

Positive expressivity and personae construction in German-speaking YouTube fan communities

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In (computational) linguistics, the study of online discourse has mainly addressed harmful or abusive content, whereas positive language use has only recently begun to receive attention (e.g., Balouchzahi et al., 2023; Njoo et al., 2023; Clausen and Scheffler, 2025). In addition, research has primarily focused on descriptive language, leaving expressive forms – common in online discourse – largely underexplored (Scheffler, in press). The present study addresses this gap by investigating expressivity in a particular type of positive online language known as *candy speech* (Clausen and Scheffler, 2025) in German YouTube comments. Candy speech refers to the expression of positive attitudes and emotions toward individuals and their posts on social media. As a form of emotional language, it is highly expressive (1).

- (1) a. Mega geil geworden! ❤️ 👍
‘Turned out awesome! ❤️ 👍’
- b. Taugt Megaaa! 3 Alter!! Hammer Arbeit!!
‘Really awesome! 3 Dude!! Amazing work!!’
- c. Zeo ♡ ♡ ♡

Furthermore, social media users employ candy speech not only to support others but also to construct and present their own identities. For instance, in (2), a user explicitly positions themselves as a fan, states that they have adopted the offered tips, and requests a tutorial, thereby performing a specific persona (Burnett, 2020), such as that of a supportive fan and an enthusiastic community member.

- (2) Suuuper Video!!!! :) Du siehst wirklich voll gut in dem video aus, wäre cool wenn du ein Tutorial dazu machen würdest! :)) Einige der Tipps hab ich ausprobiert und sie haben wirklich gut geholfen :) Bin ein großer Fan von dir, mach weiter so :*
‘Super video!!!! :) You really look amazing in it, it would be cool if you made a tutorial for it! :)) I tried some of the tips and they really helped :) I’m a big fan of yours, keep it up :*’

Expressivity has been primarily studied from a theoretical perspective (Gutzmann, 2019; Gutzmann and Turgay, in press), while only a few approaches have examined it empirically, for instance, by focusing on intensification (Cotgrove, 2025) or inter-speaker variation in its use (Discher and Ackermann, 2025). Our study contributes to this line of research through an investigation of expressivity in positive online discourse using corpus data and addresses the following two questions: (i) to what extent is candy speech expressive, and (ii) what role does expressive language play in constructing virtual social identities.

To answer the first question, we use the dataset from Clausen and Scheffler (2025), which was manually annotated for different types of candy speech in a corpus of German YouTube comments (Cotgrove, 2018), such as positive feedback (*Suuuper Video!!!!*), group membership

(*Ich bin ein Riesen Fan von euch 🥰* ‘I am a big fan of yours 🥰’) and affection declaration (*Du bist der Beste!* ‘You’re the best!’). We examine candy speech expressions for the presence of various kinds of expressive phenomena, namely adjectives (Gutzmann, 2019; Bross, in press), interjections (Stange-Hundsdoerfer, in press), vocatives (Gutzmann, 2019; Schaden, in press) and pronouns (Amaral, in press), as well as social media specific phenomena such as expressive lengthening (*Suuuper*) and expressive emojis (Grosz et al., 2023; Grosz, in press).

To address the second question, we investigate how users employ expressive candy speech (identified in the previous step) to project social personae in online spaces. We focus on the role of positive expressivity in the shaping of social *fan personae* (cf. Theodoropoulou, 2007; Busse, 2014; Meer and Och, 2022) within different fan communities. We define a fan community as a group of users who post supportive comments under a creator’s YouTube videos and, explicitly or implicitly, identify themselves as fans. In-group members of such communities can develop shared values and linguistic practices that distinguish them from out-group members and reinforce a sense of collective identity. Thus, we conceptualize a fan persona as a collective, abstract identity that users can adopt or discard. While individual users may employ different linguistic forms of expressivity to signal their belonging to a community, our goal is to identify recurring patterns that contribute to the construction of a collective fan persona associated with a specific creator or domain. For example, fans might adopt the characteristic phrases, emojis or stylistic patterns of a particular YouTuber to signal alignment with the community, such as the YouTuber BonnyTrash fans’ use of the 🦄 emoji and the phrase *sei immer du selbst, außer du kannst ein Einhorn sein, dann sei ein Einhorn* (‘always be yourself, unless you can be a unicorn, then be a unicorn’).

To examine how expressive language varies across virtual communities and how it contributes to the formation of community-specific identities, we conduct a comparative analysis of the fan bases of three popular YouTube creators from distinct content domains: music, lifestyle and gaming. Using Burnett’s (2020) framework of persona analysis, we model each community’s characteristic virtual persona (e.g., gaming fan vs. music fan) as a point in a multidimensional vector space derived from linguistic features in user comments. This approach enables us to quantify and visualize patterns of expressive language use across communities, identify the dimensions along which fan identities diverge or overlap, and clarify the role of positive expressivity in shaping community-based personae.

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