

“Flip the Script” on Transracial Adoption: Counter Discourse Activism on Social Media

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This paper presents a case study of counter discourse activism on YouTube. By analysing a selection of videos produced by the social media user Lilly Fei, the research sets out to investigate the lexical, rhetorical, and discursive strategies she uses to challenge dominating narratives on transracial adoption, thus “flipping the script” on the issue. The recently emerging approach of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), which relies on the tenets of both Critical Discourse Analysis and digital humanities, was chosen for the investigation. Results suggest that the counter discourse promoted through Lilly Fei’s channel finds its legitimacy in her personal involvement in the topic and the first-hand quality of her narratives. The YouTuber is also able to construct a trustworthy and expert online *persona* that gives voice to the minority of transracial adoptees, thus providing them with the possibility of being publicly represented while, at the same time, offering their parents some guidance as to how they can communicate with and support their children adequately.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents a case study of counter discourse activism on YouTube. It investigates a data set of videos posted by Lilly Fei, a content creator interested in challenging hegemonic representations of transracial adoption and raising awareness of what it means to be an adoptee having a distinct ethnicity inheritance than one's parents. More specifically, this study focuses on the language strategies she uses to debunk dominant, positively biased accounts of the process of placing and raising a child into a new, racially-different environment.

The metaphor "flip the script" indicates the possibility of dramatically changing prevailing narratives, which are collectively and traditionally agreed-upon and generally go uncontested. This expression has been widely used (often becoming a hashtag) on the Internet, due to the fact that the latter affords common individuals access to the public sphere, thus providing unprecedented visibility to discourses which do not align with hegemonic ones.

However, though Digital Theory establishes a connection between new media affordances and their democratising role, most studies shed light on the existence of a significant gap between the potential for democratisation of the Net and its actualization (see, among others, Papacharissi 2002; Jenkins and Thorburn 2004; Hindman 2009; Coleman 2017; Schradie 2019). As regards social media specifically, their introduction has produced a shift away from traditional communication patterns "based on an authority that uni-directionally filters and delivers Internet content to the mass of users" (Yus 2011, 93), but their main goal is "to commoditize and monetize individual communication" (Gayo-Avello 2015, 11), not to foster democratisation or participation. Web 2.0 platforms are "the product of communicative capitalism" (Gayo-Avello 2015, 11) and are known to mainly reproduce dominant discourses. As a matter of fact, they rely on an algorithm that heavily incentivizes posts uploaded by a restricted set of users (i.e. "political, corporate, and media elites [that] have colonized social media", Gayo-Avello 2015, 10) and content that is already popular; these forms of mechanical decision-making can ultimately lead to conformity (Caplan and Boyd 2018). *YouTube*, the second ranking website worldwide (see www.similarweb.com),¹ is no exception. Its algorithm has been proven to "intentionally scaffold [...] videos consistent with the company's commercial goals and directly punish [...] noncommercially viable genres of content through relegation and obscurity" (Bishop 2018, 71; see also Jenkins et al. 2013).

As far as transracial adoption is concerned, the videos with most views are those shared on either adoptive parents' or mainstream media channels.² This means that the viewpoint of children, whose lives are primarily impacted by the adoption process, does not weigh more than the other narratives. It is also to be noted that many transracial adoptees do not offer an alternative stance on the matter, although an increasing number of them are using *YouTube* to flip the script.

This study thus admittedly focuses on a relatively circumscribed phenomenon and adopts a purely qualitative approach to examine the linguistic and communicative features of counter discourse identified in the content posted by activist Lilly Fei. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: after a review of the literature about

¹ Data updated in March 2023 (<https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/>).

² Mainstream media channels normally re-post content intended for TV distribution, sometimes edited in shorter fragments and thus more similar to the typical *YouTube* format.

transracial adoption narratives and the issues surrounding them (cf., § 2), the data set and method are described (cf. §3). The analysis of the videos, carried out in order to evince their lexical (cf. §4.1), textual/generic (cf. § 4.2), and discursive characteristics (cf. §4.3) is then illustrated, completed by some concluding remarks (cf. §5).

2. Literature Review

In the USA and in Western countries, multi-ethnic households are still a minority but their number is rapidly increasing. This demographic transformation has an impact on collective assumptions about what a family is and what it should be (Sun 2021, 232): whereas ethnic heterogeneity has always been the only accepted norm, nowadays things are changing. The debate also extends to transracial adoption, a practice that has always been deemed controversial. Adopting from different racial backgrounds became common in the U.S. in the years of the Korean War, during which many children were orphaned and in need of care (Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013, 257). Since then, transracial adoption and its possible benefits and drawbacks have been at the centre of numerous public discussions. Detractors think that having parents belonging to another ethnicity (typically White/Caucasian) may cause adoptees to experience difficulties in forming their racial identity and even feel ashamed of their origins (Docan-Morgan 2010, 337). Those in favour maintain that, in spite of these issues, placing children into permanent families is more beneficial than keeping them in institutions (Docan-Morgan 2010, 337).

Transracial adoption discourse mainly consists of narratives – social constructions through which we interpret the world and communicate our experience to those around us (Gergen and Gergen 1986) – produced, spread, and consumed by the main actors of the adoption process, principally parents and adoptees. For the latter, especially if they are very young, narratives about adopted people may offer repertoires for identity construction (Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013, 258) and help come to terms with their present and past situation (Suter et al. 2014). However, these narratives are not without criticism and engender diverging views among experts, practitioners, and adoptees.

As regards to the linguistic resources deployed, the introduction of the so-called Positive Adoption Language (PAL) to reduce negative associations about adoptions (for instance, the expression “make an adoption plan” is favoured over the verbs “abandon” or “give up”; Branco et al. 2002, 4) has been welcomed by some, while others are in favour of Honest Adoption Language (HAL) because they maintain that PAL can potentially invalidate adoptees’ and birth parents’ feelings and history (Myers 2014).

At the level of discourse, it has been underlined that some features of adoption narratives may not be empowering for all the parties involved. For example, the voices of birth families and children are often marginalised or silenced in favour of those of professionals or parents (see Sun 2021, 237) who, for understandable reasons, tend to generate uncritical, positively-biased representations of adoption. This practice is typically depicted as a movement towards salvation, where children are “rescued” from abandonment, neglect, danger, poverty, and sadness and are brought to safety, nourishment, love, and happiness (see Sun 2021; Riboni 2022). This kind of narrative frames the arrival in an adoptive home as a process of gain and not loss, in spite of the fact that it also coincides with the permanent separation of biological family members.

Birth parents are very rarely mentioned, whereas adoptive ones are invariably represented as selfless individuals whose sole purpose is to help children in need (Chen 2013). As a consequence, adoptees are depicted as harbouring only positive feelings towards their new households (a portrayal which, besides being unrealistic, does not provide validation for possible negative emotions). Moreover, potential problems arising from their different ethnic backgrounds are often disregarded or downplayed. Finally, another dominant narrative describes adoptive children and parents as destined to live together, which indirectly conveys the message that their match is unquestionably right and appropriate (see Chen 2013; Sun 2021; Riboni 2022).

Against this background, digital transracial adoption activists such as Lilly Fei attempt to attract public attention in order to show how problematic hegemonic discourse is, flip the script, and give voice to adoptees' perspectives.

3. Data and Method

The case study examined in this paper regards Lilly Fei's *YouTube* channel. Lilly was adopted from China when she was six months old and placed in a white family. She is a twenty-eight year-old PhD student as well as a social media activist. She has approximately 1,670 *YouTube* subscribers.³ Her activist videos do not reach a wide viewership and normally receive very few comments.⁴ Most of the feedback she gets from her audience is positive and encouraging but, just like many other users who cover sensitive topics and promote counter discourse, she has to deal with online hate and harassment (for a systematic review of these phenomena, see Chetty and Alathur 2018; Castano-Pulgarín et al. 2021). Fei's videos sporadically attract criticism from those who are ideologically opposed to multi-ethnic families and those who accuse her of being ungrateful and disrespectful for debunking positively biased narratives on adoption.

The data set investigated in this research belongs to a collection of posts called "Lilly's Adoption Story" playlist, which consists of 129 videos (dubbed as "parts") posted between 2017-2022. Ten entries specifically dealing with issues associated with transracial adoption (see *Appendix*) have been selected for the analysis.⁵ Fei's content was chosen for this paper not because her channel is particularly popular (as already stressed, transracial adoption counter discourse is still very marginal in the public sphere as well as on social media platforms) but for its extremely specific focus on the cause and the completeness of its arguments which make it a representative case study. Fei's adoption story playlist relies on the "sit-down format", a kind of video which has been proven particularly effective to present narratives and get one's ideas across. Sit-down content is "usually filmed in a private room (e.g., in a bedroom), where a YouTuber is framed close-up sitting in front of the camera facing the viewer" (Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill 2022, 157). Visual and audio resources typically reproduce "an intimate

³ Data collected in September 2022.

⁴ Whereas YouTube's most successful posts generate millions (or even billions!) of views, Lilly Fei's rarely get more than 1,000. Her videos typically get fewer than 10 comments each, which confirms that transracial adoption counter discourse is still marginal on YouTube.

⁵ As previously noted, in spite of the highly interactive nature of YouTube, Fei's content does not foster much user-generated dialogue; as a consequence, it was decided to only focus on her and not on the few comments posted under her videos.

and calm environment in which the message stands out” (Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill 2022, 164) and in which concentration is facilitated, especially if the topic is complicated and requires focused attention (Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill 2022, 165). Differently from other social media platforms, which typically allow for very short posts, YouTube and, more specifically, sit-down videos provide the possibility of broadcasting rather long monologues and fully articulate one’s narratives. However, just like any other Web 2.0 content, they are able to generate more engagement than traditional media (Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill 2022, 152) and reach (potentially global) audiences.

The methodological framework applied in this research is Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), a relatively new paradigm which combines “tenets from Critical Discourse Studies with scholarship in digital media and technology” (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018, 45; see also KhosraviNik 2014, 2017, 2018). In line with Fairclough’s model typically relied on in traditional CDS (1995), this approach also provides a systematic description of the three main levels of processes involved in a communicative event, i.e. processes of production, consumption, and distribution. Starting from the acknowledgement that “[s]ocial media have brought about a paradigmatic shift in communicative systems at the heart of conceptualisations in CDS” (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2023, 17) which has significant repercussions on all these processes, SM-CDS investigates them all in light of the affordances specific to the digital environment.

In spite of the pre-eminently textual focus of the research, SM-CDS was deemed more suitable for the research than any other discourse-based analytical method; this is because Lilly Fei’s decision to embed her message in the YouTube ecosystem as well as her choice of the sit-down format have significant repercussions on her communicative and language strategies. Although affordances which make social media highly multimodal and interactive admittedly play a secondary role in the examination of her channel (as already stressed, reliance of non-textual semiotic resources and user-audience interaction are circumscribed), the impact of the digital environment on the data set should not be underestimated. In actual fact, Lilly Fei’s preference for YouTube as a vehicle for transracial adoption counter discourse affects her videos at different levels, e.g. it impinges upon their organisation or it influences the kind of self she displays in them.

In the study the examination of these levels operationally translates into a three-tiered analysis which explores the micro-, meso-, and macro- structures regularly occurring in her monologues. The first level of investigation is concerned with the examination of “vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and text structure” (Fairclough 1992, 75) and rests upon the main concepts featured in research about Languages for Special Purposes and Popularization (Halliday and Martin 1993; Gotti 2003; Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004; Garzone 2006, 2020) and its later development which takes the peculiar features of Web 2.0 into account (Hafner et al. 2022). The meso-level of analysis focuses on the identification of text types (Werlich 1976), rhetorical moves and generic conventions (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993; as regards web genres see, among others, Giltrow and Stein 2009) in the videos selected, whereas the third and final level deals with the isolation and interpretation of the counter discursive strategies utilised by the YouTuber in order to position herself vis-a-vis other users discourses, especially prevailing ones, on transracial adoption (Fairclough 1992, 1995; KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018, 2023). This final step in the examination will be guided by not only the

main tenets of SM-CDS but also the most important concepts of (Transracial) Adoption Studies (see, among others, Chen 2013; Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013; Suter et al. 2014; Sun 2021) and Critical Race Theory (see, among others, Essed 1991; Delgado 1995; Duster 2000; Twine and Warren 2000): digital activism on transracial adoption finds itself at the crossroads of multiple discourses, which should all be taken into account.

The description of the three levels illustrated above and of how they combine will reveal how Lilly Fei constructs alternative narratives capable of flipping the script on this delicate subject matter.

4. Analysis

4.1 Lexical analysis

The first step in the analysis is the identification of the lexical features of the videos collected. Two main patterns emerge from them: the use of transracial adoption specialised lexicon and the introduction of terms borrowed from other specialised domains. As regards the former, the following examples suggest that Fei carefully selects the words that she utilises because she is interested in popularising the terminology related to the adoption process and typically found in therapy and or psychology literature. She appreciates the importance of using the correct words to express, distinguish, and categorise the different aspects of this experience.

1. People should know about *adoption trauma* and *adoption grief*, and know about the layers of transracial adoption [...].⁶

Although they may appear similar, the expressions "adoption trauma" and "adoption grief" indicate two distinct conditions: whereas the first has to do with the trauma of being separated from one's family as a newborn, the second refers to the feelings of pain and loss perceived by birth parents when they are giving their children up for adoption. In example 1, Fei illustrates the meaning of these specific terms in order to make her audience aware of the multifacetedness of transracial adoption, in contrast to the fact that it is often portrayed in simplistic or biasedly positive ways by dominant discourses. The inclusion of the phrase "adoption grief" also allows the YouTuber to incorporate biological parents into the picture, which, as already mentioned, rarely happens in prevailing narratives.

2. I think *I'm just going to re-define what my definition of being in the fog is and being out of the fog*. And to me being out of the fog is just recognizing all of the complexities that come with your adoption story and recognizing that in order to gain this new adoptive family and this new adoptive life you had to lose a biological family first, and that family separation is going to cause trauma and it's going to cause some pain and grief for you and that's just something that you have to process and work through and it's going to affect people differently. It's recognizing that adoption isn't just this rainbows and unicorns adoption as a blessing story, and it's recognizing that adoption stories are very unique.

⁶ Emphasis in the examples has been added to highlight the presence of the phenomena investigated; it does not provide intonation information.

Being in the fog is basically just ignoring all of the trauma and ignoring anything other than “I would have been dead if I was not adopted.”

In example 2 Fei relies on the specialised metaphor “being in/out of the fog”. The ground of resemblance between source and target (to use Lakoff and Johnson’s terminology; 1980) is represented by (lack of) sight: adoptees who emerge from the fog are portrayed as progressively able to see and come to terms with their traumatic memories of separation from their original families. In psychological terms, the metaphor of “coming out of the fog” designates the passage from a stage of denial to one of increasing awareness of the painful feelings inherent to being adopted (see, among others, Branco *et al.* 2022). Although Fei prefaces this explanation with the statement that she intends to re-define the expression “being in the fog”, her definition does not differ significantly from those provided in psychology and therapy literature (Branco *et al.* 2022.). However, her remark (similarly to her comment in the previous example) reveals that she is very aware of the crucial role played by words and definitions in the process of reality construction and interpretation.⁷

Besides relying on adoption language, the content creator appropriates words borrowed from other special languages. For example, she utilises the verb “to normalise”, which is a buzzword of social media discourse;⁸ she bends the meaning of this term in order to be able to incorporate it in her monologue and the title of her video, possibly with the intent of attracting attention:

3. *I do not mean normalise transracial adoption as, like, let’s make this a normal practice.* Let’s make this the default method of saving a child, or whatever you wanna call it. [...] So what I mean when I say, like, normalise transracial adoption is educate the general public and educate other people, so that way, transracial adoptees don’t get stuck in these really uncomfortable, awkward, and triggering situations.

She also employs the term “code-switch”, which belongs to the domain of (socio)linguistics, to refer to her continual changing of language variety or register to adapt to the different ethnic backgrounds she was immersed in.

4. I was constantly in-between and I was constantly *code switching* and trying to find my place in both worlds and I really just wanted to fit into one.

The items of specialised lexicon analysed in examples 1-4 are either transparent in their meaning (which can be worked out on the basis of the context) or accompanied by some kind of (re-)definition or explanation. This may be an indication of the fact that Fei envisages the target audience of the videos is non-expert whereas she portrays herself as authoritative in the field. It might thus be hypothesised that she intends to address viewers who either do not have any direct experience in transracial adoption and have a limited knowledge of the issue or may have a personal involvement but still be unable to challenge dominant narratives (esp. adoptive parents and “in-the-fog” adoptees). The examination of text types and generic features of her posts may provide useful

⁷ Fei’s content shows that she is well-read on the topic. She is probably aware of the debates about adoption terminology which have been taking place among scholars and practitioners and her lexical choices seem to align with the approach promoting Honest Adoption Language (HAL; cf. § 2).

⁸ “Normalize X is a phrasal template used to call for normalization of various practices that has seen regular use on Twitter since January 2019.” (*Know Your Meme*, www.knowyourmeme.com).

information to investigate the communicative purposes and intended public of Fei's videos.

4.2 Textual and Generic Features

The data set selected for the study reveals a prevailing rhetorical organisation which features a recurring alternation of text types, personal pronouns, and referents. The YouTuber tends to start her monologues in front of the camera with a personal anecdote. The latter is normally followed by a generalisation of the issue and an argument that culminates – as often happens in social media genres – in a call to action.

The narrative text type (Werlich 1976) and the first person singular therefore expectedly dominate the beginning section of the videos, that is to say in the rhetorical move where Fei tells an episode of her past or describes her life as a young adopted child.

5. I wasn't taught how to cook the food. I wasn't taught the language. I also played a part in that I didn't want to do those things.
6. *As early as elementary school* I had the fellow... the few fellow Chinese students in my class, you know, *constantly* telling me that *I'm not Chinese, I don't speak the language, I don't eat the food, I don't go home to Chinese parents.*

These short narratives are cleverly placed at the opening of posts as they accomplish two functions: first, they are meant to attract the attention of the audience and retain it as much as possible and secondly, they serve as a discursive foundation that allows her to widen the scope of her speech to discuss transracial adoption issues in more general terms.

Social media makes an incredibly vast amount of content available, so starting out on a strong, emotional note by sharing something personal allows the YouTuber to be appealing and competitive on the platform. The struggles she often recounts in her memories (which she selects with the aim of underscoring how difficult it can be for adoptees to "fit in" in an ethnically-different environment and debunking discourses that either ignore or downplay the problems they may encounter in their new context) can also prove strategic in provoking stronger and more sustained reactions in her public, since it has been demonstrated that most YouTube viewers, if not properly engaged, exit videos after ten seconds on average (*Data Box*, www.databox.com) and that, by and large, human beings are more likely to focus on negative than on positive information (see, among others, Soroka and McAdams 2015).

Fei's linguistic and rhetorical choices appear to emphasise how problematic her life as a transracially adopted child has always been. Whereas example 5 is rather neutral in this regard, example 6 abounds in terms and expressions that stress Lilly's difficulties with identity issues. The initial adverbial "as early as elementary school" and the adverb "constantly" underline that she was made to feel an outsider by her Chinese school-friends often and that this started happening when she was really young. The anaphoric repetition of the first person singular followed by the negative form of the auxiliary *do* (significantly in the present tense, indicating either the presence of a free direct speech or the fact that Lilly still lacks some aspects of the Chinese identity, or possibly both) gives prominence to her feeling of isolation from her peers, too.

Personal anecdotes normally occur at the beginning of posts also because they can provide a credible basis to support the ideas put forth in the following parts of the videos. They represent what Theo van Leeuwen would dub as a form of legitimation (2007) for ensuing generalisations and arguments, which represent the core segment of each entry: since the primary purpose of the footage selected seems to be the utilisation of Fei's story as a tool to raise a debate and facilitate a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in transracial adoption, the generalisation and argument moves play a crucial role in the videos and feature the main message that the woman wishes to relay; these moves are realised by means of the argumentative text type and contain pronouns in the third person plural that mostly refer to either transracially adopted children or their adoptive parents.

7. [...] a lot of the issue is that parents don't think that kids are capable of understanding physical differences and race and a lot of times parents – white parents – think that it [racism] won't happen to their non-white kids. [...] I think it's important for parents to [...] teach their kids that, yeah, not everyone in the world thinks that your race is equal.
8. [...] to me it [having to go to Mandarin lessons] was always “Why would my mom force me to do this?” And it really just highlighted another difference between *me, an adoptee, and them, everyone else. No one else* has to work hard to embrace another culture, that is their own. Adoptees have all of these feelings inside them but they may not know how to express them, especially if the adoptee is younger. And so I think that parents should be sensitive to that and maybe consider “Hey, maybe I shouldn't be forcing this culture on my child”.⁹

Example 7 represents an instance of generalisation followed by an argument; the latter is presented as the logical consequence of the initial statement that many parents do not consider the possibility that their transracially adopted children might be the victim of discrimination and racism. Example 8 starts with the recollection of the YouTuber's resentment towards her parents who forced her to engage in activities aimed at making her acquire some knowledge of her first family's language and culture. Fei highlights the mismatch between the (good) intentions of the parents and the undesired effect that their choice produced on her, that is to say that, rather than helping her embrace her Chinese origins, she felt all the more alienated from her peers. This feeling is linguistically encoded not only in the juxtaposition of the personal pronouns “me” and “them” but also (and more strongly) in their referents, respectively “an adoptee” and “everyone else”. In the same vein, the following antithesis between “everyone else” and “no one else” contributes to underscoring the stark contrast between children who are adopted from other cultures and those who are not, besides providing a smooth transition from Lilly's memories to the generalisation of the issue of lack of communication between the members of adoptive families. The final argument, where she reflects on the importance of parents being attentive to children's emotions, especially because young adoptees may not be able to express them effectively, appears

⁹ The author is aware of the inconsistency between examples 5 and 6, where Fei states that she does not know the Chinese language, and example 8 where she maintains that she was forced to take Mandarin lessons. There might be a variety of reasons for this inconsistency (these claims may refer to different moments in the YouTuber's life, she might have attended lessons but not remember much of them...) but they go beyond the scope of this study and will not be investigated.

as the natural conclusion of the monologue since it is presented after the personal anecdote and the generalisation of the problem.

Most videos end or contain a call to action formulated as an instruction. This is a very common feature of social media and YouTube specifically as it prompts viewers to do something as a result of their watching.¹⁰ People relying on the platform for marketing purposes perform a call to action to invite the audience to make a purchase. Activists like Lilly Fei realise this closing rhetorical move to provoke change in the discursive and in the social practices they disagree with. In the case at hand, the ultimate goal is to affect the awareness and the behaviour of the audience, especially of those members directly involved in transracial adoption.

9. Really, I'm saying "*normalise compassion for transracial adoptees*". So yeah, please do that. (laughter)
10. If *your* child of colour comes to you and talks about this, *don't ignore them, don't turn a blind eye* and say, "Oh no there's no way that could happen. You're *my* kid. You're not going to experience racism."

Example 9 represents the ending of a post which culminates in the request to show compassion for transracial adoptees. The imperative forms are addressed to a generic "you" whose referent corresponds to any member of the audience watching the video. Differently, example 10 contains a call to action which is clearly directed to a specific sector of the public, adoptive parents. These two examples might indicate that there are two target viewerships the YouTuber has in mind when she speaks in front of the camera: a global one, consisting of users who might access her channel by chance, and a more selected one, comprised of adoptive parents who are personally invested in getting insight into the life of adoptees to better understand their children. In both regards, Fei acts as a spokesperson for her category.

4.3 Discursive Strategies

The discursive strategies identified in the data set combinedly concur in challenging dominant narratives about transracial adoption, thus flipping the script. They coagulate around three main discursive *foci*: adopted children's experiences with racism and discrimination, their issues with identity construction and in-betweenness, and the importance of representation as a means to empowerment.

As regards racism and discrimination, Fei utilises the term "microaggressions" to refer to the hostile attitude transracial adoptees are often victims of because of their ethnicity. This term belongs to a special language, that of Critical Race Theory (Solorzano and Perez Huber 2020; Perez Huber *et al.* 2021). This lexical choice not only further confirms that the YouTuber is very knowledgeable about the academic work related to the issue of transracial adoption and can use the relevant specific terminology, but also shows her willingness to incorporate scholarly concepts and definitions in her videos so that they can be disseminated to the general public.

¹⁰ Experts suggest placing this move at the end because the call to action rhetorically represents the culmen of the video. Moreover, if viewers have watched it to completion, demonstrating clear interest, they may be more inclined to do as suggested by the YouTuber (*Vidyard*, www.vidyard.com).

Whereas microaggressions are common also to other children belonging to racial minorities, she sheds light on a dynamic which, instead, only involves youngsters with mothers and fathers from another background: numerous strangers tend not to treat them and their parents as members of the same family. In example 11, the YouTuber stresses that, in spite of the ways she behaves with her parents, some people seem to attach more importance to their distinct ethnic origins and do not recognize their familiar bond:

11. [*talking to her boyfriend*] In my opinion *you look about as much like my parents as I do. The only difference is that you are also white but you also weren't interacting with my parents in any way that would imply you were their son.* [...] I could probably have like [*sic*] walked arm-in-arm with my mom in the store and been like, "MOM I want this. MOM I want that," but people would still be like, "Wait, that white dude HAS TO BE her son".

In this example, she starts from the implicit assumption that family ties have to do more with feelings and behaviour than with genetics and race: she claims that skin colour and eye shape are only a component of the outward aspect of a person. Lilly discursively decouples the notions of ethnicity and appearance and maintains that the shop assistants who mistook her boyfriend for her mother's son totally based their supposition on the fact that they are both white, whereas they should have paid more attention to their dissimilar looks and, more importantly, to their (not maternal-filial) interaction style.

She further complicates the concept of race by arguing that her first ethnic identity coincided with that of her adoptive family, and it was only when somebody else pointed out her different background that she became aware of it:

12. I was being raised by a white family, *I felt very white*, and then I realised, when I was going to school and I was going out, *people did not see me as white* and, as a child, *that didn't really make sense to me.*

Fei states that the kind of experience described in example 12 is extremely common among transracial adoptees, thus implying that racial belonging is a discursive construction. In the case of children adopted from other ethnicities, this discursive construction is the object of an ongoing negotiation between them and the outside world. Sadly, whereas they tend to privilege the commonalities they share with people from their environment, their racial dissimilarities are more visible to the latter (see example 13).

13. Nobody wanted to point out how we were similar. It was just like, "No, you're, you're different, you're different". [...] I am sure there were many ways that I was very similar to the other students in my class and my friends, but we weren't really focusing on that.

This kind of situation often leads to a feeling of in-betweenness and identity crises which can prove particularly painful for adoptees. Dominant narratives about transracial adoption consistently overlook any negativity and do not validate children's suffering. As a result, adoptees themselves often struggle to acknowledge and understand their negative emotions.

14. [...] I knew I wasn't white and then I had the other Chinese kids telling me that I wasn't Chinese. I was like, "*Well what the heck am I?*" So that just raised a lot of confusion for me and I didn't talk to my parents about it at all and so obviously I was confused. No one could explain to me what was happening if I wasn't gonna speak up.

In example 14, Lilly explains that she was confused but could not rely on narratives featuring sensations of not belonging in order to comprehend what she was experiencing. As a consequence, she did not share her identity issues with her parents and could not count on any external support to deal with them. By foregrounding this problematic, she attempts to make it visible to her public. In particular, she addresses her viewers who are personally involved in the process of transracial adoption with the intent to normalise their struggles. When she was young, she was unable to identify and communicate her feelings of in-betweenness to her parents, but now that she is more mature and more aware of these issues she can act as a spokesperson for adopted children and give voice to them. As already noted, she expects a sector of her intended audience to be made up of mothers and fathers who might be interested in getting insight into the perspective of transracial adoptees and into their often tacit and unrecognised difficulties. At the same time, Fei's admission of her responsibilities in not reaching out to her parents might also be a gentle invitation to speak up addressed to those of her viewers who have also been adopted.

She emphasises the importance of embracing one's being in-between. Just like it happens with the concept of race, hegemonic discourses simplify the notion of identity and depict it in absolute terms, that is to say they tend to represent people as completely identifying with either the group they were born into or their adoptive one.

15. I'm trying to embrace the fact that I am in-between and that's ok because *being a transracial adoptee is an identity in itself*.

In example 15 the YouTuber rejects the prevailing discursive construction of identity, (probably among the main factors to determine children's sense of not belonging), and proposes a new one which also contemplates the possibility of being in-between.

Starting from this assumption, she argues that transracial adoptees' is an identity in its own right and, as such, it should be collectively acknowledged. Moreover, although it is possessed only by a very limited minority of people, its representation in media and cultural products should be widened as it can be turned into a powerful means to achieve self-acceptance and empowerment.

16. I'm in my late 20s and *part of embracing myself comes* with growing up and maturing and just having more life experience, but it also comes *with more representation and seeing more people like me and getting excited that there are other people like me out in the world* and I think it's important for transracial adoptees especially to see that because they don't have that representation in their own home and they may not have it in their community.

Fei points out that being able to mirror oneself in public figures as well as fictional characters is beneficial for young adopted children. On account of this, she has devised a YouTube channel aiming to provide more representation to the transracial adoptee

identity. As a matter of fact, her content offers narratives other transracial adoptees can relate to and feel understood and “seen”.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The three-tiered analysis of the data set selected for this study allows us to make some considerations regarding the strategies utilised by social media activist Lilly Fei in her counter discourse on transracial adoption. The YouTuber creates an online *persona* which displays traits aiming to attract visibility to a very small minority, that of children adopted transracially, which has traditionally been silenced and excluded from the public sphere. To make herself “watchworthy”, she presents herself to the audience as authoritative in the field and she appeals to *ethos* to do so. Lilly constructs her credibility by emphasising how knowledgeable she is about the topic and all the three levels taken into account in this research, i.e. the lexical, rhetorical, and discursive level, concur in the formation of her trustworthiness.

The use of specialised lexicon enables her to appear as someone with a theoretical knowledge of the issue of transracial adoption; the fact that specific words or expressions often come with an explanation or definition suggests that the YouTuber discursively assumes the role of instructor and envisages her monologues in front of the camera as instances of expert-to-layperson communication.

The construction of her expertise also stems from a careful rhetorical organisation of her posts which reveals regularly occurring patterns: as already mentioned, they typically start with short personal narratives and end with an argument and a call to action. The last moves of this structure, which are meant to affect the beliefs and the behaviour of the viewers, find their legitimacy and efficacy in the first-hand accounts shared by the content creator at the beginning of her videos. The fact that Fei is personally concerned about the issue and has direct experience of what it means to be placed in an ethnically different family make her a reliable source, thus contributing to conferring more power to her arguments.

The combination of strong involvement and theoretical knowledge of adoptive issues thus represents the most conspicuous features of her social media character. These characteristics make her comparable to many other categories YouTubers, especially influencers or wannabe influencers, who want to relay persuasive messages to their audiences and do so by discursively portraying themselves as both passionate and proficient in their field of expertise (Riboni 2020). However, whereas the latter rely on this amalgam of traits to gain their followers’ trust in order to ultimately promote products or services, Fei exploits similar linguistic and rhetorical strategies to promote counter discourse on transracial adoption.

Although her channel is not widely popular and dominant narratives (mainly reproduced by parents but sometimes even by adoptees themselves) still prevail on YouTube, new ways of discursively approaching the topic, which make the struggles and difficulties of belonging to a multi-ethnic family (more) visible, are slowly emerging. These evolving representations also contribute to normalising the negative feelings that adoptees may harbour with respect to the contexts in which they were placed.

Lilly Fei’s channel has been turned into an advocacy platform through which she challenges the collectively-accepted script according to which children who are adopted are saved by their parents and live happily after their arrival in their new environment.

From an ideological perspective, her videos are a tool to give voice to the category of transracial adoptees, traditionally unable to participate in public debates about their own situations and experiences. Her choice to post content on a global platform such as YouTube has to do with her wish to spread her message and reach as many people as possible, thus provoking a change in social and discursive practices. At the same time, though, she is also targeting a very specific kind of audience, mainly comprised of adoptive parents, who might not be able to communicate with their children adequately and might therefore benefit from Fei's stories and explanations, and transracial adoptees, who might relate to the YouTuber and find a validation for their negative emotions in her words. Her online activism may therefore raise awareness on the multifacetedness of transracial adoption and provide a valid (albeit small) contribution to the prevention of stereotypes and discrimination.

As a consequence, it is hoped that more and more narratives questioning commonly-held views on the topic are produced and disseminated on social media and elsewhere. It is also hoped that more research such as this – admittedly limited – study will be carried out on transracial adoption and that it may play a part in the promotion of counter discourses which flip the script.

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Appendix

Lilly Fei's YouTube Channel <<https://www.youtube.com/c/lillyfei>>

"Pt. 2 Elementary School Microaggressions",
oct, 2 19, 2017 8 min

"Pt. 5 Who's the Child?"
oct 22, 2017 8 min 38 sec

"Pt. 23 Exploring Cultures and Transracial Adoption"
jan 11, 2018 5 min 16 sec

"Pt. 26 Racism",

feb 18, 2018 8 min, 55 sec

"Pt. 27 Prep for Racism"

march 3, 2018 13 min, 3 sec

"Pt.60 Covid-19 and Racism",

march 29, 2020 11 min, 8 sec

"Pt. 74 Owing My Identity"

march 30, 2020 11 min, 35 sec

"Pt. 76 Feeling In-Between"

june 13, 2020 10 min, 53 sec

"Pt. 82 Representation Matters"

aug 3, 2020 9 min, 41 sec

"Pt. 99 Normalising Transracial Adoption"

feb 6, 2021 8 min, 14 sec