'**Я—ГЕЙ! (I am gay!)':**
Russian Coming Out Video Narratives
on YouTube

AN ESSAY BY CLINTON GLENN
McGill University

Abstract: In this paper I examine YouTube "coming out" videos posted by Russian LGBT YouTubers in order to understand the narrative features that they share, such as when some-one first came to understand their sexual orientation, how others around them have treated them, as well as their relationships with family, friends, and classmates. Here I use data scraping and coding to categorize videos scraped from YouTube based on thematic content, identity labels, types of representation, and other contextual information. I also look at the particularities of the videos that connect them to larger debates about LGBT rights in Russia, including the threat of prosecution under the infamous "gay propaganda" legislation. Finally, I look to the case study of YouTuber Zhenya Svetski to analyze how his coming out narra-tive reflects his social existence and experiences of homophobia, as well as the visual and rhetorical strategies he employs in his coming out video.

Keywords: Coming-out, social media, YouTube, LGBT, Russia

I n January 2013, during a television debate on the pro-Kremlin *Kontr* network over the introduction of the infamous 'gay propaganda' bill in the Russian Duma, journalist Anton Krasovskii outed himself on air.[1] Towards the end of the program, and in response to his own feelings of being a hypocrite during the discussion, he clearly stated: 'I'm gay, and I'm a person just like you, like President Putin' (Sokolova 2013). Krasovskii explained in an interview that his decision to come out was met with a swift dismissal: within a day he had lost his job, his shows were removed from the network's website, and all acknowledgement of his existence as an employee of *Kontr* were gone (Sokolova 2013). In the years since his

---

[1] The legislation, which falls under Article 6.21 of the Criminal Code of Offenses of the Russian Federation targets the promotion of 'non-traditional sexual relationships' under the guise of protecting children from harmful material. It also provides for monetary penalties for individuals, businesses and organisations, as well as the threat of administrative arrest and deportation for foreigners deemed to be in contravention of the law (Glenn 2020).

coming out, Krasovskii has emerged as an HIV/AIDS activist, which preceded his second coming out in 2017 when he acknowledged his HIV+ status (Kopelevich 2017). More recently he has begun producing documentary videos for the Kremlin-linked English language news service *RT* (Russia Today).

Krasovskii's experience points to the consequences LGBT Russians face in their personal and professional lives after coming out publicly. In the years since the passing of the 'gay propaganda' legislation, positive representations of LGBT Russians have been continually marginalised by state authorities through the legal enforcement of prohibitions against the distribution of materials promoting 'non-traditional' relationships to minors, requiring that any such content be labelled as 18+.[2] However, as a small number of recent articles have described, political and sexual dissent are alive and well on social media platforms such as YouTube, in spite of potential social and legal consequences (Strudwick 2017; Raspopina 2019). A 2018 article in *Wired UK* describes how the Berlin-based Russian LGBT activist collective *Quarteera* reached out to popular Russian YouTubers to help spread knowledge about LGBT issues and homophobia in Russian society.[3] As a part of this strategy, the Russian YouTubers were brought to Berlin, attended workshops on LGBT issues, met LGBT refugees, participated in Berlin Pride, and then returned to Russia and released videos about their experiences (Bateman 2018). While these videos were marked as 18+ so as not to run afoul of the 'gay propaganda' law, the social reach of the YouTubers allowed for the videos to reach a wide audience that LGBT-activist-produced content might not otherwise.

While there have been a number of videos released by allies supporting LGBT rights in Russia, in this article I explore the proliferation of content produced *by* LGBT Russians, primarily through the genre of YouTube coming out videos. It is part of my larger project, in which I compile a database of such videos on Russophone YouTube and analyse the narratives present in these videos, including the rhetorical strategies the YouTubers employ for discussing their sexual/gender identities, the ways they film and edit their videos including the graphics they use, props they hold, or other forms of visual storytelling, as well as other intertextual elements that have larger resonances in global LGBT culture. Part of my research also looks at their presence outside of YouTube, whether they participate in LGBT activism or not, and if there have been any material or social consequences for their videos, particularly in relation to the 'gay propaganda' law.

In a tentative analysis of my findings so far, I describe the specific narrative features that these videos share: how the LGBT YouTubers came to understand their gender and sexual identities, the process in which they came out to friends and family, their experiences of social and political homophobia, and how they came out to their YouTube audiences. The present analysis focuses on the act of coming out to the YouTuber's audience. In particular, I am interested in the relationship between the individual and their online audience: many of these YouTubers had extensive audiences and had published many videos online before coming out, and the act of revealing their sexual or gender identities has the potential to alienate

---

[2] There have been a number of prominent cases in recent years where individuals have been prosecuted for perceived infractions of the law. A key example is the case of feminist and LGBT rights activist Iulia Tsvetkova, who was fined repeatedly for breaching the law and currently faces trial for 'distributing pornography' on a social media page named after Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (RFE/RL 2021).

[3] YouTubers that participated in the project include Lyubarskaya (https://www.youtube.com/user/lyuBARoprosov/featured) and Vitaly Kovalev (https://www.youtube.com/user/TheVitaliyKovalev).

those followers who knew them before they revealed their true identities. Conversely, the act of coming out also has the potential to attract new audiences—those who identify as LGBT and look to videos on YouTube as a way of dealing with social isolation.

Furthermore, I examine how these YouTubers approach coming out in the context of the Russian 'gay propaganda' legislation that was passed in 2013. In the context of Russian LGBT YouTubers, I look at how they attempt to circumvent this legislation, primarily through disclaimers on their videos that they are for an 18+ audience. A challenge of doing this type of research comes in the Russian government's ever-increasing censorship of the internet—and the potential implications this has for the availability of content on YouTube.[4] While all the videos I speak about in this article remain available inside and outside Russia, it is uncertain whether this will continue to be the case.

My analysis in this article is driven by the research question: how do Russian LGBT YouTubers use the coming out genre of YouTube video to both depict and reflect on their own social reality? I offer this research question with a caveat: in this project, I do not intend to conflate online and offline lived experiences of individual YouTubers—after all, what someone chooses to upload to their social media account is a deliberate choice.

I start by defining what a coming out video is, and in particular, the types of narratives these videos contain. Following this, I describe my methodological approaches to collecting Russian LGBT coming out videos, how I am categorising and coding them, and the type of data that my search has collected. Furthermore, I describe how I will be analysing these videos, primarily in terms of the visual structures and narrative features they contain. In order to ground my methodological approaches, I look at a case study, the coming out video of Russian YouTuber Zhenya Svetski,[5] released in April 2017. Finally, I conclude with some questions for future research and a final reflection on how my project has relevance in the broader context of digital media studies.

---

[4] For example, in 2018 Roskomnadzor (Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media) attempted to ban Telegram, an encrypted chat application popular among young people and opposition activists. The network had fallen afoul of censors, which claimed that the technology allowed for extremist activity due to its encryption algorithms (EWDN 2019). In summer 2020, Roskomnadzor quietly dropped the ban on Telegram. Researchers have since surmised that the ban was lifted due to mass resistance of Russians who continued to use the app—including government officials, as well as the Roskomnadzor's inability to prevent Telegram from functioning, despite numerous attempts to do so (Khurshudyan 2020; Porter 2020). Other major social networks including YouTube and Twitter have also come under sustained pressure from the Russian government in recent years. YouTube has faced the ire of the Kremlin, which claims that YouTube unfairly censors Russian media while being inconsistent with their moderation policies (Flegontova 2020; AFP 2021), while Twitter has been threatened with censorship due to 'illegal content' that remains available on the platform even after Roskomnadzor filed complaints with the platform (Light 2021). In the context of YouTube, Roskomnadzor regularly submits take-down requests to YouTube's parent company, Google. While not all requests are enacted, many are—with the offending content either removed from YouTube or banned from being viewed in Russia. The extent to which VPN services can be used by Russians to circumvent this remains to be seen, particularly given Roskomnadzor's threats to ban VPN access if companies do not comply with the agency's blacklist of sites that should be blocked in the country (Reuters 2019).

[5] As the journal requires, I observe Library of Congress transliteration standards for all Russian names in this article that do not have an established Latin representation, but for those YouTubers, such as Svetski, who provide a Latin representation of their name, I use their representation.

1. What is a coming out video?

While there are no set guidelines as to what constitutes a coming out video, the main conventions of the genre include a confessional monologue, either to a camera or to a friend or family member, that the YouTuber identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or another sexual or gender identity. The genre travels across linguistic and regional online communities. Many of these coming out videos address questions posed by fans and followers, where the YouTuber responds to rumours or suggestions that they may be LGBT, or as a response to questions of whether they are in a relationship. In their analysis of YouTube coming out videos as a genre, digital studies scholars Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh describe how the coming out video is 'an intentionally broadcast statement that attempts to negotiate the boundary between intensely personal desires and public identities' connected to 'the shaping of personal desire through public discourse about sex, sexuality, and sexual identity' (Alexander and Losh 2010: 38). In effect, the YouTuber's choice to bridge the personal and the private links individual identity to broader discourses about sexuality.

Furthermore, Alexander and Losh describe how the coming out video as confession acts as 'a moment of intimate disclosure of an authentic identity hidden by a social mask, while also emphasizing how gender and sexuality are performed for the camera, much as they are staged in offline environment' (Alexander and Losh 2010: 39). To this I would add that for prominent YouTubers, particularly those who have built up a follower base and a community around their channels, the act of coming out is more than just a moment of choosing to express their authentic selves—it also represents a rupture point in their online persona—the before and after. As I discuss in the case study towards the end of this article, for Russian YouTuber Zhenya Svetski, his coming out video represents a chance to show his authentic self to his audience as well as the point at which he decided to delete all of his previous content from his channel. Furthermore, there are very material consequences to online and offline 'performances' of gender and sexuality. Much in the same way that coming out in real life is a radical act of self-representation with the potential for a phobic backlash, coming out online represents the potential for the YouTuber to lose a large portion of their audience and the community they have built up, as well as a potential loss of ad revenue from a decrease in followers and video streams. On the other hand, coming out also holds the potential for new forms of community, based on shared sexual/gender identity or life experience.

In terms of how this applies to Russian YouTubers, this article looks at how the coming-out narrative in these videos—from the confession of how they came to first know their identity, whether friends and family know, and what this means for their YouTube presence—is inflected by the social and political situation in Russia, and in particular the material consequences of the 'gay propaganda' legislation.

2. Methodology and approach

The main methodological approaches I use in my analysis include data scraping and collection followed by narrative and visual analysis of videos produced by Russian speaking residents of the Russian Federation, and available via YouTube in the country. In the first part of

this project, I used the data scraping software Octoparse to run keyword searches through YouTube using the terms 'каминг аут' and 'ЛГБТ'.[6] The resulting data set included 206 videos, as well as key metadata including the video name, YouTuber/channel, channel link, number of views, when the video was posted, and the description in the content section of the video. I manually sorted these videos based on relevancy—for example, if they were coming out videos or had been scraped based on similarity to keywords in the description of these videos. I also filtered them based on their location.[7] The final list includes 167 videos of individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender and 'non-traditional' sexual orientation.[8]

I then coded the videos, identifying and tagging the main narrative structures present across the sample collected. These topics include audience, family/friends, experience, activism, news segments, and other. *Audience* refers to the implied audience for their video. The majority of these videos feature the YouTuber coming out to their viewers, either by responding to questions about their sexuality in the comments of their previous videos or by deciding to discuss their personal lives. Another set of videos feature the YouTubers coming out to *friends and family*, with the loved one appearing *either on-screen or via a phone conversation*. The coming out act in these videos is directed at the YouTuber's loved ones, rather than the YouTube audience, and viewers are placed in the position of voyeur rather than passive confidante of the YouTuber. YouTubers Zhenya Svetski (Image 1; 2020), Volodya Spinster (2020) and prominent beauty blogger/vlogger Andrei Petrov (2019) have uploaded videos of their coming out to their parents. While the videos are particularly emotional, given the close-up shots of the YouTubers' facial expressions, there is a distinct difference in context in these videos.[9] When the YouTuber comes out to a loved one, they experience the consequences of the action as they are filming, and thus have editorial power over how the video is structured and released (if at all).

---

[6] While the majority of videos that were located during the data scraping process feature Russians coming out to their audience or families, a number of videos featured translations into Russian of coming out videos originally produced in English. For example, the Dutch YouTuber Nikki Tutorial's coming out as trans video has been translated into Russian by a number of different YouTubers—either featuring the original English audio with Russian subtitles added (Lusia Danilova 2020) or dubbed over with Russian dialogue (M&K interesting channel 2020).

[7] I segregated a number of coming out videos that were in Russian but the individuals lived in other Eastern European countries, with the majority located in Ukraine. While a comparative analysis of these videos is out of scope for this article, further research could illuminate the similarities—and differences—of Russophone LGBT YouTubers across post-Soviet countries.

[8] While the latter identification could potentially be seen as an attempt to not identify with a definitive label (similarly to labels used in the English context such as pansexual), the question of to what extent this is an internalising of homophobic rhetoric present in contemporary Russian society remains unanswered at this time.

[9] Zhenya Svetski's coming out video (2017) has been viewed as of May 2021 more than 600 000 times, while Andrei Petrov's coming out video (2019) has more than 2.4 million views. In comparison, Australian pop singer Troye Sivan's coming out video (2013) has 8.8 million views.

Image 1. Zhenya Svetski comes out to his father in a phone call.

Image description: A young man in a white-and-black striped shirt is standing in his bedroom and holding his phone in front of him. He appears to be talking on the loudspeaker.

Source: Zhenya Svetski, 'ЗВОНЮ ПАПЕ И ГОВОРЮ, ЧТО Я ГЕЙ (I call papa and say that I am gay)', *YouTube* (April 2020).

In contrast, when a YouTuber comes out to their audience, the reaction occurs after the video is uploaded—the unpredictability of this action sets it apart and the stakes are different.

A small number of these YouTubers are also activists in their off-screen existences and use their channels to inform LGBT viewers of resources on sexual health, HIV/AIDS and PrEP, legal rights, and support groups in Russia.

Some, such as YouTuber and activist Karen Shainyan (Image 2),[10] also directly address straight audiences in their videos, attempting to dispel myths about the LGBT community, both in Russian and around the world (Parsons 2020). On the other hand, YouTubers also confront individuals known for homophobic comments, such as Andrei Petrov confronting Volodya XXL face-to-face over his past remarks in which he called gays the 'scum of society' (Image 3; Pushka 2020).

---

[10] Shainyan has an ongoing series entitled Straight Talk with Gay People, where he has open conversations with individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, about their life experiences and stereotypes about the LGBTQ community, among other topics. He also has videos in which he interviews people active in the Russian LGBTQ cultural scene, such as drag queens, and American LGBT celebrities including Billy Porter and Cynthia Nixon.

Image 2. Karen Shainyan interviewing Russian drag queens while being done up in drag.

Image description: A wide-angle camera shot depicts four people: Karen Shainyan, a young man with a light stubble, is sitting at a table and holding a coffee cup. Next to him stands a young dark-haired girl who is a makeup artist helping Shainyan get ready in drag. Sitting beside Shainyan is a drag queen, who is applying makeup in front of a mirror that stands on the table. At the background, the camera man who is filming them is reflected in the mirror.

Source: Karen Shainyan, 'Русский дрэг, бесстрашный и беспощадный (Russian Drag, fearless and merciless)', *YouTube* (December 2020).

Finally, during my initial data analysis, I located several news pieces where individuals were interviewed and discussed their coming out stories or where Russian parents of LGBT children discuss life after coming out (Meduza 2018). While many pieces are sympathetic to their interviewees, in one example journalist Kseniia Sobchak conducts a roundtable discussion of homosexuality with six openly gay men including Karen Shainyan and Andrei Petrov (Sobchak 2020), with her questions steering the conversation towards stereotypes or involving offensive terminology.1

The final category by which I structure my initial impressions of these videos is based on the dominant forms of representation they depict—positive, neutral or negative—though some videos can be classified as offering more than one form of representation. Positive representations include videos produced by LGBT individuals that depict their lived experiences in a positive light, regardless of whether they have faced social or material consequences.

Image 3. Andrei Petrov confronts Volodya XXL over homophobic comments he has made on social media.

Image description: Two young men are sitting on the opposite ends of a sofa, looking at each other and having a conversation. One of them (Petrov) has earrings and a necklace; he wears makeup.

Source: Pushka, 'ВОЛОДЯ XXL О ГЕЯХ, БЛОКИРОВКЕ TIKTOK И ТРАВЛЕ (Volodya XXL on gays, TikTok blocking, and bullying)', *YouTube* (January 2020).

Negative representations include videos where being LGBT and/or coming out are depicted negatively or through false information or rhetoric, such as the manipulation of images of LGBT culture by Russian media in order to depict Western nations as degenerate and in moral decline (Persson 2015). Neutral depictions refer to videos that convey information such as statistics or facts and are typically dedicated to topics such as accessing health care or social support resources.

The second part of this project involves analysing the narratives present in these videos, including the rhetorical strategies the YouTubers employ for discussing their sexual/gender identities, the ways they film and edit their videos, including the graphics they use, props they hold, or other forms of visual storytelling, as well as other intertextual elements that have larger resonances in global LGBT culture. Part of my research also looks at their presence outside of YouTube, whether they participate in LGBT activism or not, and if there have been any material or social consequences for their videos, particularly in relation to the 'gay propaganda' law. Furthermore, I am interested in the language the YouTubers use to reference their own identities —LGBT—and how the use of English terms through translation and repurposing in Russian links local conceptions of sexuality to broader global discourses. I have also discovered some Russian YouTubers that use local terms, though my

analysis of this aspect will be done later in my project. As a way to ground my methodological approach, what follows is a case study of the coming out video posted by YouTuber Zhenya Svetski in April 2017.

3. Case Study: 'Я ГЕЙ! МОЙ КАМИНГ-АУТ' (I am gay! My coming out)

Active on YouTube since 2014, Zhenya Svetski became more widely known to Russian online and TV audiences as a cast member of the first season of *HYPE CAMP* a reality show from the *Piatnitsa!* Network.[11] In this show, vloggers and influencers lived in a mansion and competed against one another to win a cash prize.

Image 4. Zhenya Svetski holds an image of Vitalii Milonov across his body while standing in a shower.
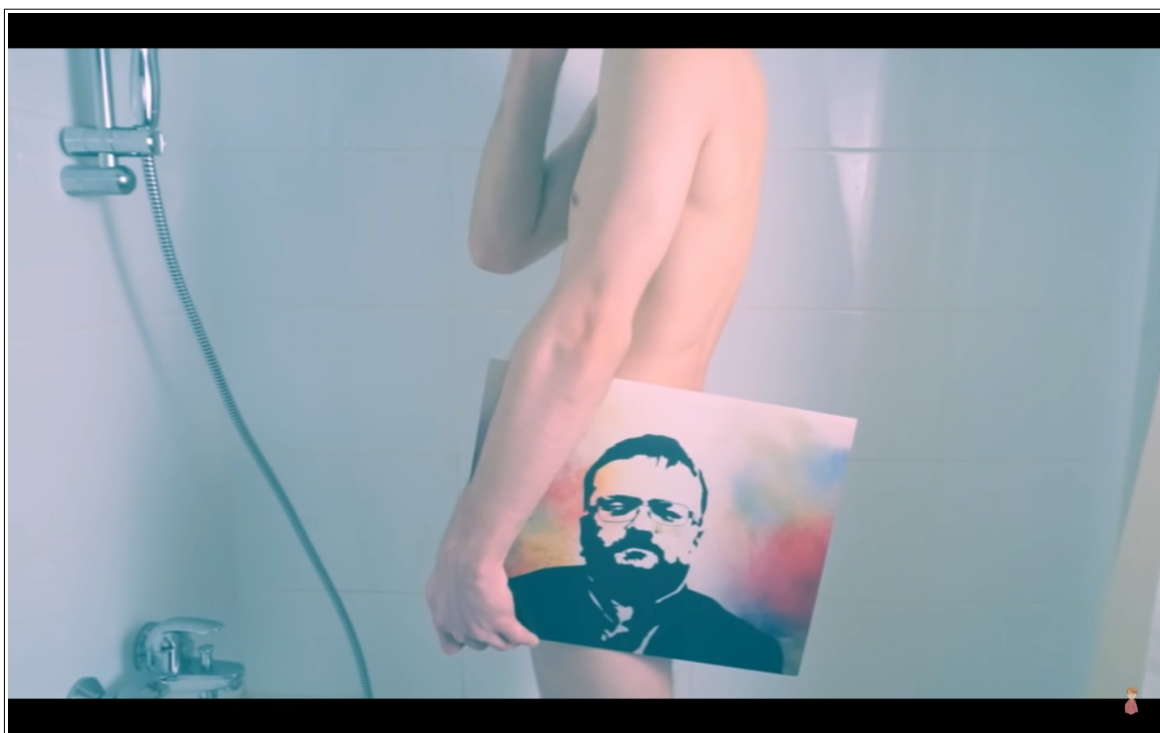

Image description: A cropped image of a young man standing in a shower, his head and legs not visible to the viewer. He holds a small horizontal image of Vitalii Milonov across the bottom part of his body.

Source: Zhenya Svetski, 'Я ГЕЙ! МОЙ КАМИНГ-АУТ | ЛГБТ революция в России / Zhenya Svetski – coming out', *YouTube* (April 2017).

---

[11] Svetski's season of HYPE CAMP was uploaded to the show's YouTube channel in November 2017, almost seven months after he posted his coming out video. On the show, he is vocal about his identity and desire to be seen as a person and not as an example of gay propaganda. While HYPE CAMP's website and Wikipedia page no longer appear on the internet, his season is currently available on YouTube without any 18+ warnings.

Image 5. An intertitle with the text in Russian 'Homophobia—[is a] psychological disorder!'.
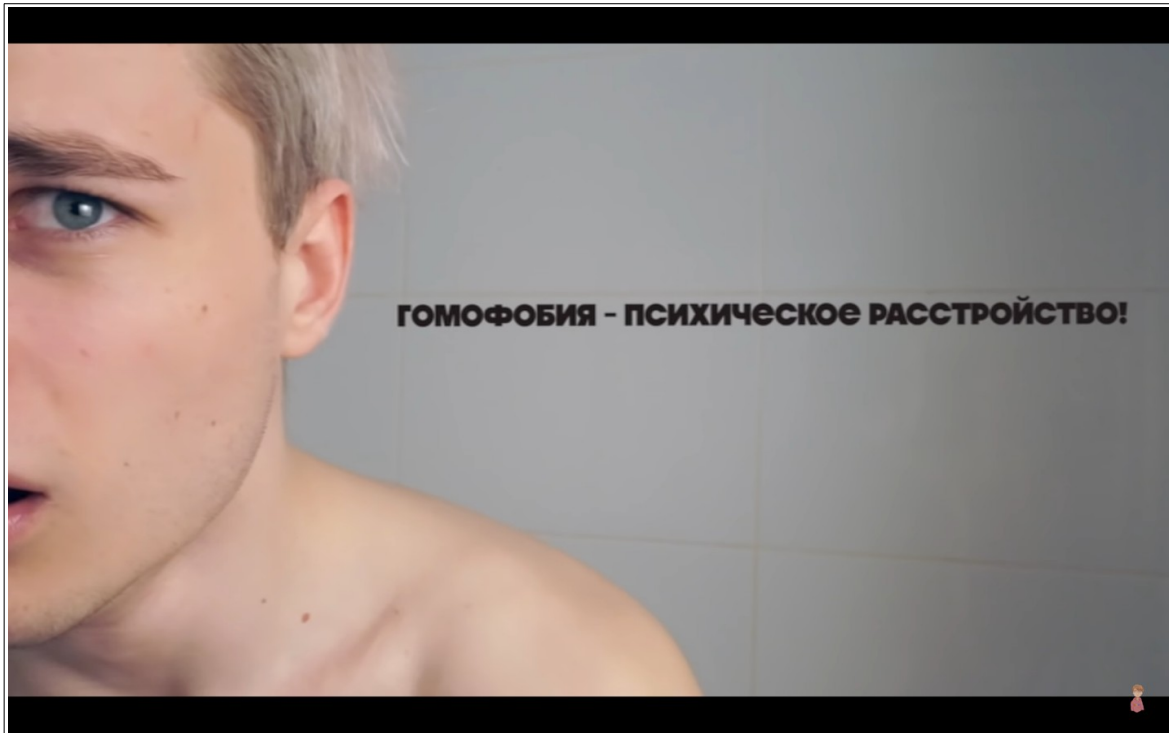

Image description: An intertitle depicting a cropped photo of a young man's face looking into the camera, with the text in Russian beside him reading 'Homophobia—[is a] psychological disorder!'.

Source: Zhenya Svetski, "Я ГЕЙ! МОЙ КАМИНГ-АУТ | ЛГБТ революция в России / Zhenya Svetski - coming out', *YouTube* (April 2017).

Svetski's coming-out video posted in April 2017 opens with Svetski standing naked in a bathtub, holding a picture of the Russian MP (Member of the State Duma) Vitalii Milonov[12] across the lower part of his body while running a knife along his skin (Image 4). The opening is overlaid with titles that display statistics such as '75% of homosexuals have thought about suicide' and '20–35% of young gay men make attempts' on their own lives. The segment concludes with an intertitle of the phrase: 'homophobia—[is a] psychological disorder!' (Image 5). The video, titled 'Я ГЕЙ! МОЙ КАМИНГ-АУТ | ЛГБТ революция в России (I am gay! My coming out | LGBT revolution in Russia)' (2017) serves to inform viewers about consequences of a homophobic environment for the mental health of LGBT individuals through the invocation of mental health statistics, while also acting as a call for an 'LGBT revolution' in Russia, whatever that may entail.

Following the intertitles and a title slide, Svetski speaks directly to the camera and comes out to his audience (Image 6). The remainder of the video is a long monologue in which he talks about his motivations for making the video: one, he wants to be honest with his audience, two, he wants to discuss his own experiences with coming to terms with and accepting

---

[12] Milonov was the architect of a 2011 gay-propaganda bill that was passed in St. Petersburg and upon which the federal bill of the 2013 law was modelled. He is also known for his frequent attacks against LGBT groups in Russia, including disrupting the 2018 opening night of *Bok o bok (Side by Side) International LGBT Film Festival* in St. Petersburg (Bennetts 2015; Kozlov 2018).

his sexuality, and three, he hopes that his video may reach out to others who, like him, have been struggling with their identities. Here it is worth mentioning that the video is not a single take, even though it is edited to appear as a single monologue. There are obvious cuts where sentences are removed (whether this was done for clarity or as self-censorship on the part of Svetski is unclear). And while the video acts very much like a confessional, it is a highly structured and deliberately edited confessional—otherwise, he might have decided to do a live stream of his coming out or post a single unedited take.

Image 6. Zhenya Svetski comes out to his audience and talks about how he came to accept his sexual identity. An image of Vitalii Milonov and a cardboard stand-in of Australian popstar Troye Sivan can be seen in the background.

Image description: A close-up image of young man with dyed blond hair and eyeglasses in his room. He is looking straight into the camera. An image of Vitalii Milonov and a cardboard stand-in of Australian popstar Troye Sivan can be seen in the background.

Source: Zhenya Svetski, "Я ГЕЙ! МОЙ КАМИНГ-АУТ | ЛГБТ революция в России / Zhenya Svetski - coming out', *YouTube* (April 2017).

Another element that stands out in the video is the cardboard stand-in of Australian pop singer and former YouTuber Troye Sivan, which is clearly visible behind Svetski. While it is never referenced in his monologue, the intertextual element of Sivan appearing is quite striking. Sivan began posting videos to YouTube in 2012 and in 2013 released his own coming out video. The style of the video is similar in that it features Sivan in monologue, speaking into the camera, and by extension his online audience (Sivan 2013). The appearance of him in cardboard form in Svetski's video reflects the global flows of queer culture and the concept of coming out as cross-cultural and unbounded by geographic or national boundar-

ies. Taking it further, the juxtaposition of Sivan's image with the image of Vitalii Milonov, who appears further in the background, contrasts an individual who can be understood as a global figure of queerness with the lived reality for LGBT Russians—political homophobia as a continual threat.

Furthermore, the rhetorical structure of the video is characterised by what I describe as a *rupture*—both in a real and a figurative sense. The rupture here is the distinction between the before and the now of coming out. As Svetski describes in the video, he deleted his previous online YouTube videos dating back to 2014 because they symbolised his struggle in deciding to come out to his audience. The coming out video thus represents his desire to both respect himself and his audience by presenting his authentic self through his act of confession and disclosure. In the video, he details his struggles with his identity, his thoughts about suicide and his own internalised homophobia. He then turns to explaining how he has come to accept himself and asserts that being gay is normal. However, in order for him to fully accept himself, past representations of him—in the guise of his previous content—had to be deleted. While the researcher in me thinks that it would be interesting to compare his videos before and after he came out—and in particular, to see how their narrative structures may or may not have changed—, I respect his decision to choose what to present from his life and not.

The video follows the same narrative script that Alexander and Losh describe in their analysis of coming out videos as a genre—the revelation of one's sexual identity, describing how one came to know their identity, how friends and family supported them (or didn't) and the community to which they belong. In Svetski's case, he describes how people in St. Petersburg, where he lived at the time the video was filmed, are tolerant and supportive of him. He ends the video with a plea for an LGBT revolution in Russia, claiming that there is no need to 'march in parades' or 'wear pink,' but that LGBT Russians should just be open about themselves and love themselves for who they are. While the video mirrors similar narratives produced by YouTubers outside Russia, the video contains several references that ground the video in the social and political context of the country, including the image of Vitalii Milonov and the reference to Pride marches that had previously occurred in Moscow and St. Petersburg.[13]

Apart from his coming out video, Svetski has posted content talking about HIV/AIDS prevention and sexual health, featuring links to *Parni +*, a Russian HIV/AIDS and sexual health resource organisation. He has also uploaded a number of videos talking about his own relationships, what it means to be gay in Russia, and myths and stereotypes about gay men and lesbians. Svetski was also featured on the December 2018 cover of the Human Rights Watch Report titled *No Support: Russia's Gay Propaganda Law Imperils LGBT Youth* (Human Rights 2018). The report outlines the challenges that LGBT youth in the country face, particularly through the increase in social hostility following the 2013 'gay propaganda' law. While Svetski's image only stands in as a representation of LGBT youth in Russia—his own story was not included in the report—his picture on the cover of the report, holding a pride

---

[13]Pride marches took place in Moscow between 2005 and 2012, with the latter marches occurring without an authorisation by the city. These marches were often marked by anti-gay violence and police inaction (Stella 2013). In 2012, the highest court in Moscow upheld a ban on pride marches taking place in the city, with the ban put in place for 100 years (BBC News 2012). Pride marches have taken place in St. Petersburg in recent years, though like those that occurred in Moscow, they are not sanctioned by the city and are often the targets of anti-gay vigilantes.

flag with the words 'I'm not "Gay Propaganda"', is representative of how LGBT visibility is often equated by Russian politicians as political or social agenda, rather than an expression of one's identity.

As a result of his visibility, Svetski has become a target of homophobic abuse. Most significantly, Svetski's name was included on a notorious 'kill list' put out by a homophobic group called PILA.[14] The list collected the names, addresses, and personal information of LGBT activists in Russia, including Svetski, and distributed the information via a website which called for visitors to track down and kill the activists to win a prize. While the website had been repeatedly taken down by Russian authorities, it reappeared online a number of times (Crittenton 2019; Hall 2019). In the wake of the murder of St. Petersburg-based LGBT activist Elena Grigor'eva in July 2019, whose name had featured on the list, Svetski took to social media to express fears that he might be the next target (Fitzsimons 2019; Glauert 2019). On Svetski's YouTube channel, he tacitly acknowledges the threats he has received and at one point was absent from his channel for a number of months, though his recent content involves live streaming videos of him and his friends hanging around and talking in his apartment.

4. Conclusion

Given the social and political context in which coming out videos such as Svetski's are released, I want to close with several questions that interrogate how these videos extend beyond their digital form into the lived experiences of their subjects. As this is a project in progress, these questions represent larger theoretical and practical challenges guiding my thinking moving forward. One of the major challenges that social media research presents is interconnectedness: social media networks are not isolated environments. Rather, they are interconnected and often interdependent, allowing users to share content from one to the next as well as promote their media-spheres via links to their various social selves on Twitter, VK, TikTok, Telegram and Facebook, among others. For example, Karen Shainyan's YouTube page features links to his other social media accounts on VK, Telegram, and Instagram, and he shares content from YouTube across all his accounts. Volodya Spinster often integrates YouTube content on his Instagram and vice versa. If one were to approach each platform as a different facet of one's online persona or a different aspect of one's social self, how would each platform challenge and reinforce specific conceptions of an individual's personality? Furthermore, my future research will examine the role that identity labels play in a YouTuber's sense of self—here I am interested in how the use of English terms and the abbreviation LGBT have been imported into Russian and whether the terms are repurposed or reconfigured based on local understandings of sexuality. I have also come across Russian YouTubers that use local terms such as 'non-traditional' to describe their sexual identities. The question of how much this reflects a desire to choose a non-specific label, akin to pansexual or other

---

[14] PILA was heavily inspired by the American slasher film series *SAW*, with imagery from the films used in numerous places on the website. PILA also framed the kill list as a game in which the site's users would hunt down and kill the activists, in a reverse from the film's narrative where the characters were placed in traps that they would have to navigate, with their deaths being depicted in increasingly violent ways.

umbrella terms in English, or whether this is an internalising of Russian-specific sexual discourses (or a mixture of both) remains unanswered at this juncture.

A second challenge is the potential censorship of the internet in Russia. This censorship extends not just to blocking platforms, but also to content and mechanisms for sharing content. A recent report 'TikTok and WeChat: Curating and controlling global information flows' by Fergus Ryan, Audrey Fritz and Daria Impiombato (2020) highlights how the Russian Federation has demanded that LGBT related hashtags be removed from TikTok videos. Furthermore, individual YouTubers have come under attack from censors. The YouTube video series *Реал толк* (*Real Talk*), which featured LGBT adults answering questions from children, was met with harsh criticism from politicians, and criminal cases were pursued by Roskomnadzor (for violating the 'gay propaganda' law) and the State Prosecutor (for 'sexual violence against children'). The creator of the series, YouTuber Victoria Pich deleted the channel and fled to the United States in the aftermath (Patin 2020). This form of censorship goes hand in hand with the prevalence of hate and violence directed towards LGBT individuals on and off social media. Aside from threats from the government, they also have to contend with doxing threats, such as the PILA website, and threads on Telegram where individuals have their data shared without their knowledge. In terms of this research project, the question remains whether platforms such as YouTube can remain viable alternatives for LGBT voices in the Russian Federation, or, if they are blocked, will another platform take their place?

Finally, this project has particular relevance for the broader fields of digital media and Slavic studies. To date there have been no comprehensive studies on the LGBT content produced within the Russian Federation that currently exists on social media platforms such as YouTube, let alone content that is shared *inter*platform—including videos being shared, reblogged, and reposted on Telegram, VK, Odnoklassniki, or uploaded to RuTube or other Russian media streaming sites. If we are currently in an 'age of declining digital rights in Russia' as internet researcher Andrei Soldatov describes (Habersetzer 2020), it remains unclear how long these platforms will exist in their current forms and how long content will continue to be freely available, particularly if it is stored on servers in Russia. I view my project as an archive of material that might not be available in coming months and years. Since beginning this project, I have also encountered information disappearing or no longer being available, including contextual information for some of the references in videos, as well as videos themselves either being taken down by their creators or delisted (the video is still available if you have a link, but cannot be found via search). Ultimately, my interest in Russian YouTube coming out videos has to do as much with their content as it has to do with what they represent: that in spite of the 'gay propaganda' law, the Russian LGBT community continues to thrive online and thus invites exploration by digital studies scholars.

References

AFP (2021) 'Russia Probes YouTube for "Abusing" Dominant Position – Regulator', *The Moscow Times,* 19 April, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/19/russia-probes-youtube-for-abusing-dominant-position-regulator-a73662 (15.05.2021).

Alexander, Jonathan; Losh, Elizabeth (2010) '"A YouTube of One's Own?" Coming Out Videos as Rhetorical Action', in Pullen, Christopher; Cooper, Margaret (eds.) *LGBT Identity and New Online Media*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 37–50.

Bateman, Jessica (2018) 'LGBT Activists Have a New Weapon against Russia's "Gay Propaganda" Law: YouTube Influencers', *Wired UK*, 29 October, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/lgbt-youtube-in-russia (15.05.2021).

Bennetts, Marc (2015) 'Fear and Family Values in Putin's Russia', *POLITICO*, 23 October, https://www.politico.eu/article/fear-and-family-values-in-putins-russia-gay-propaganda-law-vitaly-milonov/ (15.05.2021).

Crittenton, Anya (2019) 'Russia Blocks Saw-Inspired Website Hunting Gay People' *Gay Star News*, 18 July, https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/russia-bans-saw-website-hunting-gay-people/ (15.05.2021).

Danilova, Lusia (2020) 'KAMIN AUT NIKKIE TUTORIALS. PEREVOD. CHAST' 1', *YouTube*, 14 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7cZjGNHrsU (15.05.2021).

EWDN (2019) 'One Year after Ban, Telegram Still Accessible from Russia with Growing Audience', *BNE Intellinews*, May 1, http://www.intellinews.com/one-year-after-ban-telegram-still-accessible-from-russia-with-growing-audience-160502/ (15.05.2021).

Fitzsimons, Tim (2019) 'Russian LGBTQ Activist Is Killed after Being Listed on Gay-Hunting Website', *NBC News*, 23 July, https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/russian-lgbtq-activist-killed-after-being-listed-saw-inspired-site-n1032841 (15.05.2021).

Flegontova, Tatiana (2020) 'Russia Threatens to Block YouTube for "Censoring" State Media', *The Moscow Times*, 19 November, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/19/russia-threatens-to-block-youtube-for-censoring-state-media-a72095 (15.05.2021).

Glauert, Rik (2019) 'Russian Blogger Fears for Life after Death Threats', *Gay Star News*, 26 July, https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/russian-blogger-fears-for-life-after-death-threats/ (15.05.2021).

Glenn, Clinton (2020) 'Мы не ошибка (We Are Not an Error): Documentary Film and LGBT Activism Against the Russian Anti-"Gay Propaganda" Campaign', in Buyantueva, Radzhana; Shevtsova, Maryna (eds.) *LGBTQ* Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Resistance, Representation and Identity*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 77–100.

Habersetzer, Nicola (2020) 'Interview with Andrei Soldatov on Digital Rights in Russia', *Human Rights Watch*, 19 June, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/19/interview-andrei-soldatov-digital-rights-russia (15.05.2021).

Hall, Jake (2019) 'The Sinister Story behind Russia's LGBTQ "Kill List"', *Huck Magazine*, August 15, https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/activism-2/the-sinister-story-behind-russias-lgbtq-kill-list/ (15.05.2021)

Healey, Dan (2017) *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Human Rights Watch (2018) *No Support: Russia's "Gay Propaganda' Law Imperils LGBT Youth*, Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Watch.

Khurshudyan, Isabelle (2020) 'How the Founder of the Telegram Messaging App Stood up to the Kremlin — and Won', *Washington Post*, 28 June, https://www.washingtonpost.-

com/world/europe/russia-telegram-kremlin-pavel-durov/2020/06/27/4928ddd4-b161-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4_story.html, (15.05.2021).

Kopolevich, Yekaterina (2017) 'Zhurnalist Anton Krasovskii rasskazal o svoem po-lozhitel'nom VICH-statuse', *Izvestiia*, 5 December, https://iz.ru/679211/2017-12-05/zhurnalist-anton-krasovskii-rasskazal-o-svoem-polozhitelnom-vich-statuse (15.05.2021).

Kozlov, Vladimir (2018) 'Russian Legislator Disrupts Opening Ceremony of LGBTQ Film Festival', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 25 October, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/russian-legislator-disrupts-opening-ceremony-lgbtq-film-fest-1155143/ (15.05.2021).

Light, Felix. 2021. 'Is Russia's Twitter Clampdown a Harbinger of Wider Restrictions'. *The Moscow Times*, 17 March 2021. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/03/17/is-russias-twitter-clampdown-a-harbinger-of-wider-restrictions-a73268 (15.05.2021).

Meduza (2018) 'Roditeli LGBT-detei o zhizni posle kaming-auta', *YouTube*, 15 February, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEyDQGOYd8g&list=PLu-IimhlAQIhIXeNxjcIS-SuX5e4JlkBF2&index=11 (15.05.2021).

Meduza (2018) 'Russia's Federal Censor Blocks Another LGBT Website for Spreading "Gay Propaganda"', *Meduza*, 30 April, https://meduza.io/en/news/2018/04/30/russia-s-federal-censor-blocks-another-lgbt-website-for-spreading-gay-propaganda (15.05.2021).

M&K interesting channel (2020) 'Nikkie Tutorials I'm Coming Out перевод на русском (Nikkie Tutorials I'm Coming out translated to Russian)' *YouTube*, 15 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noQTdPvsLXI (15.05.2021).

Parsons, Vic (2020) 'Meet the Proud Gay Russian YouTuber Who's Trying to Change the Country for Millions of Persecuted LGBT+ People', *PinkNews*, 25 May, https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/05/25/gay-russia-karen-shainyan-billy-porter-cynthia-nixon-vladimir-putin-lgbt-youtuber/ (15.05.2021).

Patin, Katya (2020) 'On the Run in LA from Russia's Anti-LGBTQ Campaign', *Coda Story*, 28 April, https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/russia-youtube-anti-lgbtq/ (15.05.2021).

Persson, Emil (2015) 'Banning "Homosexual Propaganda": Belonging and Visibility in Contemporary Russian Media', *Sexuality & Culture* 19 (2): 256–274.

Petrov, Andrei (2019) 'ZVONIU MAME I GOVORIU, CHTO IA GEI', *YouTube*, 18 September, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6zNx45npCY (15.05.2021).

Porter, Jon (2020) 'Go Read This Story about How Telegram Evaded Its Russian Ban', *The Verge*, 29 June, https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/29/21306691/telegram-russia-ban-evaded-washington-post-go-read-this (15.05.2021).

Pushka (2020) 'VOLODIA XXL O GEIAKH, BLOKIROVKE TIKTOK I TRAVLE', *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBHNokgDZwg&t=1214s (15.05.2021).

Raspopina, Sasha (2019) 'Russia's Star YouTubers Are Frank, Socially Engaged, and More Explicit than Ever', *The Calvert Journal*, 25 February, https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/11034/russian-youtubers-2019-yury-dud-nixelpixel-badcomedian-ruslan-sokolovsky-mama-otlichnika-louis-vagon (15.05.2021).

Reuters (2019) 'Russia Threatens to Block Popular VPN Services to Prevent Website Access', *The Moscow Times*, 29 March, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/03/29/rus-

sia-threatens-to-block-popular-vpn-services-to-prevent-website-access-a65007 (15.05.2021).

RFE/RL Russian Service (2021) 'Russian LGBT Activist On Trial For "Pornography" Launches Hunger Strike', *RFE/RL*, 2 May, https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-lgbt-activist-tsvetkova-hunger-strike-/31233911.html (15.05.2021).

Ryan, Fergus; Fritz, Audrey; Impiombiato, Daria (2020) *TikTok and WeChat: Curating and Controlling Global Information Flows*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Sivan, Troye (2013) 'Coming Out', *YouTube*, 8 August, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoL-MnXvK80 (15.05.2021).

Sobchak, Ksenya (2019) 'Kaming-auty, gei-lobbi i zapret propagandy: shest' geev i Sobchak', *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksdptbnbu8c&t=4s (15.05.2021).

Sokolova, Ksenia (2013) 'Anton Krasovsky: I'm gay, and I'm a human being just like president Putin', *Snob.ru*, 6 February, https://snob.ru/selected/entry/57286/ (15.05.2021).

Spinster, Volodya (2020) 'KAMING-AUT PERED MAMOI', *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oAUBB3iiFI (15.05.2021).

Stella, Francesca (2013) 'Queer Space, Pride, and Shame in Moscow', *Slavic Review* 72 (3): 458–480.

Strudwick, Patrick (2017) 'This Is What Happened When A Young Russian Came Out As Gay On YouTube', *BuzzFeed*, 14 April, https://www.buzzfeed.com/patrickstrudwick/this-is-what-happened-when-a-young-russian-came-out-as-gay (15.05.2021).

Svetski, Zhenya (2017) 'IA GEI! MOI KAMING-AUT | LGBT revoliutsiia v Rossii / Zhenya Svetski - coming out', *YouTube*, 19 April, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vy0brXrn_Ak (15.05.2021).

Svetski, Zhenya (2020), 'ZVONIU PAPE I GOVORIU, CHTO IA GEI', *YouTube*. 2 April, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdfJ2E9UP-A (15.05.2021).

CLINTON GLENN is a PhD candidate in Communication Studies at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. His dissertation research examines the material urban fabric of the three Baltic capitals, Tallinn (Estonia), Rīga (Latvia), and Vilnius (Lithuania), through an exploration of LGBT pride marches under the banner of Baltic Pride. His dissertation research has been supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the European Union Development Fund through the Archimedes Foundation/Estonia, and the Education Exchanges Support Foundation of Lithuania. His work has been featured in *esse: art + opinions*, *Unmediated*, *Synoptique: An Online Journal of Film and Moving Image Studies*, *Lambda Nordica*, and *SQS: The Journal of Finnish Queer Studies*.
[clinton.glenn@mail.mcgill.ca].