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Out on YouTube: Queer Youths and Coming Out Videos in Asia and America

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Abstract

Coming out videos have become an increasingly popular genre on social media among queer youths and YouTube celebrities, and a few most popular ones have generated tens of millions of views combined that have also caught wide public attention from traditional mass media. This paper considers and compares two (sets of) coming out videos on YouTube from the Rhodes brothers in the United States and the Huang brothers in Taiwan that both became landmark social media and mass media events. It questions the normative narrative of coming out and the uneven flows of youth cultures and celebrity cultures online, where the visibility of certain social groups has masked the invisibility of other marginalized people. The critique extends to the “YouTube celebrity economy” and video-based female queer fandom, as well as the parents’ responses and reactions to their children’s coming out that have been recorded on video—an important part of coming out that is often overlooked in queer studies and youth studies. This paper offers a unique lens that connects online stardom and fandom to parental responses to coming out, shedding further light on global youth cultures, YouTube economy and queer celebrities, and parent-youth relations in Asia and America.

Keywords

Coming Out, Queer Youths, Taiwan and United States, Celebrity Culture and Female Fandom, Parental Response to Coming Out

In the recent decade, YouTube has become an ever-popular digital media platform for queer youths—teenagers and young adults—as well as celebrities to come out of the closet and reveal their sexuality to a large audience including fans and followers (see Figure 1). The process of “coming out on video” has been acknowledged and celebrated as empowerment and emancipation for queer people, and as highly public and political spectacles that often draw a large crowd for democratic participation where the “YouTubers” are seen as role models who encourage and support other queer youths to come out (Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh 2010; Laura Horak 2014; Michael Lovelock 2017; Matthew G. O’Neill 2014; Bryan Wuest 2014). This extends to mass media such as *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* in the United States that features YouTubers whose coming out video has gone viral on social media, as well as reality TV shows such as the *Uit De Kast (Out of the Closet)* in the Netherlands and Belgium that guides queer teens to come out publicly on-air (Sander De Ridder and Frederik Dhaenens 2019).

Recent research on YouTube coming out videos, and more broadly on the coming out process and participatory media cultures, has generally cast a positive light on this relatively new social phenomenon. Coming out on YouTube is understood as a practice that has raised the visibility of queer individuals and communities at large, which enables connections and rapport among the socially marginalized minority groups online and on the ground (Wuest 2014). It also offers therapeutic values and psychological benefits for both the narrators and the spectators through making, watching, sharing, and commenting on the coming out videos, and researchers find that such disclosure videos may help reduce homophobia and prejudice against sexual minorities (Erin B. Waggoner 2020). The publicly mediated coming out process on video is also shown to be important and beneficial for the identity formation and construction of queer youths (De Ridder and Dhaenens 2019). The popularity of coming out videos has made them an informative and entertaining *genre* by itself (see Alexander and

Losh 2010) across today's social media and mass media landscapes through participatory storytelling of a shared and highly visible collective narrative.

Figure 1. Number of Coming Out Videos Uploaded, by Month (YouTube, in Wong 2017)

However, the assumed emancipation and empowerment of queer youths through coming out videos have been questioned and challenged as rendering the media platforms merely “functionalistic” as “meaningless intermediators” of a highly complex process (De Ridder and Dhaenens 2019). Further, the coming out rhetoric itself is deeply problematic and paradoxical, argues Jeffrey Weeks (2007, 83–84) among others, that entails and unleashes both personal truths and self-creation—a self-made narrative and identity that can be re-told and re-made. This narrative often drives people into a binary identity of gay versus straight (see De Ridder and Dhaenens, 46), and recent research in Asia also indicates that the pressure for young people to come out can be as strong and oppressive as the social stigma and

homophobia that kept them in the closet in the first place (Jingshu Zhu 2018, 1086; see John Wei 2020, 51–53 for more on this). The social integration of queer people through the act of coming out is encouraged and advocated for by activists in parts of Asia where queer activism is established on an imported Western paradigm that does not always fit local cultures (Ana Huang 2017, 232–34; Wei, 52), while the process and narrative of coming out only take meanings within the dominant heteronormative productions of social structures and individual agents (see De Ridder and Dhaenens, 46; Lovelock 2017, 89).

While existing research has shown the complexities and contradictories embedded within the mediated process of coming out, this paper investigates and compares two (series of) real-life youth coming out events that were recorded on video and released on YouTube respectively in the United States and Taiwan. This method enables a comparative lens to scrutinize the connections and differences between the two cultures through the digitally mediated process of coming out on the global platform of YouTube that makes conceivable a global queer youth culture. The choice of Asia and America connects the two culturally distinctive locales through queer youth videos and digital celebrity economies, underpinned by the increasing social acceptance of gay people in both the United States and Taiwan that have legalized same-sex marriage. It also helps reveal existing power asymmetries in global cultural flows between the two societies (and the two continents), as the former holds the pinnacle of digital technologies and global ‘platform economies’ through YouTube and popular social networking sites, as well as significant cultural clout through its powerful entertainment industry, while the latter is on the cultural periphery of the Asia-Pacific.

The two sets of videos, respectively from the Rhodes brothers in the United States and the Huang brothers in Taiwan, have been chosen for analysis because their coming out have both become landmark social media events and mass media events widely reported by and featured in local news reports, talk shows, and newspapers. In other words, these videos have

larger social impacts beyond online social networks and digital media. Based on these two case studies, the first part of this paper examines the values and pitfalls of coming out videos for queer youths and the wider (queer) communities, questioning the asymmetrical flows of queer cultures in a global context. The second part explores the YouTube economy and female queer fandom in the process of “star-making” and re-making to challenge the politics of celebrity economy and fan culture. The third and last section interrogates the narrative of the parents in the videos facing their children’s coming out, an often-overlooked issue in existing scholarship. This paper extends and expands current critiques of coming out through a unique lens that connects online stardom and fandom to parental responses to coming out, contributing to the studies of global youth cultures, YouTube economy and queer celebrities, and parent-youth relations through Asia and America.

Out on YouTube: Identity and Visibility in Global Coming Out Cultures

Aaron and Austin Rhodes, twin brothers and popular YouTubers, came out to their father on the phone that they were both gay and recorded the conversation on video. They uploaded the video to YouTube in January 2015, which soon went viral and attracted 14 million views within the first week (doubled to nearly 28 million at the time of writing). They were then invited, together with their father, by Ellen DeGeneres to share their story on her talk show on TV (2015). They also made a couple of follow-up videos with their dad and released them through their Rhodes Bros channel on YouTube. Their initial coming out video has also been translated and subtitled in other languages and re-uploaded to various video-sharing sites by local queer activists (and slash fans) in other countries, which has to some degree extended their “cyber celebrity” status and their fandom to international audiences through their landmark coming out.

A few years later in June 2020, the younger brother of the popular YouTube duo Huang Brothers in Taiwan was forced to come out publicly. They also recorded it on video and uploaded it online for their fans and followers, which went viral and attracted millions of views in the first few months. As the Huang brothers already had a large following especially among Taiwanese youths and were seen by young people as public figures, the younger brother's coming out has attracted wide media attention and the video was featured in several news reports on TV (see for example TVBS 2020). In fact, the coming out has been a mass media frenzy, as Huang Wei-wei (the younger brother, hereafter Wei-wei) was forced to disclose his private life after a local magazine was tipped off by an informant to expose his sexual orientation. This provoked protests from not only the Huang brothers but several celebrities and YouTubers, and the magazine apologized and retracted the report the next day—essentially to no effect as the words were already out and people already knew. This whole event has triggered public discussions and debates in Taiwan from online social networks to public TV and traditional print media, while Wei-wei also talked publicly a few times about his struggles around his forced coming out as a YouTube celebrity with over two million followers on several social media platforms combined.

These two coming out events follow and echo a long series of disclosure videos on YouTube that have attracted public attention and scholarly interest, including the videos from popular YouTube personalities Connor Franta (2014) and Ingrid Nilsen (2015) as well as young celebrity athlete Tom Daley (2013). As Austin Rhodes recalls in the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*, he had seen “so many [coming out] videos online,” which inspired and helped him “come out personally.” These videos and narratives are often understood as leading to the formation and affirmation of people's individual and public identities—a kind of identity that is important “in practice” for marginalized social groups to build coherence and solidarity facing institutional oppression (Wuest 2014, 21–22). The “visibility” of the queer youths in

these videos offers a framework of reference for other young people to find and connect with their peers online, through which a shared public identity can be internalized through individual experience and vice versa (23–25).

This visibility/identity is firstly achieved through accounting the past in the videos—the memory of “being different” and “always like that”—to re-signify and reinforce a linear subjectivity through a culturally intelligible narrative of individual sexual development that is narrow, particular, coherent, and recognizable (Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser 2013, 82, 85, 87). In the case of the Rhodes brothers, Austin told Ellen DeGeneres that “I don’t remember like a defining moment. I just remember, honestly, just always kind of feeling that way,” echoing their later video (2016) that he and Aaron shared the same kind of “gay interests” since early childhood until they came out to each other at the age of 16. For the Huang brothers, Wei-wei also remarks in his coming out video that he knows since he was a kid (從小開始就知道) and recalls his first coming out to his high-school classmates before graduation. The “memorial accounts” like these have become standard narratives in the coming out genre that function as “memories of an identity” (85) to “stabilise queer identity not through a claim to future selfhood but a claim to the linearity and essentialism of the past” (83).

However, there exist other constituencies of the coming out video in the formation of a visible and highly recognizable identity, both individually and collectively. First, “memorial accounts” include another parallel narrative, namely the past trauma of being “scared” (害怕) facing their non-conforming sexuality that both Aaron and Wei-wei have talked about in their videos, as well as being bullied and mistreated by others because of their difference as seen in other coming out stories. Second, the narratives also mark a dawning moment for the youths to perform, confirm, and affirm their identity and visibility, which often convey and leave an impression that “self-authentication” through the video is better than “in the closet” for both

the narrators and the fans and followers—hence a better future for everyone than the troubled and traumatized past. Synthesizing theories from other scholars, I have described this elsewhere as a duo process of confessing (narrating the painful past) and daydreaming (actively imagining a better future) that jointly constitute an expansive strategy to transcend the difficult and liminal present (Wei 2020, 45–53). This duo-narrative extends the linear progression of selfhood from past plights to a promising future—hence from hostility and homophobia in personal and collective memories to both real and anticipated acceptance and support in the queer community and wider society. Lovelock (2017, 96–97) calls this an “emotional transition,” which is justified by the courage and the integrity of the queer youths who not only stay “true” to themselves but also disclose the “truth” to fans and followers as well as a large number of audiences on social media.

In this case, the (hyper)visibility of coming out is achieved paradoxically through a normative process to conform with the social expectation for fixed sexual identities that has been integral to the establishment and development of the coming out genre (see Cover and Prosser 2013). This narrow/focused narrative for a clearly and unambiguously confessed sexual self also conforms with the public demand and curiosity to know more “truth” about homosexuality in parts of Asia (Zhu 2018) where public knowledge of sexual diversity may be limited and queer people still face lower social visibility. This, of course, traps both the queer celebrities and the viewers in an essentialist understanding of sexuality that potentially alienates those who do not fit in fixed identity categories or do not want to be “put in a box” in a rigid regime of gender and sexuality. More important, this normative narrative has obscured and effectively rendered irrelevant other underlying issues such as institutional homophobia, historical violence, racism against queer people of color, cultural difference around gender and sexuality, and the privilege of the white male in local and global power

asymmetries that mark a one-way flow of queer videos and images from the West to the rest of the world (that is seldom another way around).

While the coming out video of the Rhodes brothers is readily available with local-language subtitles in the Chinese-speaking (Sinophone) part of Asia and also reported by news media in the Dutch-speaking part of Europe (see De Ridder and Dhaenens 2019, 56), the video from the Huang brothers barely attracted any attention outside Taiwan and nearby areas, and remains largely invisible to international audiences in the global English-language (Anglophone) sphere. This raises the question of “who is visible” and “for whom” around the popular genre of coming out videos. While “visibility” has been celebrated by YouTube viewers and researchers alike, it is apparent that white, young, urban, cisgender, male, and middle-class queers from Anglo-European cultures are much more visible on the global stage, despite the trove of coming out videos from other cultures and in other languages that are available on YouTube. When it comes to the spectators, while Asian audiences often have access to and enjoy both Western and non-Western digital contents, those in the West are often trapped in a genre of their own that is often taken for granted as the default version of the global “coming out culture.”

This is why I argue that the “visibility” thesis is inherently a limited and incomplete argument that has conveniently overlooked both the producers and the consumers outside the dominant cultural and language groups—those who already enjoy more visibility in the first place—in the current global coming out narratives. To be blunt, the coming out genre so far is stunningly and overwhelmingly white and male-dominated. The “Brief History of the YouTube Coming Out Video” (Wong 2017) published by a major online news outlet in the US exclusively features white queer youths with a male majority, because their videos had more views and more visibility, while non-white and non-Western coming out videos and queer youth celebrities have received little attention in Anglophone cultures and scholarship.

The “visibility” of white queer youths on YouTube has masked the “invisibility” of queer people of color and those outside North America, Western Europe, and Australasia in a supposedly “global” coming out culture and queer celebrity economy that has come “together” through digital social media.

This is why queer studies and queer cultures including coming out videos still need to be questioned and challenged from not only the geographical position but the conceptual and methodological positioning of Asia (see Petrus Liu 2010)—and other marginalized regions, post-colonial societies, and developing economies where local understandings and practices of gender and sexuality are inevitably shaped by their colonized past and current engagement with global developmental bureaucracies and neoliberal capitalism (see Rahul Rao 2015, 2018). This argument both echoes and extends previous research on queer Asia to directly challenge the so-called global “gayness” (Dennis Altman 2001) that imagines a flattened and borderless world where gay cultures flow freely without restrictions, resistance, and transnational power hierarchies and asymmetries. It also relates to the neoliberal productions of self-reliance and individual entrepreneurship in the corporate and capitalist ecosystem of the “YouTube economy,” which this paper further considers through the coming out videos below.

Politics of YouTube Celebrity Economy and Female Queer Fandom

The Rhodes brothers were already active and popular on YouTube with a relatively small group of followers (compared to that of the Huang brothers) before they came out. The act and dramatic effect of twin brothers coming out together to their father soon became a social media extravaganza, as discussed above, which made them YouTube sensations and public role models to raise queer visibility and encourage other queer youths. Both before and after the release of the video, they have sophisticatedly navigated through the ecosystem of the

YouTube economy to attract and maintain a growing audience, which is both a condition and a consequence of their successful coming out as a public narrative (Figure 2). This is the process through which they have gained and continued to accumulate their “symbolic capital” to acquire and build up their status and influence (see De Ridder and Dhaenens 2019), who have then attained the “symbolic validation” of their status as YouTube influencers and role models for young queer people through their coming out videos (see Lovelock 2017).

Figure 2. *Twins Come Out to Dad* (Rhodes Brothers, 2015b)

In the case of the Huang brothers, they were already sponsored by and cooperating with a large number of businesses in an open-end digital economy that connects video-sharing and online celebrity cultures with various parts of the “real” economy on the ground. They are also under contract with a commercial agency and have their own production team of around a dozen employees in their Huang Studio. In his coming out video, Wei-wei disclosed that they already knew about the news report before it went to press, and their company called an urgent meeting to discuss possible strategies to cope with this public “fallout”—the incident was essentially a public relations (PR) crisis for the celebrity brothers

and for the agency backing them. The coming out video, albeit every bit authentic and emotional, was also a reactive and effective PR stunt that was put together at the last minute to deal with the fallout. In the video, Wei-wei has apologized to his team and his company that he had caused trouble and disappointed them, which added to his stress on top of the social stigma around homosexuality, despite the latter's unconditional support and acceptance (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *About the News Report, I Want to Tell My Family...* (Huang Brothers, 2020a)

On the other hand, in today's YouTube economy, coming out is not only a risk but also an opportunity for the celebrities to challenge and change their "self-branding" and "mode of visibility" to redefine their public appeal (Lovelock 2017, 88–89). Their likable and relatable personalities and willingness to share personal information have constituted their initial and ongoing popular and commercial appeal, when YouTubers like them lacked the initial "celebrity-making resources of mainstream media" (91). The Huang brothers are leaders and participants of this star-making and re-making process on YouTube, centered in which is not only a neoliberal individual entrepreneurship that has become hyper-visible

(Lovelock 2017). Rather, it also involves relentless self-investment and constant self-reliance nested in a highly professional and commercial process that still relies on traditional labor participation, corporate management, and continuous churning out of products (videos) for the consumers. In his coming out video, Wei-wei has also apologized for his “failure in self-management” (沒有做好自我管理). Managing one’s personal and private life is another neoliberal ideal that puts the responsibilities on individuals to effectively manage themselves in a way that will not disrupt productions or reduce productivity, essentially leaving systemic problems like homophobia and social stigma to the hands of private participants of the market in today’s capitalist Asia (see Wei 2020, 141, 156).

Further, in their coming out videos, both the Rhodes brothers and the Huang brothers shed tears when they talk to their parents about their sexuality. On the one hand, the burst of emotions and the act of crying further authenticate the process of coming out that both the story and the emotion are true and unreserved—they are “as authentic as possible,” as Aaron Rhodes puts it in the video. This not only raises empathy from the viewers but helps further legitimate their identity in the community where past trauma and the pressure to come out are common and prevalent among queer youths in both the West and the East. On the other hand, the tactic of tears itself shows the “emotional literacy” of these young celebrities (Eva Illouz 2007) and the cost of their “emotional labor” in self-disclosure (Katherine Sender 2012; Lovelock 2017). In this case, their fans are essentially entrusted to support them by virtue of loyalty in response to their openness and authenticity—an “affective public” (Lovelock 2019, 78) often supportive of and sympathetic to the emotional coming out videos.

That means coming out videos may significantly boost their popularity and help them catch wider public media attention, as seen in the cases of the Rhodes brothers and the Huang brothers, whether this was intended or not by the queer youths themselves who came out on YouTube. While coming out risks losing followers and driving away conservative viewers, it

often turns out to attract substantive support from existing fans and appeal to new audiences if it becomes a public spectacle as in the two cases analyzed here. While public news media often represent the queer youths as brave heroes and role models, focusing on the potential social impact of their coming out, their fans and followers often see the disclosure as both a personal message and a reward for their support, inasmuch as their “idols” have chosen to “confide” in them directly where loyalty has become mutual and positively reinforced in the celebrity economy and fandom on social media.

This is also evident among the slash fans of male celebrities—known as Boys’ Love or BL fans in the Chinese-speaking parts of Asia—a mainly female fandom imagining inter-male romance and intimacy of both real-life and fictional characters and public figures that has a substantial online presence across the West and the East (see Wei 2014). This is especially the case for the Huang brothers, who not only acknowledge the large BL fan base they have but self-knowingly tease each other about their “intimacy” in many of their videos, while the editors in their production team also add additional intercuts, subtitles, and sound and visual effects to further tease out their “bromance” that they know will attract audiences. In several videos, the Huang brothers themselves have played the roles of same-sex partners to act out the scenes of proposal, wedding, and marriage, boosting their popularity among gay male viewers and female BL fans alike thanks to their willingness to show their close and intimate bonding as both real-life brothers and an imagined “screen couple” popular among Taiwanese youths. For those familiar with BL fandom, the active imagination of romance and intimacy between brothers is a popular (yet controversial) sub-genre. But, for those outside the fan circle, this may be rather confusing or distracting from the positive social impact of their coming out video for other young people in the community—even to dethrone them as role models whose coming out is supposed to be a “framework” for the social integration of queer youths.

In fact, the popularity and public influence of the Huang brothers partially owes to the large BL following they have generated, echoing the proliferation of BL videos, films, and web series that have become mainstream since the same-sex marriage legislation in Taiwan (more on this below) at the forefront of today's queer visibility and sociality in Asia. In East Asian popular cultures and BL fandom, a mature, protective, and good-looking older brother plus a cute and somewhat spoiled younger brother would be a "dream couple"—a brotherly dynamic that has been actively acted out by the Huang brothers to gain symbolic status and public influence among their followers in an increasingly mainstream local BL community. Also, some gay couples used to call each other "brother" and describe their relationship as "brotherhood" in Sinophone Asia, when they still faced strong stigma and people had little knowledge and understanding of homosexuality; describing it as "brotherly bonding" hence made it more acceptable and understandable, which in turn underlines today's hyper-visible and ever-popular female BL fandom of (real and imagined) gay male romance.

Further, the Huang brothers have both played female characters in their videos with convincing cross-dressing, which is informative of the performativity of gender as well as encouraging for those who do not fit in the gender categories assigned to their biological sex. In addition to attracting gay men and BL fans, this potentially calls into attention the issue of *gender* beyond the focus of the coming out video on *sexuality*, which may help reduce transphobia as well as other types of prejudice against gender and sexual minorities. The diverse and often entertaining videos from the Huang brothers are arguably a welcome and positive change from the plethora of cisgender white male coming out stories that have dominated the global coming out culture on YouTube, while the female BL fans' repurposing and reimagining of brotherhood have also shown their agency to re-write (hetero)normative stories. These have conjointly offered a much more expansive exploration and demonstration

of possible gender and sexual mobilities beyond the uniformly monolithic coming out story and the standard narrative of identity.

This argument accounts for the emotional labor of the celebrity youths on YouTube to commodify themselves and meet the fans' expectation and imagination for an affective public that goes beyond the empathy for their struggles in the closet. In the words of Aaron Rhodes in their 2016 video *Coming Out to Each Other*, he and Austin are just “two little gay best friends who happen to be brothers,” which offers a possible lens through which other viewers and followers may understand the enthusiasm and euphoria of slash and BL fans who actively reimagine and re-signify brotherhood in real life as bromance on screen. The fandom of these celebrity brothers arguably transcends the normative narrative of coming out to conform with social expectations for fixed gender and sexual identities. Instead, it indicates a collective imagination and narrative to “queer” the social construction of personal and public identities and relationships, and further challenges the underlying heteronormativity by turning and extending a “normal” coming out story to something deeply queer and possibly disturbing—hence more powerful in the face of the still strong imperative and pressure for conformity.

Thus, in a conceptual sense, the reimagined narrative destabilizes and deviates from the standard coming out genre on social media. In a practical sense, the fandom itself is a significant and integral part of the so-called “YouTube celebrity economy” that is deeply fragmented consisting of those who become followers for different reasons (BL, coming out, both, or otherwise). In this case, Wei-wei's coming out video has met the expectation and speculation of many BL fans about his personal life, which has (partially) transformed a popular cultural imagination into a reality that offers instant and long-term satisfaction for BL enthusiasts on top of the empathy it has generated among both BL and non-BL audiences. The “affective public” of a diverse viewership and fan base arguably goes beyond “an imagined audience” and a peer support network “consisting specifically of other young LGB

people who are struggling to come out” (Lovelock 2019, 78). The (gay) male-dominated video production and networks are joined and challenged by (heterosexual) women, expanding this affective public by re-casting the “canonical” coming out story into a largely female queer fandom. Here, the fan community is integral to the emotional labor shared by the celebrities and the viewers in the current YouTube economy to collectively write and re-write a never-ending queer story that has become much richer and fuller to extend and expand the single moment and the simple narrative of coming out.

Narratives of the Parents: Parental Reactions to Coming Out

Both the Rhodes brothers and the Huang brothers came out to their parents over the phone and recorded the conversation in their coming out videos. The immediate reactions from their father and mother, respectively, have hence become part of the public narrative on YouTube in their coming out stories. These have offered us a rare opportunity to scrutinize the parental reaction to their children’s coming out, which is often overlooked in queer (youth) studies and in current scholarship on coming out videos and digital cultures. Coming out, by nature, involves two parties: gay people and (often) their family; the heavy and often exclusive focus on gay people in current scholarship has apparently neglected another half of the story. For Aaron and Austin Rhodes, their father was the last person they needed to come out to, as other family members already knew. Their nervousness was obvious in the video when they were both reluctant to make the call, and then started crying and remained speechless for a while after they dialed their father’s phone. The long silence apparently made their father nervous and worried, until the moment of the revelation:

Aaron: ... *I’m gay and, um, Austin is, too, and we just wanted to like call you and tell you.*

Father: *Okay.*

Austin: ... *I finally feel like that I'm at that point now to be able to tell you... and I just don't want you to like not love us any more or anything like that.*

Father: [Cutting off Austin] *all right, stop it.* [Long pause] *would you just stop it.*

[The video was cut here, indicating a long silence or possibly omitted conversations.]

Father: *It's the way things are... You grew up in a lot different generation than me, you know. I just really don't know what to say... You know I love you both. That'll never change.*

The conversation went on and the father reiterated that he would still love both of them, and that they should live their life as it is. He also recalled that his own father “abandoned” him (Rhodes Brothers 2018), which probably underlined his unconditional acceptance of his sons. The conversation ended with the father saying “it’s a lot” (for both of them) but “it is what it is” and there is no point trying to change his sons. Here, the father apparently went blank for a while immediately after his twin boys’ coming out, as indicated by the long pause and the cut in the video, and then turned around to a narrative of love, acceptance, and the rhetoric of “you are normal” and “it’s normal” to perhaps convince himself to accept his sons and encourage them to live on as it is. This kind of emotional process is not uncommon, which involves “awkwardness, strangeness, difference, [and] hardness” (Lovelock 2019, 77), although these descriptions come from the experiences of queer youths while the parents’ struggle has seldom been examined. Here, the parents’ emotional investment and personal struggle can be as strong and difficult as the emotional process of their children. The digitally mediated process has put the parents in a public narrative, exposing their vulnerability to millions of viewers beyond the familiar, private space of the family. Although their inclusion in the video is often a decision of their children, their bravery and emotional labor are equally commendable and recognizable by the audiences.

In a later video that the Rhodes brothers did with their father, they asked him about how he remembered his “initial reaction” to their double coming out (Figure 4). He recalled that he was “stuck in motion” and “[didn’t] know what to say,” and experienced “nothing but pure emotion” until he reminded himself that “this is not life-threatening” and he could accept it. This revelation helps cast a light on the parents’ experience: they may seem to be collected and supportive, but there might be a sea of intense underlying emotions going on facing their child’s coming out—or a double coming out in this case that had apparently put the father under pressure. A sense of helplessness (“don’t know what to say” or how to react) was apparent in the immediate aftermath of his sons’ coming out. Ellen DeGeneres said to the father several times in her show that “I’m sure you don’t understand it but you accept them.” In the words of the father himself, the twins’ coming out helped broaden his horizon and he can accept that “one little piece of their life ... is different from others.”

Figure 4. *Meet our Dad* (Rhodes Brothers, 2015a)

The Huang brothers’ video, in which Wei-wei called his mother to come out, takes a different turn. Not unlike the emotional and teary Rhodes brothers, Wei-wei also started to

cry soon after his mother picked up the phone. While Wei-wei was visibly stressed and upset about the ongoing social stigma, his mother appeared to be more at ease with homosexuality than he was. She told him that she “already knew” and “it’s no big deal” (沒什麼大不了):

Wei-wei: *I’m homosexual. [Pause] I don’t like girls.*

Mother: *Do you ... [hesitating] do you want to know that I already knew a while ago?*

Wei-wei: *I don’t know. I’m so scared. I was afraid of telling you.*

[...]

Mother: *I started to suspect that you were like that a long time ago.*

[...]

Mother: *It’s indeed hard for me to accept it at the beginning, but after knowing it for many years—I never asked you [about this]—I’m no longer struggling as you are my son no matter what. Maybe other parents cannot accept it, but I don’t mind whether you are [homosexual] or not.*

The conversation (all translations mine) lasted much longer than the Rhodes brother’s coming out. Wei-wei’s mother actually did most of the talking over the phone and their conversation was very rich. She shared her knowledge and understanding of homosexuality and told her son that the incident (news report and forced coming out) was not his fault and he should not be ashamed about his sexual orientation or the gossip about his private life in the tabloid magazine, even though she understood that the situation was hard for him and his brother as they were public figures under constant media and public scrutiny. The mother’s acceptance and thoroughness in her response to her son’s coming out and to the PR crisis offers a stark contrast to the young boy himself who was upset and took all the blames on himself for the public fallout.

If we put the two videos together, it is clear that the responses and reactions from both parents center on a few key themes facing their children’s coming out: (1) unconditional love

and support of their sons, despite the initial panic/refusal and sense of helplessness, whether they already knew it or not; (2) acceptance of the fact that homosexuality cannot be changed, which they and their children must accept and there is no use for their sons to take on the blame on themselves and live in the shadow; and (3) homosexuality itself is a normal part of society and human sexuality, which only marks a small difference between their children and others, who should be equally accepted and integrated into the larger society. Here, the narrative of the parents parallels the coming out rhetoric of the queer youths themselves, both of which focusing on disclosure as revealing personal truths and creating a “normative” identity and understanding of homosexuality that need to be integrated into society without challenging the underlying heteronormative structures and social institutions.

The key message here from the parents to their children (and to other viewers) is that the difference in sexuality is a normal and small part of personhood that, once unambiguously identified and revealed, should not be treated with hostility and discrimination. As the parents themselves put it, “it’s normal” and “it’s no big deal.” The push for acceptance through the parlance of “normal” and “not that different” goes hand in hand with the narrative of the queer youths. In a later Q&A video, for example, the Huang brothers were asked to answer a range of questions from their fans and followers, including “when Wei-wei realized that his sexual orientation was different.” Answering the questions on a roller-coaster (literally) to make the video spectacular (Huang Brothers 2020b), Wei-wei shouted at the top of his lungs when the roller-coaster pushed him to the top of the track: “I’M NO DIFFERENT THAN OTHERS! I WAS BORN THE SAME AS EVERYONE ELSE!” (我和別人沒有不同！我與生俱來都和大家一樣！).

The narrative of “sameness” is effective for the assimilation of queer people, although in a conceptual sense it further curtails the potential of “queerness” in destabilizing the strong and robust hetero-centric familism and social structure in today’s Asia. As Wei-wei himself

remarked later in a YouTube talk show hosted by local TV guru Matilda Tao (Tao Talk Show 2020), the “low social acceptance of homosexuality” is prevalent in Taiwan both before and after the same-sex marriage legislation in 2019, which explains why Wei-wei was under enormous pressure and finally reached a breaking point when he came out to his mother. The legislation itself has provoked a strong local backlash from the conservative part of the society, and the 2018 referendum to include gay marriage in the Civil Code failed to pass—the government had to come up with a new law specifically for same-sex couples (Wei 2021a). For both the parents and the queer youths, homosexuality may still appear problematic and coming out may not be a suitable and viable option for many, although supporters and fans of the coming out videos often significantly outnumber those who are in opposition—the latter may not have a strong presence in the YouTube economy dominated by a much younger and generally more inclusive audience.

The narrative and support from the parents—equally authentic and sometimes quite emotional—marks another dimension in our understandings of queer youth cultures and coming out videos on YouTube. The two cases discussed here, one in the United States and another in Taiwan, are both highly visible on social and mass media and warmly celebrated in their respective contexts. The positive reactions from the father of the Rhodes brothers and the mother of the Huang brothers have made themselves “role models” for other parents in the affective public and emotional labor of the YouTube economy, as shown in various news reports and talk shows cited in this paper. However, I should caution that successful coming out stories are often more visible, while failed cases and troubled kinship negotiations with the family are often not recorded and shared online, and the coming out process and the parents’ rejection can both become a long battle without guaranteed success (Wei 2020, 2021b). The last thing I want to see is that today’s queer youths blindly mimic the celebrities on YouTube to come out when they are not ready, not well-supported, or in a place where

coming out may have severe negative consequences for their health, safety, and well-being. That, at any rate, is my last word of caution in today's increasingly visible and global "coming out culture."

Conclusion

The genre of coming out videos and the research on this phenomenon are relatively new and still rapidly changing along with ongoing social transformations in our diverse practices and understandings of gender and sexuality. This paper has critically considered and compared two examples from different cultures to shed further light on this growing field of inquiry. On the global stage, the power asymmetry has largely structured and determined who is visible (and for whom) on transnational media platforms such as YouTube, which is in turn deeply rooted in the digital celebrity economy and queer fandom as part of the local and global neoliberal cultures and economic rationality. The reactions of the parents have helped us understand their struggles behind their supportive and normative narratives. A queer feminist approach underpins this study, offering a critique on (1) the relative lack of female coming out videos, (2) women's agency in reimagining and encouraging inter-male romance to challenge heteronormativity, and (3) the agency of the mother who not only accepted but more sophisticatedly dealt with his son's coming out.

While the reactions of the parents have often been overlooked in the studies of queer youth coming out videos so far, my analysis shows that their narrative of acceptance closely echoes that of the queer youths themselves, although both are still trapped in the normative rhetoric for social integration and assimilation rather than the more fundamental change of underlying social structures. With more people globally stay at home due to the lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which may lead to long-term behavioral changes in how people consume digital contents online, the coming out video as a genre and a narrative that

has become increasingly popular calls for further research and critical examinations to better understand its functions and limits in a changing global media landscape and youth cultures. More transnational studies are needed on the imperatives and contingencies of coming out videos in a global context in the ensuing decades of the twenty-first century.

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While young gay men are increasingly mobilized in their decision-making to pursue sociocultural and socioeconomic capital to afford a queer life, the ubiquitous and compulsory mobilities have significantly reshaped and redefined today’s queer kinship structure, transnational cultural network, and social stratification in China and capitalist Asia. With *Queer Chinese Cultures and Mobilities*, Wei interrogates the meanings and functions of mobilities at the forefront of China’s internal transformation and international expansion for its great dream of revival, when gender and sexuality have become increasingly mobilized with geographical, cultural, and social class migrations and mobilizations beyond traditional and conventional frameworks, categories, and boundaries.