IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND ARTICULATION: A CRITICAL-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC LGBT ADVOCACY OUTREACH

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the School of Journalism and Communication
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2014

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Title: Identity, Culture, and Articulation: A Critical-Cultural Analysis of Strategic LGBT Advocacy Outreach

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

School of Journalism and Communication

June 2014

Title: Identity, Culture, and Articulation: A Critical-Cultural Analysis of Strategic LGBT Advocacy Outreach

This study examines how LGBT activists and LGBT youth make meaning of a strategic advocacy campaign. By examining activist and advocacy efforts aimed at youth, this research brings to light how LGBT organizations use campaigns to articulate identity and, conversely, how LGBT youth articulate notions of identity. Through the lens of the It Gets Better Project, a nonprofit activist organization, this dissertation uses in-depth interviews with organizational members and chat-based interviews with LGBT youth to study the meanings participants brought to the campaign.

Strategic communication has been instrumental in construction of LGBT as a cohesive collective identity and has played a vital role in the early stages of the gay rights movement. This research demonstrates how contemporary LGBT advocacy, through strategic communication, works to shape understandings of LGBT youth.

Instead of focusing on the Internet as a democratic space that equalizes power differentials between an organization and its publics, this study shows that the construction of identity is the result of a dynamic process between producers and consumers in which power is localized and does not simply belong to an organization or its public.

This research challenges the Internet as a democratic space and demonstrates that identity is a discursive struggle over meaning that is bound up in the intimate dance between producers and consumers of a campaign. In contrast to functionalist understandings of public relations that privileges the organization, this dissertation contends that a cultural-economic approach focuses on the processes of communication. A cultural-economic approach gives voice to the diverse audiences of a communication campaign and addresses the role communication plays as a discursive force that influences the construction of identities.

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PUBLICATIONS:

Ciszek, E. (2013). Advocacy and amplification: Nonprofit outreach and empowerment through participatory media. *Public Relations Journal, 7*(2), 187-213.

Ciszek, E., & Gallicano, T. (2013). Changing cultural stigma: A study of LGBT and mental illness organizations. *Public Relations Review, 39*(1), 82-84.

Ciszek, E. (2013). LGBT advocacy in the digital age: Participatory media and the empowerment of an LGBT public. In N. T. Tindall & R. W. Waters (Eds.) *Coming out of the closet: Exploring LGBT issues in strategic communication with theory and research* (pp. 207-218). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my advisor, Pat Curtin: thank you for giving me faith in this project, confidence in myself, and hope for making the world a better place through my scholarship. Thank you for always being armed with a red pen, only being an email away, and having a box of tissues handy. Thank you for pushing me further than I ever believed I could go.

To my committee members, Chris Chavez, Gabriela Martinez, and Judith Raiskin: thank you for pushing my scholarship forward. Your feedback challenges my thinking and makes me reach higher.

To the faculty at the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon: I express my gratitude for your financial support through these years and for granting me funds for my scholarship.

To my organizational participants: Thank you for making this project possible. Thank you to the organizational members for your relentless work to make the world a better place. Thank you for believing in your work and your message. Thank you to the employees at the It Gets Better Project, for as Seth noted, “lifting up the kimono” to show me what goes on behind the scenes. Thank you for opening your door to scholars, like myself, and seeing the value in collaborating.

To my youth participants: Thank you to for opening yourselves up and sharing your thoughts, trials and tribulations, dreams and aspirations, and believing that my research will help make the world a better place.

To my partner, Christina, for her unconditional love, support, and patience, for giving me hope that my work will make a difference. To my daughter, Quinn, for being born amidst the chaos and wonder of this process, for giving me hope that I can work to make the world a better place for her. To my parents, Al and Sophie, for their relentless support throughout the years, for giving me the skills to love what I do and do what I love, and to keep my head up in moments when hope was hard to find. To my in-laws, Don and Beth, for their encouragement to stay focused on my hopes and dreams. And lastly, to our dog Charley, for giving me hope in humanity, one tail wag at a time.

"I know that you cannot live on hope alone, but without it, life is not worth living. And you gotta give 'em hope." – Harvey Milk

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In winter 2013, I spent five days in Atlanta at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's 25th annual Creating Change conference, the largest LGBT activist and advocacy conference in the United States. I was in attendance with more than 3,000 LGBT activists and advocates. Over the course of five days, I had the opportunity to attend more than 250 workshops and caucus sessions, four keynote plenary sessions, meetings, receptions, and social events. I was surrounded by community organizers, outreach volunteers, lobbyists, and activists who have been working on behalf of LGBT rights for more than 30 years – people who have devoted their entire personal and professional lives to doing this work and building and sustaining momentum for the movement.

Since 1988, the conference has been a space for activists to gather for skill building, community building, and to build political power from the ground up. The Executive Director of the Task Force, Rea Carey, noted, "We are living in a watershed moment for LGBT equality in America" because of "25 years of mobilizing, strategizing…celebrating our right to love and be ourselves" (Creating Change Program, 2013). In the opening statements to the conference and in the first few pages of the program, the movement's dedication to legislative action is apparent. The issues on the agenda that year included the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act, the Uniting American Families Act, the Student Non-Discrimination Act, immigration reform, protections for reproductive rights, economic security, and combating HIV/AIDS.

Other concerns advocates and activists addressed included issues facing LGBT youth. Recently, bullying has come to the forefront of public attention as a result of the suicides of a number of teens and young adults, who were believed to have been victims of anti-gay bullying. In an opening letter to the 2010 Creating Change conference, Carey wrote:

> Let us not forget the tragic losses we have faced this year –and in past years – in the suicides caused by violent harassment faced by our community's young people. Our nation is facing a serious epidemic that must be faced by our schools and administrators. Our elected officials must act promptly on federal legislation aimed to protect LGBT students from harassment. (p. 7)

Through strategic outreach campaigns, advocacy organizations have been increasingly responding to the needs of LGBT youth. The issues of bullying and suicide continue to be at the forefront of activists' agendas on local, regional, and national levels.

During a conference panel on safe schools and LGBT youth, Allison Gill, the Government Affairs Director for The Trevor Project—the leading national nonprofit organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth—articulated the need for more research and data on issues pertaining to LGBT youth. This dissertation is a direct response to that call. The purpose of this research was to examine the production and consumption of identity in LGBT youth outreach efforts. In a broad sense, through a study of activist public relations, this research examined the processes of meaning making as they relate to public relations practices.

Youth and the LGBT Movement

To understand the issues facing LGBT youth today it helps to understand the cultural milieu and the historical development of the social and political contexts. Education scholars Griffin and Ouellett (2003) identify three main eras in the history of LGBT issues and youth: homosexual educators as a threat to children (1920–1979); identification of lesbian and gay youth as a population at risk (1980–1989); and the focus on schools as a risk environment for LGBT youth (1990-2002). I add a fourth era to their work that I define as bullying, suicide, and LGBT youth (2003-2013).

The Homosexual Threat (1920-1979)

Within LGBT history, the mid 20th century in the United States was characterized by legal and social policing of gender and sexuality. Adults were the only ones believed to be homosexual and were seen as deviants and threats to children. In the landmark text *The Sociology of Teaching*, Waller (1932) wrote that homosexual teachers "carry sex problems into the schools, and transmit abnormal attitudes to their pupils because they have no other attitudes" (p. 147). Mainstream organizations initiated efforts to promote strict adherence to traditional gender norms of masculinity and femininity. For example, during the 1930s and 1940s, the National Education Association (NEA) launched a campaign to increase the number of married women in education, claiming that married women would have a better understanding of children and would therefore be better teachers than single women.

Following World War II, communism and McCarthyism marked an era characterized by the enforcement of sodomy laws, police raids of gay bars and private homes, and government surveillance of suspected homosexuals in an attempt to deter the threat of homosexuality (D'Emilio, 1983; Faderman, 1991). Cold War politics drove the reconstruction of traditional gender roles and patterns of sexual behavior. During this time gays and lesbians were under attack: purged from the armed forces; congressional investigations into the employment of "perverts"; FBI surveillance; state sexual psychopath laws; harassment from police forces; and news coverage warning readers of the sexual "deviates." D'Emilio (1989) noted: "The tightening web of oppression in McCarthy's America helped to create the minority it was meant to isolate" (p. 459).

The Cold War and anticommunist sentiment that permeated the United States provided the setting that sustained the attack on gays and lesbians. Administrators dismissed educators accused of homosexuality on the grounds of protecting youth from the sexual and moral threat posed by exposure to gay and lesbian adults. During the 1950s and 1960s, investigations to identify and dismiss homosexual educators in public schools proliferated (Harbeck, 1997). Given the lack of unbiased research and the severity of legal ramifications, public vilification of homosexuality was standard.

In the 1969 landmark decision *Morrison v. State Board of Education,* the California Supreme Court ruled that dismissing teachers because they were homosexual was insufficient grounds for dismissal or revocation of certification unless it was coupled with misbehavior (Harbeck, 1997). In 1973, several states adopted the Model Penal Code, decriminalizing private and consensual sex between adults, and the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. These decisions signified a changing tide in gay and lesbian issues in the United States.

In spite of these changes, in 1977, conservative activists organized to defeat several local gay rights laws. In Dade County, Florida, singer Anita Bryant and followers of her "Save Our Children" campaign used images of the "menacing gay educator" to play on the fears of the public. These efforts encouraged financial contributions to conservative Christian organizations and political action to repeal laws protecting gay and lesbian citizens. Subsequently, in 1978, a conservative state legislator in California introduced the Briggs Initiative, which if enacted would have barred openly gay and lesbian teachers from schools and prohibited any positive portrayal or discussion of homosexuality by any school employee in or out of school. While this initiative was defeated in a statewide referendum, around the same time, Oklahoma enacted legislation modeled on the Briggs Initiative. The battle over nondiscrimination laws in Dade County, Florida, the Briggs Initiative in California, and the passage of the law in Oklahoma established the foundation for future conflicts between Christian fundamentalists and educators over issues of gender and sexuality. While the focus during this time was on gay and lesbian educators, the social and cultural climate during this period foreshadowed the development of concerns about gay and lesbian youth (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003).

In the same year, LGBT activist and community leader Harvey Milk focused on the welfare of gay youth and addressed the need to speak to young people:

> The only thing they have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be all right. (Blasius & Phelan, 1997)

Milk's speech and stance demonstrated the ties between adult gay rights and the concern for gay youth.

During the following era, 1980-1989, gay and lesbian activists focused social and political efforts on issues pertaining to LGBT youth. Activists framed LGBT youth as victims suffering from systemic oppression, which countered the claim by Christian conservatives that gays and lesbians victimized minors. Instead, activists positioned themselves as advocates for oppressed minors (Jenkins, 2001).

Lesbian and Gay Youth (1980-1989)

In 1984, reporter Eric Rofes called for K-12 public schools to address the needs of gay and lesbian students. In an article in *The Advocate*, a national gay and lesbian newspaper magazine, Rofes (1984, p. 15) described the conditions gay and lesbian youth faced:

> Gay teens still feel isolated in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools. It's a rare gay teenager who finds support in his or her high school—either from another gay student or an openly gay teacher. The options for the typical gay teenager in high school really haven't expanded much after 15 years of the contemporary gay movement.

In addition to activist efforts in the 1980s, largely focused on the HIV and AIDS crisis, scholars were developing a growing body of interdisciplinary research focused on gay and lesbian adolescents. During the 1980s researchers in medicine, social work, and psychology began publishing research about the experiences of gay and lesbian youth. Characterized by what Savin-Williams (1990) called a "clinicalization," research emerging at this time focused on the "at-risk" status of gay and lesbian youth. Researchers identified this population as at increased risk for suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, low self-esteem, dropping out of school, homelessness, violence, HIV infection, and prostitution (Feldman, 1988; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Kourany, 1987; Remafedi, 1987). The focus on gay and lesbian youth was a double-edged sword. Increased visibility brought much needed attention to marginalized youth. However, conservatives pointed to empirical data that showed how terrible and unhealthy it was to be gay, obscuring the cause (i.e., homophobia) and attributing it to homosexuality itself.

During the mid-1980s, the federal government reported that the teen suicide rate had tripled since the 1950s. Under the Reagan administration, Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler commissioned the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide to gather data on "risk factors" and strategies for intervention and prevention (Davidson & Linnoila, 1989, p. 5). Activists lobbied for inclusion of gay and lesbian youth in this study. A representative of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) asked social worker Paul Gibson to write a paper providing an estimate of the problem's scope, risk factors of suicide for gay and lesbian youth, and proposed solutions because of his experience working with gay and lesbian youth.

In the summer of 1989, the Department of Health and Human Services released the 310-page study, "Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide," as a response to suicides and suicide attempts by U.S. youth. Gibson's section of the report concluded that, because gay youth "face a hostile and condemning environment, verbal and physical abuse, and rejection and isolation" from families and peers, they are two to three times more likely than their peers to commit suicide (Reinleib, 1989, p. 16). The paper concluded with suggestions that pointed to homophobia and societal factors contributing to the suicidality of gay and lesbian youth. This report faced internal opposition. On October 13, 1989, Dr. Louis W. Sullivan, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, renounced this section of the report:

> The views expressed in the paper entitled “Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide” do not in any way represent my personal beliefs or the policy of this Department. I am strongly committed to advancing traditional family values… In my opinion, the views expressed in the paper run contrary to that aim. (The New York Native, 1989, p. 14)

The study was promptly concealed by the Bush administration (Romesburg, 1994).

Despite efforts to suppress this part of the report, the issue of LGBT youth suicide became the driving force for activists calling for more attention to the needs of gay and lesbian youth. In an interview with *The Advocate*, reporter Chris Bull noted:

> It's tragic that we have allowed politics to get in the way of helping [gay youth]…many times it's just a matter of giving them ... an accurate understanding of who they are. How many times do we have an opportunity to help people so easily? (Romesburg, 1994, p. 17)

In a 1991 article in *The Advocate*, reporter Shira Maguen (1991, p. 40) wrote, “The facts and figures surrounding gay teen suicide and the government cover up are indeed disgusting.” The attention garnered by Gibson’s 1989 report fueled the fire for advocacy work addressing LGBT youth. On the cultural front, in 1998 *Rolling Stone* magazine credited Gibson with sparking the “gay youth movement” (Lipsky, 1998). Data from the report served as a powerful resource for justifying intervention and changes in school policies and protections.

Schools and LGBT Youth (1990-2002)

Language of increased risk for gay and lesbian youth propelled policy debates on national and local levels. In 1992, Governor William Weld of Massachusetts, using statistics from the 1989 report, established the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, leading to development of the first state-sponsored Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Youth. In 1993, the Massachusetts legislature passed an amendment to the student rights law adding sexual orientation to the list of protected categories. On the West coast, a coalition of public and private individuals and organizations formed the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State. The coalition conducted research projects recording the issues lesbian and gay youth faced in schools (Reis, 1999). Kevin Jennings, a member of Weld's commission, founded the Gay Lesbian Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) in 1990, promoting the formation of gay-straight alliance student groups in schools. As an advocacy, resource, and educational organization, it became central in working to create safe schools for all students regardless of sexual orientation. Since 1999, GLSEN has been conducting national school climate surveys to provide information about the educational environment for LGBT youth in the United States (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2011). Statistics from Gibson's (1989) report also were used to support the development of gay youth drop-in centers. In 1994, The Trevor Project, a national suicide hotline and crisis intervention center for gay and lesbian youth.

Education research at this time focused on K-12 schools as sites of harassment and violence directed toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and gender non-conforming students. A body of prescriptive literature emerged calling for policy changes and describing particular interventions as well as outlining the legal responsibilities of schools to provide a safe environment for LGBT youth (Rofes, 2000). Out of this research and work with educators came the "Safe Schools" movement, grounded in the philosophy that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, teachers, and families are members of every community and school and ought to receive the basic civil rights of respect and fair treatment.

Contemporary Issues: Bullying, Suicide, and LGBT Youth (2003-2013)

In this section I extend the work of Griffin and Oullett (2003) by proposing a new era defined by strategic advocacy efforts aimed at LGBT youth. Recently, national and local organizations have recognized the need for research that supports LGBT youth. In 2012, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) conducted a study of 10,000 LGBT youth ages 13-17 in the United States. According to the survey, LGBT youth are more than two times (51%) as likely as non-LGBT youth (25%) to say they have been verbally harassed and called names at school (HRC Youth Survey, 2012). In school, 71.3% of LGBT students report hearing homophobic remarks such as "dyke" or "faggot" often or frequently (GLSEN, 2011). However, issues facing LGBT youth are not confined to the classroom. Outside of school, LGBT youth are nearly twice as likely as their peers to have been verbally harassed and called names as well as to have been physically assaulted (HRC Youth Survey, 2012). Chad Griffin, president of the Human Rights Campaign noted, "No one would say that growing up LGBT is easy, but this survey is a stark wake-up call to the daily toll that discrimination takes on vulnerable young people" (Landmark Survey, 2012, ¶2).

Statistics further support the need for more youth-oriented advocacy work. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2009), suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 24 and accounts for 12.2% of the deaths every year in that age group. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide as their straight peers (CDC, 2011). Almost half of young transgender individuals have thought about taking their lives, while one-quarter report having made a suicide attempt (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). Given these statistics and recent events of young gay people taking their own lives, it comes as no surprise that increasing attention has been given to LGBT teen suicide and outreach services (McKinley, 2010).

Today, advocacy efforts pertaining to LGBT youth outreach span a variety of micro-social and macro-social levels, from regional and local discussions about creating safe schools at the K-12 level to public policy enactment at the state and federal levels. At the level of education, GLSEN—the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network—addresses issues from a K-12 educational perspective, targeting state and federal legislation for implementation of policies regarding safe schools. From a public health perspective, The Trevor Project addresses bullying with suicide outreach and prevention campaigns. At the federal level, the Obama administration held the first-ever White House Conference on Bullying Prevention in March 2010. President Obama, Vice-President Joe Biden, Cabinet Secretaries, and members of the White House Staff produced videos for the *It Gets Better Project*, a YouTube-based project started in September 2010 by internationally syndicated columnist Dan Savage and husband Terry Miller in response to the suicide of several gay youth. The *It Gets Better Project*, the focus of this research, is one of several advocacy outreach efforts currently aimed at LGBT youth.

The It Gets Better Project

Savage and Miller uploaded their eight-and-a-half minute video, speaking of their struggles as gay youth and experiences with harassment and bullying, and ultimately how life got better once both got through high school. The intent of the video was to serve as a direct communication to at-risk LGBT youth. Savage, a columnist at Seattle's alternative weekly newspaper *The Stranger*, rallied a call for LGBT adults –"singles and couples, with kids or without, established in careers or just starting out, urban and rural, of all races and religious backgrounds"– to create and submit videos to help show LGBT youth that life does in fact get better (Savage, 2010a, ¶18).

The video propelled a worldwide movement, receiving submissions from individuals, celebrities, organizations, corporations, religious groups, universities and colleges, and politicians. Within a week of uploading the original video, the It Gets Better YouTube channel received more than 1,000 videos, surpassing the channel's capacity and requiring a separate website to house the contributions (Advocate.com Editors, 2010; Savage, 2010b). Three weeks later, the It Gets Better Project became part of the Iola Foundation, a registered tax-exempt nonprofit organization. The project shifted from a single YouTube-based video to a small but flourishing volunteer-based organization.

While the magnitude of the project represents the contemporary cultural energy devoted to issues pertaining to LGBT youth, some LGBT activists critique the project for not addressing structural problems (Eichler, 2010). Queer blogger Zoe Melisa, for example, says the project sends a message to mainstream audiences that "we don't need to work for major systemic change" (Eichler, 2010, ¶3), while blogger Rebecca Novack notes, "there is actually no path to change in this vision" and promoting an "illusion that things just 'get better'" enables inaction (Queer Watch, 2010, ¶9). While it has been criticized for not working to solve the immediate problems facing LGBT youth, Savage defends the project, arguing that the videos are a step in the right direction amid slow moving public opinion and policy (Hartlaub, 2010).

The project continues to provide a forum for LGBT individuals and allies to share their personal stories, experiences, and struggles with an audience of LGBT youth. As of December 2013, more than 60,000 user-created testimonials of how life "gets better" have surfaced from participants worldwide and have been viewed more than 50 million times ("About," n.d.). In accordance with Savage's original mission, the channel includes videos representing voices and experiences across categories of gender, sexuality, nationality, race, ethnicity, age, religion, and (dis)ability. Furthermore, the It Gets Better Project is part of a larger movement that includes global media attention for LGBT youth harassment, bullying, and suicide as well as the implementation of local, state, and federal policy changes regarding bullying (GLAAD, 2011; "National Anti-Bullying Month," 2011; "President and First Lady," 2011; "Safe Schools Improvement Act," 2011).

Bridging the Gap: Advocacy, Activism, and Public Relations

Some contemporary LGBT activists believe America has "reached a watershed moment in its writing of gay rights history" (Basu, 2013, ¶6). Veteran activist and journalist Mark Segal noted, "Watershed? No, it's a tidal wave" (Basu, 2013, ¶7). In his second inaugural address President Barack Obama noted, "Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law" and included a landmark LGBT activist moment when identifying three civil rights moments in

American history: Seneca Falls (women's rights movement, 1848), Selma (black-rights movement, 1965) and Stonewall (LGBT rights movement, 1969).

Justification for Study

Despite the historical prevalence and trajectory of LGBT activism in the 20th century, there has been surprisingly little research in public relations literature pertaining to these issues. Given the shifting social and cultural tides regarding the acceptance of LGBT people, a body of literature and scholars devoted to LGBT issues in public relations is emerging. This dissertation contributes to this growing corpus. In light of this, this dissertation investigated the social and communicative phenomena of advocacy outreach efforts in the digital age. This study examined how LGBT activists and LGBT youth make meaning of strategic advocacy campaigns and how a campaign shaped the identity of LGBT activism at a social, cultural, and political nexus in the United States. By examining activist and advocacy efforts aimed at youth, this research brings to light how LGBT organizations use campaigns to articulate identity, and conversely, how LGBT youth articulate notions of identity. This research is an intervention: because as scholars we know relatively little about young people at the margins, we need to learn from LGBT youth in order to provide them with more appropriate and relevant information and resources.

My dissertation contributes to the field of public relations in furthering work on identity and activism. This study informs public relations by considering the role of activism and social movements within public relations practice and theory. Theoretically and empirically, this dissertation contributes to critical-cultural public relations literature by exploring the multiple realities that exist in social contexts, showing the complexity and cultural contingency of identity.

The research questions driving this study drew from critical-cultural public relations literature, prompting me to examine how producers and consumers understand activist communication. Analysis of data unearthed how organizational members (i.e., employees, board members, and consultants) of the It Gets Better Project understood the work of the campaign and how LGBT youth made sense of the project. Through its use of the cultural-economic model, this dissertation advances understandings of identity within public relations and the practice of public relations as cultural and discursive.

The next chapter conceptualizes and reviews the major theoretical literature informing this study. Chapter III outlines the qualitative method and data analysis used to answer the research questions. The fourth chapter presents the research results, the fifth chapter discusses these results, and the sixth chapter presents the conclusions, limitations, and implications of the research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the growing interest in LGBT issues in public relations at the practitioner, publics, and campaign level, the LGBT community has largely been ignored by scholarly research within public relations research. A small growing body of literature and a collective of scholars is focused on LGBT issues and public relations. One area of research explores the experiences of LGBT strategic communication practitioners (Tindall, 2013; Tindall & Waters, 2012; Waters, 2013). A second area includes industry approaches toward LGBT audiences and publics (Mundy, 2013a; 2013b; Wrigley, 2013). Third, scholars have examined specific LGBT outreach efforts and campaigns (Chávez & Place, 2013; Ciszek, 2013a, 2013b; Phillips, 2013; Phillips & Brabham, 2012). Research in this area explores effective, responsible, and ethical communication to an increasingly diverse audience. To date, research shows that little has been done to understand LGBT publics' experiences with strategic communication efforts.

Given this dissertation's broader focus on activism and public relations, this review focuses on the often contentious relationship between public relations practice and theory and activists and activism to demonstrate how thinking within the field has evolved to become more inclusive of activism as a form of public relations practice. It also pulls in relevant literature from social movement scholarship on collective identity to set the foundation for the research questions.

Public Relations and Activism

Evidence suggests that activists have been implementing public relations for at least 100 years. For example, during the late 19th century, populist and progressive organizations challenged the power of monopolistic organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Groups pressed for workplace reform, women's suffrage, and reform in the food and drug sectors through direct confrontation and appeals for increased government regulation. Abolitionists, suffragists, and labor organizers acted as public relations activists during this time by directing efforts toward governmental and corporate social change. In their examination of Frederick Douglass' "Fourth of July Address," Heath and Waymer (2009) note how anti-slavery groups lobbied, worked to create alliances, raised money, mobilized resources, engaged in media relations and community relations, and advocated for policy reform. Similarly, during the 1960s, activists employed public relations to "attract the attention of the corporate elite, developing and utilizing many of the modern tools of public relations" (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 52).

In fact, a modest body of literature suggests that many of the tactics used by activists are public relations tactics, and their motives can be viewed as public relations strategies. Smith (2005) broadly defines activism as a process by which a "group of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change polices, practices, or conditions" that they find problematic (p. 6). Activism involves efforts to change the status quo by targeting social norms, embedded practices, policies, or the dominance of certain social groups (Zoller, 2009). Activist organizations strive to raise awareness, change attitudes, and encourage or discourage certain actions (Taylor & Das, 2010).

Third sector groups such as social collectives, community action groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) carry out activist public relations to foster public legitimacy for social change (Demetrious, 2008). Because garnering acceptance by segments of the public is part of the life cycle of an issue (Crable & Vibbert, 1985), activists must establish the legitimacy of their own issues while simultaneously challenging the legitimacy of target organizations and the values they represent (Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

From an organizational perspective, researchers have examined strategies and tactics employed by activist publics (J. E. Grunig, 1997; Lerbinger, 1997). Some scholars have argued that, while not typically as sophisticated in resources and scope as the organizations and institutions they target, activist groups use similar tactics and strategies to reach publics and achieve goals (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). Grunig and Grunig (1997) suggested that activist groups might practice public relations in the same way as other groups or organizations.

Activist communication efforts, therefore, are driven by objectives that are "not that different" from other organizations that use public relations to pursue strategic goals and maintain the organization (Smith, 2005, p. 7). Activist organizations have two main public relations goals: first, to influence public opinion and behavior to resolve the problematic situation and second, to create and maintain their efforts (Smith, 2005). In working to resolve issues they have identified, activist publics generally pursue three areas: (1) eliciting or resisting change on the part of an organization, industry or field; (2) seeking public policy or regulatory changes that would effect institutional change or public behavior; and (3) changing social norms. These goals are not independent or mutually exclusive, and many activist organizations take up all three efforts (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

An overarching goal activist organizations have is sustaining the movement (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). Central to this is securing support from followers, volunteers, and monetary supporters. As such, activist organizations have two main publics to whom they target their efforts. The first is the targets of the activist efforts, including supporting publics that can help them achieve their goals, as well as supportive organizations, legislators, and regulators. The second is the focus of the activist efforts, those opposed to the issue, including publics, organizations, and legislators. In the case of LGBT activism, the target of activists efforts include supporting publics, which consist of allied individuals and organizations that support LGBT issues and communities. Secondly, the focus of efforts for LGBT activists include conservative institutions and organizations that oppose LGBT equality (e.g., the Tea Party, the Religious Right).

Smith (2005) identified three categories of strategies employed by activists: confrontational tactics, informational strategies, and relationship building strategies. Confrontational tactics, which include boycotts, demonstrations, and symbolic events, are used to garner public attention through dramatization of an issue. Informational strategies are designed to raise awareness and understanding of a group's concern and suggestions for solving the issue. Finally, through relationship building strategies, the goal is to negotiate a desirable outcome for all parties involved by building satisfactory relationships with the responsible institutions or organizations. This last strategy mirrors corporations' use of symmetrical communication and relationship management in public relations. The choice of strategies employed by activist organizations is determined by how those who run the organization value public relations (Smith, 2005).

A growing body of literature focuses on strategies that enable advocacy and strengthen movements (Leitch & Neilson, 2001; Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Scholars have examined how communication produced by multiple voices enriches the public discussion of a social issue or problem (Han & Zhang, 2009; Jiang & Ni, 2009). Derville (2007) attempted to clarify the concepts of advocacy and activism, defining activists as "people who form a group for social change and use militant tactics to achieve their goals" and advocates as "people who form a group for social change and solely use moderate tactics to pursue their goals" (p. 8). Derville (2007) differentiated activist-style strategies (direct, oppositional, attention-getting) from advocacy strategies (proactive, sustained, supportive of long-term social change).

Yet for years, these public relations activities have not been recognized by scholars as such because they issued from activist groups, not organizations per se. The majority of research in the field takes an organization-centered stance toward activism, as illustrated by the title of a book, *Managing Activism: A Guide to Dealing With Activists and Pressure Groups* (Deegan, 2001). Until recently, activists have been viewed as external publics to an organization—rather than public relations practitioners themselves—a perspective grounded in the functionalist approaches underlying the majority of public relations theory.

The Functional Tradition in Public Relations Theory

Functionalism views societies as "integrated, harmonious, cohesive 'wholes' or 'social systems'" (O'Sullivan, 1994, p. 124). Thus, a functionalist view of public relations leads to an ideal notion where all parts of an organization "function to maintain equilibrium, consensus and social order" (p. 124). In particular, role theory, systems theory, and excellence theory have embodied a functionalist perspective and have driven much research in the field. A functional perspective, which has been prevalent in the early years of public relations scholarship, views publics and communication as a means to achieve organizational ends (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Emphasis is placed on the production of strategic organizational messages and the advancement of organizational goals or on diagnosing what stands in the way of organizational success. Within functional perspectives, activist are obstacles the organizations must navigate.

According to Lerbinger (1997), activists pressure organizations into crisis mode by organizing groups to press demands and gain public support. Activists, according to Sriramesh (2010), "coalesce around problems caused by organizational activities and attempt to find resolution through various means," such as education through publicity campaigns, lobbying government for greater regulation, media relations, and sometimes even radical action (p. 703). Thus, much research has been devoted to organizational responses to activism, particularly the role of public relations practitioners in mediating these relations (e.g. Courtright, 2007; Henderson, 2005; Hon, 2006; Hung, 2003; Lester, 2006; O'Callaghan, 2007; Zoch, Collins, Sisco, & Suppa, 2008).

Role theory. The organizational role of practitioners has been one of the most studied areas of public relations (Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1999). In the 1970s, Broom developed a typology of roles that would account for the multitude of activities and responsibilities of public relations professionals. Practitioners were identified as consultants to the dominant coalition–those members of an organization with the collective power to make strategic decisions and change organizational structure (Robbins, 1990).

According to role theory, the effectiveness of an organization depends on the extent to which public relations is considered in goal setting and program planning. Within this theory, power is inherent in the roles individuals enact (Katz & Kahn, 1966);

power is conceptualized as an individual's ability to influence another's behavior (Dahl, 1957). Depending on their involvement in decision-making, practitioners occupying public relations roles may hold different kinds of power. Individuals involved in decision making identify publics that are important to the organization, conduct environmental scanning, and make policy decisions (J. E. Grunig, 1992). Within this framework, activists are conceptualized as entities that need to be monitored and managed. Thus, it is the role of public relations practitioners in management positions to serve as the liaison between the organization and these potentially problematic publics.

Role theory legitimized the profession of public relations and the argument that pubic relations professionals should have a seat at management table, setting the precedent for framing public relations as a management function. Role theory was incorporated into a broader theoretical approach to the field–systems theory.

Systems theory. Systems theory was first proposed by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) to account for complex behaviors and relationships among system components and how effectively they adapt to the environmental system in which they are a part. According to systems theory, organizations are organic entities that engage dynamically with their environments. Communication is the central mode by which organizations structure themselves and acclimate in spite of their environment.

Public relations has been guided by systems theory since the 1980s. Within public relations scholarship, systems theory represents the organization as a complex social system made up of independent parts and dependent on the environment in which it operates. According to systems theory, the role of public relations is to balance the forces internal and external to the organization. Systems theory positioned practitioners as both part of the system as well as boundary spanners (e.g., Vasquez, 1996), with the role of the practitioner as a technician or manager or both.

Role theory and systems theory are intimately related. For example, environmental scanning is a key role of public relations practice, whereby information is brought both into the organization and sent out to the environment (Dozier, 1990). Public relations operates as a feedback function, helping organizations interpret their environments and maintain homeostasis. Thus, anything disrupting the functioning of an organization, such as activism, is reason for concern. Emerging from systems theory, there is a history of anti-activist discourse in public relations, which established an adversarial relationship between activism and corporations. For example, Daugherty (2001) noted:

> Special interest groups and activist organizations use technology to put their causes on the public agenda. They force the hand of corporations and pressure government to react. Business must respond to these challenges and take an active role in setting the public agenda…Activists are successful in getting access to policymakers, are popular among consumers and understand how to get media attention. (p. 396)

Here activists are identified as one of the publics an organization has to deal with. In this manner, activists are characterized as roadblocks and problems to be managed and dealt with by organizations, often through the practice of issues management.

Issues management. Issues management developed as a systematic way for corporations to confront public policy (Jones & Chase, 1979) under the premise that corporations have the moral and legal right to participate in the formation of policy and not merely to react or respond to policies designed by government (Chase, 1984). Issues management was developed as a business function to enhance the current and long-term performance of corporations by anticipating change, prioritizing opportunities, and avoiding or mitigating threats (Renfro, 1993). Ultimately, the goal is for public relations practitioners to manage issues strategically before issues become problems.

Organizations must respond to activist pressures because activist groups can issue grievances, boycott, or strike an organization, garner negative media attention, and take other actions that can severely harm the revenue of an organization (L. A. Grunig, 1992). Hallahan (2000) noted that public relations has had a "preoccupation" with activism because of potential consequences of activist groups, which can "directly and immediately threaten the organization's goals or help to attain them" (p. 500). Werder (2006) noted that the behavior of activist groups "is a growing problem for organizations operating in today's multidimensional marketplace" (p. 342). Thus, these actions can impact the organization's ability to operate without interference. How activists respond to an issue and how that issue should be managed by organizations is the subject of the situational theory of publics.

Situational theory of publics. The situational theory of publics illuminates the relationship between organizations and activists, providing a systematic way to predict and practice public relations as it pertains to activist publics. The situational theory of publics has three variables that highlight the precursors that lead individuals to engage with issues: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement. Problem recognition is the extent to which individuals perceive a matter to be an issue and to consider what should be done. Constraint recognition is the degree to which perceived obstacles prevent individuals from acting. Involvement includes the extent to which individuals recognize a connection between themselves and an issue. Individuals with high problem recognition about an issue, low constraint recognition for responding, and high involvement for the issue are considered to be active publics and are likely to form relationships with organizations.

According to this theory, the communication behaviors of publics can be best understood by "measuring how members of publics perceive situations in which they are affected by organizational consequences" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 148). Grunig and Hunt (1984) identified a three-stage development process in which publics move from non-publics to being latent, aware, and then active in terms of issues. As publics evolve through these stages, Grunig and Repper (1992) suggested that organizational communication with these publics ought to shift from long-term, relationship building communication to encourage greater involvement by the public in organizational decision-making processes and to greater use of media and interpersonal communication. The situational theory of publics serves as a predictor of activism, operationalizing publics as either active information seekers or passive information processors (J. E. Grunig, 1997).

Situational theory of problem solving. Kim and Grunig (2011) broadened the conceptualization of publics from the situational theory of publics in their situational theory of problem solving. This theory was developed as a complement to issues management to aid organizations in dealing with activist groups. The situational theory of problem solving claims that the extent of communicative actions increases as one becomes more motivated in problem solving. While the situational theory of publics focuses on individual acquisition of information as a form of active communication, the situational theory of problem solving examines how certain issues fuel activist publics through the variable of information selectivity.

The situational theory of publics and the situational theory of problem solving account for the emergence of activist publics, allowing public relations practitioners to identify, measure, and segment publics to understand their nature and plan appropriate organizational communication. These conceptualizations of publics in terms of how their information seeking and selectivity may impact an organization form part of the broader basis of excellence theory.

Excellence theory. According to Botan and Hazleton (2006), excellence theory “has probably done more to develop public relations theory and scholarships than any other single school of thought” (p. 6). The excellence study, conducted by Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier in the 1980s, was a research project in public relations carried out over a period of 15-years with more than 300 organizations in three countries (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The objective of the project was to identify characteristics of excellent communication departments and to understand how excellent public relations makes organizations effective (Grunig, 1992). One aspect of excellence theory is the two-way symmetrical communication model, which can be traced back to Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) four models of public relations: press agentry/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical. J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) described the two-way symmetrical model as the excellent model for the practice of public relations. While the model has undergone several revisions since its original conception, according to Grunig (2000, 2001), at its core it involves collaboration, negotiation, and compromise.

Excellence theory was a “watershed” not only for public relations scholars but also for “the ways in which the public relations industry was encouraged to view the practice” (Brown, 2010, p. 277). The influence of systems theory on excellence/symmetrical conceptions of public relations is clear (Brown, 2010). Symmetry aimed to position public relations as a science rooted in systems theory, with effects of public relations seen as measurable through quantitative methods. Within the excellence framework, public relations operates as a corrective force, helping an organization achieve consensus and harmony. In relation to activism, the excellence study proposed how public relations and activist organizations could build relationships. The study considered the effectiveness (or excellence) of public relations practitioners’ actions as they related to activist efforts.

In her chapter of the excellence study, “Activism: How it Limits the Effectiveness of Organizations and How Excellent Public Relations Departments Respond," L. A. Grunig (1992) positioned her research as an attempt to help practitioners deal with the opposition they faced from activist groups. According to her findings, the purpose of activists is "to exert control over the [practitioner's] organization even as outsiders" (p. 504). It is this orientation that framed much of the scholarship on activism and public relations within the excellence tradition.

Research guided by the excellence theory suggested that activism would improve the practice of public relations within organizations because when faced with the threat of activist retaliation, organizations were more likely to practice two-way symmetrical communication (L. A. Grunig, 1992). Through several case studies, L. A. Grunig found that activism was a major issue for organizations because activists applied pressure by means of public opinion against organizations, which threatened government regulation of organizations. She concluded that all four models of public relations, press agentry/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) were practiced in organizations dealing with activists. She concluded that the two-way symmetrical model was not always successful in dealing with activists, although J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1997) hypothesized that activists would push organizations toward excellence in public relations:

> Organizations that face activist pressure would be more likely to assign public relations a managerial role, include public relations in strategic management, communicate more symmetrically with a powerful adversary or partner, and develop more participative cultures and organic structures that would open the organization to its environment. (p. 10)

Activists were thus conceptualized as publics that "push organizations toward excellence" (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 442; Grunig, 1992), in which a "turbulent, complex environment" with pressure from activist groups "stimulates organizations" to develop excellent public relations (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 16).

Activism and the critique of Excellence. Thinking of public relations only from the perspective of corporations and business interests, however, ignores the reality that activist organizations and groups strategically use communication efforts to "call attention to, frame, and advocate" issues, positions, and activities (Heath & Waymer, 2009, p. 195). Several scholars agree that J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of public relations, especially the two-way symmetrical model, do not adequately explain activist public relations (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Leichty & Springtson, 1993; Murphy & Dee, 1992, 1996). As Cancel et al. (1997) contend, excellence theory fails to "capture the complexity and multiplicity of the public relations environment" (p. 33).

Critics of excellence (e.g., Karlberg, 1996) argued that a symmetrical approach is insufficient to offset the enormous resource disparity between corporations and activist publics. In reaction to Karlberg, Grunig and Grunig (1997) argued, "[E]ven very small groups can have the power to affect the potency and autonomy of corporations and government," citing Olson's (1971) theory of collective action to counter Karlberg's critique (p. 39). According to Olson's model, activists can invoke motivation and fervor to offset the resource advantage of large corporations and other organizations. Stokes and Rubin (2010) challenge the theoretical application of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations, arguing that activists successfully use corporate public relations strategies and tactics while not engaging in, nor desiring, compromise or consensus. Stokes and Rubin (2010) contend that rather than viewing activists as challenges to be dealt with by management efforts, a rhetorical theoretical framework more appropriately accounts for activist groups that seek to remain outside of the zone of compromise.

Some critics of symmetrical approaches to communication argue that publics have little power and voice against resource rich corporations (e.g., Botan & Taylor, 2004; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996). They argue that power imbalances between organizations and publics make the "win-win" situation proposed by the excellence model (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) unlikely and often impossible. As Dozier and Lauzen

(2000) noted, the practice of activism is "largely studied by public relations scholars from the perspective of organizations with pockets deep enough to hire professional public relations practitioners" (p. 8). Because of a lack of resources, "powerless" publics, such as activist groups, struggle to participate in information seeking and active communication behaviors (Karlberg, 1996).

Thus, the applicability of excellence to activism is dependent largely on access to resources and is implicated in issues of power that the theory does not account for. As Dozier and Lauzen (2000) argue, the theory is unable to address two issues: the issue of "powerless publics," which they define as groups whose lives are impacted by organizational behaviors but do not possess the resources to achieve mutually beneficial relations with the organization; and the issue of "irreconcilable differences," or situations where the organization and/or its behavior is objectionable to the activist group. In propelling theory and practice forward, Dozier and Lauzen point to critical theory as the link bridging public relations and activism by "shifting our perspective to look at old issues in a new light" (p. 13).

Critical Approaches to Public Relations

Critical theory, as Dozier and Lauzen suggest, is better suited than functionalist approaches for addressing nuances of activism and public relations and provides new ways to conceptualize activism that serve to enhance the theoretical and empirical domains of public relations. As articulated above, normative theories of excellence have ignored the emergence of public relations and activism as "points of societal change and resistance" (L'Etang, 2009). While functionalist theories have provided us a model of two-way symmetrical communication, they leave us unable to deal with the role of power in practice (e.g., Holtzhausen, 2000; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996; Motion & Leitch, 1996).

Taking a critical stance, scholars have argued that organizations express symbolic power through public relations (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Edwards, 2009; Maguire & Hardy, 2006, 2009; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Motion, Leitch, & Brodie, 2003). Critical scholars consider how power is symbolically and discursively deployed through public relations. Organizations project certain goals and values to publics, thus practicing public relations discursively. However, interactions take place in particular social, cultural, and political spaces, where power relations are uncertain.

Some critical scholars have employed cultural studies as a guiding framework to consider historical, institutional, contextual, and regulatory factors that impact communication (Champ, 2008; Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Daymon & Hodges, 2009; Han & Zhang, 2009; Jiang & Ni, 2009; Zhang, 2010). This framework accounts for social and cultural dynamics, thus situating processes of strategic communication in contrast to the presence of power and hierarchy. Research guided by critical-cultural approaches illustrates how issues can generate multi-faceted meanings or potentially be infused with constructed identities (Curtin & Gaither, 2006; Han & Zhang, 2008).

From a Marxist postcolonial perspective, Dutta (2009) asks: "Where are the voices of activists in the public relations literature?" bringing to light that interests being served by mainstream public relations work has "erased alternatives" (p. 293). Rather than conceptualizing activist publics as stakeholder groups to be managed, he suggests that imagining activists as practitioners of public relations opens up new possibilities for knowledge production. Dutta notes, "Locating agency within activist movements opens up possibilities for listening to voices that challenge the dominant configurations and suggest alternatives to dominant articulations" (p. 294). While many of these critical approaches assume activists to be powerless, history shows otherwise. Therefore, to conceptualize activist public relations, an approach that acknowledges alternative articulations and power as fluid, not rigidly hierarchical, is needed.

Cultural-economic model. While theorists of functionalist perspectives distance themselves from contested social meaning, critical cultural scholars embrace a discursive perspective that places production and negotiation of meaning at the forefront. Curtin and Gaither (2005) call for a shift away from the notion of public relations practice as a tool of commerce toward a framework that broadens the scope of public relations to include social, cultural, and political contexts. Their approach privileges notions of identity, difference, and power in the discursive practices of public relations.

Curtin and Gaither's cultural-economic model is based on the circuit of culture put forth by scholars at Open University, including Stuart Hall (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997; Figure 1). The model recognizes the role of structural constraints, such as economics, technology, and cultural norms, while also privileging human agency and subjects' abilities to resist those constraints. By focusing on the dynamic culture in public relations practice, the model provides alternative ways to conceptualize public relations. The circuit comprises five moments—representation, regulation, production, consumption, and identity—that converge to create "a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified, and recreated" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38).

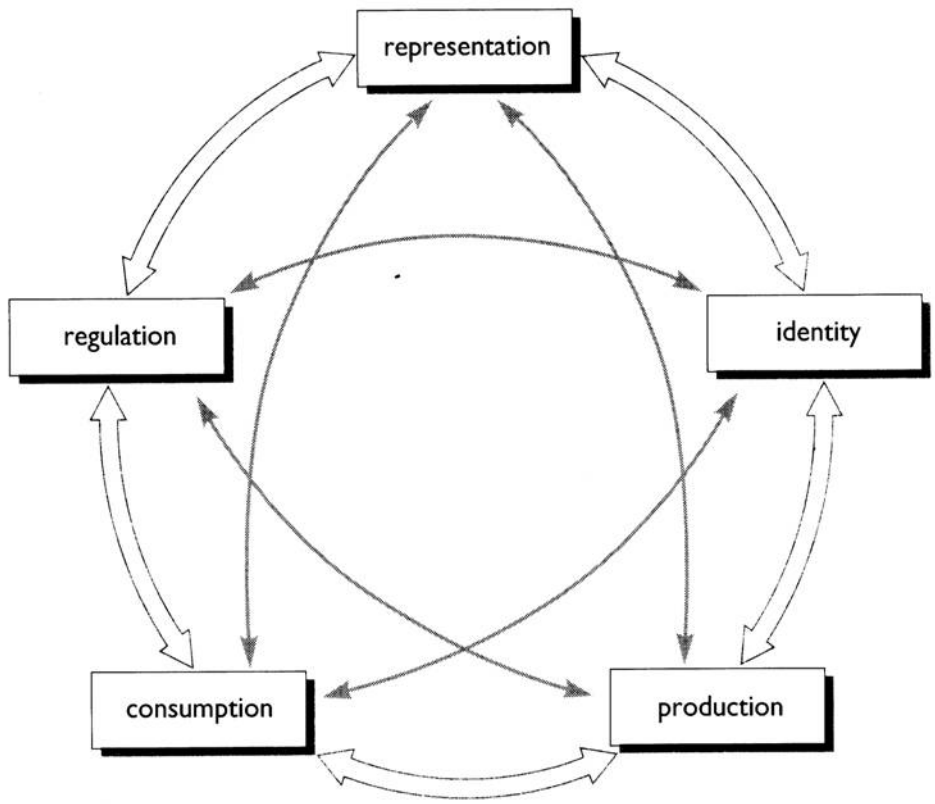


Figure 1: Circuit of Culture

Representation. Representation is the production of meaning through language and is "the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning" (Hall, 1997, p. 61). Representation refers to the production of meaning "through language, highlighting the symbolic underpinnings of culture" (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003, p. 274). Representations are socially constructed through discourse and symbolic systems, forming a "shared cultural space" dependent on "communication as a relational process" (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 99). It is through representation that cultural producers give meaning to texts.

Regulation. Regulation refers to the cultural context of the issue and is composed of both formal and informal controls on cultural policy and politics, such as technological infrastructures, regulatory bodies, and institutionalized educational systems as well as informal controls of cultural norms, ethics, and expectations. Regulation modifies meanings through processes that attempt to limit or control meaning (Champ, 2008). However, regulation does not imply an inability for disruption or breaking of the status quo. Rather, regulation is a

> dynamic process that is often contested, and while the outcome is likely to be affected by economic pressures and power structures…it also depends on the specific circumstances and on the creative actions of individuals and groups. (Thompson, 1997, p. 4)

Within the framework of the circuit, human agency can challenge meaning generated within the moment of regulation. And although regulation establishes formal and informal rules of conduct, there is always the opportunity for contestation and renegotiation (Curtin & Gaither, 2005).

Production. Production is made up of the technological and logistical limitations that shape the creation of a cultural text in addition to how it is ideologically informed. During the moment of production, communication professionals construct discourses to achieve organizational objectives. Through the process of production, professionals act as cultural intermediaries, creating materials that "define the norms, values, and realities that are regarded as legitimate in a particular context" (Edwards, 2009, p. 269).

Consumption. Equally as important as production, consumption is the moment when meaning is actualized. Although cultural texts are encoded with meaning during production, production is not fully realized until the moment of consumption. Consumption is "not the end of a process, but the beginning of another, and thus itself a form of production" (Mackay, 1997, p. 7). Consumption is concerned with what a text means to those who consume it. Hall's (1980) earlier theory of encoding/decoding provides a framework to understand how audiences decode media texts.

Encoding/decoding. The circuit of culture grew out of Hall's earlier work on encoding and decoding. The moment of production corresponds to Hall's (1980) concept of encoding (i.e., embedding preferred readings), and the moment of consumption corresponds with the act of decoding (i.e., negotiated interpretations). Individuals give meaning to objects, events, ideas, and relationships (du Gay et al., 1997), and it is through language that meaning is translated (Hall, 1997). In the production of messages a process of encoding occurs, whereby producers of messages insert codes and symbols into channels (Hall, 1980). These messages are then decoded by consumers, such that audiences of messages interpret and re-imagine codes and symbols. This approach highlights the audience's capability to produce its own meanings and to decode texts in preferred ways as well as in oppositional readings to the dominant ideology.

Texts, including those examined in this study, are polysemic and leave gaps for interpretation that are not necessarily anticipated by the producers of the messages. Although audiences may have multiple interpretations of texts, Hall (1980) argues that they take one of three possible decoding positions: (1) the dominant-hegemonic position, (2) the oppositional position, and (3) the negotiated position. In the first, when one's cultural location is close to that of the producer, he or she will interpret the text within the frame of the dominant code or the "preferred reading" (Hall, 1980, p. 136). When one's cultural location is opposite to that of the producer, he or she will have to create his or her own version of the message and may take an oppositional point of view (Hall, 1980). An oppositional reading occurs when the viewer understands the literal and implicative meanings of a text but decodes the meaning in a heterogeneous way. Here Hall (1980) argues that the "politics of signification" come face to face with the "struggle in discourse," conveying the failure of encoding to achieve a hegemonic reading of the text. Finally, the decoder may take a negotiated position, whereby some elements of the dominant meaning are accepted while others are rejected and altered to fit the decoder's understandings and goals. This stage is a "mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" where one acknowledges the "legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level," one makes his or her own "ground rules" and operates "with exceptions to the rule" (Hall, 1980, p. 137).

In the process of encoding, the producer uses specific codes in hopes that the decoder will interpret these codes as meaningful. Codes within these texts help the reader to "reference a wide variety of social meanings, relations and associations" and serve as the

> means by which the widely distributed forms of social knowledge, social practices, the taken for granted knowledge which society's members possess of its institutions, beliefs, ideas and legitimations are 'brought within the horizon' of language and culture. (Hall, 1977, p. 330)

The degree of symmetry and asymmetry between the encoding and decoding is the result of both structural differences of relation and position between the encoder and decoder

(Hall, 1980).

While Hall's model of encoding/decoding has been critiqued for short comings, subsequent theoretical and conceptual contributions have clarified the limitations of this model. In response to functionalist media effects research that dominated at this time, Hall's encoding/decoding provided a complex conceptualization of the media/audience relationship. The model has utility in that it "suggests an approach" to communication and "opens new questions" in contrast to a positivist tradition of linear models of communication (Hall, 1980). The circuit of culture provides a more theoretically robust model for examining the discursivity of texts with the five moments of the circuit.

Identity. The moment of identity exists in conjunction with the other four moments of the model. Identities are produced, consumed, and regulated within culture, "creating meanings through symbolic systems of representation about the identity positions which we might adopt" (Woodward, 1997, p. 2). Identities are made up of a multiplicity of socially constructed meanings and practices (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Hall (1990) argues that "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact…we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (p. 222). Identities are produced and consumed through cultural texts and symbolic systems. They are also formed at particular historical moments during which they are influenced by the regulatory systems (Woodward, 1997).

In public relations, research with publics has contributed to our understanding of identity. For example, research on publics has shown that message recipients can use power productively to reject hegemonic representations (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002). While consumption has contributed to cultural studies research on active audiences (e.g. Levenshus, Hobler, Sundstrom & Aldoory, 2010; Vardeman, 2008), little research has been conducted on production and consumption as they inform identity in activist communication. Scholars have examined how communication professionals legitimize particulars norms, acting as cultural intermediaries (Edwards, 2006), and as such, act as social agents by linking producers and consumers (Hodges, 2006) in forging shared identities (Nixon, 1997). For example, in their study of the smallpox eradication campaign, Curtin and Gaither (2006) illustrated how the World Health Organization created cultural and national identities to achieve organizational objectives.

Cultural studies of public relations campaigns often focus on identity (Gaither & Curtin, 2008; Vardeman-Winter, Tindall, & Jiang, 2010), whereby identities influence the production of messages and their meanings (Curtin & Gaither, 2006). Within cultural studies of public relations, individuals as well as organizations and issues take on cultural identities. Curtin and Gaither (2006) identify a limitation in cultural public relations research: scholars either look at organizational identities or identities of publics. Instead, they suggest that identity is a "central discursive concept" that is applicable to "any communicative enterprise" and is central to public relations connected to an issue (p. 68). However, scholars must move beyond the study of practitioner perspectives to further examine identity within social and cultural practices.

Articulation and identity. The theory of articulation, as developed by Hall, provides a framework to explore identity in public relations. Articulation can be understood as the moment when the five points of the circuit overlap (du Gay et al., 1997) and is the site where meanings are "created, contested, negotiated, and re-created"

(Curtin & Gaither, 2006, p. 69). In "On Postmodernism and Articulation," Hall (1986) offers a definition of an articulation as the "form of the connection that can make the unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time" (p. 141).

By recognizing historically and culturally localized particulars, articulation propels the cultural-economic model beyond the determinism of traditional critical-cultural approaches. While articulations are always formed in relation "to material practice and historical conditions" (Grossberg, 1986b, p. 57). Articulation is a

> complex set of historical practices by which we struggle to produce identity or structural unity out of, on top of, complexity, difference contradiction. It signals the absence of guarantees, the inability to know in advance the historical significance of particular practices. (Grossberg, 1986b. p. 154)

Thus, while identity is conceptualized as fluid and unstable within the cultural-economic model, the theory of articulation provides a framework to locate identity contextually.

Grossberg (1984; 1992) and Hall (1986, 1988) outline the criteria that make up the theory of articulation. First, the relationships that emerge are non-necessary, in that they have no natural presence in society. Second, the relationships are contradictory, in some cases empowering and in others disempowering. Third, these relationships are struggled over and are constantly renewed and reshaped.

Articulation theory contends that any entity, such as identity, is made up of smaller components that have come together in a particular configuration that is kinetic and never guaranteed to persist. While articulation can reinforce hegemonic tendencies, it is politically significant because it can also resist tendencies to establish, naturalize, and legitimate, social inequalities. Articulation can be a powerful tool of analyses of identities because it "provides a method for disassembling seemingly unified wholes in order to examine the ideological glue that binds them together" (Jung, 2007, p.161). Communication scholar Kevin DeLuca (1999) argues that articulation theory provides the foundation for a "fundamentally rhetorical understanding of . . . the new social movements" that have been sites of contestation over the production of meaning in relation to political and cultural capital (pp. 334-335).

A model of articulation insists that the articulated identity comprises parts, and these parts are joined in specific contexts. Articulation is a process of creating connections among various contextual factors on the level of practices and on the level of meanings. Articulation becomes a viable tool for mapping out the non-necessary and contradictory articulations employed in the pursuit for social change. According to Slack (1996), articulation as a methodology maps the context, but "not in the sense of situating a phenomenon in a context, but in mapping a context, mapping the very identity that brings the context into focus" (p. 125). Thus, "identities, practices, effects generally constitute the very context within which they are practices, identities or effects" (p. 125).

Articulation provides a way to understand how ideological elements emerge and how they can attract and empower communities, mapping out the relationships between ideological forces, groups/organizations, institutions, and perspectives created. The map traces the relationships between the larger ideological forces circulating within the cultural context. The circuit of culture, or cultural-economic model (Curtin & Gaither, 2005), is an example of such mapping, whereby cultural products are explored through five moments of the cycle. While the cultural-economic model holds significance to studies of identity in public relations (e.g. Champ, 2008; 2010; Curtin, 2011; Curtin & Gaither, 2006; Gaither & Curtin, 2007; Han & Zhang, 2009), additional research is needed on articulation as it pertains to identity, activism, and public relations.

The concept of articulation presents a variety of ways to understand the discursive production and consumption of identity. This dissertation, along with the recent work of Curtin, Ciszek, and Gaither (2013), proposes articulation theory as a more sustainable and inclusive theoretical base to bridge public relations with social justice. Articulation provides a framework for further examining identity that offers theoretically and empirically promising avenues for public relations research that will expand understandings of activism.

Activism and collective identity. Within the context of activism and social movements, identity functions as a political tool for mobilization. As such, identity is a process that "serves the situational needs" of both producers and consumers (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). In public relations, however, little extant research has applied a broad discursive notion of identity to activist public relations theory and practice.

Collective identity is a broadly used concept in social scientific studies of gender, multiculturalism, sexuality, identity politics, ethnicity, nationalism, and social movements (e.g., Armstrong, 2002; Calhoun, 1994, 1997; Kelly-Fikohazi, 1997; Lichterman 1999; Phelan, 1989; Ryan, 2001). Polletta and Jasper (2001) define collective identity as:

> [A]n individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is

> distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity…Collective identities are expressed in cultural materials. (p. 284)

Collective identities are shared meanings that provide a cultural context for planning, empowering, executing, and evaluating individual and collective participation. Such identities are a set of shared meanings that are produced, reproduced, negotiated, and renegotiated within cultural contexts (Hunt & Benford, 2004). Collective identity, or a sense of “we-ness” and “collective agency,” is at the heart of mobilization and political action (Snow, 2001) and is central to the “emergence, trajectories, and impacts” of social movements (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 283).

The LGBT movement is considered the quintessential identity movement (Duyvendak, 1995; Duyvendak & Giugni 1995; Melucci, 1989). During the mid-1970s LGBT activists created a range of institutions—newspapers, magazines, health clinics, churches, social centers, and businesses—implying the existence of a cohesive gay community (D’Emilio, 1983). The gay and lesbian movement became a self-conscious, cohesive minority, where individuals could perceive themselves as members of an oppressed collective, sharing an identity that subjected them to systematic injustices (D’Emilio, 1983). D’Emilio (1989) noted:

> What was once a secret, despised identity had become the basis for an urban community, sharing many of the characteristics of more traditional ethnic groups. And the community had, in turn, spawned a vigorous politics that gave it unusual national influence and served as a beacon of hope for others. (p. 473)

Over the following decades gay and lesbians worked to produce a mass movement based on a shared group identity.

Power and identity are at the heart of LGBT movements. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler noted that mobilization of identity categories for politicization "always remains threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes" (1990, p. 103). Thus, as Butler suggests, identity is a powerful organizing tool, but with the power of inclusion comes the power of exclusion. Sociologist Joshua Gamson (1995) asks: "For whom, when, and how are stable collective identities necessary for social action and social change?" (p. 403).

Identity is not simply an essentialist category but rather is a kinetic site for social and political action. Similarly, in the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997), identity is a culturally contingent, kinetic site where moments of the circuit come together in an articulation. Table 1 organizes aspects of this research as they relate to the cultural-economic model and the study of production and consumption of identity within the case of activist public relations.

Summary

By their sheer political nature, activism efforts are deeply ideological. This research was driven by a feminist understanding that articulates the need to give voice to silenced populations and to study "the specificity and power of language and their relation to knowledge, context and locality" (Parpart & Marchand, 1995, p. 2). Through its use of the cultural-economic model this research advances understandings of activist strategic communication as a form of public relations. The cultural-economic framework informs my reading of activist public relations discourse about LGBT youth outreach. The theoretical basis for this research provides the foundation for uncovering processes of meaning production and meaning consumption and the influences on identity. Through articulation, this study considered the complexity of culture, identity, and strategic communication within activist public relations.

Table 1: Research context (adapted from Hobler, 2012)

Moment	**Description**	**Demonstration**	**Consideration**	**Campaign Context**
Production	Planning, design, process, resources, technology	Encoding messages, selecting channels, identifying audiences, evaluation	Organizational culture; organizational identity; circulation of messages	Organizational members as cultural intermediaries
Consumption	Interpretations of meaning; modifications to constructed meanings	How objects/texts are received, interpreted, negotiated or accepted, and re-produced	Access to messages; Engagement with messages; Implementation of messages	Situational variables (access to technology; cultural competency; self-knowledge)
Identity	Social understandings held by individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, networks, and cultures	Manifestation of issue; point of intersection with other moments (articulation)	Individual, organizational, and cultural identities. Producer: organizational identity; Consumer: audience identities	Meanings of/about sexuality, gender, community; Intersecting and differing exchanges between individuals and organization

Research Questions

Based on the literature, this study asked the following research questions:

Production

RQ1: How do producers define the audiences for their campaign?

RQ1a: What identities does the campaign discourse construct for consumers?

RQ2: What are the producers' intended messages?

RQ2a: How are these messages encoded into the campaign?

RQ2b: What norms do these discourses legitimize?

RQ3: How effective do producers believe the campaign is in achieving its goal?

Consumption

RQ4. How do consumers interpret the messages contained in campaigns directed to them?

RQ5: What identities do consumers believe are imposed upon them by these campaigns?

RQ5a: What identities do they adopt?

RQ5b: What identities do they reject?

RQ5c: What other identities do they adopt instead?

RQ6: How do consumers make use of campaign messages in their everyday lives?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

To answer the research questions, I examine these issues within the framework of a campaign directed toward LGBT youth. This chapter presents the theoretical basis for my methods, making an argument for qualitative inquiry to answer my research questions, and explains how my data collection and critical analysis were emergent processes. First, however, it is necessary to situate myself in relation to the topic.

Positionality

As an out queer scholar whose academic pursuits have centered on the intersections of LGBT issues and communication and who also has a professional background in strategic communication, I have an insider's perspective on the issues I am studying, which provides both strengths and weaknesses. As a 28-year-old lesbian, I have an intimate understanding not only of what it means to be an LGBT individual but moreover what it is like to go through the processes of self-discovery regarding my sexual orientation and gender identity. In addition, I have first-hand experience with issues of bullying and suicide that are rooted in issues of gender and sexuality. My personal experiences provide me both insight and empathy to the issues at hand. However, I also recognize the need to be open to others' experiences and perspectives.

Qualitative Research

While there has been an abundance of statistical data from nonprofit, governmental, and academic institutions examining issues pertaining to LGBT youth, many of these organizations note the need for more qualitative work. Lived experience is at the heart of qualitative research, at the intersection of culture and individual beliefs and action (Nelson, et al., 1992). Thereby, through qualitative methods this research explored the interaction between strategic advocacy efforts and the meanings that individuals give to these interactions. The object of this interpretive method is to gain an understanding of the construction and reconstruction of meaning through communication (Daymon & Holloway, 2011) and interpretation of the meaning of social phenomena that individuals ascribe to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research provides "multiple truths, alternative visions and critical perspectives" (L'Etang, 2008, p. 249) to holistically examine the complexity of strategic communication. As such, qualitative methods were employed in this research to explore the articulation of identity within the context of an activist strategic communication campaign.

Procedure

Part 1: Production of Identity: LGBT Activist Organizations

Data collection for this research constituted two phases. In the first phase, to obtain the perspectives and insights of producers of an activist strategic communication campaign, I interviewed organizational members of the It Gets Better Project.

The It Gets Better Project organization. In October 2010, the project moved from a campaign to an organization, leading ultimately to the establishment of itgetsbetter.org. As the central hub of the organization, the official website is a place where visitors can "take action" and get involved by making a donation, record and share a video, take a pledge, purchase items (e.g., clothing and books), and connect to the organization's other social media sites (i.e., Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). While the It Gets Better Project has an organizational presence on these social media platforms, the website functions as the nexus. The project has expanded beyond being an archive of videos and now has several employees and volunteers that facilitate outreach efforts throughout the country. At the time this dissertation was conducted, the organization had four employees based at headquarters in Los Angeles: an executive director, a director of international and BETTERLegal programs, a media manager, and a full-time office assistant; four board members, and one consultant in New York City. Despite creating the original videos, Dan Savage and Terry Miller do not have day-to-day involvement with the project, but do sit on the board of directors.

Sampling of activist organization personnel. Through LinkedIn, I was able to connect with Seth Levy, the Chairman and CEO of the It Gets Better Project. Because of the organization's willingness to be part of ongoing dialogue in the academic community regarding LGBT youth advocacy, Levy was greatly interested in participating in this research. Levy established email contacts for me with employees, a board member, and a consultant for the organization (Table 2), each involved with strategic communication at the project at varying capacities.

Table 2: List of It Gets Better Project organizational members

Name	**Organizational Title**
Seth Levy	Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Ted Farley	Executive Director
Elliot Rozenberg	Director of International Affiliates Program and BetterLegal
Brett Peters	Media Manager
Basak Ayter	Board of Directors member
Julie Kashen	Consultant

In-depth interviews. I conducted in-depth interviews with the aforementioned organizational members. In-depth interviews, as Marshall and Rossman (1999) noted, “are much more like conversations than formal, structured interviews. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's meaning perspective, but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses" (p. 82).

Interviews were conducted over the phone with all organizational members. Phone interviews provided the most flexibility for scheduling times to interview participants given the geographical location of the researcher and the participants. Phone interviews also allowed me to speak with participants when and where it was convenient for them, whether they were at work or at home. Each participant verbally agreed to a consent form dictated to the participant at the start of the interview (Appendix A). All participants agreed to the use of their comments in academic papers and this dissertation. This project was reviewed and approved by the University of Oregon’s Institutional Review Board.

In this research, I employed features of active interviewing. Within active interviews, meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and the participant (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). An active interview approach does not position a participant as a reservoir of experience or knowledge, with experience to be extracted or the participant as a "vessel of answers" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 7). Instead, the active interview positions this moment as an opportunity for meaning making and investigation into the construction of reality. It is in this process that participants engage in the expression of experience. Active interviews situate participants as sources of knowledge, while the interviewer actively engages in the construction of the content of the interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Responses and questions elicited through active interviews are productions that are dependent on the interaction between the interviewer and the participant.

An interview guide (see Appendix B) was used to direct the conversation and to ensure that participants were being asked the same questions and that comparable information was being gathered (Cresswell, 2007). Qualitative researchers advise starting interviews with nondirective questions in order for respondents to speak about a topic widely before narrowing to directive questions (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). While an interview guide was used, when questions arose during the course of the semi-structured interview, I probed participants for information and explanation.

While interviewing provides key insights into the lived realities and perceptions of participants, researchers have identified several limitations of this method. Lindlof (1995) pointed to the uncertainty of participants' representations of reality and the limitation of the interview to understand the situated use of language. However, due to the interactive and intimate nature of interviews, cooperation between the researcher and participant is central: "Interviewees may be unwilling or may be uncomfortable sharing all that the interviewer hopes to explore, or they may be unaware of the recurring patterns in their lives" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 110). In order to protect themselves, participants may not tell the truth and deceive the researcher. Additionally, the quantity of data produced from interviews may be overwhelming. Similarly, Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that cooperation between researcher and participant is key, requiring interactivity and intimacy.

To address the shortcomings of qualitative interviews, I took several measures. To build rapport, through initial conversations I provided participants with transparent and honest reasons why they were contacted, the goals of the research, my reasons for doing this research, what I hoped to accomplish, and how the interview would be conducted (Lindlof, 1995). In their work with gay men, Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer's (2002) participants wanted to know the researcher's perspective and to know his or her orientation regarding the research and the LGBT community before being interviewed. In building rapport and credibility with participants, I expressed details about my identity when appropriate. I disclosed personal information regarding my interest in LGBT issues and my own identity as a member of the LGBT community in order to engage the participants.

Despite these limitations, interviews allow insight into the experiences and interpretations of organizational members producing strategic communication campaigns. While the campaigns are disseminated to the public, interviews provide tools through which researchers can learn about the seen and unseen (Glesne, 2011), about the processes that go in to making these messages. Interviews provide the researcher with an understanding of participants' attitudes and behaviors in their own words (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and 30 minutes, with most sessions lasting about an hour. Interviews conducted July 2013, were digitally recorded to ensure an accurate representation of the participants' remarks. Data analysis began with interview transcriptions. A transcriptionist was hired to transcribe interviews from digital recording files. To ensure data was accurately transcribed and culturally specific language to LGBT issues was attended to, I hired an individual who self-identified as a lesbian and was familiar with LGBT advocacy, the It Gets Better Project, and was versed in language pertaining to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. I compared the written transcripts against the audio recordings to verify accuracy of the transcription.

Part 2: Identity and Consumption of Campaigns: LGBT youth

In the second phase of this research, I interviewed LGBT youth to gain their perspectives and insights of these strategic communication campaigns.

LGBT youth sample. When recruiting a "hidden" population such as LGBT youth, researchers have often relied on white, educated, urban samples of LGBT youth connected to LGBT groups and networks (Savin-Williams, 2001). Previously, scholars have focused exclusively on sexual identity, excluding other factors such as gender, race, and class. Yet scholars have argued that intersectionality and diversity must be built into sampling strategies of LGBT youth research (Hillier & Rosenthal, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2001). To provide myriad voices, it is important to include a sample of diverse identities and experiences. I obtained a rich sample of 24 LGBT youth ages 13 to 18 who varied in racial and ethnic identity, socio-economic class, age, geographical location (urban, suburban, and rural), and level of "outness" (the degree to which individuals are open about their sexuality or gender identity to others), in order to give voice to marginalized individuals in an already marginalized population. The goal was not to develop a representative sample but rather to gather rich data and obtain data saturation.

Recruitment. The Internet is an ideal space to study youth. The architecture of the Internet provides a hypertextual, flexible, dialogic, interactive mode of address that as Livingstone (2012) notes appeals to youth, "fitting their informal, peer-oriented, antiauthority approach," creating a space where they feel empowered (p. 166). There is evidence that digital environments play an important role in the lives of LGBT youth. Researchers have found that LGBT youth use the Internet as a space to practice same-sex desire and identity in ways that are not possible in their offline lives (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Hillier, Harrison, Dempsey, & Nieto, 2004).

While only 18% of LGBT youth say they participate very often or sometimes in an LGBT group outside of school, 52% of LGBT youth say they participate very often or sometimes in an online community that addresses issues facing LGBT youth (HRC, 2012). Therefore, participants for this study were recruited from online communities pertaining to youth and LGBT issues. Prospective participants for this study were recruited online through organizational-based and community-based Facebook pages. With more than a billion monthly active users as of December 2012, Facebook is a powerhouse within social media. It provides a platform medium for dissemination of strategic communication to targeted groups. I reached out to page managers of the following Facebook community pages (Table 3), asking them to distribute my survey to followers. The list of community pages is made up of some of the most popular community pages on Facebook for LGBT youth (e.g., Gay Teens) or the Facebook page of well-known direct-service LGBT youth advocacy organizations (e.g., Ali Forney Center).

Table 3: List of LGBT community Facebook pages where recruitment message was posted

Page Name	Number of Likes
LA Gay & Lesbian Center	31,060
Gay Teens	19,900
Ali Forney Center	8,099
GSA Day	7,904
Support Gay/Bisexual/Lesbian/Transgender Teens	5,296
1n10	4,773
The Hetrick-Martin Institute	3,794
One Voice Community Center	3,318
Wingspan	2,901
GLBT Advocacy & Youth Services	2,060

The second platform that was used for recruitment was Reddit, a social networking site where registered community members can submit content. A unique feature of Reddit is the subreddit, a custom-made sub-forum that allow very specific areas of interest. The call for participation was placed on the following subreddits (Table 4). The selected subreddits are community spaces specific to LGBT and LGBT youth topics.

Table 4: List of subreddit forums where recruitment message was posted

Subreddit	Number of Readers
LGBT	84,459
Actuallesbians	29,305
GayBroTeens	4,816
LGBTeens	2,186
Teengirlswholikegirls	580

Messages were sent to the moderators of the above listed subreddits, asking if they would be willing to promote the survey. The moderator from LGBTeens was skeptical about my authenticity and wanted me to verify that I was who I said I was. Before reposting my survey, she asked me to verify my identity by sending her a picture of myself holding up a sign with my Reddit username on it (Figure 2)

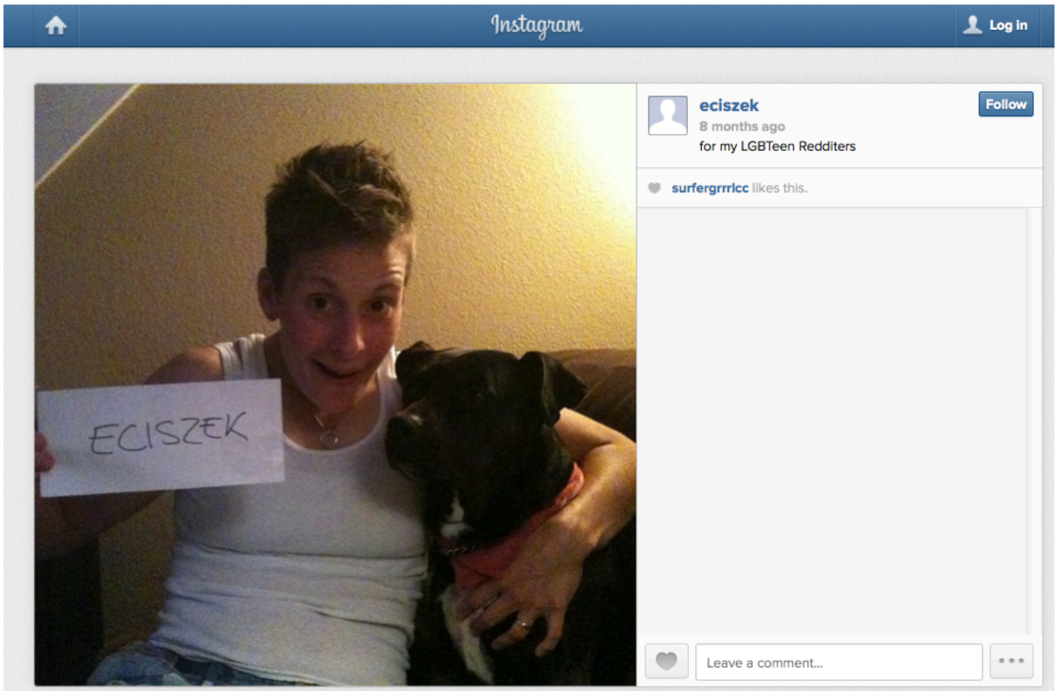


Figure 2: Instagram image to prove my identity to the Reddit community

After my identity was verified by the moderators of the group I was granted permission to post my call for participation.

Open-ended survey. The first step of this research was participant screening through an open-ended online survey posted on Qualtrics (see Appendix C). This descriptive questionnaire preceded interviews with respondents. A questionnaire allowed me to collect qualitative responses and demographic information from respondents but did not require direct involvement. In addition to providing data about perceptions of the campaign, responses allowed me to identify individuals who were willing to serve as informative research participants for in-depth interviews.

The first page of the survey was a brief introduction to the survey topic and consent information. A link to The Trevor Project's Helpline was made available on the first and last pages of the survey if participants felt distressed and needed further support or assistance from an outreach organization. A total of 725 participants began the survey, with 349 complete responses. Participation dropped at question 14: "Are you familiar with the It Gets Better Project" with 437 responding "yes" and 174 responding "no." The last question of the survey asked participants to leave their email address if they were interested in being interviewed. A total of 88 participants left their email addresses to be contacted for an interview.

All 88 participants were sent a follow-up email regarding the interview (Appendix D). Out of those 88, 30 individuals responded to the first email and were sent an informed consent email (Appendix E). After receiving an email from participants consenting to be participants in the study, I worked with each individual participant to set up a time to conduct the interview (Appendix F). Because questionnaires did not allow me to probe, ask follow-up questions, or provide clarification while the participant is responding, I conducted follow-up chat-based interviews (Appendix G) with willing participants to elicit in-depth information. In total, 24 participants followed through with the interviews.

Online interviews. There are several means by which interviews can be conducted, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Advancements in technology have led to changes in mass communication as well as changes in qualitative research. For example, interviews can now be conducted through computer-mediated communication (CMC). Computer-mediated interviews can be conducted through both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Synchronous interviews have included text-based chat (Miner et al., 2012), Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP); (Hay-Gibson, 2009), videoconferencing (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009), and video chat (Cabaroglu et al., 2010), while asynchronous interviews have included email interviews (Ison, 2009; Kennedy, 2000).

Scholars are increasingly employing virtual methods to investigate topics that might be difficult in face-to-face-communication, such as suicide (Horne & Wiggins, 2009), high-risk sexual behaviors (Chiasson et al., 2005), sexual orientation and schooling (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008), and young people's sexuality (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004). Online qualitative methods offer the chance to establish a less threatening and more open type of interaction between adult researcher and adolescent participant compared to face-to-face methods, particularly if the matter is sensitive or stigmatized (Hessler et al., 2003). Researchers argue that participants are more open about sensitive subjects in virtual settings because increased anonymity encourages more "honest" discussion (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). In research examining youth and virtual communities, young respondents indicated greater ease in discussing difficult matters online due to more privacy, time to think, and the ability to erase and change responses before submitting (Dunkels, 2007). Also, online spaces afford populations that struggle to make their voices in more mainstream channels a platform to better develop communication skills (e.g., Dahan & Sheffer, 2001; Leonardi, 2000).

Chat-based interviews. For this project, I carried out chat-based interviews on three platforms: Facebook Chat, Google Chat, and Skype Chat. Conducting interviews on Facebook Chat required "friending" participants on Facebook. Several participants felt comfortable with this, while others preferred more anonymous platforms such as Google

Chat or Skype Chat. Google Chat required participants to have an email account with Google, while Skype Chat required participants to have a Skype account. Participants were allowed to select which platform was most convenient and comfortable for them to use and suggest an alternative if none of the options were desirable. In situations where participants felt most comfortable using Facebook Chat, I have allowed participants to continue being my “friend” and “defriend” me when they felt it was appropriate.

I conducted semi-structured synchronous chat-based interviews with youth respondents. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used in each interview to ensure that all areas were covered in each interview (see Appendix F). Each interview started with a request for participants to tell me a little about themselves (e.g., age, grade, general geographic location, orientation, and race). Any information that would give me a sense of who they were). In order to build rapport with participants, I provided a little information about myself. For example: “I'm 28, live in Oregon with my partner, our dog and 2 cats. I'm white, Polish-American first generation daughter of immigrants, and identify as lesbian.” In starting the interview questions, I asked participants to share their thoughts about the It Gets Better Project. The remainder of the questions listed on the interview guide were worked into the interview as the conversation developed.

Chat-based interviews allow for real-time interaction between researcher and respondent in addition to high levels of involvement (James & Busher, 2012). They make possible spontaneous interactions between the researcher and participant. This immediate form of dialogue gives participants a sense of awareness of one another, enhancing involvement, and narrowing the psychological gap between the researcher and participant

(Bowker & Tuffin, 2004).

Chat-based online communication is a faster, more conversational way of engaging with respondents. Researchers employing online interviews have found that chat-based interviews provide longer, more thorough responses to questions than those in email (e.g., Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). Like with any method of data collection there are drawbacks. One downside is that unlike face-to-face interviews, I did not have access to body language and non-verbal cues. However, according to the HRC's Youth Survey (2012), 73% of LGBT youth say they are more honest about themselves online than in the real world, thus supporting the interview method of this research. Another consideration is difficulty in establishing trust and gaining rapport with participants. I worked to overcome this by self-disclosing when appropriate, being careful to avoid jargon and adult-like language in my interviews. Another potential downside to online interviews is that some participants may not be as articulate writers as they are speakers (Karchmer, 2001). I found that it took participants a long time to answer questions and often 20-30 minutes passed between when the question was posed and when a participant responded. Interviews varied from 40 minutes to 3 hours, with most lasting approximately 60 minutes.

One participant also noted that he could illustrate his response to a prompt better than he could articulate it. The picture and accompanying description were data rich and prompted me to follow up with all 24 participants. I asked them, if they wanted to, to draw a picture of what comes to mind when they thought about LGBT advocacy and the work of the It Gets Better Project. Five participants submitted illustrations, and these pictures were analyzed using the same iterative multi-step coding process as were the interview transcriptions.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, I engaged in what Hall (1975) refers to as a "long preliminary soak" (Hall, 1975, p. 15) in the data to get a broader sense of the discourse and how it fits together. Starting with the raw data, I employed analytic procedures to transform the data to gain understanding (Gibbs, 2007). This required an open-ended reading of the data, allowing themes to emerge in a reflexive, inductive manner. A more systematic analysis followed, employing three-step coding, keeping in mind the questions that articulation theory foregrounds.

Coding

Data analysis was guided by an iterative process of three-step coding. I developed codes as I analyzed the interviews to define concepts I began to see within the data. Preliminary findings drawn from early coding refined and improved my subsequent data gathering. My codes changed from description, to shorthand labels, and then developed into emerging analytic categories that served my ongoing discussion, questions, and conclusions. I stopped refining concepts when I began to see patterns and connections that reinforced my use of terms (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The initial step of open coding brought to light ideas, meanings, and themes running through the conversations. The goal of this process is to identity a range of possible meanings present in the text (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During open coding, I developed codes by process of analysis, working through each interview transcript line by line, staying close to the data to form my codes and compare insights (Charmaz, 2006). Codes began as descriptive phrases and then evolved to shorthand labels, which then became emerging evaluations, prompting discussion, questions, and conclusions (Charmaz, 2006).

I revisited sections of coded texts several times during which I refined the names of codes, collapsed codes, assigned one or more codes to the same text, and shortened or lengthened sections of coded text. I reduced properties from the data into 25 open codes. I reviewed sections of coded data several times; refined the names of codes, combined codes, assigned codes to same pieces of data, and shortened or lengthened sections of coded text. In this phase, I worked from and around existing categories to identify relationships between dimensions of each group of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

I then carried out axial coding, the second stage of coding. Axial-coding provided a means to gather data together into an intelligible framework (Charmaz, 2006). Emergent findings guided my subsequent coding. I started to modify codes that I had developed earlier in the research process. During axial coding, I worked to identify relationships between dimensions of each group of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Axial coding provided a way to organize data into an intelligible framework (Charmaz, 2006). During this step, instances that appeared to contradict the dominant messages were also identified and noted to ensure depth of analysis.

By my last phase of coding, I had reduced my codes into 9 groups. The third stage, selective coding, allowed me to question my observations and assumptions, furthering the connections between sub-groups of codes. In this step, previously identified categories were refined into a concept that encompasses and describes the relationships in the interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1967). The selective coding process drew together the connections and disconnects regarding the multiple understandings of

LGBT identity by organizational members and youth participants. I remained focused on connecting my analysis to existing theory and literature. I ceased coding when I reached a place where I had collected multiple illustrations of the phenomena I was studying (Charmaz, 2006; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Throughout the interviews diagramming (Appendix H), memo-writing (Appendix I, and organizing were useful exercises that helped to bridge connections between concepts (Lonkila, 1995). The memos illustrate the iterative process of the three-step coding method. The next chapter presents the results of the open and axial coding processes.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Part 1: Organizational Members

The first section of this chapter describes the results of the open and axial coding of the interview data collected from the six organizational members of the It Gets Better Project. Open coding resulted in 15 categories, which during axial coding collapsed into four categories (Table 5).

Table 5: Open and axial codes from interviews with organizational members

Classification	Category	Description
Axial code	Building optimism	Constructing a campaign of optimism
Open code	Disrupting the cycle	The campaign thwarts the crisis
Property	Road block	The campaign derails the negativity
Property	Alternative	The campaign provides options for youth
Open code	Staying focused	The campaign has to stay on track
Property	Rubber-necking	The organization aims to get people to stop and pay attention
Property	Positivity	Sticking to the optimism
Property	Not about the problems	The message is about the joy
Open code	Calling the shots	Organization determines campaign content
Property	Calculated	Members establish and implement messaging guidelines
Property	Managed	Employees vet submissions to the campaign
Open code	Adjusting the Message	Members suggest the reality of the optimism
	Shifting the onus	Emphasis placed on individual to make it better
	Uncertainty	Members revealing skepticism
Axial code	We have to save the kids	Communicating to and working to save LGBT youth in crisis
Open code	Needing guidance	Young people need adults to guide the way
Property	Confusion	Lost and looking for adult guidance
Property	Sympathy	Youth seek out mentors who have gone through what they are going through
Open Code	Sneaking	Youth navigate and calculate to survive
Property	Avoiding obstacles	Youth can bypass adults that stand in their

		way
	Isolation	Youth watch videos alone. Not a community
Open code	Identifying high-risk	Campaign aimed to reach those that most need help
Property	Crisis	Important to reach youth that are suicidal
Property	Despondent	Youth are down in the dumps
Open code	Classifying constituency	Determining observable characteristics of consumers
Property	Quantified	Identifying actual consumers
Property	Targeted	Specifying ideal consumer
Property	Inventory	Determining demographics of consumers
Axial code	Building community	Constructing a diverse constituency unified by a common goal
Open code	Creating connections	The campaign brings people together
Property	Space	The organization creates a platform for interaction
Property	Authenticity	The campaign demonstrates real experiences and emotions
Property	Web of support	The campaign is a mass of individual stories woven together
Property	Access	The campaign makes it possible to reach a previously untouchable population of youth
Open code	Encompassing	The campaign unites a wide audience
Property	Connect	The campaign bridges the gap between LGBT adults with LGBT youth
Property	Global	The campaign brings awareness to international LGBT issues
Property	Universal	The campaign demonstrates that everyone has a role to play
Property	Breadth	The campaign paints a picture of the expansive community
Open code	Serving as an Intermediary	The campaign serves as a link between the LGBT community and the rest of the world
Property	Humanized	Putting a face to the issue
Property	"Conduit"	Creating a connection
Property	Domesticated	Campaign becomes a household name
Open code	Subverting	Sliding under the radar as a way to change culture
Property	"Non-threatening"	The campaign is safe and vanilla
Property	Incorporate	Working LGBT issues into mainstream spaces
Property	"Hot knife through butter"	Cutting through political squabble
Axial code	Convincing	Justifying organizational efforts

	themselves what they are doing is working	
Open code	Hunting data	Focus on quantifiable measures
Property	Insufficient	Data isn't enough to tell the story
Property	Impossible	Unable to capture what they are trying to measure
Open code	Working the anecdotes	Employing narratives to tell the organization's stories
Property	Powerful	Depth of feedback
Property	Shared experience	Space to make visible one's story
Property	Contradiction	Word of mouth feedback is not in line with social media analytics

Giving Them Hope

The first axial code that emerged was "Building optimism." Table 6 outlines the four open codes that led to the axial code: disrupting the cycle, staying focused, calling the shots, and adjusting the message.

Table 6: Building optimism

Properties	**Open**	**Axial**
Road block	Disrupting the cycle	Building optimism
Alternative		
Rubber-necking	Staying focused	
Positivity		
Not about the problems		
Calculated	Calling the shots	
Managed		
Shifting the onus	Adjusting the message	
Uncertainty		

Disrupting the cycle. Open coding revealed that most organizational members described the campaign serving as a disrupter for youth in crisis. Members believe the campaign thwarts the cycle of negativity that LGBT young people go through. Both Ted and Seth noted that the project works to “disrupt” the downward “spiral” that LGBT youth are caught in. Ted understands the project as a road block, noting that it “serves as a disrupter to get in there and provide those testimonials of life being a success, perhaps before or somewhere in the midst of that spiral down to a crisis point.”

While Seth and Ted saw the campaign as serving as a roadblock, Julie pointed to the options the stories present, showing young people “that there’s a whole other life out there.” This perspective suggests the project first throws up a roadblock to derail young people, then bombards them with messages, a sort of chose-your-own-adventure novel, where youth can watch videos to see various directions their lives can take. Several members pointed to the project as serving as a fork in the road for its audience, opening up alternative paths for young people.

Staying focused. Some organizational members emphasized that campaign messages must stay on track and cannot deviate from the themes of hope and optimism, otherwise they might be detrimental to the project’s success. Ted believes optimism is the key to the success of the organization, and it is through this optimism that the project gets noticed: “Our strength is in positive messaging, and that is a voice that sometimes there’s not too much of, because those sad stories and those gory details are very attention grabbing. It’s our rubber necking response.” The positive messaging is a way to get people to slow down and pay attention to the issues LGBT youth are facing.

Similarly, organizational members often emphasized that the project must stay on message and not get sidetracked by specific issues. Julie noted: “It’s so easy to focus on the problems and the negative and the bullshit, I think, and what I love about what they’re doing is just really focusing on the positivity and on the hope.” Members made it known on several occasions that the campaign is not about the issues. Ted noted that the project "engag[es] an audience about a dialog that's not necessarily all about what the problems are, but about the joy that one can experience when they get through the tough times and live openly, and openly in acceptance of who they are." This quote emphasizes focusing on the future and not dwelling on the realities of the immediate.

Calling the shots. Several organizational members stated that anyone can submit a video to the project and be part of the movement in a seemingly democratic process. Interviews revealed, however, that employees are involved in the day-to-day content management through calculated and systematic decision making. While anyone can upload a video to YouTube and label it "It Gets Better," it is clear from the interviews that employees serve as gatekeepers, deciding which videos will actually be featured on the organization's website.

One way the organization manages content is by vetting videos for appropriate content. Brett noted how he works with staff to create "safe messaging guidelines" or what he described as a "kind of rule book of what to look out for, what kind of messaging is unsafe." The messaging guidelines are based on leading publications on suicide and bullying: "Everything we do has a science behind it and studies behind it so it's not just arbitrary." Interestingly, interns and assistants are tasked with actually vetting the videos; the lowest men/women on the organizational totem pole are in charge of approving the messages at the heart of the campaign.

Adjusting the message. While all organizational members focused on organizational messages of hope and optimism, Brett suggested an alternative narrative:

> We have this It Gets Better video that actually came out way long ago and it's sort of Dan's favorite where this woman goes, 'It doesn't get better but you get stronger.' And that's kind of the message that we are sending. We're saying, "It gets better." But it really gets better because you get stronger and that's the message I think we try to send out.

Brett was the only organizational member to suggest that the message of "it gets better" is not entirely accurate and maybe limited and flawed. Instead, Brett points to the responsibility of the individual to toughen up.

> Our message there is we don't know if it's going to get better tomorrow, but we do know that there are plenty of people out there to reach out to and speak with and to find hope with those connections and that one day their life will get better in terms of the way that they view themselves.

This perspective brings to light the complexity of the campaign as bound up in messages of hope that are not necessarily coming to fruition in the ways other organizational members believe they were.

Axial code: Building optimism. Taken together, the four open codes (i.e., disrupting the cycle, staying focused, calling the shots, and adjusting the message) merged into the dominant theme that the Its Gets Better Project is in the business of creating hope. The word hope was used 40 times by members during the six interviews. Members envisioned the campaign as building optimism for the future, creating a culture of hope for LGBT young people. They identified the central goal of the project as actively building optimism. Basak noted: "In the very, very basic crux of it all, when you bare-bones it, I feel like it represents hope. I feel like it represents hope that wasn't necessarily there. I feel like it helps bring hope." All organizational members emphasized the importance of creating hope and building optimism.

The data demonstrate that organizational members see themselves as part of something much bigger than just a catchy phrase. Members contrasted the project's focus on optimism with the pessimism of other organizations: "I've worked in government and nonprofits, and it's so easy to focus on the problems and the negative and the bullshit, I think, and what I love about what they're doing is just really focusing on the positivity and on the hope" (Julie). The project, then, builds optimism by disrupting the downward spiral, staying on message, and downplaying the problems.

Focus on the Youth

Table 7 shows the open and axial coding that reveal how organizational members constructed the campaign's target audience.

Table 7: We have to save the kids

Properties	**Open**	**Axial**
Confusion	Needing guidance	We have to save the kids
Sympathy		
Avoiding obstacles	Sneaking	
Isolation		
Crisis	Identifying high-risk	
Despondent		
Quantified	Classifying constituency	
Targeted		
Inventory		

Needing guidance. A few members conveyed that young people who access the campaign are at a point of confusion in their lives and need adult guidance. While each member was asked about the audience for the campaign, Basak, in her capacity as a board member, and Julie, in her capacity as a consultant, addressed this question in most detail. Interestingly, they are the most distant from the campaign; as a consultant and board member, respectively, they are not involved in the day-to-day operation of the organization.

Basak emphasized that young people, regardless of sexual orientation, are “pretty lost,” “looking for mentorship,” “looking for assistance and guidance,” and “struggling with all of the different elements that are coming their way.” She suggests that ultimately what they need and what they are looking for is guidance from elders; intergenerational relationships need to come to fruition to help young people. In making these claims, however, she is vague and does not specifically address who young people are looking for guidance from or what kind of guidance they are seeking. Instead, she conveys guidance and mentorship as amorphous concepts that will somehow make things better.

Basak believes young people are inherently confused and lost and adding sexual orientation to the mix complicates things further: “I think youth are always looking for that relatibility and that person who’s going to either help mentor them or help them grow and help them see that this is just a temporary, you get thrown a lot of chips in life.” According to her, young people need adult figures who can empathize with them and who have gone through similar life experiences, such as sexual orientation.

Julie sees the project as providing a way for youth to bypass adults and to bypass authority figures, giving them an outlet if they do not have anyone they can talk to. Julie perceives young people as sneaking around the adult figures in their lives in order to access the content of the campaign. She connotes an element of danger, a sense that young people will be caught and outed if they don't navigate around authority. This sneaking is done in isolation: young people move from the dangerous spaces of home-life and school to digital spaces where they can try to assemble an alternative sense of community. The resulting image is of youth navigating an obstacle course where adults and authority figures serve as roadblocks.

From this perspective, young people need to maneuver this obstacle course in order to get to the safe space provided by the project. Julie noted that the project provides a space where young people can "at least can listen to someone who is telling you things you want to hear and you need to hear." Although Julie speaks about the "things" young people hear in vague terms and is not specific about what the messages entail, she suggests that these messages are different and in stark contrast to what these young people are hearing in their day-to-day lives.

Ted retold the story of one young person watching the videos alone in his room at night "because he knew his parents wouldn't necessarily understand and so it wouldn't turn up as if it were porn or something like that." Through this story, Ted suggests that young people are seeking out these videos, but there is an element of danger here. Young people are sneaking to watch these videos as if they were sneaking to watch porn instead of doing homework.

Ted added, "And so he just talked to us about watching video after video and that helped him to realize…that there were a whole hell of a lot of people out there who were just like him, and their story was his story." Ted believes the project allowed this young person to connect with people in virtual spaces in a way that couldn't happen outside of cyberspace and without the help of the project.

Working to reach at-risk youth. Several organizational members noted that the primary target of the campaign is at-risk LGBT youth, including "youth in crisis" and youth "contemplating suicide." They noted that the project is an intervention designed to stop young people from spiraling downward because LGBT people are commonly the victims of bullying and experience suicidal thoughts. These members, however, did not discuss how they go about identifying at-risk youth or ensuring that the messages reach this audience as part of a successful intervention.

These organizational members were not prescriptive concerning what actions should be taken to intervene in youths' lives. Instead, they vaguely talked about young people and the issues they face. Seth noted that the It Gets Better Project is not a direct service organization like its sister nonprofit, The Trevor Project. While all members claimed that at-risk youth are the primary audience of the organization's efforts, Seth and Ted acknowledged that the project does not have the capacity to adequately deal with the needs of an at-risk audience. The project is one of intervention through messaging only.

Classifying constituency. Several organizational members spoke about the target audience of the campaign using quantified strategic and analytic language. Members often referred to consumers as the "target," specifically in terms of particular demographic categories. For example, Basak noted: "I'd say 10 to 22, male/female, and secondarily I'd say probably like 25-40. But again, as far as who we want to impact the most, I think it falls in that range, those two primary targets." She conveyed a binary understanding of gender, not accounting for an audience that does not fall within this dichotomous construction, such as a transgender audience. However, she added, "We're not exclusive."

Basak indicated on several occasions that in her capacity as a board member she has a macro perspective on the organization, helping with top-level planning and strategizing. She is the only organizational member I spoke with, however, who decentered sexuality (or the LGBT component). She suggests that the project is not just about LGBT young people; rather it is about all young people: "I think the key is and always will be youth, so I'd say primarily, I'm not even going to target it 'LGBT' but I'd say kids, probably from around age 10 to post-college, 21, 22." She understands the target of the campaign to be a broader youth audience; regardless of sexual orientation, all young people are vulnerable and at risk. She doesn't perceive much difference between kids and LGBT kids; they all experience moments of adolescence and the project is not simply a "gay campaign." Rather, it transcends sexual orientation and speaks to larger issues young people face.

A tension exists between who members identify the audience in specific terms and the organization's attempt to speak to a broad audience. In his capacity as media manager, Brett closely monitors social media analytics. Many of his insights were grounded in his understanding and experience of the audience in quantitative analytic terms. Brett understands social media as tools for reaching specific audiences:

> I'm talking like 25 to 45 is our main audience on Facebook, which is obviously not the demographic we're necessarily trying to reach. It's important that they do see what we're doing because they're going to be the donors, but in terms of getting our messaging out Tumblr is where all the youth are.

While on several occasions Brett valued Facebook for its potential donor reach, he enthusiastically discussed the organization's involvement on Tumblr as a "jackpot" moment of being in the right place to engage with the right demographic.

Taking inventory. Brett is able to extract several key demographics when examining the analytic reports on Facebook: "I have age, I have gender. I don't have ethnicity or nationality or things like that. I can see what countries people are coming from, what states they are in." Not surprisingly, no social media analytics identify sexual orientation. Organizational members understand the primary audience to be LGBT youth in crisis, yet analytics do not allow employees such as Brett to identify if LGBT young people are the ones actually seeing or engaging with this content.

Axial code: We have to save the kids. Participants repeatedly emphasized the role of the campaign as saving the children, but members' understandings of who the children were and how that goal was to be achieved varied. Much as the organizational members ascribed to a lofty notion of hope as the campaign message, saving the children was the shared goal.

Constructing a Collective

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was that the campaign contributes to building a community, a virtual community, as well as serving to bridge gaps between communities (Table 8).

Creating connections. All organizational members understood the project as bringing people together to forge relationships. Elliot pointed to the project as a virtual community center: "I love that we get to create those connections for people and that LGBT youth who feel that they're alone have somewhere to go."

Table 8: Building community

Properties	**Open**	**Axial**
Space	Creating connections	Building community
Authenticity		
Web of support		
Access		
Connect	Encompassing	
Global		
Universal		
Breadth		
"Conduit"	Serving as an intermediary	
Domesticated		
Non-threatening	Subverting	
"Hot knife through butter"		
Assimilate		

A few members suggested that authentic expression is a hallmark of these connections and relationships. Julie noted: "I just am so touched by people's honesty, by how real people are, by how much hope there is, how much love there is, and so I feel like it does create this virtual sense of community for people." These connections are realized through the outpouring of emotion in the videos.

Elliot sees each of the thousands of individual stories as a thread in a larger web of community and support:

> One of the reasons why I joined the project and why I'm such a huge fan and supporter of the work of the project is because it really shares so many different stories and it really shows LGBT youth that they're loved, that they're supported, that there are people out there that they can talk to.

For Elliot, the project brings people together, unifying a plethora of voices and diverse experiences under the umbrella of hope.

The key factor that differentiates the project from its sister nonprofit organizations (i.e., The Trevor Project, GLSEN) is direct access to young people. As Elliot noted, the “incredible social media network” allows the organization to “reach out to a constituency that other organizations or companies have difficulty reaching…very few of them have the ability to reach out to tens and hundreds of thousands of LGBT youth ages 12 to 18 on a daily basis.”

Encompassing. Several members saw the project as an intergenerational and intragenerational community builder within the LGBT community. Interestingly, age (not gender, race, ethnicity, or class) was the key enabling characteristic. Elliot reflected on the intergenerational scope of the project:

> When you hear back from adults, young adults or members of the older generations, it gives them hope for the future generations. In the LGBT community I think as you get into the older generations, those members of the community have, in general, experienced a different time of LGBT history and a time when you really couldn’t be open at all. And a lot of those members of the community came out much later in life and couldn’t ever come out at work. And there are a lot of different stories when you talk to people in their 50s, 60s. So one of the great things is that it gives those members of the community hope for the future generations, and it gets them excited. It gets them engaged, and it kind of gives them more incentive and more motivation to make videos and to talk to the younger members of the LGBT community about some of the issues that are

going on and how they can make it better for themselves and for the rest of the community.

While all members claim that the project is about young people, this quote illustrates how some members perceive the role the project plays for older generations of LGBT people. It suggests the project is not just about young people but is also about bearing witness to the experiences of LGBT adults and bringing to light LGBT histories long silenced.

Ted believes the project is both inspiring and affirming to "a whole generation of older LGBT individuals who perhaps in some spaces it was even tougher for." In this view, although the project is aimed at LGBT youth, the impact that it has on LGBT adults might be greater than the impact it has on young people. Julie believes the project gives LGBT adults a way to reconnect with issues that LGBT young people might be facing and stay connected with the larger movement.

> I was at an event a few months ago where someone got up and was like, 'I live in New York City with my husband and we have this great life and we forget that there are still challenges out there because we live in Chelsea and our lives are just normal. So it's great to be reminded that it's not like that everywhere and that I can play a role in helping other people to see what life is like.' So I think it's a way to keep adults connected as well and to keep them engaged with the civil rights movement.

A couple members believe one way the project has brought LGBT youth and adults together is through the project's international component, which creates a global presence and community. Since the inception of the project, the organization has had the opportunity be involved on an international level in a way that, as Seth noted, "allowed local people who wanted to promote an LGBT youth agenda that was sort of culturally and linguistically and politically and whatever appropriate to their part of the world." Seth added that the campaign "operate[s] on a suite of media tactics, a brand, a level of visibility," all of which allow international partners to "move the needle for LGBT youth in their part of the world." He was clear to note that organizational efforts are "very much a pull, not a push."

Several organizational members portrayed the project as representative of an expansive, sprawling community. Elliot said he hopes the audience knows that they are loved by

> this enormous community of people all over the world, that they're supported, that they can be who they are, that they don't have to change who they are and that even though times may be tough right now there is a wonderful world out there waiting for them and that they should have hope and faith that this tough time will come to an end.

Intermediary. While the previous open code spoke to the project's diverse LGBT constituency, the data showed that many participants believe the project serves to bridge the gap between the LGBT community and the rest of society. While members did not bring up the history of LGBT movements in contrast to mainstream society, their responses pointed to the roots of an "us vs. them" relationship and the role of the campaign in breaking down the dichotomy. Seth called the organization a "conduit" that brings together these disparate worlds "to create some kind of connection between voices and stories and issues in the LGBT community and the rest of the world."

Ted believes the project brings LGBT issues into the home: "Everyone says you get over the whole homophobia thing once you meet a gay person. I think in households all across the country, the candid nature and the unscripted aspect of [the project] has brought gay people into households around the country." He thus alluded to a time when gay voices and stories were banned from mainstream media and existed only on the margins. He believes LGBT visibility is a solution to homophobia by showing the rest of the world that LGBT people are just like everyone else. Within this perspective, the unscripted, amateur nature of the project conveys authenticity and intimacy, portraying LGBT people as your family, your friends, and colleagues.

The project humanizes the issue by putting faces and stories out there that attract media attention, launching the project into the mainstream. Seth noted: "We kind of came out of the gates and immediately, within moments, really, were something people were talking about in I think households around the world, in newspapers around the world and other things, irrespective of being LGBT." Importantly, Seth noted that the project gained traction "irrespective of being LGBT," suggesting that something bigger is happening that is driving the project going viral, something that the organization is still trying to get its finger on.

Subverting. Some organizational members see the project as sliding under the radar to change culture. Seth pointed to how youth suicides provided the public attention grabber, but then the project provided the positive stories and voices to draw in previously reluctant supporters. The spirit of the message, then, as Seth noted, "is at once very positive and correct and simple and non-threatening, while also being rather subversive and transcending boundaries between the LGBT community and the rest of the world."

Axial code: Building community. Several members pointed to instances where the campaign had transcended these divides through collaborative efforts among the project, corporations, and other organizations. Seth spoke about partnering with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms as part of an LGBT pride event, noting the importance of speaking with law enforcement to make them conversant with LGBT issues.

Seth and Ted were quite enthusiastic when talking about corporate partnerships. For example, Seth discussed how the It Gets Better partnership with Wells Fargo bridges LGBT issues into corporate spaces: "I'm excited to really get into that space, about sort of changing corporate culture and how this is a way in to really taking the temperature of your work force. Having people start conversations internally, seeing what happens one year after your It Gets Better video is out there." As part of their branding efforts, Wells Fargo uses the It Gets Better Project as a portal to share LGBT employees stories.

Giving Themselves Hope

Organizational members were asked to address how effective they believe the campaign and organizational efforts have been. Members had very different understandings, and Table 9 shows the codes that emerged from the data.

When asked about the effectiveness of their efforts, members stumbled. They emphasized the insights from social media analytics, but at the same time they pointed to the power of stories they hear from people who have watched the campaign videos.

Table 9: Convincing themselves what they are doing is working

Properties	Open	Axial
Insufficient	Hunting data	Convincing themselves what they are doing is working
Impossible		
Incomplete		
Frustration		
Powerful	Working the anecdotes	
Shared experience		
Contradiction		

Members conveyed a tension between wanting to quantify results in measurable ways but experiencing difficulty in trying to do so. “At the moment there aren’t very many quantitative things we can look to. What we do know quantitatively primarily are social media statistics” (Seth). Interviews revealed that the analytics the organization can access aren’t revealing the kind of information it wants.

Chasing the data. Several employees conveyed that much of the day-to-day energy at the organization is devoted to digging around in the data. Brett relies on Facebook Analytics for insights: “I’ve become very in tune and I study them every day and I go in there and I see what’s doing well, what’s not doing well, what’s getting more comments, what’s getting a bigger reach? So I take that very seriously.” Seth indicated that the organization knows much about the demographics and online behavior of its social media followers, but these data points are tied to media and are not direct measures of the organization’s efforts. Despite the piles of data the organization has aggregated from social media analytics, these quantitative measures can’t prove effectiveness.

Seth was the only participant to mention that youth directly provided key insights: “One of the things that’s so fundamentally important for a variety of reasons for this project is getting measured feedback from youth, from other stakeholders, from people who might have been impacted in one way or another by the project." His ultimate aim, however, is to "build the sort of data and outcomes and impact and other information that's so vital" for grant applications or demonstrating the value of this effort. The emphasis, then, is on quantifying impact, not on really listening to audience input. Seth indicated that the organization struggles to identify what role it actually plays in achieving its efforts. He places the organization's efforts within the larger LGBT nonprofit landscape: "We are part of any number of things that are going on right now that are improving the lives and circumstances of LGBT young people. So to what end can the quantitative data be directly attributed to our work?"

Several organizational members seem focused on grabbing data and finding ways to determine organizational outcomes. Ted stated: "We have the opportunity to define our own metrics of success so that we can do this in ways that we know are measurable." While there is a felt need for hard evidence, however, it is not getting the organization where members believe it needs to go. Ted noted that quantifying efforts is central to the grant-funding process for nonprofits, but more importantly it is crucial to responding "in a credible way" to questions of whether its efforts are working.

Working the anecdotes. Many organizational members indicated that anecdotes are the most powerful indicators of organizational effectiveness. Brett noted that the organization gets quite a few video submissions with an accompanying note saying, "This project saved my life. It helped me so much. It helped me feel more confident about myself and find community." Elliot pointed to anecdotes as the most effective means for the organization to determine if what it is doing is working. Basak conveyed the organization's tricky relationship with anecdotes: "It's hard because hope isn't naturally a quantifiable topic, but we continue to get messages from kids about how the project has affected them. And you can see it through the social media; you can see it through just with the fact that additional people are submitting their own videos."

On several occasions, members noted that they receive feedback in the form of emails and comments on the YouTube page. Seth pointed to the organization's YouTube and Facebook pages, where countless people indicated the project had saved their lives. Several members shared experiences of receiving emails from people around the world who have watched the videos. Elliot recounted getting one such email from two young gay men in Iraq:

> They're scared every day that they're going to be found and either placed in jail or killed. And the two of them watch It Gets Better videos to kind of get through the day sometimes and that to me is, obviously the situation is terrible and horrible and we're trying to help them as much as we can but the fact that the It Gets Better videos can be that one part of the day where they're not scared, where they're happy, where they share time together.

While members noted that anecdotal evidence points to the importance of the videos, Brett relies on social media analytics to inform his strategic insights: "We found through our research and our statistics that the video posts don't do as well. People are not looking at them, they're not liking them, they're not commenting on them. They're not engaging our audience." This contradicts the data from interviews with other members who point to anecdotal evidence of the videos as having a real effect on audiences. Despite these "very, very real, tangible individual experiences" (Seth), the organizational members expressed the need for quantifiable measures of organizational efforts to prove effectiveness.

Convincing themselves what they are doing is working. Organizational members hold on to anecdotal evidence about hope, convincing themselves that what they are doing is working, despite a lack of hard data. Brett noted that while the organization has stories "to know that we're on the right path," he believes "there's no tangible research we can show." During the interviews, members were eager to share stories of times they were told the project had saved someone's life. When asked about the effectiveness of the organization, however, members floundered. They pointed to the need to quantify results in a way that would be understood by donors.

Summary

The results demonstrate complex, often clashing, perspectives about the It Gets Better Project and how organizational members understood the campaign. While some organizational members rally behind the seemingly democratic nature of the project, others shine light on the processes of content management that happen behind the scenes. All organizational members believe in the "it gets better" message of the campaign, yet those working on the ground struggle to produce tangible evidence of their efforts. While many organizational members buy into the promise of "it gets better," those members closest to the day-to-day operations of the project suggest that messages may not be actualized by audiences. Some organizational members believe the force of the project is in its wide reach, others believe its power is in the virtual community it creates, while still others believe its strength is in its role as a bridge between the LGBT community and mainstream society. Some organizational members conceptualize youth in terms of demographic segmentation, while others understand youth in anecdotal terms. While some members perceive adults (i.e., family and authority) as roadblocks for LGBT youth, other members believe adults (i.e., LGBT elders) work to provide an intergenerational community for young people.

The next section presents the results of interviews with LGBT youth to understand how they perceive the advocacy efforts of the campaign.

Part 2: LGBT Youth

At the start of the interviews, participants were asked to say a little about themselves (for example, their age, grade, geographic location, sexual orientation, race, etc.) to provide a sense of who they are. To establish rapport, I disclosed background information about myself, including my sexual orientation (to show my connection to the topic). Table 10 includes the terms participants used to describe themselves. Unlike a survey, participants decided what information they wanted to disclose to me and selected the language they wanted used to convey their identity. For example, when talking about race and ethnicity, one participant identified as “Latino,” another as “Hispanic,” and others as “Mexican.”

Participants live in a variety of geographical regions in the United States, including rural, suburban, and urban areas. Two participants live in international urban areas. Many participants placed much emphasis on the geographical region where they lived and how this affected their experience as an LGBT person. Some participants disclosed their level of “outness,” or how open they are about their sexuality or gender identity with those in their lives.

Table 10: List of LGBT youth participants' demographic information

Name	Age	Grade	Gender	LGBTQ orientation	Location	Race/ Ethnicity	"Outness"
Atifa	16	12	Female	Queer	the South	Black	Not out
Austin	14	9	Transgender (FTM)	Bisexual	Central Texas	Caucasian	Out for a year
Connor	18	College in the fall	Male	Gay	Rural Alabama	White	Not out
Ashley	16	11	Female	Lesbian	Small town Tennessee	Caucasian	Out to family & school
Alex	16	11	Male	Gay	Southeastern Iowa		
Heather	16	11	Female	Lesbian	New Orleans, Williamsburg, Michigan	White	
Diego	15	10	Male	Gay	Long Beach, CA	Mexican, 1st generation	
Michael	16	12	Male	Gay	Connecticut	Hispanic	Came out 10/2012
Kyle	15	10	Male	Gay	Central Illinois	Caucasian	
A. J.	15	10	Male	Gay	Suburbs of Dallas, TX		Out to everyone but dad
Antzo	15	10	Male	Gay	Toronto, Canada	Immigrant from the Philippines	Openly gay
Noah	18	College in the fall	Male	Gay	Southeastern Connecticut	Mexican Italian & Native American	Openly gay
Alejandro	16	11	Male	Gay	San Diego, CA	Immigrated from Mexico 8 years ago	Only out to two people
Logan	16	11	Male	Gay	Pittsburgh, PA	Caucasian	
Emily	13	8	Female	Bisexual	Northern Illinois	½ Hispanic, ½ Caucasian	Out to close friends and father
David	17		Male	Gay	Southern Oregon, grew up in Deep South	White	Just came out to friends and family living in the South

Name	Age	Grade	Gender	LGBTQ orientation	Location	Race/ Ethnicity	"Outness"
Ryan	15	10	Male	Gay	Northwest Canada	Caucasian	
Hannah	14	9	Transgender	Queer	Suburban Pennsylvania	White	Only out as trans to one person
Dan	16	11	Male	Gay	Texas	Black & White	
Nick	17	12	Male	Gay	Long Island, NY	English & Hispanic	
Jacob	15	10	Male	Bisexual	Alabama	White	
Arturo	17	12	Male	Gay	Caracas, Venezuela	Latino	
Billy	19	College freshman	Male	Gay	New Jersey	White	
Justin	14	9	Male	Gay	Indianapolis, Indiana	White	

Open coding resulted in 14 categories, which during axial coding collapsed into five categories (Table 11).

Table 11: Open and axial codes from interviews with LGBT youth

Classification	**Category**	**Description**
Axial code	I am not alone	Project revealed that there is a community out there
Open code	Feeling connected	Linked to a larger collective
Property	Not alone	Not isolated
Property	Just like me	Others are feel the same way (present)
Property	Not the first	Others have felt this way before (past)
Open code	Constructing Community	Piecing together individuals and communities
Property	Amorphous	Nebulous network of individuals
Property	Abundant	Overwhelming amount of people
Property	Connected	Real stories from real people
Axial code	We're just normal people	The project normalizes LGBT people and issues
Open code	Normalizing	Demonstrating to opponents that we're just like everyone else
Property	Inform	Need to educate; Gay ≠ unnatural
Property	Advocate	Working to show opponents
Property	Dispel misconceptions	We aren't monsters
Open code	Humanizing	Weaving LGBT into the cultural fabric
Property	Educate	Putting faces to stories
Property	Assimilation	Talking the talk and walking the walk
Open code	Challenging stereotypes	LGBT people aren't cliché
Property	Conventional	Just the "Average Joe"
Property	Performance	Construction of identity through action
Property	Relatable	Identifying oneself in representations
Axial code	The future will be good	Planting a seed of optimism for the future
Open code	Creating hope	
Property	Light at the end of the tunnel	Faith in the future
Property	Lifeline	Being the salvation
Property	Courage	Giving participants courage
Open code	Showing Proof	Providing examples of it getting better
Property	Serving as a	Showing life in the future

	reminder	
Property	Confirmation	Affirmation that things will improve
Axial code	There are no guarantees	Participants challenge the message and point to the realities, noting obstacles that stand in the way
Open code	Challenging the message	Participants were weary about the reality of things getting better
Property	Contradiction	In conflict with day-to-day experience
Property	Discontent	Unease with the spirit of the message
Property	Resonate	The degree to which participants feel the project depicts what they are going through
Open Code	Making it better	Project should actively be working to make changes
Property	Relevancy	Identifying oneself in the messages
Property	Barriers	Mobility is linked to technological and economic resources
Property	Rallying Cry	Need to do something now; take action
Axial code	This is part of something bigger	How participants understand the landscape of LGBT issues
Open code	Locating Efforts	Identifying the historical and social context of the project
Property	Contextualize	Where the project fits in to the landscape
Property	Attribute	What role the project has played
Property	Clearing the haze	Getting rid of misconceptions
Open code	Setting the status quo	Transcending boundaries & establishing new cultural norms
Property	Making noise	Bringing awareness to the issues
Property	New standard	Establishing a standard

Not Isolated

Table 12 outlines the open codes that led to the axial code “I am not alone.”

Table 12: Isolation of LGBT Youth

Properties	**Open**	**Axial**
Not alone	Feeling Connected	I am not alone
Just like me		
Not the first		
Amorphous	Constructing Community	
Abundant		
Connected		

Feeling connected. Many youth conveyed that the project helps them feel connected to a larger collective because isolation and fear of being alone are fundamental components of their reality. Austin said the project made him realize “I'm not alone and that things change for the better.” Heather noted that the project made her feel not so alone in a close-minded town where being gay “is like painting a target on yourself.” Several youth said that they were the only LGBT person they knew in their class or school. Matt explained how the project helps reinforce that he isn’t the only gay person in the world and gives him confidence. Even though folks involved with the project don’t know him personally, “just by creating a project meant to help people like me felt like there were people out there that were on my side.” The majority of youth expressed that the project made them feel connected to a larger community that is just like them.

Constructing community. LGBT young people spoke about the project as a virtual space that links people with similar stories and experiences. They depicted the community as amorphous, a nebulous network of individuals connected by struggles as people with a shared identity of LGBT. Alison noted that these shared experiences helped strengthen the bond among people in this network.

When talking about the size of this virtual community, youth articulated different understandings of scale. Kyle noted that it made him “feel good” to know that “dozens of people” care and want to provide hope. Conversely, Atifa noted that “there are literally millions of other people” who want you to be happy. Data suggest that the scale of the community does not matter, what matters is that there is a community, regardless of size. What’s important is knowing that someone, somewhere, is out there.

Authenticity is central to the construction of a community; real stories by real people. Alison noted that getting "real people" involved in efforts, and not just "a journalist who has little to no connection to the subject in the article," is key to showing young people they aren't alone. Noah also articulated this point, noting that it's important to hear from "a real person, not just my therapist being a therapist and saying 'suicide is not the answer.'" Credibility, for youth, results from hearing from the Average Joe.

Axial code: I am not alone. The axial code "I am not alone" captured this sentiment of community and connectedness, in which young people pointed to a larger community engendered by the project. Youth expressed that the project, among other advocacy efforts, helped them to feel less isolated. The project offers LGBT youth a cyber community that does not exist in their real lives: a space where young people can seek out stories and resources to explore sexual and gender identities, remaining fairly anonymous, while at the same time feeling connected to a larger collective of real people like themselves. LGBT youth participants and organizational members shared points of similarity in their understandings of virtual community and authenticity.

Just Like Everyone Else

Time and time again, LGBT youth conveyed the need to be "normal." Youth described their experiences with the project as being closely tied to a sense of normalcy (Table 13). Several young people noted that the project addressed some of the misconceptions and stereotypes around LGBT people, working to show that LGBT people are just like everyone else and that sexuality and gender are not reducible to stereotypes as perpetuated by mainstream media.

Table 13: We're just normal people

Properties	**Open**	**Axial**
Inform		
Advocate	Normalizing	
Dispel Misconceptions		
Educate		We're just normal people
Assimilation	Humanizing	
Conventional		
Performance	Challenging Stereotypes	
Relatable		

Normalize. Some youth participants graphically depicted how they understand LGBT issues and advocacy. In his sketch Logan described the picture from the perspective of a child without pre-existing knowledge of sexual orientation (Figure 3). He noted that while people might look different on the outside, "we're all the same on the inside." He emphasized that sexual orientation should be viewed in the same way: "It shouldn't matter what you look like or who you love; it should matter how good of a person you are."

Logan mixed the colors together at the top of the picture then faded them out into their own respective colors, which he compared to young people finding their way and place on the earth: "fading away from conformity into their own person." His image suggests that one only becomes vibrant upon finding his or her own true color. In the image, Logan depicts gay and lesbian characters twice but does not include a transgender figure, suggesting a limited understanding of the project's aim and audience.

Figure 3: Logan's illustration

Jacob noted that he likes the project because it talks about LGBT issues as "a normal and casual thing" in contrast to being a "weird, unnatural thing." He believes the project brings awareness to all sides of life in the LGBT community and its "normality." Several youth participants said the project provides authentic representations, in contrast to mainstream media portrayals of LGBT people, as David noted, as a " bunch of sexual deviants with our BDSM gear" (i.e., sexual practices of bondage, discipline, dominance, and submission). He emphasized that in contrast to these representations, he thinks of himself as normal. Matt noted the project works to "show them that we aren't alien monsters with tentacles growing out of our backs, we're just normal people like them, and all we want is to be treated like everyone else."

Billy pointed to two ways the project normalizes LGBT issues. First, the videos shows LGBT young people that it's "totally okay to be that way, and that it is 100% normal." Second, the project acknowledges that not everyone agrees with LGBT rights. He noted that although opposition to LGBT equality exists, the project communicated to LGBT youth and others that LGBT is normal: "it IS normal and okay to be LGBT."

Young people pointed to the need to inform society about LGBT issues. Matt said that if we just take the time to educate straight people, they can see that "we're just normal people." He emphasized the LGBT community needs to communicate with the straight world, particularly those who are anti-LGBT, to show that LGBT people are just like everyone else. For many youth participants, the prevailing sentiment was to know us is to love us; if only the opponents could get to know a gay person, they would see we aren't that different.

Humanizing. Youth pointed to the way the project uses storytelling to weave LGBT people into the cultural fabric. As Atifa noted, the project "humanizes gay people" so they're no longer an "other" but just simply human.

Educating non-LGBT people is central to naturalizing LGBT people and issues. In his sketch, Michael captured the sense of educating through advocacy efforts (Figure 4).

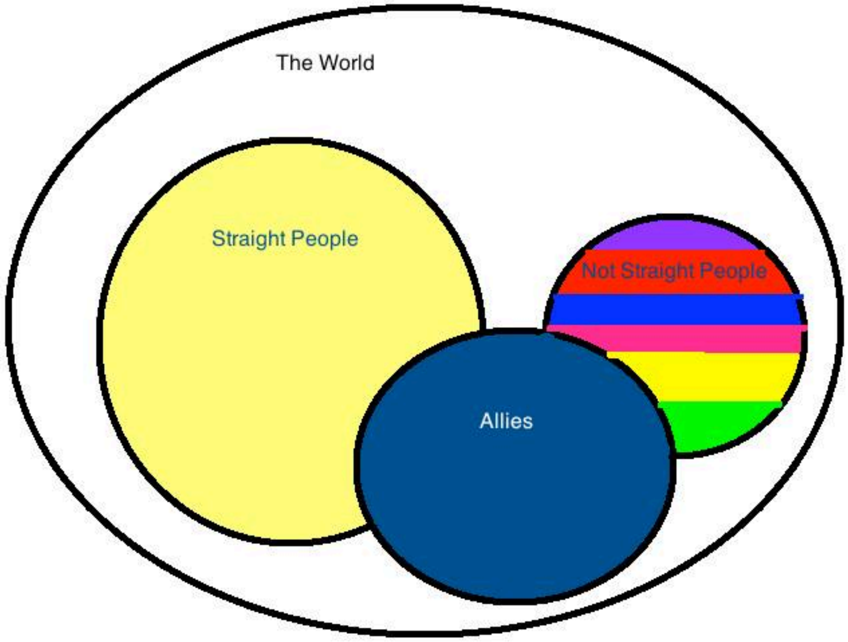


Figure 4: Michael's illustration

He noted that the world "is huge with all sorts of people" and that it is particularly difficult to be open-minded, leaving communities divided into straight people and people who aren't straight. He sees allies as "forming a bridge to almost join the two [straight and not straight people]." Michael explained that LGBT advocacy organizations, like the It Gets Better Project, are allies that help LGBT people struggling with their "sexualities and identity" while also educating people who may not understand LGBT people. Similarly, Noah noted that the project is "taking something from the minority and spreading it through and to the majority." Like Michael, he sees the project functioning as a bridge.

On several occasions youth noted that the project shows that LGBT people are capable of assimilation. Antzo understands the LGBT community as "rather denigrated by the rest of society," thus preventing LGBT people from succeeding professionally and personally. This belief has led him to worry about being overlooked because of his sexuality and feeling as though his sexual orientation holds him back from doing "something great" in his life, creating a tension between his private and public lives.

Several young people understood the project as highlighting how one can be successful in his or her professional life despite being LGBT. Heather believes the project shows that when one is an adult, being gay is not a big deal and at that point it is easier to find people who accept you. She thought it was "cool" to see that one "can be gay and successful."

While the campaign has more than 60,000 videos produced by various individuals and organizations, youth in this research referenced a handful of videos by corporations, celebrities, and politicians, including those by NASA, President Obama, Pixar, Apple, Google, the New York Police Department, Rise Against, and YouTube celebrities Michael Buckley and Brett the Intern. Although this wasn't a study focused on the moment of representation, this research uses literature on the video contributions to the project as a foil for how participants' understandings of the videos fit in with what the videos actually are and encompass. In a content analysis of the It Gets Better Project, Ward (2013) found that while all videos shared the "it gets better" message, there was much variance in the narrator(s), the anecdotes shared, the length of the message, and the popularity—by way of numbers of views. While the campaign has over 60,000 videos produced by various individuals and organizations, youth in this research referenced a handful of videos by corporations, celebrities, and politicians that resonated. These videos, however, are not representative of the campaign as a whole, as most of the contributions to the project feature average people (Ward, 2013).

When asked about her favorite video, Atifa pointed to the video contribution to the campaign by Pixar Animation: “I think because it did a really good job of sending the message that you can be really awesome and kickass at something and not have your sexual orientation be the end-all be-all of your identity/who you are as a person.” She indicated that sexuality is only one part of an individual’s identity, and while her sexuality is one component of who she is, what makes her human is her “various intersecting identities” as “black, poor, a women, AND identifying as queer.”

Challenging stereotypes. Youth emphasized that the project deconstructs stereotypes by providing more robust and complex representations of LGBT people and issues, in contrast to the homogenization of LGBT people and issues they perceived in the media. Young people noted that the videos show multiple identities of LGBT people, not just sexuality as one’s primary identity. Antzo believes that the project shows LGBT professionals–technicians, policymakers, educators–who aren’t the stereotypes of gay males, which he identified as “flamboyant” and “feminine.” Regarding lesbians, Antzo was glad the project doesn’t portray them as “masculine” and “unable to fulfill gender roles properly.” Instead, he believes the project shows that “they're able to really interact and integrate with other women well,” and bisexual individuals are not necessarily “confused” or “promiscuous.”

For some youth, the videos that resonated the most featured individuals who challenged mainstream stereotypes of LGBT people. Logan said a video featuring a soldier helped him the most: “It made me realize that just because you're gay, you don't have to fit some stereotype.” He noted that until recently, television shows and movies featured a “token gay guy” who talked with a lisp, had great fashion sense, and was very melodramatic. Seeing these images in the media “was very confusing” because he didn’t see himself that way. The soldier video helped him realize that “not all gay guys were like that” and that the token gay guy “was just some silly stereotype.” Logan’s insights demonstrate the flattening of identity can occur in mainstream media and that can make it challenging for young people to identify themselves as LGBT. In contrast, the project provides a plethora of videos with diverse representations of gender and alternative performances of masculinity and femininity that challenge stereotypes.

Connor, who described himself as a very masculine, macho guy who “likes guns, large vehicles, and video games,” noted that he always has been emotionally detached but seeing the videos “tore down that emotional isolation” and “truly touched my soul.” He was at a loss for words when trying to describe discovering the videos. He admitted that at first he did not connect with the project, finding the videos from President Obama and political satirist Stephen Colbert not very moving. But then he came across the video from the New York Police Department.

> I was so intently watching, I turned off my TV, music, and ended up being late to a meeting I had to go to, because this was the most important thing in my life at that moment...I was just watching it and, all of the sudden, I just started crying, not tears of sadness, but of pure and uncontrolled joy.

Connor experienced a moment of self-recognition and was moved that there were people out there like him who wouldn’t judge him but who would celebrate him for who he was.

Axial code: We’re just normal people. An overwhelming majority of young people conveyed the need for belonging. They communicated how the project shows the world that LGBT people are just like everyone else, that LGBT people are normal. Youth noted that the videos highlight how LGBT people are not reducible to binaries or stereotypes and that one can be both LGBT and successful; they are not mutually exclusive. Sexuality is only one part of participants' identities, and the project challenges many of mainstream media's representations of LGBT people, providing more robust depictions.

Faith in the Future

Table 14 outlines the open codes that led to the axial code "The future will be good."

Table 14: The future will be good

Properties	Open	Axial
Light at the end of the tunnel	Creating Hope	The future will be good
Lifeline		
Courage		
Serving as a reminder	Showing Proof	
Confirmation		

Creating hope. All LGBT youth participants identified hope as the dominant theme of the project, with several using the imagery of light. Kyle described the project as "a beacon of hope." Connor noted that on some days he feels like there is "but a candle of brightness," and watching the It Gets Better Project gives him the sense that "somewhere, somebody doesn't think that I'm a horrible person."

Matt said the project provides a "light in the distance" by showing that the future can be better and that people are on his side even though often it feels like this is not the case. Sophia called the project is a "light at the end of the tunnel" and said "there are people who care about you." These comments suggest young people are hopeful they will get to experience the positive things people talk about in the videos, but for many participants the videos offer a flicker of distant hope, but not the ray of hope that some organizational members believe the project provides.

Some youth participants, however, perceive the project as a lifeline, a source of salvation. Ryan recalled telling himself he wasn't gay, that it was wrong. Then he saw the It Gets Better video by his favorite YouTube celebrity, Brett the Intern: "He actually kind of saved my life. I wanted to commit suicide, but I started to watch his videos and I don't know, it just helped me for some reason." While he was unable to articulate why this particular video was important to him, hearing the message from someone he idolizes served as inspiration.

Noah also credited the project with saving his life. Of the three videos from Apple, Pixar, and Google, he said: "These three videos, from my favorite three companies in the world, are the reason I am alive. And that is 100% honest." For Noah, the videos helped capture his aspirations to one day work in the technology industry; they showed him that he could live openly as a gay young man and be a successful professional.

When asked to illustrate LGBT advocacy, Antzo depicted the It Gets Better Project as a lifeline for young people surrounded by hostility (Figure 5).

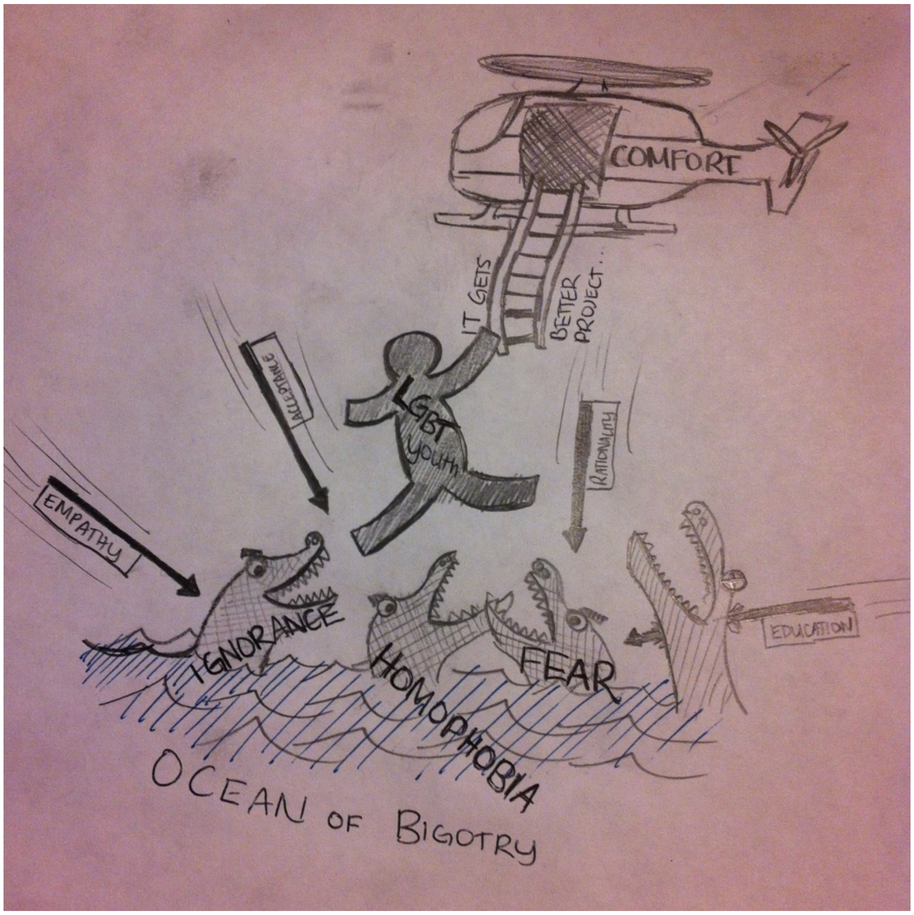


Figure 5: Antzo's illustration

He noted that while the monsters of ignorance, homophobia, and fear "may appear formidable, and frightening," what these monsters don't realize is that "newfound values that are generally accepting of the LGBT community are coming in from everywhere: popular culture, religion, politics." He pointed to the "multitude of things" working to make the world a safer place for LGBT youth, such as the It Gets Better Project serving as a ladder to pull LGBT youth out of the pit of desperation.

His illustration portrays LGBT youth as in limbo, barely hanging on between the hostility of the world below and the comfort and support that the project provides. While the project provides youth access to a space of comfort away from the monsters, however, the danger of falling always looms.

For other young people, the campaign videos provide them courage in their day-to-day lives. Kyle recalled giving a class presentation on same-sex marriage during which he came out to his classmates. He described the emotional release he experienced when finishing his speech “almost like a shock,” but it was “a feeling of relief.” He pointed to the It Gets Better Project as giving him confidence: “The It Gets Better Project has given me a new perspective on this aspect and helped me to form my speech.” Kyle noted that he is the only out gay student among 400 students in his small Catholic high school.

Showing proof. Many young people understood the campaign as providing a fast-forward glimpse into what life can be like. While their present lives may not be “better,” the videos remind them that life can get better and that they can one day live “normal” lives. Nick admitted he enjoys watching the videos that show people who have grown up and “raised complete families.” For him, the videos provide hope that he too can someday have a family and achieve the American Dream. While most youth participants perceive the videos as testimonials that things could get better, Sophia asserted that the project “proves” that life will get better despite things being hard in the present.

Some youth participants remarked on times when they saw the videos’ “it gets better” message in their own lives. Alex recounted walking down a street while visiting Washington, D.C. and spotting two young men walking together, holding hands. “The fact that two people are comfortable enough to do that, without it even being a big deal, is pretty great.” Alex described this as a moment of self-recognition, seeing himself in this couple and imagining a life of freedom, living out and proud.

Axial code: The future will be good. Most young people emphasized that while their current situations may not be ideal, they were confident things would improve over time. Like organizational members, youth understand the project as showing the promise of the future. Organizational members were optimistic about the project; however, several young people were more cautiously realistic about the project's promise. Youth pointed to the project as planting seeds of hope for the future but not as a beacon of hope in the present.

No Promises for the Future

Table 15 outlines the open codes that led to the axial code "There are no guarantees."

Table 15: There are no guarantees

<table>
<tr><th>Properties</th><th>Open</th><th>Axial</th></tr>
<tr><td>Contradiction</td><td rowspan="3">Challenging the message</td><td rowspan="8">There are no guarantees</td></tr>
<tr><td>Discontent</td></tr>
<tr><td>Resonate</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Relevancy</td><td rowspan="3">Making it better</td></tr>
<tr><td>Barriers</td></tr>
<tr><td>Rallying Cry</td></tr>
</table>

Challenging the message. Several young people observed that the messages in the campaign often contradicted their everyday experiences. For example, some pointed to a generation gap. Justin said it was difficult to hear messages from older LGBT people because "people in their 40s or 50s seem way old," and their experiences are dissimilar from his because "even 20 or 30 years ago" the situation was different. He suggested it would be better to have young people sharing their experiences, that hearing the same message from a peer would be more effective.

Connor discussed how his day-to-day experiences hold little hope. He recalled a guest speaker at his high school, a “horrible, self righteous nut,” who quoted Leviticus and yelled “All of the fags! All of you!! Are going straight to hell!” He recounted seeing his teachers, whom he had thought highly of, nodding their heads in agreement. He said he laid awake in bed for hours that night, hoping that he wouldn’t have to wake up to face the world again.

David described battling depression: “I don't believe it can get better for me, so I try my best to make it better for others.” Diego talked about coming out to his family and his dad telling him that once he turns 18 he will be kicked out of the house and no longer have a family: “I said to myself… It gets better? When?? It’s more like it gets worse!! I don’t have those victory moments like everyone else. Why am I an exception?” He felt duped by what he saw as the false promise of the message; his reality was not a virtual community but a feeling of isolation.

Several young people pointed to a disconnect between bullying in the project and the realities of bullying in their own lives. Although the project addresses bullying as a main issue for LGBT youth, few participants had direct experience with being bullied themselves. While Alex believes that some young people face bullying, name-calling, and physical violence, he has not encountered them. Antzo believes there is “no anti-gay bullying at my high school,” and A. J. noted that “bullying just doesn't really happen as far as I can tell.”

For several participants the issue they face is not bullying but coming out as LGBT. Billy noted that although he wasn't bullied for being gay, the project helped him with coming out and fitting in. Participants acknowledged that bullying exists, but they focused on self-identification as LGBT and disclosure of this identity to friends and family.

While some perceived a contradiction between the stories in the project and their own experiences, other participants felt the project messages rang true with their experiences. Austin noted the project "hits pretty close to home for most of us," and he hasn't met anyone who hasn't experienced ignorance in some capacity. Noah recounted the story of Tyler Clementi's suicide in 2010, describing how he learned about the story while watching the news and feeling heartbroken. Tyler's experiences mirrored his own: "Being an outlier to begin with, being gay, going to college soon. It was scary as all hell. I hadn't come out yet." At that moment, he remembered thinking to himself, "Is this going to be my life?"

Making it better. A few youth critiqued the project for simply putting out messages of hope but not actively working to make things better for young people. These youth were disappointed the project doesn't offer a magic answer to their questions and struggles. Nick noted that while it's great that people share stories and bring attention to issues, "I don't think it's really attempting to find a solution." A. J. believes the videos need to focus more on how teens can make their situations easier for themselves and critiques the project for simply showing how people overcome adversity and now have much better lives. He believes teens need more information about the resources and solutions available to them: "A thousand people can tell them it gets better, but those are empty promises until they know how they can make it better themselves." These young people wanted explicit, prescriptive directions on how to make things better, not just promises.

Several youth identified help as a privilege in the face of financial, technological, and geographic constraints. Ryan noted not everyone has the means to move "from middle of nowhere, Arkansas to say, New York City." He perceived the urban as holding promise for a better life while rural living was hopeless. Alison recognized that young people without Internet access don't have the opportunity to share their journey or hear others' experiences. She believes the project misses a whole group of young people who can't afford computers or who go to schools that aren't great. She noted that outreach programs privilege well-to-do neighborhoods; they aren't likely to visit inner city schools. These youth perceive hope as coming with a price; it is privilege for those with economic and technological resources.

While he likes the idea behind the campaign, Matt contends the project should focus on making the world a better place for LGBT youth. He argues that the project needs traction rather than "holding the philosophy of just waiting and holding on even when everything seems to be crashing down around you." Matt finds the focus on the future rather than the immediate to be "perplexing" and "frustrating," and at times he "can't help but feel a little hopeless." He wants immediate gratification from the project, an instant fix: "Before we look toward the future, we need to look at the present."

Austin illustrated his frustrations with the contemporary social climate facing LGBT young people like himself (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Austin's illustration

He locates global issues—war, death, starvation, poverty—in geographic space, while his personal concerns of sexuality and gender identity are off the map. For him, there are more pressing issues in the world than his personal life: "At this point gender and sexual orientation are irrelevant" and should not matter. Being stuck on LGBT rights is "keeping us from being able to focus on the bigger picture with what's happening globally." In contrast, Matt identifies the intersection of the global and personal, pointing to the laws in Russia that make it illegal to share or discuss anything LGBT issues with minors. He noted, "With all the progress we've made, the world continues to struggle with moving forward." Few youth participants, however, were able to move beyond the immediate and locate their experiences within a broader social landscape.

Axial code: There are no guarantees. The axial code, "there are no guarantees," emerged from young people's critique of the It Gets Better Project. While youth recognized the project's objective of broadcasting messages of hope, many were critical of this optimism and skeptical about actualization of this hope. Data reveal a spectrum of relevancy and degree to which young people believe the project resonated. Some pointed to the contrast between the promise of the message and the realities of their day-to-day lives. Others described how the project encapsulated their experiences. While bullying has been at the forefront of the news, several young people noted that bullying wasn't something they struggled with. Some wanted explicit directions on how to make things better; others were frustrated that so much energy is devoted to sexuality and gender when more pressing issues should command attention.

Not Just About Me

Locating efforts. Some youth participants understand the It Gets Better Project as part of a larger movement toward social equality (Table16). Atifa believes the country is progressively "getting better"; she pointed to representations of people of color and queer characters on television as well as LGBT issues in the Supreme Court and the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act. She believes the It Gets Better Project is only a small part of why and how this is happening. She locates the project within a larger historical context, noting: "People 10, 20, 30+ plus years ago fought and even died for this to happen."

Noah said, "Without the It Gets Better Project we wouldn't have the repeal of DOMA." While he acknowledged he was making a leap to attribute the repeal of DOMA to the work of the project, he noted, "It's Marketing 101." He calls a corporate It Gets Better video "amazing PR" and that makes a corporation "just seem like a politically progressive company."

Table 16: This is part of something bigger

Properties	**Open**	**Axial**
Contextualize	Locating efforts	This is part of something bigger
Attribute		
Clearing the haze		
Making noise	Setting the status quo	
New standard		

Justin illustrated a different understanding of how the project fits within the larger landscape (Figure 7).

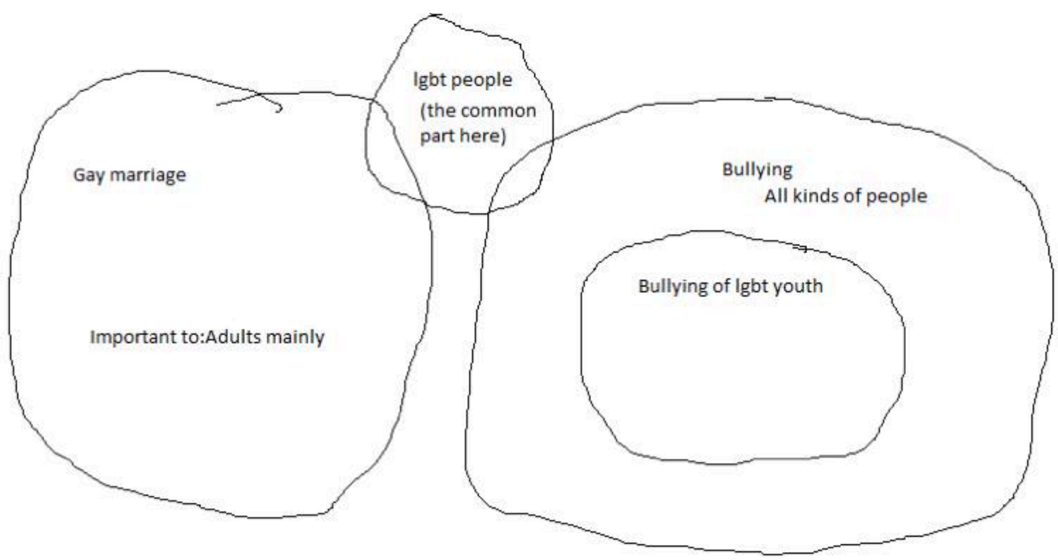


Figure 7: Justin's illustration

Justin does not believe LGBT youth outreach efforts, like the It Gets Better Project, relate directly to contemporary political and social issues. He believes that gay marriage and bullying both deal with the lives of LGBT people, "but they're entirely separate ideas for 2 different groups of people." Different issues face different parts of the LGBT community; lumping the community into one giant collective ignores different facets of identity. Justin points to generational divides and age as key components. He understands gay marriage as primarily an adult concern, while bullying affects everyone, including LGBT youth. Despite the division, Justin believes the project is part of efforts aimed at "making the world a more accepting place, better, more fair."

Some youth evoked imagery of fog and haze as ignorance that stands in the way of acceptance. A. J. noted the role the project plays in getting rid of "some of that ignorance" and "kinda cloudiness in people's heads" surrounding LGBT issues. Antzo commended the project for working to dispel misconceptions about the gay community and "really trying to clear the haze" around same-sex marriage. This imagery of fog and haze suggests that people can't see clearly what is actually out there.

Young people pointed to a broader lack of understanding of how LGBT issues such as same-sex marriage relate to LGBT youth. While some young people believe LGBT youth issues are separate from contemporary same-sex marriage debates, others believe advocacy efforts like the It Gets Better Project have pushed public opinion in favor of same-sex marriage.

Setting the status quo. David sees the project as "making a lot of noise about gay rights," which has led to the "crystallizing" of acceptance. He noted that people become "conduits" for the project's message of acceptance, resulting in a critical mass of support and awareness of LGBT issues. For Atifa, the project sends a message to society as a whole, not just the LGBT community. She pointed to the impact that prominent public figures, such as celebrities and politicians, have when openly supporting gay people: "It's setting a new status quo."

Axial code: This is part of something bigger. This axial code, “this is part of something bigger,” emerged from young people’s understanding of the It Gets Better Project as part of a larger movement toward LGBT equality and social justice. Like organizational members, youth participants believe the project speaks to not only LGBT people but society at large, bridging the gap between LGBT communities and the rest of the world. While some made a direct link between legislative action and the public awareness the project has garnered, however, others did not believe this relationship was explicit.

Summary

The results demonstrate often-conflicting viewpoints about the It Gets Better Project and how young people understood the campaign in their day-to-day lives. Some youth actively engaged with the project’s messages of hope; others weren’t so confident in the project’s promise.

In some instances, young people identify the issues they face as LGBT youth as personal (i.e., coming out to family and friends), while in other instances the issues were cultural (i.e., homophobia or acceptance of same-sex marriage). For some, actualizing the message of “it gets better” is possible through societal change, for some it is through community, and for others it happens through individual efforts. For some youth the project did not resonate because they could not see themselves in it nor could they identify with the campaign messages. The videos that resonated with youth often challenged stereotypes about LGBT people and featured a hero figure or company participants aspired to emulate.

Many youth participants expressed an overwhelming desire for belonging. What the project provided for many was making them feel like part of a community. The project situates one's identity as LGBT as a way to build community through unifying experiences with those who have come before.

Some youth participants noted the project demonstrates that LGBT people are normal, just like everyone else. Normalcy was central to young people's understandings of the project, and they stressed that sexual orientation is only one part of their identity. Even though the term abnormal never appears in the interviews, the emphasis on normality suggests that LGBT people and issues are often understood and depicted as abnormal. The data reveal a constant tension between the binary of normal and abnormal as applied to identity.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Findings reveal overlaps and disconnects between how organizational members and LGBT young people make sense of the It Gets Better Project. While both share a sense of a collective community made possible through outreach efforts such as the project, some young people thought the virtual community functions more as an ideal than as a reality. Both members and LGBT youth recognize the message of hope the campaign puts forward; young people, however, tended to be more skeptical of its promise. While all organizational members emphasize that the project is about youth, many youth participants believe the project speaks to older generations of LGBT people and society at large. Organizational members often saw the campaign as working to transcend the divide between "us" and "them," which young people saw as a way of normalizing LGBT people and issues to demonstrate to mainstream society that LGBT people are just like everyone else. The following section explores in more depth the perspectives of producers and consumers of the campaign.

Research Questions

In this chapter I answer the research questions guiding this study. The following section answers the research questions that guided this study: RQ1-3 address organizational members, while RQ4-6 address LGBT youth.

The first research question asked: How do producers define the audiences for their campaign? While all organizational members stated that LGBT youth are the primary focus of the campaign, data revealed several other audiences for the project: an imagined queer community, the LGBT movement, and society at large. All organizational members emphasized youth, but when reading behind their words, these other audiences were evident.

Imagined Queer Community

Several organizational members noted that the content of the campaign shows young people they are not alone because the project provides a virtual space where LGBT youth can build connections. Elliot noted:

> You can see LGBT youth communicating with each other, you can see them communicating with other adults on our, through the comments on the videos, and I love that we get to create those connections for people and that LGBT youth that feel that they're alone have somewhere to go.

This study suggests that many organizational members believe the It Gets Better Project, through its collection of narratives and digital network, creates an imagined queer community, similar to Anderson's (1991) "imagined community," which owes much of its existence to media. Pullen (2007) draws from Anderson's work and suggests an "imagined gay community," or a self-reflexive recognition of other gays that results from the increased visibility of gay individuals in the media. Pullen's work is largely limited to the study of gay men; this study, however, suggests the concept of an imagined queer community as encompassing multiple sexual and gendered identities. Such an imagined queer community creates a unified movement, establishing common bonds with fellow members, developing a sense of "we-ness" through shared sexual and gender identities, and instilling a loyalty to the larger movement.

This imagined queer community manifests in a cultural consciousness whereby individuals come to recognize one another as belonging to this specific movement. Such an imagined community, as Anderson (1991, p. 188) notes, is only possible when substantial groups of people are in a position to think of themselves "as living lives parallel to those of other substantial groups of people—if never meeting, yet certainly proceeding along the same trajectory." Some organizational members believe the project employs social media to construct a space where LGBT youth can come to see people like themselves, which in turn creates a collective identity. Social network sites provide youth spaces for identity formation, status negotiation, and peer-to-peer sociality (Boyd, 2007). This study affirms the potential of social media to help audiences form a virtual community, supplementing people's lived experiences.

The danger of constructing an imagined queer community lies in the simplification of individual and collective complexities and differences into a fixed common bond. Within the It Gets Better Project, this bond is shared oppression. What an imagined community does not do is draw attention to the larger institutional and structural inequalities that are the sources of these oppressions. By focusing on the future, the campaign may reify a narrative of oppression and triumph, in which individuals are able to pull themselves up out of darkness if they work hard enough.

The LGBT movement. Several organizational members also believe the project establishes an intergenerational movement by affirming the experiences of older generations of LGBT people and connecting them to contemporary youth issues. The project is constructed as a place where LGBT people come together, regardless of age, to share experiences and stories of how life gets better. Historically, social stigmas that regarded gays and lesbians as mentally ill and predatory prevented LGBT adults from communicating with LGBT young people. The advent of the Internet and development of social media networks opened new spaces for dialogue among LGBT people of different generations and geographic spaces.

Reflecting on the first It Gets Better video, Dan Savage expressed a desire to talk directly to young people, those at-risk and in need, recognizing he was waiting for permission he would never get. In the era of social media, he noted he could speak directly to LGBT kids right now: “I didn't need permission from parents or an invitation from a school. I could look into a camera, share my story, and let LGBT kids know that it got better for me and it would get better for them, too. I could give 'em hope.” YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter make it possible for LGBT adults to talk to youth, creating a space for intergenerational communication.

Mainstream society. Findings revealed that all organizational members of the It Gets Better Project pay much strategic attention to how the campaign can incite broader social change by connecting LGBT people and issues to a broader social landscape. Seth noted: “I think one of the huge values of the organization is that we have transcended that curtain between the LGBT audience and the rest of the world and we need to be able to speak to the rest of the world and not just LGBT people about our stories, our issues, et cetera.” Several members understand the project as showing mainstream America the complexity of the LGBT movement and demystifying gay lives and gay experiences. The danger in this approach is that by making LGBT lives intelligible for a mainstream audience, identities are reduced to the most palatable representations (i.e., the respectable gay adult) or the most sensationalistic representations (i.e., the suicidal gay youth). By making LGBT people “palatable,” as queer scholar Walters (2003) argues, “gays have been made invisible in a new way" (p. 127), thereby distorting the reality of who LGBT people really are and how they really live (Schulman, 1998).

LGBT youth. One research question asked: What identities does the organizational discourse construct for consumers? Organizational members, without exception, indicated that everything the organization does centers around LGBT youth. This section examines how organizational members articulated youth identities and, in doing so, what identities they normalized.

Disempowered. Throughout the interviews, several organizational members depicted LGBT youth as disempowered. Brett noted the project brings to light "the plight that an LGBT person goes through in their adolescent years." Members depicted young people as in need of saving, and the project functions as one source of salvation for these kids in crisis.

Several organizational members perceive navigating identity as an LGBT young person as dangerous. These members often depicted authority figures, such as parents, families, and teachers, as obstacles young people should avoid rather than considering that at times they might also serve as advocates. From this perspective, the campaign functions as a lifeline for young people, an understanding shared by some youth participants as well.

Strategic Messages of Hope

The identities of LGBT youth, as imagined by organizational members, influence the production of campaign messages. Therefore, the second research question asked: What are the producers' intended messages?

The concept of hope guides the overall organizational strategy and the aggregation of campaign messages. It is a concept that many audience members embraced as well, yet hope, as constructed by several organizational members, is an amorphous concept, loosely defined and difficult to pin down. Such ambiguity makes it difficult to hold the organization accountable for measurable results or to demonstrate organizational effectiveness, yet it also ensures that the project reaches the largest audience possible. Because the project message is vague and open to interpretation, the It Gets Better Project is not overtly queer. This strategy allows a variety of key influencers and target audiences that previously might not have associated themselves with LGBT issues to adopt and spread the message.

Additionally, although members spoke of the organization's mission to make the world a better place for LGBT youth, findings reveal an emphasis on individual responsibility. As Brett noted, "It doesn't get better but you get stronger." Placing the responsibility on youth emphasizes individualism and reinforces the myth of the American Dream. Through hard work and perseverance, anyone can succeed and thrive, even the queer kids. Dalton (1995) notes that this myth suggests that success in life has nothing to do with pedigree, race, class background, gender, national origin, or sexual orientation; success is within everyone's control regardless of background and status. Lofty messages of hope and hard work erase the historical, structural, and institutional inequalities that stand in the way of "it" getting "better" for those on the margins.

Organizational members control the direction and flow of the messages: therefore, the sub-question examined in this inquiry asked: How are these messages encoded into the campaign? This research question explored the processes by which the messages of the campaign are produced, getting at the heart of the moment of production in the cultural-economic model. Unlike many strategic communication and public relations professionals, however, organizational members of the It Gets Better Project are not the creators of the messages; rather they work as archivists of user-generated content.

Gatekeeping

Employees, specifically interns, aggregate, scrutinize, vet, and assemble campaign content. While several organizational members spoke about the democratic nature of the project, in fact, employees ultimately call the shots, deciding which messages to include and exclude. Brett noted:

> Obviously anyone is more than welcome to upload a video to YouTube and label it as "It Gets Better," but we have the discretion of whether we're going to feature it on our website or not. So that's where the video vetting process comes from. People submit them to us and then we decide, is this safe? If I was a 14-year-old child in crisis, would this make me feel better? Would this make me feel worse?

Interns function as gatekeepers (Shoemaker, 1991), controlling the direction and the flow of messages by letting some stories pass through the organizational gates but keeping others out, ultimately helping to shape the public's knowledge of LGBT issues. Gatekeeping shows that decisions are made and implemented based on the organization's understanding of the campaign. Gatekeeping is a useful strategy because it keeps the project on message, but it is also potentially problematic when deciding which messages to discard and which to let pass.

This gatekeeping builds an agenda for LGBT issues, often focused on bullying, suicide prevention, and time as curative. In this way, the project sets a public agenda for

LGBT issues by assembling miscellaneous, sometimes incongruous, parts into a package of issues that help define that LGBT movement.

Given the processes and power implicated in the management of the project, the second sub-question explored asked: What norms do these discourses legitimize? The It Gets Better Project operates within a cultural framework of popular media, public policy, and academic texts that position LGBT youth as “at risk,” suicidal, pathological, and vulnerable. This framing has important ramifications, for as Driver (2008) notes, the means through which queer youth are named and interpreted are “profoundly important in shaping a social, cultural, and psychic process of recognition and comprehension” (p. 6). Such framing influences which young people are deemed worthy of attention and resources as well as the ways youth are approached and assisted at institutional and interpersonal levels (Driver, 2008). Data reveal that given funding constraints and the need to produce measurable outcomes, organizational members often understand young people within this framework as well.

Youth as Victims

Rofes (2005) identified a “martyr-target-victim” narrative framing queer youth in mainstream media and scholarly publications. Such framing influences how young people are socially recognizable and legitimized, thereby narrowing who and what we think of as LGBT youth.

The data from this dissertation affirm that queer youth are at times represented as isolated and invisible, but at other times they are seen as resilient and able to seek out resources and connect with communities in digital spaces. Some campaign messages from the campaign challenge language used to frame LGBT youth that has often resulted in “foreclosing the ambiguous, desiring, relational, and ephemeral dimensions of their experiences” (Driver, 2008, p. 3), instead presenting new identities and vocabularies to speak about young people.

Strategically Building Bridges

Strategic communication, specifically public relations and has played a vital role in the early stages of the gay rights movement and has been instrumental in construction of LGBT as a cohesive collective identity (Alwood, 2013). A campaign does not simply represent LGBT youth but produces recognizable—and fundable—depictions and definitions of what it means to be a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender youth.

Several organizational members suggested a strategic narrative of hope is attractive because it simplifies the complexity of LGBT individual and community identities, making messages more palatable for non-LGBT people and building bridges between mainstream society and LGBT communities. Ultimately, the organization is a means to an end: social acceptance of LGBT people and issues and policy change. Seth noted that the project brings together resources and funders that “wouldn’t have otherwise necessarily lent their resources and their name and voice to this issue.”

Effectiveness of organizational efforts is implicated in processes and the meanings organizational members bring to the campaign. Therefore, the third research question asks: How effective do producers believe the campaign is in achieving its goal? Organizational members shared conflicting perspectives about measuring the effectiveness of the project. While emphasizing the work the organization does to track metrics, members often relied on anecdotal evidence as indication of the campaign’s success. Several organizational members expressed frustration at not being able to deliver measurable results and evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign in concrete terms. Despite the gut-feeling members have that the project is working to make things better, members emphasized the need for hard data as proof of organizational effectiveness.

Employees on the front line of communication efforts seemed fixated on chasing data and quantifying organizational efforts and effectiveness; yet they were plagued by the inability to quantify “hope.” When Seth and Ted talked about quantifying efforts scientifically, it was often within the context of funding. Ted noted: “The difficult part…is quantifying goals and getting outcomes in a manner consistent with what foundations and other granting organizations are used to seeing…we can’t quantify services like that.” While many members emphasized storytelling as central to the campaign, the financial viability and future of the project depends on legitimizing organizational efforts through measurable outcomes that can be demonstrated to potential funders.

Ted suggested that in order to remain a force in the LGBT movement, the project has to play by the rules of the funding game and measure outcomes: “For my own sanity we’ll be doing some real planning that will have at its core a real focus on outcomes.” Although the organization receives hordes of emails and messages from viewers of videos and followers of the campaign, the money that makes the wheels of the organization keep turning is predicated on quantifiable metrics, and turns the people the organization is designed to help, LGBT youth, into abstract statistics. Activist groups get mainstreamed and co-opted by funding institutions, no longer bucking the system but becoming part of it in order to stay afloat.

Summary

Many organizational members believe the project, by way of social media, provides a platform for intergenerational community building and to transcend the divide between the LGBT community and mainstream society. Employees, specifically interns, keep the campaign on message by serving as gatekeepers, ensuring content stays on track and advances the organizational agenda. Several members expressed difficulty in assessing effectiveness, often chasing quantitative data to justify organizational efforts for funders, while still struggling to know if the message is reaching and ringing true to LGBT young people.

The next section explores how young people understand advocacy efforts of the It Gets Better Project, attending to the stories and silences from interviews with LGBT youth.

LGBT Youth

To explore how LGBT youth decode the messages of the It Gets Better Project and what meanings they attribute to the campaign, the fourth research question asked: How do consumers interpret the messages contained in campaigns directed to them? While many organizational members emphasized the campaign messages are intended for an audience of LGBT youth, LGBT youth in this study often had a difficult time relating to the project. Some suggested that the project was really about older LGBT people sharing their experiences, which were not relevant to them. Results suggest that if the organization is truly dedicated to youth outreach, efforts should be made to speak with, rather than to, young people in the spaces they frequent.

Similar to organizational members, every young person interviewed in this study identified hope as the main theme of the It Gets Better Project. Both groups of participants agreed on the main message, but the scale of hope varied. Unlike organizational members who viewed the project as a giant ray of optimism, young people viewed the project as a sliver of hope. For young people, the project does not have the magnitude of effect that organizational members believe it has.

Many youth participants talked about the future in distant ways, struggling to look beyond the immediate. While they often liked the messages, young people conveyed frustration at not being able to see instant results of the promise "it gets better." They noted that the project says it will get better, but the videos don't provide any tangible advice on how to make it better.

While the campaign focuses largely on bullying, most youth participants noted that this wasn't really an issue they faced. Their struggles centered on coming to terms with their sexuality and coming out to friends and family, which is consistent with research from psychology and counseling that notes the coming out process is often the most stressful part of identity formation (D'Augelli, 1996). Youth didn't watch the videos to learn how to deal with bullies but to seek advice on how to talk with friends and family about their sexuality and gender.

These results support the work of sociologists who contend that narratives of self-discovery and disclosure structure LGBT lives (Giddens, 1992; Seidman, 2002). Belonging to a community is one facet that contributes to young people's sense of self, and youth see the project as a space for constructing community. However, their understandings of virtual communities are different from their understandings of local communities. Virtual communities are tied together by loose connections. Such loose connections, or what sociologist Granovetter (1973) calls "weak ties," connect otherwise disconnected individuals and groups. According to Granovetter, it is the people with whom we are least connected who offer the most opportunities. Grabowicz et al.'s (2012) study showed that Granovetter's theory applies to online social networks as well. The It Gets Better Project provides youth thousands of opportunities to connect with strangers who share their sexuality or gender identity. These weak ties provide young people with a social network and a space to connect and simultaneously maintain their anonymity.

Identity construction is a "process in which contrasting 'stories' of the self and others—stories of difference—are told, appropriated, and retold as stories of location in the social world of structured inequalities" (Duggan, 1993, p. 793). To explore the complexity of identity construction, the fifth research question asked: What identities do consumers believe are imposed upon them by these campaigns?

The project circulates representations of LGBT identities, providing a repository from which young people draw to develop a grammar for the articulation of identity. How much youth absorb, adopt, reject, and rework identities from the campaign depends on each individual's cultural context, history, and social location. Therefore, a sub-question asked: What identities do they adopt?

While some youth noted that they don't identify with the project because of the perceived age gap, they believe the campaign shows that others "like them" (i.e., sexual or gender minorities) exist beyond their local communities. In this way, the project resonated with young people despite the generational differences. Logan stated: "It helped me come to the conclusion that there are other guys out there like me who feel the same way, and that was comforting." While the stories and experiences may not resonate with some young people, the project creates a sense of belonging through the creation of a horizontal community and identity of being LGBT, that for these young people, functions as an assemblage of people like themselves.

While many young people feel connected to others through the project, they do not directly engage with people they meet through the It Gets Better Project, nor do they communicate with the organization. Rather, the mere presence of thousands of stories helps these youth feel that they are part of something larger than themselves. Often they participate passively, soaking up content.

Several youth, however, believed campaign representations did not fit with their sense of self and how they experience the world. Therefore, RQ5b asked: What identities do they reject?

I am not a victim. While a report from the Human Rights Campaign (2013, p. 1) argues that "the deck is stacked against young people growing up lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender in America," this study suggests that many young people do not see themselves as victims of their circumstances. Several participants spoke confidently about the future and the support they receive from family and friends. Even those participants who believed their current situations were not ideal noted that they believe their future might be bright. Gonick (2003, p. 137) contends that queer youth

> have refused to be rendered invisible or to accept the negative stereotypes thrust upon them. Instead they have worked to produce positive self-identifications and representations and to create the social conditions that will open up new possibilities for living life as queer people.

Several participants noted that they wanted to get involved in my research as a way to share their experiences and to make the world a better place for LGBT youth like themselves.

I am not a stereotype. Media, as Gray (2009) notes, are the central site of production of social knowledge of LGBT identity, where most people, including those who will come to identify as LGBT, first see or get to know LGBT people. Some scholars suggest that media representations of LGBT people have redressed cultural marginalization and give LGBT people reason to celebrate (Doty, 2000; Gamson, 1998; Gross, 2001). For several young people in this study, however, media representations of LGBT people and those in the campaign were sources of strife, not cause for celebration. Nick described seeing a video on the It Gets Better website during pride week:

> I really hated it because it just played up all these gay stereotypes…there was just this one clip where it was a guy and he introduced himself, said that he was gay, and then started putting a banana down his throat…it gives off this stereotype/appearance that all gay people are just only looking for sex.

Some youth expressed difficulty in identifying with and seeing themselves in these texts.

Several young gay male respondents noted that they could not relate with the effeminate, flamboyant gay male trope they believe dominates popular media. They expressed what Annes and Redlin (2012) call "effeminophobia," or the fear of effeminacy. David noted: "Despite being gay I'm puritanical on gender roles…cross dressing makes me feel uncomfortable." Findings from this dissertation affirm Pascoe's (2007) work, which found the effeminate boy to be a source of anxiety for other boys. Of note is that female participants did not express the same sorts of anxieties around gender as male participants did.

While participants rejected the victim narrative and expressed discomfort with the perpetuation of stereotypes in the campaign, they took on alternative identities. RQ5c asked: What other identities do they adopt instead?

Just a normal teen. Of the youth I spoke with, many shared the belief that despite their sexual orientation or gender identity, they are just like everyone else, and want to be considered "normal." For these young people, normal means being able to do the things other teens do, such as hooking up. As Justin noted: "everything's about relationships, and who's doing what with whom." Several participants expressed their frustration with not being able to actualize their sexual orientation. Nick noted: "I had this foolish belief that when I came out I'd suddenly find the guy of my dreams." For these young people, a better future is not defined by the right to get married; "better" is about being able to meet a guy or girl and explore their sexuality. Several months after the initial interview, for example, one participant reached out and asked me advice on what to do about a crush on a straight classmate.

I am not just gay. Data suggest that youth understand themselves as much more than their sexual orientation and gender identity. During interviews, youth participants spent more time describing their racial/ethnic identities, family situations, geographical/regional locations, and experiences in school than they did speaking about sexual orientation or gender. Atifa spoke to the complexity of her identity:

> Being black, poor, a women, AND identifying as queer, it's pretty obvious to me that we live a world of injustice and inequality. But we've made so much progress. I feel very fortunate and hopeful that my ability to live a healthy, happy, and fulfilling life will not be cut short by my various and intersecting identities.

Queer youth are not, as Driver (2008, p. 2) notes, "discursively containable," and are "not reducible to any single dimension of their embodiment, identity, or situation" (p. 2). As such, their subjectivities are bound up in gender, race, ethnicity, class, and geography.

Such complicated identities affect how LGBT youth appropriate the project. Therefore, the sixth research question asked: How do consumers make use of campaign messages in their everyday lives?

Social media and digital platforms are expanding realms of social interaction and identification for LGBT youth. Driver (2006) noted that online communities help provide multilayered spaces of self-representation, support, and belonging for youth who are marginalized on the basis of their gender and sexual differences. Findings from this study suggest that the It Gets Better Project serves as one of these layers for several young people, who understand the campaign as part of a bouquet of advocacy organizations that together make the world a better place for LGBT youth like themselves.

Findings reveal that what distinguishes the It Gets Better Project from other advocacy organizations and resources is that it provides moments of storytelling that transform how several young people think and talk about their identities. Many participants spoke about the project as a digital resource, providing them access to a repository of stories they consume as a way to make sense of their own experiences. Unlike other online platforms that provide peer-to-peer networking opportunities, however, data suggest that the It Gets Better Project is not a dialogic space for young people. Teens look to other social media platforms, such as Reddit or Trevor Space, to engage with other LGBT young people.

Summary

The findings from this study point to complex and often-conflicting viewpoints about the It Gets Better Project and how young people understood the campaign. Some youth saw the project as hopeful; others weren't so confident in the project's promise. At times, young people saw themselves as victims, while at other times they recognized their ability to access resources like the It Gets Better Project as a way to help themselves.

Youth identified the issues the project presented in some instances to be personal, (i.e., depression and isolation), while in other instances the issues were cultural (i.e., homophobia and perpetuation of stereotypes). They provided examples from their own lives that demonstrated the relevance and application of the campaign to their day-to-day lives. Data did not reveal one dominant way that young people understood how things would "get better." For some, actualizing the message of "it gets better" is possible through societal changes, for some it is through community, and for others it will happen through individual efforts.

Recognition of self contributed to whether the project resonated with young people. Not all youth could not identify with the messages of the campaign; however, they indicated they liked the message, but it didn't hold true for them at the present moment. For some young people things were already "better," while for others, a "better" future was too hard to imagine. Some youth critiqued the project for not delivering on its promise, for not doing enough to make it better for young people.

Often youth believed the videos did not provide the immediate answers they needed for things to get better in that moment. Other young people described the videos as aspirational, giving them something to strive for, such as a successful career or a husband and children. Tensions between immediacy and futurity exist for many young people. In this study participants spoke about their desires for things to get better, pointing to the contradictions between working to navigate their daily lives and trying to imagine a future in which they one day can have a career and get married as an out and open LGBT person. Although the term abnormal never appears in the interviews, the emphasis participants placed on normality suggests that LGBT people and issues are often understood and depicted as abnormal.

As demonstrated in the findings, young people adopt and adapt media technologies to suit their local and specific needs. Young people appropriate the message of "it gets better" in their own lives as it applies to their local and digital lived experiences. Virtual communities supplement young people's existing local communities, providing them an outlet to negotiate their multiple identities. The It Gets Better Project serves as one resource among a sea of others that young people turn to for confirmation and reassurance when things get tough. Some participants are living the promise of "it gets better," while others hope to some day get to the point of self-acceptance.

The following section discusses the selective code that emerged in this dissertation, "a hierarchy of hope."

Selective Coding

Selective coding is the process through which the core theme illustrating the perspectives of interview participants is determined. Data point to "a hierarchy of hope" as the connecting theme among organizational members and LGBT young people. Hope is inherently an amorphous concept, however, and it can assume different identities and manifest along different timelines. While young people have hope for a better life, organizational members have hope in social change; both buy in to the message of hope, but in very different ways. The construct of “a hierarchy of hope” emerged as central to the analysis, pointing to the different levels of understandings of just what hope is and what a better future entails.

A Hierarchy of Hope

A discourse of hope appeals to multiple levels—the individual, the social, the institutional, and the structural—forming a hierarchy of hope (Figure 8): an inverted pyramid where the structural level is positioned at the top and funnels down to the individual level. The inverted pyramid shape captures the emphasis participants placed on structural top-down hope that trickles through institutional and social levels down to the individual level. Structurally, hope is a tool to create social change and social justice, broadly making the world a better place. Institutionally, hope infiltrates social institutions, such as marriage. At the social level, hope speaks to a broad audience, working to change hearts and minds. At the individual level, hope is about personal change, living a better life. Each level of the hierarchy was present during interviews with organizational members and LGBT youth, but employees placed more emphasis on the structural, institutional, and social levels, while LGBT youth tended to focus on the individual level.

Organizational members. Several organizational members construct hope as a social and political discourse defined by forward-looking vision, collective efforts, and shared values. Structurally, members understand hope in abstract terms of social change and social justice. Institutionally, members see hope as a utopian promise: a faith in a future where LGBT people have access to the same institutions as their heterosexual counterparts, such as marriage equality. At the social level, hope is a collective force that

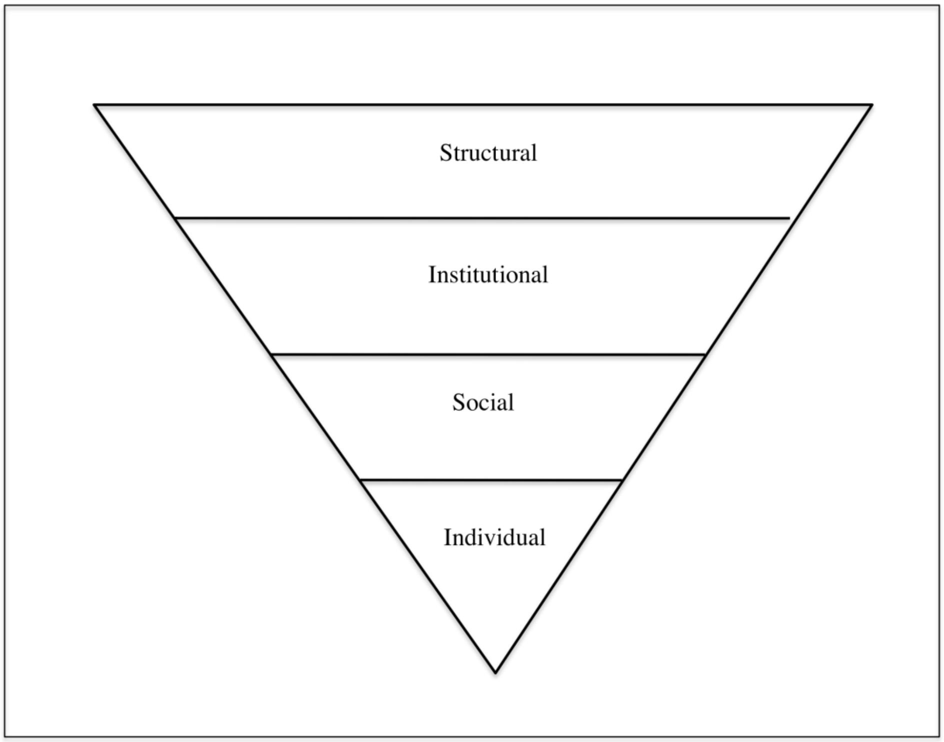


Figure 8: A Hierarchy of Hope

brings together LGBT communities and mainstream audiences, uniting people and mobilizing them around an issue. Several organizational members believe the project moves the needle on mainstream acceptance of LGBT issues even if they can't measure it. For many members, hope manifests at a macro-level, even though the face of the campaign is a youth-centered, individual level of hope. Hope is often defined by access to social institutions such as marriage, demonstrating how organizational members are becoming part of the LGBT advocacy machine that has recently been dominated by an agenda of equality by way of same-sex marriage. Organizational members suggest they have been co-opted by the system and are adopting a perspective dominating many of the larger LGBT activist organizations (i.e., the Human Rights Campaign).

LGBT youth. Many young people situated hope primarily at the social and individual levels. At the social level, youth expressed hope that society will view LGBT people as normal, just like everyone else. They see themselves as just regular teens trying to get by in their day-to-day lives, and the project helps them see that as LGBT they are human and have nothing to be ashamed of.

At the individual level, some young people are wishful that things will get better for them eventually, but for these youth hope is tinged with pessimism and skepticism not found in organizational member discourses. While young people wanted to believe that things get better, several had reason to believe otherwise. A few LGBT youth had difficulty seeing beyond the immediate, and although they noted that they buy into the message, their attitudes toward the future reflected otherwise. For these young people, it takes too long for hope to trickle down from the structural, institutional, and social levels to the individual level on which they are operating.

While some young people may be pessimistic that things will get better for them at the individual level, however, they buy into the message at the social level and are hopeful that things will get better for other people. This suggests a third-person effect, where youth participants believe that the message has a greater impact on others than on themselves.

Conceptualizing hope. Hope is a powerful construct because it operates at macro and micro levels; it is a big, broad, and squishy concept. Hope can be emotional, encompassing, and ambitious; it can also be ambiguous, fluid, open to interpretation, and difficult to pin down. Everyone can connect to hope in his or her own way, and participants use the concept in their own localized ways. Because everyone has a different understanding of what hope is, employees have trouble quantifying it and measuring organizational efforts. Yet the very thing that makes the project so difficult to define quantitatively is its very strength—everyone can buy into the concept in his or her own way and make it their own.

Summary. Hope as a communicative construct generates an alternative discourse to the dominant narrative of bullying and suicide that has surrounded LGBT youth in academic literature and mainstream media. Hope produces a new possibility for social change by mobilizing social and psychological resources for translating belief into action, for actualizing optimism. Hope is a concept that establishes new possibilities at individual, social, institutional, and structural levels. As a discursive construct, hope is ambiguous, culturally contingent, and politically powerful. It represents a universalizing emotional state that anyone, regardless of age or sexual orientation, can relate to. The strength of the project is that audiences can interpret hope in ways that fit with their localized understandings, their particular social contexts. Yet hope operates at many levels of society, and the main disconnect between producers and consumers of the campaign stems from differing levels providing relevance and meaning to participants' experiences.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

As noted in Chapter II, public relations theory has taken a socio-cultural turn, in contrast to the functionalism that has driven much previous theory. The implications of this study for public relations theory are outlined below in terms of the democratic promise of the Web, the role of articulation theory and identity within strategic communication campaigns, and how practitioners function as cultural intermediaries.

Theoretical Implications

The Web as a Democratic Space

Around the turn of the millennium, many public relations scholars viewed the Internet as a potentially democratizing space, where publics could engage in dialogue with organizations and be active participants rather than just passive receivers of communication. In 1998, Kent and Taylor predicted that the Internet would level the playing field between organizations and publics, and Coombs (1998) contended that the Web would function as an equalizer for activists. That same year, Heath (1998) argued that the Internet might be one of the best channels for activist organizations to use to communicate their messages and build public support for issues due to the egalitarian nature of the Web.

Along the same lines, in a study of the It Gets Better Project, Phillips and Brabham (2012) argue that the Internet has shifted the tide, creating a new kind of public relations work where participants, not just organizational employees, hold the power to create and disseminate content. They contend that lines between public relations practitioners and publics are increasingly blurred and suggest the It Gets Better Project illustrates a shift of power to control messages between organizations and publics within the digital landscape.

Other scholars, however, suggest the Internet is not fulfilling this democratic promise. Despite the Internet's exponential growth, a decade-long body of research demonstrates that websites often remain poorly used communicative tools (McAllister-Spooner, 2009). Scholars continue to question whether social media can deliver on the promise of dialogic communication, a model of communication grounded in dialogue that would challenge power inequalities between organizations and their publics (e.g., McCorkindale & Morgoch, 2013; McWard & Sweetser, 2014; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Smith, 2010) and the Internet as a democratic space (Kent, 2013). Findings from this dissertation add to the growing body of literature that challenges the promise of democratic communication via the Internet.

Although the It Gets Better Project is predicated on the ideological identity of YouTube and social media as democratic spaces, the messages that actually make it onto the organization's website or are shared on any of the organization's social media sites are subject to a systematic process of content management that belies this democratic ideology. Contrary to the findings of Phillips and Brabham (2012), the data presented here suggest the Internet does not always function as a space where organizations and publics have equal power to control the message. Rather, organizations and their publics negotiate message control. While anyone can publish a YouTube video with the message "it gets better," to be featured on the project's website or YouTube channel, a contribution has to pass through organizational gates. The project encourages campaign supporters to produce and submit messages, but ultimately some organizational members decide which content makes the cut and what is left out.

This study suggests, then, that power differentials shift given situational variables and that a more complex process is at play, a process that is a dynamic interplay between producers and consumers that situates power as localized and contingent, not simply belonging to an organization, or its publics, or shared proportionally between them.

This study employed a cultural-economic approach to examine the interplay between producers and consumers. Production and consumption are not stand-alone moments but form discourses of contested meanings (Taylor et al., 2001). Identities are produced and consumed as part of the cycle of production/consumption, in which meanings arise through articulations.

Articulation and Identity

As discussed in Chapter II, articulation is the moment when the five points of the circuit overlap (i.e., regulation, representation, production, consumption, and identity) and is the site where meanings are "created, contested, negotiated, and re-created" (Curtin & Gaither, 2006, p. 69). Articulation theory provides public relations scholars a different way to think about publics as opposed to demographics or psychographics. As some scholars have noted, segmentation transforms social groups, loosely organized around conditional characteristics, into consumer niches, where such identities are assumed to be stable, measurable, and powerful in predicting consumer behavior (Sender, 2004). Organizing publics by such characteristics creates seemingly unified identities. While such unification is helpful for planning and implementing strategic communication efforts, the risk is treating identity as a unitary and essentialist category rather than a shifting incomplete process. The situational theory of publics suggests that scholars can measure and predict the behaviors of a public based on their relationship to an issue. Such conceptualizations of publics, however, do not account for the complexity and multiplicity of identities are produced and consumed through articulation.

Unlike extant theory that suggests producers manage and define audience identities, articulation accounts for identity as dialectical. The construction of identity becomes a dance between producers and consumers in which producers construct discursive identities that consumers either adopt or reject and construct their own.

Articulation makes space for multiple understandings of identity within localized, contextualized cultural spheres (Hall, 1986). Articulation theory prioritizes the processes by and contexts within which identities are constructed and through which meaning is generated. For example, organizational employees articulated one identity of LGBT youth as disempowered victims, drawing on larger webs of meaning informed by ideological forces, social institutions, and group and organizational influences.

Because the articulations that join the moments of the model are temporary, so too are the identities that result. Some strong linkages are enduring, however, because of ideological and structural forces that keep them in place. For example, both organizational members and youth pointed to a culture of homophobia that propagated an identity of LGBT people as abnormal. Deconstructing historically, ideologically, and institutionally ingrained identities in order to re-articulate new identities is difficult for both producers and consumers, as this study demonstrates.

While this study focused on LGBT as a defining identity, many young people mentioned how their intersecting identities contributed to their understandings of the campaign. A few scholars have examined how intersectionality plays out in public relations theory and practice (i.e., Vardeman-Winter, Tindall, & Jiang, 2010, 2013), and this study suggests more work is needed in this area. For participants, sexual and gender identity was only one part of who they were: race, ethnicity, class, and geography were often mentioned as additional identity facets that factored into how they made sense of campaign messages.

Cultural Intermediaries

In contrast to functionalist understandings of practitioners as managers and technicians, a cultural-economic conceptualization repositions organizational employees as cultural agents, which Bourdieu (1979/1984) terms cultural intermediaries: those involved with "information and knowledge intensive forms of work that have come to be seen as increasingly central to economic and cultural life" (Nixon & du Gay, 2002, p. 496). Through aggregation and curation of content, organizational employees construct a shared identity to achieve organizational objectives.

This content is subject to the interpretations of consumers, however. Organizational members cannot achieve their objectives if the messages do not resonate with LGBT young people; thus, they must operate at the intersections of production and consumption, constantly monitoring and creating articulations that engage consumers.

Understanding practitioners as cultural intermediaries moves public relations scholarship away from organizational-centric theories of publics to a process-centric model in which identity production is a constant give-and-take between producers and consumers. Such a theoretical shift means that practitioners are not solely managing content but are instead creating spaces for the production and contestation of identities.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study contributes to the development of public relations, it does have several limitations that should be noted. For example, given the qualitative method used I cannot generalize my findings to all LGBT organizations or to all LGBT youth populations. By providing rich descriptions, however, this research illuminates important issues in identity, activism, and public relations.

Due to time and resource limitations, I only recruited and interviewed participants from one organization. Because I established initial contact with the CEO and chairman of the It Gets Better organization, my organizational participants were those to whom he referred me. I did not have the opportunity to speak with others in the organization, such as interns, which would have provided additional insights into the curation process.

In regard to youth, I recruited participants who were actively involved in an LGBT online group; therefore, many of my participants had come to terms with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and were at different levels of "outness" with their friends and family. These participants were already savvy to various degrees about resources and campaigns dedicated to LGBT youth. Several youth participants said that they wanted to participate in my study as a way to give back to the community and to make things better for other LGBT young people like themselves. Given this self-selection, I quite possibly did not hear from those most at need or at risk, those furthest on the margins.

Few bisexual and transgender individuals were in my participant pool. Further research is needed that examines the production and consumption of bisexual and transgender identities within LGBT activist discourses. Bisexual publics and identities have received little consideration by strategic communication scholars and are often lumped with lesbian and gay identities (Tindall, 2007; Waters & Tindall, 2012). Similarly, despite increasing interest by mainstream media, to date little research in strategic communication exists that explicitly examines transgender publics or identities. LGBT has become a contentious term that speaks to a particular kind of sexual diversity, often at the expense of excluding bisexual and transgender identities.

As with all nonprofit organizations, time and money are limited resources. During interviews with producers, time was at a premium. While the chairman and CEO was eager to chat, interviews with the executive director, director of international programs, and media manager were more rushed. Additionally, all organizational members were well versed in the mission statement of the project and several of them attempted to direct the conversation in ways that highlighted the positive work of the organization while steering clear of conversations that questioned the effectiveness of organizational efforts. Many scholars have been critical of organizational efforts since its inception in 2010, and the issue is apparently still sensitive four years later.

When speaking with youth, online chat-based interviews proved to be time consuming and at times did not yield much data. Often youth were not responsive, and it would take several minutes to receive an answer to a question. On several occasions young people had to do something else (i.e., eat dinner, do chores, finish homework) during our interviews. While online interviews afforded me access to an often inaccessible population, at times it came at the cost of thin data. For future studies, I would employ phone or face-to-face interviews with youth participants.

Building rapport with youth participants proved to be challenging. Anonymity was both a blessing and a curse. Online chat provided a degree of distance between myself and my participants in which they could talk openly about their understandings, opinions, and feelings. At the same time this anonymity worked to increase the distance between myself and my participants, making it difficult to establish any sort of intimacy that might have elicited more in-depth data.

Several participants saw me as a resource and used our interview time as an opportunity to ask questions, such as how they should come out or how to deal with a crush. Often this led to getting off topic, which proved fruitful. For example, on several occasions, the conversations deviated from the interview guide because participants wanted to speak about relationship issues and their struggles to actualize their sexual orientation. This helped me see that young people were often more focused on the immediate and that abstract messages of the future often did not resonate.

Future research should focus on speaking with young women; the majority of youth participants in this study were young gay males. It was challenging to find young females who identified as LGBT and were willing to participate, and more work is needed to understand how gender—or one's physical, biological, mental, and behavioral characteristics along the spectrum of masculinity and femininity—contributes to one's perception of the project. Additionally, this research focused on organizational members and the organization's target publics, but other important stakeholders include donors, volunteers, international affiliates, sister LGBT organizations, and corporations. The international scope of the project also came up on several occasions during interviews with employees; however, because of my study design and research questions I did not include international affiliates in this research. Future research should examine the formation of dominant discourses of LGBT identity among different stakeholders and cross-culturally. Research could consider how the project creates identities within a context of cultural and national identities.

This examination of the discursive formation of LGBT identities suggests the ways in which the cultural-economic model extends public relationships scholarship. Although the cultural-economic model comprises five moments, examining the moments separately allows exploration of the degree to which extant research fits into a particular moment (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). While studying the moments in isolation can be illuminating, however, each moment is part of an interdependent unit that must be located within the larger context of the model.

This study focused on the moments of production, consumption, and identity; as such, it leaves under-examined the ties to the remaining two moments of the circuit: representation and regulation. Future research could consider how meanings of LGBT identity are generated through campaign discourses, such as exploring the dominant and alternative narratives that emerge from the user-generated videos or how the campaign is represented by mainstream and LGBT media. In terms of regulation, research could examine the overlap of the public and private spheres in regard to legal, technological, regulatory, and cultural norms that constrain understandings of LGBT identities, such as exploring the infrastructure of YouTube and how technological developments and user-generated content have influenced public relations processes.

Issues of sexuality are “remarkably thin” in public relations research, which remains dominated by binary notions of gender and sexuality (Edwards & L’Etang, 2013,

p. 45). Interviews with young people pointed to the fluidity of identity, challenging gender identity and sexual orientation as binaries falling along a spectrum of masculine/feminine, male/female, and heterosexual/homosexual. The cultural-economic model suggests scholars need to move beyond such binaries, which is compatible with the constructs of queer theory. Queer theory affords scholars a critical method of deconstruction and destabilizing of normality, pushing researchers to consider not what is identity, but how identity is formed. Queer theory, in line with the cultural-economic model, propels strategic communication research and practice beyond binary understandings of identity to be more inclusive of identity as a kinetic discursive space.

Reflection

On several occasions during my interviews with LGBT youth, I was confronted with the realities of sexism and gender policing that happen within LGBT communities. Several of my young male participants spoke about gender norms and the discomfort they felt when presented with images of effeminate men or masculine women. A couple participants pointed to gender transgression as detrimental to the LGBT movement and noted that if it weren't for radical queers, equality may have already been achieved. As a masculine woman, these perspectives made me uneasy. Although during these moments I wanted to interject and provide a brief lesson in Queer Theory 101, the situation required I redirect the conversation and refocus on the questions from the interview guide.

Other times I had to veer from my research objectives and focus on the interpersonal moments of the interviews. The nature of my method required I "friend" a participant on Facebook. However, when proposing the project I had not planned on how I would end my relationship with my participants. I decided to let my participants "defriend" me when they felt it appropriate to end our virtual relationship. However, nearly one year later, I remain Facebook friends with several of my youth participants. This points to the need for further examination of the relationship between researcher and participant in online research (Markham & Baym, 2008).

As a communication practitioner, I have worked with theories and models and statistical data to provide strategic insights to clients. I had come to believe that having a strategic plan for researching/implementing/evaluating communication is necessary for effective communication. However, over the past four years, I have sat with piles of qualitative data and now have interviewed 24 teens and six adults. Meaning making around identity cannot be reduced to statistical models in which every participant is a data point and those who do not fit the norm are seen as "outliers." Herein lies the struggle: how do I empower LGBT people and stay true to my queer feminist ideals that every participant's position is unique and important, but stay true to my roots as a communicator who understands the need for strategy, planning, and order as well as the realities of working for an organization with resource limitations and intersecting interests?

Similarly, organizational members experience the same issues with balancing their roles as strategic communicators and members of the LGBT movement. In the face of youth suicide, the organization was born out of an eight-minute YouTube video by Dan Savage and Terry Miller, delivering a message of hope to LGBT young people. Hope has allowed the message to reach mass audiences who adopt and adapt the message in different ways. Hope made possible the widespread accessibility and buy in from a variety of stakeholders, many from the very institutions that the project was critiquing.

The It Gets Better Project faces an identity crisis of its own: can it stay true to its roots as a lifeline for young people while simultaneously partnering with mainstream organizations? Can it challenge cultural inequalities and bring about social change while advocating for acceptance into social and economic institutions that benefit some but not others? The project seems as if it may have outgrown itself, needing human and financial resources that require a strategic shift. The project struggles with its own fate, never originally aiming to be a nonprofit organization, simply a message of hope. In order to sustain its efforts, the organization needs the support of funders who rely on metrics. But the beauty and curse of hope is its ambiguity: everyone can relate to hope, but no one can agree on a way to define and measure it.

Although public relations literature stresses the importance of two-way communication, the organization has no dialogic relationship with LGBT young people. While it creates a community that young people passively partake in, the project's real power is bridging LGBT people with mainstream society, serving as a conduit to social acceptance of LGBT people and issues. The project is a strategic communication effort that illustrates how activism and public relations share many of the same goals, identities, and discursive spaces.

Bringing It All Together

The face of activism and advocacy has changed since the 1990s when radical organizations positioned themselves in stark opposition to the social and economic forces they opposed. Contemporary activism, as demonstrated here, uses strategic communication and strategic decision making to carry out organizational objectives in ways that entangle them in marketplace considerations.

The It Gets Better Project, activism, and public relations are not in separate camps but occupy a more fluid environment that is informed by cultural-economic forces. Market forces and economic need can lead to the co-opting of activist organizations, pulling them into the mainstream as they align with corporations and major funders to keep themselves afloat. Mainstream acceptance is a double-edged sword, and as Weaver (2010) notes, activists must often tread carefully, resisting dominant discourses while working strategically to gain necessary funding.

This study brings public relations and activism closer together, rather than viewing them as inherently antagonistic. In response to Dutta's (2009) call asking where the voices of activists are in public relations, this dissertation illustrates how the cultural-economic approach makes space for activism within public relations scholarship and practice. Conceptualizing activism as outside of public relations or the enemy of public relations misses the mark. Much like the identities that LGBT youth adopt and construct, the identities of activism and public relation are fluid, multiple, conflicting, and at times overlapping. Who gets labeled an activist depends on the context and who is doing the articulating.

Articulation theory expands strategic communication's understanding of public relations practitioners to include activists who work to shape public opinion and legitimize their positions. Campaigns, like the It Gets Better Project, are part of larger webs of meaning constructed by and through discourses, as are other public relations practices. The two often inhabit overlapping articulations, not dichotomous ones as earlier public relations often posited.

Flashback to 2013, the Creating Change conference in Atlanta. I am sitting in the crowd, among hundreds of LGBT activists, wondering what could be done to address the bullying and suicide epidemics plaguing our young people. What I have learned since that time is that instead of assuming we know the issues facing young people today, we should be talking to young people in the places they frequent, both on and offline, about their lives and experiences. They share many concerns with those of the more established LGBT movement, but they bring forth new and relevant issues that resonate with their day-to-day lives. LGBT young people are much more than a single demographic, and campaigns, to be effective, must embrace the multiplicity of their identities.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

(for phone-based interviews with It Gets Better Project employees)

Consent Form (to read to interviewees over the phone):

Introduction
Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me about the It Gets Better Project. As mentioned in my previous e-mail (or phone call), this research study seeks to understand more about the It Gets Better Project and LGBT youth advocacy work.

Please listen as I provide additional information about the study. At the end of this section, you will be asked if you consent to being interviewed for this study. Stating "yes" when asked if you agree to participate in this study will serve as your verbal signature of consent - if you agree to participate.

Information
The purpose of this research study is to understand advocacy efforts and the It Gets Better Project. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a part of the It Gets Better Project.

Description of the Study Procedures:
You are invited to share your experiences through an interview for this study. If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed about your experiences. The interviews will take place over the phone. There aren't any right or wrong answers in these interviews; I just want to know your opinion. The interviews will take about 30 to 40 minutes and there may be a follow-up interview whenever is convenient for you.

Risks of Being in the Study:
Participation in this study does not involve any foreseeable risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study:

The purpose of this study is to learn more about youth advocacy work and communication. While you will not receive any direct benefit from this study, your participation is central to learning more about advocacy efforts and programs aimed at LGBT youth.

Confidentiality
The data gathered during the interview process will be accessible to me alone, the

principal investigator, and it will be stored on a password-protected computer. With your permission, your name will appear in presentations, written reports or publications alongside your organizational title and affiliation. At the end of the study, I will send you an executive summary to the e-mail address you have provided to me.

You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty.

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research study. If you have questions, complaints or concerns, you should let me, the principal investigator Erica Ciszek, know at any time (eciszek@uoregon.edu) or my faculty advisor, Dr. Patricia Curtin (pcurtin@uoregon.edu).

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by an Institutional Review Board committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board at 541-346-2510 or by email at *ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu.* If you contact the University of Oregon IRB, please refer to study #04262013.032.

<u>Participant's Agreement:</u>
Do you have any questions about the study?
Do you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study?

- If yes, proceed with the interview.
- If no, thank her/him for their time and end the phone call.

APPENDIX B

ORGANIZATION INTERVIEW GUIDE

(It Gets Better Project employees)

Introduction
Hi, my name is Erica Ciszek. It is nice to meet you. Thank you for helping with my study; I greatly appreciate it. As mentioned in my email, this study is about LGBT youth advocacy. This information will be used in my research and it could also be used in publications to help communication scholars learn about advocacy work.

Consent
With your permission, I would like to record our conversation with a recorder so I can accurately interpret it. I will destroy the recording on or before May 1, 2018. Only I will have access to the recording. Do you feel comfortable with my use of a recorder for our discussion? [Review informed consent form and collect signed form.] Do you have any questions before we start?

Thank you. So, I would like to start by asking some general questions about your role with It Gets Better Project.

<u>Questions</u>
Q1: Please tell me briefly about how you became associated with the It Gets Better Project.
- Probe: How long have you been affiliated with the It Gets Better Project?
- Probe: Why did you decide to join It Gets Better Project?
- Probe: Describe your involvement with It Gets Better Project?

Q1a: What does the It Gets Better Project mean to you?

Q2: Tell me a bit about the aims of the project.
- Q2a. What does the campaign represent?
- Q2b. Tell me what you think this campaign means at this current time in history.

Q3: Tell me who you think the audience for your campaign is.
- Q3a. What do you think this project means to your audience?
- Q3b. Can you tell me about a time where someone used this campaign in their day-to-day life?

Q4. How do you tailor your materials to reach this audience?
- Q4a. What is the major takeaway you want the audience to leave with?
- Q4b. Can you tell me about a time you saw someone respond positively to the materials? What about a time that you saw someone respond negatively?

Q5: Tell me about the effectiveness of the project.
- Q5a. What were the goals of the campaign?
  - Probe: Can you tell me about a time that you saw a goal of the project achieved? How about a time when it was not achieved?
- Q5c. Tell me about any resistance you have faced for the It Gets Better Project.

Can you tell me about a time when a criticism of the project been very hard for you?

Probe: How about from critics or LGBT activists?

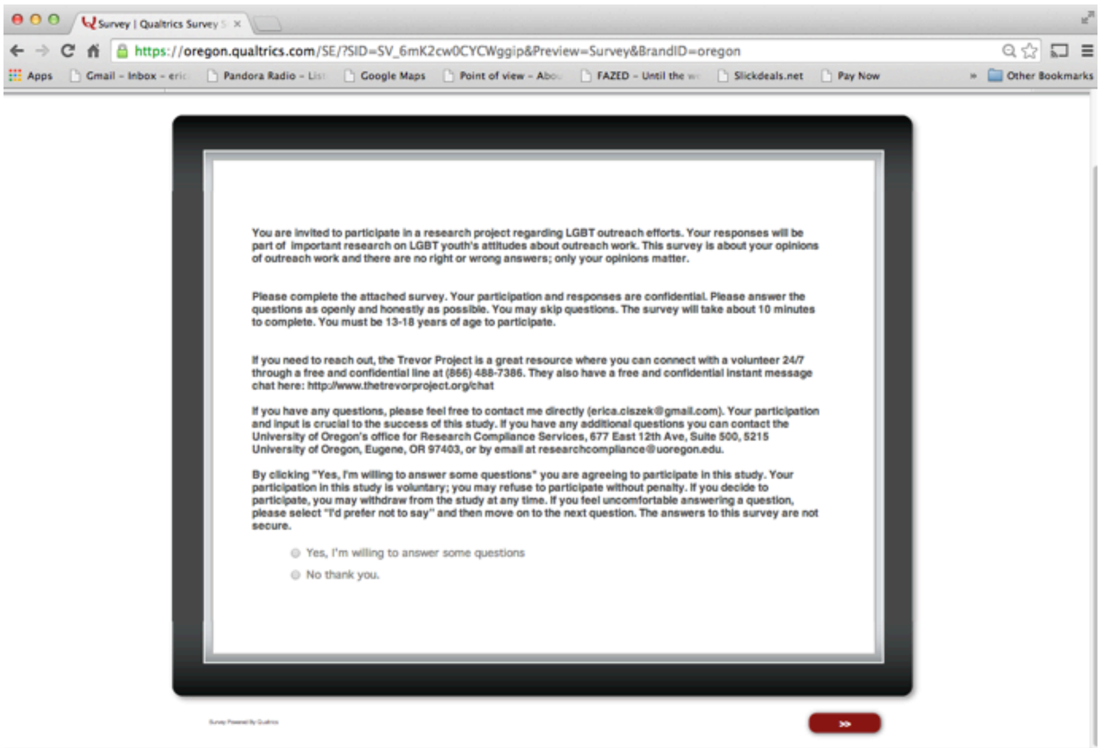
Probe: How about from other advocacy groups?

Those are all the questions that I have today. Is there anything else you would like to add about the project or your involvement? This has been so helpful. Without your participation, this study would not have been possible. If I have any additional questions, would it be OK to follow up with you via phone or e-mail? Once the study has been completed, I will e-mail you an executive summary. If at any time you have questions about the study, I can be reached by e-mail at eciszek@uoregon.edu.

Thank you again!

APPENDIX C

QUALTRICS SURVEY FOR YOUTH RECRUITMENT



APPENDIX D

EMAIL FOLLOW-UP FOR YOUTH

(from survey)

EMAIL #1

Hi there,
You recently completed a survey and left your email noting that you are willing to participate in a study on youth outreach. If you did not, I apologize for contacting you.

If you are between 13 and 18 years old and familiar with the It Gets Better Project, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your opinion of the project. There are no right or wrong answers, only your opinions matter.

Please send me an email to let me know that you are interested in participating.
Thanks!
Erica Ciszek

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

(for chat-based follow-up interviews)

EMAIL #2

Hi there,
You recently completed a survey and left your email noting that you are willing to participate in a study on youth outreach. If you are between 13-18 years old, identify as lesbian gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) or questioning, and are familiar with the It Gets Better Project, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your opinion of the project. There are no right or wrong answers, only your opinions matter. The purpose of this study is to find out young people feel about media messaging and the It Gets Better Project.

INFORMATION
You are invited to share your experiences through an interview for this study. I will ask questions will be about your opinions and attitudes of the It Gets Better Project and your experiences with the project. The interviews will take place over online instant message chat, such as Google Chat, MSN instant messenger, AOL instant messenger, or Facebook Chat, depending on which you prefer. There aren't any right or wrong answers in these interviews; I just want to know your opinion. There will be approximately 20-25 participants in this study. The interviews will take 30 minutes to 1 hour. There will probably be a couple interviews, whenever is convenient for you, and we will pick up where we left off in our last chat. If you are under 18, you do not need parents' consent to take part in this project (only your own written). A parent/guardian consent form is available if you will be seeking parental permission to participate in this project.

RISKS
Participation in this study may involve some added risks or discomforts such as other people accidentally finding out about your participation in this project, which could result in being associated with LGBT people.

Online chat makes it possible to capture interview responses that could potentially be accessible to other users of a computer. If privacy is a concern, for additional security precautions be sure to delete your chat history and make sure you are in a private place when chatting.

To address the risks mentioned above:
All materials connected to your involvement in this project will be made confidential (kept encrypted, password-protected, and stored in a locked facility) and the information you provide will be coded so that your name cannot be associated with your responses. All materials related to this project will be destroyed after: 05/01/2018. The researcher (Erica Ciszek) will not disclose your participation in this project to anyone. She will have

to contact the proper authorities if she thinks you might hurt yourself or someone else, or you might be in danger of being hurt.

BENEFIT

While it may or may not directly benefit you, the findings from this study will be useful to LGBT youth and organizations and groups supporting them.

PAYMENT

For participating in this study, you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card once our interviews are complete. You will decide when the interviews are complete and you no longer want to participate. There is no set number of interviews you must complete in order to get the gift certificate. The gift certificate will be emailed to you at the email address you have provided.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any interviews you do will be kept completely confidential and your name will be removed from all work done on this research project. You should also understand that the researcher is required to contact the proper authorities if it is believed that you might hurt yourself or someone else, or you might be in danger of being hurt.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study you may contact the researcher, Erica Ciszek at 1275 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403 by phone at (541) 346-3738 and by email erica.ciszek@gmail.com.

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the University of Oregon's office for Research Compliance Services, 677 East 12th Ave, Suite 500, 5215 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, or by email at researchcompliance@uoregon.edu.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may refuse to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read this form and I have been offered the opportunity to print it out. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this study.

Please indicate that you agree to participate by typing in the return email in ALL CAPS: I CONSENT TO BEING A PART OF THIS STUDY at the top of the returned email. By answering the interview questions, you will be demonstrating your agreement to participate in this project. If you would like a paper copy of this consent form please go to your email or web browser program’s menu and select the “PRINT” command. You may also store this email in your inbox or other email folders but note that this will leave a record of your participation in this project.

APPENDIX F

EMAIL #3 TO LGBT YOUTH

EMAIL #3

Hi there,
I'd like to set up a time for us to chat online and ask you a few questions about your opinion of the It Gets Better Project. It will take about 30-45 minutes and we will probably chat a couple of times whenever it's safe and convenient for you. Let me know which chat program works best for you. Some examples are Facebook Chat, Google Chat, AOL Instant Messenger, or MSN messenger. Please select the one you feel most comfortable using and let me know your username so I can add you to my contact list. Also, let me know which day and time work best for you to chat.

Thank you so much!
Erica

APPENDIX G

CHAT-BASED INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR YOUTH

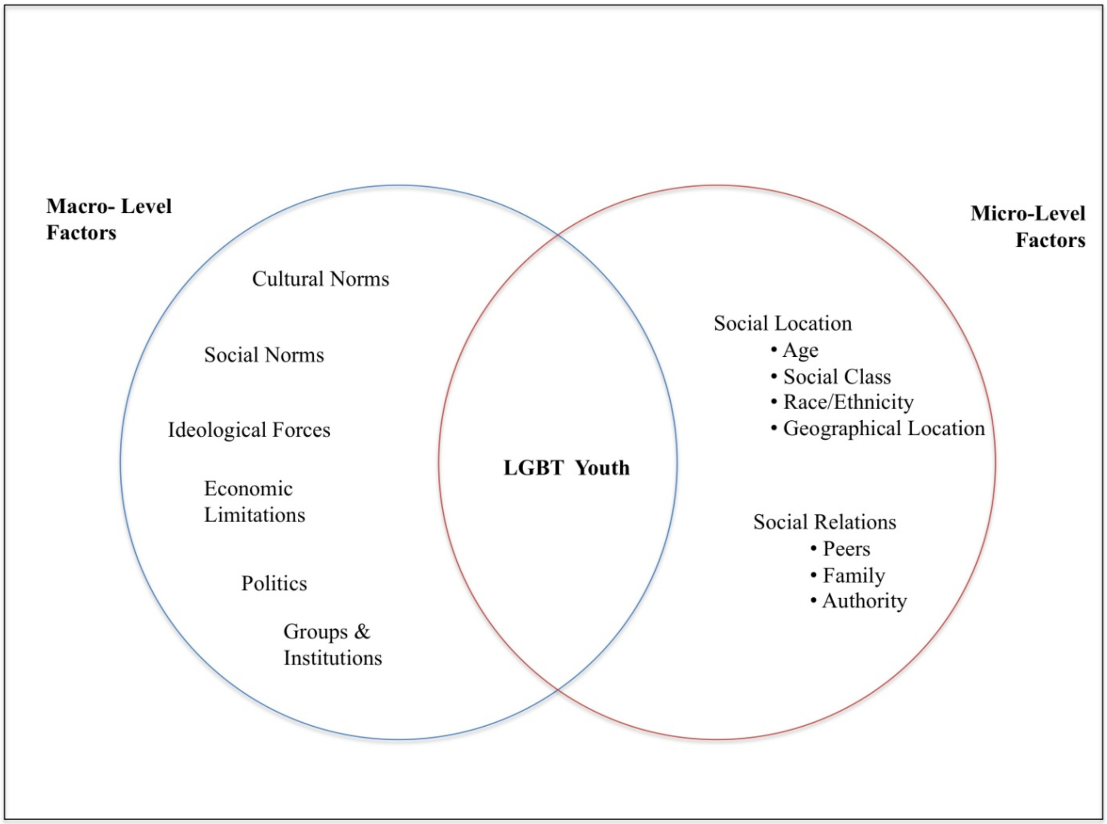
Hi there,
Thank you for being willing to chat with me. I am doing a project to learn what youth like you think about the It Gets Better Project. If at anytime you are uncomfortable with the questions you do not need to answer them. You can skip a question at any time. You can answer as many or as few questions as you want to. If at any time you are distressed, The Trevor Project is a great resource where you are able to connect with a volunteer 24/7 through a free and confidential line at (866)-488-7386. They also have a free and confidential instant message chat here: http://www.thetrevorproject.org/chat. Also if you have any questions about this research please contact the University of Oregon's office for Research Compliance Services, 677 East 12th Ave, Suite 500, 5215 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, or by email at researchcompliance@uoregon.edu.

So let's get started:
1. Tell me your thoughts about the It Gets Better Project.
2. What do you think the It Gets Better Project is all about? What is the project saying?
    - How do you feel about what they are saying in the project?
3. In your opinion, who is the audience of this campaign?
4. Tell me about how the project presents issues kids like you might be facing?
    - Does the project accurately depict things you are dealing with? Why or why not?
    - How does it make you feel about how LGBT issues are being talked about?
5. How is the project relevant to you? Does it speak to you?
    - If Yes: Tell me about how the It Gets Better Project is relevant to you personally.
    - If No: If you don't think it speaks to you, why?
        - What other projects do you feel speak to you?
6. Tell me about how you might use the information from the It Gets Better Project in your day-to-day life (at school, at home, with friends, etc.).
    - Tell me about a time when you thought about the project in your own life?
        - Who were you with? What were you doing?

Is there anything else you would like me to know? Would you mind if I emailed you again if I had follow up questions?
Thanks for all of your help!

APPENDIX H

SAMPLE ANALYTIC MEMO 1



APPENDIX I

SAMPLE ANALYTIC MEMO 2

Date: October 30, 2013

Everyone keeps talking about hope. How does one define hope? How do we quantify hope? Effectiveness of campaign efforts falls within dominant LGBT rights discourse in regards to political landmarks like same-sex marriage rather than in lived experiences of youth participants in the day-to-day realities of navigating the social landscapes. What is the relationship between institutional context of the organization and the lived experiences of consumers of the campaign? More importantly, what do the LGBT youth learn about themselves and the world around them through engagement with these campaigns?

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