

Retoryka wizerunku publicznego

Rhetoric of the public image

9 (2) 2022 ISSUE EDITORS: ANNA BENDRAT, ELŻBIETA PAWLAK-HEJNO

MICHAELA FIKEJZOVÁ

CHARLES UNIVERSITY, FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, CZECH REPUBLIC

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1989-5532>

michaela.fikejzova@gmail.com

MARTIN CHARVÁT

METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY PRAGUE, DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA STUDIES, CZECH REPUBLIC

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1733-6582>

martin.charvat@mup.cz

Who's the 'real' transgender? The representation and stereotyping of the transgender community on YouTube

Kto jest „naprawdę” transpłciowy? Reprezentacja i stereotypizacja społeczności transpłciowej na YouTube

Abstract

The article aims to provide an analytical introduction to the ways of representation of the transgender minority in new media. Through a rhetorical analysis of the selected content related to two high-profile transgender YouTubers, we identified five building blocks of the given discourse: reduction of a structural problem to a personal one, reduction of a person's reality to feelings, tokenization, psychiatrization of transgender identity, and ingroup gatekeeping. These aspects of the discourse function as a limiting and formative force for the media representation of what is considered to be a transgender identity and transgender experience in a given discourse. Therefore, transgender people are rendered unable to express their own experience as it is stereotyped beforehand through the structure of the debates and interviews and media representation in general.

Artykuł ma na celu analizę wprowadzającą do sposobów reprezentacji mniejszości transpłciowej w nowych mediach. Poprzez analizę retoryczną wybranych treści związanych z dwoma głośnymi transpłciowymi youtuberami, zidentyfikowano pięć elementów składowych dyskursu na ich temat. Są to: redukcja problemu strukturalnego do osobistego, redukcja indywidualnej rzeczywistości do uczuć, tokenizacja, psychiatryzacja tożsamości transpłciowej i *ingroup gatekeeping*, czyli selekcja informacji w obrębie danej grupy. Wymienione aspekty dyskursu funkcjonują jako siły ograniczające i formujące medialną reprezentację tego, co w danym dyskursie uznawane jest za transpłciową tożsamość i transpłciowe doświadczenie. W związku z tym osoby transpłciowe nie są w stanie wyrazić własnego doświadczenia, ponieważ jest ono z góry wpisane w stereotyp poprzez strukturę debaty publicznej i wywiadów oraz poprzez określoną reprezentację medialną.

Key words

rhetorical analysis, representation, transgender discourse, new media, YouTube
analiza retoryczna, reprezentacja, dyskurs transpłciowy, nowe media, YouTube

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MICHAELA FIKEJZOVÁ

CHARLES UNIVERSITY, FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, CZECH REPUBLIC

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1989-5532>

michaela.fikejzova@gmail.com

MARTIN CHARVÁT

METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY PRAGUE, DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA STUDIES, CZECH REPUBLIC

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1733-6582>

martin.charvat@mup.cz

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1. Introduction

In June of 2021, Nancy Jo Sales from *The Guardian* interviewed Natalie Wynn, a transgender video-essayist, primarily about her stance on cancel culture. Even though Wynn being a transgender creator was not in the focus of the interview, Sales asked several questions that lead to Wynn's 'transgender'² opinions—she was asked about transgender legislation, about her 'personal mental health issues,' about being a 'warrior.' The interview was structured in a way that followed a common pattern for media content regarding transgender people. The subject herself becomes a token for the whole community, her identity is medicalized, and her struggle with the system is reduced to just her struggle. This study aims to map out how rhetorical and discursive strategies lead to an even bigger marginalization of transgender people, even when they are trying to be empowering. Our focus on two high-profile transgender YouTube creators, Natalie Wynn and Blaire White, aims to identify the building blocks of transgender discourse on YouTube through the analysis of content they either create or partake in.

2. Methodology

The concept of discourse and discourse analysis was primarily put into play by Michel Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* from 1969, where he reflects

1. This paper is partially (50%) the result of Metropolitan University Prague research project no. 93-01 "Political Science, Media and Anglophone Studies" (2022) based on a grant from the Institutional Fund for the Long-term Strategic Development of Research Organizations.

2. Generally, we use the term "transgender" in the broadest sense, applying it to every person who does not identify themselves with the binary gender they were assigned at birth. In the last two paragraphs of the second section, we further specify the gender theory used in the study. Concepts tightly connected to the analysis itself are explained throughout the analysis in the fourth section.

upon his previous works (*The Birth of Clinic*, *The Order of Things*, etc.). As Foucault (1971) states, discourse is anonymous and no one owns it; it is otherwise much more: discourse provides the power, and, at the same time, forces someone to speak in a specific manner; there are themes and topics within every society that can be discussed, and topics which are excluded from the discourse.³ Social, institutional, economic, political, libidinal and other mechanisms do not guarantee the freedom of speech to the speaker because, to be heard and seen, they must follow and be subjectivized by the order of the discourse. Through such discursive (and non-discursive) strategies, one is set to be a ‘docile subject’, whose way of being is affirmed by certain socius. The themes and topics which are spoken about under this discourse are constructed. Foucault proposes the term ‘discursive objects,’ i.e., objects which are constituted by discourse are artificially constructed.

Fairclough uses the notion of ‘ideological power’, which is a power “to project one’s practices as universal and [...] is exercised in discourse” (Fairclough [1989] 2013, 27). Ideological power is inscribed in society’s view on gender, sexuality, and every type of behavior.⁴ Ideological power is always a political power, whether it operates on a macro or micro-level (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis, of course, starts with the ‘text’, but also in trying to reveal those ‘hidden’ conditions of production of the text and to reveal the political forces laid in every communicative action (Fairclough 1995). Additionally, according to Teun van Dijk (2001, 352), critical discourse analysis should focus not only on revealing the political forces as such, but especially on how “social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.”

In the case of identities, the construction of identity is both discursive and non-discursive and determines how we conceptualize who we are and how we communicate with others, to which social assemblage we are being inscribed or are inscribing ourselves. Discourse analysis tends to show “how personal and social identities are shaped in social interactions, and how they are created, reproduced, negotiated, imposed, or even resisted through discourse” (Grad 2008, 8).

In the present paper, we deal with the discursive representation of transgender people in the new media, and we would like to present certain discursive strategies which are in play in defining who is the ‘real’ transgender. Therefore, we focus

3. But as Theo van Leeuwen writes, some “exclusions leave no traces in the representation, excluding both the social actors and their activities. Such radical exclusion can play a role in a critical comparison of different representations of the same social practice, but not in an analysis of a single text, for the simple reason that it leaves no traces behind” (Leeuwen 2008, 29).

4. “Different social practices are ‘regulated’ to different degrees and in different ways—for instance, through strict prescription, or through traditions, or through the influence of experts and charismatic role models, or through the constraints of technological resources used, and so on” (Leeuwen 2008, 7).

mostly on the already mentioned shaping of the personal and social identities in a given discourse. We are especially interested in the ways the discourse limits the development of those identities. As Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak (2001, xii-xiii) note, we can trace the so-called ‘referential strategies’ (how ‘people’ or ‘objects’ are named, and in what way they are referred to), ‘predicational strategies’ (which kind of traits and qualities are being inscribed to them), ‘argumentation strategies’ with special interest on ‘fallacies’ (argumentative schemes of justification), ‘perspectivation and framing strategies’ (expressed points of view), ‘mitigation’ and ‘intensification strategies’ (how the biased usage of language works). When Reisigl and Wodak (2001) emphasize argumentation strategies, they make the rhetorical aspect of the discourse analysis salient. There is, of course, one problem we need to deal with: Paul van den Hoven (2016) writes that rhetorical discourse analysis is not a standardized method, nevertheless, it employs highly standardized tools for analyzing texts and discourses, such as the analysis of the narrative structures and the analysis of different types of arguments. This remark aligns with our notion of the distinction between rhetorical and discursive. From our point of view, everything that is rhetorical is also discursive, in the view of the fact that the discursive – in the sense of a specific area of utterances – determines what is considered to be rhetorical in a given discourse.

Following what has been said above, we would like to aim at the rhetorical means of persuasion, distinguish fallacies and point out the main ‘nod’ points of the discourse about transgender people. The identification of the main nod points is based on our preliminary knowledge of analyzed material and the media discourse regarding transgender people in combination with the literature review of the existing research on similar topics. We will not only use classical rhetoric, but also so-called ‘new rhetoric’, mainly as represented by Stephen Toulmin (2003), and narratology (Barthes 1975; Bremond 1980). In other words, we would like to trace how the analyzed discourse is being naturalized in new media (Fairclough [1989] 2013, 76). Specifically, we focus on how the identities of transgender people are shaped and limited by the discourse from which they arise.

We are facing a paradoxical situation in the case of the discursive subject of ‘transgender people’: they are being framed as the accused, whereas it is them who are being attacked – they are victims, but they are forced (through discursive strategies) to prove their innocence, but their voices are not heard in the present order of the discourse. They are invited to forums or public sessions, but the oppression is so strict that they cannot speak with their voice. It is the case of Lyotard’s (1989) *differend* – the distribution of power is already set and pre-established; we aim to reveal this distribution and how it is represented and rhetorically articulated in dominant discourse and expressed through the media.

Transgender people are in this context victims of a phenomenon called discursive injustice. Kukla (2014, 441) defines discursive injustice as a situation where “[...] a speaker’s membership in an already disadvantaged social group makes it difficult or impossible for her to deploy discursive conventions in the normal way, with the result that the performative force of her utterances is distorted in ways that enhance disadvantage.” The voices of transgender people are undermined by the cissexist⁵ discourse, which can be briefly defined as discourse where it’s ‘normal’, ‘natural’, and/or ‘morally right’ to identify as a gender that was assigned to us at birth. Anything else is considered deviant and these ‘abnormal’ people are labeled as monsters and a threat to children. Their utterances and arguments that otherwise would be taken seamlessly as justified and serious (in the sense of coming from persons aligned with the demands of cissexist society), instead are vastly disregarded and undermined by the fact that the speaker belongs to a social group of transgender people.

The main cissexist argument builds on the essentialist perception of gender, which Dembroff (2018, 22-23) calls, and debunks, as a ‘Real Gender’ assumption. The diminishing of a transgender person’s identity statement is at its core a quest for determining whether one is ‘really a man/woman’ (Dembroff 2018, 22). The criteria for defining ‘real’ womanhood or manhood are usually based on biological characteristics, sometimes reduced to one’s unchangeable chromosomes. To limit the frequency of this metaphysical debate, transgender people rely, to some extent, on so-called *passing*. Drawing on Butler’s (1990, 1993) theory of gender, we may describe passing as a meticulous pursuit of performing as a gender that matches the identity of a given person. This includes, in alignment with Butler’s argumentation, not only clothing and make-up, but also every gesture, and every act. Transgender people are trying to live up to non-realistic standards set by the societal discourse, the ideal norms for ‘being a woman’ or ‘being a man,’ and being perceived as one. As Halberstam (1998, 27-29) notes, these standards are hardly passed even by cis people.

3. Sample

The current research conducted in the media representation of transgender YouTubers mostly covers vloggers who record their transgender journey through the ‘talking head’ format. The researchers analyze intimate transition vlogs (Horak 2014), interview vloggers about the struggles they are facing on the platform

5. The prefix ‘cis’, or the adjective cis(gender), is in our understanding the antonym of the term ‘trans(gender)’, a cis person is a person who identifies as the gender that is the same as the one assigned to them at birth. The term ‘cissexist’ subsequently means “hostile towards transgender people”. Regarding the cis/trans binary, see e.g., Schilt & Westbrook (2009) or Darwin (2020).

(Miller 2018), or map out the differences between online and offline transphobia⁶ (McInroy and Craig, 2015). Colliver, Coyle & Silvestri (2019) conducted a discursive analysis of comments under YouTube videos regarding the topic of ‘Gender Neutral Toilets’ and pointed out three arguments: (i) Gender neutral toilets as sites of sexual danger, (ii) Claiming victimhood: gender neutral toilets as undermining the rights of cisgender people, and (iii) The delegitimization and othering of transgender people. We follow up on some points made by this study even though our focus is outside the issue of gender neutral toilets.

Our sample is different from the samples in the aforementioned studies as we focus on Blaire White and Natalie Wynn: two high-profile transgender YouTubers⁷ who explicitly thematize the topic of the transgender minority. They are both political commentators, even though their style of commenting on social issues is vastly different. They also find themselves on the opposite sides of the political spectrum. Blaire White is a ‘self-described center-right political commentator’ (Tenbarge 2020) affiliated with the Republican Party. Her YouTube content mostly comprises reaction videos and debates that she hosts, usually with clickbait titles including phrases like ‘heated debate,’ ‘sexual predator,’ etc.

Natalie Wynn, who is the creator of the ContraPoints channel, started as a political commentator debunking the alt-right. After coming out as a transgender woman, she started focusing more on transgender topics such as the gender-critical movement⁸ or so-called ‘transtrenders.’⁹ In her videos, she often uses recurring characters who present a specific point of view. Politically, Wynn inclines to socialism, and she actively supported Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign.

We first focus on the content made by these commentators themselves, which was published on YouTube and explicitly mentions transgender issues and/or reacts to their counterpart’s arguments, without their presence. The data set for this category consisted of 6 videos published by Natalie Wynn and 6 videos published by Blaire White in the years 2017-2021. Secondly, we analyze videos and public debates in which either of them took part where the main topic is again transgender issues. In this category, we analyzed 4 debates that Wynn took part in and 4 debates that White took part in. All the chosen debates were hosted on YouTube.

6. In our understanding, transphobia is a set of negative attitudes, be it hatred, hostility, anger, or moral outrage aimed at transgender people (Bettcher 2007, 46).

7. Blaire White currently has 977 thousand subscribers with overall channel views reaching the number of 160 million. Natalie Wynn has 1.53 million subscribers with overall channel views 71.6 million.

8. Gender critical movement or trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) defend the view that being a woman is biologically (chromosomally) determined, therefore transgender women cannot be ‘fully’ women. See e.g., da Costa (2021). Wynn (2019a) arguments against the gender critical stance in her video ‘Gender critical’, in which she calls the name of the movement a dog whistle and insists on labeling this stance ‘TERF’.

9. ‘Transtrenders’ is mostly a pejorative term that is heavily used for ingroup gatekeeping. It is targeted against those people who e.g., do not experience gender dysphoria (explained further in this study), started transitioning and then detransitioned, etc. Wynn (2019b) tries to fight the label ‘transtrender’ in her video bearing the same name.

The videos and debates were chosen according to whether their content is related to transgender issues and to what extent¹⁰. To contextualize their appearances in public debates we also explore several interviews given by them to mainstream media and their social media accounts.

For the present paper, we pinpointed the following building blocks of the discourse that surrounds transgender people on YouTube: (i) reduction of a structural problem to a personal one, (ii) reduction of a person's reality to feelings, (iii) tokenization, (iv) psychiatrization of transgender identity, and (v) ingroup gatekeeping. We identified these aspects of the discourse based on analyzing the material described at the beginning of this section along with the findings of previous research we gathered through literature review.

A specific type of (rhetorical) argument (or fallacy) can be found, traced, and analyzed in each of these 'building blocks.' We would like to add that in the case of our material, we are subject to the same (technological and social/political) a priori debate structures that are described by Bourdieu ([1996] 1998) in his short book about television. Bourdieu rightly claims that the discussion is staged, it is a kind of theatre with predefined boundaries and limits, i.e., some questions and themes are never raised, they are excluded from the discussion. The participants are also set up to play a certain role, which is in many cases reduced to simple binary opposition (Bourdieu [1996] 1998): each of the guests should represent a specific point of view (so there can never be any kind of consent about anything), because (as we have said earlier) the distribution of power is already pre-established.

4. Analysis

(i) Reduction of a structural problem to a personal one, and (ii) reduction of a person's reality to feelings

The first two building blocks are very closely connected and overlap in most cases. They are even present in interviews and debates, where the moderators are trying to point out that the given issue is structural, but then undermine this fact by how the question is formulated. In the VICE debate, where Blaire White was present, even questions regarding legislature contained the reduction to a personal issue in the sense of how a given person is personally affected by the mentioned legislature, and to personal feelings, e.g., "How do you feel about the new trans legislation?" "Is the given change meaningful to you?" From the transgender-inclusive feminist position, these questions are trying to be 'sensitive', they are

10. Both Wynn and White mention transgender issues in most of their videos, for the analysis we selected those that elaborate in length on those issues, thus do not anecdotally mention them.

meant to protect transgender people from critics who tend to condemn statements such as “this legislature, by and large, negatively affects transgender people,” even when the given argument is sound and data-based.

This reduction is based on a rhetorical fallacy, and the underlying argumentation could be described as follows: the main source of knowledge about the world, about our being-in-the-world, is based on our subjective common-sense experience, which can be (paradoxically) generalized. And, of course, another presupposition is that life is meaningful. What is left behind the curtains is that the so-called ‘experience’ is determined by socio-political and economic circumstances. Even the perception of ourselves, our body, our sexuality (and thus the world we live in) cannot ever be thought of independently¹¹ of the circumstances mentioned above—it structures and constructs specific identity types.

Another type of reduction happens when a transgender person’s life is labeled as an ‘unfortunate fate’ or ‘pitiful situation.’ These types of comments usually imply two things: (a) the given person was ‘born this way’ which is ‘unfortunate,’ and (b) the given person is for some reason unable to ‘escape’ their ‘situation.’ We elaborate more on this type of reduction in (iv), as it is usually tightly connected to the psychiatrization of the transgender identity. Notions like ‘unfortunate fate’ or ‘pitiful situation’ lead to the viewpoint from which life is a story operating through general narrative structures. In the structural analysis of narration proposed by Claude Bremond and Roland Barthes, every story begins with a so-called state of deficiency: something ‘bad’ happens, the equilibrium of the world is disrupted, and the whole narration thus follows the aim to renew the equilibrium on a new level of being (satisfactory state). A lot of things can get worse (procedure of degradation) but must improve during the narrative (by the procedure of improvement) (Bremond 1980). Roland Barthes (1975) calls the moments of change ‘essential signified cores’ which forward the narration.

From the (mainstream) perspective as to who is a ‘real’ transgender? ‘Transgender’ is rhetorically coded as a ‘state of deficiency’ (i.e., something ‘less’ than a ‘normal’ human). There are not many procedures of improvement when someone identifies as transgender; it is a procedure of degradation, even if the person finds the identification as a satisfactory state. In other words, to identify as transgender means that one has already begun the journey to complete degradation and (perhaps) cannot be saved by oneself, but instead needs the help of someone

11. For example, in the VICE debate, just as in videos produced by Blaire White, the other important parts of the transgender experience (e.g., class, race, etc.) are left out of the debate, and the identity is reduced only to the binary of transgender/cisgender. On the other hand, in Wynn’s videos we find a lot of effort put into expressing that she’s well-off, especially in the context of the transgender minority, she also stresses she has a white privilege and that she ‘passes as a woman.’ Nevertheless, these efforts are diminished in the general media representation of her, and transgender people, and her experience is often used as the paragon of the transgender experience, for example in the already mentioned interview in *The Guardian*, or the debate with Blaire White.

who knows the situation better. This leads us to the double-sided conception of experience: if you are not transgender, your experience can be generalized, and thus is ‘right’ or ‘normal’; if you are, your experience is not an experience ‘per se,’ it is not a ‘full’ experience, but only the fantasy or function of an abnormal mind. The only way to ‘improve’ the situation is based on the acceptance that nothing like transgender exists, and you need to get proper treatment to fight the developing degradation to function properly within a given society, which could be called a ‘satisfactory state’ from the ‘normal’ structural viewpoint. Your ‘pitiful situation’ would improve, and thus can be treated as a general ‘life-journey’ (‘everyone has ups and downs’) that will always lead to a happy ending.

The reduction or non-validation of a transgender person’s experience deploys the usage (but in a twisted way) of one classical rhetorical trope called prosopopoeia. Quintilian describes this figure of speech as a power to “bring down the gods from heaven, evoke the dead, and give voices to cities and states” (Institutes of Oratory, Bk. IX Ch. II). Giving voice to non-living objects and things that cannot defend themselves in a trial results in the need for someone to be an advocate of these things or their friend, someone who has deep and intimate knowledge of the thing and its language and can translate the speech of the thing into human speech. We have seen that transgender people are presented as not ‘human’ in an ordinary sense. They are almost ‘things’ deprived of their voice, so there must be someone who can translate their feelings and experience into the language of the ‘normal’. Of course, transgender people can talk, but they are not heard, and those who are speaking on their behalf twist the meaning and transfer words within the structure of mainstream bias. This shift solely has one aim: to diminish ‘abnormal’ experience and replace it with a common one, so the ‘problem’ (existence of transgender people) can be resolved.

(iii) Tokenization

Tokenization is technically the next step in the reduction scheme. In the VICE debate, participants are divided into groups with specific labels, such as ‘transgender Republican woman’, or ‘non-binary Democratic-leaning person’. The moderator enforces these labels by the sequence in which they decide who is going to respond next. The sequence, as the whole debate is set up as a fight-show, bounces between the most polar-opposite participants as possible. Referring to a transgender person through not only their name but also a given label is an extremely important part of what Reisigl and Wodak (2001) call referential strategy. By stereotyping the whole group of LGBT members by giving them labels and the staging of the debate, the moderator enhances the ingroup gatekeeping phenomenon, and, especially for the

outgroup viewer(s), underlines the image of a given group as politically incoherent with unclear opinions.

In the debate between White and Wynn, then a genderqueer non-binary person, the tokenization takes place through White's upper hand. She hosted the debate on her channel under the title 'Heated Debate w/ Genderqueer Feminist,' so Wynn's descriptive label is even given in the title of the debate itself. During the debate, Wynn does not use these labels for herself heavily. On the other hand, White heavily uses the intensification and referring strategy by constantly repeating she is a transsexual (and not transgender) woman. Her point of view leans towards the psychiatrization of the transgender identity. Since this debate, Wynn has not taken part in similar events to avoid such pitting of transgender people against each other.

On the contrary, White takes part in numerous debates with different outcomes and positions. For example, in the debate with a conservative commentator, Ben Shapiro, she proclaims herself to be somebody who is "always damage-controlling for the trans community," which is a part of her broader narrative that she is a 'true transsexual.'¹² In her argumentation, she panders to the conservative point of view by taking on their strategy of referring. She uses Shapiro's concept of 'biological pronouns,'¹³ within which the 'proper' way of using said pronouns is to refer to the gendered chromosomes of a given person. Even though she tries to debunk this argument by using a sound analogy of biological vs. adoptive parents, she gives in to the discourse established and enforced by conservative transphobes such as Shapiro. The overall tone of the debate is calm, and both leave with their minds unchanged. But changing each other's opinions does not seem to be the aim of the debate from the onset. They both leave with quite different perks for future debates—White confirms her position as a 'real trans' through being one of the few transgender people who, as she points out during the debate, are not treating politically conservative opinions and actors 'aggressively', and Shapiro takes away the fact that there is somebody whom he can refer to in the future from the transgender community who agrees with him on the biologically determined pronouns. For Shapiro, this is advantageous argumentative ammunition for future debates.

White finds herself in a very different position in another conservative debate that was not hosted on her channel. In 2021, White took part in a debate titled 'Christian Conservatives BATTLE Pro-LGBT Republicans' (Slightly Offens*ve, 2021). Even though the title implies that the debate is going to be centered around LGBT issues, the moderator and Christian conservatives take a big discursive step

12. White uses the term 'transsexual' to stress the importance of medical diagnosis and surgical and medical transitioning as people are usually diagnosed as 'transsexuals,' and not as 'transgender people.'

13. Wynn dedicated her video essay called 'Pronouns' to debunking Shapiro's argument (Wynn, 2018c).

– they deliberately conflate LGBT issues with the ‘leftist agenda’ and proclaim LGBT people to be ‘leftists’ based on being LGBT. Once again, we see White pandering to the conservative discourse through using their vocabulary, which she also takes to be her own, even when she is attacked by it. She uses phrases such as ‘gender ideology’ and reduces the transgender issues to a ‘different life.’ This type of rhetorical strategy worked in the case of Shapiro, but it does not hold up in this context. In the case of arguments given by John Doyle and Lauren Witzken, White faces several slippery slope arguments that are much harder to fight, as they are also utilized *ad hominem* in her case. The Christian conservatives are trying to answer the question “How do we take the country back from the radical left?,” where ‘radical left’ is a synonym for the ‘LGBT propaganda’ for which White herself is a token. Witzken is more explicit when it comes to personal attacks: “The best you can do for us is grow out your mustache and tell people not to live like you.” Because of being tokenized, White is in Witzken’s argumentation responsible for ‘the sins’ of the ‘radical left.’ Witzken manifests a typical case of a combination of *ad hominem* arguments – White is a transgender and degenerate, therefore we cannot take her opinions seriously, and being a transgender is falsely considered to be “a gateway drug to pedophilia.”

White is rarely allowed to even finish her arguments. Her main argument is that it is not necessary to pander to minorities, but that people should not be explicitly excluded. White, of course, does not mean all people and adheres to her concept of ‘true transgender’ based on psychiatric diagnosis. Even though she gives her definition, which could theoretically even be accepted by ultraconservatives, she loses the debate because she was set up to lose from the very beginning.

(iv) Psychiatrization of transgender identity

The psychiatrization of the transgender identity is wide-ranging, usually employed through the concept of gender dysphoria. According to the *American Psychiatric Association*, gender dysphoria is, in the case of adults and adolescents, “a marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and their assigned gender, lasting at least 6 months.” This type of marked incongruence must fulfill at least two of several criteria, for example, “a marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and primary and/or secondary sex characteristics,” or “a strong desire to be treated as the other gender.”¹⁴ This type of psychopathologization of the transgender identity, where the ‘truly transgender’ person must fit the given criteria, is echoed in the everyday discourse about transgender people. Accompanied by the social pressure to be ‘recognizable’ as

14. See the full list here <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria>

the gender the given person identifies with, along with other gender-oriented social norms, transgender people are constantly pressured to ‘prove’ their identity.

Transmedicalism is, to some extent, used as a shield against this type of pressure. As stated by White (2017): “I am a transsexual, there’s a medical basis for that, there’s a scientific basis for that.” Using the word ‘transsexual’ is considered, within the online public arena, to be a transmedicalist dog whistle that is implying a connection between a ‘valid’ transgender identity and psychiatric diagnosis. White similarly uses this implication in her debate with Wynn, where she states that she does not misgender transsexuals. In this situation, she is reacting to Wynn’s criticism of misgendering fellow transgender YouTuber Riley Dennis, who, according to White, “doesn’t try hard enough” and “should start hormone therapy, if he [sic!] wants to be considered trans.” The transmedicalist stance is sometimes assigned to Wynn as well, mostly because of the more complicated structure of her channel. Wynn uses characters and plays out debates to confront different opinions. Consequently, in YouTube discourse, just as in mainstream media discourse, the opinions of her characters, e.g., transmedicalist Republican Tiffany Tumbles (Wynn 2018a), are conflated with the opinions of Wynn herself¹⁵.

What comes into play here is the fact pointed out by Foucault, and, for example, R. D. Laing (1965). Psychiatrization is a power-based act that differentiates between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal,’ and this distinction is artificially constructed in a given social, political, and economic realm of forces. Those who are labeled as ‘abnormal’ are of no use for a society and its economics. So-called ‘abnormal’ behavior is nothing else but a reaction to a certain state of social and economic relations, and, thus, completely ‘normal’ in the sense that external conditions are unlivable, and that is why a person acts beyond the stated norms and codes of living. Of course, Mark Fisher (2009) also said that contemporary governing ontology denies that any kind of ‘abnormal’ can be caused by social circumstances. Biochemization of ‘disorders’ (mental or sexual) and their specific personalization is unbelievably profitable for capitalism (pharmaceutical lobby etc.) (Fisher 2009). Once again, we face the double structure of disapproval (‘transgender’ are not the one producing any kind of economic value) and hidden acceptance (it is profitable for governing ontology to ‘have’ them because money can be made).

Because the transmedicalist argument is heavily used in wider discourse about transgender people, we would like to break it down with Toulmin’s (2003) model as an analytical tool. The grounds for the claim that transgender identity is valid are that transgender disorder is listed as a medically treatable disorder by several psychiatric organizations. This, in turn, warrants that transgender identity is valid

15. For example, in an interview with *The New Yorker* the author quotes Wynn on saying “Politics is aesthetics,” when it was not Wynn who said that, nor is it an opinion that Wynn necessarily stands for, it was uttered by a character named Justine in a staged debate about performativity gender in Wynn’s (2018b) video essay ‘The Aesthetic.’

because it is an existing diagnosis with medical grounds. The warrant is usually supported by personal backing: White knows that it is an existing diagnosis, because she was diagnosed as dysphoric, and, therefore, her identity is valid. The qualifier for transgender identity being valid is whether a given person is diagnosed with such disorder. In line with this argumentation, not all transgender identities are valid, only those who have medical evidence. A rebuttal for this claim could be that transgender people existed before the transgender disorder was added to the list of psychiatric organizations.

(v) Ingroup gatekeeping

As we have already mentioned, White is a proponent of the transmedicalist argument. She applies this stance in most of her reaction videos, which are an immense part of her YouTube content (e.g., White 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). The structure of these reaction videos is usually as follows: White picks a fellow transgender YouTuber or a public transgender persona and criticizes them for “not being trans enough.”¹⁶ She also comments on general transgender issues such as pronouns, children transitioning, etc. The main motive of all these videos is ingroup gatekeeping, White positions herself to be a ‘real transgender’ who is “damage-controlling for the whole community”. Through her commentary, she labels people whom she deems not to be ‘trans enough,’ e.g., they have not or are not even planning to undergo hormonal therapy and/or surgeries and they are therefore ‘just freaks and deviants’¹⁷. She guards her own identity and legitimizes it by labeling other people unfit. This is a very similar argument to the one that cis people make in the comments in Colliver et al. (2019), whereby instead of cis people claiming victimhood by saying they are oppressed by the pure fact that gender-neutral toilets exist, one transgender person claims victimhood on the grounds of other people identifying themselves differently. She presents the whole situation as a zero-sum game, where only one side can win, which is a rhetorical fallacy, as it is not the case. Transgender people of all sorts may coexist in one society. White is meticulously trying to find the enemy within her group of peers to find who is to blame for the dire situation transgender people find themselves in. This is tightly connected to her pandering to the general conservative public.

16. For example, White made two videos about Riley Dennis, a transgender YouTuber, critiquing her for ‘not taking hormones’ and ‘looking like a man.’ She also made a collection of utterances made by other transgender people called ‘THIS is Why the Trans Community Isn’t Respected (RANT),’ where she lists utterances and actions, she deems as transgressions of the rules for “real trans people.”

17. Wynn (2020) analyzes White’s commentaries in her video essay ‘Cringe’, in which she criticizes White for apologizing to Riley Dennis, but keeps on making this type of react content, which Wynn considers to be hurtful for both the individual and the community as such.

Ingroup gatekeeping is not a phenomenon happening in a vacuum, but it is heavily stimulated from outside the transgender community¹⁸. In the VICE debate, all the participants are pitted against each other, and disagreements are hyped through the structure of the debate. The simple question of “How do you characterize a transgender person?” asked of a transgender person, automatically becomes a weapon against their community.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we set out to map how the transgender discourse on YouTube is constructed, and how it furthers the marginalization and oppression of transgender people. Through analyzing the content created by Natalie Wynn and Blaire White and the content they took part in, we pinpointed five building blocks, or rhetorical strategies of a given discourse: (i) reduction of a structural problem to a personal one, (ii) reduction of a person’s reality to feelings, (iii) tokenization, (iv) psychiatrization of transgender identity, and (v) ingroup gatekeeping. These strategies are found both in the content that aims to marginalize transgender people, such as the debate with Christian conservatives, as well as in the content that proclaims itself to be emancipatory for either transgender people or the LGBT community. They function as limits for what is considered to be a transgender experience and identity, which they form through specific discursive rules. Therefore, transgender people become voiceless as their identity is formed before they have the chance to voice their own experiences. Discursively (and rhetorically), transgender people are pitted against each other, challenged to reach unreachable ideal norms set out by the discourse itself.

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18. For example, Wynn was canceled several times for doing or saying something the trans community on Twitter, or a part of it, saw as a transgression of the community rules, e.g., cooperating with Buck Angel as a voice actor, Buck Angel being a controversial figure who allegedly ‘hates non-binary people.’ Wynn was not only harassed for the cooperation itself, but she was also labeled as hostile towards non-binary people (HealthyGamerGG, 2020).

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