most of which are framed not as attacks on trans people but as concerns about the "safety of women and children", "the fairness of sports", or the "protection of children from medical decisions".¹⁰

⁵ Raun, *Out Online*, pp. 1-20.

⁶ J. Ellis, 'Digiqueer Criminology and the New LGBTQ+ Visibility', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 21, no. 4 (2025), pp. 490-507, p. 490

⁷ M. L. Hendricks and R. J. Testa, 'A Conceptual Framework for Clinical Work with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Clients: An Adaptation of the Minority Stress Model', *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 43, no. 5 (2012), pp. 460-467, p. 460, DOI: 10.1037/a0029597.

⁸ A. M. Sánchez-Sánchez, D. Ruiz-Muñoz and F. J. Sánchez-Sánchez, 'Mapping Homophobia and Transphobia on Social Media', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 21, no. 1 (2024), pp. 210-226, p. 222.

⁹ L. Channon and N. Mathieson, 'Automated Detection of Mainstreamed Transphobic Content on YouTube', *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies*, 4, nos 1-3 (2025), pp. 41-75, p. 43, DOI: 10.57814/49jz-0663.

¹⁰ Channon and Mathieson, 'Automated Detection of Mainstreamed Transphobic Content', pp. 42-43.

Platform policies and ownership have played an important role in shaping the online environment for trans people. Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter, now X, in 2022 marked a particularly important turning point. Comparisons of data collected before and after this change show that the platform became significantly less likely to suspend accounts for hateful content and that transphobic, homophobic and racist posts increased in both volume and engagement.¹¹

Research on social media platforms shows that trans and gender non-conforming users face higher rates of online harassment than cisgender users and often experience platform moderation systems as ineffective.¹² Anti-trans narratives circulating online are also connected to wider political and social changes, including political discourse, mainstream media and legal processes.¹³ In several countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States, anti-trans political rhetoric has intensified significantly since the mid-2010s, suggesting a close relationship between online hate and offline policy debates.¹⁴

Taken together, previous research shows that social media has become an important space for trans visibility, identity exploration, community building, and self-representation.¹⁵ At the same time, this visibility also exposes trans people to intensified forms of online transphobia and mainstream anti-trans narratives.¹⁶

However, how these two developments are experienced and narrated together by trans influencers themselves has received less attention, since studies usually focus either on the possibilities of online visibility or on the harms of anti-trans hostility. What remains less explored is how public trans subjects make sense of visibility as an everyday practice: how they describe its benefits, anticipate its risks, manage its emotional costs and continue to appear publicly despite hostile conditions. This thesis addresses that gap by analysing the narratives of the trans influencers on YouTube.

¹¹ M. Armas-Neira, 'Weaponizing Transphobia on Social Media', *American Journal of Psychiatry Residents' Journal*, 21, no. 3 (2026), p. 20, DOI: 10.1176/appi.ajp-rj.2026.210307.

¹² C. Are, C. Talbot and P. Briggs, 'Social Media Affordances of LGBTQIA+ Expression and Community Formation', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 31, no. 4 (2025), pp. 1401-1422, DOI: 10.1177/13548565241296628.

¹³ Channon and Mathieson, 'Automated Detection of Mainstreamed Transphobic Content', pp. 42-43.

¹⁴ Channon and Mathieson, 'Automated Detection of Mainstreamed Transphobic Content', pp. 42-43.

¹⁵ T. Raun, *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-20.

¹⁶ Channon and Mathieson, 'Automated Detection of Mainstreamed Transphobic Content', pp. 41-43.

2. *Theory*

2.1 Trans visibility online

The central theoretical concept for this thesis is visibility: what it means for trans people to be publicly visible on social media, what that visibility enables and what it costs. Although visibility might at first appear to be a question of representation, being seen rather than not being seen, research on queer and trans politics shows that it is a deeply contested and politically charged concept.¹⁷ As Edenborg highlights, visibility is never neutral but is shaped by relations of power: who is seen, how they are seen and under what conditions are all structured by social, cultural and political forces beyond individual choice.¹⁸

Edenborg suggests the concept of regimes of visibility as an analytical tool that shifts the question from whether visibility is desirable to what visibility does in a particular context, what it creates, what it makes impossible and whose interests it serves.¹⁹ This framework is particularly useful for this study because it does not assume a simple positive relationship between trans people's online visibility and their safety or well-being. At the same time, Edenborg documents how increased queer visibility has often been met with hate: as LGBT people have become more visible in the public sphere, they have at the same time become more exposed to harassment and violence.²⁰ This is what scholars describe as the “double-edged sword” of queer visibility: visibility can be necessary for building community, challenging misrepresentation and making political demands, but it can also create conditions for harm and intensified hostility.²¹

A dimension of trans visibility that is especially important for this study is passing: the ability or pressure to be read by others as belonging to the gender one identifies with. Edenborg notes that for trans people, visibility has historically been deeply ambivalent: while trans activists have often seen visibility as key to changing social attitudes, being visibly trans has also meant

¹⁷ E. Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', in M. J. Bosia, S. M. McEvoy and M. Rahman (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 348-363, p. 350.

¹⁸ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 350.

¹⁹ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 353.

²⁰ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 353.

²¹ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 353.

becoming a target of violence.²² For many trans people, passing as gender-conforming, being perceived by cisgender's as "man enough" or "woman enough," is not just a preference but a matter of safety and survival.²³ The ability to pass, however, is context-dependent: it depends on access to medical transition, on class resources, and on the social environment in which one moves.²⁴ For trans influencers, passing gains particular significance because they are publicly known as trans and may continue to be read through their trans identity even when they pass in everyday interactions. An indirect form of passing pressure operates in their online presence: the implicit expectation that they will present their trans identity in ways that are acceptable to cisgender viewers and appear trans in the "right" way. This includes pressure to conform to binary ideals of manhood or womanhood and to avoid expressions that cisgender viewers may read as outside binary gender norms.²⁵ This is the social and political context in which trans influencers produce their content, and it helps frame how their narratives describe the pressures and hostile responses attached to public trans visibility.

This pressure to conform to cisgender expectations around gender visibility can be understood through Judith Butler's theory of appearance and recognisability.²⁶ Butler suggests that "the people" at any moment are shaped by rules that determine who can present themselves in public as recognisable political actors.²⁷ These rules influence whose presence is acknowledged and valued and who is pushed into invisibility through gendered norms.²⁸ In their earlier work on gender performativity, Butler explains that gender is not an inherent quality but a set of acts, appearances and performances that must be constantly repeated to create the appearance of a stable gender identity.²⁹ Trans people who do not perform gender in ways that fit within the binary system, or who are not read as clearly male or female, are often rendered unintelligible within dominant gender norms.³⁰ This perceived unintelligibility can become a target for

²² Edenberg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 354.

²³ Edenberg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 354.

²⁴ Edenberg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 354.

²⁵ E. Zhang, 'I Don't Just Want to Look Female; I Want to Be Beautiful: Theorizing Passing as Labor in the Transition Vlogs of Gigi Gorgeous and Natalie Wynn', *Feminist Media Studies*, 23, no. 4 (2023), pp. 1376-1393, p. 1377.

²⁶ J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 24-30.

²⁷ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, pp. 24-31

²⁸ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, pp. 24-31.

²⁹ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 33.

³⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 25-26.

transphobic hate speech. However, Butler also argues that these visibility regulations are not fixed; they can be challenged when those considered invisible or illegible choose to appear and claim space in the public sphere.³¹

These dynamics of visibility, passing, and gender legibility take on distinct forms in social media environments. In their sociological review of queer online representation, Das and Farber show how digital platforms can both provide opportunities for queer self-expression and reinforce dominant norms related to gender, race, and class.³² Drawing on an intersectional framework, they argue that certain forms of trans visibility are elevated online, particularly those embodied by white and gender-conforming individuals, while others continue to be pushed to the margins.³³ Trans creators who do not fit these expectations because of their race, gender expression, or political views often receive less visibility through platform algorithms and are more exposed to hostility online.³⁴ Das and Farber also point out that many YouTube transition videos reproduce binary ideas of gender, presenting transition as a clear movement from one gender category to another and leaving non-binary and gender non-conforming identities out.³⁵ This shows that norms around passing are reinforced not only through direct discrimination but also through the ways platforms themselves are structured.

Duggan's concept of homonormativity helps explain how queer and trans visibility can function within, rather than against, dominant social norms.³⁶ In this framework, queer and trans subjects are more likely to become socially acceptable when they appear non-threatening, depoliticised, white, gender-conforming and middle-class. Trans influencers who challenge these norms through gender non-conformity may face more hostility because they reject the conditional acceptance in mainstream discourse.³⁷ Edenborg's idea of the normalising power of visibility explains how some trans subjects become acceptable or celebrated while others are stigmatised for not conforming to dominant expectations of passing.³⁸

³¹ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, pp. 24-31.

³² S. Das and R. Farber, 'User-Generated Online Queer Media and the Politics of Queer Visibility', *Sociology Compass*, 14 (2020), e12824, p. 7, DOI: 10.1111/soc4.12824.

³³ Das and Farber, 'User-Generated Online Queer Media', p. 7.

³⁴ Das and Farber, 'User-Generated Online Queer Media', p. 7.

³⁵ Das and Farber, 'User-Generated Online Queer Media', p. 7.

³⁶ L. Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p. 50.

³⁷ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

³⁸ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

3. Method

This chapter presents the study's epistemological foundation, methodological approach, and analytical process, while also addressing relevant ethical considerations. The study is based on a narrative analysis of publicly available social media content produced by four trans influencers and is grounded in a feminist epistemology of situated knowledge.

3.1 Epistemology

All research is conducted from a particular standpoint, whether or not that standpoint is made explicit, and what counts as valid knowledge is shaped by social position, experience and values.³⁹ In this study, the epistemological framework is rooted in the concept of situated knowledge.

3.1.1 Situated knowledge

Donna Haraway develops the concept of situated knowledge through her critique of what she calls the “god trick.”⁴⁰ This is the pretence that knowledge can be produced from nowhere, by no one in particular, creating a view of the world that appears universal and free from any particular bias or value system.⁴¹ Against this, she argues that all knowledge is produced from a specific location: a particular body, social position and historical moment.⁴² Feminist objectivity, for Haraway, does not mean neutrality but rather transparency about one's position and its effects on what one can and cannot know.⁴³

Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint theory⁴⁴ develops a related but distinct argument. While Haraway emphasises that all knowledge is shaped by particular viewpoints and social locations,⁴⁵

³⁹ D. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', in A. M. Jaggar (ed.), *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 346-362, p. 348.

⁴⁰ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', p. 348.

⁴¹ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', p. 348.

⁴² Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', p. 350.

⁴³ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', p. 350.

⁴⁴ S. Harding, 'Borderlands Epistemologies', in A. M. Jaggar (ed.), *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 331-340, p. 331.

⁴⁵ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', p. 346.

Harding argues that the standpoints of marginalised groups can produce more objective knowledge than those of dominant groups⁴⁶, precisely because people in marginalised positions are often forced to understand both their own experiences and the dominant structures that shape them. Those in dominant positions, by contrast, may remain ignorant of other perspectives.⁴⁷ Harding calls this 'strong objectivity': the idea that beginning research with the lives of those who are less privileged produces more complete and less misleading information about the social world.⁴⁸ For this study, Harding's argument both supports centering trans influencers' narratives as a source of knowledge and underlines the importance of the researcher's own positionality. As someone who occupies a partially, but not fully, marginalised position in relation to gender and sexuality, I must remain attentive to what my standpoint enables me to see, and what it may make harder for me to fully understand.

Maja Sager develops these frameworks in the context of Swedish gender studies research, showing how situated knowledge shapes not only who a researcher is but also how they conduct their study and what they can and cannot see from where they stand.⁴⁹ Sager emphasises that situating oneself in research is not only about listing identity positions but about describing the place and perspective from which knowledge is produced.⁵⁰ As described in the introduction to this thesis, I approach this study as a gay person with a fluid gender identity, someone who can relate to occupying a non-normative position in relation to gender and sexuality, but who has not experienced gender dysphoria or the specific forms of transphobic hostility directed at visibly trans people. Following Haraway⁵¹ and Harding⁵², I do not see this position as a limitation that disqualifies me from doing the research, but rather as a perspective that shapes both what I am able to notice and what may remain outside my field of view.

⁴⁶ Harding, 'Borderlands Epistemologies', p. 334.

⁴⁷ Harding, 'Borderlands Epistemologies', p. 334.

⁴⁸ Harding, 'Borderlands Epistemologies', p. 339.

⁴⁹ M. Sager, 'Att skriva fram kunskap som situerad', in M. Kolankiewicz, M. Liinason and M. Sager (eds), *Genusvetenskapliga forskningsmetoder* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2024), pp. 29-44, p. 31.

⁵⁰ Sager, 'Att skriva fram kunskap som situerad', p. 30.

⁵¹ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', pp. 346-362.

⁵² Harding, 'Borderlands Epistemologies', pp. 331-340.

3.2 Data

Purposive selection is appropriate in qualitative research when the goal is analytical depth and variation.⁵³ The four influencers were chosen because they all use their YouTube platforms to publicly discuss their experiences as trans people, including their transitions. Together, they represent meaningful variation in terms of national context, content style and approach to visibility. Their content includes lifestyle and personal vlogging as well as long-form video essays, and the sample includes two trans men and two trans women. This variation is important because it allows the analysis to attend to how influencers navigate trans visibility and transphobic hostility in varied ways.

The sample was also shaped by my prior familiarity with the influencers' content. I selected creators whose videos I had previously followed and knew to contain extended reflections on transition, identity, visibility and experiences of hostility. Three of the influencers are based in the United States, and one is based in Sweden, which means that their experiences are shaped by different national and cultural contexts. These differences are not treated as the basis for a systematic national comparison, but as part of the variation within the material.

From each influencers channel, a selection of videos was chosen for transcription and analysis. The main selection criterion was thematic relevance: only videos in which the influencer explicitly discussed trans experience, including transition, identity or experiences of transphobia and hate speech, were included.

One influencers material was originally in Swedish. Quotations from this material have been translated into English by the researcher. The translations are meaning-oriented rather than strictly word-for-word, with the aim of preserving the content, tone, and emotional meaning of the original speech as far as possible. This choice also supports the anonymisation strategy, since presenting Swedish quotations in the original language could make the influencer easier to identify.

The number of videos selected from each influencer varied, both because the influencers have produced different volumes of relevant content and because the individual videos differ

⁵³ A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

considerably in length. Four videos were selected from one of the influencers, two videos from one influencer and five videos each from two influencers, totalling sixteen videos across all four influencers. The different numbers of videos do not show unequal analytical importance for each influencer; rather, they reflect the availability of relevant material and the length and density of individual videos. What the four influencers share, and what unifies the material, is that their content is oriented toward discussing trans life from a first-person perspective, making their YouTube channels comparable as sites of trans self-narration.

All selected videos were transcribed in full by the researcher. Decisions about what to include, how to replicate spoken language in writing, and how to handle pauses and emphasis all shape the material available for analysis.⁵⁴ In this study, transcriptions aimed to capture the spoken content of the videos as accurately as possible, with attention to emphasis and tone where these were analytically relevant.

Rather than selecting videos from a fixed calendar period, the selection followed each influencer's own transition timeline, that is, the span of time during which they documented their transition on YouTube. Some of the influencers are still transitioning. This decision was made because the research question focuses on how trans influencers narrate their experiences, and for all four influencers, transition is an important part of those narratives. Following the influencers own temporal framing is more consistent with a narrative approach, which takes seriously how people organise their experiences into stories with their own beginnings, developments, and turning points⁵⁵.

3.3 Data analysis

3.3.1 Narrative method

A narrative, in this context, is a structure through which events and experiences are organised into a meaningful sequence: a story that the teller presents to an audience.⁵⁶ Narratives, according

⁵⁴ J. C. Lapadat and A. C. Lindsay, 'Transcription in Research and Practice: From Standardization of Technique to Interpretive Positionings', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5, no. 1 (1999), pp. 64-86, p. 66, DOI: 10.1177/107780049900500104.

⁵⁵ A. Phoenix, 'Tänka genom narrativ', in M. Kolankiewicz, M. Liinason and M. Sager (eds), *Genusvetenskapliga forskningsmetoder* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2024), pp. 379-394, p. 379.

⁵⁶ C. K. Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (London: Sage, 2008), p. 3.

to Riessman, are not neutral reflections of events that simply happened; they are constructed and selective.⁵⁷ When people tell stories about their lives, they make choices about what to include and what to leave out, how to position themselves and others, and what meanings to attach to their experiences.⁵⁸

A key theoretical point, developed by Riessman, is that narratives are performative: they not only describe experiences but also actively shape how those experiences are understood.⁵⁹ When a trans influencer tells a story about being misgendered on social media, they are not simply reporting what happened. They are also positioning themselves as subjects deserving recognition, making a claim on the audience's attention and challenging dominant narratives about trans people. Phoenix notes that narrative identity is the sense of self that people construct through storytelling, which is never fixed or final but is shaped by new experiences and new contexts.⁶⁰ This is particularly relevant for this study, since the influencers' channels document their trans experiences over extended periods, allowing the analysis to examine how their narratives develop and shift across videos.

The specific form of narrative analysis used in this study is thematic narrative analysis, as described by Riessman.⁶¹ Thematic narrative analysis mainly examines the content of narratives, focusing on what is said rather than on linguistic structure.⁶² The researcher reads across narratives to identify recurring themes, patterns and concerns in the material.⁶³ The difference between this and a conventional thematic analysis is that the themes are not treated as detachable categories. They are analysed as parts of narrated life stories: how the influencers move between past and present, how they address imagined situations, how they position themselves as vulnerable, and how they give meaning to transition, hostility, and visibility over time. At the same time, the researcher remains conscious of the particular circumstances and social position from which each narrative is told⁶⁴. This is especially important for this study because the

⁵⁷ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Phoenix, 'Tänka genom narrativ', p. 380.

⁶¹ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, p. 53.

⁶² Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, pp. 53-54.

⁶³ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, p. 44.

⁶⁴ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, pp. 53-54.

material consists of YouTube videos that often return to earlier experiences and reinterpret them from a later point in the influencers life.

In practice, the analysis proceeded in several stages. The first stage involved close reading and re-reading of all sixteen transcripts, during which initial observations and impressions were noted.⁶⁵ The second stage involved identifying narrative segments in which the influencer constructs a story or account of a specific experience⁶⁶, such as an encounter with hate speech, a moment of recognition or belonging, or a reflection on the costs and possibilities of being publicly trans. The third stage involved reading across these segments to identify shared themes and patterns⁶⁷, as well as significant differences between influencers. These readings formed the basis for the analytical categories used in the result section.

3.4 Ethics

Within gender studies, ethics is understood as inseparable from the political and epistemological commitments of the research.⁶⁸ As Sara Eldén argues, research ethics must not be reduced to a routine of rule following.⁶⁹ Rather, ethical reflections must run through the entire research process, from the choice of research question through the analysis to the presentation of findings,⁷⁰ particularly important in gender studies research where research can reproduce the power relations it seeks to critique.⁷¹

This study has received ethical approval through Lund University's internal ethics review process. The research is also guided by Vetenskapsrådet's framework for good research practice, which identifies four fundamental ethical principles: to do good, to do no harm, to respect autonomy and to uphold justice.⁷²

⁶⁵ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, p. 54.

⁶⁷ Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, p. 54.

⁶⁸ M. Kolankiewicz, M. Liinason and M. Sager (eds), *Genusvetenskapliga forskningsmetoder* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2024), p. 380.

⁶⁹ S. Eldén, *Forskningsetik: Vägval i samhällsvetenskapliga studier* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2020), p. 128.

⁷⁰ Eldén, *Forskningsetik*, p. 128.

⁷¹ Kolankiewicz, Liinason and Sager, *Genusvetenskapliga forskningsmetoder*, p. 380.

⁷² Vetenskapsrådet, *God forskningssed* (Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet, 2024), p. 57.

A central ethical issue in this study concerns the use of publicly available online content without individual consent from the people who created it. Vetenskapsrådet notes that publishing content on social media does not automatically constitute participation in research, but that informed consent may be waived in observational studies of publicly available material contacting individuals is not partially possible.⁷³ The influencers are public figures who have deliberately addressed large public audiences through freely available YouTube videos.. On this basis, individual consent was not treated as a requirement for this study. Trans people are particularly exposed to risk in social media research, facing disproportionate levels of online hostility that cisgender people do not face in the same way. However following both vetenskapsrådet⁷⁴ and Eldén⁷⁵ The absence of a formal consent requirement does not remove the researcher's ethical responsibilities, since the protection of participants must remain a priority. This study commits to this through anonymisation: the four influencers are not named or directly identified anywhere in the thesis. This decision reflects Eldén's understanding of anonymisation not only as a procedural requirement, but as an expression of respect for those whose words and experiences form the basis of research.⁷⁶

The researcher's own position constitutes a further ethical dimension of this study. Eldén argues that a good researcher must maintain fundamental respect for those whose experiences they study, a responsibility that may involve intellectual discomfort.⁷⁷ Following Pillow, I understand this discomfort not as an obstacle but as part of taking the ethical responsibilities of research seriously.⁷⁸

In the analysis, the influencers are referred to by pseudonyms that are unrelated to their real names. Because the material comes from public YouTube videos, anonymisation cannot remove every possible risk of recognition; therefore, identifying contextual details have been minimised and the analysis focuses on patterns in the narratives rather than on exposing personal information about the creators.

⁷³ Vetenskapsrådet, God forskningssed, p. 69.

⁷⁴ Vetenskapsrådet, God forskningssed, p. 69.

⁷⁵ Eldén, Forskningsetik, p. 131.

⁷⁶ Eldén, Forskningsetik, p. 131.

⁷⁷ Eldén, Forskningsetik, p. 128.

⁷⁸ W. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16, no. 2 (2003), pp. 175-196, pp. 187-188, DOI: 10.1080/0951839032000060635.

3.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged, first the sample is small and purposively selected, four influencers whose content is produced primarily in English and Swedish. Because they have public platforms and established audiences, they have a relatively privileged position compared with many trans people whose voices are less visible online. Trans people who do not create content in English, or whose visibility is constrained by race, class, or national context are not represented in this material. The analysis has attempted to account for intersectional differences within the sample, including differences in how the influencers engage with structural critique, but it cannot fully address the experiences of people whose conditions of visibility are far more restricted.

What is narrated publicly on a YouTube channel is always already shaped by decisions about what to share and what to withhold, by the presence of a large audience, and by the platform's own norms around content and self-representation. The influencers' narratives are not transparent windows onto their inner lives; they are constructed and performed for an audience. This does not make them less valuable as data, but it does mean that what can be known from this material is what the influencers choose to make visible, not what lies beneath that visibility.

Third, as a researcher without lived experience of gender dysphoria or visible trans identity, there are dimensions of the influencers' experiences less well positioned to perceive and interpret than a researcher with such experiences. This study's findings should be read with this in mind.

These limitations do not invalidate the analysis, but they clarify its findings: the thesis examines how four relatively visible trans influencers narrate identity and visibility on YouTube, rather than making claims about trans people or trans influencers as a whole.

4. *Analysis*

This chapter presents the results of the thematic narrative analysis. Narrative analysis was conducted on sixteen YouTube videos produced by four trans influencers: Mary, a trans woman; Robert, a trans man; Linda, a trans woman; and Eric, a trans man. The analysis identified five overarching themes across the material, each addressing dimensions of the research question.

The first three themes focus mainly on how the influencers narrate and manage hostility, while the final two themes focus more directly on how they construct identity and visibility over time. Together, the themes answer the research question by showing how identity, visibility and hostility are narrated as connected rather than separate experiences.

4.1 Passing, gender legibility and cisgender expectations

One of the clearest themes in the material is the pressure to pass, understood here not simply as the wish to be recognised as one's gender, but as a social demand shaped by cisgender expectations of gender legibility. Across the four influencers, passing is narrated as both external and internalised: it comes from audiences, social norms and public expectations, but it also becomes part of how the influencers evaluate themselves. This makes passing particularly important for understanding trans visibility online, since these influencers are publicly trans and therefore cannot simply use passing as a private strategy of safety.

Mary's narration of passing pressure is among the most direct in the material. In her first video, she reflects on appearing on camera without makeup, framing it as a conscious act of resistance against the norms of performing femininity. She describes a recurrent inner conflict:

A lot of trans people go around feeling like they have to convince themselves that they are passing as a woman, in my case. And it's a really hard thing because sometimes you wear makeup almost just because you want others to see you as a woman and not because you might want to wear makeup that particular day.

(Mary, video 1)

Mary's account of wearing makeup not for herself but to be read correctly as a woman by others illustrates precisely what Edenberg describes as the normative demand for gender legibility: a demand that is experienced as simultaneously external and internalised.⁷⁹ Knowing that the pressure is socially constructed does not dissolve it. Instead, Mary's narrative shows how deeply these norms can shape both self-presentation and self-evaluation.

⁷⁹ Edenberg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

In her fourth video, recorded several years later, Mary returns to this theme with more emotional complexity. She describes a cycle in which her gender dysphoria and her general mental health interact with and intensify each other:

If I feel pissed off, my self-hatred increases, my gender dysphoria increases, and sometimes it's hard to be like this. Oh my god, who's screaming the loudest?

(Mary, video 4)

The metaphor of competing voices, dysphoria and self-hatred shouting over one another captures the psychological entanglement of passing anxiety and low self-worth. Mary also reflects on the extent to which external affirmation drives her sense of self:

Based on affirmative sayings like this: you're serving women, it can make me like this. I can put a lot of self-worth into it in some way, which I hate.

(Mary, video 3)

This tension between knowing that external validation is not a stable foundation for self-worth and nonetheless depending on it is characteristic of Mary's narrative voice throughout. It reflects how her narrative constructs a fundamentally ambivalent relationship to visibility: being seen correctly is necessary, but it also exposes her to the risk of being seen incorrectly.

Robert's narration of passing takes a different form, shaped by his earlier non-binary identification and his journey from being constantly misgendered during early transition to being correctly read as male in later videos. In his second video, recorded during his first year on testosterone, Robert reflects on misgendering as the most painful form of transphobia he experiences:

I would rather someone punch me in the face for being trans and be like I don't agree or I don't believe in it and someone get physical with me than someone just politely seeing me as something I'm not. That hurts more.

(Robert, video 2)

Being seen as something one is not is experienced as an erasure of the self, a finding that resonates with Edénborg's argument that visibility can constitute a form of social regulation and

discipline rather than recognition.⁸⁰ For trans influencers, passing is not as available as a private strategy in the way it might be for non-public trans people: their trans identity is known and part of their public persona. This makes the subtler form of passing pressure identified by Das and Farber particularly relevant: the expectation that trans visibility should be non-threatening and acceptable to dominant audiences.⁸¹

Eric's narration of passing follows a parallel path. In his fifth video, after several years on testosterone, he describes how a period of reduced exercise and shaving his beard for a creative project triggered dysphoria:

I felt like a lot of the feminine features that I had transitioned away from were coming back, and I felt like I was seeing all of these things come back that I didn't like about myself, so my dysphoria came back a lot.

(Eric, Video 5)

What is important here is that Eric's dysphoria is triggered not by external hate speech but by the perception that his own body is failing to pass. He must navigate not only social expectations but also an internal relationship with his own self.

Recorded ten years into her transition, Linda reflects critically on the urgency she felt to pass in the early stages:

I think when I was going through it, I felt a lot of urgency and a lot of anxiety around the time that I might be losing it if I wasn't, you know, done transitioning.

(Linda, Video 2)

Linda's retrospective narration adds a temporal dimension to passing pressure. From the position of someone looking back after many years, she presents the urgency to "finish" transition not simply as an individual feeling, but as something produced by social expectations about what a successful transition should look like.

⁸⁰ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

⁸¹ Das and Farber, 'User-Generated Online Queer Media', pp. 5-6.

4.2 Transphobic hostility as anticipated and structural

A second theme concerns how transphobic hostility is narrated as something the influencers already know when they become publicly visible. The material includes a direct account of expected hostility, and the emotional work of preparing for negative responses.

Eric's first video, his coming-out video recorded in 2013, opens with an explicit acknowledgement of expected hostility:

I know I'm probably going to get a lot of hate, and I do expect there to be a lot of negative comments and I'm sure a lot of people are going to have nasty things to say. They're going to be people who are extremely rude, and this doesn't make sense, it's weird, it's gross, whatever.

(Eric, video 1)

Eric's statement shows that transphobic hostility is already present as an expectation before it appears as an actual comment or attack. His decision to come out publicly is therefore made with an awareness of the risks attached to visibility. This connects to Edenberg's idea of visibility as a double-edged⁸² condition: visibility makes recognition and community possible, but it also increases exposure to judgment and hostility.

Mary's narration of hate speech focuses more directly on its emotional effects. She reflects on hate comments that target her femininity directly, noting that their power lies in how personal they are:

What sucks is that the hate comments really are. They go into very personal things, and then it becomes very, very difficult sometimes not to think about it.

(Mary, Video 1)

Mary's account shows how online hostility is connected to the pressure of gender legibility discussed in the previous section. The hate she describes does not target her in a general way but attacks precisely those aspects of appearance, femininity and self-presentation through which she seeks recognition as a woman. This connects to Butler's argument that gender is regulated

⁸² Edenberg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

through norms of recognisability.⁸³ When trans people are judged as failing to appear in the “right” way, their visibility becomes vulnerable to correction or rejection. Mary’s narrative, therefore, shows that transphobic hate is not only external abuse but can enter the self and shape how she relates to her body, femininity and public presence.

What matters here is that she does not present herself as unaffected, these patterns appear across the material: the influencers acknowledge the pain caused by hostility, but they also narrate themselves as actively managing it. Therefore, they show both vulnerability and agency.

Linda, in her second video, addresses transphobic hostility in a more political way. She reflects on the experience of seeing anti-trans rhetoric in mainstream political discourse:

Having our access to healthcare be a political battle, having our participation in sports be a political battle, having our lives be a political battle, really for these people to use further their own campaigns. That shit’s actually legitimately painful.

(Linda, video 2)

Linda’s narration moves between the personal and the structural. The pain she describes is felt individually, but it is also collective because it concerns a broader trans community whose lives are turned into a political debate. This connects to the research field on mainstream transphobia, where anti-trans hostility is not always expressed as direct hatred but often appears through public arguments about healthcare, sports, children or safety.⁸⁴ Linda’s narrative shows how these debates are experienced from the position of someone whose life is being discussed as a political problem. Her account also connects to Edenborg’s argument that visibility is shaped by political conditions.⁸⁵ Trans visibility here does not only mean being seen; it also means becoming subject to public judgment, debate, and regulation.

Linda’s narrative also complicates Duggan’s concept of homonormativity.⁸⁶ Rather than presenting trans visibility as private, individual, and non-political, she insists that trans lives are already made political through debates about healthcare, sports, and public legitimacy. Her

⁸³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 25-33.

⁸⁴ Channon and Mathieson, 'Automated Detection of Mainstreamed Transphobic Content', p.40

⁸⁵ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

⁸⁶ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, p. 50.

visibility, therefore, does not fit easily into a homonormative model of acceptable queer or trans representation, because it refuses to separate personal identity from structural critique.⁸⁷

This also makes Linda's narrative different from the more personal, diary-like narratives of some of the other influencers. While Mary focuses on the emotional effects of personal hate comments, Linda connects hostility to wider political structures. Through this shift, she frames transphobia not only as individual cruelty but as something produced through media, politics and public discourse. Taken together, Eric, Mary and Linda show that transphobic hostility shapes public trans visibility in different but connected ways: it is anticipated before coming out, felt personally through attacks on gender presentation, and experienced structurally through political debates about trans lives.

4.3 Community and strategies for managing visibility

In response to these conditions, all four influencers describe strategies for maintaining public visibility while also protecting their well-being. These strategies include relying on community support, setting boundaries around what is shared, and finding meaning in the positive impact their content has on younger trans viewers. What connects these approaches is that visibility is narrated as something actively managed. The influencers do not describe themselves only as targets of hate; they also narrate practical and emotional strategies through which public visibility becomes more liveable.⁸⁸

Community is the most consistently recurring resource across the material. Robert, reflecting on his early years on YouTube, directly attributes his survival to the trans YouTube community he found and became part of:

I've watched every video that's just like this on YouTube so hopefully this does the same thing for someone else as all of those videos did for me. It just gave me validation and confidence to be able to do it myself.

(Robert, video 2)

⁸⁷ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, p. 50.

⁸⁸ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

Robert describes the trans online community as something sustained through mutual support. His own visibility was made possible by the visibility of others, and he frames his videos as a contribution to the same chain of support. This connects clearly to Raun's work on trans self-representation and community building online.⁸⁹ YouTube is not only a platform where trans people become visible to a wider public but also a space where they speak to each other, share experiences, and make transitions imaginable for others. In Robert's narrative, content creation itself becomes a survival strategy. It is a way of giving back to a community that had first helped him understand himself.

Linda, similarly, uses her platform explicitly to build community. Her videos consistently address her audience in the second person, using terms such as "you," "sister" and "girly" in a way that positions viewers as participants in a shared experience rather than as spectators. In her first video, reflecting on how trans people navigate rejection, she offers her audience a reframing:

I hear you. I am there for you. I understand your pain is real. We're going to do our best to get through this together.

(Linda, video 1)

This explicit statement of solidarity is characteristic of Linda's narrative mode. She presents her platform as a communal space in which pain is acknowledged and shared, not minimised or dismissed. The repeated use of "we" constructs a collective trans subject, rather than an isolated voice. This is analytically important because it shows how visibility can be used not only for self-expression but also for care.⁹⁰ Linda's public presence serves to secure recognition for others, especially those who may feel alone in their offline lives. In this sense, her narrative shows that online trans visibility is not only being seen by cisgender audiences. It is also about creating spaces where trans people can recognise, support and speak to one another.

Selective disclosure also operates as an important strategy across the material. Mary, for example, describes her approach to decisions about surgery. She decides not to discuss upcoming

⁸⁹ Raun, *Out Online*, pp. 1-20.

⁹⁰ Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

procedures publicly until she is certain that she wants to pursue them for her own reasons and not because of social pressure:

I want to take time before I actually talk openly about it, but also actually to do the surgery, because I want to kind of feel confident that I actually want to do it for myself and not because I want to do it for society's pressure on trans women.

(Mary, video 3)

Mary's strategy of waiting before speaking constructs a protected space between her private decision-making and her public persona. This is important because it shows that visibility on social media is not simply a question of sharing more or less. It is a constant negotiation over what can be made public, when, and under what conditions. In relation to Butler's ideas about appearance and recognisability⁹¹ Mary's decision can be read as an attempt to resist the pressure to make her body available to public judgment. She does not reject visibility altogether but refuses to let the audience determine the timing or meaning of her transition-related choices.

This also connects to the previous sections on passing and hostility, Mary's silence about her next surgery is not a lack of openness but self-protection, in a context where trans women's bodies are often judged according to cisgender expectations of femininity. Selective disclosure therefore becomes one way of managing the double-edged nature of visibility.⁹² It allows her to remain publicly present while still protecting parts of herself from audience pressure.

Taken together, these strategies show that the influencers do not simply endure hostile visibility. Robert presents visibility as a chain of mutual support, Linda uses her platform to create collective recognition, and Mary protects her autonomy by deciding what not to disclose. The influencers are harmed by hostility, but they also use the possibilities of online visibility to care for themselves and others.

4.4 Identity as process: narrating the self across time

A central feature of the narrative material is that the four influencers describe trans identity less as a fixed or completed state than as something that changes over time. Across all four channels,

⁹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 25-33.

⁹² Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', p. 358.

identity is narrated as a process: something that unfolds, develops and is repeatedly reinterpreted. This is where the narrative method becomes especially important. The material not only shows what the influencers say about identity but also how they organise it over time. YouTube allows them to document change, return to earlier versions of themselves, and give new meaning to past experiences from the present. In this sense, their videos do not simply describe transition. They actively narrate transition as a process of becoming.

This connects to Phoenix's understanding of narrative identity as constructed through storytelling rather than as something stable or final.⁹³ It also connects to Butler's theory of gender performativity, where gender is not understood as an inner truth simply expressed outwardly but as something produced and recognised through repeated acts, appearances and social meanings.⁹⁴ The influencers' narratives show this process in practice: they return to earlier moments, reinterpret their past selves, and explain how their understanding of gender has changed over time.

Robert's fourth video, recorded in 2024, intercuts older footage from his earlier videos with present-day commentary that revisits the earlier material in light of later experience. Reflecting on his pre-transition self watching a famous person come out, he notes:

This is a great example of someone when experiencing undiagnosed gender dysphoria. I don't have the words to describe how I'm feeling but I'm clearly deeply uncomfortable within my own skin.

(Robert, video 4)

The move here, speaking about a past self almost from the outside, demonstrates the narrative distance between who Robert was and who he is now. The present Robert has words for feelings that the past Robert could not yet explain. The video becomes an act of reinterpretation, in which earlier experiences are re-narrated through a language unavailable at the time. This is precisely what makes narrative analysis useful in this study: the focus is not only on Robert's identity as trans but also on how he constructs the meaning of that identity over time.

⁹³ Phoenix, 'Tänka genom narrativ', p. 380.

⁹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 25-33.

Robert also offers an explicit formulation of this processual identity in his third video, when asked about his transition:

There is no way I could be Robert today if I wasn't all the Robert's that I was before. There's no way like there genuinely is no way.

(Robert, video 3)

This statement does not present identity as a replacement of what came before. Transition does not erase earlier versions of the self but brings them into the present. The different versions of Robert, before transition, as non-binary and as a trans man, are all described as part of his current self, even though that self has changed over time. This challenges a simplified narrative of transition as a movement from one false self to one true self. Instead, Robert's narrative emphasises continuity through change: the self becomes different, but it does not become disconnected from its past.

Eric's narration of the identity process takes a different but complementary form. In his fifth video, he reflects on growing his hair to its pre-transition length and experiencing a complex recognition of continuity:

Now seeing my hair like this cuz it's always been curly, it's always been big, it looks the way that it did back then and so like I look in the mirror and my hair is the same but everything else is different and everything else is so much better.

(Eric, video 5)

The sameness of the hair against the difference of everything else is narrated as emotionally notable: it provides a thread of continuity that connects the person Eric is now to the person he was in one of the hardest periods of his life. Eric describes the past as something that remains part of him rather than something he must escape. This moment shows that identity is not narrated as a simple opposition between before and after transition. His narrative, therefore, complicates the idea of transition as total transformation. It is also a process of re-encountering the past from a safer, more stable present.

Mary's narrative of identity is marked by a recurring movement between confidence and doubt. Across her four videos, she moves between moments of clear self-affirmation, such as when she states that she is "still as much a woman now as I am when I wear makeup," and moments of uncertainty about whether she will ever feel complete:

What's clear to me, though, is that I wouldn't, I mean, fuck, this is so... because no, I probably wouldn't, or god... Okay, now I'm really thinking out loud here. Would I trade away being trans? No.

(Mary, video 3)

Mary's statement is important because certainty does not appear before narration. Instead, it emerges through the act of speaking. She thinks aloud, hesitates, contradicts herself, and then arrives at the answer that she would not give up being trans. This makes her self-understanding appear as something produced through reflection rather than as something already fully settled. In relation to Butler, this shows identity not as a fixed inner essence but as something repeatedly worked through in language, embodiment and public self-presentation.⁹⁵ Mary's uncertainty does not weaken her identity. Rather, it shows how identity can be actively made meaningful through narration.

Linda's narration, recorded a decade into her transition, provides a different perspective on the identity process, reflecting on the ten years since she began transitioning, she articulates a wish that she had moved more slowly:

I kind of wish that I had taken my time more and gotten to know myself as a trans person before rushing into changing myself. The journey is, it's part of the fun. It's part of the magic.

(Linda, video 2)

Linda encourages younger trans people to also enjoy and inhabit the process. Presenting transition as valuable in itself rather than something that needs to end. This is important because it challenges the idea that transition is only about reaching a final, stable identity as quickly as possible. Instead, Linda frames the process itself as meaningful. Her narrative also connects back to the previous discussion of passing pressure: the urgency she once felt to "finish" transition is

⁹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 33.

later reinterpreted as something shaped by anxiety and social pressure. From her present position, she offers a slower and more reflective understanding of becoming.

Taken together, these narratives show that trans identity is not presented as a fixed destination reached through transition. Rather identity is narrated through its relationship to time: through past selves, bodily change, memory, and future possibility. Robert shows identity as build up by time; Eric shows continuity through bodily memory; Mary shows self-understanding emerging through narration; and Linda shows transition as a process that can be reinterpreted retrospectively. This is where narrative analysis becomes especially useful: the material concerns not only trans identity as a category but also how the influencers make sense of identity through stories of change, continuity, and becoming.

4.5 Visibility on one's own terms

The final theme that emerges across the material is the attempt to use YouTube as a space in which trans people can claim visibility on their own terms. Through their videos, the influencers define themselves, challenge misrepresentation, build community and refuse the scripts that cisgender culture imposes on them. This is perhaps the most explicitly political theme in the material, and it connects most directly to Edenberg's concept of regimes of visibility.⁹⁶ The influencers do not simply appear within the conditions of online trans visibility. Their narratives show attempts to negotiate and contest those conditions through content, self-representation and audience address. At the same time, their narratives show that visibility is never fully self-determined. It is shaped by audience expectations, platform norms and the responsibility that comes with speaking publicly as trans in a hostile online environment.

Robert reflects on what his platform meant during the early period of his visibility. As one of the most widely watched trans creators at a time when trans identities were not widely discussed or accepted, he notes:

⁹⁶ Edenberg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', pp. 350-351.

I was one of the most watched trans creators at a time where trans identities were not widely discussed or well received so I felt a heightened sense of responsibility. I mean, I carried that so much.

(Robert, video 4)

Visibility here becomes a form of advocacy, even when it is not explicitly framed as activism. Robert's presence on YouTube during a period of relative trans invisibility was politically important because it made trans life visible in a context where trans identities were still poorly understood and often rejected. This connects to Edenberg's argument that visibility is never neutral: it can create recognition and political possibility, but it also places pressure on those who become visible.⁹⁷ Robert's narrative shows this double movement. His platform gave him the possibility to represent trans life on his own terms, but it also produced a burden of responsibility. He does not appear only as himself; he also carries a wider representational role for other trans people.

Robert's account can also be read in relation to Duggan's concept of homonormativity.⁹⁸ His sense of responsibility comes not only from being visible as an individual trans person but also from knowing that his visibility may be read as representative of trans people more broadly. This creates pressure to appear as understandable, responsible, and non-threatening to a wider audience. In this sense, public trans visibility is partly shaped by conditions of acceptability: the influencer may speak but is also expected to speak in ways that do not disturb dominant norms.

Linda's approach to her platform is perhaps the most consciously pedagogical of the four. Her videos consistently address her audience as people who need and deserve information, affirmation, and community. In her second video, she articulates an explicit vision of what her ten years of visibility have been for:

I love my life, I love myself. I love the way that my transition has turned out. I'm really proud of little me for making it this far and for not giving up and for creating a safe life for myself and a peaceful life for myself where I can be myself.

(Linda, video 2)

⁹⁷ Edenberg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', pp. 350-351.

⁹⁸ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, p. 50.

The pride Linda expresses is personal, but it also has a collective dimension. Her “little me” can be read not only as her younger self but also as a figure through which younger trans viewers may recognise the possibility of survival and flourishing. This connects to Raun’s work on trans self-representation and community building online.⁹⁹ Linda’s platform is not only a place where she tells her own story. It becomes a space where trans viewers can encounter a possible future for themselves. Her visibility, therefore, functions as a form of care and pedagogy. She uses her public presence to create recognition for others, especially those who do not have access to trans community offline.

Mary’s narration is shaped by the desire for self-expression and the pressures of addressing a public audience. She describes the difficulty of speaking openly about topics such as eating disorders, while remaining aware that her words could affect vulnerable viewers:

I only want to be a support. I don’t want to be a trigger.

(Mary, video 2)

This brief statement captures a tension that runs through all four influencers’ narratives: the desire to use visibility to help others, combined with the awareness that visibility also carries risks. Mary’s account shows that claiming visibility on one’s own terms does not mean that visibility is without limits. Instead, it involves constant ethical negotiation over what to share, how to share it, and how it may affect an audience. This connects to Butler’s argument that appearing in public can be a political act but that public appearance is always shaped by norms of recognisability and vulnerability.¹⁰⁰ Mary appears as a trans woman speaking from her own experiences but also manages the responsibility that comes with being watched by others.

This also connects to Das and Farber’s argument that online queer and trans visibility is shaped by dominant norms around gender, race, class, and acceptability.¹⁰¹ The influencers use YouTube to represent themselves, but they do so in a space where some forms of visibility are more easily accepted than others. Their attempts to speak on their own terms, therefore, take place within

⁹⁹ Raun, *Out Online*, pp. 1-20.

¹⁰⁰ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, pp. 24-31.

¹⁰¹ Das and Farber, 'User-Generated Online Queer Media', p. 7.

unequal conditions. Robert carries the burden of representation, Linda creates a pedagogical and collective form of visibility, and Mary carefully manages what can be shared without causing harm. In different ways, they all show that visibility is not simply a matter of being seen. It is a question of how one is seen, by whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences.

For all four influencers, YouTube is narrated as neither a completely free nor a neutral space. It is enabling because it allows trans people to speak in their own words, reach others, build community, and challenge dominant representations. At the same time, YouTube is constraining because visibility on the platform is shaped by audience expectations, public scrutiny, platform norms and the broader hostile environment around trans lives. The strategies described in the previous sections, community building, selective disclosure and reflective narration, are all ways of navigating these conditions.

5. Conclusions

5.1 What the study shows

This thesis set out to examine how trans influencers narrate and navigate identity and visibility in a hostile online environment. The analysis shows that online trans visibility is not just a matter of becoming seen, but a negotiated condition in which recognition, vulnerability, self-definition, and regulation coexist. The four influencers narrate visibility not as purely empowering or purely harmful, but as something that must be actively managed through passing practices, emotional preparation, community building, selective disclosure and retrospective self-narration.

A second key finding concerns the nature of passing pressure as experienced by trans people who are publicly and knowingly trans. Passing has typically been theorised in relation to the question of whether trans people can be perceived as cisgender in everyday life. For trans influencers, the question is not whether they pass as cisgender but whether they perform their trans identity in ways that are acceptable to cisgender audiences. The empirical material shows this clearly in three examples: Mary's account of wearing makeup not for herself but to be read correctly as a woman; Robert's formulation of misgendering as a more painful form of harm than physical violence; and Eric's description of dysphoria triggered not by hate speech but by the

perception that his own body was failing to conform to gender norms he had partially internalised. The expectation that gender should appear clear and recognisable operates not only in everyday interactions but also through audience expectations and the unspoken norms that shape acceptable forms of trans representation online.

Across all four influencers, transphobic hostility is narrated not as an exceptional event but as a background condition, something that must be anticipated and incorporated into one's self-representation before it arrives. Eric's anticipatory narration, naming the expected hate before it happens, is perhaps the clearest example of this, but the pattern appears across all four channels. To anticipate hatred so clearly that one names it before it arrives is to live in a social environment where hostility becomes a calculable part of public life, not an exception to it.

The finding about identity as a process contributes to understanding what trans self-narration does over time. The longitudinal format of YouTube allows the influencers to construct identity not as a fixed state achieved through transition but as something cumulative, continuous, and in ongoing relation to the past. This appears in Robert's insistence that every version of himself is present in who he is now, Linda's reflective wish to have moved more slowly, Eric's curl of hair as a thread connecting past and present, and Mary's real-time uncertainty about whether she would give up being trans. These accounts challenge the common view of transition as a straightforward movement from one fixed gender to another. Instead, they show that transition is not narrated only as arrival, but as a continuing process of change, reflection and reinterpretation.

5.2 Contributions and directions for future research

This study contributes to existing research in three main ways. First, it extends research on trans online visibility by showing how visibility is narrated not only as representation or community building, but as an ongoing practice of making public trans life liveable. The influencers do this through community building, selective disclosure, humor, emotional preparation and careful control over what parts of the transition become public. Second, the study contributes to research on online transphobia by showing that hostility does not only appear as direct hate speech after visibility has occurred. It is also anticipated in advance and therefore shapes how visibility is planned, felt and narrated. Third, the thesis contributes to narrative approaches to trans

self-representation by showing how YouTube's longitudinal format allows influencers to construct identity as a process rather than as a completed transition from one fixed gender position to another.

The findings also have implications for how online spaces are understood as regulated environments. Regulation should not be understood only as formal moderation, such as whether hateful comments are removed or whether users are banned. The narratives analysed here suggest that online spaces are also regulated through audience expectations, platform norms, algorithmic visibility and the anticipation of hostility. While this study cannot determine how YouTube's algorithms technically distribute trans content, it shows how platform conditions are experienced and anticipated by the influencers themselves. The influencers adjust what they share, when they share it, and how they present themselves because they know that visibility can invite judgment, misgendering, harassment, or political debate. In this sense, regulation operates before it happens: it shapes the conditions under which trans people decide how visible they can afford to be.

Future research could combine narrative analysis with platform data to study how trans narratives are amplified, limited, or made vulnerable by platform structures. This would build on Rodriguez's work on LGBTQ incorporation¹⁰² and Das and Farber's work on algorithmic privilege while extending the analysis beyond self-narration to the platform conditions that shape which trans narratives become visible.¹⁰³

Future research could also attend to forms of trans visibility not represented in this study: non-English-language content, content produced by trans people of colour outside Western European or North American contexts, and content on platforms other than YouTube. As Are, Talbot and Briggs show, different social media platforms create different affordances for LGBTQIA+ expression.¹⁰⁴

Future research could attend more closely to audiences: how trans people who watch this content narrate its role in their own lives, how it shapes their understanding of identity and how it

¹⁰² Rodriguez, 'LGBTQ Incorporated', pp. 1818-1819.

¹⁰³ Das and Farber, 'User-Generated Online Queer Media', p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Are, Talbot and Briggs, 'Social Media Affordances of LGBTQIA+ Expression and Community Formation', p. 1403.

functions as a resource for resilience in contexts of social hostility. Austin's work on the life-saving role of the internet for trans youth suggests that this audience relationship is important and deserves closer empirical attention than existing research has given it.¹⁰⁵

Overall, the thesis shows that online trans visibility is not simply a condition of being seen, but an ongoing practice of negotiating recognition, vulnerability and self-definition in public. Visibility can create recognition, community and resistance, but it can also expose trans people to new forms of regulation, hostility and responsibility. For gender studies, this means that the politics of visibility must be analysed not only in terms of representation but also in terms of the conditions under which people become visible, the norms they must navigate to remain visible, and the forms of agency they develop within those constraints.

¹⁰⁵ Austin, 'It's My Safe Space', p. 35.

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Appendix:

Appendix A

Influencer pseudonym	Video	Type of video	Length	Date	Main themes
Mary	Video 1	Personal reflection/vlog	14:15	May 2021	Passing, makeup, gender dysphoria, hate comments, gender legibility
Mary	Video 2	Personal reflection/mukbang-style vlog	14:24	July 2023	Everyday life, self-presentation, visibility, audience intimacy
Mary	Video 3	Q&A video	15:09	July 2024	Transition, audience questions, gender identity, visibility, self-representation
Mary	Video 4	Q&A/personal reflection video	29:47	January 2025	Gender dysphoria, self-worth, mental health, transition, audience questions
Robert	Video 1	Transition story video	7:58	January 2017	Transition narrative, coming out, identity, self-representation
Robert	Video 2	One-year transition update	16:11	April 2018	Transition, passing, misgendering, identity, public visibility
Robert	Video 3	Personal reflection/transition update	8:33	April 2020	Transition, identity over time, self-reflection, continuity
Robert	Video 4	Retrospective reflection video	14:06	June 2022	Transition, identity over time, past self, public visibility, self-reflection
Robert	Video 5	Retrospective reflection/commentary video	34:03	October 2024	Transition, identity over time, past self, public visibility, responsibility
Linda	Video 1	Advice/community-oriented video	17:16	June 2024	Community, solidarity, rejection, emotional support, trans self-worth
Linda	Video 2	Retrospective reflection/advice video	40:56	August 2025	Transition over time, vulnerability, anti-trans politics, self-worth, visibility
Eric	Video 1	Coming-out video	7:53	October 2013	Coming out, anticipated hate, public visibility, identity, self-representation

Eric	Video 2	Transition update video	9:09	January 2015	Transition, bodily change, passing, gender affirmation, public visibility
Eric	Video 3	Transition update video	5:31	May 2016	Transition, passing, bodily change, gender affirmation, self-reflection
Eric	Video 4	Personal reflection/transition update video	10:48	September 2016	Transition, passing, self-representation, public visibility, identity
Eric	Video 5	Retrospective reflection video	13:07	April 2019	Dysphoria, passing, body image, continuity, identity over time