

# Archiving the Wonders of Testosterone via YouTube

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**Abstract** The article engages with trans male video blogs on YouTube, framing them as living archives that offer unique opportunities to access and share embodied trans knowledges—which have previously been limited or inaccessible—such as information about and visual accounts of medical transitioning processes. It is argued that archiving one’s transition works through a kind of performative documentation, partly documenting and partly instantiating the transformation by tracking and tracing the bodily changes. Testosterone figures as *the* transformative technology, while the upper body becomes *the* privileged site of self-fashioning. YouTube hereby offers an alternative and empowering archive of how trans male bodies *could* look, while its cumulative effects also play a significant role in determining how they *should* look.

**Keywords** YouTube, Vlogging, testosterone, gender, virtual ethnography

In my repeat watching, I developed a visual narrative of what transition and trans masculinity were supposed to look like: My face would change in these ways, I would lose weight here and gain it there, my voice would sound different by this many months on T. Over time, I became attuned to the visual cues of trans masculinity.

—Avery Dame

This epigraph is taken from a blog post written by Avery Dame (2014), a PhD candidate in gender studies, reflecting on the act of watching trans male video blogs on YouTube. As many readers know, YouTube has become an important archive for trans people; it houses one of the most vivid visual cultures of trans (self-)representations and has become a place that many turn to for information and support (Raun 2012).<sup>1</sup> The first group of trans vloggers started in 2006, the same year that YouTube became the Internet’s most popular visual medium.<sup>2</sup> By now, creating and posting video blogs is so ubiquitous in many trans communities

that trans vlogging has become a genre in itself (Raun 2015). These user-created digital trans archives coexist with analog archives of trans lives and experiences housed in libraries and nonprofits.<sup>3</sup> The artifacts and papers curated by professional archivists and preserved in brick-and-mortar settings are, however, inanimate. As K. J. Rawson suggests, “transgender phenomena prove quite challenging to the archive. The very site of transgender experience—the body—cannot be captured by the historical fragments collected in an archive because of the irreducible distance between historical objects and the lives they come to represent” (2014: 25). What these attempts seem to fail in doing—letting trans experiences come alive—is exactly what the trans vlogs appear more likely to accomplish. The user-created content uploaded to YouTube encompasses a “living” archive of trans corporeality and identity. In this article, I examine how trans men, in particular, archive their medical transition through the video blog medium. How does delivering ephemeral trans experiences directly to the camera in the first person change our notion of the archive? How does YouTube function as an archival space for trans male experiences and identities?

### **YouTube as an Archive**

YouTube has become the world’s largest archive of moving images (Snickars 2009: 293). It is a digital *Wunderkammer*, containing material from a wide variety of actors, including amateurs and professionals (and material created by the so-called pro-ams),<sup>4</sup> as well as content from traditional media sources. The popularity of YouTube is remarkable, and it has entered the lexicon not just as a noun but also as a verb—one can be asked to “YouTube it” (Strangelove 2010: 5). YouTube is an archive, first and foremost, because it stores and displays information (Gehl 2009: 46). However, unlike traditional archives, it is heterogeneous, complex, and unsteady; its composition is constantly shifting, and it is continuously built and reshaped by its users (Pietrobruno 2013: 1263). Because videos can be removed by Google (owner of YouTube) or by the creators/uploaders, the archive’s material (the videos) may disappear at any time (1261). YouTube is nevertheless considered by many to be an ideal form of archive because, primarily, it allows user contributions and offers instantaneous access (Prelinger 2009: 268, 270–71). Sheenagh Pietrobruno describes YouTube as a “participatory and interactive archive, which allows users to add to core collections, enabling a popular voice to enter into centrally controlled collections” (2013: 1262). In that sense, YouTube is far more democratic than archival collections usually are. It enables the production and distribution of personal narratives and community knowledges without the filtering system of a traditional archive (Rawson 2013). Profit seeking, however, puts limits on the apparent equality of the site: YouTube users are steered toward particular videos by means of coded mechanisms that

rely on promotion and ranking tactics. Although the site's users influence the visibility of videos by rating and commenting on them, that feedback is processed with the help of undisclosed algorithms that are increasingly commercially driven (van Dijck 2009: 45; 2013: 126).

YouTube is thus constituted, in part, by the tension between its role as an egalitarian repository of anything and everything and its need to promote material that will increase its profit (Gehl 2009: 48). This in turn influences the trans vloggers, compelling them to develop strategies (tagging, having people link to one's video, and making video responses) that increase viewership. It now takes a lot more time and skill to ensure one's page lands on the page of search results. YouTube is increasingly a platform for sponsored videos, and major broadcast companies employ it as another content distribution channel (Kim 2012: 57–58). As a result, when searching for “transgender,” for example, a commercial news clip from ABC tends to pop up before any user-created content. YouTube has also become far more hierarchical, as branded trans vloggers with higher numbers of views and subscribers show up much more often in the news feed or related videos than new users or users with only a small number of views/followers. New or fairly unknown trans vloggers are more likely than ever to stay unnoticed.

### **A Database for the Display of Everyday Trans Life**

Despite these limitations, as living archives, trans vlogs offer a unique opportunity to access and share embodied trans knowledges that have previously been limited or inaccessible, particularly visual accounts of medical transitioning processes. Furthermore, the multimodality of YouTube (the combined use of sound, text, music, pictures, as well as annotations) offers creators multiple ways to enrich communication. The audio-visuality conveys meaning very differently than a text-based web page, which cannot communicate social cues, of voice and reactions, for example, and nonverbal cues such as facial expression, direction of gaze, posture, dress, physical appearance, and bodily orientation (Baym 2010: 50–52).

Trans vlogs can be characterized as sources of knowledge and audiovisual how-to guides for transition. Moreover, in this genre, trans is openly claimed as an identity, and the body-altering procedures are laid out for visual consumption and inspiration, which potentially challenges the pathologization and stigmatization of trans. However, as my virtual ethnographic studies on YouTube show,<sup>5</sup> many trans people did not initially intend their vlogging to be an educational and political project. The YouTubers had more personal and pragmatic reasons for vlogging, including documenting one's path for one's own sake, possibly networking with other trans people, and using YouTube as a place for individuals to store large amounts of data. The vlogger Skylar told me in an interview that he initially uploaded his videos to YouTube because they took up so much space on

his computer: “This way I had a place to put them [the videos] and organize them” (Skylar 2011). Here YouTube is described as an archive in a very literal sense: a site for storage that also offers some functionality for cataloging via its interface, allowing users to add metadata through tagging.

The ability to store and display chronicles of everyday trans life in a publicly accessible archive is especially significant, given that many queer histories have been lost, destroyed, censored, designated as “classified information” and prohibited from view, or never collected in the first place (Danbolt 2013: 69). During most of the twentieth century, public libraries had little information to offer on trans topics, and attempting to access such information was potentially dangerous. Likewise, scientific journals were accessible only through elite institutions, limiting awareness of the little literature that did exist (Devor 2014: 9, 11). Subcultures and countercultures have therefore often turned to informal, non-official channels to collect and distribute information, such as personal diaries, family photo albums, underground magazines and newsletters, personal libraries, and oral archives such as narratives and stories (Pietrobruno 2013: 1262).

### **The Performative Documentation of the Effects of Testosterone**

When I conducted virtual ethnographic fieldwork on YouTube, I quickly noticed that trans men were especially heavy users of the video blog medium as a way to track and archive their bodily changes, posting them on their personal channel page for themselves and others to see and compare.<sup>6</sup> The trans male vlogs show a significant emphasis on, even preoccupation with, testosterone. Its effects on the body are especially easy to render visually. Many vloggers offer an oral enumeration of the changes that testosterone has facilitated to accompany the videos of the body. Many label their vlogs by the number of months they have been taking testosterone. Testosterone also becomes the structuring principle, defining when it is time to make a new vlog (monthly or annual updates, for example, two months on T, one year on T, and so on).<sup>7</sup> While the predominance of testosterone (and how to inject it) serves as an educational show-and-tell, its overwhelming presence also seems to express a belief in the drug as *the* transformative technology, perhaps because it produces visible cues taken by most to represent bodily sexual difference.

Skylar is an example of a trans male vlogger who has documented his (medical) transition in depth, and who by now has become a micro-celebrity.<sup>8</sup> Although the style and the purpose of his vlogs have slightly shifted with years, from shorter informal documentations to longer and more educational pieces directed more specifically toward an audience, overall, they function as a personal archive of his transition. He documents the physical changes facilitated by testosterone, surgery, and working out, and he makes the visual narrative of his

transition available for collective communal consumption. He began vlogging when he was just seventeen years old. Like many other trans men, he began posting to YouTube around the time he started taking hormones. In fact, his vlog appeared on the very day that he had received his first shot of testosterone (Skylar vlog, February 3, 2009). He tells viewers that he was able to “shoot myself up with man today,” and that he feels “really good . . . like there is just a huge weight that has been lifted from my soul” He also provides a meta narrative in this particular vlog entry: it is the first one in which he speaks. It is possible that he records his voice on the day he first takes testosterone in anticipation of the physical changes he expects to happen.

Documenting his premedically transitioned appearance seems to serve the sole purpose of archiving (“this is me pre-T” as he states), offering Skylar a historical backdrop upon which to project the future. In that sense, his current image (as it appears in this video from 2009) is already instantiated as a “before” or “historical” image serving as a site of comparison. For example, displaying his recently operated-upon chest, Skylar says it is for “documentation purposes” (Skylar vlog, February 2, 2010). Each vlog serves as a kind of snapshot or audiovisual “proof” of how he looks and sounds at a specific time, stepping-stones to a transformed, “masculinized” self. Skylar mixes earlier with newer video footage to create what I label “commemorating vlogs.” A commemorating vlog is a special kind of transitional video that, alongside past and present moving images, typically includes photographs, written text, voice-overs, and music, which together highlight the physical changes and create a typically heroic narrative of transformation, one in which the protagonist overcomes great challenges and finds oneself.

Although the vlog is repeatedly narrated as a process of documentation, it also contains performative dimensions. The camera meticulously focuses in on every change—muscles, hair, and facial features—and in so doing performatively constitutes these effects as “masculinizing.” There are several hand-held close-up shots of Skylar trying to show the viewer the size and shape of the transitioning body or the growth of hair. His slightly bearded cheek takes up the entire screen as he instructs the viewer where to find the newest growth of hair with a “Wait, wait—you can kind of see it” and then moves the camera a bit to show us another part of his face “and the sideburns, whoopee” (Skylar vlog, October 28, 2009). Because so many trans male vloggers use the camera to construct what testosterone does (internally and externally), vlogging becomes a way to make the self and the viewer see its biomedical effects. Testosterone becomes masculinity through the ways in which biochemistry (the substance, the amount of time, and the dose) is directly connected to visible signs of muscles and hair growth. Here the drug and the camera are mutually constitutive, instantiating and

confirming maleness, thereby allowing the vlogger and the viewer to witness the process (documenting effects) while also being a site for staging what and how to witness (performative effects). To archive one's transition therefore works through a kind of performative documentation, documenting and instantiating the transformation by tracking and tracing the bodily changes. Or as philosopher Jacques Derrida states, "the archivization produces as much as it records the event" (Derrida 1995: 17). In that sense, the vlog functions interchangeably as a site for the preservation and for the creation of transition.

### **An Alternative Archive: The Trans Male Body as a Visual Spectacle**

In Skylar's case it is not just the biomedical changes facilitated by testosterone that are archived but also the effects of his workout. He is posing and flexing in front of the camera to proudly show the results of his workout program. Different kinds of "technologies" are applied here in order to nurse and keep the trans body healthy, in shape, and aesthetically pleasing (food, tattoos, workouts, testosterone, and surgeries).

Reviewing numerous male vlogs, it becomes clear that the body, especially the upper body, becomes, for most, *the* privileged site of self-fashioning. In addition to offering information about testosterone, the other most frequent theme in this genre is advice about sculpting the torso, especially after top surgery. As a fetishized marker of maleness in the trans male vlogs, the chest is invested with sexual potency and desire. Some flex their chests, highlighting their strength and physique, whereas others appear in more static objectifying poses. Working out after top-surgery seems to be a way to (re)claim and (re)connect with one's (upper) body after years of dissatisfaction with that self-same body. There is, as feminist cultural theorist Susan Bordo has argued, social power ascribed to the ability to control the size and the shape of the body: "It means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to 'shape your life'" (Bordo 1993: 195). Drawing on Bordo's analysis, the massive focus on the firm, muscular (upper) body in the trans male vlogs conveys a willful, disciplined self-creation—attributes that coincide with cultural understandings of masculinity. The built body is produced by pain and bodily suffering; it is an achieved body, the fulfillment of a plan, the literal triumph of mind over matter. The built body is not the body one is born with, it is the body made possible by the application of thought and planning, just like the medically modified trans body itself.

In twentieth-century psycho-medical discourses, trans-as-error is a widespread trope for diagnosing and understanding trans identity (Howard 2014: 82). Photographs from medical textbooks have "reduce[d] the personhood of those with nonstandard bodies to a medical disorder or criminal character type"

(Singer 2006: 604). In trans vlogs we are offered alternative images of how trans male bodies look. Skylar presents one of these “attractive” and “positive” images (attractive vis-à-vis the current mainstream norms for male bodies). He has a large number of followers and has become the object of many people’s idealized and sexualized consumption, made apparent by the many comments below his videos stating how “cute” and “hot” he is. In this way, the numerous medically transitioned, well-sculptured trans male bodies on YouTube provide viewers with an archive alternative to that of the medical textbook. Here the trans male body becomes a desirable image, lending itself to a kind of pleasurable and admirable visual consumption, which challenges the psycho-medical archive of failed, pathetic, and pathologized trans male images.

Yet YouTube is not just offering us an alternative and empowering archive of how trans male bodies *could* look. Its cumulative effects play an increasingly significant role in determining how they *should* look. The trans male vlogs become idealized versions of transition and trans maleness. Or as the epigraph by Avery Dame suggests, trans masculinity becomes a kind of audiovisual vocabulary. Trans visibility becomes trans visibility, defining what being a trans man means and looks like (Dame 2014). The trans male vlogs become sites of (dis)identification for Dame both before and after starting medical transition himself: “Sometimes, when I’m looking at images for my work, I’ll turn to my fiancée and say, ‘See, I wish my scars looked like his’ or ‘I wish I had been on T at 17, it would have made such a big difference.’ . . . It illustrates the influence of visibility on the viewer. Seeing isn’t just an act of looking, it’s also a moment of imposition by both the viewer and the viewed” (Dame 2014).

While trans male vlogs manifest potentials—and possible futures—they also create norms for how trans men look, feel, and talk about their transition, and how they vlog about it. In that sense it seems true, even for the unsteady and user-created trans male archive of YouTube, that the archive involves an element of “commencement” as well as “commandment” (Derrida 1995: 9).

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## Notes

1. For an extended analysis of trans video blogging, see my forthcoming book *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube*.

2. Some of these early vloggers are still active, see, for example, Charles at [www.youtube.com/channel/UCVCIVzMd7-WeoIq1QGULqaQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVCIVzMd7-WeoIq1QGULqaQ) and Erin at [www.youtube.com/channel/UCVivEKkRsAMYVMsVpKTCYtA](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVivEKkRsAMYVMsVpKTCYtA).
3. For example, the University of Michigan now houses the National Transgender Library and Archive, created by Dallas Denny, the founder of the American Educational Gender Information Service, Inc. The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, founded by Aaron Devor, has amassed key collections.
4. YouTube has been heavily commercialized since Google acquired the platform, and the distinction between amateur material/user generated content (UGC) and commercial material/professionally generated content (PGC) has become difficult to maintain (Kim 2012). The culture of the so-called “pro-ams” has spread, and many producers of UGC are now creating videos for YouTube as their main profession, assisted and funded by the YouTube partnership program, ad revenue, and sponsored content (Mosebo Simonsen 2011: 80).
5. During 2009–12 I conducted extensive virtual ethnographic fieldwork on YouTube, initially going randomly from one vlog to another, being directed by the videos that popped up when typing search words such as *transgender*, *transsexual*, *trans woman*, and *trans man*, watching numerous videos. In the spring of 2011, I selected eight case study vloggers to include in my core corpus of material—a selection of popular but also “typical” vloggers at the time, combined with a certain degree of diversity in particular regarding the style of vlogging, gender expression, sexual orientation, and age. I conducted interviews with them and meticulously watched all their vlogs. When researching for my upcoming book (2015), I once again engaged in massive “strolling” of the “streets” of YouTube.
6. These videos are numerous, so this is just a selection: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCVCIVzMd7-WeoIq1QGULqaQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVCIVzMd7-WeoIq1QGULqaQ), [www.youtube.com/user/ALionsFears](http://www.youtube.com/user/ALionsFears), [www.youtube.com/user/uppercaseCHASE1](http://www.youtube.com/user/uppercaseCHASE1), [www.youtube.com/user/partar400](http://www.youtube.com/user/partar400), and [www.youtube.com/user/MrMisterDrumm/videos](http://www.youtube.com/user/MrMisterDrumm/videos).
7. Within the trans YouTube community, testosterone is predominantly referred to simply as “T,” which is the shortened, insider lingo for the substance.
8. *Micro-celebrity* is a term coined by Theresa Senft (2008), connected to a process by which people express, create, and share their identities online and are famous to a niche group of people (Marwick 2013: 114–15). Whereas a Hollywood star/mainstream celebrity has an audience that they are distanced from, the micro-celebrity has a community that they are responsive to, who expect transparency, openness, and “authenticity,” and with whom they are required to directly interact or connect in order to maintain their status (Senft 2008: 116; Marwick 2013: 158, 118, 119).

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