

# Netizens' Reactions to a Transgender Actor's Pronoun Change in Instagram: An Engagement System Approach

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores netizens' views on transgender actor Elliot Page's December 2, 2020, Instagram post, in which he changes his pronouns to 'he/they'. This qualitative descriptive study evaluates netizen opinions in Elliot Page's coming-out post on Instagram which garnered over 140.000 reactions at the time of analysis, serves as the context. A selection of 24 comments related to gender pronouns has been chosen for the data. This research seeks to examine how online users express their stances, utilizing the engagement system from appraisal theory and helps categorizing netizens' comments into monogloss and heterogloss. Based on this analysis, netizens seem to support, oppose, or compromise Elliot's gender pronouns using various types of engagement systems. Supporters tend to use monogloss, opponents use contract heterogloss, and neutrals use expand heterogloss.

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## 1. Introduction

English, as a language that employs gender-specific third-person singular pronouns like "he" and "she," sparks both support and criticism. Many people express frustration over the absence of singular pronouns that accommodate individuals who identify as non-binary or gender non-conforming. Throughout history, pronoun usage has evolved, with one example being the replacement of the singular forms "thou," "thee," "thy," and "thine" by the more flexible "you," "your," and "yours," which apply to both singular and plural forms, regardless of gender. Given this historical shift, many linguists predict that third-person singular pronouns in modern English may also undergo changes in the future. As a result, pronouns often become a point of debate concerning linguistic self-determination and the right to personal identity (Knisely & Paiz, 2021).

The usage of the generic pronoun *he* is viewed as sexist because it is typically applied primarily to males even when the target audience could be any gender. Various pronoun forms are in use, including mixed pronouns like "he or she" (commonly written as s/he), the generic use of "she," newly introduced pronouns such as "ze," "zir," "zirs," and the singular "they" are among the pronominal alternatives suggested (Pauwels & Winter, 2006). Second-wave feminism, which flourished from the 1960s through the 1990s, is often credited for initiating non-sexist language reforms like the widespread adoption of mixed pronouns (Paterson, 2020). Many people think that this is the reason why pronouns are not just a component of language but also political terms. Gender vocabulary evolves alongside shifting conceptions of gender, just like the terminology surrounding other delicate and nuanced subjects (Baron, 2020).

The development of social media in the modern era as a forum for expression, in particular the sharing of thoughts, is a factor that contributes to the acceleration of globalization. People's perspectives on a topic can be swayed by what they read or watch on social media, particularly if influential figures are participating in the conversation about the topic (Dhahir, 2016). Users' interactions with language in social media serve multiple functions, including language reproduction, self-representation, dialogue between capitalism and individuals, and identity formation (Junus, 2019). Users of social media can communicate with one another in multiple forms, including via the usage of chat rooms and the comment sections of posts (Rahmania et al., 2021). The

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reason that Instagram is selected as the focus of this study is due to the fact that the comment section on Instagram is frequently utilized by internet users as a forum in which to voice their perspectives.

This research focuses on social media, differing from earlier studies that investigated gender pronoun usage across various life contexts using field observations or online questionnaires. It specifically examines comments made by netizens on December 2, 2020, in response to the coming-out post of transgender actor Elliot Page on Instagram. The objective is to explore how netizens interact with Elliot's use of gender pronouns, applying the engagement framework outlined by Martin and White (2005). Since this topic deals with people's perspectives or points of view, examining the advantages and challenges of using gender pronouns is crucial from both an academic and a more practical perspective. It is hoped that this study will help individuals understand the widespread opinions on social media, so that one may prefer to explore this issue rather than take one side for granted. This is especially so for those unfamiliar with the difficulties associated with gendered pronouns in English-speaking countries.

### 1.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) examines the relationship between language and social life by recognizing the multifunctionality of language within texts (Halliday, 1978). It draws on both immediate and wider cultural contexts to interpret texts. The framework explains how the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions of language work together to generate experiential, logical, interpersonal, and textual meanings. For example, texts fulfill an ideational function by representing experiences and the world, which leads to variations in individual beliefs (Eggins, 2004). On an interpersonal level, texts are ideologically influenced and reflect diverse social roles and identities negotiated through language.

There are 'realization' relationships that link the discourse, semantic, grammatical, and vocabulary levels (Halliday, 2004). In essence, semantic relations manifest as formal grammatical and vocabulary structures, facilitating interdiscursive interactions across genres, discourses, and styles. Discourse semantic systems consist of ideation and conjunction for ideational meaning, negotiation and evaluation for interpersonal meaning, and identification and periodicity for textual meaning. Notably, the development of appraisal, SFL's evaluation model, emerged from the reorganization of coherence as a discourse semantic structure (Liang & Shin, 2019).

### 1.2 Engagement System

The analysis of linguistic tools employed by speakers and writers to express their evaluations, attitudes, and emotions — or, to put it another way, the intersubjective and ideological stances — is what is meant by the term "appraisal". It is via the use of lexical and linguistic resources pertaining to attitude, graduation, and engagement that appraisal theory, which expands the interpersonal meaning of SFL, critically evaluates arguments and viewpoints that are perceived through the medium of language (Martin & White, 2005). Attitude is when the appraiser's sentiment about the object is embodied in their attitude toward the item, there are affect, judgement, and appreciation. Graduation is grading a statement involves considering how the idea is built up over time and how it relates, either directly or indirectly, to the topic at hand. For engagement system that is used in this current study, Martin and White (2005) explore how speakers and writers recognize the viewpoints of others and how they interact with those perspectives. They examine whether individuals present themselves as supportive, opposing, uncertain, or neutral regarding the beliefs and values held by other speakers. The engagement system of appraisal theory consists of the following categories:

- a. Monogloss: A monogloss statement is one in which the author or speaker simply states their opinion without bringing up any other points of view or perspectives or leaving any room for discussion.
- b. Heterogloss: If the speaker or writer references another source or makes an effort to express the statement in a different way, they have engaged in heterogloss. The different types of heterogloss are:
  - 1) Contract: The author/speaker appears to shut down, discourage, or contest alternate perspectives (dialogical contraction). The two basic varieties of "contract" are:
    - Disclaim, when a text takes the stance of "denying" or "countering" an opposing viewpoint, the voice in the text is establishing its own authority.
    - Proclaim, portray the claim as one that is supported by a lot of evidence (persuasive, credible, believable, substantiated, widely accepted, trustworthy, etc.), using constructions like "concur-concede", "concur-affirm", "pronounce", and "endorse" to set themselves against, suppress, or rule out alternative positions.
  - 2) Expand: dialogically, the speaker/writer makes room for other perspectives and points of view (dialogical expansion). Two distinct "expands" exist:
    - Entertain, by representing the statement as one of several viable perspectives and by making clear

that it is based on the author's own contingent, subjective experience, the author's voice entertains or invokes the dialogic alternatives, such as through a 'rhetorical' or 'expository' query.

- Attribute, there are "acknowledge" and "distance" that come into play when the textual voice permits or suggests dialogic alternatives by framing the statement as originating from an external voice or a third party's subjectivity.

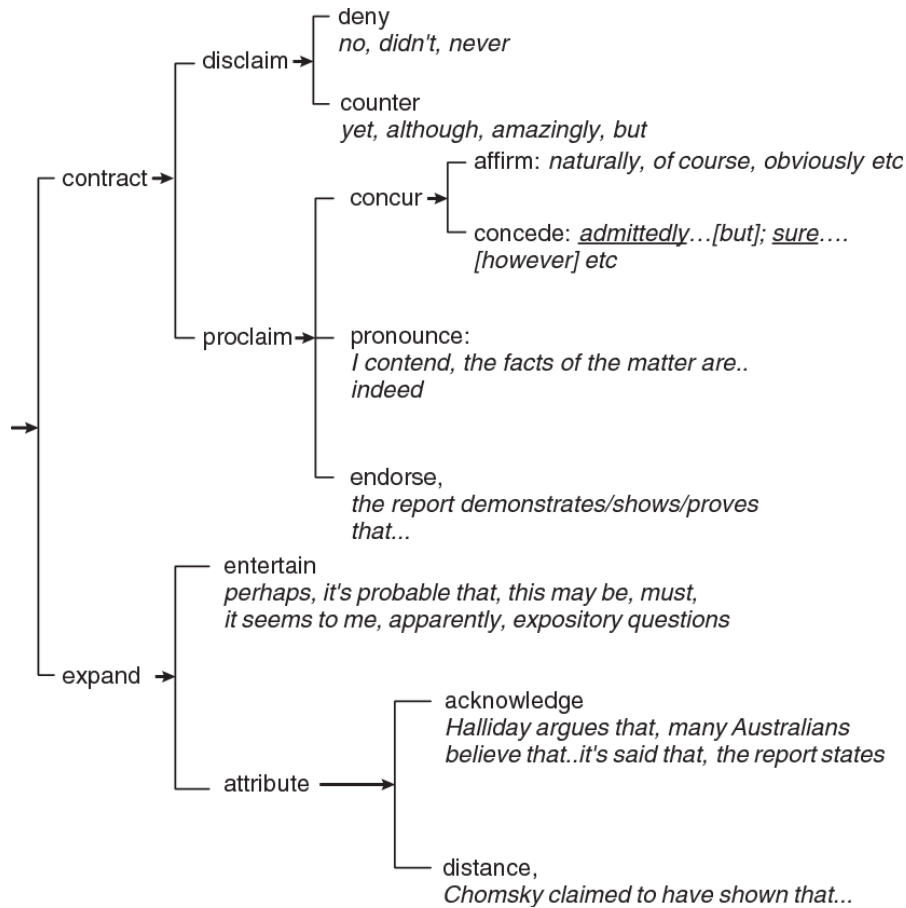


Figure 1. Heterogloss Engagement System by Martin and White (2005)

In the context of this study, as demonstrated in Figure 1, the appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) provides the basis for the engagement system that is used to categorize the comments made by netizens. In the verbal and written contact, the negotiation of alignment and disalignment is one of the primary concerns of the engagement system. The engagement system is effective in analyzing how language users articulate their assertions or arguments in chosen contexts (Liang & Shin, 2019). Disclaiming, proclaiming, entertaining, and attributing are the four distinct ways that individuals articulate their perspective through contractive or expansive articulations, respectively.

### 1.3 Language in Social Media

A linguist who does not use social media regularly may have trouble understanding the value of language as a communication tool and consequently be less likely to regard it as a valuable resource for scientific inquiry. Page et al. (2014) contend that linguists who overlook social media risk making themselves the subject of ridicule due to the widespread influence of the Internet and the prominence of social media in various communities. This includes aspects such as women's language, LGBTQ+ language, teenage language, and language used in professional settings are all examples of discourse communities that have had a slow but steady rise to prominence in the history of linguistics. There are various facets to consider while analyzing language in online social media. Common language units are separated into five types by Page et al. (2014): linguistic practices, texts/utterances, phrases and sentences, lexemes or words, and morphemes. Despite the emergence of new forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), contextual elements such as participants, imagined context, extra-situational context, behavioral context, textual context, and generic context remain relevant for assessing language on social media platforms.

Apart from private messages, the comment section of a post is where most social network users choose to have conversations with one another. It's like a virtual chat room where people may talk to one another and share ideas. An individual's linguistic preferences, as expressed in online comments, may have their roots in more generalized cultural norms regarding the use of language (Page et al., 2014). Discourses in the form of commentary might include ideas and beliefs about how a community should go about doing its work, how its members should relate to one another, what matters most, and how its members should evaluate their own identities and the results of their own deeds (Bouvier & Way, 2021). As a result, various perspectives and ideas may be unknowingly propagated by netizens, where even the most seemingly innocuous comments may have underlying ideological and political underpinnings.

## 2. Methods

The descriptive qualitative method is used to conduct this study through an in-depth inductive analysis of the data. The data consist of assertions made by internet users in the comments section of Elliot Page's coming-out Instagram post from December 2, 2020, which has garnered over 140,000 comments at the time of this writing. The data can be accessed at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIQ1QFBhNFg/>. Comments from both the most recent and oldest parts of the thread will be browsed through and some chosen for analysis. As illustrated in the screenshot of Figure 2, Elliot's coming-out post includes comments featuring both text and emoticons, reflecting various expressions from netizens. Due to the enormous number of comments, including emoticons, which are not analyzed in this article, comments are chosen based on the manner in which netizens reference Elliot Page's usage of pronouns in the post. In the end, only 24 of the numerous comments are collected as data due to the fact that the majority of the comments are repetitious and referred to the same proposition.

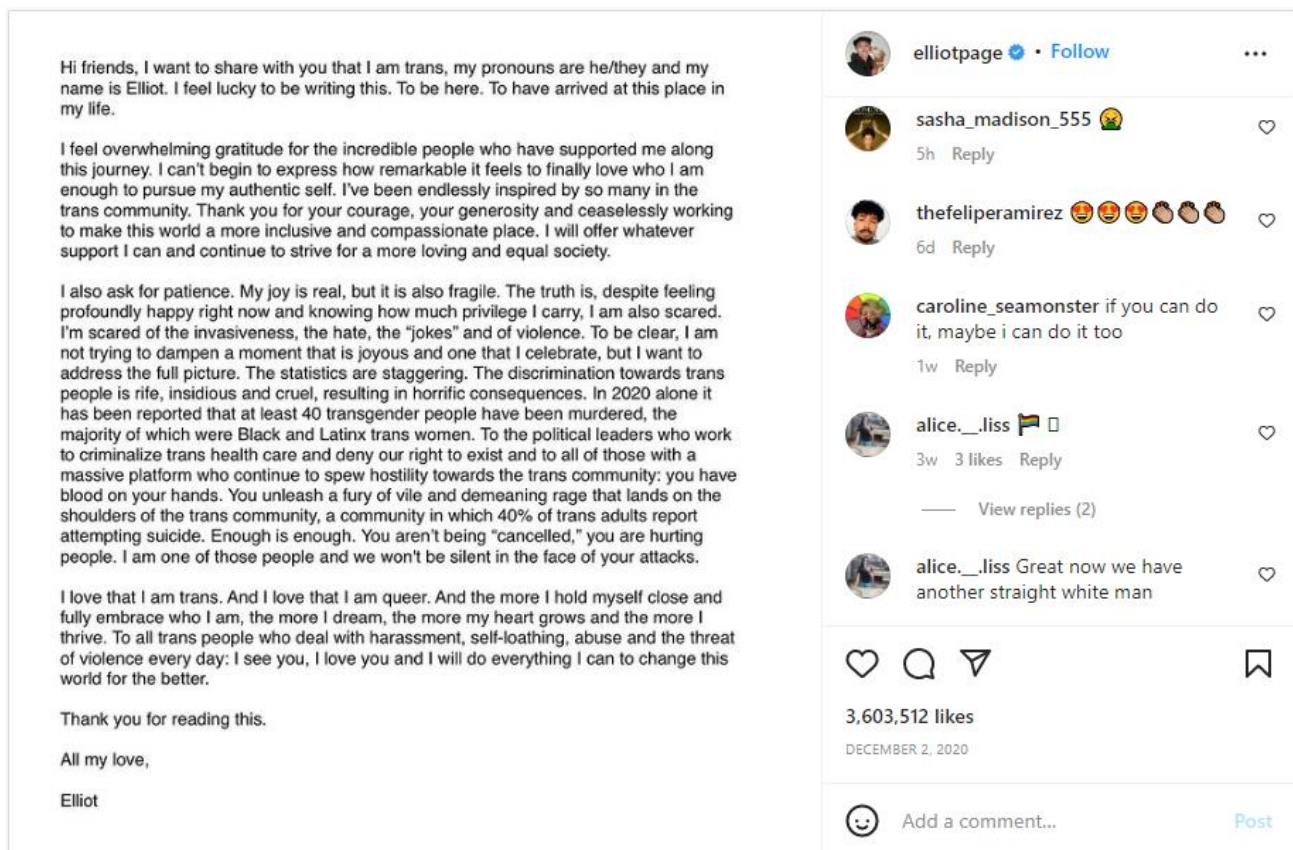


Figure 2. Elliot Page's coming-out Instagram post on December 2, 2020

This research investigates the perspectives articulated by netizens in the comment section of Elliot Page's coming-out post on Instagram. The goal is to categorize these perspectives according to the engagement system outlined by Martin and White (2005) as they supporting, opposing, and being neutral or compromised with regard to Elliot's usage of pronouns. When it comes to the analysis phase, the first step is to compile all of the comments made by netizens discussing the gender pronouns used in the post. The second step is to classify the comments according to the engagement system of appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) that will be separated

into *monogloss* and *heterogloss* categories, which will be further subdivided into *contract* and *expand*. The data have been systematically coded using specific abbreviations, such as [mon] for *monogloss*, [con] for *contract*, and [exp] for *expand*. A table will be provided to illustrate the classification of netizens' positions according to the type of engagement system employed. This will reveal the predominant engagement system used by each group. Along with the description of the data, the discussion will address netizens' positions regarding Elliot's decision and how these views are connected to various causes or facts as well as some previous studies on the topic of gender pronouns.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The study results indicate the predominant engagement system used by each group of netizens in response to Elliot's pronoun change. Table 1 categorizes netizens' positions based on the engagement system applied: supporters predominantly use the *monogloss* [mon] system, opponents tend to employ the *heterogloss contract* [con] system, and neutral responses are characterized by the *heterogloss expand* [exp] system. The subsequent discussion will delve deeper into these engagement systems for further analysis.

Table 1. Netizens' Responses Classification based on Engagement System


Engagement System	Supporting	Opposing	Neutral
Monogloss	[mon 1], [mon 2], [mon 3], [mon 4], [mon 5]	[mon 6], [mon 7], [mon 8]	-
Contract	[con 1], [con 2], [con 3]	[con 4], [con 5], [con 6], [con 7]	[con 8]
Expand	[exp 1], [exp 2]	[exp 3], [exp 4]	[exp 5], [exp 6], [exp 7], [exp 8]


In presenting the results of data analysis, the researcher divides it into two parts based on the type of engagement system from appraisal theory, namely *monogloss* or *heterogloss* (*contract* and *expand*), as the netizens express their opinions in Elliot's coming-out post about his use of gender pronouns. In addition to the description of the data, the position of netizens over Elliot's decision will be discussed.

#### 3.1 Monogloss

The term "monogloss" is used to describe a communication style in which the speaker or writer only offers their own opinion without mentioning any competing viewpoints. The comments left by netizens below represent *monogloss* data denoted by the code "[mon]" and followed by the sequence number. The comments of netizens who practice *monogloss* style of engagement system are typically positive in tone in order to support Elliot's decision, consisting of congratulations and anecdotal stories about their experiences, and do not contain any opinions or expressions that are offensive to opposing viewpoints. Such as the [mon 1], [mon 2], and [mon 3] netizens congratulating and thanking Elliot for publicly identifying as a transgender individual and adopting a new name and preferred pronouns. Since they make no attempt to acknowledge or allude to any other positions that might disagree with their propositions, the *monogloss* forms are readily apparent. For [mon 4] and [mon 5], the netizens support Elliot's decision by defending his choice to change both his gender and pronouns without mentioning those opposing positions directly as they clarifying what Elliot has done and who he is.

[mon 1] : Ahhh! Yes! So proud of you for being you! I'm also trans (he/they), and I find it wonderful that you're embracing your identity! It can be really hard to be happy about being trans, but know that it's ok, that people love, accept, and understand how you feel!

[mon 2] : Thanks for coming out! Makes me feel less alone to know that someone like you could face the same problems as me. I'm He/They as well so thanks 

[mon 3] : Hi Elliot  I'm trans too and hope people respect you and your pronouns good sir:))

[mon 4] : HE is a MAN

[mon 5] : They go by he/they because that's the pronouns they chose:)

In the comment, netizens [mon 1] and [mon 2] use the phrases "I'm also", "as me", and "as well" to indicate that they agree with the choice that Elliot made as they sharing the same experience as someone who is transgender and using the exact pronouns as him. One more netizen in [mon 3] echoes the sentiments expressed in the two comments that came before it by stating that, like Elliot, s/he too is a transgender; however, the netizen does not specify what pronouns s/he uses. When a netizen only makes comment on Elliot's post and does not respond to any of the other comments, they are using the *monogloss* form. In the comments [mon 4] and [mon 5], netizens support Elliot's decision by defending him against competing viewpoints that might appear to contradict his choice to change both his gender and pronouns. In order to support Elliot's choice and acknowledge that Elliot is a man, netizen [mon 5] puts a lot of emphasis on her/his expression by writing her/his comment in caps lock, namely "HE" and "MAN". Additionally, in [mon 6], the netizen justifies Elliot's decision by stating that if those are the pronouns that Elliot prefer, then that would be it as well. Insinuating that pronouns are similar to individual rights that do not require further debate. The netizen does not appear to be willing to open up a space for dialogue for various perspectives, especially those that are in opposition.

Those who have expressed their approval and gratitude to Elliot have shown that they agree with his actions and accept him. For example, [mon 1] and [mon 3] are both open about being transgender and use the same pronouns as Elliot, so they clearly all fall under the umbrella of the LGBT community. It's clear that the netizens [mon 4] who are standing up for Elliot and pointing out that he is a man have a high regard for the rights of LGBT individuals, including Elliot, who is transgender. Then, in [mon 5], the netizen shows support for LGBT persons who use preferred pronouns by noting that s/he agrees that Elliot has the right to select the pronouns he wants. Historically, LGBT youth and adults have experienced distress and anxiety when they coming-out as such or disclose their identity to others (Fahs, 2021). However, many netizens' comments on Elliot's coming-out are positive which means they are able to discover a wide network of support they had never known existed before. Such support may alleviate the potentially traumatic and painful aspects of the transition, especially for those most susceptible to negative reactions from others.

While many online users express their gratitude and support, others use *monogloss* to express their disapproval and sarcasm, preventing the development of a constructive conversation. One such example is the netizen [mon 6] who claims Elliot is a woman. The remaining *monogloss* comments are from internet users making fun of Elliot's coming-out post. These users include netizens [mon 7] and [mon 8]. Through sarcasm, these users express sentences that convey negative connotations about Elliot. For instance, they use phrases like "My pronouns are pspssps" and "Your pronouns are re/tard".

[mon 6] : You're a woman

[mon 7] : Hahaaaa hi everyone I'm a cat. My pronouns are pspsps and it. I'm so lucky to be here

[mon 8] : Your pronouns are re/tard

The netizen [mon 6], who claims that Elliot is a woman, has effectively stifled any further discussion, not only with Elliot but also with anyone who argues that Elliot is a man without mentioning these other positions in his/her comment directly. Since Elliot is transgender and has announced his transition, using the "he/they" pronouns and his new name should make it clear that he prefers to be treated as a man. However, [mon 6] writes a sentence in the present tense to express disagreement with this view, suggesting that Elliot has always identified as a female in her/his opinion. Since this person is clearly opposed to Elliot by stating "You're a woman", the others with potentially divergent viewpoints are excluded from further dialogue as monogloss characteristics. The manner in which netizens [mon 7] and [mon 8] make fun of Elliot is to mimic Although they referenced what Elliot wrote in his coming-out post, they manipulated the language to serve their own agendas. For example, when Elliot states that he uses "he/they" as his pronouns, a netizen [mon 7] responds by claiming to be a cat and stating that their pronouns are "pspsps" and "it". This user is imitating Elliot in an attempt to make fun of him. For [mon 8], the netizens mocked Elliot by saying that Elliot's pronoun is "re/tard" which means he is a retarded person and obviously it is not a type of pronoun so the aim is none other than to insult Elliot. The vast majority of the mockery and derision directed at Elliot's post takes the form of a *monogloss*, which consists of straightforward phrases that lack further modalities and do not leave room in the discourse for other possible alternatives.

The manner in which netizens have opposed Elliot demonstrates that they do not care about the rights that LGBT people have fought for with regard to transgender individuals and preferred pronouns. Netizen [mon 6] does not acknowledge that Elliot is a man; rather, he asserts that Elliot is a woman, which indicates that s/he does not acknowledge the existence of transgender people. On the other hand, netizens [mon 7] and [mon 8] voice their disagreement by mocking Elliot, saying that they could have written his pronouns better using their

own analogy. The manner in which they comment in such a manner indicates that what Elliot has done is both impossible and ridiculous. They prefer not to respect Elliot's decision to change the pronouns he uses. The significance of using the appropriate pronouns is affected by a number of circumstances, as Brown et al., (2019) find. They claim that a transgender person's emotional stress decreases when others use the correct pronoun while addressing them. This is because the transgender person feels supported and validated in their gender expression. As a consequence of this, netizens who disagree with Elliot's decision do not take into account the psychological conditions that Elliot and others who support him may experience as a result of the opposition expressed by these netizens.

### 3.2 Heterogloss

If a speaker or writer aspires to engage in heteroglossic conversation, they must either stimulate or offer up alternate dialogic possibilities. The first type of heterogloss, known as a *contract*, is indicated by the code "[con]", and it takes place when the speaker or writer seems to restrict, counter, or contest other possible viewpoints. The second type of heterogloss, known as an *expand*, takes place when the speaker or writer acknowledges alternative viewpoints, and it is denoted by the code "[exp]". The two codes are followed by the sequence number.

#### 3.2.1 Contract

In response to Elliot's coming-out post, many netizens utilize the heteroglossic *contract* type within the engagement system. This form of dialogical contraction is marked by comments from netizens that seem to deny, restrict, reject, or even contest alternative possibilities that do not align with their views. (Martin & White, 2005). *Contracts* feature *disclaim* (deny and counter) and *proclaim* (concur-affirm, concur-concede, pronounce, and endorse) clauses. Concerning Elliot's decision to change his pronouns to "he/they," most netizens' comments feature words like "no," "not," "don't," and "but," as illustrated by the comments below. The examples within the engagement system of contract include disclaimers and denials, characterized by the use of "don't," "no," and "not." This form of denial often manifests in the comments on Elliot's post as expressions of either support ([con 1] and [con 2]) or rejection ([con 4], [con 5], [con 6], and [con 7]) for his transgender status and pronoun change. For the *contract proclaim, concur-concede*, it is indicated by the use of the word "but" or "however", which are preceded by an agreement that there are other views, that serve to limit as in [con 3] and [con 8]. Here, the netizens acknowledge that there may be opposing viewpoints, but limit the dialogue space for them.

[con 1] : No u can be a female with he/him pronouns. Pronouns have nothing to do with gender

[con 2] : pronouns don't equal gender! so you can be a man and use both he/him and they/them pronouns!!

[con 3] : They use he/they pronouns and identify as a male! Yes their assigned gender at birth was "female" but he is actually a man

The above netizens who employ the heterogloss contract type engagement system concurrently argue to defend Elliot's use of pronouns. Netizens [con 1] and [con 2] express the same idea over the gender being unequal to pronouns by utilizing *contract disclaim, deny*, which is denoted with "no" and "don't". Meanwhile, netizens [con 3] verified that Elliot was indeed born as a female, but he is in fact a man by utilizing *contract proclaim, concur-concede*, denoted by "yes...but...". Their opinions are consistent with those of LGBT advocates regarding a transgender individual. As an illustration, some who support LGBT believe that gender is not solely a biological category but also a sociological construct resulting from social processes, a perspective derived from queer theory (Butler, 2011). When it comes to the responses of netizens who agree with Elliot's choice to change his gender, name, and pronouns, we can classify them as proponents of the LGBT movement. This is due to the fact that they supply all potential ways to defend, support, and justify Elliot's decision. Some people also advocate for the usage of the singular pronoun 'they' and agree with the simultaneous use of the pronouns 'he' and 'they' that Elliot uses, and maintain that pronouns do not correspond to gender while talking about the biological topics as in the comments above. Their beliefs align with those of pro-LGBT individuals who advocate for gender equality, who likewise hold the view that gender is distinct from sex and should not be reduced to a simple binary opposition of the sexes (Butler, 2011). They are sometimes referred to as non-binaries in this context.

On the other hand, those who are opposed to LGBT, universally hold the belief that biology treats gender and sex as interchangeable concepts as in the comment [con 4]. For another form of disapproval of Elliot's pronouns, there is netizen [con 5] who says that just because Elliot thinks he is a man does not mean he is a man. Then, there is [con 6] who asserts that the pronoun 'they' is only for plural. Finally, [con 7] emphasizes

that Elliot's pronoun should only be 'he/him' instead of 'he/they'. The form of heterogloss contract seen in the comments against Elliot's decision below is a *contract disclaim, deny*, characterized by the usage of "no", "don't", and "not", as a form of denial of alternative positions and limiting space. dialog.

[con 4] : No actually your a female whose very confused. Pronouns don't change biology. It's simple science @elliotpage

[con 5] : You don't have to be "he" for having a mind of he

[con 6] : They is plural, don't steal that from us

[con 7] : In that case, your pronouns are "he/him" not "he/they"

The view given by netizen [con 4] contradicts what is explained by the queer theory (Butler, 2011) which says that sex and gender are two different things. Netizen [con 4] holds to the general theory that gender is divided into a binary system and is no different from gender, including the use of pronouns. Netizens [con 4] and [con 5] echo the same thing that what Elliot does is only in his own mind which he exaggerates, for them Elliot is just a woman who thinks of himself as a man. Meanwhile, netizens [con 6] and [con 7] imply that Elliot, who is essentially a singular person, should not use the plural pronoun 'they'. Netizen [con 6] even says Elliot is a thief which meant he should not have the right to use the pronoun 'they' and [con 7] even says what the pronoun Elliot should use is not the pronoun 'they' but only 'he'. This means that the netizens above assume that there are only two genders and a pair of pronouns for the third person singular, i.e. woman is 'she' and man is 'he', and 'they' is specifically for the third person plural. It implies that, for them, pronouns are not something that can be chosen just because people feel like it. Whereas according to Braquet (2019) in the chapter on terms in the world of LGBTQ+, gender pronouns are pronouns or sets of pronouns that a person prefers others to use when addressing or referring to them. Traditionally, the singular pronouns in English are "he" and "she," which can be uncomfortable for some individuals who identify as transgender, non-binary or gender-non-conforming people, which is why the singular pronoun 'they' is recommended. In contrast to this, the four netizens above do not support this understanding and make they are classified as anti-LGBT who adhere to the binary system.

In addition to the comments that express approval and disapproval, there is a comment from netizen [con 8] that is neutral in *contract proclaim, concur-concede*. The formulations that fall within the *concur-concede* category of *proclaim* suggest that the speaker might possess knowledge of some other perspectives as the netizen [con 8] says "OK great" before the connecting word "but". Then there is a 'leading' or 'rhetorical' question, in which the writer or speaker assumes the audience already knows the answer since it is so 'obvious'. The question "He is only one person, right?" in the comment [con 8] is leading question because it finishes with the word "right?" which works the same as the question tag. Therefore, the speaker or writer is shown as 'in dialogue' with different perspectives through the use of parallel formulations (Martin & White, 2005).

[con 8] : Ok great, but why 'they'. He is only one person, right?

Netizen [con 8] is not on the pro or con side of the gender pronouns debate since s/he is asking question that neither side would have. The netizen is not affiliated with either of the two competing viewpoints, pro-LGBT and anti-LGBT, hence it is possible to categorize her/him as either neutral or compromise about Elliot's pronouns. The phrase at the beginning that says "Ok great, but . . ." does not mean that s/he supports Elliot. Because after saying that, S/he asks about the use of Elliot's pronouns, which implies that Elliot is only one person but why does he use two pronouns. The question cannot also be categorized as a rejection of Elliot because of her/his compromising nature at the beginning before asking the question, this is what makes netizens [con 8] above belong to the impartial group. Understanding that the pronoun 'they' is plural does not necessarily make someone anti-LGBT, because it is a common knowledge that is learned all over the world where English is a compulsory subject in schools, although for pro-LGBT of course this includes traditional grammar. A study by Noll et al. (2018) discussing the results of their research in relation to language change, concludes that 'they' is a more effective epicene pronoun as a substitute for the generic 'he' for people whose gender is unknown or unspecified. As can be seen, netizen [con 8] does not seem to know about the development of modern English regarding the singular 'they' which makes him ask such a question.

### 3.2.2 Expand

A statement is dialogically expansive when it actively permits diverse perspectives and voices to be heard in a discourse. The way netizens open the dialogue space, among others, is by referring or quoting something from outside or a third party in conveying their opinions (*expand attribute*) or by providing their own views



which can also take the form of a question (*expand entertain*). Netizen [exp 1] applies the *expand attribute, acknowledge*, by using the word "says" which refers to the bible, and "say" to refer to God. The comment [exp 1] is also included in the *contract disclaim, deny*, because it uses the word "not", but here it is deliberately focused on the *expand attribute, acknowledge*, as a sample. Meanwhile, netizen [exp 2] expresses her/his encouragement for other views to discuss by using *expand entertain*, as s/he conveys by stating that 'they' pronoun can be used in the singular form along with the examples of its use. The way the netizens convey their opinions aims to provoke others to participate in the discussions they have open about the topic in which they are trying to defend Elliot's decision from the opposing views.

[exp 1] : let's not also forget the Bible says not to judge and god said to his people love each other as I have loved you". fake Christians love to pick and choose which parts of the Bible to follow!

[exp 2] : 'they' can be used as a singular pronoun, too. For example if you're referring to a stranger. "someone dropped their wallet, I hope they find it!"

Netizen [exp 1] who brings up religion by mentioning "bible" and "god" is trying to defend Elliot from his haters who insinuate a lot about what Elliot is doing that is not in accordance with religious principles. Therefore, the netizen [exp 1] defends him by saying that what the haters do by insulting Elliot was also not allowed in religion. S/he said that the haters are just quoting the words of God they liked in order to attack Elliot, but from the way s/he quotes the bible, what s/he does is the same but with the aim of defending Elliot. Then for netizen [exp 2] defending or supporting Elliot by explaining that the use of the singular 'they' is not impossible, s/he even goes as far as to give an example of how to use it in a sentence in her/his comment, this is done in case someone does not know about it. At the start of the twenty-first century, individuals who identified as neither male nor female began to use the singular form of the pronoun 'they' when referring to known individuals, for example, "Jay is a good buddy of mine. I had the pleasure of their company at work". With the move towards gender-neutral language progresses, its usage in contemporary standard English is becoming more common and increasingly accepted in formal contexts (Tavits & Pérez, 2019). In the two comments above, netizens [exp 1] and [exp 2] both supported Elliot by defending him with their respective opinions. The form of their positive voice towards Elliot's decision allows them to be classified as pro-LGBT people, or at least they can be called allies which according to Braquet (2019) means someone who does not identify as a member of a marginalized group, in this context the LGBT community itself, rather they are those who support individuals and communities within those marginalized groups. Allies are actively working to change laws, policies, systems, etc., which will improve the lives of those who are marginalized.

Netizens also utilize the *expand entertain* category of the engagement system to criticize Elliot's choice and his supporters, as evidenced by the comments [exp 3] and [exp 4] who comment, "I think that He/They is such a clown thing," and "Are you schizophrenic, too?" respectively. Expressions consisting opinions like "in my view," "I guess that," "I believe it is," and "maybe" are frequently employed in *entertain*, and the word "think" as in the [exp 3] is considered an opinion because it presents the statement as dependent on the speaker's personal beliefs and values. By likening Elliot's actions to a foolish thing, the "clown thing", and utilizing the term "is", the netizen in [exp 3] below is engaging in a metaphor kind of sarcasm. The category of *entertain* also encompasses particular kinds of "pseudo" questions, which are typically seen in non-interactive texts composed by individuals for the sake of entertaining rather than to affirm some concept. The netizen [exp 4] asks, "Are you schizophrenic too?" indicates that s/he believes Elliot is fabricating his experiences, similar to a schizophrenic individual who often endures delusions.

[exp 3] : I think that He/They is such a clown thing 🤡🤡🤡🤡

[exp 4] : How can you call yourself a "they"? The word "they" implies MORE than 1 person! Are you schizophrenic, too?

The two netizens above are people who do not side with Elliot's decision, considering Elliot to be abnormal because he uses the pronoun 'they'. Netizens [exp 3] think that Elliot's use of two pairs of pronouns 'he/they' is ridiculous, and netizens [exp 4] even think that Elliot has a mental disorder, namely schizophrenia. The use of the singular 'they' is not normal for them. Their disapproval can be said to be a form of their anti against Elliot and his defenders. This makes them look like transphobic, where forms of intolerance or prejudice against LGBT people are shown in the form of hatred, discrimination, or violence, this attitude can be referred to as "anti-LGBTQ+ bias" (Braquet, 2019). According to LaScotte (2021) the use of the singular 'they' has increased significantly in recent decades and is beginning to infiltrate academic discourse and mainstream media, and is

even regarded as more inclusive and politically correct, because the singular pronoun 'they' can refer to individuals who identify outside the gender binary. Airton (2018) in her/his study of de/politicization pronouns suggests that situations in which we pay attention to being called upon to 'accommodate' other people's differences are circumstances that require us to become mindful of behaviors—whether our own or those of others—that we typically overlook. It's not that we haven't previously 'accommodated' others; rather, the routine nature of daily life has been disrupted. As a result, the distinction between normative and non-normative behaviors has become more pronounced, leading to heightened awareness and sensation. Which means the point emphasized in this phenomenon is how to respect others. Meanwhile, the netizens [exp 3] and [exp 4]'s mockery above to Elliot is a form of their rejection of the usage of the singular 'they'. Instead of asking if they really do not know about the case, they judge Elliot by taking his decision as a joke.

Regarding the remaining aspects of gender pronouns, most netizens are in a neutral position, as they tend to ask rhetorical or expository questions that highlight their confusion. The form of *expand entertain* creates a discussion area for other options, such as netizens' comments [exp 5], [exp 6], [exp 7], and [exp 8] below. By not taking any side, they appear open to tolerating all differences by anticipating a response from any alternative which may be engaged or entertained by their questions.

[exp 5] : How can you be a he and a they?

[exp 6] : I don't understand how are his pronouns he/they? I thought he is a trans male now, so they should be he/him, right?

[exp 7] : Im not native English speaker. When do you use the pronoun them? Do I use him still? I'm not joking, I really want to know

[exp 8] : Soooo? This means that the English language must be changed? I mean who's gonna change the language? And you gonna teach that to kids the new pronouns? I mean to learn how to use the pronouns in 2020.

Netizens [exp 5], [exp 6], [exp 7], and [exp 8] can be categorized as neutral, as their comments do not reflect a pro or anti-LGBT bias and appear open to any response. For instance, in an attempt to avoid coming across as critical or supportive, netizen [exp 7] adds firm remarks such as "I'm not a native English speaker," "I'm not joking," and "I really want to know." This question is considered neutral because these strong statements indicate that the individual is not taking a side and genuinely seeks clarification due to their non-native English speaker status. Additionally, the question raised by netizen [exp 8] is rhetorical and cannot be answered definitively; nonetheless, it directly relates to Elliot's post. English, being a global language, has become a required subject in most schools around the world, prompting the netizen [exp 8] to ponder how to disseminate the current information regarding this language trend. Bradley (2019) contends that while grammatical objections are often made against broadening the usage of existing pronouns—regardless of how common or historically established they may be—individuals seeking to adopt more gender-neutral language or those who identify as non-binary and prefer to be addressed accordingly may question whether these linguistic rules stem solely from grammatical puritanism or if they are also influenced by sexism and transphobia. However, netizen comments are arranged in the form of rhetorical questions to allow debate or even simple conversation about whether something exists (Martin & White, 2005). Under certain circumstances, *expand entertain* can suggest a sense of uncertainty or a lack of commitment to the netizen's perspective or reality. In this context, it implies that the individual is not firmly aligned with a particular viewpoint but is open to considering various possibilities. As such, this type of "pseudo" or rhetorical question fits into this category, where readers of the comments are invited to reflect and engage. Rather than seeking straightforward answers, these questions encourage a deeper exploration of the topic, prompting readers to think critically and offer definitive solutions based on their own interpretations. This approach can foster a richer dialogue, as it allows for the examination of multiple viewpoints and encourages nuanced discussions.

There are three netizen positions that can be seen, namely supporting, opposing, and being neutral or compromised. For supporters who are considered pro-LGBT, the majority use *monogloss* to congratulate Elliot on his coming-out. For the resisters, most of them use the *heterogloss contract* to convey their rejection and ridicule of Elliot's decision. Meanwhile, people who cannot be positioned on the pros or cons are grouped into a neutral group using *heterogloss expand*. While both this study and Liang and Shin (2019) examine netizens' comments on social media through the lens of the engagement system, there are two significant differences: (a) the previous study utilizes local media, capturing only the perspectives of individuals within China, and (b) it centers on discussions regarding the use of both the local language and the national language of the country. Even though English is the language at issue, those who are not fluent in it might nonetheless seem to have their

ideas expressed and contribute to the discourse. In this study, it is discovered that the greater a person's belief in her/his idea or position, the smaller the discussion space that is available to opposing views.

#### 4. Conclusions

Elliot Page's coming-out post on Instagram captivates netizens to comment as he assumes a new identity and disseminates his transgender ideas. Pro-LGBT people support Elliot's decision by praising and defending him. However, those who oppose Elliot's decision can be classified as anti-LGBT, as they view gender as a binary system and reject all beliefs related to LGBT identities. Neutral and compromising netizens mostly ask queries regarding Elliot's gender pronoun use. This study demonstrates that public perceptions towards gender have evolved or even shifted. In this case, Elliot, a transgender man, gains many supporters in a society where LGBT issues were previously deemed taboo or difficult to embrace. Regardless of the pseudo nature of social media, it can be observed how diverse ideas exist about gender pronouns reflected through the comments amongst netizens who are thought to be able to represent global society. The engagement system derived from appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) is utilized to categorize netizen comments and determine how they open, limit, or close the discourse space. It turns out that the theory used in this study can help to determine how a speaker or writer conveys their opinion and whether or not they intend to allow further discussion to occur in their delivery, which means that if not, they truly hold on to their beliefs or opinions about a thing, which can be linked to their ideology.

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